Inviting Children Into the Fun: Providing Enough Activity Choices Outdoors

by Elizabeth Jones

Nicholson's concern was that children are cheated of their creativity when adults have had all the fun playing.

In environments which offer the possibility of discovery and inventiveness, children's play sustains itself.

The more complex an environment, the greater its potential "to keep children continuously interested. If children are expected to play in an area for any length of time, high complexity seems virtually essential." (Kritchevsky, Prescott, and Walling)

Simon Nicholson's "theory of loose parts" says:

In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kinds of variables in it.

. . . most environments that do not work . . . do not do so because they do not meet the "loose parts" requirement. Instead, they are clean, static, and impossible to play around with. What has happened is that adults in the form of professional artists, architects, landscape architects, and planners have had all the fun playing with their own materials, concepts, and planning alternatives, and then builders have had all the fun building the environments out of real materials. And thus has all the fun and creativity been stolen; children and adults and the community have been grossly cheated . . . (Nicholson, 1974, p. 30)

Children, like adult designers and builders, need loose parts with which to design and build for themselves. In environments which offer the possibility of discovery and inventiveness, children's play sustains itself. In environments devoid of loose parts, children get in trouble. It isn't very difficult to change one environment to the other.

Loose Parts in Action

The public school where Mary Lou teaches kindergarten also has two preschool classes with which she shares a large asphalt play yard. Mary Lou has given a great deal of thought to the organization of her classroom, which is her own, but not to the shared outdoor space. Nor, in September, had the preschool teachers.

September

There are 33 four year olds outdoors with no loose parts except sand and one frisbee. The stationary equipment includes four swings and several climbers and slides. Children are climbing, sliding, swinging, waiting for turns on the swings, running, and throwing sand. Four children are playing with the frisbee. Three boys are wrestling in the sand. There is a bike path painted on the asphalt; several children are running around it. A boy discovers that the slide makes a fine loud drum, using his heels, but an adult tells him to stop.

A running child falls and skins her knee. She cries loudly. "Why is she crying?" one adult asks another. "She was *running*," is the accusing answer.

The most imaginative play in the yard—with the dramatic theme "Run Away and Hide!"—has been organized by two small boys who are hiding in the bushes, then running around the corner and along the covered walkway adjacent to the yard. They are entirely out of sight of any adult. They disappear and reappear; it is some time before they are caught at this illegal game.

Children have been outside for 25 minutes; some are asking to go in for lunch. But it isn't lunch time. "I can break down the door," says one boy hopefully. Several children waiting on the porch organize a running game until a teacher arrives to organize them into a line and take them in.

Early October

All three classes are outside, a total of at least 45 children. Teachers have brought out bikes and a hoop. Many children are waiting for turns. Complaints of "Teacher!" are frequently heard. It's been windy, and the porch and the dirt under the trees are covered with leaves—loose parts which no one seems to have noticed.

A visitor, too frustrated to remain an observer, asks one of the teachers, whom she knows, if it would be all right to bring out a few crates and the animals from the block area. The teacher, surprised but curious, thinks about the idea and then agrees.

The visitor puts the crates on the porch, stands up several animals in a crate, and puts the remaining animals in the leaves under the trees. "What are those for?" asks a curious child. "I thought they might like to come outside in the leaves," says the visitor. "Can we play with them?" And play they do—zoo, animal fight, bury animals in the leaves, take them for a bike ride, wash them in the drinking fountain. Animal-washing is particularly absorbing for several children over a long period of time.

Enterprising children from the other preschool class go into their room and bring out their animals—and a few cars for good measure. Oh oh, the two rooms' animals are going to get mixed up, thinks the visitor. How nice, a cooperative classification activity in the making, is her second thought. She suggests the idea to the other teacher. Then she leaves, wondering what will be happening on her next visit—and whether she'll even be welcome.

Late October

The visitor returns to spend some time in the other preschool room, apparently welcome. At the end of circle time the teacher asks the children, "What would you like to bring outside?" "Animals," says one boy, and they do. They don't even have to wait in line today; when children are ready, out they go.

Outdoors, the sand table is filled with rice and lots of tools. There is also a crate full of tools which children can take to the sand around the climbers, bikes and wagons, stilts, a ball, and leaves. The preschool teacher across the way has spread a mat on the porch against the classroom wall, added two lacy pillows, a quilt, and some dolls to make a large bed, and now is sitting comfortably on it in the sun. One girl is snuggled next to her, talking; two others are tucking dolls into bed. Again the drinking fountain gets used for washing animals; some children bring containers from the sand to fill with water. Wet sand is much more useful than dry sand.

