

A young boy with dark hair, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt and white pants, is sliding down a blue slide. He has his arms outstretched to the sides and is smiling. The slide is part of a colorful playground structure with yellow and green frames. The background is a clear blue sky.

OUTDOOR PLAY

A Stimulating & Nurturing Childhood Experience

BY AMINA KARIM KANJEE

Childhood is considered to be the most memorable period of a person's life. If I look back at my early years, I can still feel the excitement and joy of all the fascinating experiences of my childhood. Earliest play experiences of dangling from the monkey bars, tree climbing, sand play, hopscotch, hide and seek, catching butterflies, cycling, or just sitting around and chatting with friends in the playground are my most cherished childhood memories. Unfortunately in the current societal framework outdoor play is fast becoming extinct. Real play is being replaced by virtual play and children spend less time playing outdoors and more hours in front of television at home.

For me 'play' represents all those activities in which children participate freely and voluntarily, they plan and organize them using their own imagination, fantasy and skills and they get immense pleasure from it. Hence play is a meaningful experience rather than an aimless activity. I will attempt to highlight through this article the many benefits real outdoor play has to offer for a child's healthy development.

Before discussing the benefits, however, it is important to understand the factors contributing to reduced spontaneous, outdoor play. I interviewed several parents vis-à-vis the daily routines of their children and concluded the following causes:

- **Flawed Assumptions about Learning:**
The notion of innate and free learning experiences has been replaced by conditions and outcome based formal activities. Play that was considered as the expected tool to help children learn naturally is now being considered as a distraction from 'actual learning'.
- **High Academic and Achievement Pressure:**
Adult expectations from children are so demanding that it leaves children with little freedom to do what interests them, or what is fundamentally essential for them. In order to prepare children for academic success adults unintentionally sacrifice child's freedom to experience free play.
- **Lack of Parental Time to Accompany Children for Outdoor Play:**
Lives of children today are much more structured, controlled and supervised, with very few opportunities for free play. With increased safety issues in the society, limited play spaces, and decrease in time available to parents in their fast paced routines, children's outdoor play tends to suffer.
- **Societal Insensitivity towards Child Nurturing:**
Increasingly very limited thoughts and efforts are invested in creating places for children where they can be with nature and play freely. Moreover with fast growing population and pressures of urban lifestyle, living is overburdened and stressful thereby having negative effects on children's spontaneous outdoor play and consequently, their health.

Why Outdoor Play is Essential for Optimal Development

It has now been unequivocally established that children can benefit from play that is outside the home, in an unstructured environment, is loosely supervised and follows no real agenda apart from letting children get some amount of physical exercise and meeting children from their age group. The benefits are not just confined to physical development only; in fact they are far more outreaching in terms of cognitive development. Following are few of the many benefits of reclaiming outdoor play and why it is essential for a healthy development for children:

Essential for cognitive development

All children are born with a treasure of innate potential. This innate potential is the prerequisite for learning, curiosity, creativity, thinking, observation, imagination, relationship building etc. The more opportunities children get to use their instincts in a natural and non-restrictive environment, the more they develop their creative, imaginative and thinking capabilities and social relationships with others. In this context, free play and especially outdoor play provides excellent opportunities for children to nurture their talent in a natural way. Limitations and restrictions on play reduce the chances of nurturing innate potential. Various research studies have highlighted that regular physical activity contributes in generating new brain cells, enhances cognitive processes, increases attention span and catalyzes the overall cognitive processes.

A natural way to develop physical skills

The outdoors provide children with the space to move freely that supports the body in developing fundamental motor skills. Experiences such as walking, running, climbing, jumping, swinging, carrying blocks, carts, etc. strengthen gross muscles. Manipulative skills, on the

Types of outdoor play and their contribution to children's development

Leading a physically active lifestyle is important for everyone. Physical activity is particularly vital for children's health and development, and for establishing healthy behaviors that promote enjoyment of childhood and lifelong activity. Play exists in many shapes and forms and becomes increasingly varied and complex with age. The developmental progression that we observe in different types of play reinforces development in other areas of child growth.

Traditional sports for example such as football, cricket, badminton, tennis and other games that require physical activity for e.g. swimming, running, and hide and seek, carry huge potential to make the child more active, physically strong, mentally recharged and psychologically happy. For toddlers, climbing ladders, swinging, riding the cycle and running are games that should be encouraged. Sand play wherein children build objects, model play dough, make mud houses, all provide avenues to children for constructive play and fosters creativity and imagination. Social Play including hide and seek, making a sand castle together, and playing in groups imparts social skills to the child, encourages cooperation and eases out competition to make play fun.



other hand, are sharpened through games like filling and emptying sand and water containers and gardening, etc. Moreover, fine motor skills get more polished while squashing and squeezing sand or clay. Experiences like these and many more make children's bodies active and adaptable to outside weather and also enable them to develop strong mind and body coordination.

