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## Play for All Children: Access to Quality Play Experiences as a Social Justice Issue

**W**e believe, as do developmental theorists (Piaget 1976; Vygotsky 1980), play therapists (Kestly 2014), and researchers (Brown 2010; Gray 2013) that play is essential for children’s cognitive, physical, creative, and social-emotional development. In addition, we recognize that the provision of quality play spaces can be a way to ensure that all children have opportunities to play. However, access to quality play spaces in the United States is impacted by disparities related to race, class, and gender. Children’s access to play has been limited in three major ways, es-

pecially for children whose families have low incomes. Research, including our own (see Jarrett 2013), shows that compared with children who attend schools and live in neighborhoods with greater resources, children in poverty and children from racially underrepresented groups have 1) lower-quality school playgrounds, 2) less time in the daily classroom schedule for recess, and 3) more structured instruction and less playful learning in school from an early age. These patterns of inequity are detrimental to the healthy growth and development of many children.

## School Playground Disparities

One visible area of injustice is access to quality play environments. Spending a lot of money on play settings is not, of course, a guarantee that healthy and productive play will occur. Children might play more with a cardboard box than with the toy that came in the box, and natural elements like rocks and sticks and leaves are just as valuable as play materials as purchased items are. On the other hand, financial resources can improve play spaces for children when they are used to make an unsafe playground safer or to make an inaccessible playground accessible. If we value democracy in society, we need robust advocacy for inviting public spaces for all children.

To determine whether economic disparities are reflected in school play facilities, Olga and her graduate students at Georgia State University conducted research on all the elementary school playgrounds in one Southern county school system. They took representative photographs of the play equipment, school gardens/nature trails, playing fields, and outdoor art and created pages of photos from each school. Each set of school photos was then scored for quality and quantity of facilities by graduate student raters and analyzed statistically. There were no significant demographic differences in school gardens, the existence of playing fields, or evidence of outdoor art. The gardens and artwork are features that likely reflect the dedication of the teachers. The playing fields were provided by the county. However, the schools in less advantaged neighborhoods had county-issued unimaginative play structures appropriate for only the youngest children, whereas the school communities in wealthier areas had raised money to build more exciting and challenging play structures. Although fancy playgrounds are not necessary for good play, the quality of a playground is likely reflective of the value the school system places on play.



## Who Gets to Have Recess?

Playground quality is of little importance if children do not have recess. Here also are issues of fairness. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, three of the six school systems in the Atlanta area abolished recess. Teachers were *not allowed* to take children out for recess despite the existence of playgrounds. A study of the demographics of the area school systems with and without recess revealed an obvious pattern. In the three school systems with recess, 21 to 32 percent of the students received free/reduced price lunch (based on family income), and 18 to 39 percent of the student body were Black. In contrast, in the three Atlanta school systems that did not permit recess, 56 to 80 percent of students received free/reduced price lunch and 68 to 89 percent were Black (Jarrett 2003).

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## Families and Play

Families want the best for their children, and sometimes they have concerns about their children playing outdoors. Here are some common concerns and ways teachers might address them.

### **I want my child to be ready for school and not just play.**

Children learn in all types of environments. The outdoor play area is their classroom just as the indoor space is. Outdoors, children learn about nature and science. They observe how the trees, flowers, and grass change according to the seasons; they experiment with light and shadows; they notice differences in the sky, wind, and temperature as the weather changes. They take on physical challenges and develop strong bodies as they climb, swing, slide, jump, throw, and ride. As they play together, children learn social skills such as being fair and taking turns. All of these skills prepare children to succeed in school.

### **Children play too rough outside; they might get hurt.**

Children need to be physically active. When they play outside, they learn how to use their bodies in ways that will help them the rest of their life. Children who are more fit and who have learned how

to properly move their bodies during active play are less likely to be injured during play (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008).

