

## *In Search of Peaceful Playgrounds*

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*Most of us have always thought of recess as a time when we escaped from the classroom, from work and from the constant gaze of the teacher. It was a peaceful and joyous time when most children occupied themselves in active play and the odd incident was quickly resolved with the help of the teacher on 'yard duty'. Not so any more. The playground is now a 'problem' in many schools largely because of the bullying behaviour occurring there. This paper discusses the relative merits of the strategies schools are implementing in an effort to deal with the bullying behaviour and suggests that more thought might be given to improving the playground environment itself as a way of addressing the problems.*

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### **Introduction**

*A prime cause of bullying on playgrounds is the lack of things to do.*  
(Rivkin, 1995, p.50)

Until recently the school playground hardly featured in educational research. It was taken for granted that recess breaks were times when children escaped from the classroom (and 'work') and freely engaged in active play with minimal supervision. Teachers saw recess breaks as a time when children 'let off steam'. Most schools had three breaks each day—a short morning and afternoon break and a long (often an hour) lunch break. Together they amounted to approximately 20 per cent of the school day so they were significant periods of time. Accidents were generally accepted as inevitable outcomes of the rough and tumble of active play and disputes, when they arose, were settled on the playground. Teachers supervised at a distance, if at all.

That has all changed. The playground has now become something of a 'problem' (Blatchford 1989, 1998, Evans 1994). Research both here in Australia (Burke, Jarman & Whitmore, 1994, Slee & Rigby, 1994, Slee, 1995, Rigby, 1996) and overseas (Olweus 1993, Smith & Sharp, 1994, Boulton, 1995, Borg, 1999) indicates that disruptive and anti-social behaviour is increasingly widespread in schools, occurs most often in the playground at recess and lunch breaks and is a growing concern for parents, children

and teachers. The most worrying form of anti-social behaviour is bullying and recent studies suggest that incidences of bullying behaviour are on the rise in both primary and secondary schools. Slee (1995), for example, found that 23.8 per cent of children in three Australian primary schools reported being bullied once a week or more often and that they were likely to feel unhappier and less safe in the playground. Rigby (1997) claims that up to one in six children in Australian schools report being bullied each week, a figure, he suggests, that is relatively high by world standards. The problems seem to be greater in primary than secondary schools, usually take the form of verbal teasing and harassment, and the incidence is higher among boys than girls.

Rigby (1996) reports that the research he and his colleagues (in particular Phillip Slee) have conducted over the years shows that more than 90 per cent of students they have surveyed say that they have witnessed incidents of bullying in the playground at recess or lunch time 'sometimes' or 'often'.

In seeking to understand why children bully others Rigby (1997) found that 70 per cent of children between the ages 8 and 12 said that they did it because they were 'annoyed' by their victims or so that they could 'get even' with them. Studies (Higgins, 1994, Blatchford 1998, Rafferty 1999) that have looked at the social dynamics of school playgrounds show that children who are excluded from games or who are prevented from playing because they are denied access to space and/or equipment, will often invade and disrupt other children's space and games. This can precipitate heated exchanges that can result in verbal and even physical confrontations. Children will say that they get 'annoyed' when other kids invade their space and disrupt their game. They may try to 'get even' by physically or verbally harassing them.

### ***Common Strategies for Dealing with Disruptive Behaviour***

Studies both in Australia (Rigby 1996, Breheney, Mackrill & Grady, 1996, Evans 1997) and overseas (Blatchford 1998, Pellegrini 1995, Blatchford & Sharp 1994) have shown that schools have tried different approaches to dealing with the disruptive behaviour occurring in the playground. The number of teachers on duty at recess and lunch breaks has been increased; stricter rules about what children can and cannot do in the playground have been put in place and the penalties for breaking the rules have been made more severe. In some instances (Breheney *et al* 1996) schools have actually organised activities for children to do to keep them occupied during breaks in the belief that most trouble came about because children were idle and idleness lead to mischief and misbehaviour. Other schools, particularly those with limited space, have segregated the playground by

age and/or gender in order to give students access to space and equipment normally dominated by a specific group.