Later in the morning, brooms, dust pans, and a trash can are brought out by a teacher and used enthusiastically by children. There are lots of leaves to be swept.

This morning, with many loose parts available and with adult attentiveness to play, outdoor play goes on for an hour. Everyone loses track of the time, in fact, until a teacher notices in surprise that it's lunch time.

It really did happen this way. Even the visitor, who knew all about the theory of loose parts, was astonished at how much difference additional materials made. Teachers had thought it would be too much work to take things outside; but once children had more to do, supervising their play became both easy and fun. Play was more complex, incorporating dramatic themes as well as physical action.

Outdoor time was no longer just recess. The space now offered clearly defined play areas and encouraged purposeful movement between them. Children moved all over the yard; they carried containers from sand to water fountain and back, from rice table to water fountain and back, from sand to bed and back. They were too busy to play "Run Away and Hide." They were even too busy to pay attention to the large truck that drove right into the middle of their yard, mid-morning, and parked there to supply workmen on the school roof. The children, workmen themselves, simply detoured around the truck on their purposeful journeys.

The staff had set up an environment outdoors which permitted dramatic play and language to flourish. They permitted children to help create the environment—to bring out things they thought they would need, and to go back in for more. They permitted water play, spilling, moving

materials around, combining and recombining materials, moving one's body in many different ways, and noise. Nobody got hurt, and "Teacher!" didn't get yelled so often. By adding loose parts, teachers transformed an environment that had not been working for children or adults into an environment that was interesting and pleasant for everyone.

Working with the Activity: Child Equation

These changes can be analyzed in terms of both **variety** and **complexity**—two useful ideas suggested by Kritchevsky and Prescott (1969). **Variety** describes *kinds of activity*. In September, children could swing, climb, slide, throw a frisbee, throw sand, and run—six kinds of things to do. In early October, teachers had added bikes for riding. The visitor added crates for building and animals for dramatic play—and for burying in the leaves the wind had contributed. The children added water for washing animals. The count rose to 11 kinds of things to do, and children had much less difficulty staying interested. By late October, digging, pouring, bouncing a ball, balancing on stilts, sweeping, doll play, *sleeping* on the bed, and hauling had been added. With a count of 19 varieties of activity, both children and adults were so absorbed they nearly forgot lunch.

Complexity describes the extent to which an environment contains "potential for active manipulation and alteration by children" (Kritchevsky and Prescott, 1969, p. 10). This is where loose parts come in. Loose parts can be manipulated, moved about, and used in new combinations.

The more complex an environment, the greater its potential "to keep children continuously interested. If children are expected to play in an area for any length of time, high complexity seems virtually essential." (p. 11)

Elaborating on this distinction, it is possible to discern three types of play units—simple, complex, and super—which vary both in their relative capacity to keep children interested and in the relative number of children they can accommodate at one time. Our basis for classifying play equipment considers its possible use based on its internal complexity.

Simple: *A play unit that has one obvious use and does not have sub-parts or a juxtaposition of materials which enable a child to manipulate or improvise (examples: swings, jungle gym, rocking horse, tricycle).*

Complex: *A play unit with sub-parts or juxtaposition of two essentially different play materials which enable the child to manipulate or improvise (examples: sand table with digging equipment, play house with supplies). Also included in this category are single play materials and objects which encourage substantial improvisation and/or have a considerable element of unpredictability (examples: all art activities such as dough or paints; a table with books to look at; an area with animals such as a dog, guinea pigs, or ducks).*

Super: *A complex unit which has one or more additional play materials, i.e. three or more play materials juxtaposed (examples: sand box with play materials and water; dough table with tools; tunnel, movable climbing boards, and boxes; and large crates.* (Kritchevsky and Prescott, 1969, p. 10)

Simple, complex, and super units differ from each other both in their capacity to keep children interested and in the number of children they can accommodate at one time. Kritchevsky and Prescott

. . . devised a method for approximating what might be called the number of play places that a room or yard actually has. To do this we assign a value of ***four*** *to complex units, on the basis that complex units will generally accommodate about four children at once. Considering the unique potential of super units, we felt they were worth two complex units and so we valued them at* ***eight****. Though many simple units can be used by more than one child at a time, the fact that they are less continuously interesting than complex units led us to assign a value of* ***one*** *to simple units.* (p. 13)

Using these definitions, there were only simple units in the yard in September: four swings, three climbers, two slides, one frisbee, and sand without tools. That's 11. This count reflects some judgments which could be argued. For example, the yard is large and there's *lots* of sand; it extends under all the climbers and swings and beyond them. Two of the climbers have slides attached; doesn't that make them complex units? And what about the painted bike path? Children were using it to define their running; they recognized it as a play space.

