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## **Pictures for Reflection**

### **A Playground Mystery: What Happened?**

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*Photograph by Larry L. Burris*

Is this simple metal frame supposed to be a landscaping border? Is this simple metal frame left over from one of the playground buildings? Is this simple metal frame lacking other important features? Did the playground managers make a mistake?

This simple metal frame on the playground is not a mistake; it is quite intentional in its form and function. What does it do?

When children play, this frame becomes a boat, table, mountain, car, plane or spaceship. Using their unbounded imagination, children transform, in their minds-eye, the metal frame into whatever is required in their dramatic play scenario.

For example, one day I observed children, ages five through eight, transforming the frame into the counter at a fast-food restaurant. Initially, two girls, six and eight years old, started playing “McDonalds.”® They took turns as server and customer, ordering, cooking, and after paying, collecting their burgers and French fries. Within five minutes, a few other children joined this thematic play scenario by simply getting into the ordering line. As still other children joined, the two original players became the servers and cashiers, using mulch for the food as well as mulch for the money.

Aside from the two original players, children appeared randomly from across the playground. No one gave directions, no one made rules, and no child appeared confused as to the expectations in the role play. At one point, there were more than 10 children standing in line, ordering food and exchanging mulch money for mulch burgers.

The metal frame invited children’s imagination and creativity. For example, while going down a traditional slide, children invent new functions such as sliding down on backs or with partners. Additionally, children may roll stones or toys down the chute. Children create different ways to explore sliding. Similarly, when using a swing, children begin to twist or jump. In other words, once children discover the single function of the equipment, they innovate other alternatives to experience. This is where the metal frame provides children with safe, numerous and creative alternative play events.

Finally, after running, climbing, and tunneling across the playground, children come to the metal framework which then serves as a quiet place to rest, reflect and observe other players.