### **It's too cold (or hot) to play outside. I do not want my child to get sick.**

With appropriate clothing, plus shade, water, and sunscreen, children can be very comfortable outdoors. They will actually be healthier, too: Contact with the diverse organisms in nature helps children's immune systems develop more robustly (see National Wildlife Federation 2012). For most children, more exposure is better for their health and well-being.

### **My child's clothes will get dirty.**

We want children to be active learners, and that means that sometimes they will get dirty. Consider dressing your child in washable clothing that will be okay if stained or send an extra pair of clothes for your child to change into.

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National Wildlife Federation. 2012. *The Dirt on Dirt: How Getting Dirty Outdoors Benefits Kids*. [http://www.nwf.org/pdf/Be%20Out%20There/Dirt\\_Report\\_2012.pdf](http://www.nwf.org/pdf/Be%20Out%20There/Dirt_Report_2012.pdf).

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2008. *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*. [www.health.gov/paguidelines/pdf/paguide.pdf](http://www.health.gov/paguidelines/pdf/paguide.pdf).

National research conducted with a random sample of children found a similar pattern (Roth et al. 2002). The researchers asked each teacher of a target child to record everything the child did during a randomly selected day. The results showed that only 79 percent of the children in the sample had recess that day; 21 percent did not have recess. The demographic breakdown of who did and did not have recess is more revealing. Thirty-nine percent of the Black children did not have recess compared with 15 percent of the White children. Also, 44 percent of the children from families below the poverty line did not have recess; 17 percent of the children from families above the poverty line did not have recess.

Some things have improved over the years in the Atlanta area. All the school systems now allow recess, although some school principals do not encourage it. But surveys of teachers in schools in high-poverty areas show that many children still do not have recess. Two hundred eleven teacher interns and new teachers (162 in preK–3) in two university master's programs preparing teachers for high-poverty schools completed anonymous surveys in class on their recess beliefs and school policies. The survey data,

collected in four waves from 2012 to 2014, revealed whether the teachers and interns had recess the day of the survey and whether the adults deprived any children of recess as a form of discipline. With each wave reported separately, results showed that 43 to 78 percent of the classrooms represented had recess the day of the survey. In approximately half of those classrooms with recess, the teacher deprived *some* children of recess as discipline. The percentage of classrooms in which *all* the children had recess ranged from 21 to 52 percent. Boys, specifically Black boys, were most often deprived of recess for infractions, including showing defiance, not finishing their class work, and not bringing a signed note from home.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), eight studies of the effects of recess on academic performance or on-task behavior all found beneficial effects. An American Academy of Pediatrics (2013, 183) policy statement asserts that recess is a “crucial and necessary component of a child’s development . . . that should not be withheld for punitive or academic reasons.” What happens when children don’t have recess? Research indicates that children are more fidgety and less on-task when deprived of recess (Jarrett et al. 1998). Punishing children by not letting them play is not likely to improve behavior or promote learning. In many schools, recess may be the only time children are free to interact. Depriving children of recess denies them the opportunity to learn important social skills such as turn taking, sharing, and organizing.



## School Through Children’s Eyes: Less Playful Learning

Bowdon & Desimone 2014) compared kindergarten data from 1998 to 1999 and from 2010 to 2011, before and after implementation of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. They found that following NCLB, children “spent less time on art, pretend play,



and child-led exploration and more time on teacher-directed instruction and worksheets. Disparities between student proficiency and instructional practices for children attending schools in high and low poverty areas persisted but did not widen.” In other words, less time for play and more time for direct instruction did *not* lessen the achievement gap. The following studies illustrate the effect of these trends on students.

Children’s own perspectives of their school experiences support these research findings that play opportunities are not equitable. For the past 14 years, Darlene DeMarie and her students at University of South Florida have investigated how children show and tell others about their elementary school experiences. First, children are interviewed about what they do at school and what they learn there.

Next, they take photographs for a book to show others what their school is like (a method known as autophotography). On another day, children do a picture selection task in which they review photographs with labels representing common themes, such as *my friends*, *the teachers*, *playing*, *having fun*, and *the school building*. (See the photograph.) Children select the one they think “best shows” others what their school is like, and the one that is the “most important” to them.

