

The Adventure Outside Your Classroom Door

Preschool children love the out-of-doors. For many children in preschools and child care centers, the time for outdoors is their favorite time of the day. But for directors and teachers, the playground can be an area of constant concern.

Administrators are looking long and hard at their current playgrounds and finding them unacceptable from a developmental and safety standpoint. An increase nationally in the number of injuries and subsequent lawsuits has forced those involved with young children to pay special attention to the equipment and maintenance of their playgrounds.

Teachers feel the need to make the playground more of an extension of the classroom in terms of learning. And parents are demanding more than an exercise-only playground for their children. So, how can we make the most of this expensive and expansive area?

► Don't Forget the Power of Play

Playgrounds for the most part have taken a back seat to research in the classroom. The National Association for the Education of Young Children describes play as the key component of a developmentally appropriate program, but offers few guidelines for the out-of-doors (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Research supports the value of play regardless of whether you're inside or outside. Play promotes problem solving, language development, creativity, social skills, discovery, and motor skills (Johnson et al., 1987). Teachers and administrators understand the potential play has for the developing child and they support it with materials, time, and space to play daily. This awareness in the power of play is a big part of the inspiration for a reassessment of our outdoor environment.

► Types of Playgrounds

Within the last few years, early childhood educators have been reexamining their traditional play yards and are seeking exciting equipment and approaches to outdoor play. These new nontraditional playgrounds fall

into three basic categories: designer playgrounds, adventure playgrounds, and creative playgrounds.

- Designer playgrounds are planned by professional architects. They are visually beautiful with lush landscaping and a variety of commercial and natural material structures.
- Adventure playgrounds are child centered, with an abundance of raw materials available, and a play leader on hand to lend assistance if needed. There is building, digging, gardening, animal care, outdoor cooking, water play, and play with the basic materials of sand, dirt, and water. Adventure playgrounds were originally designed to give children an opportunity to do what adults do outdoors.
- Creative playgrounds are somewhere between the other two. They are designed using commercial play equipment and natural and found materials such as railroad ties and truck tires.

Which type of playground is the right one for your center?

► One Adventure-Type Playground

Ask Ky Murphy, the director of the Summerhill Children's House in Enid, Oklahoma. Ky's play-

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ground illustrates the unique approaches to outdoor play being seen across the United States. On any given day, you can find children caring for animals in the small petting zoo. They may care for, feed, and pet goats, chickens, ducks, and even a donkey. Or they may prefer to play kick ball in the open field area. On this adventure-type playground, you will *not* find a typical multilevel deck and post climbing structure, but rather a *castle*, a large *pirate ship*, a *fort*, and a *playhouse* with its own carport for fast food pick up in the drive-by window. In addition, there is a large garden area for growing fruits, vegetables, and flowers.

This outdoor space is a good example of meeting the play needs of the children by use of imagination coupled with abundant materials. The playground is a homegrown effort that was designed by Ky and her partner, Nancy Heim, and built by local contractors. The area for outdoor play is extremely generous (a half acre) but to date, with 110 toddlers through kindergarten age children, they have never had any concerns with safety or liability.

► Not All Playgrounds Are Created Equal

There is no doubt that playground design and development has had a recent revival, largely because of the safety and liability issues with older playgrounds. But many see teachers' and administrators' concerns for safety as the force toward sterile landscapes and fixed equipment that has little play value for children. This emphasis has turned some playgrounds from child-centered environments to *structured* center environments. Dr. Tom Jambor of the University of Alabama, an independent playground designer, feels passionately that as early childhood educators we have reduced playground design to a single play structure that may be beautiful to look at but lacks lasting play value for children. He cites the growing concerns for safety and the strict guidelines from the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the Americans with Disabilities Act for this trend. For him, today's playgrounds are "boring." Summerhill's playground may be the exception to Dr. Jambor's statement, but it is certainly not alone.

► What's Ideal?

The first adventure playgrounds were designed shortly after World War II by an architect who became fascinated by the children playing in the vacant lot next to a construction site. Even though

there was a playground available, they chose to dig and build with the construction scraps. This basic need children have to create was the inspiration for adventure playgrounds in Europe and later in the United States.

