

Children's play is more than physical education - Arvid Bengtsson

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The child and play

Children act out in play the world around them. This is their way to acquire the abilities of adults and their mode of life. They 'play themselves into' the culture they grow up in. They play over and over, repeat, test, vary and investigate. They are curious, and they are always on journeys of discovery. At the same time, they test their own abilities. How far can I throw? Can I throw farther than Peter, than I could yesterday? How high do I dare to climb? Do I dare as much as my friends? How do I stand in comparison to the others?

Children play their way into their own identity, and into a social community. Physical development is a natural outcome of all these activities that play involves them in.

In other words, to grow up is something natural, if you are healthy, and if the society you live in does not place any obstacles in the way.

As adults, we rarely give a high priority to the play of children. Play is for the time that remains, after the 'important' things have been done, and often there is neither time left over, nor energy. Assignments or duties can have to do with the care of the family, and for millions of children throughout the world such activities take up almost all the time available.

Another effective way to prevent children from playing is to programme their day with school work so that no time is left over. In many schools the demands for achievement are so high that the evenings must also be used for homework. And in some industrial countries it is even quite usual for children to be forced to go to night school at the end of the ordinary school day in order to follow the career their parents expect of them.

To do this is to prevent the functioning of nature's own machinery of acquired learning, which is play, and this, presumably, cannot be done with impunity. A very important and fundamental part of our upbringing cannot be learned from books. It must come from experience, and we know that the early experiences in life are the most decisive for our future development.

Sport and recreational activities are of great importance in today's society, but organized activities cannot without serious consequences replace free and creative play, where the children exercise their own initiative. Nor can play be replaced by calisthenics on the school schedule, or by cricket, football, or whatever the games currently played are called, even though these can be useful and stimulating adjuncts.

It is not sufficiently recognized that play in all its variety is also physical education. During play, children exercise a great deal of activity, which often engages the entire body. You crawl, you climb, you run, you jump, and you work with your hands.

You are totally involved in the happening of the moment, and all your senses take part. Physical education goes hand in hand with social, emotional and creative development. Children play because play is their natural form of expression. They are motivated by their own pleasure.

There is play where there are children. Play is not a need you go to a certain place to satisfy. In all parts of a community, wherever there are children involved, there is also play, because play is their natural way of association and being.

All spaces in a city cannot, naturally, be constructed for play, but different kinds of play areas should be incorporated in surroundings that children usually frequent.

This means that planning for play to a high degree is also city planning. Children represent an important and also a sensitive sector of the population that must be taken into consideration from the very outset in planning. Children are the weakest link in the chain of the community and should largely be seen as the standard. What children cannot manage in a given surrounding presents a risk to the community and should therefore be avoided.

It is important to remember that children are small and have a very limited radius of activities. They move in restricted circles, and their homes always lie in the centre. This is particularly true in the case of the youngest children, but older children also spend most of their time within a radius of 300 to 400 metres from their homes.

Therefore, the most important playgrounds are those that are close to home. Playgrounds for small children should be located not more than 50 metres from each home.

Living in the city

There are many different kinds of traffic, and play is one of them. Children 'play themselves' from one place to another, and within a normally functioning area of homes, a whole network of more or less important play paths gradually develops. The way to school is such a path, and one of the most important.

That play traffic will sooner or later clash with other kinds of traffic - for instance, automobile traffic - is not surprising. Automobile traffic is of course a relative newcomer to our residential areas, but in a few decades it has managed practically to cripple all other forms of traffic, and, not least, play traffic. This confrontation has been very harsh, and every year countless thousands of children at play around the world are killed by motor vehicles. Automobile traffic today exacts a much greater mortality role than any children's disease.

If this transformation of the community caused by the internal-combustion engine had come about suddenly, there would surely have been violent protests and countermoves, but it happened slowly and stealthily, and few noticed the danger before it was upon us, and by then we had already become used to it. And today, more often than not, the children are taken to task for their carelessness. Even so, we know from research that small children are very unreceptive to traffic education. They can memorize the rules, but they lack the maturity necessary to live with the fact of traffic. Children below the age of 7 or 8 cannot cope with the most simple conditions for moving in a stream of traffic, and they cannot begin to be compared with grown-ups in this respect before the age of 11 or 12.

