

1999

# Outdoor play

Carolyn E. Althaus  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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# Outdoor play

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This paper is a review of the literature relative to outdoor play practices in education. Benefits, as well as problems, associated with outdoor play practices were discussed. Guidelines for planning and implementing successful outdoor play practices were outlined and conclusions were drawn from the literature. Recommendations were made for future outdoor play programs.

**Outdoor Play**

**A Graduate Project**

**Submitted to the**

**Department of Curriculum and Instruction**

**In Partial Fulfillment**

**Of the Requirement for the Degree**

**Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education**

**University of Northern Iowa**

**By**

**Carolyn E. Althaus**

**May, 1999**

This Research Paper by: Carolyn E. Althaus

Entitled: Outdoor Play

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirements for the

Degree of Masters of Arts in Early Childhood Education.

Charles R. May

April 26, 1999

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Director of Research Paper

Judith M. Finkelstein

April 26, 1999

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Faculty Reader

William P. Callahan

4-28-99

Date Approved

\_\_\_\_\_  
Head, Department of Curriculum  
And Instruction

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## CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Outdoor recess has been a common part of the school day for decades. As adults reflect on their own recess experiences vivid memories occur. For many, the opportunity to play with classmates was an important reason to go to school. During a study by Michael Henniger, adults were asked to recall one of their favorite memories as a child. Of the adults asked, 70% recalled an activity that took place outdoors (Henniger, 1994). Children value outdoor play; just as adults did when they were in elementary school. Recess is often seen as a chance to get away from academic tasks and recharge. In the outdoors, children are faced with challenges and freedoms different from common academic tasks. Children accomplish physical feats which allow them to gain confidence and improve their self esteem. During recess, children's social skills develop. It is a time for children to figure out who they are as they deal with the injustices of social involvement and practice necessary adult social skills. Children are also interacting with a variety of other children. They must learn to cooperate and negotiate with others.

According to Pellegrini and Glickman (1989):

Recess is one of the few times during the school day when children are free to exhibit a wide range of social competencies - sharing, cooperation, negative and passive language - in the context that they see meaningful. Only at recess does the playground become one of the few places where children can actually define and enforce meaningful social interaction during the day. Without recess, the children lose an important educational experience. (p.24)

## History of Outdoor Play

Outdoor play and child development was influenced by Friedrich Froebel in Germany in 1837 (Frost & Wortham, 1988). Froebel regarded all play as important and significant in the development of children. He believed that play developed children's character as well as their physical fitness (Pettis, 1996). Children were encouraged to work with and discover nature during their outdoor play experiences. Children's experiences consisted of building dams, tending gardens, caring for animals, playing running games, and games of war.

Froebel wanted children to explore materials, such as balls, cubes and blocks. He called these materials gifts; also, Froebel wanted children to engage in play that involved perforating, sewing, and drawing. He called these activities occupations (Decker & Decker, 1997). In about 1900, Anna Bryan wanted to supplement Froebel's gifts and occupations. She introduced materials such as hammers and nails, pasteboard boxes, wood and wire. Swings, seesaws and climbing poles were being added to other kindergarten environments as well. At the Harriet Johnson Nursery School in Boston in 1920, the following equipment and materials were used in the play environment: sand and water play materials, wheeled vehicles, balls, hammers, nails and boards, work benches, ladders, steps, swings, and slides. However, these kindergartens and nursery schools were not typical of the early 1900s. Public schools at the time were focusing on materials for reading, writing and arithmetic. The emphasis on academics left no funds to supplement outdoor play equipment and structures. Limited equipment consisted of fixed steel exercise apparatus (Frost & Wortham, 1988).



Originally, playgrounds were seen as the answer to the need for physical fitness and child development (Rivkin, 1998). In the 19th century, Germany, a country well known for physical fitness, was concerned that as city life became more apparent, people's physical and mental health was at stake; as a result, Rousseau Gutsmuth introduced outdoor play and exercise training in 1812 (Frost & Wortham, 1988).

Germany's influence became apparent in the United States in 1821 as a crude outdoor gymnasium was built in Salem, Massachusetts. Germany's techniques influenced another American, Marie Zakerzewska (Frost & Wortham, 1988). Zakerzewska observed children in Berlin playing in sand pile playgrounds. Boston adopted the idea and began their own sandgartens in 1886. This marked the beginning of the first serious outdoor play movement for children in America (Pettis, 1996).

The emergence of innovative playgrounds came in the 1950s and 1960s. The new play environments were designed and developed by artists, architects, recreation specialists, educators and commercial manufacturers. These people began evaluating playgrounds in terms of child development (Hartle, 1996). As a result of fresh perspectives, playgrounds took on an original look. Imaginative play, the representation of significant cultural events, and artistic appeal was the essence of the playgrounds of this time.

Recycled and low-cost materials formed the first junk playgrounds. Structures were made of scrap lumber, rubber tires, old vehicles, concrete culverts, railroad ties and any other reusable construction materials. Another kind of playground that was developed during this era was the fantasy playground. The structures in these play environments were designed around cultural themes such as a nautical playground or a

castle playground. Other playgrounds were built to recall phases of history, such as space travel, or the old west. Playgrounds in the 1950s and 1960s were creative, safer, and more aesthetically pleasing than previous structures; however, one misfortune was that adults appeared to be more interested in the structures than students (Frost & Wortham, 1988).