Perhaps the most drastic action taken by schools to counter misbehaviour in the playground has been to reduce the amount of time children have for recess/lunch breaks. The rationale is that there will be less trouble in the playground if children have less time each break. Blatchford (1998) and Pellegrini (1995) report on a few schools in England and America respectively that have even eliminated recess breaks altogether. In these schools teachers decide if and when their class needs a break and they take them out for supervised activity. At other times physical education and sport are used as substitutes for recess. This means, of course, that teachers don't get a break but they appear to be less concerned because they no longer have to deal with playground disputes which occurred under the traditional model. Needless to say most children were less than happy with the loss of playtime.

In Australia we haven't yet seen such drastic action but we do have evidence of schools cutting back the number of breaks and the time children spend at play during each break. The following comments from Principals interviewed in an earlier study (Evans 1997) give some insight into the changes taking place here in Australia;

Lunchtime was previously an hour. Last year this was reduced to 45 minutes which included 10 minutes inside to eat lunch thus allowing 35 minutes playtime. These changes were made primarily to avoid bullying and fighting in the playground which seemed to occur towards the end of lunch break (p.18)  
I think the times we've got now for recess and lunch are terrific. There's less aggravation out in the playground. We have lunch from 12.30 till 12.40 inside then the children go out until 1.15 which gives them 35 minutes. Before that it was longer and they seemed to lose the plot and forget what playing was all about and there was a lot of aggravation out there and for teachers on duty it was a nightmare at times. But the shortened time plus the new discipline policy has had a dramatic effect. It's actually a pleasure to be out on yard duty now where people are getting on well with each other. (p.19-20)

These changes have not pleased the children because, apart from having their playtime reduced and restricted, they generally came about without any consultation. Given that they saw the playground as their domain and playtime as their favourite part of the school day they were less than happy with the changes as the following comments (Evans, 1996, p.56) illustrate;

Lunchtime is too short. By the time we get out and eat our lunch and have a little play it's time to go back in. (Grade 5 girl)  
I think it stinks that we have less time to play. It's our time. The teachers just don't want to be out on yard duty, that's all. (Grade 6 boy)

Not all teachers were pleased either. The changes meant that they had to adopt more of a policing role, which they disliked and which did little to help develop positive relations with children. And while cutting playtime may have lead to fewer problems in terms of accidents and anti-social behaviour it also meant that teachers had less of a break. Playground supervision, or 'yard duty' as it is often called, has never been a popular task but it is even less so now as teachers are being held more and more accountable. The following extract (Evans, 1994, p.36) makes this point very clearly;

I hate yard duty. You spend all your time breaking up fights, demanding children pick up rubbish, attending to injuries, dealing with complaints and driving kids out of prohibited areas. You spend all your time playing policeman, focusing on trouble spots and trouble-makers. It is a thankless and joyless job which leads to poor relations between teachers and children.

Teachers are caught in a dilemma. They don't like having to do 'yard duty' particularly if it continually forces them into a managerial and policing role. They see recess as a time when both they and the children can have a break from each other but the growing concern about safety in the playground means that there are now more teachers required for supervision and they have to be more vigilant than ever.

In addition to the above many schools have put in place anti-bullying policies aimed at providing the children and the teachers with skills and strategies by which they can better manage disruptive behaviour. A 'whole school approach' (Tattum & Herbert, 1993, Sharp & Thompson, 1994, Rogers, 1997) involving the teachers, parents and children in developing a common strategy is generally advocated. The focus (Field 1999) has been on helping the bullied children develop coping skills and helping the bullies develop other ways of venting/dealing with their anger and frustration. Close & Lechman (1997) believe that teaching children conflict resolution skills will help them learn to resolve their own disputes without adult intervention. Nelson, Smith and Colvin (1995) have successfully experimented with peer mediation to resolve behaviour problems in the playground at recess. Similarly Pepler, Craig, Ziegler & Charach (1993) give examples of schools that have successfully used students as 'peacemakers' or peer conflict managers. The peacemakers were chosen by their peers and then given extensive training in dealing with problems that arose in the playground. The 'peacemakers' program had some success because, as Pepler *et al* (1993, p.88) explain, 'while bullying may be difficult for teachers to detect, peers are present during interactions and, therefore, can play a significant role in reducing the problem'. They make the point,

however, that responsibility for stopping bullying must be shared by both teachers and students.