Therefore, to protect children in traffic in most cases really means to separate children from traffic. The principle of traffic segregation, that is, the separation of different kinds of traffic, is in theory generally accepted by planners, but the step between theory and practice here too is a long one. Who protects the rights of children in traffic planning? Where are the children's Ombudsmen?

We know today from a number of investigations in different countries that children who live in high-rise buildings play outdoors less than other children, and have fewer contacts with other children. This means that many children spend a great deal of their time alone, and this during the years that they are most sensitive to the influences of their surroundings. We do not know very much about the effect this has on their future, but we have every reason to be concerned.

We believe today that the predominating aspects of our personality are already shaped during the first 4 or 5 years of our life, and that it is this experience, or lack of experience, which is decisive.

Our social adaptability is thus determined at this early age, and whatever goes wrong then can be very difficult to correct later. Many believe that our juvenile problems are then formed, and that measures must be taken at this age to prevent them. The problems in our schools may have their origin in insufficiencies of the surroundings during the early years of growth.

Lonely children can easily become lonely adults, and very often their isolation is caused by the type of building they inhabit. Far too many children are frightened in their exterior surroundings, and very often there is every reason to be frightened. The large, anonymous areas of a high-rise complex often act as a no-man's land where the law of the strongest prevails.

Extensive American studies also show that the crime rate is higher in concentrated high-rise communities than in any other form of residential area. The crime rate can be up to three times as high as in fully comparable areas with lower buildings.

The anonymity of the surroundings favours the bold-hearted 'toughs', but at the same time it makes those who are frightened even more frightened. This is therefore dangerous for all children. Those who are frightened are impeded in their development, and those who are unafraid easily come to dominate, and thus the basis is laid for developments that can have quite serious consequences.

Play and work

Children's play has in all ages been linked with the work of adults, and it has often been difficult to determine where play ended and work began. Play had a meaning, as did work. It originated in the world of adults that the children were a part of, and this was the world that 'was played'. Sometimes the play was work, and sometimes the reverse.

This is still true in many places, for better or for worse. Children work hard, and their performance is counted on. They help to pull the heavy load in order to support the family, and this is often a hard and thankless task.

At the same time, however, this open world of adults is an enormous asset. There is not only work. There is also community. Even if the children have little to say, they have their eyes and ears open. They see and hear everything. There is much to think about and much that wants and needs to be played out.

In the industrialized countries the pendulum has swung to the other extreme. Here, child labour is a dirty word, and not without reason. During the Industrial Revolution labour meant ruthless exploitation of the weakest members of the community, including children. No one wants to return to those days, but there is a question whether in the subsequent development the baby was not thrown out with the bath water.

Today, the child lives too much in its own world. Increasing numbers of parents leave this world in the mornings to go and work in a different part of town, and then return to it in the evenings. Remaining are the young children, a few old people, and, to some extent, the mothers, though it is becoming increasingly common for the mothers to work outside the home, and the children are left to day care, or are simply left at home alone.

Not much happens in such circumstances. The children are left to occupy themselves as best they can. There is time enough for play, but the inspiration and urge to play are often in question. What can you play, if you can't experience anything? The television programme of the previous evening may have provided certain impulses, or even forced a certain impression, which somehow must be acted out in play. But this is only a second-hand impression of an adult world, that is not quite tangible, and is not capable of giving one's existence content or meaning.

A world consisting solely of children is even for the child a world fairly lacking in content, where even play stagnates, and where apathy and indolence take root. The very important internal learning mechanism that is play then also stagnates, which can result in serious consequences for the child's physical, mental and social development.

True play is meaningful and has a purpose, even if the child who plays is not conscious of it. Play can also be heavy and difficult work, using all one's strength and senses. Children build huts, dig in the ground, and work hard at it. Their inspiration is the reality around them, or what they perceive as reality.

It is therefore important that the play surroundings be conceived with the idea of 'opportunities for work' in mind, instead of entertainment, which is normally the case with established playgrounds. Conditions must be created for activities that the children consider important to carry out. Children must be compensated as far as possible for shortcomings in their surroundings. This must be the function of what is called play-planning.

