

Taking back the playground^[1]

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EXCERPTS

That play spaces should be designed for children, not adults, might seem obvious.

But a five-year study tracking the habits of toddlers and preschoolers in playgrounds across Vancouver suggests an obsession with safety has forced kids into safe but sterile and uninspiring outdoor spaces that might satisfy adult anxieties and needs, but shortchange children's development.

Instead of traditional swings and slides, the kids want places where they can hide, play with dirt and be creative.

Susan Herrington, a professor in the University of B.C.'s School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, who led the study, said modern, trendy-looking playspaces may be safe and the equipment is sturdy, but they leave nothing for childish imaginations.

Between 2003 and 2008, she and her researchers studied 16 outdoor play centres, videotaping children aged two to five.

They found that 87 per cent of the time the conventional equipment - monkey bars, swings, slides and climbing structures - remained empty. Even when the children played on or around the equipment, they used it for its intended purpose, like going down the slide, only three per cent of the time, according to the study.

"This is an interesting statistic, given that the equipment is usually the most expensive part of an outdoor play space budget," says Herrington, who conducted her research as part of CHILd, the UBC-based Consortium for Health, Intervention, Learning and Development, part of the Human Early Learning Partnership.

The project comprises teams of academic researchers and community professionals from across B.C., and was funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

It wasn't difficult to figure out why the equipment was shunned most of the time, according to Herrington, who interviewed early childhood educators and gave workshops at child care centres as part of the research.

"They lack challenge - and we heard this loud and clear from the early childhood educators we interviewed. Fiftyseven per cent [of early childhood educators] said the equipment needed to be more challenging."

The natural instinct of any child - to be drawn to play by throwing dirt, sand or water in puddles, chutes and tunnels - comes into direct conflict with manufacturers of playground equipment, who tend to appeal to parents' anxieties about safety, Herrington says.

"We found that outdoor play spaces that contain materials that children could manipulate - sand, water, mud, plants, pathways and other loose parts - offered more developmental and play opportunities than spaces without these elements.

"The playground equipment industry has a very aggressive marketing campaign going on that is largely based on putting fear and guilt into the minds of parents. Landscape architects are under a lot of pressure to simply install equipment because its easier and more recognizably accepted by adults as a place to play compared to [a more natural environment]."

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Herrington suggests that studying the way children move, and the way in which structures feed their imaginative dramas and stories, should be a priority in design. But designers succumb to the pressure to make play spaces stable and orderly and clean - and the kids ignore them.

"In Vancouver, it's a lot about image," she says. "We found that early childhood educators who worked in play spaces situated in new condominiums or even park space were constantly being criticized for not keeping the play space neat. Some condo owners complained that a nearby messy play space would erode their property values."

Kristina Whelton-Davis noticed similar themes while watching her son Keyan, 6, play in city parks. She often travels from her Mount Pleasant neighbourhood to Nelson Park in the West End, where Keyan indulges in the paths, brush, and man-made bee habitat.

Similarly, he's attracted to the playground in the Olympic village -- again, not for its conventional play structures but for the natural elements, she says.

"Keyan found the play structure itself a yawn, but has spent hours running through the paths, tunnel and throwing stones in the man-made

pond."

Though she says most of the playgrounds in her research proved to be too small to inspire kids to explore and play, Herrington sees some bright lights in the region.

Garden City Park in Richmond, designed by Vancouver landscape architect Jeff Cutler, features an arboretum, pond, bridge, a wet play area next to its playground (which is nothing but unconventional, with natural wood and rocks), sand, a creek bed and a water play area. The plan, by space-2place design, is certainly not common in newer play spaces around Vancouver.

Grounds staff of the Vancouver board of education told trustees in March that about 88 pieces of playground equipment at city schools will be removed in the next five years and an additional 76 in the following five.

Since B.C. doesn't fund playground construction, parents and school parent advisory committees are forced to raise money for new equipment. Some non-profits, such as the Aviva Community Fund, offers Canada-wide competitions for funds online.

Herrington's study argues that fundraisers might find some relief in the findings that it's not pricey equipment, but design with natural elements, that fosters child development.

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