

## Reflections on the importance of playing outdoors

# Making Outdoor Learning Possible

by Jim Greenman

In Minneapolis there is a skyway system that connects the second floors of buildings throughout the downtown area — offices, hotels, stores, and residential developments. There is also a domed stadium and there are domed tennis courts, skating rinks, swimming pools, and indoor fountains. In Minneapolis and many other places, one can seriously ask: Why go outside to the world of snow and ice, heat and mosquitoes, auto exhaust, and rain?

The outdoors has weather and life, the vastness of the sky, the universe in the petals of a flower. But many programs, following the models of schools, have seen the very qualities that make the outdoors different as obstacles or annoying side effects. The openness is tightly constricted; weather provides a reason to stay in, and landscape and life are things to be eliminated. A playground, considered the primary, if not the only outdoor setting, performs the same function as a squirrel cage or a prison exercise yard — it is a place for emotional and physical release and a bit of free social interchange.

### Playground Types

**Traditional playgrounds** in schools, centers, or parks are open areas dotted with various pieces of unrelated commercial, usually metal, large muscle equipment such as slides, swings, climbing domes or bars, spring animals, seesaws, and so on.

Children play on one piece of equipment until bored and then move on to the next. Play tends to be disjointed. These playgrounds encourage large motor play and little else. Children have no way to change the setting. Creative and social play tends to be limited to adding an element of risk in using the equipment, such as swinging together or jumping off slides. The amount of motion and varying heights, and an often inadequately impact-cushioning surface, result in safety problems. Children *least prefer* traditional play areas when given a choice (Noren-Bjorn, 1982).

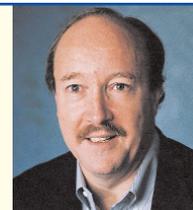
Developed as an alternative to traditional playgrounds, **creative playgrounds** are coordinated and designed or adapted for a site. These include both modular coordinated play installations and *one-off* architectural designs which have a sculptural or natural quality in the forms and materials. Often the landscape is used to create

berms for slides and tunnels. There usually are multiple levels of platforms, steps, and slides for climbing, chasing, and hiding. At first largely static except for occasional cargo nets and wobbly bridges (a reaction to the dangers of traditional playgrounds), today there are installations that include varieties of swings, moving parts, and cable slides. Creative playgrounds can support a variety of motor and social play in a compact area, if they include moving parts. They are usually attractive to both adults and children. They rarely, however, have any provisions for loose parts.

Typical nursery and child care play areas lean toward a blend of traditional and creative, with perhaps a playhouse and sandbox thrown in, and a trike path if size permits.

There are alternatives common in other countries but relatively rare in the United States. Adventure playgrounds, found in Europe, literally grew out of the rubble of World War II. Sometimes called work-

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yards, adventure playgrounds are the ultimate expression of the power of loose parts. The idea, expressed originally in the 1930s by Danish architect C. Th. Sorenson, was “sort of a *junk* playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine, and make dreams and imagination a reality.” Virtually nothing is static (or expensive). They are filled with junk — wood, rope, canvas, tires, wire, bricks, pipes, rocks, nets, logs, balls, abandoned furniture, wheels, vehicles, and unimaginable and assorted artifacts.

Adventure playgrounds have play leaders who help children to build, demolish, repair, incinerate, dig, flood, and play safely. Tools are provided and their use supervised; fire and water are considered important elements of the playground. Children are allowed to create complex structures, both physical and social (“Girls keep out on Tuesday”). There is a wide variety of cognitive, social, and motor play. As a play leader expressed, “The secret of a successful adventure playground is in its continual development; it is never complete, never developed. It is sort of a *terrain vague* that can be many things to children.”

Adventure playgrounds are most often designed for school-aged children. Supervised adventure playgrounds have an excellent safety record and have proven to be highly popular with children. Despite this, they are rare in the United States and likely to remain so. The extreme caution due to the insurance crisis, the likelihood that adults would have trouble accepting the unsightly “junkiness” of the play area (Spivak, 1974), and just the lack of tradition of such playgrounds makes the spread unlikely in the near future.

