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Conflict and Play in a Child's World

by Jill Wood

Every summer a dump truck delivers 10 cubic yards of play sand, dumping it in a designated area of our three-acre playground. In August, children delight in climbing the hill of sand, letting their bodies tumble forward, knowing the pile will collapse to catch their fall. Others stretch a tarp over the side of the sand pile, then take a running jump off the top, landing on whatever plastic bucket lids they have secured to their bottoms to optimize gravity's pull. But by far the most popular two activities are shooting water from a hose into the pile of sand to watch it erode, and making elaborate networks of reservoirs connected by trenches, hose pieces and PVC pipe.

Our playground has only one sand pile and a few hoses. We use a clever system of splitters that transform one hose into three or four, but with 16-24 kids on the playground, there are daily disagreements regarding the purpose of the hoses and who gets to hold them. Children argue over which areas of sand are designated for reservoirs versus tarp slides, which are for blasting holes

through the middle of the pile versus precisely redirecting water towards a tiny pipe, and which areas are for tumbling down versus building up.

"You just stepped in Lake AP!"

"Your water is touching my castle!"

"How would you like it if I ruined something you worked hard to make?" [Followed by ruining the thing the other child has worked hard to make.]

Adults often wage wars over resources such as water, fertile land, fuel; children fight over the same things, just



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pleasure of sharing time and space with children at play since. She has studied playwork in the UK and holds a masters of library and information science. She founded Bayou City Play in 2014 as a way to reach the wider Houston community through loose parts play sessions in local hospitals, schools, libraries, parks, and nature preserves.



Photo by Jill Wood

as passionately, just as competitively, and with the most powerful weapons in their arsenal—their bodies, their words, and their ingenuity.

We adults can create structure to make these issues go away temporarily, for instance by using a timer to figure out how long each child may hold the hose, or creating quadrants in the sand for different projects, but these “solutions” are temporary and take away one of the most important features of our playground—the freedom to take risks and experience the full range of human emotion amongst peers, which includes the freedom to experience conflict.

Adventure Playgrounds

Our playground is one of just a handful play spaces in the United States modeled after adventure playgrounds throughout Europe and parts of Asia, where children have access to real tools and building supplies, but also to other children, time, and permission to create their own play agendas.

These playgrounds are termed adventure playgrounds, or “junk playgrounds” after the non-precious nature of the materials on site, and the freedom children have to manipulate them. Shaped by the communities that use them, they take on many forms, but by definition, all adventure playgrounds must prioritize child-directed play; have plenty of loose parts that can be used in whatever way children wish; and must have adults trained in playwork, a professional approach developed on UK adventure playgrounds during the 20th century.

Playwork defines children’s play as activity that is “freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.” When children are given permission to play freely for several hours, they may be overwhelmed by that freedom at first,



Photo by Jill Wood

but eventually they get their bearings, find their strengths and never look back.

Our adventure playground is located in Houston, Texas, so the site is flat, swampy, and sometimes smells like sulfur when the wind blows strongly from the refineries located east of the city. It is not bucolic, but it is nature as defined by southeast Texas. We share our three acres with frogs, crawfish, snakes, and egrets. We have carpets of wildflowers and delicious blackberries in the spring, and while we do not have many trees or mountains to climb, we can have hills of sand delivered by truck, and the children would tell you it is the most beautiful place on earth, because they built it themselves.

Sometimes building your own playground involves hammers, nails, and lumber, but often the play is in children’s minds. In a single two-and-a-half hour play session we might see play schemes that involve a battle with homemade props and costumes, a game of hide and seek, daydreaming in a hammock, challenges involving height or speed, and potions that include every collectible ingredient on site. Some of those play schemes may last seconds, some may go on for days or even years, but what all of the play will have in common is that it will be self-chosen and deeply important in the moment.

It will also involve risk-taking, because children are built to push themselves, and where there is risk-taking there is conflict. People fight over things that are important to them.

Playwork and Conflict

On our playground, children direct the play, so we also want them to direct the conflict within the play. It can be difficult for us playworkers; our grown-up hearts want to protect children from pain and turn conflict into teaching moments where ideals such as respect, empathy, and justice can be exemplified in real time. But this is not what playworkers do. While we cannot allow children to physically hurt one another, nor do we allow systematic bullying to occur, we try our best to view everything from a child's perspective, and children simply do not see conflict the same way adults do. So, we hold back as long as we can. We keep a close eye and register details, but we do not intervene to facilitate a conversation, unless a child is in danger of being hurt.