Rigby (1996) also sees an important role for peers to play in helping to resolve problems that arise in the playground. Whatever means are used to tackle the problem of bullying the most important issue in his mind is that students are involved in the process of seeking solutions. To do so is empowering for them.

In our efforts to stamp out bullying and make playgrounds safe there is a very real danger that we are creating environments which are so uninteresting, so sterile and so restrictive that they leave children with little to do other than annoy and intimidate their fellow students.

### ***Dull and Boring Playgrounds***

According to Slee (1995, p.320) 'all too often the playground environment is dull and uninteresting with little to capture the imagination and interest of the children'. Rivkin (1995) and Higgins (1994) argue that boredom is a major factor in contributing to anti-social behaviour in the playground at recess times. Bored children, out of frustration or simply a lack of things to do, may find it amusing to tease, intimidate, and generally annoy other children and even the duty teachers.

Children are easily bored if the playground environment provides few opportunities for them to engage in activities they enjoy. As Groves & Mason (1993) found children prefer playgrounds which offer a variety of activities and which allow them to change, adapt and manipulate the setting. Titman's (1994) research showed that children liked a playground to have trees, leaves, shady areas, grassy areas and different levels. They wanted places where they could climb, explore, take risks, build cubbies. They love to play with mud, soil, water and sand. They wanted to play *with* things not just *on* them. 'The most popular equipment was that which allowed them to adapt it, to make new meanings around it and subvert or change its apparent intention. The greater the potential of the equipment or item to be changed or manipulated the better' (Titman, 1994, p.47).

What do we see in most school playgrounds today? The apparatus is firmly fixed in concrete. Most movable and moving equipment such as swings, see-saws, roundabouts, etc. has long since been dismantled and relegated to the scrap heap. A litany of rules discourage or prevent children from climbing trees or even playing in and under them. Noticeboards announce in bold type that there are to be NO ball games played near school buildings, NO games that involve tackling, NO jumping off playground equipment and, in schools with very little space, NO running around school buildings (for fear of collisions with obstacles or other children). And teachers and parents reel in horror at the prospect of

children playing with branches, leaves, soil, water or mud. Even the traditional sand pit has disappeared in many schools. Animal excrement, pieces of glass, even syringes, have forced schools to cover or remove what has always been one of the most popular play areas for the younger children.

As the following comments from primary teachers acknowledge, safety and ease of supervision have come to dominate our thinking about playgrounds and in the process has turned them into fairly barren and uninviting places to play.

The playgrounds and school environment discourage creative play. There are rules defining where balls may be kicked and where running may or may not occur. Children are not allowed to run on paths or jump off walls. Trees are not to be climbed and natural materials are not to be used for building cubbies. There is a bush area but children are not allowed to play there. These rules are designed to make our supervision easier

(Evans, 1994, p.34).

Our school places a lot of emphasis on providing a safe environment for children. This has meant the removal of many pieces of equipment such as suspended tractor swings, raised stepping stones, overhanging branches, and dense undergrowth. We don't allow loose equipment. It's too dangerous, it creates storage problems and it is open to theft and vandalism. By emphasising safety I am sure that we have robbed children of many enjoyable play experiences but what choice is there?

(Evans, 1994, p.37).

As Tompkins (1982, p.25) asked 'is it not surprising that when there is nothing to manipulate, transform, or act upon creatively, children direct their energies and abilities toward vandalising or otherwise transforming the playground. In this kind of adult-designed playground children have no sense of ownership or control over the environment, and are therefore prone to irresponsible behaviour.'

The issue of ownership and control emerges as one of the most important factors in determining children's attitudes toward their playground. The development of a 'caring and sharing culture' is often a stated priority for schools. Titman (1994, p.63) makes the point that 'school grounds, by their design and the way they are managed, convey messages and meanings to children which influence their attitudes and behaviour in a variety of ways'. She found that when children were actively consulted about what they would like to see in the playground this conveyed messages about the extent to which they, and the playground environment itself, were valued. On the other hand when they weren't consulted, and when nothing was done to make the playground more

interesting and fun to use, children saw this as implying that the school didn't care. In her years of working with schools she found that, in the majority of cases, they fell far short of the children's ideal. 'Mostly they offered children space for simple diversion, for what adults call 'letting off steam', and very little else. The children had therefore come to feel that the only thing they were supposed to do outside was to rush around, chasing each other or playing organised games which largely depended on commanding territory. Their wide range of other needs were largely ignored or prohibited either by the design of the grounds and/or by the way they were managed' (p.59). This resonates with a comment from a Principal interviewed about the changes to his school's playground;

I think 30 minutes is probably about enough. It gives them time to get out, run around, let off a bit of steam, play with their mates, whatever they want to do, and then get back into it. It doesn't give time for boredom to set in.

