

It Ain't Easy Being Green

by Jim Greenman

“A playground should be like a small scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it. Experiences for every sense are needed, for instance: rough and smooth objects to look at and feel; light and heavy things to pick up; water and wet materials warmed by the sun; soft and hard surfaces; things that make sounds (running water) or that can be struck, plucked, plinked, etc.; smells of all varieties (flowers, bark, mud); shiny, bright objects and dull, dark ones; things that are both huge and tiny; high and low places to look at and from; materials of every type, natural and synthetic, think, thick, and so on.”

— Richard Dattner, **Design for Play**

How many playgrounds approach Dattner's ideal? Most early childhood programs don't even try. More typical is a rather small fenced area with a few pieces of playground equipment. But the child's outdoor experience does not have to be bound by the playground. The playground may be planned as part of a larger outdoor context:

- all the accessible outdoor space — the sidewalks, the city parks, the stream nearby.
- all the time the children have access to the outdoors — daily, weekly, seasonally.
- the outdoor experiences that children have outside of the program, in the yard, on the street, in the park.

An Indoor Culture?

We are becoming an indoor culture, more comfortable in malls than cities. Millions of young children are only allowed outdoors with supervision. In many

areas, even the backyard or front stoop are viewed as perilous unless closely supervised. Many children come home from school and watch television. On any particular day, they can choose between *Geraldo* talking to “transvestite dads who seduce their daughters' husbands,” or “the case of the murdering mom” on *Hard Copy*, or *Gilligan's Island*.

It is a strange time. We live in an age when our children may know far more about bizarre people we care nothing about or a stage set island than the workings of their own backyard — that marvelous ecosystem teeming with life. They may know more about, or rather have more information on, exotic zoo animals and farm animals than the snails, squirrels, birds, worms, and bugs that live outside their windows.

The outdoors for many of us is becoming more and more simply a passageway, to be hurried through, or often sealed from us by car windows. It is not integral to our experience, or a destination to enjoy for itself. When it is a destination, it is a task oriented enjoyment such as a ski slope or an outing to a park — a consumable event, not a collection of simple pleasures.

In the world of children's programs, as in schools, the outdoors is often simply a place for recess — a temporary respite or diversion for both staff and children and, at best, a place for large muscle exploits. On less inviting days, going out is an inconvenience or pain. It is not uncommon to limit children's time outside to less than an hour per classroom, both as a means of coping with small playgrounds and an assumption that the time indoors is more valuable, more the stuff of school.

○ What's the result? Two important aspects of life are shrinking in children's lives: nature, in all its transcendent, powerful glory — unpredictable, mysterious, untamed, and infinite — and nearly as absent, open spaces and physically challenging spaces, places to literally take off, scale, and explore.

What's the Harm?

Is there really much cause for concern? After all, much of what goes on outdoors can happen indoors. The danger lies in this — we know a lot about how children physically and psychologically develop; we know less about how they become good people.

How do we become wise?

What is wisdom if not developing a perspective that is broad and deep, placing knowledge in a context that encompasses an understanding of the universe and our place in it? How can children hope to become wise and develop values within the confines of a narrow, carefully regulated world. Where is their invitation to life's dance? It is the marriage of nature to the soul and the intellect that allows wisdom to grow.

○ It is not wise to foul your surroundings but that is what our societies are doing. Freeman Dyson is a brilliant physicist and critic who has written widely on a number of scientific topics, including the notion of Gaia — the earth as a living entity. When asked how he could be optimistic that ultimately humankind wouldn't destroy the ecosystem and kill off the vegetation through pollution and global warming, his faith lay in a simple belief: people will always love trees. I am less sure we will develop the wisdom to continue to nurture that love if children are removed from the natural world.

How do we become spiritual?

The essence of spirituality is a sense of miracle, a day-to-day appreciation for the miracle of the world and all its complexity. Without a deep sense of awe at the vastness and majesty of the natural world that humbles us, and a simultaneous ennobling sense that we are intrinsically a part of that world, our spirituality remains shallow.

How do we become sensual?

○ hot moist caresses oozing
hard soft tickling forceful

wet resilient fragrant delicate
juicy warm smooth silky

The words above are sensual words — they characterize our sensory experience. They can describe being outdoors, caressed by breezes, tickled by the grass, digging in the wet sand; or they can describe the pleasures of food; or intimate human contact. Our sensuality is a gift, essential to the full enjoyment of life pleasures, but we can lose the secret of the sensuous life in the overwhelming presence of the objective world. The time spent outdoors in a natural setting may well play a fundamental role in the development of our sensuality.

