

## A Difficult Truth

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It is a difficult truth for many of us involved in children's playgrounds to accept, but it would seem that the playgrounds we design and build throughout the United Kingdom are often not as popular with the children we provide them for as we might like to believe. Various studies dating from the early 1970s to the current date show that by far the majority of public playgrounds that we build attract very low numbers of unaccompanied children on a regular basis. Possibly more worrying is the finding that the children that do visit our playgrounds tend not to stay for very long.

Yet public playgrounds are very expensive things; expensive to design, to build and also to maintain – especially where regular damage and vandalism is an issue. This begs an obvious question: why do these children not make more use of something that is provided principally for their benefit?

Involving children in the design of our playgrounds seems to make a difference, but unfortunately even when we adults do allow children to participate in this process many of the really important questions have already been answered. In addition, we have a habit of asking entirely the wrong questions. Instead of asking children, "What would you like to build in our new playground?" or, "How would you make this existing playground better", what we should be asking is, "When you are not on the playground, where are you spending your time and what are you doing when you are there?"

Pia Björklid says, "Many studies have shown that children play everywhere, regardless of whether the space has been designed for play or not. Yet when playgrounds are laid out, children are expected to play there and nowhere else." Location seems to be crucial to this. Research has shown that by far the most important factor in whether a playground will be well used or not is its location – a factor that is much more significant than either the size of the playground, the type and quantity of equipment, or the overall investment in terms of money involved. Put simply, a well designed playground that has a high play value score but which is built in the 'wrong place' will simply not receive much use, whereas a playground with a low play value score but built in the right place can be bursting at the seams.

The participation of children in the design of playgrounds is important for a variety of reasons and this is a practice that should be the norm. But the most important question of all – where should the playground be built in the first place – is one of those questions that is likely to have been decided long before children have become involved in the process. So, what is the 'right place'?

When children are asked about where they spend most of their free time there are a number of factors that seem to be significant in their choices. One is that children of all ages like 'green spaces' – not, it seems for any aesthetic attraction or concern for the environment, but more because these places are simply full of collectable materials that can be used in play: grasses, flowers, leaves, trees, berries, sticks, stones, logs, and particularly water are very popular play materials that are often well provided for in playgrounds in other countries. A typical playground in the United Kingdom however is devoid of these things, and trying to persuade adults to accept that such things should be designed into a playground often results in reactions of horror – these things are far too unhealthy and dangerous to be put near children. Anyone who has tried to persuade a playground provider to use sand as a surfacing material instead of rubber or bark knows exactly what I am talking about.

Another is that despite the fact that children will occasionally travel a reasonably long

distance to visit a popular place, those places which are visited the most often, again by children of all ages, are places that are close to home and, possibly more significantly, close to houses in general. On the outside, older children in particular might like to project an air of fearlessness, but the reality seems to be that they value being close to adults when there are playing. Unfortunately, this is often the complete reverse of what adults want and it is interesting to note that complaints by children of being chased away from a favourite play place by adults is more common than are complaints about traffic.

So, why do we continue to design and build playgrounds in the wrong places, knowing that children themselves are likely to avoid using them and will instead play in places that some adults will see as risky and unacceptable? I would suggest that there are two possible reasons for this: one is that we have simply got used to seeing playgrounds that look the way that they do. Another may be that in the United Kingdom we adults not only have a very negative attitude towards children and what they do but when it comes down to it we simply don't like children. How else can we explain the contradiction of adults who express fears for the safety of their children when playing outside, but yet are not prepared to accept a communal playground being built close to and in amongst their homes? This is what their children are asking for.

Public playgrounds are expensive things, and in terms of value for money we should ensure that the playgrounds we build are regularly visited and well used. But the original question we asked, why do children not make more use of our playgrounds, is in many ways the wrong question to ask. What we should be asking ourselves is why do we continue to design and build playgrounds in the United Kingdom that simply ignore the reality of how and where children play? Why do we build playgrounds that are placed far from children's homes and which have no natural materials to play with alongside the more accepted swings, roundabouts and climbing frames? There are other countries around the world, notably the Scandinavian countries that do much better at this than we do, so what is the problem here?

This seems to present a challenge to those who commission new playgrounds in the United Kingdom, and also to those who design and install them. Perhaps we should be creating playgrounds with fuzzy edges rather than rigidly designated fenced spaces that contain nothing but hard equipment. Perhaps we should be contributing to creating a more playful environment rather than simply building 'playgrounds'. And there's the real challenge – to re-define what we mean by the word 'playground' in the United Kingdom and persuade those adults that this is what our children deserve.

So, I present you with this challenge: as playground professionals are we prepared to accept this? Are we prepared to continue designing and building expensive playgrounds knowing that children will not use them? Or are we willing to break the mould, tackle this negative adult attitude and re-define the British playground?

Are you up for the challenge?

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