However, a variation of adventure playgrounds, also called Creative Playgrounds, originating in Sweden, incorporates loose parts to allow children to construct their own environments. Instead of junk and tools, modular building

pieces and panels are available for construction. This form of adventure play as part of a child care program or school is eminently feasible as demonstrated by Play Mountain Place in Los Angeles (Ellison, 1974).

**Environmental play yards**, which encourage an active interaction with plants and animals, water and dirt, weather, and the life cycle, offer children education at its most compelling. The Environmental Yard at Washington School in Berkeley, California, offers the most fully realized expression of the idea. A one and a half acre asphalt traditional playground has been transformed to incorporate miniature ecosystems — *the meadow, willow island* — ponds, pathways, gardens, and animals.

Here and there throughout the country are child care programs in semi-rural areas that are able to incorporate many of the same experiences. For urban programs, a garden, shrubs, a birdbath, and trees are a start.

## The Outdoors in Children’s Lives

Richard Dattner (1969, p. 44) gives testimony to a vision of a playground very different from the exercise yard, one reflecting Buckminster Fuller’s view that playgrounds should be renamed “research environments”:

*A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it. Experiences for every sense are needed, for instance: rough and smooth objects to look at and feel; light and heavy things to pick up; water and wet materials as well as dry things; cool materials and materials warmed by the sun; soft and hard surfaces; things that make sounds (running water) or that can be struck, plucked, plinked, etc.; smells of all varieties (flowers, bark, mud); shiny, bright objects and dull, dark ones; things both huge and tiny; high and low*

*places to look at and from; materials of every type, natural, synthetic, thin, thick, and so on. The list is inexhaustible, and the larger the number of items that are included, the richer and more varied the environment for the child.*

Most programs do not have the outdoor playground space to create miniature worlds. But a program playground exists in a larger outdoor context. If the playground is planned as part of that whole, the child’s outdoor experience may reach Dattner’s ideal. The context includes:

- all the accessible outdoor space — the sidewalks, the city parks, the stream nearby.
- all the time the children have access to the outdoors — daily, weekly, seasonally.
- the outdoor experiences that children have outside the program — in the yard, on the street, in the park.

In the urban areas and areas with harsher climates, the outdoors is a precious resource to be carefully maximized when it is available. In some fortunate areas with year round gentle climates and open spaces, the outdoors is a way to extend classroom boundaries to the horizon daily.

## Outdoor Places

What outdoor places benefit children?

### ***Places for Active Motor Play***

Children need physical challenge from a playground: the opportunity to literally *reach new heights and run wild*. They need the stimulus of risk; they need choices in climbing, sliding, swinging, and so on so that they can determine the excitement and challenge they are ready for. Playgrounds are where reputations are made — whether 4 or 14 years old — and structures are necessary that allow derring-do with which to build self esteem. Equally important are *break away points* for those who change their minds or need time to

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act (much like adults on a ski slope) — alternate routes up and down, graduated challenge, and a range of accomplishment opportunities that allow all children to build self-esteem without pressure.

**Places for Swinging:** Swings with seats, tire swings, rope swings, porch swings, hammocks. Different swings provide different experiences with time, motion, and body control. “Swing ropes for example can be long, suspended far above the ground, giving a long incredible WHOOSH — moving through a big space with each swing. They can be short — a fast-moving, back-and-forth, round-and-round kind of ride” (Moore, R. in Coates, 1974, p. 233). Add the short circular motion of tire swings, the back and forth of porch swings and hammocks, the experience of standing or lying on the swing, swinging together or in tandem and the variety of learning experiences are evident. Three-chain tire swings are very versatile and safe; they work well with very young children and with children with disabilities.

**Places for Sliding and Rolling:** High, low, wide, narrow, curvy, straight, fast, slow. Slides offer wild release, experiments with friction, social experiences, and all sorts of physical challenge. Set in a hill, slides can be safe for the youngest children and for children with disabilities. Wide slides offer more possibilities for experimentation with the body and for social sliding.