A catalyst for enhancing confidence and critical thinking

By playing in natural settings, children develop their own toys and play props, direct their actions and sometimes generate detailed skits using their imaginative and creative skills. While playing in open areas, children work out alternative ideas, take risks, experiment, make mistakes and ultimately solve their problems using alternative ways. Such experiences make children independent and bold and encourage them to become risk takers. These bold and fear free experiences during outdoor play sharpen children's confidence and independence that ultimately results in developing their problem solving skills. It is a common observation that children who play on streets or in open spaces, come out physically stronger and more confident when it comes to decision making as compared to children who have limited exposure to outdoor play.

Source of exploration and appreciating nature

Playing outside provides children with a variety of

opportunities to explore nature and build up their conceptual understanding about the world. While playing outdoors with sand, water, blocks, carts, etc. the ideas of volume as well as spatial senses start developing. While pouring and filling water or sand, comparing the weight of sand buckets, or measuring water in a rain gauge, estimating number or size of wooden rods or blocks, judging speed or distance quickly while running, climbing or hiding or analyzing relation in between bodies, sense the directions of wind and how it effects, etc, are just the few examples from the billions that supply children with huge experiences to learn using their senses. Such skills that children sharpen in their childhood are essential for further building their knowledge and understanding about the world in later years of their lives.

A means for emotional stability and social skills

Outdoor play encourages children to express their emotions freely in an open environment. They shout when excited, scared when taking risks, and cry when hurt. Moreover children also learn to care and empathize when somebody needs support. Such experiences are quite essential in strengthening emotional stability of a human's life and should be initiated from the very early childhood. Outdoor play provides opportunities for children to participate comfortably in diverse social groups as well. This facilitates in them in developing interpersonal skills and a sense of interdependence within society that ultimately make them socially dynamic beings.

Conclusion

Children and society as a whole can benefit significantly by maximizing the learning opportunities that natural outdoor play environments offer young children. The need is now to reverse the trend of diminishing outdoor play for children. Caregivers, educators as well as policy makers are all responsible for advocating and ensuring provision of play spaces and the need for free play in the early years. Parents need to schedule play time and accompany children to playgrounds and educational pressures need to be scaled down. Policy makers ought to recognize the many benefits of outdoor play and make provisions. All this however requires more than an attitudinal change. By the end of the day children are

going to be what they are developed for. All children have the right to face the sun, feel the fresh breeze, and see the world the way they want to see and explore. Now it is in our hands to realise whether we are subduing the innate potentials children are born with or opting for their natural growth.

About the Writer:

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Children Who Just Watch

While many young children, when given the opportunity, will immediately engage in play with others, families and early childhood teachers often encounter children who only want to watch from the side. These children will watch others playing around them - constructing a towering building; reenacting a battle of dinosaurs in the sandbox; putting on a puppet show - without actually getting involved.

Family members and teachers may be anxious when preschoolers do not engage in play with other children, but this "onlooker stage of play" can be an important step in the social development of young children. It is an opportunity for young children to learn and mentally practice interacting with others. With adult guidance, they'll benefit from this thoughtful time.

In the onlooker stage, children don't physically interact, but their minds and feelings are fully engaged in the play of others. You can see it in their faces and body language. Their eyes may open wide as they see a block building growing taller, then they may dart quickly to another corner to determine the location of the growling dinosaur sounds. Their faces may break into smiles at the antics of other children pretending to be monkeys and gorillas.

Each type of play has value: in solitary play, children acquire self-knowledge; other kinds of play help them build confidence, practice interacting, and learn how to cooperate with other children. Children who go through an onlooker (or "watcher") stage get to be mentally engaged without the potential intimidation of actually being in the thick of things.

This engagement offers children opportunities to mentally manipulate what they see and hear, organizing and integrating information and storing it away for future use. The children may actually be mentally placing themselves into a situation they are observing, and testing how they might respond if they were involved.

As "watchers," children have opportunities to manipulate their cognitive experience of the behaviors of others, gaining information which will later be used within the context of their physical, verbal, emotional, and social behaviors. The use of this information is not just imitation, but a true understanding of the causes, actions, and consequences of particular behaviors - similar to the way preschoolers might use self-talk or private speech to review what they have learned about words and language. The onlooker stage offers an opportunity to watch and learn before stepping into the action.

All young children do some watching; some young children do it a lot. We now know that this is a valuable experience for children. As family members and as early childhood teachers, we are often anxious when preschoolers are not willing to engage overtly in play with other children. Perhaps we should allow them more time to watch and learn. When the time is right, they will be more comfortable and successful moving into the world of full social interaction.

Source:

Excerpted from "He's Watching! The Importance of the Onlooker Stage of Play" by Sarah Jane Anderson - an article in the NAEYC Journal, Young Children.