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The Rise of Adventure Play Provision in North America

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Abstract

Play provision, which includes time and space for play, is making a comeback in the U.S. and Canada after several decades of serious decline. One indicator is the formation of six new adventure playgrounds in the U.S. in the past five years. They follow the tradition of such playgrounds in the U.K. and provide children with abundant loose parts for play and trained staff who support children's play without directing it. Loose parts and trained play staff are also finding their way into schoolyards and summer camps. The North American Adventure Play Association (NAAPA) is developing workshops and trainings for play staff, and providing an avenue for play advocates to seek out and help one another. Play provision in general, and especially play rich in adventure and risk, is on the rise again.

Keywords: adventure playgrounds, loose parts, North America

Concerns about Diminishing Opportunities for Children to Play

Despite the essential contribution of play to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth, in 2007 the American Academy of Pediatrics felt compelled to release guidelines in response to the "multiple forces that challenge play."

> *Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength.… Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregiver.… Because every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their unique potential, child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play* (Ginsburg, 2007, pp. 182-183).

The report opened the door to media coverage of the importance of play (e.g., Brown, 2014; Henig, 2008) and was indicative of a growing awareness that play, especially outdoor play, had significantly declined over one generation. A study of over 800 mothers found that "70 percent of the mothers reported playing outdoors every day when they were young, compared with only 31 percent of their children. Furthermore, when the mothers played outdoors, 56 percent remained outdoors for three hours at a time or longer, compared with only 22 percent of their children" (Clements, 2004, p. 73).

There is a growing level of action in North America to combat the decline in opportunities for play through various programs and initiatives, including training playworkers to support and protect play without interfering unnecessarily, and adventure playgrounds, often seen as the closest experience to the freedom to play that characterized childhood in earlier generations.

The Development of Adventure Playgrounds

The first adventure playground was created during World War II in Emdrup in Copenhagen, Denmark, and was called *Skrammellegepladsen* meaning a "junk playground." In Danish, the word *Skrammel* means junk or reusable rubbish and has a positive connotation.

Lady Allen of Hurtwood, a British landscape architect, visited Emdrup after the War and then developed the first junk playground in Britain. She soon came to feel that "junk" had a negative connotation in English and that the playgrounds were worthy of a better name. In 1953, she met with Sir George Peppler to decide on a new term for playgrounds. They resolved upon *adventure playgrounds* (Dighton, n.d.).

When Lady Allen first visited Emdrup, she was inspired to see children playing as she had as a child although with playworkers present. They watched over the children's play but wore their "cloaks of invisibility" (Wilson, 2010, pp. 10-11) so that the children felt free to create their own play scenarios, as children have always done throughout the ages.

Adventure playgrounds took hold in North America in the 1970s and in 1976 the American Adventure Playground Association was founded. By 1977, 16 adventure playgrounds in the U.S. had been identified, but it is thought that there were several more, including in Canada (Frost, 2012).

In the 1980s many adventure playgrounds closed for lack of funds, complaints about their junky appearance, or for other mundane reasons. Two that remain from that era are in Berkeley and Huntington Beach, California, plus a summer adventure play camp in Yorba Linda, California. All three now serve a second generation of adventurous players.

Fortunately, there is growing interest in creating new adventure playgrounds in North America. This has been stimulated in part by an article in *The Atlantic* magazine (Rosin, 2014) and a complementary documentary film (Davis, 2015) that focused on *The Land*, an adventure playground in Wales, UK.

In the past decade, six new adventure playgrounds have opened in the U.S., and other communities are interested in opening more, often communicating their wishes on the Facebook page of the North American Adventure Play Association (https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanadventureplaygrounds/). For instance a group of mothers in Montreal, Quebec, Canada approached the adventure play project, *Le Lion et la Souris / The Lion and the Mouse*, to help them open an adventure playground. There had been a short-lived adventure playground in their neighborhood 40 years ago, and now the mothers were hoping to create a new one.

Some adventure playgrounds are sponsored by parks departments, such as the new summer adventure playground on Mercer Island near Seattle and the long-standing ones in Berkeley and Huntington Beach, while others are supported by non-profit organizations.

Common Elements of Adventure Playgrounds

There is some debate about what differentiates an adventure playground from a more traditional playground. There are a few important elements that adventure playgrounds have in common and that more traditional playgrounds do not have. One is an abundance of loose parts—open-ended materials, either natural or manufactured, generally discarded by adults but which can be used in a myriad of ways by children. While standard playgrounds with fixed equipment look the same each day, adventure playgrounds change according to the play of the children. The term *loose parts* was first introduced by the architect Simon Nicholson who summarizes their importance for play and creativity:

> *In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it* (Nicholson, 1971).

The other element common to adventure playgrounds is the presence of play facilitators, called playworkers in the U.K., a name that is taking hold in North America as well. In the U.K., playworkers are trained to support children's play without undue interference. Their professional work is guided by *The Playwork Principles*, which include statements about the essential nature of play for children and youth and describes play in this way: "Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated" (Play Wales, n.d.).