Children love to roll themselves and objects down slopes. Walking, pulling, or hauling up a slope provide challenge. Summer’s rolling hill becomes a water slide with a plastic tarp or winter’s sliding spot. Tires, balls, and teachers all roll nicely. Railings can become courses for rolling objects by adding pipe or tubes.

**Places for Climbing:** Trees, live or dead; platform climbers; ropes; ladders; sculptures; tire trees; pole mountains. **Anything that can be climbed will be climbed.** The

exhilaration and the challenge of climbing depends not just on the height but on the size and spacing of footholds and handholds, whether the climbing structure moves like ropes or branches, whether the surface is wood or metal, whether it is open underneath, and so on. Large metal frames and jungle gyms often take up a lot of space and get relatively little use, unless loose parts are available for adding on. Climbing structures need multiple levels of difficulty and stopping points. Creative play installations with platforms, timbers, tires, and nets fill this need.

**Places for Jumping:** Platforms, poles set in the ground, climbers, anything that allows a secure launching point and a safe, absorbent landing area away from the traffic flow. Plato saw the model of true playfulness in the need of young children, animal and human, to leap. Leaping expresses faith in yourself and your environment. The opportunity to jump from different heights and land safely is incomparable, a test of self and gravity.

**Places for Running:** Open space, pathways, or tracks which allow all kinds of running. Children run this way, thatta way, back and forth, round and around. Toddlers and other steady walkers need smooth, flat surfaces.

**Places for Throwing and Kicking:** Walls and nets, hoops, barrels, trees, as targets; balls, bean bags, plastic discs, and (when appropriate) rocks and sticks as missiles. Throwing, heaving, hurling something to someone, at something, into something belongs on a playground. Humankind probably began kicking during the first boring walk — kicking rocks and sticks and small animals. Children love to propel things and feet do the job with dispatch.

**Places for Bouncing and Balancing:** Beams of different sizes, widths, and heights; logs, poles, boulders; wobbly balancing surfaces, movable balance beams, and planks. Children will balance on

everything from a crack in the sidewalk to railings on a deck. They love to balance on their feet, stomachs, heads, and hands.

Bouncing requires knees; variations come from different surfaces — planks with give, spring platforms or spring animals, trampolines or rebounders.

**Places for Traveling, Riding, and Transporting:** Children love pathways and sidewalks that provide a here and there and routes in between: to journey, to race, to haul, to ferry, to caravan. Institutional wheel toys are far superior to home-use models. Vehicles that encourage hauling or two child use have special value.

Carts and wagons for transporting children on walks allow toddler treks that don’t leave the caregiver with two or more weary adventurers to carry the final block. The carts that attach to the back of adult bikes provide wonderful personalized bike trips for one to three children.

**Places to Move Slowly:** In a Japanese garden, one moves slowly along a path, eyes alert to new views, body shifting as the path changes beneath one’s feet. On a lazy day, the urge to float and dawdle can become overpowering; on a gray day, the need to hold back can take over. Stone and wood paths or patterned walks that encourage deliberate motions delight children and adults.

### ***Places to Be Human***

**Places to Watch, to Wonder, to Retreat:** When the challenge of the climber or the commotion on the swings is too much, where is there to go to be alone or with a trusted friend or fellow temporary out-cast? Where is the cork tree for smelling the flowers? Where can I observe my next challenge? Quiet spaces scaled to child size — grottoes, nests, perches, miniature picnic tables off a beaten path — all provide wayside rests. Greenery has a calming effect.

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**Places to Sleep:** It is common in European programs to sleep outside or on sleeping porches. Occasionally taking naps outside provides children with memorable experiences.

**Places to Eat:** What makes life interesting is variation; and when outdoor eating (and cooking) is possible, children are delighted (and so are the local wildlife).

**Places to Be Diapered and to Go to the Bathroom:** Access to the bathroom or diaper table will determine the amount of outdoor play.

**Places to Discover:** "I do not know what I may appear to the world; but to myself I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me" (Isaac Newton).