During the 1970s and 1980s, the variety of playground equipment available increased. The flexibility of structures also increased, for manufacturers provided consumers with options for changing structures by linking new sections to existing structures. This flexibility allowed consumers to add new structures as their need for complexity increased; in the 1980s space-age plastics were introduced which gave color to equipment as well as resiliency. These new plastics reduced the likelihood of burns from skin contact with metal in the hot sun.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (1981) has sparked interest in playground implementation and playground safety. Lawsuits, which occur when equipment is faulty, supervision is insufficient, surfaces are inappropriate, and maintenance is poor have resulted in playground improvement and safety. Knowledge concerning the importance of play and the developmental significance of play has aided those responsible for play environments; by using this knowledge, they developed safer, challenging, aesthetically pleasing, and developmentally sound play places for children.

### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if providing students with outdoor play opportunities is necessary, and to present guidelines for implementing a successful outdoor play program. To accomplish this purpose, this paper will address the following questions:

1. Why is play important to children?
2. Why is outdoor play important to children?
3. What are the benefits of outdoor play?
4. What are the problems involved in providing outdoor play?
5. What are the guidelines for developing a successful outdoor play facility?

### Need for the Study

Providing outdoor recess or outdoor play opportunities has been common in many schools. The need for outdoor recess has been challenged recently by people who believe that declining achievement scores are a result of lack of time spent on academic tasks. Educators and school systems are wondering if eliminating outdoor recess will increase achievement scores. There has not been a lot of research done regarding the impact of providing students with outdoor play moments. Data that have been collected suggests that recess is good for children because it is positively related to educational outcomes (Pellegrini, 1991). This research of literature will be analyzing why outdoor recess is a necessary part of the school day.

### Limitations of the Study

The literature examined for this study was mainly limited to materials presently available from colleges in Dubuque: Loras College, Clarke College, and the University of Dubuque. There was also access to material from the University of Northern Iowa, Inter-Library Loan System. Some important information could not be obtained for this study.

### Definition of Terms

**Recess:** a break in what one is engaged in. A period of time away from the task at hand: an interlude, a change of pace which often takes place outdoors.

**Playgrounds:** designated recreational areas where stationary and manipulative equipment is located to facilitate a child's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### The Importance of Play

Before the importance of outdoor play can be examined, the value of any type of play in school must be clarified. Play has been described, by many early childhood educators, as the child's work. There are many positive components and results of play. Play shows educators how well children are developing and is a way for children to further their development (Sawyers, 1994). Play develops many aspects of a child's life as it shapes the whole child. Play promotes cognitive development as well as socioemotional development (Ceglowski, 1997, Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1988).

There are many ways play promotes cognitive development. Play enhances problem solving abilities, creative thought, and school achievement (Ceglowski, 1997, Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Verbal judgement and reasoning are other significant results of play (Mann, 1996). Through play children develop manipulative skills as well as the ability to construct an understanding of relationships, which is the heart of logical-mathematical knowledge (Chaille & Silvern, 1996). It is through manipulations with objects that children begin to understand and construct knowledge regarding how things work (DeVries & Kohlberg, 1987).

Play also promotes moral development by enhancing children's feelings of efficiency and leads to discovery of self and the world in which we live (Devries & Zan, 1994). Play contributes to the development of positive peer relationships (Mann 1996). Children learn to cooperate and get along with others through play experiences. Play allows children a chance to express their feeling appropriately in a non-threatening

atmosphere (Sawyers, 1994). Pretend play allows children to take on different roles and experiment with different perspectives (Ceglowski, 1997; Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Ultimately, play allows children to autonomously choose activities they are interested in gaining understanding. Play allows children to learn the most they can because it encourages children to construct their own knowledge as they interact with the physical world and with other children (Kamii & Devries, 1993). Children get a better understanding because they are interpreting the play experiences for themselves, in their terminology and based on past experiences. Instead of passively receiving information as true simply because they were told so by their teacher, they learn truth through their own experience (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Play, then, offers the child the opportunity to make sense out of the world by using available tools. Understanding is created by doing, by doing with others and by being completely involved in that doing. Through play, the child comes to understand the world and the adult comes to understand the child. (Chaille & Silvern, 1996, p.278)

### Outdoor Play

Most early childhood educators would agree that play is important and is even considered young children's work. There are a variety of theories which support why there is a need for outdoor play. It has been found that children who are confined in the classroom for long periods of time become fidgety, restless and unable to concentrate (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). One view is that recess helps our sanity. Another explanation is that human beings have a need to move, converse, and change from their

routine (Pellegrini, 1991). Recess reduces fatigue and burnout; it enhances our time on task; it increases our energy level, and recess helps develop a more positive outlook toward work (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). Some of these notions have been studied and theories have resulted from them.