I thought he was just another urban unfortunate — an elderly man grinning broadly and chortling with glee as he almost skipped along the walk, cracking the ice in every puddle along the way. It turned out he had spent his entire life in hot, sunny climates, came to the north, and was experiencing snow and ice for the first time. The years peeled away and it was the little boy he once was who couldn't contain his delight and surprise at the CRUNCHING sound of crisp snow and the exquisite feel of ice cracking underfoot: "I never thought it would sound and feel so wonderful," he laughed.

How do we become physical?

We admire the grace of the dancer or athlete — the loose-limbed confidence that allows disciplined muscular precision and explodes into dynamic expression. How else to achieve any semblance of that except repeated exposure to wide open spaces

Lobotomy Park

Sign on a school playground:

1. No running
2. No throwing or kicking
3. No climbing up the slide
4. Sit on the swings
5. No digging
6. No climbing on the fence
7. Keep your shoes on
8. Stay off the grass

NO COMMENT

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and objects to leap from, and opportunities to use our bodies against hills and winds?

How do we develop a sense of freedom?

“When in doubt, twirl.”

— Choreographer Ted Shawn

Four year old Marietta was bouncing up and down alone, for no particular reason. The bouncing changed to lying on her back and kicking up her legs, then leaping up, and then back down on her back. Perhaps a Jane Fonda flashback, whatever it was, she was free to do it — as well as accessorize the movement with weird noises. Jerry, George, and Katie were free to hide behind the tree and whisper mysteriously, and race from tree to tree.

Watch children outside when they are free from pinched confines of 35 square feet per child, free to move and make noise and congregate. Watch the vigorous exploration of movement, sound, substances, and social possibilities.

Beyond the Squirrel Cage

Playgrounds should have climbers and slides and swings. Children need the physical challenge from a playground — the opportunity to literally “reach new heights.” They need the stimulus of risk and choices in climbing, sliding, and swinging. Playgrounds are where reputations are made — whether four or fourteen years old — and they need structures that allow derring-do to build self-esteem.

But the outdoors should offer so much more (adapted from **Caring Spaces, Learning Places**):

Places to roll: Children love to roll themselves and objects down slopes. Walking, pulling, hauling up a slope provides challenge. Summer’s rolling hill becomes winter’s sliding spot, or a water slide with a plastic tarp. Tires, balls, and teachers all roll nicely. Railings can become courses for rolling objects.

Places for jumping: Plato saw the model of true playfulness in the need of young children, animal

I Am Not an Ethereal Guy

“It’s easy for you to say, you like being outside! It’s your thing. You’re one of THOSE!” After a workshop on playgrounds, I was good naturedly dismissed as one of THOSE, an outdoor wonk. It is not the first time I have been dismissed as impractical and unrealistic — thus what I write should be disregarded — but as one of THOSE? Well, that would not be me!

It is time to confess. You will not find me backpacking through the wilds, happily munching trail mix. I never went to summer camp, nor have I kayaked in icy water. I am not in tune with Black Elk’s vision. Neither lederhosen nor gortex play an important part of my life. I love flowers but have little patience for gardening. I am not one of THOSE. No, I am a material guy — urban variety.

But not being “one of THOSE” is no excuse. What is teaching all about? We want children to transcend our own limits, to appreciate life in ways we would like to but don’t. Teachers need to stretch and be a variation of “one of THOSE” that is at least convincing and inspiring to children — whether “one of THOSE” is someone who likes animals or plants, or good music or literature, or builds with blocks, or enjoys movement and being outdoors. It is hard to do well by children and stay within the confines of our own upbringing.

I watched a group of preschoolers playing in a small fenced play area in a park. Outside the fence was a wooded park with ponds and boulders and high grassed fields. Standing watch at the entrance, a teacher gently shooed children back to the Spartan play equipment. One boy hung around the gate, resisting entreaties to once again go down the slide. He looked at the teacher with wistful eyes, his body tense with desire to slip around her and take off, and said, “Can’t you just get outta the way?”

If we are unable to stretch ourselves, perhaps we can at least set things in motion and “get outta the way.”

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and human, to leap. Leaping expresses faith in yourself and your environment. The opportunity to jump from different heights and land safely is incomparable, a test of self and gravity.

Places for running: Children run — this way and that way, back and forth, round and round.

