

Adventure Playgrounds and Outdoor Safety Issues

by Janet McGinnis

How is it that children's play yards have evolved from sand piles to the manufactured slides, climbers, and swings found on most playgrounds today? Children's outdoor play environments have been influenced over the years by play theories that date back to Jean Jacques Rousseau of France in the 18th century, who advocated for a return to nature speaking to children's need for a sense of freedom (Christianson & Vogel song, 1996). Playgrounds have taken many forms over the years, with an overriding recognition of the important fact that play is essential to early development. Play is the work of early childhood and the way by which children learn and grow.

Attempts to provide the ideal outdoor setting for children's play have been inspired by the desire to support physical challenge, play and recreation, organized games, and exploration of the natural world. In the 1970s and '80s we saw adventure playgrounds develop using discarded materials such as scrap lumber, rubber tires, old vehicles, and other recycled materials. This concept of adventure playgrounds began in Europe in the 1930s. Sometimes referred to as "junk playgrounds" these were informal areas found most frequently in Scandinavian countries where children create their own design and structures under the supervision of a play leader. The popularity of adventure playgrounds has reappeared over the years (like bellbottom pants) and still has many supporters.

More recently, safety concerns have been raised as an increase in playground injuries have received media attention. The concern for safety is justified. Over 200,000 children are treated in hospital emergency rooms in the US each year as a result of playground equipment-related injuries (Tinsworth & McDonald, 2001). There has been a strong emphasis on identifying the cause of these injuries and constructing safer playground equipment. Much progress has been made in playground equipment safety. As a result of guidelines published by the Consumer Product Safety Commission in the

Handbook for Public Playground Safety, and the publication of the 2001 American Society of Testing and Materials International Standard 1487, important equipment-related safety issues such as unsafe surfaces, spaces that can entrap a child, protruding hardware, and unsafe equipment layout to name a few, have been addressed.

Many existing playgrounds, however, still have unsafe equipment (US PIRG, 2001), and this has received a great deal of public attention and concern. A simple solution that corrects all problems quickly is difficult to find. The cost of replacing unsafe equipment or purchasing equipment for new development has been difficult for many organizations, schools, and child care programs. Many programs find themselves with open areas where unsafe equipment has been removed, but nothing has yet replaced it. As dollars are being spent to upgrade playgrounds with safer equipment, there also appears to be growing awareness that children in our country are spending less time outdoors than in previous generations. In our culture, we seem to have lost sight of the health benefits and learning opportunities that abound in the outdoor



Janet R. McGinnis, M.Ed. has consulted with child care providers and organizations in the area of health and safety since 1989 and specializes in the outdoor environment. She holds a master's degree in health education, is a certified playground safety inspector, a child care health consultant, and has completed the Child Care Design Institute with the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University. Janet chairs the Outdoor Learning Environments Advisory Committee for the North Carolina Partnership for Children (Smart Start) and designed and presented a statewide train-the-trainer program in North Carolina for infant and toddler outdoor learning environments funded by the NC Division of Child Development. She is president of Health Directions, Inc., and provides training and consultation services nationally.

environment that have little to do with playground equipment.

For previous generations spending time outdoors was a given. Children walked to and from school, played outdoors after school every day, played outdoors all day until dark on weekends, and their families had picnics, went to parks, or camped to make outdoor time a part of everyday life.

Today, many children have a very different lifestyle. More children are in child care, more families have two working parents, fewer parents are able to stay home with children, there is less community in neighborhoods, and there are more concerns about safety. As a result, children are going out-



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doors less. Often, the only exposure children have to the outdoors is when they go outdoors in child care. This awareness has brought many child care professionals to reconsider what they want children to get from their outdoor experiences.

Traditionally, the outdoors has been viewed as the arena for practice and development of gross motor skills. Children today undeniably need to have opportunities to be physically active. With growing rates of obesity reaching even into the preschool population, the clear message is that watching television, playing computer and video games, eating fast foods, and leading a sedentary lifestyle is not healthy for children or adults. In response to these trends, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education has recently published physical activity guidelines for children birth to five years of age (NASPE, 2002). Offering safe opportunities for children to challenge themselves physically is important. Providing safe playground equipment is an excellent way to offer this challenge.

The outdoors environment can offer many more possibilities than playground equipment alone for active play and learning. The ways in which we develop outdoor spaces and outdoor programming for children in child care and school settings can address safety issues while also enriching childhood experiences outdoors.

RECESS OR RESOURCE?

Many adults today came from an era of school recess — a time for children to take a break from classroom learning and “run off a little of that energy.” The outdoor time during school was generally a time children played on the available equipment, played ball together, often formed their own play groups, and teachers were often on the side, available but uninvolved. The word itself, “recess,” implies taking a break from . . . what? The classroom? Learning? The underlying attitude is that children *learn* in the classroom and *stop learning or take a break*, outdoors.

