

Back to the playground

by Drake Bennett

The first thing kids notice at Teardrop Park, the thing they talk about, at least, is the slide. Fourteen feet tall, 28 feet long, and straight, it descends from a miniature mesa into a sand pit, allowing for luge-like speeds.

Built in 2004, Teardrop Park—an eponymously-shaped 2 acres a few blocks from Ground Zero in lower Manhattan—is a manifesto on the possibilities of a playground. Along with the slide, there's a broad lawn ending in a pocket marsh, complete with a log for balancing on. At the opposite end is a sandbox with a water spigot so young sculptors can control the consistency of their sand. There are winding paths for chases, a sprinkler for hot days, and boulders and a 25-foot-high cliff for climbing....

Teardrop Park is at the forefront of a playground renaissance, a renewed interest in how and where children play.... "There's a real international playground movement taking hold around the world, and it's really very exciting," says David Elkind, a professor of child development at Tufts University and author of the recently published book "The Power of Play."

This pro-playground vanguard, according to the child psychologists, designers, architects, parents and teachers who form it, is motivated by the conviction that play, in a larger sense, is under attack. High-stakes testing has elbowed recess out of the school day, video games keep kids indoors and sedentary, while parents, fearful of pedophiles and abductions, no longer let children roam freely.

...The fact that communities are getting serious about play, proponents hope, means leaders recognize the extent to which it is endangered in modern society.

At the same time, this reexamination of playgrounds is triggered by the conviction that, in the United States in particular, playgrounds

have become rather unfun—designed with only safety in mind, they've lost the capacity to excite or challenge children....

But even as the American playground was being tamed, the template for an alternative was emerging in Europe. In the 1930s, a Danish architect noticed that many children were ignoring the playgrounds he designed and playing in rubble-filled vacant lots instead. Turning those lots into playgrounds was simply a matter of installing an adult "playworker" to facilitate activities and make sure nothing catastrophic happened. "They were rough-and-ready, and quite anarchic places," says Wendy Russell, a lecturer in playwork at the University of Gloucestershire. Now somewhat more formalized, there are about 1,000 such playgrounds around Europe. ...

American playground proponents tend to see northern Europe as a model for where they'd like to see the United States go. Countries like Wales, for example, have government agencies devoted to play, in several European countries it's possible to get an advanced degree in playwork, and the far less litigious European legal climate gives playground designers far more leeway....

Ultimately, to playground proponents, playgrounds matter because play matters. Psychologists since Jean Piaget have argued for the developmental importance of child's play, but recent years have seen more attempts to provide a firmer experimental basis for these claims. Studies have shown that play helps children concentrate and that they develop social skills and self-control through it. Animal studies suggest that something in the act of playing triggers neuronal growth.

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