

Enriching the outdoor play experience.

Abstract:

Playgrounds have been ignored as venues for learning, although educational experts have emphasized play as an important aspect in developmentally appropriate programs. Aside from the physical and motor development offered by outdoor play, opportunities to improve social interaction through both social and intellectual play are also available. Early childhood educators should avail of the potential diversity and richness offered by outdoor play environments.

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Teachers, administrators and others generally consider playgrounds and the activities that occur there less important than indoor spaces in the lives of young children. This view is reflected in textbooks used to prepare teachers for early childhood education (e.g., Brewer, 1992; Feeney, Christensen & Moravcik, 1991; Lay-Dopyera & Dopyera, 1990; Seefeldt & Barbour, 1990). In a quick review of these texts, the author found an average of 21 pages describing the indoor play setting and its preparation and only a little under 5 pages discussing the outdoor play site. Similarly, although the National Association for the Education of Young Children emphasizes play as an essential ingredient in developmentally appropriate programs, it gives few specifics for providing such experiences outdoors (Bredekamp, 1987).

From their inception, playgrounds and outdoor play experiences have been viewed primarily as an opportunity to develop physical skills through vigorous exercise and play (Frost & Wortham, 1988). Despite this long-held attitude, educators are becoming more aware that outdoor play can be much more valuable than previously assumed.

Clearly, outdoor play can stimulate physical-motor development (Myers, 1985; Pellegrini, 1991). In addition, however, playgrounds are a positive setting for enhancing

social interaction (Kraft, 1989; Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1988). Further evidence indicates that well-equipped playgrounds can stimulate a variety of play types, including dramatic play (Henniger, 1985).

Outdoor play can be as effective as indoor play in facilitating young children's development. Frost & Wortham (1988) suggest "The outdoor play environment should enhance every aspect of child development--motor, cognitive, social, emotional--and their correlates--creativity, problem-solving, and just plain fun".

With a little effort, playgrounds can move from their current rather sterile status (Frost, Bowers & Wortham, 1990) to more stimulating, creative spaces for young children. Most playgrounds would benefit by more variety in available materials and spaces. Movable toys and equipment can make playgrounds into spaces where children can have a greater effect on their environment. In addition, concerned adults need to ensure that children have numerous opportunities for dramatic play outdoors. Finally, playgrounds need to be safe environments where children are free to explore without fear of injury from materials or equipment.

The play experiences of young children are often categorized either according to the level of intellectual functioning or in relationship to their social complexity. Smilansky (1968) defined four major types of cognitive or intellectual play (functional, construction, dramatic, games with rules) and Parten (1932) suggested four additional social play categories (solitary, parallel, associative, cooperative).

To help facilitate these important play types in the indoor setting, early educators have consistently provided children with a large variety of quality play materials and toys (e.g., blocks, manipulatives, art materials, housekeeping items, dramatic play materials, musical instruments and objects from the natural environment). Teachers spend considerable planning time organizing these materials into interesting and inviting centers and ensuring that new choices are available to children on a regular basis.

Options for the playground are much more limited (Frost, Bowers & Wortham, 1990). Although swings, slides, climbers, tricycles and a sandbox are common, this equipment is not sufficient to stimulate a broad spectrum of quality outdoor play. Spaces for children to engage in solitary play (e.g., a cluster of plants with a small opening for the child), toys and props for dramatic play (see Jelks & Dukes, 1985) and materials for construction play (e.g., outdoor blocks, wooden boards and boxes, small cable spools, gardening space and tools, old tires) are needed to enrich the variety and complexity of the playground. Concerned teachers should periodically reorganize the playground to provide new and exciting choices for young children.

Esbensen (1987) suggested that teachers consider the outdoor setting to be an extension of the classroom, with the same potential for enhancing development. He defined seven play zones that should exist on every playground: transition, manipulative/creative, projective/fantasy, focal/social, social/dramatic, physical and natural element. Esbensen recommended the addition of a playhouse containing a table and chair set, housekeeping toys and equipment, and other home-related accessories to stimulate more social/dramatic

play outdoors. With additional planning and preparation, teachers can create these zones and ensure that the children participate in a variety of play types.

Movable Toys and Equipment

An essential element of learning in the early childhood years is the opportunity to affect the environment. Children learn a great deal by manipulating the materials and equipment in their world (Kamii & DeVries, 1978). Play helps children actively make sense of their environment (Piaget, 1951). Through active play, children are learning, exploring and creating. Wassermann (1992) called this the generative function of play.

Nearly all of the indoor play materials can be manipulated by children. Puzzles, blocks, art materials, musical instruments and dramatic play props are among the many materials commonly found indoors. On the playground, however, this diversity is rare. Frost, Bowers and Wortham (1990) recently conducted a survey of American preschool playgrounds and found that

tricycles were most often available, with an average of about three per playground. Loose tires, sand, wagons, barrels and loose boards (building material, stacking blocks) were available, in descending order, ranging from about two tires per playground to about one barrel or board to every three playgrounds.

