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Child's Play

Demise of play bodes ill for healthy child development, researcher says

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Add another item to the "ways kids' lives in no way resemble their parents' childhoods" list.

In addition to not having to go to an actual library to look up a quick fact in a real book or carry a phone that's larger than half a slice of Spam, it appears that children also may reach adulthood without weathering the ancient rite of dodge ball or playing tag at recess.

To an adult, it seems almost Orwellian.

If the adult is a leading national expert on playground safety and a 40-year scholar on child development, it sounds like a big mistake.

Dr. Joe Frost, the Parker Centennial Professor Emeritus in The University of Texas at Austin College of Education's Department of Curriculum and Instruction, is an outspoken advocate of developmentally appropriate children's play, with over 18 books and 100 articles to his credit. As parents, childcare centers, schools and parks increasingly demand risk-free, scratch-free and tear-free play, he finds himself living in interesting times.

"I travel the nation and abroad consulting on play and child development, playground design and play equipment safety," says Frost, "speaking about the value of play and emphasizing the importance of appropriate play opportunities to a healthy child. What we've seen over the past three or so decades is what could be termed the *demise* of play. This is largely due to a frenzy of litigation over playground injuries and a misunderstanding of the educational and developmental value of play—the consequence has been complete removal of playgrounds and recess.

"If the children don't play, they won't get hurt and if they don't get hurt, we won't get sued. It's an extreme stance, and it's detrimental to the children. Much more so than a scratched knee or bruised elbow."

The history of playgrounds, in the U.S. and abroad, is a study in how difficult it can be to get designers, safety specialists and child development experts on the same page. Some playgrounds built mid-century around the whimsical imaginations of adults caused fatal injuries to children because the play equipment simply was not safe. Other playgrounds passed every safety test but featured large immovable, static parts that denied children the opportunities for free play and exploration that are necessary to healthy emotional, mental, social and physical development.

Last summer a school south of Boston made headlines nationwide when administrators announced they were banning tag, touch football and unsupervised games of chase at recess for fear children would get hurt and the school would be held liable, indicating that



Dr. Joe Frost

maybe the way of dealing with play and playgrounds is not to deal with them at all.



According to Frost, the trend in the U.S. of throwing the baby out with the bathwater and doing away with recess, playgrounds and some forms of play began back in the early 1970s, when playgrounds sported large manufactured pieces of equipment that are familiar to most adults. The typical school, park or other public playground had large, heavy-duty metal merry-go-rounds, slides, swing sets, seesaws, jungle gyms and overhead ladders. The seemingly innocuous equipment unfortunately included head entrapments, dangerous shearing mechanisms and asphalt or

 **Child's Play Photo Gallery:** Select thumbnail image to view larger photo with description.

concrete surfacing below it.

Parents' complaints about the number of injuries from jungle gym falls (onto hard asphalt, rocks, cement or a similarly unyielding surface) and an increase in litigation started the ball rolling and a regulatory commission responded by issuing playground safety guidelines that were suggested but not mandatory. Through the 1980s and '90s, the list of rules continued to bloat, becoming an unwieldy tangle of federal regulations that often, perversely, contradicted state regulations and were enforced by confused, under-trained inspectors and under-funded agencies.

Although manufacturers now are producing much play equipment that is safe and developmentally appropriate for children, the cost often is prohibitive for playground operators and the public remains wary of possible injuries.

"When national safety guidelines were initially proposed, some playground manufacturers vigorously opposed them," says Frost, who has worked with more than 200 U.S. law firms in 36 states and the U.S. Department of Justice, serving as an expert witness or consultant in playground injury cases. "What they soon discovered, though, was that as the guidelines became more and more specific, playground owners were having to replace playground equipment to keep up with ever-changing, ever more technical, even contradictory regulations. An enormous amount of money was being spent—financially good for manufacturers but not so good for playground owners."

