



Benefits of Playgrounds for Children

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Children love playgrounds. This is an undeniable fact, but adults rarely stop to think about the benefits of those magical structures for children. I grew up at the park at the end of our street - playing tag, imagining the park was a ship, restaurant or jungle fortress. I learned to climb and jump and swing and use the equipment in every manner imaginable. My parents probably never stopped to think about how all that play benefited me, but as I watch community playgrounds sit empty, I am prompted to think about what some children today are missing.

Statistics tell us that children today spend too much time inside, they are not active enough and obesity is increasing with alarming speed.^{1,2} Lately, the media has paid a great deal of attention to the physical inactivity of children, but simple solutions have not been so forthcoming. One solution is already down the street in most neighbourhoods. Playgrounds provide children with infinite opportunities to develop all sorts of skills.

The easiest benefit to identify is the development of physical skills. Running helps to improve cardiovascular endurance, climbing builds muscles, and jumping, sliding and avoiding being tagged help children develop coordination and timing. Problem solving is required when children are first learning how to use the monkey bars, slide down a fire pole or get into a tube slide.

Beyond those physical skills, children can also learn in a variety of other ways. Creativity is integral to the development of imaginary play sequences as playground equipment becomes a spaceship or clubhouse. Language skills are encouraged when children have to explain the rules

of a new game or invite others to join them while they play. Children have to learn to follow rules (both the safety rules of adults and the unwritten rules of children's play), settle disagreements, or choose who will be the leader, captain or king of the jungle for the day.

Another benefit of playgrounds is the opportunity for children to participate in unstructured play. Many children today do participate in extra-curricular activities, but those activities are often adult-directed and very structured. The opportunity to go to the playground and play however you want is important to the development of creativity. It is also an important way for children to learn to entertain themselves rather than depending on adults to provide activity ideas.

Risk and injury are words frequently associated with playgrounds. There is no denying that children can sustain serious injuries if they are not adequately supervised, if the equipment is not properly maintained, or if they don't have adequate skills and sense of safety to use the equipment properly. BUT, all the risk cannot be removed from the playground. In fact, it is the opinion of this author that it shouldn't be. "Play is a key element in children learning to appreciate, access and take calculated risks, which is fundamental to the development of confidence and abilities in childhood".³ Children need to learn which risks are reasonable and which ones are dangerous.

For school-age children, the other benefit of the playground is that it gives them a chance to use up some excess energy and return to class ready to learn. Children need to run and play and recess is the perfect opportunity to do so. Recent research has shown that "breaktime





maximized children's attention to school tasks when they returned to the classroom".⁴

With all these benefits to be had, I hope to see all the playgrounds in my neighbourhood filled with children this spring and summer!

References:

1. Canadian Pediatric Society, press release November 2002.
2. Tremblay, Mark S. and Willms, J. Douglas. Secular trends in the Body Mass Index of Canadian Children. *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 2000; 163(11): 1429-1433.
3. Best Play: What Play Provision Should Do For Children A report on Children's play from The National Playing Fields Association, Children's Play Council and PLAYLINK. 2000.
4. Caseberry, D. in Measure or Value, Papers of the 1998 PLAYLINK Conference.