### Surplus Energy Theory

One such theory is the idea of surplus energy. This theory justifies recess by stating that children have a need to blow off steam after a long time in the classroom (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). Herbert Spencer (1873) is credited with the surplus energy theory of play. Spencer believed that animals and humans released excess energy through physical activity. Spencer observed that surplus energy would build up while the body was at rest also he recognized that human beings have more energy to discard because they do not need to spend as much time hunting and gathering as more primitive animals. Furthermore, Spencer suggested that through play surplus energy is dispersed (Evans and Pellegrini, 1997).

Spencer's theory is often used today. Many teachers say children become fidgety because of a need to release pent-up energy. Thus, playing outdoors helps children to concentrate better. Other teachers have suggested that the outdoor break is seen as a psychological reward for having sat in one's desk for a prolonged period of time.

Overall, some teachers attribute the ability to dissipate surplus energy as the reason why children are able to maintain attention throughout the school day (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997).

## Novelty Theory

Another theory that supports the need for recess is the novelty theory. The following statement by Pellegrini (1991) has been used to describe novelty theory:

Children need recess because they are temporarily bored with their immediate classroom environment. When they go outdoors for recess they seek novelty by interacting with different peers in different situations. But, when the novelty of the recess environment begins to wane, they again need to change. At this point, the classroom becomes a novelty and children actually pay closer attention. (p.40)

The basis for the novelty theory is that children's interest levels change. The novelty theory suggests that the reason children are fidgeting and inattentive is because they have become bored with the tasks they are engaged in, and they begin thinking of other more novel things to do, such as play outside.

## Play as Practice Theory

Another theory that has been developed to explain the need for recess is the notion of play as practice. The idea is that play prepares children for adulthood (Jelks & Dukes, 1985). Activities on the playground encourage competition, experimentation with social situations, and family-oriented dramatic play. Practice with a variety of situations on the playground is important to in learning to cope as an adult. Children learn what is and what is not socially acceptable, and as a result, they learn to make better decisions which will help them as adults.

Whatever the theory one believes about outdoor play, it is evident that recess is an important element of classroom management and behavior guidance (Pellegrini & Davis, 1993). Children are excited about outdoor play. They can run, jump, climb, yell, and be super heroes. There are new and unique challenges, freedoms and discoveries to be



made. Outdoor play is much more than a time to let off steam between more valuable indoor activities. Instead, outdoor play is one of young children's primary vehicles for healthy growth and development (Frost, 1997b).

### Benefits of Outdoor Play

Students as well as teachers benefit from outdoor play. Some of the positive effects are easily seen and measured and others are less tangible. Most benefits concern the development of the whole child and the inclusion of independence.

An obvious benefit is that children can give their gross-motor skills a workout. (Frost, 1997a) Children can test their skills on complex climbing structures. They build a sense of accomplishment as they master physical risks found on the playground. This in turn encourages young children to face and master other challenges. Children develop a positive self-esteem as they marvel at what they are able to achieve (Wilford, 1996). Often, they surprise themselves which gives them the courage to try something more difficult the next time.

Another benefit outdoor play has is a wider range of play opportunities. Children get more messy and have more freedom outdoors (Sawyers, 1994). Ordinary play equipment that is brought outdoors can suddenly have new meaning. Playing musical instruments outdoors sounds much different from playing indoors. In outdoor play, sand and water activities encourage freedom that is restricted indoors. Consequently, children have more liberty for self-expression in outdoor play.

Playing outdoors also helps children gain a respect and an appreciation for the natural environment (Wilson, Kilmer, & Knauerhase, 1996). Young children naturally

wonder about the world. They are curious about their surroundings and interested in exploring. Outdoor play promotes the exploration of their world and encourages children to be an advocate for the environment. Environmental education is a critical component for developing the whole child, as well as an important component of environmental conservation. Children need to be educated on how to respect their environment.

Investigation of the natural world supports the scientist that is in all of us. We want children to be curious, to make hypotheses, and to experiment freely. Promoting experimentation is how creativity flourishes (Ross, 1995). We want children to be active learners who question results and take the opportunity to make their own discoveries. The need to experiment with cause and effect relationships is an important component of children's development (Kamii & DeVries, 1993). Outdoor play is a good way to encourage experimentation. Children using blocks to build a structure must use important life skills such as hypothesizing, estimating weight, and exploring balance. As a child investigates properties in a sandbox, she may discover that the sand will hold its shape if a little water is added (Wilford, 1996). The process of children's predictions, assumptions, successes, and failures is what supplements their need to learn. The opportunity to discover promotes children's curiosity and the tenacity to continue learning.

Some data suggest that recess is good for children because it is positively associated with educational outcomes (Pellegrini, 1991). Popularity with peers and children's ability to function as a group member has been a proven predictor of school adjustment and success (Pellegrini & Glickman, 1989). How children perceive themselves socially and monitor their ability to interact with others, is critical to the

development of self-worth and acceptance of self (Weiller, 1992). Juvenile delinquency and personality disorders may develop in the child who has difficulty socializing with others (Pellegrini, 1992). These problems can be addressed and then possibly reversed if detected early. As a precaution, schools need to be aware of and concerned about social adjustment as well as academic achievement.