Collectively, all three methods—children’s talk, photographs, and picture selections of play—reveal key differences among schools through children’s eyes. In fact, the three vary depending on the racial and ethnic demographics of the children and by the socioeconomic status of the children’s families.

DeMarie (2010) compared children’s perceptions of their schools at a “successful” school and an “unsuccessful” school. These labels were based on Florida’s statewide rating system, which used only children’s scores in reading and math on a standardized achievement test, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). At the time of this research, schools with the highest achievement test scores were labeled “A” schools. Those with the lowest scores were labeled “F” schools. The “A” and “F” schools in this study were both charter schools located in urban neighborhoods that are home to high numbers of families with low incomes. However, 92 percent of the students attending the “A” charter school were White and 92 percent of students attending the “F” charter school were Black. The “F” school was a Title I school (having a high percentage of children eligible for free and reduced-price lunches), but the “A” school was not. The “A” school charged higher school fees (for items such as school uniforms and supplies), which meant that it drew a lower percentage of children from the surrounding neighborhood.

The results of that study suggested differences in children’s opportunities for play in these two schools, and these differences were especially evident for children in the pri-

mary grades. Children in kindergarten to second grade attending the “A” school talked significantly more about play than similar grade-level children in the “F” school. When children attending the “F” school did mention play, it seemed it was not a typical part of their school day but something that occurred infrequently. For example, a first-grader mentioned that the class would have a party the following Friday, and that the students would have fun playing outside, eating, and “looking at cars and places.” At the “A” school, 24 percent of the children in kindergarten to second grade took at least one photograph that represented play. At the “F” school, only 7 percent of the children took any photographs that represented play.

In response to the question “Which picture best shows what your school is like?,” 21 percent of the “A” school children in kindergarten to second grade selected the pictures of “play” or “fun.” In contrast, none of the children at the “F” school selected either of those pictures as best showing what their school was like.

The same researchers also conducted studies at schools with moderate achievement (i.e., “C” schools according to the State of Florida), again using interviews, autophotography, and picture selection to learn about children’s perceptions of their school experiences. The schools had similar standardized achievement test results, but their demographics differed tremendously. Again, it was evident that opportunities for play were not equitable. Children at the school with a higher percentage of racially underrepresented groups and free or reduced-price lunch eligibility talked significantly less about play than children who attended the other school. (Tellingly, none of the children in kindergarten at either school took any photographs of play.)

Decision makers often think that schools that are not achieving need more academic instructional time. Yet the findings of this research contradict this belief. The most successful school (the “A” school) was the one that offered children more play opportunities. The least successful schools were those that did not offer children regular play opportunities. In fact, when the researchers entered the classroom at the most successful school, the children were engaged in active learning or play and hardly noticed their entry. On the other hand, not only did all the children in the least successful school notice the researchers’ entry, they practically begged to be the ones who could leave their classrooms and their piles of worksheets on their desks.

## Examples of Change

One example of a program that has made a difference in the quality of outdoor play spaces is the Boston Schoolyard Initiative ([www.schoolyards.org](http://www.schoolyards.org)). Described in *The Great Outdoors*, revised edition, by Mary Rivkin, this initiative transformed 88 Boston Public School yards from asphalt lots to dynamic play and learning spaces. Though the initiative is no longer operative, the schoolyards continue to be inspirational places for children, and the program has also inspired similar ones such as the Oakland Schoolyard Initiative in California.