(Evans, 1997, p.19)

In reality the children never got the chance to 'do what they want to do'. They weren't consulted about the changes. No one asked for or listened to their suggestions. Not surprisingly they were less than happy about the reduction in time and the restrictions imposed on their playground activities. To them recess was much more than simply an opportunity to 'let off steam'. It was the most valued part of the school day.

Playgrounds that have limited space and resources; where rules proscribe what, where and with whom children can play, and where the teacher on duty takes on a policing role to sort out disputes, do little to promote the sort of 'caring and sharing' environment that most schools strive for and like to boast having. As Higgins (1994) notes a school that has a small, bleak and barren playground does not give the impression that it is a caring environment. 'Inhospitable places do little to encourage a sense of pride and belonging for teachers, pupils, lunchtime supervisors and parents' (p.162).

On the matter of children being actively and genuinely involved in decisions about the playground Freeman (1995) makes the point that 'whilst public participation is an accepted tenet of the planning profession, there seems to be little evidence that planners take seriously the participation of children in planning decisions, even where children are the focus of the decision' (p.386). This is despite the fact that it has been shown (Titman, 1994, Rafferty, 1999) that children have definite ideas about what constitutes a good playground and they have the capacity to put their ideas into practice if given the opportunity. 'If children are to be participants they need to participate on an equal basis, and if this is not

possible at least have their contribution taken seriously' (Freeman, 1995, p.387).

### ***It Can be Done: Imaginative playgrounds make a difference***

Rafferty (1999) documented the process of change in a school of 200 children whose playground was 'a large featureless tarmac area' (p.2). To their credit the school board decided that, as the children were the main players, their views should be sought and they should be integrally involved in any changes that took place. A questionnaire revealed major concerns about the playground. According to the children it was boring, in poor physical condition, dangerous, and they complained of bullying, sexist and anti-social behaviour. It occurred to the school that there may well be a connection between the boredom and the anti-social behaviour.

The children offered a number of suggestions as to how the environment might be improved. For example, they felt that the playground could be made more interesting if they had greater access to equipment (such as skipping ropes, balls and hoops), to grassed areas where they could play or sit and to sheltered areas where they could go in poor weather. Rafferty (1999) concluded that the children involved showed they were capable of translating their ideas into practical outcomes. 'Giving children a voice helped in personal and social development, raising confidence and encouraging good citizenship' (p.5).

The whole process of involving the children was seen to be very valuable and parents and the school board were delighted with the enthusiasm the children showed and the suggestions they came up with for improvements to the playground. One of the most important outcomes was the establishment of a 'Green Forum' the membership of which consisted of children, parents, teachers and community members such as the Environmental Education Officer. The forum set about transforming a waste area into a 'wild area'. What was most noticeable was the change in children's behaviour. 'There was a growth in cooperation, ownership and good behaviour. Children known as troublemakers seemed to be transformed when involved in the area...' (p.4).

Higgins (1994) argues that by involving children in the decision making process you give them the opportunity to practice social skills, such as negotiation, compromise, sharing and caring, which help promote pro-social behaviour. The process, therefore, is just as important as the ultimate goal (the improved playground).

Higgins, herself a landscape designer, describes how she initiated a project which involved the redesign of the playground in four English primary schools using the 'whole school' approach. The playgrounds, prior to the project, were characterised by large bleak expanses of grey asphalt,



a lack of seating, windy exposed sites, sparse vegetation and badly worn grassed areas. 'The school grounds lacked diversity, spatial structure, colour and stimulation' (Higgins, 1994, p.176). Children in each school described the playgrounds as being dull, cold, noisy, smelly, ugly and places where there was not much to do but 'hang about'. Not surprisingly graffiti was common and children amused themselves by engaging in illicit activities and playing in places that were 'out of bounds' which suggested to Higgins that 'restrictive rules were resented' (p.176).

