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promoting the value of play

This article discusses the energy value of play and refers to a 1981 study on organised and not-organised play

The Age, Thursday 15 January 2004

**Losing weight may be child's play
January 15, 2004**

Children themselves may be part of the answer to obesity problems, writes Gwenda Davey.

It is to be hoped that the "fat camps" the Federal Government wants to incorporate into after-school programs to tackle what it calls "the twin crises of child-care availability and childhood obesity" will not simply offer more organised "phys-ed", and more control on children's activities.

Hard-pressed teachers and carers, faced with more demands on their time and skills, might be encouraged to know that children themselves have some of the answers to obesity and ill-health through their own traditional playground games.

Almost a generation ago, two Queensland university lecturers in physical education, P. L. Lindsay and D. Palmer, produced a report titled *Playground Game Characteristics of Brisbane Primary School Children (1981)*. The report, which has never been duplicated, is even more relevant today.

The researchers compared formal syllabus games with the traditional games children played in the playground. They observed nearly 5000 children from grades 1 to 4 playing their traditional games such as ball games, pursuit games, skipping games, hopscotch, elastics, marbles, knuckle-bones and jacks, hand-clapping games, counting-out rhymes and "miscellaneous games".

Overall, they found that many traditional playground games offered more for children's wellbeing than the syllabus games.

Australian adults can remember at least some of their childhood favourites, such as the skipping rhyme:

Teddy bear, teddy bear, touch the ground,

Teddy bear, teddy bear, turn around . . .

Most traditional playground games include considerable physical activity, such as running, jumping, skipping or hand-clapping, but the Brisbane researchers studied not only movement but social, inter-personal and environmental factors involved in game-playing.

Overall, there was a high statistical correlation between syllabus games and playground games, with both representing the basic physical needs of children. Some of the differences were, however, particularly striking such as the greater emphasis of the traditional games on cardiovascular endurance, strategy, pursuit, chanting, touching and rhythmical movement.

It is possible that in the generation since this research, the difference between syllabus and traditional games has narrowed. But the value of traditional games is still outstanding. In the interests of public health, schools and after-school programs should encourage children to play spontaneous games, and should provide free time and environments friendly to such games.

Playgrounds should contain a variety of play areas as recommended by Lindsay and Palmer - open areas, confined areas, walls for ball bouncing, grass-covered areas, artificial surfaces, dirt areas, adventure playgrounds, under-school areas, wet weather play areas and shaded areas. The playground needs to be an effective learning environment where a variety of play is possible.

Many schools are already implementing these recommendations, but traditional play itself is often under threat. In the United States, some schools have abolished recess time and other free time in the interests of discipline and academic achievement.

Fortunately, Australian schools have not gone to such extreme lengths, but fears of accidents, litigation and of "fighting" have led to some schools banning certain games such as "British bulldog" and marbles. (Interestingly, "red rover" and "British bulldog", noted as the most popular boys' games in Brisbane in the 1970s, were found to develop a sense of strategy and improvement in cardiovascular endurance.)

Fears are not confined to accidents. Anxiety about paedophilia has led in some places to concern about hand-clapping and skipping rhymes such as the old favourite:

I am a Girl Guide dressed in blue,

Here are the things that I can do.

Stand at ease, bend your knees;

Salute to the King, bow to the Queen,

Show your knickers to the football team.

The Mr and Mrs Grundys who are worried about the "poppy show" might like to consider that serious physical activity, including traditional play, needs appropriate clothing, and school uniforms need to consider these requirements. Primary school girls would do better in summer shorts than dresses or skirts. Skirts are not helpful for high-jumping, cart-wheels and somersaults.

Adults sometimes claim "children don't play like they used to". Wrong. The Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria has one of the world's largest collection of children's traditional play games and rhymes, and it is clear to the museum's curators and supporters that such play is alive and well. The Children's Museum in the Carlton Gardens is featuring a participatory program in traditional games.

Playground games are not only of value for children's physical wellbeing, but for intellectual and social development as well. Prodigious feats of memory are required to remember the numerous verses of hand-clapping games. Lindsay and Palmer also found that co-operation held sway over competition in playground games and that children were flexible in the rules to allow for participation by children of different ages and ability levels. The degree of organisation required to achieve these ends is considerable, and it is not for nothing that children's games have been described as "legislatures and courts of law".

Even the preliminary to many games, the counting-out ritual, involves careful organisation and arcane rhymes:

Eenie meenie macka racka

Ra ri dominacka,

Chickalacka lollapoppa,

Om pom push.

Out goes one! Out goes two!

Out goes another one

And that is you!

Perhaps it is time to bring back into adults' vocabulary a phrase that many seem afraid to use today when talking to children: go outside and play!

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