



Shape Play to Shape Minds

Well-designed playgrounds and play structures provide a favorable setting for child development

By Lynn Pinoniemi

Play has an invaluable role in encouraging child development. But play isn't just one thing; it's an invitation to explore, learn, and grow. Play opens up a world of possibilities. Play—on a playground, in a soccer game, or at an art studio—teaches kids not only how to exist together, but also how to accept

people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. In other words, play helps shape kids into thinkers, dreamers, and leaders.

For several years, the campaign to promote play has revolved around battling the childhood obesity epidemic. But play is important for more than just physical development. Play helps shape children's cognitive, motor, and social skills, in addition to supporting leadership development, teaching tolerance, spurring creativity, promoting problem-solving and diligence, and regulating emotions.

It's on the playground that children learn persistence, leadership, competition, bravery, support, and empathy. Play is fun and physically beneficial. But play is also an organic form of learning. That's why it's important to

offer free playtime to children of all ages and abilities.

To date, playgrounds have been largely overlooked as settings for development, perhaps because it is easy to assume that play is "just for fun" or that playgrounds are just for exercise. However, research suggests that children's early experiences and the settings they inhabit have a powerful role in helping them become healthy and effective thinkers, leaders, and collaborators.

Playgrounds can be deliberately designed to encourage children's engagement in developmentally significant forms of play. Educational leaders have an opportunity to provide space for children to blend pretense and social play with physical activity; children can run around while "fighting dragons" or swing



FURTHER READING:

According to Landscape Structures' Inclusive Play Survey, more than 70 percent of parents "strongly agree" that playground equipment should be designed so all children can play together. View the results at <https://bit.ly/2JZjepN>.

from play equipment like monkeys, exercising their social, cognitive, and physical skills all at once.

Here's what you should do to design a playground that encourages development:

1. Provide for children with diverse needs and levels of ability. Inclusive playgrounds provide broad play experiences that allow children to integrate and develop all of their senses. For example, toddlers who are learning to walk can find a physical challenge in climbing a few stairs, while skillful 10-year-olds can find an equally exciting challenge in clambering to the top of a play structure. Children can take advantage of open spaces to engage in socially and linguistically complex pretend scenarios, but they also might find a quiet nook in which to privately create elaborate stories. Products such as playground spinners engage kids' visual and vestibular systems to help them develop a better sense of balance and motor planning. Swinging or moving back and forth on gliders gives kids an understanding of how their body moves through space and the speed of movement with which they're comfortable.

2. Go beyond the minimum requirements and follow the seven principles of Universal Design. Universal Design is a framework for the design of environments, products, buildings, and ideas, with the express goal that they be usable by the widest range of abilities. Use of this framework increases access, safety, comfort, and social participation within the play environment, and educators can reference its seven principles to understand how their current play spaces might be enhanced to meet the needs of their school's population.

The more kids play, the more they develop the skills necessary to engage, change, and impact the world around them. Climbing on playground structures engages multiple

sensory systems, which teaches kids to relate to objects and navigate in the world. Play experiences that offer lots of "touch" opportunities let kids organize information and develop visual and auditory systems.

In order to create a playground design that ensures kids will make time for free play, remember that play is a trial run for adulthood—a way

for kids to discover and practice all the skills they'll need in the future. Collaborate with your designer to create playgrounds where kids of all abilities can practice their leadership skills and learn to accept people of all ages, abilities, and backgrounds. **P**

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