As early childhood professionals, we know that children learn from play and that children do not stop learning when they go outdoors. But what messages are we giving children in the traditional playground setting? Generally, playgrounds have a few pieces of equipment, protective surfacing, and are enclosed by a fence. Often, equipment is crowded to the point that there is not space to run, and the setting does not reflect a natural world. For children in full time care, this may be their only experience of the outdoor world.

We may not believe that children stop learning outdoors, but in many schools and child care settings, the outdoor areas have not been embraced as part of a learning environment, have not been developed, and are not utilized by children to inspire learning or active play. Children get bored if they have the same few pieces of equipment to play on every time they go out. And it isn't safe to bring loose parts, riding toys, or construction toys into a playground equipment area.

HOW CAN WE STRIKE A BALANCE?

Balancing safety and risk is perhaps the biggest challenge faced when developing outdoor learning environments, and there are no universal answers to the questions that arise. We have come to hear the many cautions about the outdoors as reasons to not go out at all. There are dangers not only with equipment, but also with sun exposure, ozone, children's clothing, poisonous plants, insecticides and pesticides, and lead paint. We are told of the need to protect children's heads on riding toys by using helmets, then we find that there are issues related to head lice and hazards with children wearing

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

helmets on equipment being in danger of becoming entrapped. It seems that our solutions create new problems.

In an old favorite, *Mud, Sand, and Water*, by Dorothy Hill, Carol Copple, ed. brings attention to the health and safety issues related to sand and water play and states, "The challenge is to provide a safe play environment and yet ensure that children do not lose out on some of childhood's finest experiences: squeezing mud through their fingers, blowing bubbles, creating worlds in the sand. The many joys of mud, sand, and water, after all, remain unchanged!" (Hill, p.2).

Striking a balance is not easy. We are learning more every day about how to provide the best quality and safest environments for children, and we need to pay attention and use that information to improve our programs. Safety in the outdoor learning environment results from a well planned design and installation, regular maintenance, supervision, planned activities, and opportunities for guided learning. Safety involves much more than the physical environment.

Professionals working to improve outdoor spaces for children, whether they come from a design background, early childhood education, or manufacturing, have become increasingly challenged to the point of frustration as they attempt to address health and safety concerns.

To strike a balance, it is important not to succumb to a reaction in either extreme:

Denial: These safety cautions are ridiculous — ignore them! Let kids be kids! We could never create an outdoor environment that would satisfy all these health and safety concerns!

VERSUS

Alarmist: Let's make sure nothing bad could ever happen outdoors to a child under any circumstance. Or, it's so dangerous out there! It's safer to stay inside and not go outdoors at all.

The first response results in a hazardous environment, the latter an environment with no challenge or perhaps no outdoor time at all.

The bottom line is that we cannot childproof the outdoors, but we can make it child friendly. Outdoor environment conditions change daily with weather, seasons, and use. Health and safety issues are continuous and changing.

Suggestions for striking a balance:

1. Embrace the rules: This is a bold request in light of the many rules that are available and the many people who react

negatively to rules. Perhaps it is helpful to think of rules as being the guardrails that keep us from driving off the road. Let's face it, we need guidance sometimes. And we have wonderful resources to guide us to address health and safety issues outdoors. In addition, every state has licensing rules that may provide additional guidance.

2. Provide a wide range of opportunities outdoors for children. Provide anchored equipment safely, and don't let it dominate the outdoor environment.

3. Plan for safe activities, storage, and use of materials in the outdoors. Health and safety guidance for this can be found in sanitation rules or in *Caring for Our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs*, Second Edition, 2002, published by the American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

4. Develop reasonable and workable rules, and an outdoor environment maintenance plan using a team approach utilizing directors, caregivers, children, and parents. Include child care health consultants, licensing consultants, and other professionals available to your organization in the plan as well.

5. When children spend time outdoors, they will undoubtedly interact with their environment, whatever it may be, and explore, be creative, and come up with ideas and things to do that perhaps their caregivers did not foresee and for which they feel unprepared. Where there are no rules, consider the value versus the risk. For example, there may be no rule about bare feet; caregivers are in a position to make a judgment call. Some will strongly oppose allowing children to have bare feet outdoors and some will feel strongly that it is an important part of the outdoor experience. Weigh the value of the activity and the risk.

Risks: Cuts, parasites (remote risk), skin infections, injuries to feet, burn to feet from hot surfaces.

Values: Feeling mud, sensory input, freedom, taking risks, learning limits, good grip, manipulation, slows down running.

Individual caregivers will have varying degrees of comfort with the outdoor environment as they do indoors. The decisions often require thought and asking the question, "How can we make it possible for this activity or feature to be safely offered?" The answer will vary from one setting to another. It is not easy, but it is our responsibility to provide opportunities for children to be challenged, stimulated, and safe outdoors in child care settings.