A complex unit has loose parts to improvise with; all parts of the slide / climbers are firmly fixed. We've counted both climber and slide, even though they're part of one structure, since climbing and sliding are different activities. But both are simple. If we decide to count the bike path and figure there are three more spaces in all that sand, that's 15 play spaces. Fifteen play spaces for 30 children. That's guaranteed trouble, just as the typical elementary school playground at recess is guaranteed trouble. Kritchevsky and Prescott suggest an analogy with the game of musical chairs.

. . . for the purposes of the analogy we shall assume that the objective of the

game is not to eliminate participants, but to provide each child with a chair each time the music stops. In a game with 20 chairs and 10 children (2.0 chairs per child), when the music stops children can easily find an extra chair without help. If there are 10 children and 15 chairs (1.5 chairs per child), some children will probably have difficulty finding an empty chair. The closer the number of chairs is to the number of children, the more likely it will be that a teacher will need to help children find the empty chairs. If there are fewer chairs than children, either some one (or more) must stand every time the music stops, or children must double up on chairs. If the teacher is in charge of the music, shifting from chair to chair will take place for all children at once and be much as described above. However, if the teacher wants the children to listen to their own "inner music," further difficulties are introduced. When the number of chairs is close to one per child, and a child wants to change chairs, choice will be severely limited, and the teacher will probably need to help. If several children want to change chairs in close succession, the demands on the teacher and the limitations on the children will be extreme. (pp. 13-15)

Fifteen play spaces for 30 children comes out to half a space per child; no wonder "Teacher!" was in constant demand to settle territorial disputes. In an environment with fewer choices than children, the only other options are waiting for turns, running, and inventing "Run Away and Hide." No teacher effort had been expended in provisioning the environment. The effort went, instead, into trying to keep it safe. It wasn't safe in September. Any living creature is at risk in an environment with too much population and too few resources.

In October the teachers brought eight bikes out of the shed, increasing the number of play spaces to about 23. But all three classes were outside, with 45 children—still only half a space per child. The visitor added only a few small items; but because they were loose parts, complexity in the yard was substantially increased. Crates—there were only three—are a simple unit; but crates with animals are complex, because both can be moved around. Animals are a simple unit, but animals with leaves are complex. If animals are taken for a bike ride, there's another complex unit. If animals are washed in a drinking fountain, where there are faucets to turn on and off, there's another complex unit. Since each complex unit is given four points in Kritchevsky and Prescott's scheme, adding four complex units to the 23 simple units already present raised the total number of play spaces to 39. That's not enough for 45 children, but the additions made an immediate difference in the quality of some children's play.

It is important that the visitor's improvisation gave children permission to improvise too. Washing the animals and taking them for bike rides were their ideas. So were bringing out more animals from the other room, and bringing out some little cars (which didn't get counted above, and would raise the total play spaces to at least 43—better). In proposing the theory of loose parts, Nicholson's concern was that children are cheated of their creativity when adults have had all the fun playing. As this environment was functioning, neither children nor teachers were exercising any creativity with materials. The visitor tried just a little. "Can we play too?" the children asked; and, since that was the point, they took over the play and complicated it some more.

By late October, both children and teachers had become creative. The outcome was at least three super units: the rice table with scooping and pouring tools, to which children added little cars and animals; tools for the sand areas, to which children added water; and the bed, with pillows, covers, and dolls, to which children brought containers of sand to feed the dolls and the teacher. The drinking fountain served as a play space as well as a water source; along the way it probably became a super unit, as children used it with both containers and animals, and carried water across the yard. Sweeping leaves was a complex activity. Children combined wagons with bikes (in a long cooperative play sequence they tried to use a bike to pull a wagon which wasn't tied on), a complex activity which later became super when containers of sand were loaded into the wagon. All this super complexity added something like 50 play spaces, for a total of over 90 and a ratio of 3:1 for 30 children. It's no wonder lunch time had lost its urgency!

References

Kritchevsky, S., E. Prescott, and L. Walling. **Planning Environments for Young Children: Physical Space**. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1969.

Nicholson, S. "How Not to Cheat Children," The Theory of Loose Parts, in G. Coates (editor), **Alternate Learning Environments**. Stroudsberg, PA: Dowden, Hutchinson, and Ross, 1974.

Elizabeth Jones teaches at Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California, where she is also involved in a consultation project with public school-sponsored child care centers. She is writing a book on the teacher's role in children's play.