

### 3. Adventure playgrounds

by

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For this session I would ask you to forget Stockholm, where the children live amidst great beauty, space, clean air and vast stretches of water, and remember instead the large, dirty, overcrowded cities of the world. Imagine yourself a child, doomed to spend your childhood and the exacting years of adolescence, growing up with little beauty, less space, and possibly years of listless boredom.

The problem of the large industrial towns is our first real challenge. The second challenge, which we have not yet met, is how to provide an engrossing environment for young people between the ages of twelve and eighteen years. It is certain they do not all want organized games all the time and yet the emphasis and money continues to be placed almost exclusively on sport.

I start from the assumption that children of all ages, and adults too, need an infinite variety of different kinds of play activity. Some of them like organized games, others prefer fixed equipment like slides, swings and climbing apparatus; others prefer to dig and camp and cook; others - and this is often forgotten - enjoy the opportunity to render a service to their fellow-men. One day they will like one type of occupation and one day another, and so we must be prepared to provide many different kinds of opportunity.

This great diversity of occupation is not, to my mind, sufficiently well recognised, and it is certainly not adequately catered for. In the congested towns of the so-called developed countries, children and young people are often at a total loss to find safe and interesting places to work and play. Many young children live cooped up in flats at an age when, by their birthright, they should have space to run, to climb, to use their hands, to experiment and be adventurous, and to make a noise without driving themselves, their parents and their neighbours to distraction. Space is, perhaps, the most precious commodity most often denied young people today.

In our built-up urban towns and even in new housing estates, we are in great danger, in our passion for tidiness and order, of destroying all the places where children can play in natural and informal surroundings. The streams are hidden in the sewers, the

hills and mounds are levelled out, the good earth is buried under concrete, and the trees are certainly not for climbing. Yet the primitive, healthy instincts of children remain, and we should not be surprised the children feel excluded and cheated. Many of the more adventurous children and adolescents become arrogant and unruly because of their deep unhappiness. In seeking for an outlet for these primary expressions of growth, they turn to wanton destruction and excessive rowdiness, or worst of all, perhaps, they will relapse into a bored street corner mentality. Who is to blame? The children or the adults?

Everyone here will be familiar with that barren type of playground where the ruthless bull-dozer has been hard at work levelling out all the exciting mounds and dells, where the good earth is hidden by asphalt, and the only amusement is mechanical equipment fixed in unalterable form. Because this equipment is so potentially dangerous, the barren yard must be enclosed by high wire-mesh fencing to exclude the adventurous, until the sense of imprisonment and doom is complete. This barbaric type of playground, so devoid of beauty, adventure, gaiety and charm, is, unfortunately, to be seen in almost every country in the world. A recent survey in Great Britain shows that four out of every five playgrounds are of this type. They are very costly to make and their only justification seems to be that they are administratively easy to maintain. It has been said that children prefer this type of playground. But how do we know, for they have no choice? Also, they can never hope to compete, as places of fun and adventure, with the streets, the half-built houses, and the rubble and rubbish of the vacant lots.

In order to give administrators a mental shock, and because of our belief that every experiment should be tried, we went to the other extreme with the Adventure Playground. These have been described as an antidote to the excessive orderliness with which we are in danger of overwhelming our children in modern society. It is an attempt to meet the great need that all children have, to experiment with fire, water and earth, and to give them free access to sturdy tools and raw materials to use in any way they wish in a place they can really call their own.

In speaking of Adventure Playgrounds, I wish to pay the highest tribute to the pioneer work done at the Waste Material Playground at Emdrup, Copenhagen, from which so many of us have drawn our inspiration.

The Adventure Playgrounds in Great Britain are all very different from each other. They are created by the children themselves to meet their own desires, but in all of them the children are free to do many of the things they are mostly forbidden by society to do elsewhere. So far, we have been able to start them only on sites



awaiting re-building. All but one are organized and financed by associations of parents and other interested people. The land is rented for a small sum from the local authority, but there is no security of tenure. An Adventure Playground is never likely to be an object of beauty in the conventional sense, since most of it is in the process of construction or demolition most of the time.

The salary of the leader is often paid, during the first year, by a grant from a voluntary organization, the National Playing Fields Association. After this, if the playground is a success, the local authority will eventually meet the cost of the salary. The rest of the money must be found by an association. It is our experience that Adventure Playgrounds will succeed only if they are open all the year round, winter and summer, so that there can be an intimate continuity of play, work and friendship. Since the sun does not always shine, however, it is essential to have a hut large enough to absorb large groups of children, and for toilets, storage space and a small room for the leader. The chief problem is to find sufficient raw materials such as timber, bricks, cement, tools, nails and so on. Because these materials are used so extensively by so many children, they disappear like ice on a stove; but without them, the playground may fail.

In the Lollard Adventure Playground, in the heart of London, you will see children of all ages from two to twenty years, engrossingly occupied with their own pursuits. It is open the whole year round, winter and summer. It is a comprehensive playground on a site of just over an acre, with a wired-in area for ball games, two soccer teams, netball and endless cricket. This area is never closed. A rough grass area for camping is a source of perpetual interest. Half the rest of the area is devoted to digging, building, bonfires, and fantasy play of rich variety. One section is reserved for the under-eights with a fine sand pit built by the older children, moveable blocks, tools and water play. During the winter, the large hut, 64-feet long, is used for acting, dancing, modelling, painting and the production of a printed magazine, written, produced, financed and published by the children. There is also a library of 300 books. Rarely less than 100 children visit the playground every day and the number of individual children that regularly frequent the playground is over 500. Some fifty boys between the ages of 16 and 20 years, wanting a realistic job to do in their leisure time, have built themselves a stout workshop (30 feet by 15 feet) on the playground, and have equipped it with tools and benches. Knowing that many old-age pensioners live lonely and isolated lives, they decided to seek them out and offer their help to paper and paint their rooms, mend old furniture and chairs, and to bring some measure of comfort into their lives. These tasks have been highly successful, and the boys themselves voluntarily finance the work out of their own earnings. This is but one example of the infinite variety of occupations that can be

undertaken in an Adventure Playground.

Because a playground of this kind has so many potentially dangerous tools, such as pick-axes, shovels, hammers and saws, and because the activity is so rich and varied, and the age range so wide, there must be a grown-up in charge. I am not speaking of a park-keeper, a playground attendant, or the caretaker in a block of flats; they are there to see that the rules are obeyed. This older companion in an Adventure Playground is perhaps its most valuable feature. Many children today have parents who go out to work for the whole day, their classes in school are mostly overcrowded and there are all too few adults who have the time and patience to be their friend and counsellor. The leader is especially appreciated by those children who find it difficult to fit in easily with their social group, and they deeply enjoy the companionship of an adult who can be generous with his time. It is not enough for a leader to be "good with children". He should be able to guide young people towards their own maturity with discoveries and adventure, all the way.

When thinking of these things, I would ask you to remember that in Great Britain it costs as much as £12 a week to keep a wayward child in an Approved School. If, by making our playgrounds rich and exciting in their opportunities, we can thereby save ONE child a year from delinquency, we have found the salary of the leader. The cost to the community of street accidents is formidable, and again we need to save only ONE child a year from a tragic accident, and the salary of the leader has been met.

I believe there is now a great awareness that the playgrounds we have so laboriously and so expensively made in the past, and continue to make today, are not what children really want. We have not yet met the challenge of the children, but I hope that before this Seminar is ended, we shall be inspired to consider every experiment that is practical and imaginative.