

Reflections on the importance of playing outdoors

Making Outdoor Learning Possible

by Jim Greenman

In Minneapolis there is a skyway system that connects the second floors of buildings throughout the downtown area — offices, hotels, stores, and residential developments. There is also a domed stadium and there are domed tennis courts, skating rinks, swimming pools, and indoor fountains. In Minneapolis and many other places, one can seriously ask: Why go outside to the world of snow and ice, heat and mosquitoes, auto exhaust, and rain?

The outdoors has weather and life, the vastness of the sky, the universe in the petals of a flower. But many programs, following the models of schools, have seen the very qualities that make the outdoors different as obstacles or annoying side effects. The openness is tightly constricted; weather provides a reason to stay in, and landscape and life are things to be eliminated. A playground, considered the primary, if not the only outdoor setting, performs the same function as a squirrel cage or a prison exercise yard — it is a place for emotional and physical release and a bit of free social interchange.

Playground Types

Traditional playgrounds in schools, centers, or parks are open areas dotted with various pieces of unrelated commercial, usually metal, large muscle equipment such as slides, swings, climbing domes or bars, spring animals, seesaws, and so on.

Children play on one piece of equipment until bored and then move on to the next. Play tends to be disjointed. These playgrounds encourage large motor play and little else. Children have no way to change the setting. Creative and social play tends to be limited to adding an element of risk in using the equipment, such as swinging together or jumping off slides. The amount of motion and varying heights, and an often inadequately impact-cushioning surface, result in safety problems. Children *least prefer* traditional play areas when given a choice (Noren-Bjorn, 1982).

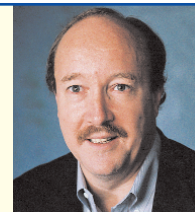
Developed as an alternative to traditional playgrounds, **creative playgrounds** are coordinated and designed or adapted for a site. These include both modular coordinated play installations and *one-off* architectural designs which have a sculptural or natural quality in the forms and materials. Often the landscape is used to create

berms for slides and tunnels. There usually are multiple levels of platforms, steps, and slides for climbing, chasing, and hiding. At first largely static except for occasional cargo nets and wobbly bridges (a reaction to the dangers of traditional playgrounds), today there are installations that include varieties of swings, moving parts, and cable slides. Creative playgrounds can support a variety of motor and social play in a compact area, if they include moving parts. They are usually attractive to both adults and children. They rarely, however, have any provisions for loose parts.

Typical nursery and child care play areas lean toward a blend of traditional and creative, with perhaps a playhouse and sandbox thrown in, and a trike path if size permits.

There are alternatives common in other countries but relatively rare in the United States. Adventure playgrounds, found in Europe, literally grew out of the rubble of World War II. Sometimes called work-

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yards, adventure playgrounds are the ultimate expression of the power of loose parts. The idea, expressed originally in the 1930s by Danish architect C. Th. Sorenson, was “sort of a *junk* playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine, and make dreams and imagination a reality.” Virtually nothing is static (or expensive). They are filled with junk — wood, rope, canvas, tires, wire, bricks, pipes, rocks, nets, logs, balls, abandoned furniture, wheels, vehicles, and unimaginable and assorted artifacts.

Adventure playgrounds have play leaders who help children to build, demolish, repair, incinerate, dig, flood, and play safely. Tools are provided and their use supervised; fire and water are considered important elements of the playground. Children are allowed to create complex structures, both physical and social (“Girls keep out on Tuesday”). There is a wide variety of cognitive, social, and motor play. As a play leader expressed, “The secret of a successful adventure playground is in its continual development; it is never complete, never developed. It is sort of a *terrain vague* that can be many things to children.”

Adventure playgrounds are most often designed for school-aged children. Supervised adventure playgrounds have an excellent safety record and have proven to be highly popular with children. Despite this, they are rare in the United States and likely to remain so. The extreme caution due to the insurance crisis, the likelihood that adults would have trouble accepting the unsightly “junkiness” of the play area (Spivak, 1974), and just the lack of tradition of such playgrounds makes the spread unlikely in the near future.

However, a variation of adventure playgrounds, also called Creative Playgrounds, originating in Sweden, incorporates loose parts to allow children to construct their own environments. Instead of junk and tools, modular building

pieces and panels are available for construction. This form of adventure play as part of a child care program or school is eminently feasible as demonstrated by Play Mountain Place in Los Angeles (Ellison, 1974).

