



#PlayToday

info@playaustralia.org.au
www.playaustralia.org.au

promoting the value of play

OUTDOOR PLAY

Written by Kerry Rogers for *centre spread winter 2003*

A whole range of learning processes in the form of free, child directed play happen in the outdoor play space. Much of this play can take place indoors. Why, then, do we brave the elements of cold, wind and heat, set up all that heavy equipment, and have to supervise that large area ensuring everyone is safe?

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CHILDREN PLAY OUTDOORS?

Self esteem is enhanced as children are provided with opportunities to:

- ◆ gain independence through freedom and choice;
- ◆ measure their increasing skills as they jump further, run faster, carry heavier weights; and,
- ◆ recognize and manage their fears as they climb higher, are chased by other children, and take risks of rejection as they attempt to enter and contribute to play.

Thinking skills such as hypothesising, questioning, experimenting, problem solving and abstract thinking develop as children engage in:

- ◆ complex social play;
- ◆ problem solving in conflict situations, relationships, and building and construction projects; and,
- ◆ the use of pretend objects in their play that lead to more abstract ways of learning about their world.

Experience of nature is made possible as children are able to:

- ◆ explore natural settings, their changes, smells, colours and feel;
- ◆ develop an appreciation of the natural environment;
- ◆ begin to see their responsibility to foster and preserve this environment; and, provide memories of play in natural settings that will last a lifetime.

"The spaces that teachers create for children seem to hold enduring memories for them that have a powerful influence on what they will value later in life" Fraser (1999) p 53.

Physical skills that incorporate both large and small muscle development are enhanced, and lifelong dispositions toward healthy activity are encouraged as children are challenged to:

- ◆ climb, run, balance and swing;
- ◆ throw and catch balls; dig, haul, push, pull and pedal: and,
- ◆ feel, pinch, squeeze and manipulate sensory materials such as sand and mud.

WHAT CAN ADULTS DO?

As adults responsible for children in group situations such as day care, preschool, playgroups or for parents, we need to examine how we provide for children's needs in the outdoor environment. The outdoor time is not just fresh air and exercise, a place for children to let off steam and a reward for finishing all their inside "work". The outdoor environment, when properly planned by skilled adults, offers unique play and learning opportunities for young children.

Time for play

Children need long blocks of time outdoors. At least one hour is needed to explore their environment, decide on and develop the play. Older children will require even more time and the opportunity to return to their play in order to fully explore the possibilities of the play.

Adults can:

- ◆ allow a gradual flow of children into the outdoors so children are able to access the outdoors when they are ready, rather than having a “line up” at the door until all children are ready;
- ◆ provide an integrated indoor-outdoor program where children choose where they want to play for much of the day;
- ◆ spend entire mornings, afternoons or days in the outdoors, moving any indoor experiences required as part of the program outside.

Spaces for play

Planning how we use our spaces effectively and efficiently also adds to the quality of outdoor play. We need to set spaces that provide opportunities for a variety of play and to meet a variety of play styles. Children need spaces for:

- ◆ challenging activities such as balancing, climbing high, tunnelling, jumping, swinging from arms and by legs;
- ◆ sensory play opportunities that include sand, mud, water, pebbles, stones, sawdust;
- ◆ hiding away, making cubbies and campsites, having picnics;
- ◆ meandering up a shady path, stopping off to pick flowers or watch a snail;
- ◆ sitting with a friend to talk or play with dinosaurs or butterflies;
- ◆ meeting as a group to sing songs, listen to stories or play games;
- ◆ imaginative play environments with small dolls, teddies, jungle animals, blocks etc.;
- ◆ pretend work such as laying drains, washing clothes or building tunnels as well as real work such as gardening, sweeping and raking; and,
- ◆ running, ball games, chasing bubbles, pushing and pulling, rolling and spinning and riding wheel toys.

Equipment and materials

To have control of their play, children need equipment and a supply of materials that they are able to access as they need it. This includes:

- ◆ gross motor equipment that is challenging and provides opportunities for children to learn to monitor and manage risks without putting them in danger; this includes climbing equipment that can be changed to offer challenge, buckets, watering cans and blocks to carry, spades, wheel barrows and trolleys to move materials and equipment.
- ◆ play equipment that children can choose from to develop their play. Blocks, wheel toys, sand toys, plastic or wooden animals, bats & balls, boats, cooking sets, dress ups, washing bowls, tool kits, telephones etc.;

- ◆ a range of loose parts, preferably open-ended materials to develop their play. Boxes, cardboard rolls, plumbing pipes, small cable reels, hoses, sheets or bedspreads, carpet squares as well as supplies of gumnuts, wood off-cuts, ceramic tiles, shells, corks, pine-cones. Older children will use ropes, planks, lightweight bricks, pieces of lattice, plastic liners; and
- ◆ dramatic play props such as old telephones, computer keyboards, cameras, car keys, binoculars, road maps, clip boards and pencils as well as pretend tool kits and medical bags.

Support for play

Children's play outdoors also requires thoughtful planning as well as active engagement of adults to assist in the development of play in the outdoors and to maintain safe and exciting play environments through:

- ◆ interaction with the children to show interest, ask questions, pose problems, and extend ideas and play skills;
- ◆ engage in play at times to model play for children;
- ◆ support children's attempts at problem solving and in conflict resolution;
- ◆ work with children to develop guidelines or 'rules' for outdoors and maintain consistent limits to protect the rights of all;
- ◆ identifying any potential safety issues such as escalating frustration that may lead to aggression; and
- ◆ modifying any play that has become unsafe or any equipment, materials or part of the environment that poses a health or safety hazard.

By planning outdoor play experiences to engage the interests of all children, by providing enough time and equipment for children to develop their play and by interacting in and supporting children's play outdoors, adults are able to provide safe and challenging environments that build on children's skills and self esteem.

Berry, P (2001), Playgrounds that Work. Creating Outdoor Play Environments For Children Birth to Eight Years. Pademelon Press, Sydney

A comprehensive resource for those planning or wanting to upgrade an outdoor area for children. This book provides a guide for planning a playground, examines desirable play features and considers the needs of children in the different ages in relation to playgrounds.

Elliott, S. and Emmett, S. (1997), Snails Live in Houses Too. Environmental Education for the Early Years 2nd ed., RMIT Publications, Melbourne.

The aim of environmental education is to provide children with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to take environmentally responsible actions. Snails Live in Houses Too interprets environmental education in terms of teaching strategies and experiences relevant to the developmental level of young children, and demonstrates how environmental education can and should be integrated into all aspects of the early childhood program. This revised edition will fill the need of early childhood educators for guidelines and activities.

Fraser, S. (2000) Authentic Childhood. Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the Classroom. Nelson, Ontario This book documents the real life experiences of adapting the Reggio Emilia approach in a pre-school and daycare in Canada, and provides working guidelines for others interested in adapting the Reggio Emilia approach. Uses photos, real-life examples and scenarios, transcriptions of actual child-teacher dialogue, and practical examples.