Chapter 8
The Places Where Children Play

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ABSTRACT
Most of us remember playgrounds that consisted of an asphalt or gravel lot with swings, teeter-totters, and monkey bars. When recess came, we went outdoors to play tag, Simon says, or kick ball. Just as educational reform has changed the classroom and the curricula, concern about the environment has changed school design and construction. This chapter examines the evolving changes in playing at school and on playgrounds. The chapter introduces the reader to general information about playgrounds and discusses the importance of green construction and sustainability. This includes a closer look at playgrounds from the perspectives of health, child development, and related moral issues. Children need to play in a safe and enjoyable environment.

INTRODUCTION
Playgrounds always have been a safety concern. States and school districts have written playground manuals and instituted policies and regulations to protect the users. Principals and staff routinely inspect the places where children play. Having safe playgrounds, however, is only one component of today’s schools. The concern for playgrounds has expanded from the needs for green, sustainable, reusable materials to the epidemic of childhood obesity.

The average American child no longer receives a sufficient amount of exercise, which has many negative ramifications that go beyond physical health risks. Research indicates that physical fitness is positively associated with academic achievement (Castelli, Hillman, Buck, & Erwin, 2007; Chomitz, Slining, McGowan, Mitchell, Dawson, & Hacker, 2008; Van Dusen, Kelder, Kohl, Ranjit, & Perry, 2011; Welk, Jackson, Morrow, Haskell, Meredith, & Cooper, 2010; Wittberg, Cottrell, Davis, & Northrup, 2010). It is well documented that an increase in physical activity improves physical fitness, which also improves cognitive functioning and academic achievement (Abadie & Brown, 2010; Archer & Kostrzewa, 2012; Edwards, Mauch, & Winkelman, 2011; Fedewa, & Ahn, 2011; Hillman, Pontifex, Raine, Castelli, Hall, & Kramer, 2009). The extent

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of the positive impact of physical activity reaches far beyond the benefits that can be directly measured by standardized tests, such as significant psychological and social benefits that also can improve students’ academic performance (Florin, Shults, & Stettler, 2010; Fortson, James-Burdumy, Blecker, & Beyler, 2013).

Although many of the factors that contribute to this sedentary lifestyle are outside the control of education, schools have traditionally been tasked with the responsibility of addressing many of the social issues that exist within our society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Because many students no longer receive a sufficient amount of physical activity at home, schools have been tasked with the moral obligation to provide this opportunity during the school day (Story, Kaphingst, & French, 2006). Societal demands, both implicit and explicit, for an increase of physical activity during the school day have steadily increased during an era of educational reform that also has experienced unprecedented increases in standardized testing and accountability (Ravitch, 2010). The accountability creates a demand for lengthening instructional time and competes with the demand for an increase in physical activity, stretching the ability of schools to accomplish both goals.

Educators at all levels, from superintendents to teachers, are influenced by the enormous political pressures created by high stakes testing, and thus often act in a manner that is incongruent with their own beliefs. As Martin and Kulinna (2005) articulated, “although teachers might strongly value physical activity and feel quite efficacious about their ability to teach physically active classes, feelings of distress or anxiety might undermine their efforts” (p. 267).

The physical health of students has commonly become an afterthought in an era when failure to achieve increasingly rigorous results for the math and reading portions of standardized tests can result in school closure. Unfortunately, the epidemic of obesity continues to spread like a virus among our nation’s youth and should be prioritized as equal to math or reading. It is imperative for educational leaders to recognize the connection between a healthy mind and a healthy body and, thus, the importance of healthy, safe playgrounds.

**HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The emphasis of physical activity in the educational system of the United States was well articulated by many of the influential leaders of our nation’s educational history. One of the prominent forefathers of American education, Thomas Jefferson, acknowledged, “exercise and recreation are as necessary as reading. I will rather say more necessary because health is worth more than learning” (The Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2012). During the common school era of the mid-nineteenth century, elementary schools were primarily concerned with instruction in the core subject areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic. The need for physical education became more apparent when successful results were experienced in Boston in 1852, as schools began to provide time for physical exercise (Elmakis, 2010). St. Louis and Cincinnati quickly copied this trend in 1855 and 1859 respectively, which became formalized for the first time in 1866 when California passed a state law that required physical education to be a part of the daily curriculum (Humphrey, 1990).

Although the early inclusion of physical education experienced some resistance from traditionalists, Dewey articulated the basic human need to integrate physical activity as a means of making education enjoyable for children. In the words of Dewey (2011), “Experience has shown that when children have a chance at physical activities which bring their natural impulses into play, going to school is a joy, management is less of a burden, and learning is easier” (p. 108). Dewey (2011) expanded on this concept, emphasizing the importance of recreation, not
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