

Pictures for Reflection

Playgrounds: Think Differently

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Playground Space: Take a Good Look

As adults plan children's outdoor spaces, what initial questions do they ask? Do they consider the possible range and variety of holistic experiences that promote children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical learning and development?

Do adults design spaces to nurture both inter- and intra-personal interactions (events and games to develop oral language and nonverbal cues, experiences to support and care for peers/ nature/critters, and opportunities to enjoy time for quiet and reflection alone and with others)? Did adults include manufactured equipment in order for children to climb, tunnel, and grip as well as plan for natural spaces wherein children learn to appreciate, explore, and problem-solve with nature (bushes, trees, flowers, dirt)?

Do adults plan for active and constructive play by including wagons, tables, chairs, balls as well as building materials such as shovels, pails, wood, and blocks? Do adults ensure a variety of play opportunities by providing different spaces (hard surface for wheel toys, chalk talk, and bouncing balls; mulch surface for falling and running; grassy surface for running and tumbling)? Instead of ordering from a catalog, did adults consult with professionals knowledgeable in designing children's complex, inclusive, and integrated play spaces?



Photo by Larry L. Burriss

Do teachers prepare to integrate indoor learning with outdoor experiences (stage for language arts/dramatic play, portable tables for arts and crafts, access to water for science and play)? Did adults plan for children's capacity to challenge, problem-solve, and innovate (garden, bird feeders, variety of climbing equipment, building materials)? Did adults ensure an inclusive outdoor space for all children to play and learn together?

Swings are fun, but for how long?

Why are some outdoor spaces more popular with children than others? As children begin to engage in play, they first ask, "What does this object/material do?" After some exploration and discovery, the child then asks, "What can I do with this object/material?" Play is about a child's ownership of the process; the child directs the play. This ownership involves children's deep thinking, active exploration, and innovative application.



Photo by Larry L. Burriss

For example, as a child considers the traditional playground swing, she asks, "What does this swing do?" With rehearsal, she comes to understand by pumping her legs forward and backward, the swing goes higher. This discovery may be pleasurable, but for how long? Just as quickly, a child's natural curiosity and desire to challenge, she will then ask, "What can I do with this swing?" This exploration of the swing's potential for complexity may include standing, twisting, or jumping off in flight. This process of ownership is also observed as children use the traditional slide. After several times walking up the steps and sliding down the chute, the child seeks innovation.

He might consider sliding down the chute on his tummy, walking up the chute, or sending toys and stones down the chute to discover which objects travels faster.

If playground equipment and apparatus remain designed for a single function, children in their natural state of challenge and curiosity, will use creativity, innovation, and problem solving to expand function.

Notice the rectangular shape? But what purpose does it serve?

Recently, while observing children at play, an eight-year-old transformed this rectangle into a popular hamburger restaurant. Simply, by calling out to other players, she quickly created a long line of potential customers. The play is now more complex because the event involves ordering different foods (perspective-taking, language, role play); making money to exchange (adding, counting, vocabulary); and creating food orders (role play, language, following emerging scripts).



Photo by Larry L. Burriss

As an adult observer, it was difficult to discern the mulch used for the pretend food from the mulch used for the pretend money; the children appeared quite clear regarding the rules (creating mulch food and money props, identifying leaders, and developing scripts).

In planning for quality outdoor play space, consider the open-ended and innovative capacity when ordering equipment, incorporating nature, and planning with teachers. Referring back to the rectangle, what is the function?

Depending on the children's direction for the play, they may need a stage, boat, mountain or for now, a counter to order hamburgers. In other words, the rectangle becomes whatever the children require at that time to support their play.

P.S. Regretfully, we cannot provide readers with the rich sounds of the playground. There was laughing, giggling, yelling, and screaming. Yes, children screamed as they slid, ran, and climbed. In other words, they loudly screamed because they could; if not in the playground, where else can they use their "outdoor voices"? And yes, there was also crying. A child's missed turn on the climber, a fall and a scraped knee, or a disagreement with a peer who did not want to play resulted in tears. Depending on the age/stage, children frequently resolved their issues; sometimes, a caring adult offered insight. In all instances however, the playground is a space to nurture children's emerging sense of self and other.

This reading list supports new possibilities

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