Taking advantage of nature, the busy city of life behind the fence, the machinery of bikes or hinges or pulleys, the aerodynamics of kites — allows great discoveries even in small areas.

**Places that Feel Different:** Sunny and shady spots, breezy spaces, still spaces.

*Once, on a summer day, I was busy in the shop, and Mequsaq and Pipaluk were playing outside with their little friends. Their game was to crawl up on a big slanting rock and slide down its smooth side. Up and down they went in one wild tumble. Then I heard their grandmother, Kasalum, come out and shout to them: 'Oh no, dear children, don't do that! Think of your poor father who has to drive long stretches in the cold and dark to get skins for your pants. Now you are wearing off the fur. It is unreasonable, you must not do it!'*

*Then she went back inside, and the children resumed their sliding down the rock, a wonderful game in any latitude!*  
from *The Book of Eskimos*,  
by Peter Feuchern (1963, p. 83)

## References

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This article is an excerpt from  
*Caring Spaces, Learning Places*  
(Exchange Press, 1988).

This book can be ordered online:  
[www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com)

# Buyer's Guide to Outdoor Environments

This directory is a partial listing of companies providing outdoor environment products and services. Companies were included free of charge. Inclusion does not imply endorsement by *Child Care Information Exchange*. Request free information about these companies by circling the number for each company on the Product Inquiry Card (between pages 64 and 65).

## American Play Systems

(800) 326-4277

Circle 70 on Product Inquiry Card

## American Swing Products

Deb King

2533 N. Carson Street, #1062

Carson City, NV 89706

(800) 433-2573

play@americanswing.com

Circle 71 on Product Inquiry Card

*American Swing Products was started in 1986. We sell to schools, parks, government agencies, private schools, day cares, and individuals. We take pride in our service.*

*In-stock products normally ship within two days. Many municipalities quote our products when asking for bids. They know they will receive quality merchandise. Most products are tested by National Testing Standards in Anaheim. Their test results are in the catalog.*

## Angeles Group LLC

Dianna Pritchett

9 Capper Drive

Pacific, MO 63069

(636) 257-0533

www.angelesgroup.com

Circle 72 on Product Inquiry Card

*Your playground can be educational and recreational. Add Angeles' cooperative, dramatic play trikes . . . firetrucks, school buses, carry-alls, and rickshaws. Include our sturdy traffic signs. With a 40+ year history of reliability and attention to safety, Angeles' SilverRider™ Trikes are most preferred. Call (800) 336-6313 for your free Angeles® Celebrates America Poster.*

## BCI Burke Company

Cheryl Van Den Bogart

660 Van Dyne Road

Fond du Lac, WI 54936-0549

(800) 266-1250

www.bciburke.com

Circle 73 on Product Inquiry Card

*BCI Burke, a leader in play for 75 years introduces Little Buddies™, the first play systems designed specifically for child care centers. Includes playground equipment, sand & water activities, and paint easels. For a Free Growth Chart, or to contact a sales representative, call the number below or visit us at bciburke.com.*

## ChildBrite by Manta-Ray

Buzz Sharpley

PO Box 796

West Unity, OH 43570

www.childbrite.com

(419) 924-2328

Circle 74 on Product Inquiry Card

*Childbrite by Manta-Ray has provided innovated educational equipment activities for the early learning years environment for over 15 years. Our products can be used indoors or outdoors, worry free, made of high-impact resins to meet your needs. Our new 4-station Space Saver easel, plus the Supersand and Water activity centers, and the all new Mobl-Lite storage systems. Practical, functional, Childbrite.*

## Childforms

(800) 447-3349

Circle 75 on Product Inquiry Card

## GameTime

(800) 235-2440

Circle 76 on Product Inquiry Card

## Grounds For Play

Bill Evans

1401 E. Dallas Street

Mansfield, TX 76063

(817) 477-5482 or (800) 552-7529

www.groundsforplay.com

Circle 77 on Product Inquiry Card

*When it comes to designing safe, stimulating, and comprehensive environments for children's play, Grounds For Play has more experience than any other company in the world. From master plan to project completion, let the experts at Grounds For Play forge your visions into great playground environments.*