While loose parts and playwork staff are common to all adventure playgrounds, there are other elements found in many adventure playgrounds. For example, zip lines are a popular piece of play equipment, and fire pits are common. Many, but not all, adventure playgrounds provide lumber and tools for building play structures. Sometimes a basic structure is provided and the children add to it, but at Berkeley and on Mercer Island, for example, the children build their structures from scratch. They look rather tipsy and frail, but the children test their stability as they build and use ample nails.

Play Days

A play day is generally a one-day event run by local volunteers or play advocates. It has become a way of introducing children, their families, or their schools to child-directed play with simple loose parts, such as cardboard boxes, tape, fabric, etc. and brings some of the qualities of adventure play to a local community.

Sarah Lawrence College, north of New York City in the U.S., for example, has hosted dozens of play days in nearby communities, especially in low-income neighborhoods. The play days are part of a program called Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPE). Saundra Norton of Sarah Lawrence describes the play days:

> *Children today have fewer opportunities to direct their own play experiences than previous generations. Many parents who bring their children to the CAPEs share fond memories of their own childhoods spending hours building forts out of cardboard boxes, puppets out of pinecones, or rolling tires on the grass. We provide these opportunities for children at CAPEs where the adults are on the periphery to support and to provide a safe space, and children and their imaginations are at the center of the experience* (Thompson & Bender, 2016).

The city of Calgary in Canada has approached play days in a somewhat different way. In the summer of 2017 the city organized a play truck full of loose parts that visited six parks for two-week periods, giving children in each neighborhood a good chance to engage in play with one another. The city's website described its mobile play experiences as "Dynamic spaces that contain a variety of materials and loose parts such as boards, tires, tape and cardboard that children are free to use to build, demolish, assemble and change their environments as they desire" (City of Calgary, 2018). In describing why the City has emphasized play, Calgary's website also mentioned the importance of active outdoor play for children's health and overall development (City of Calgary, 2018).

The Canadian branch of the International Play Association has facilitated play days for several decades. It has produced a manual which is available on its website (IPA Canada, n.d.b) It is also facilitating a National PlayDay movement starting in 2018. The chosen date is the first Wednesday of August to align with the U.K. National PlayDay (IPA Canada, n.d.a).

ParticipACTION is a Canadian organization that has emphasized the need for physical activity and its research has contributed to Calgary's commitment to initiatives such as their Mobile Adventure Playground. ParticipACTION's 2018 report card on time spent by Canadian children and youth in active play earned the country a D, meaning that only 27 to 33 percent of children and youth engaged "in active play and non-organized/unstructured leisure activities for several hours a day" (ParticipACTION, 2018, p. 31). In its recommendations for increased active play, the ParticipACTION report stated there was a positive association between outdoor time and physical activity, and it was important to ensure that adequate outdoor active play opportunities are afforded to children in a variety of settings.

Destination Playgrounds vs. Neighborhood Playgrounds

In the U.K., adventure playgrounds are generally located in places surrounded by housing so that local children can come on their own. Playworkers are on hand, but there are very few parents present. Many of the playworkers commented that the same children come again and again and play together over a period of years.

In contrast, most of the adventure playgrounds in the U.S. and Canada are considered destination playgrounds. They are not embedded in neighborhoods, and children generally do not come on their own. They are brought to the playgrounds by adults and often play with children they have not seen before or will not encounter again. Such play still offers many advantages, but it does not permit the same development of social play that occurs when children play together over a period of years.

Adventure Play in Schoolyards

Adventure play with loose parts and trained staff has begun entering schoolyards in North America during recess and in after-school programs, where children play together on a daily basis. An example is The Parish School in Houston, Texas. In 2008, the school head asked Jill Wood, the school librarian, to help establish an adventure playground where the after-school program could take place. Jill writes that she was handed a notebook from the Houston Adventure Play Association which basically said, "find a bunch of junk, put it out, and let the children take the lead." That was her starting point, and the children's play developed from there.

> *The play was complex and inspiring from the start with costumes made from grass, sand volcanoes, freestyle jumping contests from the culverts, and a bucket band called Techno and the Rock Stars. Kids carved out space for quiet tinker-y play and built structures for climbing, dancing, and chatting. Play schemes could last a few minutes or a semester* (Wood, 2017, p. 103).

It is hard to estimate how many schools in North America now use loose parts in recess for there is no research on the growth of this approach. Two schools wrote about their projects for the book *Playing It Up* (Almon, 2017), and Portland Free Play has produced a film about its pilot project in a school in Portland, Oregon. Teachers at the Portland school were surveyed before the project and again after one month of loose parts play. All reported a significant increase in children's happiness during outdoor play time (Portland Free Play, n.d.).

A pilot project in Toronto, Canada introduced loose parts in six public schools under the leadership of Earth Day Canada and supported by a U.K. training provider. The website of Earth Day Canada (https://earthday.ca/earthplay/schoolplay/) says it will increase the project to 42 schools by 2020 with an eventual goal of bringing the program to schools across the country.