Dramatic play, which is an integral part of quality playground atmospheres, is fundamental in the development of young children (Frost, 1994). Children's imaginations are broadened during dramatic play. Dramatic play offers opportunities to interact with others and become aware of boundaries (Jelks & Dukes, 1985). Children become aware of varying points of view during dramatic play. They often pretend what it is like to be an adult. Another critical component of dramatic play is the relationship between oral language, writing ability, reading comprehension and dramatic play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). It prepares a foundation for success in formal education later. Young children who can manipulate symbols in dramatic play are more likely to accept and effectively use the arbitrary symbol systems of mathematics and written language (Henniger, 1993).

Pellegrini & Bjorklund (1996), addressed another benefit of outdoor recess. They argued that when breaks are placed between cognitively strenuous tasks, children's attention and learning actually increases. Research many years ago indicated that children learn better when material is spaced over time, rather than concentrated. It is the principle of distributed practice as opposed to massed practice (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996). When children's task efforts are spaced, their attention is maximized.

Another benefit, of outdoor play, is that social skills thrive when children learn to cooperate and solve conflicts outside the classroom (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997).

Developing social skills is probably one of the most important skills children practice on the playground and probably one of the first skills overlooked for its importance. On the playground, children must learn to manage their behavior and get along with others (Pellegrini & Glickman, 1989). Adults are often there to supervise but children are the ones in charge of their play and ability to cooperate with others. Adult social skills such as negotiation and compromise are often called upon to help children collaborate and accomplish desired goals (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997). Negotiation skills promote children's ability to be flexible, make allies, and redefine situations (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1988). Children's ability to take a perspective and solve hypothetical social problems increases when children are given the opportunity to explore a variety of roles and situations during play (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996).

Outdoor play can be therapeutic (Frost, 1997b). Children act out their conflicts and disappointments in more dramatic ways outdoors and, in doing so, they are able to cope better with difficult situations. As children face increasing complex problems in families and neighborhoods, opportunities to play freely become even more important (Frost, 1994).

Teachers also benefit from children playing outdoors. Teachers get to relax and not be the center of attention. They get an essential break from the rigors and demands of being the person in charge. Outdoors, children take control of activities, which give teachers the opportunity to observe student's learning. Recess is a great opportunity for

teachers to document developing skills, individual interests, and see how well children function as part of a group (Pellegrini & Glickman, 1989).

Another interesting benefit of recess is that the adult child relationship seems to change outdoors. Recess provides teachers the opportunity to talk with children one on one and make personal connections. Because teachers often watch and stay separate from children's play, children become empowered which is often an opportunity for them to dramatize personal experiences (Frost, 1994). Teachers learn about home encounters and relationships as they witness dramatic play situations unfold and overhear peer conversations. The primary purpose of outdoor play is the same as for other forms of play: the development and learning that take place for the whole child intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically. Outdoor play also provides breaks from concentrated school tasks.

#### Problems Involved in Providing Students with Outdoor Play

While play may seem desirable, it remains a controversial idea. It is sometimes seen as a frivolous act because it takes time away from important life tasks, such as earning a living and studying for a career (Mann, 1996). Recently educators, parents, and communities have begun to question the purpose, frequency, and duration of recess (Pellegrini & Smith, 1993). Some teachers think that instructional time should be used solely on academic matters and have chosen to reduce the frequency and duration of recess opportunities (Evans & Pellegrini, 1997).

Educators and school administrators are looking at eliminating recess as a solution to declining test scores and school achievement across the country. They

believe that if students work time is increased, student learning will also increase. This view contends that time spent playing could be better spent on academic tasks (Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 1996). However, that rationale is not completely accurate. Pellegrini & Bjorklund (1996) contradict the speculation that more time will automatically improve learning.

Certainly, children benefit from receiving quality instruction, and increasing the number of hours of instruction per year that a child receives may indeed increase learning. This, however, is not the same as stating that more intense, break-free hours of instruction will enhance learning. (p.5)

Pellegrini & Bjorklund report that intense, continual hours of instruction may actually hinder children's abilities to learn more. They believe recess supports the value of play. One example of this principle is a study conducted by Hyson, Hirsch-Pasek, and Rescorla (1991). Their study focused on parents who had enrolled their children in an academic preschool. The parents had hoped that the academic option would accelerate their children's scholastic achievement. The study concluded that children who went to academic preschools were less creative, showed more test anxiety, and had less positive attitudes toward school (Ceglowski, 1997).

Some classroom teachers would like to see recess eliminated. These teachers commented that instructional time is spent solving problems that developed on the playground which takes away from academic learning (Blatchford, Creaser, & Mooney, 1990). This occurs because students experience conflicts on the playground and are not able to settle them, so they bring them indoors for the teacher to resolve. The process is often lengthy and is done at the expense of the other children in the room.

Teachers are also concerned that conflicts and violence on the playground is destroying children's relationships and compromising children's safety (Pellegrini &

Bjorklund, 1996). Some argue that, although recess is meant to be an opportunity for children to have fun and be independent, oftentimes students are being bullied, teased, and called names (Blatchford, Creaser, & Mooney, 1990). Aggression and unpredictable violence seems to be on the rise. Parents and teachers are concerned by this trend and believe that abolishing recess would present one less occasion for a student to be violated (Pelligrini & Smith, 1993).