## GroundScape Technologies

Cary Senders

4595 Van Epps Road

Brooklyn Heights, OH 44131

(800) 922-7529

www.groundscape.com

Circle 78 on Product Inquiry Card

*GroundScape Kids playground safety surface is made from clean, shredded recycled rubber — tested by the CPSC as the safest playground surfacing available. GroundScape Kids never degrades or loses its effectiveness as a safety surface — needs no annual replacement; the surface is practically maintenance free! This non-toxic surfacing is available in fun colors. GroundScape Kids Premium ADA is wheelchair accessible.*

## HAGS Play U.S.A.

Billy Joyce

13515 Barrett Pakrway Drive, #261

St. Louis, MO 63021

(866) KIDS-PLAY (543-7752)

www.hags.com

Circle 79 on Product Inquiry Card

## KaBoom!

(202) 659-0215

Circle 80 on Product Inquiry Card

## Kidstuff Playsystems

Richard Hagelberg

5400 Miller Avenue

Gary, IN 46403

(800) 255-0153

www.fun-zone.com

Circle 81 on Product Inquiry Card

State-of-the-art steel and plastic play structures; installation services nationwide; also a complete line of shade structures and surfacing materials, benches, and picnic tables. For a free catalog, call (800) 255-0153 or visit us online: [www.fun-zone.com](http://www.fun-zone.com).

#### **KOMPAN, Inc.**

(800) 553-2446  
Circle 82 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **Lakeshore Learning Materials**

2695 E. Dominguez Street  
Carson, CA 90810  
(800) 421-5354  
[www.lakeshorelearning.com](http://www.lakeshorelearning.com)  
Circle 83 on Product Inquiry Card

*Lakeshore Learning Materials has innovative and appropriate active play materials for both the indoor and outdoor early childhood classroom.*

#### **Landscape Structures**

601 Seventh Street South  
PO Box 198  
Delano, MN 55328-0198  
(763) 972-3391 or (888) 4FUNLSI  
[www.playlsi.com](http://www.playlsi.com)  
Circle 84 on Product Inquiry Card

*Landscape Structures Inc. (LSI) is the nation's leading designer and manufacturer of high-quality playground equipment, site furnishings, protective surfacing, and shade structures for schools, municipal parks, housing developments, and child care centers. Landscape Structures designs products for children of all ages and abilities.*

#### **Little Tikes Commercial**

(800) 325-8828  
Circle 85 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **National Program for Playground Safety**

Dr. Donna Thompson  
U.N.I. School of HPELS  
Cedar Falls, IA 50614  
(800) 554-PLAY (7529)  
[www.playgroundsafety.org](http://www.playgroundsafety.org)  
Circle 86 on Product Inquiry Card

*NPPS is a clearinghouse for information on playground safety. They have brochures, videos, CDs, lesson plans, and new this year — a Supervision Kit.*

#### **Planet Playgrounds**

Vicki Morella  
1925 Shiloh Road, Building 1  
Kennesaw, GA 30144  
(678) 801-2002  
[www.planetplaygrounds.com](http://www.planetplaygrounds.com)  
Circle 87 on Product Inquiry Card

*Manufacturer of commercial wooden and metal play structures. Custom fabrication of slides and tubes.*

#### **PlayDesigns**

Dana Shrawder  
1000 Buffalo road  
Lewisburg, PA 17837  
(570) 522-8080  
[www.playdesigns.com](http://www.playdesigns.com)  
Circle 88 on Product Inquiry Card

*PlayDesigns understands how important it is to offer the right activity at the right time. That's why we offer an exciting collection of activities and play structures that include both age- and developmentally-appropriate activities to thrill and challenge young children at their development.*

#### **Playground Environments International**

(800) 777-6596  
Circle 89 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **PlayNation PlaySystems**