Adventure Play in Camps

Another popular way to include loose parts and staff for adventure play is during summer camps. The city of Yorba Linda near Los Angeles has offered adventure play camps for over 30 years. The camps function like adventure playgrounds with play facilitators, loose parts, and tools for building play structures. The camp's website (Yorba Linda, 2018) offers this description of the camp:

> *Come join this fun-filled exciting and unique summer adventure where campers will play, imagine, and creatively build all while learning new skills, developing teamwork, building self-confidence and having fun! Whether campers are building forts, hammering, sawing, painting, treasure hunting, deciphering clues, completing challenges, playing games, earning AP money, or swimming in the mud pit, the adventure will never stop!*

Play:groundNYC on Governors Island in New York City uses its summer adventure day camp to help finance "greatly subsidized and free programming to thousands of New York City children in a diversity of neighborhoods all year long through our free summer weekends and off-season programs" (Play:groundNYC, n.d.). The financing of staff for adventure playgrounds is always an issue, and Play:groundNYC's approach may become an important model for others.

Concerns about Risk

One might think that offering school-age children hammers, nails, saws, and even hatchets would put the children at high risk, but when risk is visible to children they rise to it. Playworkers frequently state that children recognize the danger of the tools and exercise caution while using them with purpose and enthusiasm.

When introducing parks departments and communities to the idea of adventure playgrounds, there are three concerns that are almost always raised: (1) injury rates will be much higher than on typical playgrounds; (2) there will an increase in lawsuits related to injuries; and (3) insurance rates will become prohibitive. But various studies in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. have not shown these concerns to be justified.

In a paper about the loss of outdoor play, Joe Frost (2006), professor emeritus at the University of Texas, quotes the findings of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (Heseltine, 1998) and says: "Despite their junk appearance and extensive challenges, 'the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (U.K.) confirms that the accident record of adventure playgrounds is far better than that of other forms of [play] provision' (p. 3)."

A recent study at The Parish School in Houston compared accident rates on the adventure playground used by the after-school program with the more traditional playground used during recess. Researchers compared data for injuries that required treatment outside the school. While accident rates were low in both settings, they found that accident rates on the traditional playground were four times greater than those on the adventure playground (Leichter-Saxby & Wood, 2018).

A second common concern is that there will be numerous lawsuits brought against the playgrounds for injuries sustained there. Yet when Halcyon Reese-Learned, a playground designer and former director of adventure playgrounds in Houston, interviewed the directors of three California adventure playgrounds—each of which had been in existence for over 30 years—she learned that two of them had had only one lawsuit each in all those years, and the third had had none (Almon, 2013, p. 27).

The third concern is that the insurance for such play spaces will be astronomical. Yet conversations with several parks departments that created adventure playgrounds and also had swimming pools or ran boating regattas found their current insurance covered adventure playgrounds without any rise in rates. When Huntington Beach opened its adventure playground in the 1970s, it specifically asked its insurers to monitor injury rates at the adventure playground and compare them with rates at other city playgrounds. After three years the insurance company found no differences in the injury rates and said no additional insurance premiums were required for the adventure play program (Huntington Park, n.d.).

The Future of Adventure Play Provisions in North America

There are growing numbers of communities interested in starting adventure playgrounds and related projects, and they are seeking ways to do so while being economically sustainable. A loosely united network of play advocates has formed as the North American Adventure Association. At this stage of its development, NAAPA is an informal organization with a Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/groups/americanadventureplaygrounds/). Play activists post news of their adventure play activities, ask for advice from other activists, and post links to relevant articles.

NAAPA convenes its meetings during conferences focused on adventure play and playwork. Such conferences have taken place several times in Ithaca, New York sponsored by the Hands-on Nature Anarchy Zone. A new style conference called a *Campference* has taken place twice with a third event scheduled in February 2019

at The Parish School in Houston. A Campference is a conference where most of the participants camp together at the site of the conference.

During the past decade there has been a noticeable increase in adventure play provision across North America, supported by new books and reports, videos, and media coverage on play and risk. A major obstacle is to raise funds to sustain such work. Most groups begin with dedicated volunteers but find that moving to the next step of hiring paid staff is a challenge. Some support their work by charging fees for summer camps and after-school programs, while offering other play provision at no charge. One of the attractive features of providing loose parts during school recess is that staff is already paid for, and most of the materials are donated.

There are early signs that insurance companies and health-oriented foundations are seeing the value of child-initiated play and are giving grants to play organizations. A recent document on play and health compiles research on the benefits of play in regard to childhood obesity, attention-deficit/hyperactive disorder, anxiety and depression, and weak bone development (Almon, 2018). It is hoped that the document will open doors to more health-related funding for adventure play provisions.

Across North America there is growing appreciation for the value of child-initiated play, for loose parts, and even for risk. If the next decade sees as much activity on behalf of adventure play provision as the past decade has shown, then children, their families, and communities will benefit greatly.

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