

New-Age Playgrounds Rule, as Long as the Kids Are in Charge

Designers Hope Letting Kids Play With Each Other Will Foster Creativity



New-age playgrounds are the rage in Europe and Japan, and now New York City's architect David Rockwell, who has designed adult play spaces in glamorous restaurants like Nobu, is leading the way in America. But, warn child psychologists, children really don't need a lot of help learning how to play. They do it naturally. (PhotoDisc)

By **SUSAN DONALDSON JAMES**

Jan. 11, 2007 — Gone are slides, seesaws and swings. City planners are now designing new-age public parks with trained "play workers" who guide children through a maze of water, ramps and sand to encourage creativity.

What happened to the old steel monkey bars on America's playgrounds? And just what exactly are play workers?

Architect David Rockwell, who has created adult play spaces at glamorous Manhattan restaurants like Nobu and the flashy Mohegan Sun resort in Connecticut, is working with New York City to design a public playground where children can engage in fantasy and learning. Rockwell and the city have worked with child development experts to plan the park, and he hopes to raise \$2 million to hire experienced play workers to help children through zones of sand and water, sloping ramps and construction gadgets.

Child psychologists agree the principles and equipment in these new-age playgrounds can be wonderful tools for creativity and learning — as long as the kids are in charge.

"Don't they allow kids to play dodgeball anymore?" said child psychologist Stephanie Pratola. "Kids don't need a lot of people hanging around showing them how to use stuff. Adults always have a right and a wrong way — and rules. Children benefit most developmentally in a non-structured way with no direction."

New Age for Children's Imagination

Young children learn about the world through their senses, and Pratola believes the sand and water available to children in these new-age parks teach them about containment, flow, volume, gravity, building and structure.

"Kids are naturally creative and imaginative and play with whatever is available to them," she said. "Water and sand are two of the most important things that seem to pull out of kids a lot of imagination. They are naturally therapeutic for younger kids, who are immediately stimulated and attracted to learn about their environment."

Based on enlightened theories about learning, these new playgrounds are a dramatic departure from the 19th century ones created for children in New York City's settlement houses. They are already the rage in Japan and Europe.

In Great Britain, local city councils have been upgrading parks in the last few years to keep up with new thinking on links between learning and play.

Sophie Lucy Matilda Scarlett James-Frost, a 9-year-old with a modern name and well-educated parents, excels in school and the arts. On weekend day trips, she makes her parents pull over every time they pass exciting playgrounds so she can try them out.

"Many are now way beyond the traditional swings-and-slides models we had," said Sophie's mother Christine, a 53-year-old former teacher. "They're made of plastics painted in beautiful imaginative colors of the rainbow and are of modernist ergonomic design."

These new-age British playgrounds are designed so children can use their wits and skills through climbing, swinging, balancing, sliding and rocking-type activities. One even has a water fountain that children can playfully stamp on.

"There is a greater sense of imaginative, creative and cooperative play," said Christine James, who works as an education officer for the British Film Institute. "They look like they've been designed by artists like Picasso or architects like Gaudi."

"As a parent, if you're honest," she added, "you wish they'd had them in your day and secretly wish grown-ups were allowed on them after dark!"

Child's Play Critical

Like those in Europe, Rockwell's park project is based on solid research that confirms play is critical to learning.

"Play is not optional for kids," Rockwell told The New York Times. "Play is how children learn to build community, how they learn to work with other people. It's how they learn to engage their sense of creativity."

Play also elevates spirits, expands self-expression, relieves stress and connects children to others, according to the national Association of Play Therapy.

Play is such an important key to social development and competence, says the association's New York president David Crenshaw, that one of the first symptoms of traumatized children is their inability to play.

"Traumatized children have a difficult time engaging in free spontaneous fantasy play," said Crenshaw. "A healthy child uses play to discharge the normal tension of the day. If a child goes to school and the teacher yells at him, after school in play, he'll set up the classroom and scream at all the kids and then feel fine."

Educators like Rockwell's use of movable objects, such as pulleys and tubes, particularly for learning math skills. Most forward-thinking mathematics programs involve the use of manipulative objects.

"The curriculum development for kids aged 3 to 8 is totally based on these principles and materials to learn spatial ability and how to count," said Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, director of the National Center for Children and Families at Columbia University's Teachers College.

New-age playgrounds help parents, too.

"They are modeling creativity," said Brooks-Gunn, who would like to see partnership possibilities between Rockwell's play worker training programs and the Columbia research center.

But some psychologists are wary and say the notion of a play worker assisting children in the new-age park has the potential to undermine social development.

For years, psychologists have been fighting an uphill battle with micromanaging parents, and play therapist Pratola wonders if trained play workers might interfere with creativity.

"The best way to encourage kids to play is not to give them any direction and just watch them with a delighted look on your face," said Pratola. "That's all you have to do to encourage imaginative play. Adults watching can turn play into competition with adult judges. Who decides when there are two tubes and three kids?"

However, Pratola still believes old-fashioned playgrounds help children develop their imagination and learn.

"The key is not to make up too many rules," she said.