But it is no easy matter to plan for children's play. The difficulty is primarily on the social level. Children want to be where others are, also where the adults are, and where something is happening. In order to be successful, playgrounds must be part of a larger community.

For young children, this means contact with parents, with the home, and with the immediate neighbourhood. Such children live in a small world, and the playground must relate to this world for it to have any real significance. This question of play surroundings for young children is of special importance, bearing in mind that these early years are so decisive a phase of the child's development.

With the years, children's area of activity grows bigger; that is, they move in a larger area, though their social needs do not decrease, even if they are no longer so dependent on the proximity of their parents. Their entire sphere of interest is still fully focused on the grown-ups and what they are doing, and what they play is what they experience as a result. Playgrounds that isolate children from where grown-ups are have little chance of performing an important role.

The street is the traditional playground

For city children, the street in its original form is unsurpassed as a play surrounding. It is a common institution for all who live alongside it. While it has become a dangerous playground for children over the years because of motor traffic, this does not alter its attraction to children, perhaps the opposite. This is where something is still happening, where something can be experienced.

It would be almost an impossibility to remove children's play from the streets in our traditional cities, without seriously damaging the quality of this play. Children have a need to be at the centre of action, and for many danger is a stimulant that attracts more than it frightens.

What can be done to reduce the risks? A great deal, of course. It is first and foremost a question of priorities. Should the children or the motor vehicles and the convenience of adults come first? At this time there is in many places a swing, happily, towards the interests of the children.

The concept of the play street is in itself not new, but it has come into the public eye again, in part through the International Year of the Child, and today many ambitious projects for play streets are being worked on in many different countries. Athens can be mentioned as an example, where a proposal has been put forward for no less than eighty such play streets.

Traffic can be regulated in different ways to increase safety, even in those cases where one does not like to talk about play streets. Through traffic can be diverted from residential streets; one-way streets can reduce traffic and make it easier to control. Curb parking along the streets, which is so dangerous for children's play, can be prohibited, etc. Play can also be given greater priority by wider sidewalks and a greater diversity in their construction, so as to take the needs of children more into consideration.

This kind of measure is above all suitable for older city sectors. At the same time one has to be on the look-out for all alternative or additional possibilities which are available. The existing social surroundings must be adapted in the most appropriate way possible to

meet the needs of children as well.

In the planning of new city sectors, there are, of course, entirely different possibilities for solving the traffic problem, but it must be realized that the removal of risks from an area in no way ensures that it will become a good environment for play. The social aspects remain equally relevant, and the social situation can hardly be said to have improved by the elimination of the activities of adults, in spite of all that motor-vehicle traffic represents. Be that as it may, efforts must clearly be made in this sphere, in view of the high rate of accidents. At least as important is the public-health aspect of motor-vehicle exhaust fumes, which, with the years, have become increasingly serious.

As regards new construction, planning for children's play should form a part of total social planning, and should be given more decisive importance than we have been used to assign to it to date.

The school as a centre for play

Schools are important social centres where children and adults come together. Unfortunately, the schools are often closed worlds, but this can be changed, and in many localities the school's attitude to its neighbours is changing. With proper siting and an appropriate orientation and co-ordination with other institutions, schools should be capable of developing into natural meeting places, even out of school hours. Installations for play would then form an integral part of the community fabric and provide joy for the children both during and after school hours. Experiments in this direction have been made in several countries. The Dewson Schools outside Toronto, Canada, is an example. Here, the school yard is the only playground for the residential area, and it was developed and is still being developed by parents, teachers, and pupils working together.

The school has a special staff for the school yard, also during vacations, when the children are still present and have more time than ever for play. With regard to the pedagogical importance of play, this activity is, of course, entirely in line with the school's other activities.

In other cases, for instance in Stockholm and Gothenborg, Sweden, the administration is in charge of the municipality's play activities, and also supervises school yard activity.

It is also usual in Sweden today for school and public play installations to be co-ordinated in city planning, so that even in those cases where they are administered by different municipal departments, they function more or less as a unit, and are thus used both during school and afterwards.



A good playground need not be costly. All kinds of junk can be used with great advantage. Notting Hill adventure playground, London.



A playground has to provide some challenge to be attractive to teenagers. Flatås, Gothenburg.