So what is so wrong with this "standardized era" of playgrounds and with school districts, such as Atlanta's, simply opting not to have playgrounds at all because replacement of the equipment every few years costs \$1-2 million a pop? Is it really so awful that school districts in Broward County, Florida, have taken away swing sets, sand boxes, bouncy horses and merry-go-rounds and posted "no running" signs on every elementary school playground? If kids don't have age-appropriate play environments where they can interact with other children and develop motor skills, big deal—can't they just play at home, becoming Wii wizards and Playstation 3 prodigies?

The answers range in severity from sobering to scary, says Frost.

Several studies over the past decade—some by Frost—have looked at the effects of play deprivation and found that an absence of play in supportive, positive contexts can create violent, antisocial, mentally impaired and emotionally sterile adults. In one study, about 95 percent of


Children in the U.S.
are the least physically fit

the convicted murderers who were examined reported either the absence of play as children or illogical, brutal, abnormal play such as bullying, sadism and extreme teasing. In the same study, around 75 percent of drunk drivers who were examined reported play abnormalities.

Obviously there is good play, bad play and no play, and, according to Frost, what makes a good play environment hasn't changed much over the years because what makes a healthy child—and, consequently, healthy adult—hasn't changed over the years. The play that builds children's physical, social, cognitive and affective development does not happen in front of a video game after school or when a child is alone in her bedroom watching TV and instant messaging a friend.

"Good play is play that involves physical activity," says Frost, "creativity, spontaneity, exploration and social interaction. It engages the body in fine and gross motor development and the mind in negotiations, autonomous thinking, problem solving, imagination and flexibility.

"The value of appropriate play has been acknowledged since antiquity and Plato, and in every century since, the most renowned philosophers and thinkers have extolled its necessity for normal human development. Thousands of research articles in multiple disciplines conclude that play is essential and it's an issue that's no longer really debatable."

Pointing to the surfeit of media coverage on childhood obesity Frost stresses that, if nothing else, setting aside enough time every day for appropriate play at school, along with healthy food choices, would be enough to shrink most children's expanding waistlines.

"In an ideal play setting," says Frost, "children are in movement and can take an active role in building their own environment, learn to take risks, develop aesthetic appreciation, strategize, mimic adult roles, practice new skills and make mistakes. Since the concept of playgrounds was born in Germany in the mid 19th century, probably the most desirable play settings have been the adventure playgrounds and city farms that you can find in Europe and the playgrounds at many private childcare centers and kindergartens in the U.S."



Vigorous activity is necessary for children's physical and social development, yet many schools around the nation are completely doing away with recess and playground equipment.



— Dr. Joe Frost

compared to their peers in other industrialized countries—their sedentary lifestyles and terrible diets can equal a form of slow suicide.



— Dr. Joe Frost

Adventure playgrounds were inspired in 1943 by the work of a Danish landscape architect and to Frost they are among the best outdoor play environments. They feature full-time, specially trained adult "play leaders" who are educated in child care, motivation, protection and development as well as in legal matters and site development. These "play leaders" watch over and facilitate the children's activities but do not set an activity agenda or structure the children's play. Supplies are provided for children to build elements of the playground on their own with a motley assortment of tools and building materials, and a varied selection of "loose parts" are available for children to use in games of imagination.

At many of the adventure playgrounds the children care for animals--one such playground in Copenhagen features stables of horses – tend gardens and cook their own food over open fires. Nature figures prominently in these playscapes and the children are able to play in sand, water, fields and forests. City farms closely resemble adventure playgrounds and are gaining in popularity worldwide because of their focus on the natural environment, agricultural projects and activities that stress humans' inter-relationship with plants and animals.

A key concept adventure playground devotees seem to recognize and that Frost cites often is that children's ideas for a playground often are better than those of adults. Although the children are constructing their own play equipment, being tended by adults who interfere less, cooking over fires and handling animals, the United Kingdom's Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents reports the record of accidents at adventure playgrounds is far superior to other forms of playgrounds.

"Back in 1976 the American Adventure Playground Association was formed," says Frost, "and there were a spattering of adventure playgrounds here in the U.S. By 2005 the Houston Adventure Playground Association had closed all of its playgrounds, and I think only three adventure playgrounds remained in the country, all in California. They never really got off the ground here because adults thought they were too messy, informal, noisy, unstructured and hazardous.

