

The combination of fresh air and the right playground equipment can boost a child's development.

photo by Chris Frichie



More than 100 years later, Lee's philosophy embodies the modern approach to playground design.

According to the research, time spent on the playground boosts a child's brainpower; it is directly linked to emotional, social, cognitive and motor-skills development.

From the 1970's through the late 1980's, American playgrounds fell into disrepair. Then, in an attempt to address safety issues, changes started being made. Although much was done to improve playgrounds, not all of the changes were for the better. Jody Capehart, who serves on the faculty at Legacy Christian Academy in Frisco, is a child development expert, author and educator who has helped design playgrounds for the last 40 years. She says some of those changes made in the name of safety are now being reversed. "A lot of things that were good for children and their brain development disappeared from playgrounds for a while. But I'm seeing those things come back on playgrounds. They're in different forms, but they're coming back. We're getting the geometric climbers back, the merry-go-rounds, the swings; the spatial nets are coming in, the towers, pyramids, domes and space ships. The climbers and the spinners are coming out too. They're all great for brain development."

There are reports suggesting that children who fail to properly develop

The Power of Child's Play

By Kim Kurth

THE ON-SET of warmer temperatures and more hours of sunlight each day have kids all over Frisco asking their parents the same question: can I go to the park and play? Kids love playgrounds and the benefits reaped from that love affair prove there's a whole lot more to child's play than meets the eye. A mounting body of evidence shows playing is central, even critical, to childhood development. According to all the research, time spent on the playground boosts a child's brainpower; it is directly linked to emotional, social, cognitive and motor-skills development, as well as improving a child's overall health. Despite the

overwhelming benefits, there's growing concern over whether today's kids are getting enough free play time.

Belief in the power of play surfaced more than a hundred years ago in the mind of a wealthy lawyer who eventually became known as the father of the American playground movement. Joseph Lee's philosophy, that play could benefit children's development, was inspired by a pile of sand in what was probably the first "official" playground in the United States in a Boston housing project in the late 1800's. Lee said, "Play for adults is recreation, the renewal of life. For children it is growth, the gaining of life."



Jody Capehart extols the value of properly equipped playgrounds.

photo by Chris Fritchie

motor skills by the age of five will likely have a hard time developing these essential skills later on. The best place to gain those skills at an early age, according to child development experts, seems to be the playground. It gives toddlers the chance to explore new surroundings and learn new skills. The Children's Institute for Learning and Development (CHILD) calls from zero to two years old the 'rudimentary movement phase.' This is the time when children learn how to control movements like reaching, grasping and releasing. For this age group, CHILD recommends playgrounds have tactile panels to promote manipulation and coordination, bridges and ramps to promote loco motor skills; and low swings, slides and rockers to promote balance and coordination.

The "fundamental movement phase" occurs between the ages of two and seven: a time when children's movement skills progress rapidly. They can run, jump, hop, skip, throw, catch, balance themselves, etc. CHILD recommends bridges, ramps, swings, slides, rockers, spinners and balance activities. Motion

apparatuses are of particular importance during these years because they stimulate vestibular development. (The vestibule is part of the inner ear that helps regulate balance.)

Children seven years and older enter the 'specialized movement phase' and the transition from learning to lifelong utilization. During this phase kids enjoy testing their own strength. They are able to take on more advanced equipment like poles, nets and monkey bars (which teach fine motor control), in addition to the usual balance activities, slides and swings.

Along with helping children advance from one stage of development to the next, playgrounds also provide the space children need to run freely and expend their energy. An overwhelming amount of research points directly to outdoor free play as a necessary part of a child's physical and mental development. However, Ms. Capehart says kids today aren't devoting enough time to free play. "All the electronics these days curtail that natural kinesthetic – that need to move and create and do,

which is how I think children were made to be. Electronics (like computers, video games, iPods and cell phones) curtail that and encourage kids to sit, be sedentary and just use their hands. I think that limits so much of what children can be. It leads to child obesity and affects their brain development. Kids need physical movement; they need the creative expression that comes with free play," she continues. "The creative play of children is their job. It is how they learn. How they grow. How they create. How they become who they are to be."

Principal Marilee McMichael of Frisco's Sparks Elementary agrees. "I think it's so important for kids to get out and get those creative juices going. They need to get out and role-play. And, if you don't give them anything to play with, whether it's equipment or anything, they will find something to do on the playground."

Recess at Sparks, as well as the other elementary schools in the Frisco Independent School District, lasts between 20 and 30 minutes every day. During that time kids are free to choose what they want to do. Ms. McMichael, who's

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Playgrounds foster a child's creative and physical development.

photo by Chris Fritchie

been in education for 30 years, says she watches her students reap the benefits from what happens on the playground. "All our kids, no matter what grade, get out and play on the playground equipment during recess. They love it. There are really good social skills, leadership skills and problem-solving abilities that develop on the playground. When you go outside, you may see a different child outside than you see in the classroom. It's fun to watch. When we meet to talk about how kids are doing, we ask what's going on out on the playground. How are their social skills? That's good input for us to have when we look at what's going on with each child."

Added to the benefits listed by Mrs. McMichael is the positive impact playgrounds have on a child's overall health. One study found kids burn half of their recommended daily caloric expenditure during free-play sessions like recess. Frisco resident Cyndy Orleans says exercise is the number one reason she takes her two children to the park at least one hour just about every day. "There are so many good parks and playgrounds in Frisco, I just really want to take advantage of them," says Ms. Orleans.

It's not exercise, but rather a sense of adventure that draws Ms. Orleans' 5-year-old daughter to a playground. "She usually meets a new friend and then she's off creating some kind of game for the two of them to play together," said Ms. Orleans. The way children spontane-

ously create such games, experts say, illustrates how time spent on a playground stimulates social and emotional development. In order for 'the game' to function smoothly, vital communication must take place through discussion, agreements and the ability to resolve conflicts. A child who cannot handle his frustrations, or abide by the invented 'rules,' will soon find himself out of the game.

Child development experts suggest kids should have at least one hour a day to do nothing but run and play when they get home from school.

Unfortunately, Ms. Capehart says, "Too many kids are not even getting in the 'free play game.' What's wrong in the world today is that children have lost that natural state of childhood, which is to play – to be children – to create. That's just not the way things are anymore." She adds, "When we were children our parents simply opened the door and we went out to play. We built forts, rode bikes and created our own playgrounds. I think, now, we create environments for

children to replace what children had years ago. Playing on the playground at school during recess is not the same as going out and having free play. Kids need that at school, but they need a lot more free play once they get home."

Ms. Capehart and other child development experts suggest kids should have at least one hour a day to do nothing but run and play when they get home from school. During summer months three to four hours per day is the suggested minimum. So how do parents make that happen? Ms. Capehart has some advice, "One recommendation I make to parents is to move the time for playing video games or watching television to the weekends, or at least limit those activities to one hour a day. When you do that you will see your child becoming happier and healthier." But, she admits it won't be easy, "Yes, you will have to live through the first week of them whining or acting like they're going to die. But, every child I've worked with on this has come back and said 'I can't believe it. I'm actually happier!' Overall, this is an area where people are not comfortable, so I encourage them to just take a baby step when initially trying to make changes. Start with cutting back on television or video games by 15 or 20 minutes a day. And then, when you see the difference in your child, you will want to take the next step."

Kim Kurth is a writer in Frisco.