

Collaborating With Parks

by Dana E. Friedman

As I visited a Head Start program in a large, low-income neighborhood on Long Island, the director and staff complained to me about the need to take a bus to get to a nearby park. I looked out the window and there was a huge expanse of burned-out grass. They explained that they could get funding for the bus, but not to fix up the adjacent park. Seems a little twisted, right?

That led me on a journey to understand how parks could be designed to enhance children's learning, making perfect outdoor playspaces for child care programs and great field trips for parents and other caregivers. What I learned is that throughout the world, including some parts of the United States,

there is a growing movement to use public spaces for lifelong learning that will enhance and sustain the well-being of children, families, communities, and the environment.

This article summarizes the ways that parks can enhance early childhood learning, while promoting health, family well-being, and the environment. Though many initiatives involve the schools, they can also be done in collaboration with child care programs. While reading this, think about what you could propose to your local parks commissioner, or ways to improve outdoor spaces of local child care programs.

Dana E. Friedman, Ed.D., is the Project Director for Early Care and Education – Long Island, a collaborative of five foundations dedicated to improving the quality of early learning for all children on Long Island.

Why parks?

Early learning opportunities

Children are always learning wherever they are, not only in classrooms. The Harvard Family Research Project has defined non-school supports as “complementary learning” and is working to encourage family support programs to develop more opportunities for preschoolers and children after school.¹ All children need hands-on learning environments that respond to and support their varied learning styles, as well as physical activity and opportunities to connect with the natural environment. All parks should, therefore, offer opportunities for both physical activity and multiple kinds of learning. The richer the park environment, the richer the learning will be.



All children need hands-on learning environments that respond to and support their varied learning styles, as well as physical activity and opportunities to connect with the natural environment.

There is particular concern about the environments of child care programs which are “not green but gray, uninviting to go outside, and unmotivating for physical activity.” In an effort to create entirely new design solutions for early childhood programs, the Natural Learning Initiative in the College of Design at North Carolina State University has brought together urban designers, landscape architects, and architects along with professionals from public health, parks, recreation and leisure, and education who share a deep commitment to systemic change.

They have now developed the Preschool Outdoor Environment Measurement Scale (POEMS), an assessment tool for evaluating the quality of outdoor environments in early childhood programs for children ages 3-5.

(www.naturalearning.org/designinstitute05.html)

According to the Help Children Learn Project of the New York City Parks Forum, parks that engage children in informal, experiential learning through play and shared experiences with peers, help lay the foundation for effective formal education.² Furthermore, parks can be a valuable resource for closing the educational achievement gap in communities. *Closing the Achievement Gap*, a landmark study published in 1998, surveyed 40 K-12 schools in 13 states across the U.S., all of which used off-site open spaces to extend learning options for students. The results convincingly demonstrate the positive impact of hands-on learning opportunities, as measured by standardized tests.³

Improving childhood health

Years ago, children spent most of their time playing outdoors, engaged in stimulating physical exercise using backyards, sidewalks, playgrounds, and parks. Yet, the environment of contemporary childhood has changed dramatically and negative health consequences from these changes have become severe. Parks can offer children a safe place for physical activity, and an environment that promotes a positive self identity, and sense of belonging as an antidote to social alienation, vandalism, and violence.

About 10% of children ages 2 to 5 are considered overweight.⁴ According to the National Alliance for

Nutrition and Activity, obesity rates have doubled for children in the past 20 years. It is important to note that Hispanic and African-American children are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white children to be overweight. In addition, low-income communities and communities of color suffer the greatest shortages of green space, which contributes to inactivity and obesity.⁵ Experts predict that if these trends continue, today's youth will be the first generation in this nation's history to have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.⁶ The epidemic of obesity, inactivity, and related diseases, such as diabetes, is shortening children's lives and destroying the quality of their lives.

A unique project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is designed to help the community think differently about what science and math are and who can do it. Initially focusing on middle school girls, the project tries to counter the negative stereotypes associated with women in math, science, and technology, as well as stress the importance of these disciplines to the region's future.

