

How Schoolyards Influence Behaviour

What common sense and research tell us.

-by Edward Cheskey

(The following is a 3-paragraph excerpt from a longer article in Green Teacher magazine. It is included here with permission.)

When I think back to my childhood, I realize how fortunate I was to have a tree to climb in my backyard and a nearby creek and woodland to explore. Later, I mourned the loss of the great willow--a threat to our plumbing, I was told--and of the creek--much safer as a fenced, open concrete sewer, we were told. I was ten when the tree was chopped down and thirteen when the creek was channelized; yet I clearly recall the joyous comfort of sitting in my tree eating bread and butter after school, and the mystery and excitement that lured me to the creek and its environs. These were familiar places to forage and play. I knew them well. I have little doubt that these experiences contributed to my grief when they were destroyed, and to the value I place on nature as an adult.

As North America becomes increasingly a continent of city dwellers, forays into natural areas are rarities for most children. One piece of land that children do know well, though, is their schoolyard. They are familiar with its physical structure, its rules and its patterns of use. Considering how much unstructured time children spend in schoolyards, this is not surprising. By my rough calculations, many elementary students spend perhaps 15 to 30 minutes a day in the schoolyard prior to school commencing, 30 minutes for recesses and 30 to 45 minutes over the lunch period. This amounts to about one and one half hours per day, or approximately 20 to 25 percent of the total time at school. By the end of sixth grade, students have spent as many as 1800 hours or 257 school days just in their schoolyard!

For most children this is social time taken up by playing and establishing relationships, developing social and physical skills and values. For introverted children, such time can be harrowing. Most schoolyards offer no respite or solace from chaotic throngs of children, schoolyard bullies and noise. The conventional perspective of school designers and administrators is that the land around the school be designed and managed for surveillance of students, ease of maintenance and team sports. Since avoiding litigation is a primary criteria in schoolyard design, the only physical features in many of them are play equipment, or "creatives" as they have come to be known. These horrendously expensive structures can accommodate only perhaps 20 children at one time. The emphasis on surveillance usually means placing them in large open spaces where there is neither shade nor shelter.

There is mounting evidence that the typical schoolyard design, emphasizing surveillance and team sports, exacerbates discipline problems, promotes aggressive behaviour and renders these places, in which children pass a considerable amount of time growing up, miserable and inadequate.

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