Play is more than play equipment. It is doing things, finding out about things and finding out about yourself. Notting Hill adventure playground, London.



Loose material always was and still is an indispensable part of any play environment.



Play with ropes. London.



Adventure playground, Utrecht, Netherlands.



Sand is an excellent play material provided it is kept moist and in sufficient quantities.



At Harborfront adventure playground in Toronto the children made their own wading pool.

School yards look the same in all countries. They are often as bare as barrack yards, where the children are dragged out to be rested and aired in the short breaks between teaching periods. But there are also happy exceptions, where the school yard is integrated in school work, where the school yard is simultaneously a place of work and play, where play and work go hand in hand, where you plant seeds and seedlings, build and do carpentry, where you play with animals, make fires, roast sausages and so on, and have a good time

together.

In such a situation, it is difficult to draw a line between play and work. They relieve each other and go together. Both are on an equal level in an all-sided education.

Theoretical knowledge can be honoured, but work with our own hands often gives the greatest satisfaction. The question is also whether practical, creative education is not at least as important as the theoretical.

The boredom of school may be a phenomenon that mainly affects the industrialized countries. It goes together with the development of society and extended compulsory school attendance, which keeps children going to school long after they have stopped considering themselves as children. It also goes together with boredom with dull and one-sided school work, governed by teaching plans and schedules drawn up long in advance, where all the student has to do is to persist and if possible meet the required demands for achievement.

The boredom of school results in poor performance and truancy, which in turn frequently lead children and young people into social situations that can have very serious consequences.

In fighting the boredom of school, it should be remembered that children are children, and that it is easier to work with than against nature. The results are better, and there are fewer difficulties.

Play remains the natural internal method of learning for children. It can be complemented with other methods to reach the goals that society demands, but it cannot be ignored without serious consequences.

The school needs installations for play. Play, like physical education and sport, is a physical activity, and, in addition, it is biologically related. This fact should be reflected in planning our schools and teaching schedules. There is today a great deal said about the need for installations for physical education and sport, but there is near silence about play. I do not want to underestimate the importance of sports installations, but I do believe that it is necessary to upgrade free play, which corresponds better to the needs of the child.

It is necessary - not least in the school - to ensure the availability of an area that makes no other demands in respect of performance than those the children impose on themselves, and where they have the opportunity to develop their own abilities, and those who are less developed physically also have a chance.

Physical installations required for play

Free play is best developed in freedom, and it can be strongly inhibited by playgrounds that are too finished, that give too little scope for the children's own initiative and instead programme activities through a one-sided selection of play equipment. I do not mean that play equipment cannot be justified in an organized play surrounding, but it must be selected with great care, and it should be clear that it is of subordinate importance, and that a good playground for children can never be achieved with play equipment alone.

The first thing is to have available outdoor space that is pleasant to spend time in. It should not be too large, nor too open, and very large areas should therefore be divided into several smaller sections with the help of vegetation or walls or boards of one kind or another. It is important to afford protection against the elements, as appropriate in the local climatic conditions. Protection against the wind is in many places a prerequisite to being able to stay outdoors comfortably. In other regions, protection against the sun is necessary, in others again, protection against rain or cold.

A wide range of possibilities is important. Instead of trying in the usual manner to obtain large, flat surfaces - as large as possible - attempts should be made to create an area that is as animated and flexible as possible. In play, the children themselves will influence and change their environment. They will find for themselves the natural relationships, the basic elements: earth, water, stones, etc. There should not just be cement surfaces, but as many different substances and shapes as possible.

What is most of all lacking in the well-swept, orderly city surroundings of the industrialized countries is the availability of loose, or unattached, materials for play, which have always been and which remain a prerequisite for much of what is creative play. It is often impossible to find as much as a piece of board or a few stones to pile up.

In order to create anything concrete, materials to create from are essential, as we all know. Materials can perhaps be dug out of the ground, but in how many playgrounds is this allowed, or even possible? Branches and twigs can be broken off local vegetation as do country children in their play, but in cities this would rarely be feasible, given the number of children in relation to the paucity of vegetation.

Loose materials must therefore be brought from elsewhere. It can really be almost anything: bits of board, logs, empty boxes, loose stones, etc. Sand is also a good material for play, particularly if available in quantity.