Playground supervisors told of frequent conflicts over space and resources and expressed concern about the safety of children, particularly when falling on the hard surfaces that took up most of the playground. One of the goals of the playground development, apart from changing the landscape and making it a much more stimulating environment, was to reduce the bullying and anti-social behaviour that was occurring in each school. And to a large extent this is what happened. The deliberate policy of involving the children in decisions at the planning, design and implementation stage gave them a sense of ownership and control over the changes and was crucial in helping to change playground behaviour. According to Higgins (1994) participation in decision making can help change playground behaviour as long as the children see that the changes are beneficial. 'If playground improvements are carried out as an anti-bullying intervention it appears that participation by pupils in decision making, discussion and perhaps most importantly in physical construction and planting is essential' (p.192).

Moore (1986) described how a primary school playground which was mainly comprised of asphalt with a few items of fixed equipment such as swings, slides and bars, was converted into a natural setting complete with ponds, streams and woodlands. The changes in children's play patterns were most interesting. Before the changes there were many accidents and injuries sustained from falling on the asphalt. Children were bored because there was nothing to do. There were frequent verbal and physical clashes as children aimlessly roamed around and amused themselves by invading each others' games.

After the changes, not only were there fewer fights, injuries and accidents but there was more integration of boys and girls and more harmonious relations between all children. Children developed a greater pride in their school and developed a strong attachment to it. Moore argues that conventional urban school yards foster sex-differentiated play and generate conflict. By comparison natural (or biotic) playgrounds encouraged more friendly play, in part because there were fewer gender specific games. The natural environment subverted the typical gender play patterns where boys dominate the open spaces with ball games and

physical play while the girls engage in social play on the margins of the playground.

Moore (1995), along with a number of other playground planners (for example, Rivkin 1995, Nabhan & Trimble 1994, Freeman 1995, Alexander, North & Hendren 1995, Titman 1994) are strong advocates of pre schools and primary schools having natural environments such as gardens, ponds, streams, bush areas, etc. and they point to examples of how such environments have transformed playgrounds into much more peaceful settings. Their approach to problems that arise in the playground is to look at ways to improve the environment so that it offers children more opportunities for creative play. This stands in stark contrast to the approach taken by many schools—to reduce playtime, impose restrictive rules and increase surveillance.

### **Conclusion**

There is a lot of pressure on schools today to make sure that the playground is a safe place for children, so much pressure in fact that some have changed the playground environment to the extent that it no longer provides the range of play experiences children want and need. The irony is that the playgrounds we now have may actually be contributing to the problem because children have so little to do that they pass the time by engaging in aggressive and disruptive behaviour.

Schools are adopting what Neven (2000) describes as a policy of 'defensive education' whereby, in order to deal with the problems arising in the playground, they adopt a punitive approach and simply reduce and restrict the opportunities for play. This can be illustrated by the fact that many schools have adopted the logic that the best way to deal with the problem is to reduce the amount of time children have at play. Limiting the time they have to play may help reduce the incidences of misbehaviour but it also means that children have fewer opportunities to engage in social interaction with their peers and to play actively in ways which potentially increase their physical health and their motor skill development. As Rivkin (1995) reminds us safety should not preclude growth-producing challenges. 'A playground with nothing to climb on certainly keeps children from long-distance falls, but on a bare playground children tend to challenge one another, sometimes with injuries resulting' (p.50). Large open spaces make for easy surveillance (which may in turn mean less bullying behaviour) but they don't make ideal play areas. Conversely, children love to play in places where they can hide and build imaginary worlds but such places are not easily supervised.

Tackling anti-social behaviour in the playground has to be done by adopting a number of strategies. The 'whole school approach', whereby

children are involved in the consultative process, has much to offer just as peer mediation has been shown to be an effective way of dealing with many playground disputes. Rules are necessary to protect children from unsafe play and supervision helps to ensure that they are adhered to.

The challenge is to find the balance between providing a playground that is safe and one which still provides children with opportunities for active and passive play which they want and need. There is encouraging evidence to show that schools that have set about making their playground a much more interesting and stimulating environment have not only managed to reduce bullying behaviour but they have observed the development of a sense of caring and sharing which makes the time, expense and effort worthwhile.

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