

Living in the Real World

by Jim Greenman

“Babies Get Out: Outdoor Settings for Infant Toddler Play”

Imagine a playground for babies.* A what? Probably few images are conjured up. Playgrounds are rough and tumble places where running, jumping, hurling, and the traffic of miniature speeding vehicles and general wild abandon flourish. Life in the fast lane is no place for a baby. Okay, instead imagine an infant/toddler park. Again, it probably seems strange to think of an outdoor place for children under two.

Let's start over. Imagine outdoor places that would be wonderful to be in with a baby, that would enable you to enjoy the world outside the walls of your daily place of work, while taking pleasure in the growing power and competence of the child — parks with sun and shade, flowers, gentle breezes, grassy hills, winding pathways, and places to relax and talk and appreciate the sounds of birds and water and crickets and babies.

Now return to the idea of a baby playground. Imagine an outdoor arena for baby play: a setting that encourages the visual exploration of a four month old; the reaching and grasping, rolling and leaning of a nine month old; and the stepping and toddling, pulling and pushing, hauling and dumping, exuberant exploration of older babies. If we begin with the idea of somehow adapting playgrounds for older children, we may get nowhere, or a somewhere that doesn't work. If, instead, we begin thinking about what we want to experience outdoors and what we want babies to experience, we may end up with something entirely different.

Design Considerations

What is the value of the outdoors? Why go outside at all? What does the outdoors offer that the indoor setting cannot?

Climate. The outdoors has weather: wind, sun, rain, fog, clouds, snow, and warmth and cold.

Landscape. Outside we can have hills and knolls, hedges, ruts, holes, streams, surfaces of all sorts of textures and descriptions and levels, and vegetation with varying colors, smells, textures, and growing characteristics.

Openness. Outside there is a vastness, a sense of infinite boundaries, even if only in one direction — up.

Messiness. Outdoors we can be much freer to be messy (or, perhaps more appropriately, earthy).

Wildlife. The world of uncaged birds and squirrels, bugs, worms, and other life forms is outside our windows.

People. Outdoors there are people in their natural habitat: working, living, playing, traveling.

All of the above is, of course, not news. Yet I think it is important to begin here if one of our criteria for design is to take advantage of what the outdoors has to offer. If we look at some outdoor settings for children (traditional school playgrounds come to mind), it is clear that this criteria may not have been taken into account.

The Nature of Infants and Toddlers

In the first two and a half years of life “children go all the way from complete helplessness to autonomy and assertiveness without any moral responsibility” (Ferguson). A baby actually thinks and acts through his gross motor abilities. Babies experience a very different world than we do, one dominated by senses and bounded by the here and now: their own

body, this moment's feelings, the limits of their physical control. They are also very small and "have tiny little hands and tiny little feet" (Randy Newman), and the scale of settings they find themselves in is rarely accommodating. Imagine what it is like to investigate predominantly with your eyes, mouth, and entire body (and not your mind and hands), to store knowledge in your physical reactions. An understanding of the way babies are and how they learn is critical to planning quality outdoor space.

Infants and toddlers have a drive to explore, to discover, to comprehend — in Piaget's terms to "construct" reality, in Montessori's terms to "absorb" their environment, in Susan Issac's words to "realize themselves." The more an infant sees and is able to make comprehensible, the more he wants to see. Vision becomes coordinated with hearing and other senses and with growing motor skills. The baby is constructing, piece by piece, "the world as we know it" — more accurately to a Piagetian, "as I know it." As a toddler begins to master her body and extend her field of action, her will to achieve greater and more sophisticated mobility is joyfully insistent.

Outdoors, as well as in, the baby needs a safe world where above all else, in Jerome Bruner's words, he is "encouraged to venture, rewarded for venturing his own acts, and sustained against distraction or premature interferences in carrying them out" — a world that doesn't make them ill, frighten them, or inordinately bang them up. Columbus would not have made his second voyage if he fell off the edge, or even if he just had a close call. Babies also come equipped with parents who have a quotient for cleanliness, scrapes, and bruises.

Because the outdoors presents countless threats to life and limb of the hardest baby, it may be tempting to just keep them inside. (They do eat worms, after all, and have not heard Frank Zappa's caution about yellow snow.) Danger lurks with ingestion, falls, the effects of sun and wind on sensitive skin, and, not least, those sturdy classmates bereft of moral responsibility. "When you have an infant of three months lying on his back watching tree patterns together with a two and a half year old who is learning to pour sand, it can be a disastrous combination" (Ferguson). Yet good design and thoughtful adults can overcome these obstacles.

The Nature of Caregivers

Because we do not customarily approve of babies on the loose by themselves, infant toddler playgrounds are also places for adults, and the design must take this into account. If there is no shade or wind break, if access to the outdoors is inconvenient, if keeping the children safe and healthy appears to require considerable effort, if there is no comfortable place to sit or lie down with a baby — in short, if it feels like a hassle to get out and an unpleasant experience to be out — use of the outdoors will be minimal.

The act of going out and being out with a baby is very different than with older children. **Going** out usually requires more forethought — change diapers? bring which bottles? sunscreen? whose nap times are coming up? — and preparation — stuff into snowsuits, fill the diaper bags, find the strollers.