There is not one adventure-type playground design that works for all centers, but there are some key components to bring the spirit of this kind of playground to your site:

- A wide variety of equipment and materials must be available for children to choose from. New play structures can be built, torn down, and reconfigured with the materials on hand by the playground participants. These loose materials might include tires; large snap-together plastic blocks; planks to use for ramps, slides, and balancing; carpentry wood and tools; rope; and plastic piping. Also included here would be the natural materials of sand, dirt, and water. The list is endless and gives children opportunities to invent and create.
- A large storage area is essential to house tools and supplies.
- A supportive staff is critical to lend a helping hand in moving materials and facilitating play with appropriate questions and dialogue. Staff members are necessary to ensure multiple opportunities for children to be real-life problem solvers.
- Educated parents and staff must understand the value of play. Young children should have an extended outdoor play period, a minimum of 30 minutes once or twice daily.

Adventure playgrounds are not without their problems. Keeping your playground fully stocked with loose materials is a continuous job, so be prepared to spend time scrounging for new materials the children can use. Because of the nature of the loose materials used, your outdoor environment will not look as attractive as a more conventional playground. This may not be a concern for your center if you have appropriate fencing enclosing your play area. Teachers and aides using this kind of playground take an active role in setting out materials and facilitating play. Therefore, administrators must ensure that their staffs are well prepared to be facilitators and co-players with the children. Liability and safety have been found to be less of a problem on adventure playgrounds as there is a great deal of evidence that this type of play environment is as safe as other types of playgrounds (Frost, 1992; Vance, 1982).

► One Success Story

The Houston Adventure Play Association (HAPA) is a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing school-age care with this exciting playground concept. To date, two true adventure playgrounds have been organized at Houston area elementary schools. These sites provide a wonderful opportunity to see adventure playgrounds in action. Mark Twain Elementary School and Tijerina Elementary School worked with HAPA to create safe and exciting places for children. Both sites offer arts and crafts, gardening, animal care, woodworking, and play with the natural materials of sand and water. A specially trained staff works cooperatively with groups of children as they invent and create with the materials available. These playgrounds have proved extremely popular with the children and the school staff.

► The Curriculum Outdoors

Teachers, administrators, and parents are realizing that the indoor curriculum can be easily integrated outdoors. The fact that activities are outdoors does not mean that they are any less important for the children. In fact, outdoor environments can easily complement the developmentally appropriate indoor early childhood program. Teachers must learn to plan the outdoor environment much the way they plan indoors. Learning centers, such as the art center, housekeeping, and the library — along with prop boxes and building blocks — should be regular features outdoors. Most activities planned for indoors can just as easily be moved outdoors.

The ideal playground is developmentally appropriate, safe, and meaningful for children — and allows the curriculum of the classroom to be explored out of doors.

Play has always been a part of the day for our youngest children, but just setting aside time for play each day is only the beginning. Teachers should be watching, asking questions of the children, listening to their understanding, and prodding them to stretch their ideas. The goal is for children to continue to develop their perspective taking, their symbolic thinking, their problem-solving skills, and to learn to think creatively and flexibly during their play. This does not happen independently of an attentive adult. Time for play must be set aside each day, and a stronger connection must be made for outdoor play and the implicit curriculum for children to receive the fullest benefit of this time.

In the last few years, we have seen a remarkable increase in the improvements of playgrounds for young children. Sterile, uninteresting playgrounds are being

replaced with thoughtful environments that are functional and exciting for those who play there. We know there is no single ideal playground design, but rather many ways to design a developmentally appropriate outdoor environment for young children.

We want children to be given every opportunity to learn and develop in all aspects of play. When adults provide well-designed adventure-type play environments, children extend their understanding and thinking. They identify problems and challenge themselves to solve them. When centers designate the playground as a play-only area, they devalue its potential for learning. Instead, think of the playground and outdoor play as central to extending the learning of the classroom. When adults deny appropriate play experiences to children because of their concerns with the acquisition of academics, keeping children clean, or a less than perfect weather day, they deny them the opportunity to participate in an activity that critically distinguishes children from adults.

► References

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