Most teachers put a lot of time and effort in planning and organizing classroom indoor activities. Unfortunately, this same importance is not given to outdoor play (Henniger, 1993). Outdoor play is often seen as a chance for children to be independent and have fun. However, the playground shouldn't be viewed as a separate component from education. The outdoor environment is rich with learning opportunities, and children are learning during this play as well. Unfortunately, one negative thing they may be learning is that adults do not value outdoor play. Children assume that outdoor play must not be highly regarded because the same care, planning, and adult interactions are not seen when walls and doors are gone.

The main debate about recess and outdoor play is deciding its value. Some educators and parents do not recognize the significance of outdoor play and students have a hard time articulating its meaning in their lives. Lack of preservation makes it more critical that advocates stress the significance before changes are made. The danger behind modifying recess to raise test scores and abolish bullying is that the value of outdoor play will not be recognized until it has been severely altered or eliminated (Blatchford & Sumpner, 1998).

## CHAPTER III

### DEVELOPING GUIDELINES FOR OUTDOOR PLAY

#### Guidelines for Enhancing Outdoor Play

Enhancing outdoor play requires consideration of an assortment of issues. All types of play should be encouraged in the classroom and outdoors. Children are involved in creative, dramatic, constructive, imaginative, social, physical, and natural play.

The following guidelines should be used when developing an outdoor play program:

1. The location of the playground is vital to its effectiveness.

When selecting a playground site, one must consider easy accessibility for regular education children as well as children with special needs. To ensure security, there needs to be separation from vehicles and pedestrians. Children also need to be protected from animals and vandals. Researching the vegetation is important to make sure that there are no poisonous plants. The area also needs to be free of man made toxic materials and electrical hazards. Drinking water should be available because children who are hot and thirsty do not feel like playing. Landscaping factors should be investigated when choosing a playground. It is important to provide shaded areas for children to rest. Look for locations that have natural features such as hills, trees, and flowers (Sawyers, 1994).

2. The playground design must include a variety of play spaces and optimal amount of children. (Frost, 1994).

Obviously there should be areas for children to run, jump, climb, and talk with others. However, there also needs to be play areas where children can play independently



allowing them a chance for solitude and reflection (Decker & Decker, 1997). Quiet, shady areas off the beaten path work well. Having a bench or chairs available is also comforting.

Watch for problems in playground design, such as pathways that put children at risk of being hit by a swing or by a child getting off a slide. Children need lots of room for interacting. Too much equipment can take up too much space, which in turn creates conflict because children do not have enough room to play (Jacobs, 1997). Inefficient square footage available per child is a factor that may spark conflicts on the playground. The quality of play decreases and fighting increases if there is limited equipment and space for children to play (Jacobs, 1997).

### 3. The types of equipment used must be multidimensional.

A variety of equipment is necessary for outdoor play to be successful; however, more equipment is not always better especially if space is sparse. Equipment should be challenging, open ended and varied but it need not be stationary or expensive (Jacobs, 1997). Large boxes, plastic crates, paper towel and wrapping paper rolls, as well as paper and markers for making signs are wonderful materials to instigate imaginative play. Children can turn empty boxes into a castle or train as they carry out dramatic play scripts. Educators need to make sure they don't deny children of these wonderful opportunities. Boxes and crates are easy to acquire as well as inexpensive to obtain which makes them great additions to outdoor equipment. Before tossing something in the trash, teachers should consider the implications of adding it to the play materials. Not only will it give kids materials to use in their discoveries and creations, it will exemplify how important and easy it is to recycle.

Providing moveable materials, boxes and crates, and indoor toys, as well as by varying play, adults are encouraging the range of play they want children to experience (Frost, 1994; Henniger, 1994). Children get bored if they are offered the same play opportunities day after day (Henniger, 1994). Equipment with multiple uses and challenges, which can be varied are preferred. Educators must constantly keep in mind the capabilities and interests of their students.

#### 4. Children should be encouraged to take ownership for the playground.

Children should be included in some decisions that will be made regarding the playground (Frost, 1994). Appearance and material selection are two ways they can be involved and foster independence. Everyone likes to spend time in friendly, beautiful places. So it makes sense to have an outdoor environment that is aesthetically pleasing. It is best if children are involved in the beautifying process. Involving students in playground decisions and responsibilities, gives them another way to connect to the school and to each other. When children are involved, they take ownership of the property and keep it's best interests at heart thus reducing the risk of vandalism and destruction.

Equipment storage decisions need to be practical (Frost, 1997a). Children need to be involved so they can choose and return materials independently. By doing this children develop the ability to share and take responsibility for the equipment (Frost, 1997a).

## Guidelines for the Teacher's Role During Outdoor Play

The teacher is a fundamental component of outdoor play. A good playground environment provides spaces and equipment which encourage peer interaction, support children's capabilities and challenge children to continue to grow (Sawyers, 1994).