Girls, Math and Science Partnerships (GMSP) is funded by the Heinz Endowments and the Alcoa Foundation and involves partners from the public, private, and educational sectors. The effort involves the creation of “explanatoids” which are signage and media about the science of real world questions in public places.

For example, at the Anderson Park, interactive signage helps children answer questions involving the physics of merry-go-rounds, swings, and twirly bars. At a popular roller coaster in Kennywood Park, large signs in the queue area are designed to stimulate curiosity about the science behind the roller coaster.

The effort was the result of an in-depth study of over 3,000 families and serves as a platform from which parents, educators, and mentors can begin to talk with young women about the opportunities available to them in the world of science. The goal is to bolster “community conversations” around each explanatoid sign, which brings science outside the classroom and into Pittsburgh's neighborhoods. (www.explanatoids.org)

The Town of Cary, North Carolina, Parks, Recreation, and Cultural Resources Advisory Board initiated the Kids Together Park because they felt the town should provide its citizens with fully accessible, universally designed family recreation facility. The participatory process was so successful that a non-profit organization was set up, headed by two of the children who did much of the fundraising. They decided on the name “Kids Together” as an expression of the mission of the park as a place for all children, regardless of ability.

Eventually, a nonprofit organization, Cary Visual Art, created several playful “art benches” and a large sculpted play dragon named Katal (Kids are Together at Last). They then produced Kids Together Explorers educational kits, linking art, nature, and learning. Kids Together Park has become a meeting ground for families, many of them intergenerational, extended, or visiting from out of town. Multi-ethnic mixes of parents get together, swap parenting tips while their children play and become included in the community. (Moore & Wong, 1997)

There is also a growing concern about children with ADHD, which affects an estimated eight percent of children 3 to 17 years old. Recent scientific research is beginning to demonstrate a health-promoting impact of everyday green space on child development, and on ADHD-like behavior, in particular.⁷ Research has shown that time spent outdoors strongly correlates with increased physical activity in children.⁸ Furthermore, physically fit children perform better academically.

These negative health trends do not just affect children. Early childhood teachers and parents can benefit from a well-designed park. In one community study, creating or enhancing places for physical activity led to a 26% increase in the number of people exercising three or more days per week. Information outreach, along with enhanced places for physical activities, resulted in a 48% increase in physical activity for adults.

Strengthening families

With the prevalence of the two-earner family, parents and children spend less time together than families in the past. Sociologists call it “time famine” and it is

shortchanging both parents and children in our 24/7 environment. Parks offer public spaces where family members of all ages can spend quality time together. Many child care programs hold their year-end parties in public parks because they offer so many opportunities for multi-ethnic gatherings and intergenerational activities. Those with disabilities can benefit from outdoor recreation areas, but special attention is needed to smooth out uneven surfaces, make signs more readable, and adapt playground equipment to be more accessible or useable by children or parents with disabilities.⁹

Community revitalization

Parks are inherently attractive to children because they permit escape from the tight strictures of daily life. For the first time in history, childhood is torn between the tight space of television, couch, and computer screens and the free-range spaces of the neighborhood. These spaces must be designed to be so attractive they will help win the tug-of-war between sedentary indoor life and an active life outdoors. For child care programs, it is an excellent way to join with

In downtown Berkeley, California, elementary school teachers, parents, children, and local residents partnered with several local organizations, including the UC-Berkeley campus to create the Environmental Yard. An acre-and-a-half of featureless asphalt was replaced with a series of mini-ecosystems reflecting the rich diversity of the San Francisco Bay region. During the summer, Berkeley Parks and Recreation play leaders and Project PLAE (Playing and Learning in Adaptable Environments) organized an array of arts and environment programs serving families citywide.

Replicated in other locations, the Martin Luther King Junior High School Edible Schoolyard is a well-known example that links learning about health, nutrition, and food preparation directly to the hands-on gardening experiences.

A similar idea was developed in Cleveland, Ohio, where the non-profit organization ParkWorks partnered with the city schools, Cleveland Botanic Garden, and Kent State University’s Urban Design Center to convert barren asphalt yards into community parks.