Children who play outdoors therefore have very few movable equipment options.

Adding more movable toys and equipment is not a difficult task. Children do not need expensive or hard-to-find items. In fact, common and inexpensive materials generally suffice. A good example of a creative playground space made with inexpensive materials is the Adventure Playground designed for older children (see Louv, 1978; Michaelis, 1979; Pedersen, 1985). The Adventure Playground, which originated in Denmark in the 1940s (Pedersen, 1985), consists of a rich variety of building materials such as scrap lumber, bricks, tires, rope and sand. With the assistance of a trained play leader, children spend countless hours building, using and tearing down their play structures, and then beginning the process all over again (Louv, 1978).

Similar materials and tools can easily be added to the preschool playground to enhance young children's opportunities to manipulate and construct in the outdoor environment. The number of tires, barrels and loose boards found on some playgrounds (Frost, Bowers & Wortham, 1990) can be increased and child-sized cable spools, outdoor blocks, gardening tools and small wooden or plastic boxes can be added.

To protect this equipment from weather and vandalism, a storage method is needed. Either a storage shed or part of an existing play structure (such as underneath a slide/fort structure) must be designated to house movable materials when not in use. If the storage area is readily accessible to children, with low shelves and baskets or boxes for loose parts, they can assume responsibility for taking out and returning this equipment.

Providing More Opportunities for Dramatic Play

Literature addressing the issue of play (e.g., Erikson, 1977; Piaget, 1951; Singer & Singer, 1990; Smilansky, 1968) clearly indicates that dramatic or imaginative play is of central importance in the young child's development. Dramatic play is key to success in later formal education. The young child who can readily manipulate symbols in dramatic play is much more likely to accept and effectively use the arbitrary symbol systems of mathematics and written language (Dyson, 1990; Nourot & Van Hoorn, 1991; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

Early educators recognize the importance of this play type and provide materials and space indoors for housekeeping, dramatic play and blocks. These centers, when stocked with quality play materials, stimulate a rich assortment of creative dramatic play that frequently spreads into other areas of the classroom. This variety of opportunities for indoor dramatic play helps meet the needs and interests of the greatest number of children. When new materials are rotated in and out of the classroom centers on a regular basis, these interests are maintained over time.

Although dramatic play opportunities do exist outdoors, they are limited and often created spontaneously by the children themselves with the few available materials. Monroe (1985) found that over half of all child care centers studied had no specific equipment for outdoor dramatic play. Frost, Bowers and Wortham (1990) found dramatic play equipment on fewer than one-third of all preschool playgrounds surveyed.

Dramatic play equipment for use outdoors can be readily purchased or scrounged. Also, some materials that are typically found in indoor dramatic play centers can be taken outdoors. For example, a camp can be set up outside with tent, fire pit, sleeping bags, cookstove and cooking utensils. Placed in a box or similar storage container, related props can be taken outside and returned indoors with relative ease (see Jelks & Dukes, 1985).

A steering wheel from a car or truck can be mounted in a wooden box and placed on the playground to stimulate a variety of dramatic play activities. The same wheel, nestled inside an old boat, can encourage nautical themes. When placed in front of a line of wooden boxes, the steering wheel can become the engine car of a train. A playhouse or fort-like structure can be purchased or constructed by parents and community members and used by children in other creative play themes. Early educators can use their imagination to develop a long list of similar materials that stimulate good dramatic play outdoors.

Safety Issues

Exciting outdoor play spaces also need to be safe environments for young children. Unfortunately, teachers and administrators are frequently unaware of the many unnecessary hazards that playgrounds contain. Although safety issues have been identified for nearly 20 years, statistics indicate that a growing number of children

continue to be treated in hospital emergency rooms for injuries incurred on the playground (Wallach, 1990).

The most significant problem on playgrounds today is the hardpacked surfaces under and around equipment (Tinsworth & Kramer, 1989). Falling from playground structures onto a hard surface, such as asphalt or packed earth, can cause serious injury. Concerned adults must replace these surfaces with more appropriate materials (such as 12 inches of sand or pea gravel) to reduce this unnecessary hazard (Thompson, 1991).

Other problems associated with playgrounds for young children include: equipment spacing, improper equipment installation, irregular maintenance and inadequate briefing of children on playground use (U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 1991). Each of these issues must be addressed so that playgrounds can be low-risk places for children to experiment in and explore.

Conclusions

Children deserve the same diversity and richness in their outdoor play environments as they have indoors. Esbensen (1987) and Frost and Wortham (1988) offer many suggestions for those interested in gaining further insights into this topic. By carefully analyzing the playground setting and determining what is missing, concerned adults can provide a greater variety of play materials and more opportunities to manipulate materials and nurture dramatic play. Then, by spending more time planning for and implementing a more complete playground curriculum, teachers and administrators can help children take full advantage of this marvelous, but frequently underdeveloped, part of a complete early childhood program.

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