Environmental play yards, which encourage an active interaction with plants and animals, water and dirt, weather, and the life cycle, offer children education at its most compelling. The Environmental Yard at Washington School in Berkeley, California, offers the most fully realized expression of the idea. A one and a half acre asphalt traditional playground has been transformed to incorporate miniature ecosystems — *the meadow, willow island* — ponds, pathways, gardens, and animals.

Here and there throughout the country are child care programs in semi-rural areas that are able to incorporate many of the same experiences. For urban programs, a garden, shrubs, a birdbath, and trees are a start.

The Outdoors in Children’s Lives

Richard Dattner (1969, p. 44) gives testimony to a vision of a playground very different from the exercise yard, one reflecting Buckminster Fuller’s view that playgrounds should be renamed “research environments”:

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 as well as dry things; cool materials and 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 both huge and tiny; high and low

places to look at and from; materials of every type, natural, synthetic, thin, thick, and so on. The list is inexhaustible, and the larger the number of items that are included, the richer and more varied the environment for the child.

Most programs do not have the outdoor playground space to create miniature worlds. But a program playground exists in a larger outdoor context. If the playground is planned as part of that whole, the child’s outdoor experience may reach Dattner’s ideal. The context includes:

- 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 the program — in the yard, on the street, in the park.

In the urban areas and areas with harsher climates, the outdoors is a precious resource to be carefully maximized when it is available. In some fortunate areas with year round gentle climates and open spaces, the outdoors is a way to extend classroom boundaries to the horizon daily.

Outdoor Places

What outdoor places benefit children?

Places for Active Motor Play

Children need physical challenge from a playground: the opportunity to literally *reach new heights and run wild*. They need the stimulus of risk; they need choices in climbing, sliding, swinging, and so on so that they can determine the excitement and challenge they are ready for. Playgrounds are where reputations are made — whether 4 or 14 years old — and structures are necessary that allow derring-do with which to build self esteem. Equally important are *break away points* for those who change their minds or need time to

act (much like adults on a ski slope) — alternate routes up and down, graduated challenge, and a range of accomplishment opportunities that allow all children to build self-esteem without pressure.

Places for Swinging: Swings with seats, tire swings, rope swings, porch swings, hammocks. Different swings provide different experiences with time, motion, and body control. “Swing ropes for example can be long, suspended far above the ground, giving a long incredible WHOOSH — moving through a big space with each swing. They can be short — a fast-moving, back-and-forth, round-and-round kind of ride” (Moore, R. in Coates, 1974, p. 233). Add the short circular motion of tire swings, the back and forth of porch swings and hammocks, the experience of standing or lying on the swing, swinging together or in tandem and the variety of learning experiences are evident. Three-chain tire swings are very versatile and safe; they work well with very young children and with children with disabilities.

Places for Sliding and Rolling: High, low, wide, narrow, curvy, straight, fast, slow. Slides offer wild release, experiments with friction, social experiences, and all sorts of physical challenge. Set in a hill, slides can be safe for the youngest children and for children with disabilities. Wide slides offer more possibilities for experimentation with the body and for social sliding.

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

Places for Climbing: Trees, live or dead; platform climbers; ropes; ladders; sculptures; tire trees; pole mountains. **Anything that can be climbed will be climbed.** The

exhilaration and the challenge of climbing depends not just on the height but on the size and spacing of footholds and handholds, whether the climbing structure moves like ropes or branches, whether the surface is wood or metal, whether it is open underneath, and so on. Large metal frames and jungle gyms often take up a lot of space and get relatively little use, unless loose parts are available for adding on. Climbing structures need multiple levels of difficulty and stopping points. Creative play installations with platforms, timbers, tires, and nets fill this need.

Places for Jumping: Platforms, poles set in the ground, climbers, anything that allows a secure launching point and a safe, absorbent landing area away from the traffic flow. Plato saw the model of true playfulness in the need of young children, animal 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: Open space, pathways, or tracks which allow all kinds of running. Children run this way, thatta way, back and forth, round and around. Toddlers and other steady walkers need smooth, flat surfaces.