The epidemic of obesity, inactivity and related diseases, such as diabetes, is shortening children’s lives and destroying the quality of their lives.

Parks are inherently attractive to children because they permit escape from the tight strictures of daily life.

Gardens for Kids L. A. is an initiative designed to bring gardens to schools throughout the city. In its first two years, over 60 new school gardens were created throughout Los Angeles with \$100,000 in annual funding designated by the Mayor and City Council. The City's Environmental Affairs Department, the L. A. Conservation Corps, L. A. Unified School District Nutrition Network, California Integrated Waste Management Board, University of California Cooperative Extension, and the L. A. Urban Resources Partnership worked with teachers, students, and parents to implement gardens at each school.

Sustainability is a key issue for the Gardens for Kids L. A. program. Many types of gardens are grown. In addition to vegetables and flowers, herbs or native plants can be grown. Gardens can be designed to attract butterflies or birds. They can also have a theme. Think about a Shakespeare garden with plants mentioned in his plays, or a rainbow garden with flowers in all the colors of a rainbow, or an alphabet garden with each plant having a name starting with a different letter. (www.vivagarden.com)

other community leaders to create something for everyone. Those relationships may come in handy when your program is in need.

Environmental stewardship

Parks clearly offer a vehicle for children's participation in community development, citizenship, and democratic processes. If children participate in the design of spaces in their neighborhood, they will value and respect them more fully. UNICEF's Convention on the Rights of the Child supports this democratic right of young people to be engaged, to be part of the process.

The Italian Interministerial Technical Committee for Environmental Education outlined the education role for the parks to supplement the more traditional role it has played. The educational strategy of the parks typically involves the schools visiting the park. In Italy, they become the schools of the parks, representing not only a vital service for the survival of local communities, but also a primary cultural structure in the area. The partnerships that form between school and park authorities allow the community to express

its needs over time. The parks can become real laboratories where schools and visitors can take part in or verify a concrete program towards sustainable development. The Italians promote their program with the phrase, "sulla terra in punta di piedi" (on the earth on tiptoe).¹¹

In conclusion

There are many ways to incorporate a learning focus into parks and opportunities for early childhood programs to work with local residents to improve parks so they benefit children, families, early childhood programs, schools, neighborhoods, and the environment. These ideas create opportunities for child care directors to form relationships with other social service organizations, civic leaders, educators, and residents by working collaboratively on a host of exciting activities — playscapes, treasure hunts, specialty camps, naturalist-lead programs, celebrations of Earth Day, Greek myths told at night under the stars, nutrition programs using gardens of herbs, bird watching, forensic labs that help solve wildlife "crimes," and landscape painting, to name a few. Child care providers, please take the time to think out of the box and into the park or your own playground for ways to enhance your curriculum, engage parents, and build relationships with community leaders. No one knows better than early childhood leaders how to turn outdoor spaces into lifelong learning environments.

Since 1984, Parks & People Foundation has worked to improve the quality of life in Baltimore's neighborhoods. Their strategy involves efforts to improve the physical, social, and environmental quality of neighborhoods through greening activities and networks committed to sustaining natural resources. Their tree planting program is designed to improve communities and reduce crime.

They work in partnership with the Baltimore City Public School Systems to remove asphalt and replace it with green space on school yards. They have brought together the Living Classrooms Foundation and the Baltimore Ecosystem Study to assist with student ecological education in a program called YARD (Youth Affecting Restoration Designs) to provide meaningful Chesapeake Bay experiences for youth.

