





LET THEM PLAY!

A safe, developmentally appropriate neighborhood recreation area is as fundamental to a healthy, happy childhood as a good school.

BY SUSAN GREGORY THOMAS ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY HEATHER WESTON



It's the place where my son Zuzu met Leo and formed a friendship so profound that now they're more like siblings. It's where Leo's mom, Nati, became the sister I never had. We spent most of the afternoons during our second pregnancies hanging out on the bench half-watching as the boys played. Then our daughters were born and this is where they duked it out with the big kids for control of the diggers in the sandbox—and when they lost, founded “the doggy club” under the rope bridge. A few months ago, my baby, Will, was awestruck by his first swing ride. Recently, my kid was even scouted by a gymnastics coach as she practiced aerials and one-handed round-offs on the black matted surface. “Where does she take classes?” he asked me. Since she had never taken any—she'd just learned it all by watching the other kids—my answer was simple: the playground.

A playground, however, is a complex, amazing ecosystem. It's easy to miss the action if your eye stays trained on the surface. True, the monkey bars help build upper-body strength and coordination, and mastering them boosts self-esteem. But have

physical activity to the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights affirming every child's right to play, there's little disagreement on this point. This unstructured time hones children's intellectual and social gifts; it instills them with a sense of fairness and judgment; it builds their bodies with muscle and know-how; it endows them with competence.

But what's less talked about is what happens when kids don't have play. Experts are finding that depriving children of free play can have disastrous consequences. Research shows that kids who lack it show signs of “play deprivation,” including aggression, repressed emotions, depression, and underdeveloped social skills, and are at an increased risk for obesity. One study conducted by John A. Byers, Ph.D., professor of biology at the University of Idaho in Moscow, showed that the benefits are not simply activated during the sensitive period for brain development, but that they actually trigger neural development itself. That is, children's brains develop differently when they play.

Doesn't it always seem as if expert studies confirm what mothers have known all along? In fact, it was groups like the



It may just look like fun and games, but playgrounds and what unfolds in them are more important to our kids and communities than many of us realize.

you noticed that for your kid, those overhead ladders might very well be the only way to avoid quicksand, a gigantic lava pit, or a roiling pool of megamouth sharks? Sure, the slide offers an experience of “safe danger,” critical for developing a sense of judgment and independence, but what about the archway underneath? For the children huddled there it maybe a vitally important hideaway or a staging ground for an epic tea party.

RECREATION DEPRIVATION

We've all heard that play is the work of childhood. It's the mantra of child-development experts. From our kids' teachers at school to the surgeon general prescribing at least 60 minutes daily of

National Congress of Mothers and the General Federation of Women's Clubs at the turn of the 20th century that first recognized the need of all children for play, rallying behind construction of the first public playgrounds in the United States. Then-President Teddy Roosevelt himself, a notorious lover of the outdoors and a fitness buff, got behind the mothers' efforts, noting in a 1907 speech that “playgrounds should be provided for every child.” He said “City streets are unsatisfactory playgrounds for children because of the danger... and because in crowded sections of the city they are apt to be schools of crime.” But he wasn't just addressing the kids who lived in urban settings. He was exhorting the impor-



Playgrounds help foster a sense of belonging.

tance of outdoor community-recreation spaces for all. “Neither small backyards nor ornamental grass plots meet the needs of any but very small children.” Roosevelt’s insights about children’s need for playgrounds could not have been more prescient—indeed, research now confirms them all.

It seems ironic, then, that although the specific obstacles may be different things are pretty much back to the sorry state of affairs of Roosevelt’s era. Indeed, up to 40 percent of American schools have cancelled recess, in spite of evidence that children do better academically when they are given even as little as 15 minutes of it a day. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation report, kids age 6 and under spend an average of two hours a day playing video games and watch-

ing TV and DVDs—which obviously eats into outdoor time. Naturally, this sedentary lifestyle is unhealthy. We have all heard that childhood obesity has reached epidemic levels, with more than 30 percent of American children in most states either obese or at risk of becoming so.

IF YOU BUILD IT, EVERYONE WILL COME

But getting kids to run around is just an abstract idea unless there’s someplace safe for them to get their move on. It’s not just individual kids who benefit when neighborhoods join forces to rehabilitate or build a playground. The community gets stronger too. Research bears it out—and then some. Consider the case of KaBOOM!, a non-profit organization on a mission to save

BUILD A BETTER PLAYGROUND

Whether your community is rehabilitating an existing space or starting from scratch, this checklist—culled from children’s play experts as well as moms on the ground—can help you get started on a playground project

1 Include Everyone

A great playground should not just be accessible to all children but inclusive as well. Boundless Playgrounds, a group dedicated to building accessible playgrounds, advocates picking equipment that allows everyone to play together. For example: an extra-wide ramp for kids who use a wheelchair might run parallel to a climbing activity or a play structure. Cozy spaces are fun for all but essential for children on the autism spectrum—to feel safe.