In order that the play area should not look too untidy, the loose material can be kept in a special section of the playground, which perhaps can be somehow fenced in and enclosed in suitable vegetation.

Many dreary playgrounds and not least school yards could be considerably improved by a suitable planting of trees and bushes. Often, it is mainly a question of doing something to the surroundings. The installation may be too open and for that reason makes a dreary impression. Children may not think about such matters, but they instinctively choose the pleasant parts of an installation and avoid the desolate ones.

The problem with new plantings is that they are susceptible to wear and tear and damage, particularly in the first years until they are properly established. Plants should be chosen that grow quickly, and therefore only need a short period to establish themselves. It is, of course, also necessary to study the area and its use carefully before planting, so that the vegetation does not constitute an impediment to play activities. Those areas where wear and tear are relatively low should be planted first.

Planting is an activity that children and parents often like to participate in, and the responsibility felt for plants you have helped to put in the soil yourself is naturally considerably larger than if you had nothing to do with them.

Adults are more important than equipment at playgrounds

Adults cannot 'buy their way out' of responsibility for the new generation. You cannot make playgrounds with play equipment alone, regardless of how well designed it is pedagogically, if by the word playground is meant a place where the children themselves elect to spend the time they have available for play. Children need our participation in one way or another, or at least our presence.

In the segregated residential areas of the industrialized countries, which during the day are almost entirely inhabited by children, extraordinary measures are needed to prevent the paralysis of outdoor activities that is so characteristic of the majority of such areas. The apathy must be broken, and this can only be done by enlisting the support of adults in these areas in establishing social points of contact where people can meet and have the opportunity of doing things together.

Since it is first and foremost the outdoor surroundings that need to be activated, the first measures to be undertaken must deal with the outdoors. A special type of such points of contact, called the play park, has been developed. Governmental recommendations in Sweden state that such play parks must exist within a walking distance of 350 metres of each home, and, if possible, be co-ordinated with regard to the feasibility of dual use of the installation. Thus there are a great many such installations. In Stockholm, for instance, there are approximately 200 play parks with a permanent play staff of 480, and about 250 additional employees during the summer months.

The costs involved are naturally considerable. But these must be viewed in the context of industrialization, urbanization and economic growth, which are directly responsible for the environment of the children.

It is in large measure in the parents' interest that suitable playgrounds exist for their children. There are many reasons why parents so rarely work to achieve improvements, and perhaps the main reason is that they do not understand how important play is. Never before has children's play been something that adults have had to be concerned with. The children have handled the matter themselves, to the extent that they have had time left over for play. That their play situation today has deteriorated so disastrously is something that neither parents nor authorities are very well aware of. And to the degree that they are aware, they too often think that it is simply a matter of play equipment: swings, merry-go-rounds, slides.

Attitudes towards play must change, and the importance of play must be pointed out through a broad information programme. This is essentially the task of society. The next step concerns the parents. Their active participation is unavoidable if true improvement is to be made. Society can build the installations, but it cannot infuse social life into them without the help of the inhabitants. Nor can the parents 'buy their way out'. Their help is needed for the play personnel to succeed in their task.

The United Kingdom has provided many examples of what can be accomplished with the initiative and participation of parents, not least with regard to adventure playgrounds, that is, playgrounds with tools and equipment available, where the children simply do what they feel like.

There are many such playgrounds in the United Kingdom today, and the overwhelming majority have come about through the efforts of parent associations and are operated by them. Most often, the communities contribute to a part of the activities, but it is the task of the parent associations to convince the authorities of the need to arrange the playground, hire leaders, find ways of meeting any shortfall in funds, and solve all other problems that come up. The problems are many, and the resources are small, but the results are often impressive.

Children, as we have seen, play everywhere, not only at organized playgrounds. In all surroundings where there are children, play must be taken into account, and the surroundings must as far as possible be adapted accordingly. Playgrounds thus constitute a much wider

concept than is normally acknowledged, and a playground is more dependent on the presence of adults than on the availability of play equipment.

Playgrounds are learning grounds for life, and they are no less important, for instance, than schools. There is a great deal that cannot be learned in books, and must be experienced.

Children play because play is their natural form of expression and their natural way to learn things, while physical development is itself a natural result of the activities children become involved in through play.