Places for throwing and kicking: Throwing, heaving, hurling something — to someone, at something, into something — belongs on a playground. Walls and nets, hoops, barrels, and trees can serve as targets; balls, bean bags, frisbees, and, when appropriate, rocks and sticks can serve as missiles. Human-kind probably began kicking during the first boring walk, kicking rocks and sticks and small animals.

Places for bouncing and balancing: Children will balance on everything from a crack in the sidewalk to railings on a deck. They love to balance on their feet, stomach, head, and hands. Beams of different size, width, and height; logs, poles, boulders; wobbly balancing surfaces; movable balance beams; and planks all provide variety.

Places (and vehicles) for riding, traveling, and transporting: Children love pathways and sidewalks that provide a here and there and routes in between — to journey, to race, to haul, to ferry, to caravan. Vehicles that encourage hauling or two child use have special value.

Places to move slowly: In a Japanese garden, one moves slowly along a path — eyes alert to new views, body shifting as the path changes beneath one's feet. On a lazy day, the urge to float and dawdle can become overpowering; on a gray day, the need to hold back can take over. Stone and wood paths or patterned walks that encourage deliberate motions delight children and adults.

Places to watch, to wonder, to retreat: When the challenge of the climber or the commotion on the swings is too much, where is there to go — to be alone or with a trusted friend or fellow temporary outcast? Where is the cork tree to smell the flowers? Quiet spaces scaled to child size — grottos, nests, perches, miniature picnic tables off a beaten path — all provide wayside rests. Greenery has a calming effect.

Places to eat: What makes life interesting is variation and, when outdoor eating (and cooking) is

possible, children are delighted (and so are the local wildlife).

Places to discover: Taking advantage of nature, the busy city life behind the fence, the machinery of bikes or hinges or pulleys, the aerodynamics of kites, great discoveries are possible even in small areas.

Places that feel different: Micro-climates — sunny and shady spots, breezy spaces, still spaces.

Places for building: Snow forts and lean-tos, milk crate walls and cardboard castles — the outdoors is a place for children to build shelters and barricades, sculptures and vehicles. With good storage and garbage control, a work yard is possible encouraging construction with or without tools, with driftwood and planks, canvas, boulders, blocks and crates, tires, and rope.

Places for creative expression: The outdoors is a natural site for art. Walls provide easels and perhaps even canvases. Wood, stone, fabric, plastic, and metal are the raw materials for sculptures that play with color, light, and sound. Sidewalk painting, water painting, altering water and sand, rock and wood environmental art that alter miniature landscapes allow children to discover and express their relation to life and beauty.

Places to pretend: Here I am, king of the forest — there is a pirate. Now a race car driver, a superhero, a frontier mother, a tiny rabbit. Where can I roam, walk the plank, save the citizenry, keep my baby safe, or find a good carrot? Children like the realism of a real stripped down car or boat. But structures that only vaguely represent other things or settings benefit from the ambiguity that allows children's imagination to take over.

Places to dig: George Washington Carver said: "People murder a child when they tell him to keep out of the dirt. In dirt there is life." Digging, burying, making mud, making ditches and rivers, finding life. Earth science!

Watery places: Is there anything more wonderful than water to a child, of any age? Water that reflects shadows and faces and flashes rainbows. Water that hides life and bits of past life. Water that moves and makes music with its gurgles and burbles and drips and splats. Water that is still. Water creates ice to crack and mud to squish, tendrils to seep through

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the grass or sand. Water ferries twigs and leaves and paper boats. Water cools us, runs off our bodies, and livens our skin. Water fills our cup, and jars, and pots. Bird baths, outdoor water tables, elevated streams, splash pools, fountains, sprinklers, and wading pools bring water to a playground.

Places for growing: Growing things allow children to experience the life cycle, to anticipate change in seasons, and to tend and care for life. Gardens, flower patches and boxes, herb gardens, trees, vines and shrubs; weeds, which to a child are simply flowers in the wrong place, provide beauty, life, and loose parts. Leaves and twigs become boats and stew, little people and airplanes.

Yeah, But Can We Change?

There are real obstacles to fully using the outdoors. But it is also a question of priorities and will. When you build a building, it costs over \$100 per square foot to create a great place to be a child. When you build a playground, you can create a wonderful environment for learning and living for \$10 to \$15 per square foot, a place where children can soar. Beyond the fence, there are resources available in the community. The purpose of life is, after all, to inhale — to live it fully and reach out eagerly and without fear for new experience. Our children deserve our effort.

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