References

1. "Beyond the Classroom: Complementary Learning to Improve Achievement Outcomes." The Evaluation Exchange. Harvard Family Research Project, Spring 2005.
2. Moore, R. (2005). "How Cities Use Parks to Help Children Learn." City Parks Forum Briefing Papers 06. www.naturalelearning.org.
3. Lieberman, G., & Hoody, L. (1998). "Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning." San Diego, CA: State Education and Environment Roundtable.
4. Ogden, C., Flegal, K., Carroll, M., & Johnson, C. (2002). "Prevalence and Trends in Overweight Among U.S. Children and Adolescents, 1999-2000." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 288 (14), 1728-1732.
5. California Center for Public Health Advocacy, An Epidemic: Overweight and Unfit Children In California Assembly Districts, December 2002.
6. Gonzalez, MD, E., L. A. County Dept. of Public Health, testimony January 21, 2004, LAUSD Citizens' School Bond Oversight Committee.

Get REAL! (Recreational and Environmental Adventures in Learning) focuses on using Florida State Parks as "classrooms without walls." The initiative builds on the parks' broad multicultural educational and recreational programs to enrich learning and integrate the use of state parks with local community programs. It shares the wonders of Florida's state parks with children and adults, seniors and economically disadvantaged individuals, forming lifetime advocates for land conservation, outdoor recreation, and environmental protection. (www.floridastateparks.org)

7. Faber Taylor, A., Kuo, F., & Sullivan, W. (2001). "Coping with ADD: The Surprising Connection to Green Play Settings." *Environment & Behavior*, 33 (1): 54-77. Sage Publications, Inc.
8. Sallis, J., et al. (2003). "Environmental and Policy Interventions to Promote Physical Activity." 15 *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 379, 389, 1998.
9. Active Living by Design, UNC School of Public Health, 2005, www.activelivingbydesign.org.

Beautiful public spaces and innovative park designs provide places for a wide variety of experiences ranging from quiet contemplation and relaxation to active recreation in all areas of the community.



Parks 2020 Vision in Portland, Oregon, developed in 1999 and completed in 2001, is a broad-based, citizen-driven directive that presents the vision, guiding principles, and recommendations for Parks and Recreation for the next 20 years. The plan covers everything from parks, open space, and natural areas to community centers and swimming pools. It discusses programs, partnerships, and funding. It builds on the past and prepares for the future. Extensive public outreach and input included newsletters, community meetings, focus groups, polls, and a web-based questionnaire that drew over 1,500 responses.

Its principles include: Essential Elements that create a livable, dynamic, and economically vibrant city; Connected System for all trails, parks, natural areas, streams, and rivers that are integrated with community centers and recreation facilities serving all residents; Inclusive and Accessible; Stewardship for all the elements of the built and natural world, sustaining them for future generations; Intrinsic Value and interrelationships of all organisms with their environment are recognized; Excellence bringing joy, fulfillment, and growth to the lives of residents; Beauty and Innovation; Future Needs; and Civic Involvement.

(www.parks.ci.portland.or.us.PlansReports/2020)

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Pick one!: This article shares successful strategies for collaborating with parks to address children's nature deficits. So, pick one to explore further. Go to the reference web sites, get more information, and find ways to collaborate with parks in your nearby environment.

POEMS anyone?: Get a copy of the POEMS assessment tool to find out where your program stands using this new resource.



Kaplan has POEMS. . .

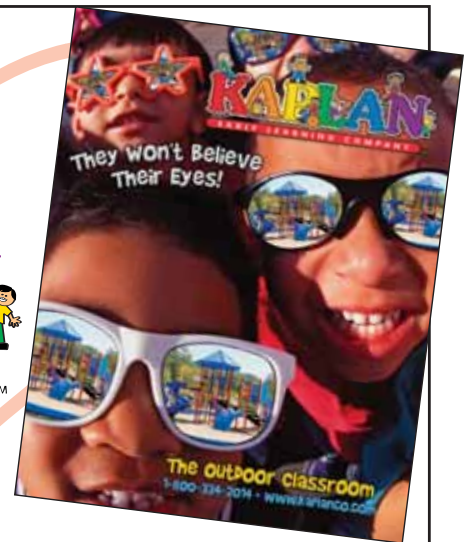


26-39502 POEMS \$24.95



1-800-334-2014 • www.kaplanco.com

Get Your Free Catalog Today!



& All Your Outdoor Classroom Needs!



Circle 36 on Product Inquiry Card