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STUDY FINDS PLAYGROUND WITH HAMMERS AND NAILS 'MORE THAN FOUR TIMES' SAFER THAN PLAYGROUND WITH SWINGS AND SLIDES

THE PARISH SCHOOL (HOUSTON, TX) - One child dismantles a broken vacuum cleaner, while another pounds nails into a chunk of wood. Beyond them, a group are splashing around with a hose and large tarp. Others are painting one another's nails or telling stories on the Fire Truck, a homemade float that has driven in the Art Car parade for 2 years. This is not a junkyard, but the after school program at The Parish School, a private school for children with communication delays and learning differences such as apraxia, autism spectrum disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Nonetheless, in an era of heightened fear of liability and injury Adventure Play at the Parish School recently received permission to for a homemade wood burning stove. "We think self-directed play is key," said Jill Wood. "Children are so capable, but we don't give them chances to practice - especially not these kids, who interact with the world in unique and brilliant ways because of their neurological differences. They need the freedom to know themselves when faced with a challenge and how it feels to reach the other side on their own."

In 2012 the American Association of Pediatrics confirmed the central importance of play in a child's healthy development. Studies conducted from within education, public health and psychology have repeatedly demonstrated that opportunities to play help students pay attention in class, reduce bullying, and improve physical, social and emotional well-being. Texas state law requires all students in full-day pre-K, kindergarten or grades 1-5 in an elementary school setting to participate in physical activity for a minimum of 30 minutes daily or 135 minutes weekly physical activity, although the nature of this physical activity is unspecified. In many schools, traditional recess is being replaced with PE class or other adult-structured activities. In January the Center for Disease Control raised concerns that the quality of recess provision may be inadequate. Afterschool may offer little reprieve, as children's extracurricular activities grow increasingly adult-directed with tutoring and formal sports leagues.

"Programs like this offer children an invaluable chance to be free in an environment where they can do anything they can imagine" said Morgan Leichter-Saxby of Pop-Up Adventure Play, and co-author of the study. "It's so easy for adults to make play opportunities more restrictive, to create new rules instead of trusting children to learn how to manage their own risks incrementally." Nonetheless, staff at the Parish School are often asked whether if the adventure playground is as dangerous as it appears. The same question is not asked of the school's conventional fixed equipment playground used at recess. Jill Wood, who founded Adventure Play at the Parish School in 2008, says that this offered a unique opportunity to compare the same children's actual rates of injury at both sites over five years.

“We really needed good research on actual risk of injury,” says Suzanna of Pop-Up Adventure Play. “These sites are growing in popularity across the country, and we know they’re safe when done right, but there’s not much quantitative evidence of that.” Adventure Play at Parish is one of the oldest sites of its kind in the USA, and highly respected in the field for its quality of provision. This study defined ‘injury’ as anything requiring off-site medical attention, such as X-rays or stitches. One hour’s play per child on the recess playground was found to carry a 0.00336% likelihood of injury. At the adventure playground the risk was 0.00078%, meaning that a child was found to be 4.3 times safer there than on the conventional equipment site. This is in spite of recess having a higher adult:child ratio than Adventure Play. The authors emphasize that injury rates at both sites were comparable in safety to golf and ping-pong, and significantly safer than most adult-led sports. Injuries also were found elsewhere in the school day, as children tripped and fell into the corners of desks, received a kickball to the face during PE class or trapped their fingers in the bathroom door.



"Comparing Injury Rates on a Fixed Equipment Playground and an Adventure Playground"

By Jill Wood and Morgan Leichter-Saxby

“It seems really striking that these places with hammers and nails and freedom are so much safer than the places we take for granted,” added Leichter-Saxby. “It’s because they’re staffed by Playworkers.” Playwork is a UK-based professional approach which grew out of the original, post-World War 2 adventure playground movement. “We distinguish between risks, which

children are choosing to engage with, and the hazards that they're not aware of. This helps staff maintain environments which are rich and changing, where children can make and do exactly what they need." Pop-Up Adventure Play has worked with Parish Adventure Play staff to deliver Playwork training since 2013.

For co-founder and Head of Adventure Play, Jill Wood, these findings were confirmation of what she expected, rather than a surprise. "Children get bored on equipment that underestimates them, and that's when things get dangerous. But if you give them a flexible environment, where they can make what they need and change it, amazing things happen."

The full findings of the study are now public, and will be discussed in depth at next year's Playwork Campference. The first Playwork Campference was held in Santa Clarita, California in 2017 and brought together diverse professionals and community organizers from 6 countries. The 2019 event will be hosted on the Parish School Adventure Playground, in partnership with Pop-Up Adventure Play. Enquiries for presentations, financial aid and sponsorship opportunities can be directed to the staff members below.

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