Playthings and Equipment That Encourage Child Initiated Play

by Susan D. Hudson

Myth: Children do not need equipment or playthings to find joy and fun during their play.

Imagine trying to play a game of tag alone or play a musical composition without an instrument. Imagine trying to climb without a tree or figure out how the world works while living in a sterile, 6’ x 6’, white room. Human beings are social animals, for whom the meaning of activity is derived from interaction with objects: physical, social, or abstract.

Physical objects refer to concrete items within the play setting, such as balls, bats, craft supplies, playground equipment, musical instruments, and so forth. Social objects are other people, such as leaders, friends, teachers, and other participants. People are the ultimate interactive objects, as they offer more social interaction possibilities than any other type of object (Rossman, 2004). Abstract objects include ideas, philosophies, or doctrines. Notions about moral and immoral activities influence children’s play behavior and interactions, along with concepts related to cooperation and competition.

Play experiences derive meaning from the type of objects found in the play setting. For instance, standing in line to play four-square has a different meaning to the child than standing in line to go to the classroom after recess. Hunnicutt (1986) suggests that to play with an object is to experience it in a totally different way than through any other mode of interaction.

Importance of Interaction

The meaning of a play experience, then, arises out of the interaction a child has with objects. Along with the perceived freedom to participate, the intrinsic satisfaction of participation and interaction and the satisfaction of creating and sustaining a play experience, the possibilities inherent in interaction, is what encourages a child to initiate play. Therefore, providing a play experience for children depends on physical educators creating an environment where interactions with physical, social, and abstract objects can take place. Because the nature of social and abstract objects changes, it is often difficult for physical educators to successfully manipulate these objects to provide effective play experiences. However, teachers control the availability of equipment and playthings in the environment and, therefore, have the ability to enhance and enrich play experiences or detract from them.

For example, an elementary school in the Midwest recently made a decision to remove their antiquated playground equipment. The lack of immediate funding prompted a decision not to replace the equipment. As the year progressed, children were still offered recess; however, there was a dramatic increase in the number of fights and arguments. The following year, raising funds to purchase a new, fully equipped playground became
a priority. Within a short time, the equipment was purchased and installed. The result was a noticeable decrease in negative social interactions. By providing children a chance to interact with physical objects, a more positive play experience was restored.

**Peaceful Playgrounds**

Melinda Bossenmeyer (2004), founder of Peaceful Playgrounds™, notes the importance of play equipment. She incorporated the use of equipment as one of five principles within the Peaceful Playground Creed. She divides play equipment into two categories: (a) consumable equipment such as balls, bean bags, scoops, etc. and (b) play structures, often referred to as **playground equipment**. As Bossenmeyer suggests, “game area markings and rules mean nothing without ample and proper consumable equipment.” The Peaceful Playgrounds program suggests the **1-10 rule**. For every 10 children on the playground, at least one piece of equipment should be available. The program recommends implementation of routine maintenance for structures and weekly checks to see that surfacing materials such as wood chips are distributed evenly and not pushed away from equipment due to usage.

**Selecting Age-Appropriate Equipment**

Is the same play equipment used by Pre-K suitable for eighth grade students? Common sense would say no, although common practice in many schools would say yes. For instance, in purchasing playground equipment, the reasoning seems to be that one size fits all. Thus, it is not uncommon to see a six-foot high slide or lower connected on the same platform as a wavy horizontal ladder (see Figure 1). While the slide can be used easily by a six or seven-year-old, the horizontal ladder is more suited to someone age nine or older.

The problem with the one-size-fits-all approach to playground equipment is not only safety. It’s also important to provide a positive interaction with physical objects in the play environment. Human nature is such that we are drawn to repeat actions we feel positive about and avoid activities we do not feel competent in performing. Thus, mismatching equipment to the developmental ability of children can detract from the total play experience.

Care should also be given to the selection of what Bossenmeyer (2004) calls "consumable equipment." While rubber playground balls are not age specific, they can be developmentally specific. For instance, a kindergarten child’s grip size is much smaller than the grip size of a sixth grade child. Providing smaller playground balls for the lower grades would seem a logical move on the part of a physical educator who wants children to have fun playing ball. Likewise, providing standard-height basketball goals and regulation basketballs detracts from the overall play experience of younger children.

What criteria should be used then for the selection of equipment for children? The criteria are no different than those used to select learning materials for children in physical education. Decide what physical
interactions in the environment might help produce a play experience. Then select physical objects based on knowledge of children’s age-related physical, emotional, social, and intellectual capabilities.

Case in point, children in pre-K and kindergarten more often play alone than in large groups. For this age group, a wider variety of consumable equipment is needed. In addition, play structures should provide for both individual interaction and small group interaction. Thus, small composite structures as well as tunnels, crawl spaces, and group gathering areas should be provided. On the other hand, children in grades five and six most often enjoy team-oriented activities and peer group competition. For these ages, adequate traditional consumable equipment is needed (i.e., bats, balls – soccer, basketball, softball or baseballs, kick balls, etc.) to allow for multiple small teams. Play structures for this age group should allow for greater physical challenges (i.e., side by side overhead ladders, parallel bars, etc.).

Case in point, children in pre-K and kindergarten more often play alone than in large groups. For this age group, a wider variety of consumable equipment is needed. In addition, play structures should provide for both individual interaction and small group interaction. Thus, small composite structures as well as tunnels, crawl spaces, and group gathering areas should be provided. On the other hand, children in grades five and six most often enjoy team-oriented activities and peer group competition. For these ages, adequate traditional consumable equipment is needed (i.e., bats, balls – soccer, basketball, softball or baseballs, kick balls, etc.) to allow for multiple small teams. Play structures for this age group should allow for greater physical challenges (i.e., side by side overhead ladders, parallel bars, etc.).

Student Writes on PE to Win National Contest

Fifth grade student Hailey Wright from Mt. Vernon, WA won tickets to the U.S. Open Tennis tournament with an article on “how being active and part of a team helps to make you healthy and happy.” PE teacher Nikki Klinger and classroom teacher Katie Ellis collaborated with Hailey on this effort. Nikki’s school also won a set of tennis rackets, nets, and balls.

Source: http://www.pelinks4u.org

Conclusion

Playthings and equipment are important to the overall play experience of children. As has been briefly discussed in this article, it is the interaction with physical objects that enrich and enhance the play experience. But in order for this positive interaction to occur, schools must provide both consumable and play structures in the outdoor environment. It also requires that school officials incorporate funds in the annual budget to replenish consumable equipment and replace playground equipment as necessary.

By matching children’s physical, emotional, social, and intellectual abilities to physical objects in the environment, play experiences are enhanced. This enhancement leads children to initiate further play experiences. Providing playthings and equipment can and does encourage child-initiated play.

References


Cup Stacking with Speed Stacks

The #1 Choice of PE Teachers Across the Country

Check out our new “On The Move with Speed Stacks” Activity Guide for lots of fun ideas promoting fitness, strength, agility, coordination and teamwork with unique stacking activities!

1-877-GOT-CUPS / 303-663-8083
www.speedstacks.com

Skating America, LLC
*Enclosed Skating Cabinets
*PEP Grant Skating Program
*Rent to Own/Purchase Skates
*In-Service Training by Curt, SW TOY

For more information contact us at:
PO Box 5094
Scottsdale, Arizona 85261
602-840-0669
Fax: 602-955-3400
www.skatingamerica.com