Teachers should observe the following guidelines as they accompany children during outdoor play:

1. The teacher must understand the importance of outdoor play and guide children in their play.

It is critical for teachers to be able to recognize the different concepts of learning that are being constructed through play. On the playground children are developing socially, emotionally, cognitively, and creatively, as well as physically. Knowing the benefits of outdoor play will help teachers identify the content that children are learning through play (Chaille & Silvern, 1996). Educators need to create environments that promote characteristics of both playfulness and work. Teachers should work on promoting enjoyable activities that are both voluntary and self-directed. When teachers take children's play as seriously as other classroom tasks, the quality and intensity of children's play increases (Ceglowski, 1997).

Teachers need to realize that they cannot direct children's play.

Children's play should be guided, but not directed. Although teachers need to improve, support, and refine play, children need freedom to explore their interests and challenge themselves. Children need teacher support so that they can take control of their play and make it their own (Frost, 1994). Teachers must respect that children own and direct their

own play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Teachers can help children carry out their play by giving them time, freedom, and support (Frost, 1994).

2. Teachers need to recognize that time is vital when children are engaging in outdoor play.

Once rich materials and an appropriate playground setting has been provided, it is important to make sure children are given plenty of time to follow their interests and generate complex play schemes. There is a direct correlation between the length of the play period and the quality of children's play (Christie & Wardle, 1992). It is recommended that children three to five years old have 30 to 45 minutes of uninterrupted play outdoors (Frost, 1994). Kindergartners in a full day setting are advised to have one hour of uninterrupted play (Frost, 1994). It is frustrating when a child's theme is emerging and the whistle signals it is time to leave. Children need to progress through certain preparatory activities such as recruiting other players, agreeing on a story, determining where their play will take place, assigning friends roles, and possibly creating a building for their dramatization (Christie & Wardle, 1992). The preparatory activities take time and don't leave much time to allow for a quality play experience that is scheduled in a small block of time. Short play periods may stifle play before it has a chance to start. When this happens a number of times, children tend to give up on the effort and time it takes to develop a quality experience and miss out on creative opportunities and relationships with peers (Christie & Wardle, 1992).

3. Teachers must enhance their observation skills so that the outdoor playground is used most effectively.

Observing play is an important function of the teacher. The teacher needs to observe the students as well as how space is being occupied. Observing students is important because not only are teachers making sure that students are safe, they are also looking to see how they can support play and encourage a variety of play (Frost, 1997a). Sometimes teachers will be asked to join play but their direction should be kept to a minimum. Often when teachers join play, it becomes an interruption (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). The play is often stopped and suddenly the adult begins imposing her own rules and ideas. The control of the play has shifted to the teacher. The play no longer belongs to the children because it is emerging around the teacher's interests not theirs (Ford, 1993). Observing space means that the teacher is evaluating the different play areas. She should notice how space, equipment, and materials are being utilized. From there she can make judgements about changing equipment or materials so there is a connection between her goals, the children's interests, and the play that is occurring.

Ideally, the teacher should not interrupt or direct children's play. However, there is a fine line between directing their play and assisting students during play. Children have a wide range of motor ability and social skills (Henniger, 1994). Offering direct assistance to a child can make the difference between a successful outside experience and a frustrating one.

4. Teachers need to involve all the children in all the activities during outdoor play.

Teachers should intervene when they are trying to include children who are left out (Frost, 1994). The adult can intervene by suggesting a small group of children try a specific activity or by including equipment that encourages partner or small group work

(Weiller, 1992). Some children may be hesitant outdoors if motor or social skills are too advanced for them to engage. It is important to introduce activities that allow for a variety of skill levels and interests so everyone can be successful (Sawyers, 1994). The adult should let the uncertain child watch others so he can observe the kind of skill that is involved, then the teacher should encourage the hesitant child to participate. To make the transition easier, she could offer her assistance. Another way the teacher can approve participation is to identify the interests and abilities of the anxious child so that she can advise appropriate times for him to be the leader or instruct the rest of the group regarding a skill or game.

5. Teachers must know when to intervene so children will make safe decisions during outdoor play.

It is important that children manipulate and explore the world around them. However, this should always be done under the supervision of an adult. "It is estimated that more than 40 percent of playground injuries may be related to inadequate supervision" (Thompson & Hudson, 1996, p.12). Helping children set limits also warrants intervention. Children, who have difficulty setting their own limits, can put themselves in dangerous, unsafe situations during outdoor play (Sawyers, 1994). The teacher needs to be aware of when those students may have difficulty and how to work with them to minimize danger and conflicts (Frost, 1994). It is often good to talk individually with the children about the rules and reasons for safety just before they go outside. Sometimes it is also necessary to remind them when they are on the playground. You don't want to interrupt the children's play but you also want to make sure they are safe.

## 6. Teachers should encourage children to explore nature.

Another aspect to consider when letting children explore outside is that children can learn a lot from nature (Ross, 1995). They are natural investigators and enjoy new discoveries. They don't have to be persuaded to observe insects because most children are fascinated by small creatures. Often children don't even realize that they are making observations and testing prospective theories. It doesn't take much for teachers to encourage children's explorations because they are already interested (Moore, 1997). However, teachers can help students take their outdoor investigations a step further by providing students with time, appropriate space, and the tools necessary to aide their experiments (Ross, 1995). This free, open-ended approach allows children to pose their own questions and pursue their own answers (Wilson, Kilmer, & Knauerhase, 1996). It is often beneficial to provide books that relate to the children's interests and the concepts they are investigating. Allow the children to take the books outside so that they can compare information and pictures in the book as they are analyzing their specimens.