For instance, let's say Sofia destroyed Edgar's sandcastle. He has been working on it for hours and she mowed it down on a homemade sand sled.

Within an adult-world context, this looks like a grave injustice. If someone were to delete this article to make more space on the hard drive as I am writing it, I would be incensed. But eight times out of 10, when playworkers hold back, Edgar does not care because his sandcastle was not the goal. He may have been enjoying the feel of sand in his skin for the past few hours, or he may have been learning how much water to add to sand to make it hold its shape. Maybe he was working on his sandcastle in that spot so he could listen to the conversation happening nearby. He may have built it close to the sledding area hoping to get Sofia's attention.



Above: An example of "graffiti conflict resolution," that can be found on the playground.

If he has been on our playground for any length of time, he knows that when you build sandcastles they are temporary and an adult will not instruct another child to rebuild it. He also knows there are hammer and nails available to build something more long-standing and that he will be back tomorrow, the sand will be there and the slide may not.

In those two cases out of 10, when Edgar lets out a howl of despair, we playworkers would walk slowly and quietly toward them. We would let Sofia try to make it better as she sees fit, and if she ignores him, we would wait to see how Edgar handles himself. Does he express his anger in a clear and safe way? Does Sofia choose to deal with it, or simply move away?

Other Possible Scenarios

- Edgar and Sofia invent a game that involves building stuff to destroy with a sled.
- Edgar is angry at first but is really relaxed and flexible because of the two hours he has spent touching sand. He calms down quickly and rebuilds further from the sledding area.



Photos by Jill Wood

- Edgar begins a slow, steady revenge that involves allies, force fields and a giant wall of tires.

That is as many scenarios as I can come up with because I am an adult and context is everything, but often children will solve disagreements on playgrounds through play rather than verbal language. Sometimes conflict will shift a narrative to a different, more interesting place. Always, conflict presents an opportunity for children to decide where to put priorities. Is it more important to slide down a hill or fix a relationship? Am I really angry or just a little angry? Do I take a stand or find something else that is just as fun? Most often, children arrive at respect, empathy, and justice on their own, because when adults step back, children really need one another. Those lessons in how to share space with other humans will happen in real time as children define time—through their own experience.

Playwork Applied

Playwork was invented on adventure playgrounds, where children have a lot of agency. They also have time, loose parts and, ideally, plenty of space. I realize in many contexts there is not a wealth of these three things, but finagling more of any of them will lessen the problematic nature of conflict and make it into something that belongs to the children.

- Loose Parts: Play supplies work best when salvaged from recycling bins or end-of-the-year closet purges; the cheaper the materials, the easier it will be to let children use them as they like. Boxes, cardboard tubes, ribbons, plastic containers, spools, buckets, and pieces of fabric work well. Since nails and lumber are not an option in most early childhood centers, tape, string, playdough, glue dots, and plain old gravity work well for sticking materials to other materials.
- Time: Larger blocks of time are better than a series of short, so if you have two 20-minute breaks for play, see if you can combine them into one 40-minute break. This makes for fewer transitions and allows children to delve deeper into play. If you have to choose between materials, time, or space, time is the one that will make the most impact.

Nothing we adults do will make play pain-free, but having the opportunity to encounter struggle in a safe environment, with adults who can acknowledge that pain, is helpful.

- Space: Many of us work in environments with limited space and there is no getting around it. In a classroom environment, it can be helpful to set aside a space within your room—a defined “free play zone” so the children know this area will be child-directed.

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What can be trickier is creating an environment in which parents allow you to allow conflict. When you consider that playworkers, who are trained to hold back and let children take charge, struggle with seeing children experience sadness, frustration and anger, you can only imagine how it feels to a parent. On our playground, we focus on parent education, model empathy, and reassure. We let parents know that if Edgar is heartbroken about his sandcastle and Sofia ignores him altogether,

that we will be there for him, we can offer hugs if asked, or help gather tires for a wall if that is what he chooses. Most importantly, we treat parents with the same courtesy we do children on our playground. We give them time to feel all they need to feel and enough space to learn what they are capable of.

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