"Even though we don't have adventure playgrounds, many of our daycare centers and preschools do integrate some of their best features, with the sorts of equipment that enhance motor activity as well as make-believe or dramatic play, construction activities and organized games. There are slides, climbers, swings, forts, playhouses, sand and water areas, trike tracks, construction materials and storage facilities for the loose items—overall, a much better melding of nature with outdoor playgrounds."

Frost has influenced the design of play settings around the country, but none more so than the three playgrounds at Redeemer Lutheran School in Austin, the site of The University of Texas at Austin Play and Playgrounds Research Project. Frost started the project more than three decades ago and has given special attention to safety in selecting, installing and maintaining the playgrounds' equipment. He continues to visit the playgrounds each week to study children's play and, along with University of Texas at Austin graduate students, uses his Redeemer School research to compile writings on children's play and playground equipment selection.

The project at Redeemer School is the longest running of its kind in the nation, and in the 30 years since it began 11 playgrounds have been installed and dismantled on the site. About a quarter of a million dollars has been spent in playground design, supplies and innovations to accommodate the developmental needs of two- to 12-year-olds.

The playgrounds at Redeemer Lutheran School began as play areas created from scrap materials. They evolved to combine safe manufactured equipment provided at no charge by Game Time (current sponsor), Little Tikes, BigToys, Kompan, Grounds for Play and Kidstruction along with complex plant and animal habitats.

Working with Dana Keyburn, a teacher at Redeemer and a master gardener, Frost aims to create an outdoor learning environment that combines play and nature and is fully integrated with the school curriculum.

In 2004, the playgrounds' butterfly gardens were certified by the National Wildlife Federation as a Schoolyard Habitat, and the children who tended the gardens were honored in November 2006, as the National Junior Master Gardeners Group of the Month by the National Master Gardener Program. Students have used the gardens to grow fresh herbs for the Austin Meals on Wheels program, conducted an annual Community Garden Festival, raised and tagged monarch butterflies for the national Monarch Watch program and created both indoor and outdoor science laboratories.

“
Good play rarely
is predictable, and no one
piece of equipment designed
by an adult is going to
match the product of
a child's imagination.”

— Dr. Joe Frost



On any given weekday during the school year, one can sit near the perimeter of one of the three playgrounds and watch a textbook example of "good play." With much noise and energy, some children are



Good play settings provide forms of play that are natural to a child's age and developmental level.

playing organized games with a soccer ball, first using it for an informal soccer match and then immediately switching to a vigorous game of volleyball in a wide open, sandy, equipment-free space. Another four or five children are tucked away in a small "log" cabin, chatting and drawing pictures in the sand with sticks that have fallen from the large trees that cover the

playground. A handful of students are developing motor skills climbing a chain metal ladder suspended over a thick, cushioned floor of wood chips, while others are swinging or playing chase around the edge of a student-tended flower bed that is teeming with insects and butterflies.

If the Redeemer Lutheran School playgrounds are Frost's pièce de résistance, then the collection of more than 1,000 books on children's play and play environments in his home office might best be described as his crowning glory. The collection dates back to the time of Plato and includes the first book on playgrounds written in the U.S. According to Frost, he receives two to three new books weekly that he dutifully adds to the archive, and he currently is writing a history of play in America.

To encourage scholarly research on play, Frost donated an earlier, expanding collection to the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, creating one of the largest written collections on play in the nation.

Even though playground safety has burgeoned into a hot media topic—made complex and combustible with lawsuits and public debate—the essence of the subject remains remarkably simple.

"When I was a boy in rural Arkansas," says Frost, "recess meant roaming through hills, woods, fields and creeks around the school, and we went out to play multiple times a day. Adult supervision was minimal, kids developed terrific motor skills and there were few or no serious injuries. We've complicated something so essentially innocent and straightforward—kids just need a safe setting where they can become strong and resilient and develop into thinkers, builders, creators and explorers."

BY **Kay Randall**

PHOTOS: **Christina Murrey**

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P.O. Box Z
Austin, Texas
78713-7509

512-471-3151
Fax 512-471-5812

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