Wilson, Kilmer, & Knauerhase (1996) explained the importance of getting children active in the natural world at an early age. It is necessary because it encourages students be become motivated about conservation. It is also critical to children in urban areas because encountering nature helps dispel fears they have of the unknown. Children in urban areas aren't often exposed to the natural world. This can be very frightening as well as lead them to misconceptions about nature's elements. For example, children in urban areas verbalized their opinion of the world outdoors in terms of being dirty and disgusting. "Without frequent positive experiences with the out-of-doors, children tend to develop unfounded fears, phobias and prejudices against nature." (Wilson, Kilmer and Knauerhase, 1996, p.57). These attitudes and feelings can be hard to overcome and can

create difficulties when one is older and learning about the natural world. To contrast this, children need to be given many opportunities to foster healthy opinions regarding their environment.

7. Teachers need to help children develop conflict resolution skills so that their outdoor play is fun and educational.

The teacher needs to model positive interactions. Stay controlled and use a calm voice when discussing conflict with children (Ford, 1993). Emphasize the importance of using words, not physical threats or blows and how to appropriately express feelings.

Many conflicts between children occur on the playground. Many of these disputes can be handled quickly and the results can be very beneficial. It is vital to allow children the opportunity to negotiate their conflicts (Jacobs, 1997). By doing this, children make sense of social rules which helps them define their own beliefs and learn how to settle problems. Children can negotiate many of their own disputes. It is during resolution that children will develop the vital skills of perspective taking and self-regulation (DeVries & Zan, 1994). However, when children are physically or verbally harming each other it is necessary for an adult to mediate. As a teacher is intervening, she should avoid trying to figure out who is right or wrong. She should ask for explanations and use guiding questions so that the students devise a solution (Frost, 1994). A good question to ask is *I see that you both want to use this. What can we do that will allow both of you to play here?* (Jacobs, 1997). Students react better to solutions they have resolved. Class discussions and group meetings are a good way to address recurrent playground difficulties. The teacher should pose questions that will help the children talk about the problem so they can suggest solutions to their problem. *How can we make sure everyone has fun and is safe during recess time?*, is often a good



way to start conversation. Having another brief meeting after play, would be effective to evaluate how well solutions worked (Decker & Decker, 1997).

Respecting, supporting, supervising, and observing play are critical roles of the teacher when outdoors. Possibly, some of the most difficult decisions will involve deciding when to step in and when to stay out of play situations and disputes. Teachers want to be sure that children are out of danger, but at the same time they need to respect children's play and try to minimize interruptions. Teachers can create wonderful, stimulating outdoor play experiences as long as they understand the importance of outdoor play and support it by providing appropriate equipment, planning carefully, and encouraging their students by giving them time and opportunities to explore outdoor play.

#### Guidelines for Playground Safety

"Each year over 200,000 children suffer injuries on our nations playgrounds."

(Thompson & Hudson, 1996, p.4) Playground safety is a critical component of outdoor play. There are many aspect of playground safety that need to be considered such as safe design, appropriate surfacing, and maintenance. The following guidelines should be used when considering playground safety:

1. Equipment must be selected to meet the developmental needs of children.

Many injuries occur because there is a mismatch between children's abilities, the design of the playground, and equipment that is being used (Sawyers, 1994). Safe playgrounds challenge children as well as match their developmental needs (Hudson, Thompson, & Mack, 1997). The size of the equipment, the needs of the children, the layout of the equipment, and ground surfaces must all be considered when developing an

appropriate playground (Thompson & Hudson, 1996; Hartle, 1996). There is no equipment that fits all children. Children of different ages, physical sizes, and abilities must all be taken into account (Hudson, Thompson, & Mack, 1997). Equipment should match a child physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually (Frost, 1994). By matching all of these requirements, children avoid hazards and fears, as well as learn to share and cooperate. When children and equipment are matched correctly, children begin to evaluate situations and their current ability level so they can recognize potential problems and avoid injury (Henniger, 1994).

## 2. Proper surfacing must be considered in playground design.

“Falls to playground surfaces are the major factor in over 150,000 public playground injuries” (Thompson & Hudson, 1996, p. 8). Special surfacing is needed under any equipment under which a child may fall. When a child falls, either the surface gives to absorb the impact or the child gives with a resulting injury or even death (Decker and Decker, 1997). Surfacing is not going to prevent every injury from occurring, but it will help reduce the severity of most injuries (Hudson, Thompson, & Mack, 1997). Pea gravel, wood chips, sand, rubber tiles, shredded tires, and rubber and foam mats are all examples of shock absorbing materials (Frost, 1994). There are many advantages and disadvantages with each material so it is important to consider climate, expense, and vandalism before installing any playground surface. Organize a surfacing program. The people involved in the program will periodically check the surfacing and decide whether or not it needs to be replaced or replenished (Wallach, 1990). Initial installment of surfacing material is critical but keep in mind worn out or depleted surfacing materials will not cushion a child’s fall.