Here are further examples of initiatives that have successfully provided better play spaces for children in low-income areas:

- National Park and Recreation Association ([www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications\\_and\\_Research/Research/Papers/Parks-Rec-Underserved-Areas.pdf](http://www.nrpa.org/uploadedFiles/nrpa.org/Publications_and_Research/Research/Papers/Parks-Rec-Underserved-Areas.pdf))
- The Learning Landscapes Program, Denver (<http://www.rwjf.org/en/research-publications/find-rwjf-research/2010/09/influence-of-schoolyard-renovations-on-children-s-physical-activ.html>)
- Community Parks Initiative, New York (<http://www1.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/468-14/de-blasio-administration-launches-community-parks-initiative-build-more-inclusive-equitable#/0>)
- KaBOOM! ([kaboom.org](http://kaboom.org); <http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/glendale/2014/10/24/west-valley-cities-building-parks-low-income-areas/17827583/>)



**Memo to: Early Education Leaders**

**From: Jason Sachs, Ben Mardell, and David Ramsey**

**Date: January 2015**

**Subject: Intentional Play-Based Learning: An Essential Ingredient**

You know about the research demonstrating the critical role high-quality early childhood education plays in children's academic and social success. What you might not know is that the programs on which the findings are based have an important factor in common: play. Play is an essential ingredient in children's social, emotional, intellectual, and moral development. When children play, they expand their imaginations, practice language skills, and learn to control their impulses (creating and following rules in order to keep the play going). These skills are all necessary to navigate successfully in school.

That is why, in Boston Public pre-K and kindergarten programs, we teach students using a curriculum that is based on an 80-minute block of time for students to choose where and how to participate in multiple centers. Our research demonstrates that this curriculum leads to particularly strong gains in vocabulary, executive functioning, and self-regulation, and predicts success in third grade.

Having time to process academic information through play and other forms of learning is critical for all students. It is especially important for students who have lower vocabulary levels. There is a tendency in schools that serve students predominantly on free and reduced lunch to exclude play in order to focus on literacy skill building. This strategy is counterproductive, as it does not match the way young students learn. The young brain is constructed to make connections between and across concepts. Only later do students consolidate specific knowledge—math, science, and literacy—as independent domains for learning.

We encourage you to work with your school leadership team and city planners to promote constructive, intentional play-based learning as an essential ingredient in the curriculum in all of your preschool and kindergarten programs. Our experience in Boston Public, along with hundreds of research articles on the science of how children learn, demonstrates that intentional play that allows for student choice and time to process and synthesize ensures that we set our young students up with necessary opportunities to succeed in school and become productive citizens.

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## Conclusion

Awareness of disparities in quality play opportunities is a first step toward advocating for children to have a quality life that includes opportunities for play. Our goal is to consider if we (as educators, therapists, and researchers) are really interested in tackling all facets of the implications of play for *all* children. Make sure the children in your setting—and those in others—have good play opportunities. For example, do all the schools in your community have safe playgrounds? Do all schools provide recess every day? Are challenging behaviors addressed through means other than depriving children of recess? Do all schools have opportunities for highly motivating and fun learning activities, such as art, music, child-led exploration, and recess?

We hope this article will lead readers to probe these issues more deeply by considering questions such as these:

- ◆ What policies and practices are in place that discriminate or privilege particular groups of children?
- ◆ What are our inherent assumptions and prejudices regarding who deserves play?
- ◆ How does understanding social justice issues affect our perceptions of play spaces, access, and quality?
- ◆ What do we do with this information?
- ◆ How are individuals, rule makers, and rule enforcers addressing these issues?
- ◆ Who will initiate and lead a democratic play and playground movement?

We recognize that play is essential for a child's academic, social, physical, and emotional well-being. We are also aware that the quantity and quality of play children experience is heavily influenced by the social and political contexts in which such activities take place, reflecting inequities in our society. This article examines a limited range of play opportunities: playground quality, access to recess breaks, and incorporation of play and fun into the school day. We hope it has raised awareness that other areas of quality play experiences described in this book may not be available to *all* children. Play advocates, including parents, caregivers, teachers, and administrators, often become involved in these issues because of concerns about their own children or their own programs. But, for a more just and democratic society, play advocates need to act to support play opportunities for other people's children as well as their own. We hope this article has increased awareness of such needs.





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