David Seitz  
492 Cobb Parkway  
Marietta, GA 30060  
(800) 445-7529  
[www.playnation.com](http://www.playnation.com)  
Circle 90 on Product Inquiry Card

*Residential backyard play systems. Full line of playground parts, accessories, slides, and kits.*

#### **Rocky Mountain Sunscreen**

David C. Erickson  
14700 W. 66th Place, #7  
Arvada, CO 80004  
(888) 356-8899  
[www.rmsunscreen.com/reports](http://www.rmsunscreen.com/reports)  
Circle 91 on Product Inquiry Card

*Rocky Mountain Sunscreen manufactures sunscreen in gallon and quart pump dispensers. Call toll free (888) 356-8899 for your free report: Skin Cancer Prevention and Sun Protection: What every childcare provider needs*

*to know. Rocky Mountain Sunscreen products are certified sun protective by the AMC Cancer Research Center. Parental consent forms included with order.*

#### **Safeplay Systems**

(770) 591-7000  
Circle 92 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **Safety Play, Inc.**

(888) 878-0244  
Circle 93 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **The Step2 Company**

(330) 656-0440  
Circle 94 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **US Games**

(800) 327-0484  
Circle 95 on Product Inquiry Card

#### **"Unity" Surfacing Systems**

Erick B. Prinz  
56 Bloomingdale Road  
Hicksville, NY 11801  
(516) 933-3238  
[www.surfacingystems.com](http://www.surfacingystems.com)  
Circle 96 on Product Inquiry Card

*We specialize in many unitary rubberized safety surfacing, flooring, and pavers (products). These resilient tiles — mats — blocks have an authentic double interlocking system with bolt-down capabilities. They come in a wide variety of colors and thicknesses to fit your needs for any indoor and outdoor applications. Exceeds all of ADA, ASTM, and CPSC safety guidelines.*

#### **Zeager Bros.**

[sales@zeager.com](mailto:sales@zeager.com)  
4000 E. Harrisburg Pike  
Middletown, PA 17057  
(800) 346-8524  
[www.woodcarpet.com](http://www.woodcarpet.com)  
Circle 97 on Product Inquiry Card

*Zeager Bros. is the original manufacturer of engineered wood fiber. WOODCARPET® is made from natural wood fibers, and is designed to reduce injuries on playgrounds. Problems with kick-out and frequent topping off are solved with WOODCARPET MATS®, DURAKICK MAT®, and DURADRAIN® drainage panels. Available in all 50 states and Canada.*

Make Learning Possible is a Singapore-based project aimed at providing children, as well as adults, in rural parts of... We also discussed on the possibility of us decorating Himalayan Pine Cones picked and processed by villagers of Likupike, that we can sell as X'mas deco to fund the Manjushree Singa Basic school's operation (and as additional income to the villagers). Exciting right!!~ Make Learning Possible. 9 March . Ever wanted to soak in the glorious view of the Himalayan ranges while finding some time to do volunteer work? Free resources including books, outdoor learning and play ideas, and other teacher and parent resources to help you get outdoors. Please share this with your colleagues and friends to help us make it possible for every child to get outdoors to learn and play every day . Facebook. Twitter. LinkedIn. Thank you for supporting Outdoor Classroom Day! We'll send you a newsletter shortly. Time to play is critical for every child – share your moments with us by tagging #OutdoorClassroomDay and make every day a day to learn and play outdoors! Educators recommend more outdoor learning - English News Lessons: Free 26-page & 2-page lessons / online activities / 7 Levels... Make sure you try all of the online activities for this reading and listening - There are dictations, multiple choice, drag and drop activities, crosswords, hangman, flash cards, matching activities and a whole lot more. Please enjoy :-)

Warm-ups.

1. **OUTDOOR LEARNING:** Students walk around the class and talk to other students about outdoor learning. Change partners often and share your findings.
2. **CHAT:** In pairs / groups, talk about these topics or words from the article.
3. **PHRASE MATCH:** (Sometimes more than one choice is possible.) currently too much focus. It also increases their quality. five major reports over the. outdoor learning is on.