### 3. Playground maintenance is necessary in outdoor play.

When playgrounds are not maintained adequately, injuries are often the result. "It is estimated that poor maintenance is a contributing factor in at least 30% of playground injuries." (Thompson & Hudson, 1996, p.16). Therefore, ongoing inspections should be done. It is best to have trained personnel perform scheduled inspections. That way there is some consistency. This doesn't mean teachers should avoid doing inspections. Teachers should be constantly aware of possibly problems and contact someone to correct them. It is good to conduct daily cleanup and visual checks. Check to make sure any tripping hazards are removed. Tripping hazards include: debris, roots, rocks, worn surfacing material and broken or loose equipment parts (Jacobs, 1997). Ongoing inspections are actually influenced by the equipment that is originally installed. If poorly built equipment is installed it is going to be difficult to maintain the playground and it's structures. It is critical to consider how weather, soil, drainage, and adjacent land use is going to affect the equipment before you install it or you may just be wasting your money (Frost, 1994). Set aside a fund for emergency repairs and replacement of equipment parts so that repairs can be done immediately (Wallach, 1990).

Many people need to be educated about the importance of playground safety. Administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and community members must all be informed about what constitutes a safe playground. It must be understood that the money spent on keeping our playgrounds in good repair, is more economical and less tragic than money that will be exhausted in lawsuits (Wallach, 1990). Keeping our playgrounds safe and maintained will reap great rewards as children can play safely and without concern of injury.

## CHAPTER IV

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine if providing students with outdoor play opportunities is necessary and to present guidelines for implementing a successful outdoor play program. The study addressed five questions to accomplish this purpose:

#### 1. Why is play important to children?

Play is important to children because it broadens their development. It shows educators how children are developing and is a means for further development. Play is the foundation of children's work. Play promotes cognitive, social, and moral development as it helps children make sense of the world and their purpose in it.

#### 2. Why is outdoor play important to children?

Outdoor play is an important element of classroom management. Teachers use outdoor play as a technique to reduce fatigue and burnout, allow children to blow off steam, keep students engaged, and prepare children for adulthood. Outdoor play exposes children to unique challenges and fundamental discoveries regarding their physical abilities and their cohabitation with nature. Outdoor play supports active play with fewer restrictions on noise and movement. Students have opportunities to express themselves as loudly or quietly as they want outdoors. The primary purpose of outdoor play is the development and learning that take place for the whole child intellectually, socially, emotionally, and physically.

### 3. What are the benefits of outdoor play?

Outdoor play provides many opportunities for children. Outdoor play reinforces and continues growth. Children can challenge themselves physically, emotionally, and socially. Playing outdoors supports children's appreciation and respect for nature. The ability to socialize with peers, negotiate and function as a member of a group are important outcomes of outdoor play which often precede school success. Research also supports the need for outdoor play as an opportunity to take a break from cognitively strenuous tasks. Research suggests that strategically applied breaks help children regain attention and increase learning.

### 4. What are the problems involved in providing outdoor play?

Some classroom teachers would like to see outdoor play eliminated. They worry about the valuable instruction time that is lost when students are outside. However, what they need to understand is that learning takes place during outdoor play and that is up to the teacher to recognize the importance and develop the experience to benefit everyone's needs.

### 5. What are the guidelines for developing a successful outdoor play facility?

Guidelines have been developed in three different areas. These guidelines include the following:

- Guidelines for enhancing outdoor play
  1. The location of the playground is vital to its effectiveness.
  2. The playground must be arranged in a way that specific spaces are designated for a variety of play activities.

3. The types of equipment used must be multidimensional.
4. Children should be encouraged to take ownership for the playground.

- Guidelines for the Teacher's Role During Outdoor Play

1. The teacher must understand the importance of outdoor play and guide children in their play.
2. Teachers need to recognize that time is vital when children are engaging in outdoor play.
3. Teachers must enhance their observation skills so that the outdoor playground is used most effectively.
4. Teachers need to involve all the children in all the activities during outdoor play.
5. Teachers must know when to intervene so children will make safe decisions during outdoor play.
6. Teachers should encourage children to explore nature.
7. Teachers need to help children develop conflict resolution skills so that their outdoor play is fun and educational.

- Guidelines for Playground Safety

1. Equipment must be selected to meet the developmental needs of children.
2. Proper surfacing must be considered in playground design.
3. Playground maintenance is necessary in outdoor play.

## Conclusions

The following conclusions were drawn from this study:

1. Playgrounds should be places where children can grow in all aspects of their development.
2. Outdoor play is important for all children and needs to be well planned. It should not be regarded as a break time for teachers nor should it be directed by teacher agendas.
3. Outdoor playgrounds should challenge children physically, emotionally, socially, creatively, dramatically and intellectually.
4. The teacher has an important role of providing a safe, enjoyable playground.

## Recommendations

Based on a review of literature and my own observations of successful outdoor programs, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Teachers need to be more aware of the importance of outdoor play.
2. Not enough research has been done in this area.
3. Teachers, parents, administrators, and community members need to give more time and attention to outdoor play.
4. More attention needs to be given to safety procedures and playground supervisors need to be made aware of safety issues.

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