Places for Throwing and Kicking: Walls and nets, hoops, barrels, trees, as targets; balls, bean bags, plastic discs, and (when appropriate) rocks and sticks as missiles. Throwing, heaving, hurling something to someone, at something, into something belongs on a playground. Humankind probably began kicking during the first boring walk — kicking rocks and sticks and small animals. Children love to propel things and feet do the job with dispatch.

Places for Bouncing and Balancing: Beams of different sizes, widths, and heights; logs, poles, boulders; wobbly balancing surfaces, movable balance beams, and planks. Children will balance on

everything from a crack in the sidewalk to railings on a deck. They love to balance on their feet, stomachs, heads, and hands.

Bouncing requires knees; variations come from different surfaces — planks with give, spring platforms or spring animals, trampolines or rebounders.

Places for Traveling, Riding, 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. Institutional wheel toys are far superior to home-use models. Vehicles that encourage hauling or two child use have special value.

Carts and wagons for transporting children on walks allow toddler treks that don’t leave the caregiver with two or more weary adventurers to carry the final block. The carts that attach to the back of adult bikes provide wonderful personalized bike trips for one to three children.

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 Be Human

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 out-cast? Where is the cork tree for smelling the flowers? Where can I observe my next challenge? Quiet spaces scaled to child size — grottoes, nests, perches, miniature picnic tables off a beaten path — all provide wayside rests. Greenery has a calming effect.

Places to Sleep: It is common in European programs to sleep outside or on sleeping porches. Occasionally taking naps outside provides children with memorable experiences.

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 Be Diapered and to Go to the Bathroom: Access to the bathroom or diaper table will determine the amount of outdoor play.

Places to Discover: "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me" (Isaac Newton).

Taking advantage of nature, the busy city of life behind the fence, the machinery of bikes or hinges or pulleys, the aerodynamics of kites — allows great discoveries even in small areas.

Places that Feel Different: Sunny and shady spots, breezy spaces, still spaces.

Once, on a summer day, I was busy in the shop, and Mequsaq and Pipaluk were playing outside with their little friends. Their game was to crawl up on a big slanting rock and slide down its smooth side. Up and down they went in one wild tumble. Then I heard their grandmother, Kasalum, come out and shout to them: 'Oh no, dear children, don't do that! Think of your poor father who has to drive long stretches in the cold and dark to get skins for your pants. Now you are wearing off the fur. It is unreasonable, you must not do it!'

Then she went back inside, and the children resumed their sliding down the rock, a wonderful game in any latitude!
from *The Book of Eskimos*,
by Peter Feuchern (1963, p. 83)

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This article is an excerpt from
Caring Spaces, Learning Places
(Exchange Press, 1988).

This book can be ordered online:
www.ChildCareExchange.com

Buyer's Guide to Outdoor Environments

This directory is a partial listing of companies providing outdoor environment products and services. Companies were included free of charge. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. Request free information about these companies by circling the number for each company on the Product Inquiry Card (between pages 64 and 65).

American Play Systems

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Circle 70 on Product Inquiry Card

American Swing Products

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2533 N. Carson Street, #1062

Carson City, NV 89706

(800) 433-2573

play@americanswing.com

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West Unity, OH 43570

www.childbrite.com

(419) 924-2328

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GameTime

(800) 235-2440

Circle 76 on Product Inquiry Card

Grounds For Play

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1401 E. Dallas Street

Mansfield, TX 76063

(817) 477-5482 or (800) 552-7529

www.groundsforplay.com

Circle 77 on Product Inquiry Card

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(800) 922-7529

www.groundscape.com

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HAGS Play U.S.A.

Billy Joyce

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(866) KIDS-PLAY (543-7752)

www.hags.com

Circle 79 on Product Inquiry Card

KaBoom!

(202) 659-0215

Circle 80 on Product Inquiry Card

Kidstuff Playsystems

Richard Hagelberg

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Gary, IN 46403

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www.fun-zone.com

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U.N.I. School of HPELS
Cedar Falls, IA 50614
(800) 554-PLAY (7529)
www.playgroundsafety.org
Circle 86 on Product Inquiry Card

NPPS is a clearinghouse for information on playground safety. They have brochures, videos, CDs, lesson plans, and new this year — a Supervision Kit.

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www.planetplaygrounds.com
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Playground Environments International

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(800) 445-7529
www.playnation.com
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