2 Set Them Free

When you begin considering design, start with a commitment to encourage free play. While all children require supervision, kids need the opportunity to play independently to develop not just the obvious social skills like sharing and taking turns, but also spontaneity and creativity. If your playground will serve little and big ones, create separate areas with age-appropriate equipment, so that both groups can play on their own.

3 Make It Safe

Falls cause 70 percent of all playground injuries, and 80 percent of play spaces lack adequate safety surfacing. The National Program for Playground Safety (playgroundsafety.org) has a simple four-point plan for evaluating your space or your new playground plans.

4 Ask the Kids

KaBOOM! lets kids design their own playgrounds. Along the way, it has identified the equipment children want most. Top picks include: horizontal ladders, climbing walls, lookout towers, spiral slides (curves make them novel), racing slides (two or more, side by side), swings, and, of course, anything that spins.

Creativity, gross motor skills, and community—mobilizing for a space where all of that can occur is a cause to unite both policy makers and parents.

play by empowering communities to build playgrounds. In 2008, Northwestern University published a study surveying the results of 32 of these KaBOOM!-led builds. Without being prompted by researchers, 84 percent of neighborhood residents and 91 percent of partners (such as local businesses) said that building a playground together had strengthened community relationships. Eighty-eight percent said that the project had transformed skepticism into a can-do attitude, and nearly 90 percent said that the experience had proven to them the power of community organizing. Nearly all participants said the playground had improved the quality and quantity of children's play. But what is remarkable is that more than half said the playground project had helped them to address larger community issues.

Eileen Collins, a mom from Laurel, Maryland, discovered this firsthand when she initiated a drive to rehabilitate her local elementary school's playground using KaBOOM!'s free DIY tools. Not only did the community show up in record numbers to help install the new equipment, but they continued to volunteer in a variety of unexpected ways. "Church groups that had helped with the build offered parenting classes and homework assistance," she says. "It even helped break the language barrier. Spanish-speaking parents began coming to local schools to take English classes," says Collins, who's now head of the Laurel Elementary School's PTA, "I was floored by the ongoing response. I had no idea that one playground could inspire so much."

That's exactly what motivates Darell Hammond, founder of KaBOOM!. "Our goal is to get people to understand that play is a right of all children, and experience has taught us that if a community is genuinely involved in their local playground—if

they erect the slides and swings, if they help design it and raise money for it—there are benefits to the whole neighborhood."

Or a whole city. Rick Baker, the former mayor of St. Petersburg, Florida, had an inspirational playground moment back in 2001. The mayor of the small city was walking home from a wonderful day at his local playground with his kids, ages 4 and 5, thinking, "Every child should have a neighborhood playground." Shortly after, Baker developed an initiative called Play'n' Close to Home, whose purpose was to ensure there is an accessible playground within a half mile of every child in the city.

To reach his goal, Baker first found existing school, church, and other privately owned playgrounds and negotiated to make them accessible to the public. Then he added 25 local playgrounds to the city's offerings, ensuring that nearly 80 percent of the city had local access to one by the end of his term in 2009. The flagship project, the Del Holmes playground—which includes an array of water features, welcome under the hot Florida sun—is not only the largest in Florida, but it's also located in the midtown area, one of the most economically depressed parts of the city. Now, families from all sections of St. Petersburg, who might never have crossed paths otherwise, meet up there. "Whenever I go to elementary schools and ask how many children have been to 'the water park,' every kid raises his hand," says Baker. "It's the centerpiece for neighborhood gathering."

Creativity, gross motor skills, and community—mobilizing for a space where all of that can occur is a cause to unite both policy makers and parents. Make a commitment to ensure that there's a great playground within walking distance of every child. You can start just by entering our contest (see box below). □

WIN A PLAYGROUND!

Parents, KaBOOM!, and Foresters Insurance challenge you to rally your friends and neighbors to win a new playground for your community and help advance the cause of play.

THE PRIZES 3 "Imagination Playground in a Box." Each set is worth \$25,000. (Go to ImaginationPlayground.org to see this portable wonder in action.)

HOW TO ENTER Go to parents.com/playground and nominate your local park, community space, or playground between now and August 20. We'll give you easy, fun tools to help you collect points—the more your entry accumulates the more likely it is to be a winner.

HOW TO WIN The top 50 point-getters will be narrowed down to ten semifinalists by our judges. Three winners will be selected by a public month-long vote. For abbreviated rules, see page 184.



Meet the Designer

The awesome architect David Rockwell has designed everything from restaurants (Nobu), stage sets (The Oscars), and now this innovative free-play concept.