Being out requires a level of grounds keeping found elsewhere only on putting greens, a watchfulness associated with the Secret Service, and a tolerance for periodic inactivity similar to that of Ferdinand the Bull. Appreciating a six month old's grooving on the sounds and sight of water dripping from the gutter only lasts so long. It is also important to note that adults, of course, vary considerably in their appreciation of the outdoors.

The Landscape

The basic dilemma: The infant toddler landscape has to be safe to eat. Shrubs, flowers, and trees in all stages of growth cannot be toxic and should be checked with the local poison control center (nurseries probably won't know in enough depth since the question of children sucking on shrubs rarely comes up). Sand areas that attract cats, wooden objects that grow moss and mushrooms, and gravel areas all present problems that need to be thought through.

Ideally, outdoor spaces for babies would have a variety of:

Surfaces: Grass, sand, wood. There should be gentle inclines to roll down and toddle up, grassy knolls to feel secluded in, and flat surfaces to strut and wobble upon.

Textures: Smooth round boulders, coarse bark and smooth sensual wood, soft and not so soft pine

needles, and other vegetation to feel and rub up against.

Color and scent as seasons change: Trees and shrubs that complement each other and transform themselves as seasons change with falling leaves, cones, and blossoms, and peeling bark (all certified by Euell Gibbons as edible).

Places to be: Round boulders and shrubs to create miniature grottos and secluded baby-size groves to go in and out, over and around; shady spots and sunny spots; open areas and tight hideaways.

Pathways: A pathway not only structures traffic patterns but in itself can be a central site for learning and exploration. Changing surfaces from dirt to cobblestone, wobbly planks, half logs, wood rounds, patterned rock, colored brick, and so on provides motor challenges and sensory exploration for babies as they crawl, toddle, push, or haul. Varying railings to include poles, chain, rope, and iron again changes the experience. (Remember how your hands were drawn to exploring railings as a child?) Pathways are exciting because they go somewhere; meandering pathways invite stopping along the way.

Barriers: Barriers, like pathways, direct the traffic flow and enclose activity areas. A creative use of barriers, restricting children to developmentally appropriate areas by requiring certain skills to surmount them, allows self-regulation. Jerry Ferguson at Pacific Oaks used tunnels, slatted wooden surfaces, shrubs, and other means to naturally regulate the whereabouts of crawlers and freewheeling toddlers. Tiny retaining walls of rock or wood that babies can lean against, scale, and explore with fingers and bellies and gates that open and close combine learning and crowd control.

Structures on the Landscape

Canopies, umbrella mounts: Shade is essential; and without trees, canopies, lawn umbrellas, and awnings become prime alternatives.

Swings: Opportunities to move in space, alone or with a trusted adult, are provided by swings with baby seats, porch swings, hammocks, and cradles.

Skeletal structures: Set in the ground ladders, hurdles, and bench-like structures are in themselves motor structures for climbing on, over, under.

Skeletons can become even more by adding planks, ladders, fabric, and so on.

Fabric and flapping things: Banners, parachutes, wind chimes, and branches make wind visible and audible.

Decks or platforms: Wooden flooring outside offers a flat surface that drains easily, providing a good place for water play and outdoor play when the ground is wet. Raised, a platform offers a baby a chance to *get high* and to see the world from a new vantage point.

Slides: A slide inset in a hill eliminates most of the risk and leaves the thrills and spills.

Half-buried tires: Tires provide mini tunnels, places to sit or lean, and pathway railings. They can be painted to reduce surface heat.

Lean-tos, houses: Anything with a roof is a play-house.

Young infant area: An enclosed area that encourages reaching, grasping, kicking, and so on as well as a variety of visual, auditory, and other sensory experiences (using fabric, branches, falling water, and so on).

Sound structures: Miniature shrines with materials that react to wind or touch with sound and motion.

Elevated waterways: Wooden, metal, or stone troughs off the ground that provide water in motion.

Diaper tables: In warm climates, outdoor diapering will maximize outdoor play.

Climbers, dead trees: Anything to pull up on, straddle, climb.

Wobbly structures: Boards on springs or tires, logs or planks barely off the ground fastened to a frame with chains, anything with a slight wobble.

Logs, benches: Places for adults to sit or lean while observing or nurturing babies.

Stored equipment and materials: Planks, ladders, parachutes and other fabric, wagons, wheel toys, wheelbarrows, pillows, balls, sand/water toys, and creative *junk*.

The success of infant/toddler outdoor time ultimately depends on the adults in the setting — adults who recognize and encourage the scientist and explorer in each baby, accept the ups and literal downs that ensue, and at the same time maintain a watchful eye and nurturant presence for long periods of relatively uneventful action. A good playground design can make the outdoor experience a delight for adults and babies.

References

Bruner, Jerome S. "Organization of Early Skilled Action," **Child Development**, 44:1-111, p. 8, 1973.

Ferguson, Jerry. In **Supporting the Growth of Infants, Toddlers and Parents**, edited by Elizabeth Jones. Pasadena, CA: Pacific Oaks, 1979.

*The term *babies* is out of fashion but using it reminds us that infants *and* toddlers are indeed babies. The automatic tendency toward jargon-irrelevant precision can be harmful, e.g. are you pre-middle age?

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