

Children's Play and Physical Activity in Daycare

Submitted By Karen Brander

The most recent initiative in the daycare community has been a focus on the importance of physical activity for young children. As we know, children are naturally active. Yet, there is an increasing concern that obesity in young children is increasing. Many factors have been named: more screen time; unsafe neighbourhoods; the shift of active play from neighbourhoods and parks to structured activities such as swimming lessons, dance lessons and organized sports. Another factor that has been identified is advertising of food products directed at young children.

We all have memories from childhood of playing outside with our friends: pick up road hockey, kick the tin can, tag, hide and seek, climbing trees, riding bikes, swimming in lakes and rivers, tobogganing. When we were children we played with a sense of freedom and intensity; children today play in the same way. I noticed this when I wrote the following observation.

It was a snowy wintry March morning when I took some of our daycare children out into the play yard. As most of the children were either in their music lesson or waiting their turn for music, I went outside with only a few children. The children who came out with me were four three year old girls and a four year old boy (Ryland).

Ryland asked for the hockey sticks and tried to organize the girls into playing hockey with him. At first they cooperated: soon three of the girls left to snowboard and only Ryland and Melanie were left with the hockey sticks.

Ryland talked about a hockey player who plays for Hamilton. He tried to convince Melanie to be the goalie, although sometimes he would decide to be the goalie. During his play with Melanie he sometimes was the Hamilton hockey player.

When Jason came outside, he was happy to join Ryland. Melanie left for snowboarding. Jason was smiling and playing with Ryland, who continued to play his fantasy hockey game while playing with Jason.

Nathan and Carson came outside and joined the hockey team. The pace picked up. Even though there was only one goalpost, Carson and Ryland kept a sort of fluid score. Jason was the goalie but would join in the pursuit of the puck when he felt like it. Carson was playing on the NHL Toronto team while he played with his friends.

Oddly, no one got hurt. It was very intense. They moved continuously. Ryland and Carson talked the whole time. Nathan and Jason were really listening to them and just as engaged in the play.

Alice and Amelia were walking on the jagged ice of what was left of the ice castle. At intervals they would jump off together (balancing on uneven surface, jumping, climbing).

Katie, Cora and Sienna snowboarded standing up, on their stomachs, etc. When they felt like it they would use the climber and the slide, go back to snowboarding, use the swings-swinging on their stomachs, back to snowboarding.

The children were active the whole time. They mixed fantasy play with active physical play. They used the general space of the play yard well. Every area of the yard was used by someone. The other skill they demonstrated was organizing themselves and including at least another child.

The idea of bringing the school program outside has been developed further in other countries. YouTube has a video *Outdoor Preschool-Norway* www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fp4Nny-rIw. In this video and also in the videos on Forest Schools examples are shown of how children are taught how to use real tools such as saws and knives to do tasks such as cutting branches from trees and building a small boat. Norway has an added challenge in that some winter days are so dark due to their northern location that the

children wear headlights so that they can see and be seen. It would be interesting in Saskatchewan to find ways to be outside for at least part of the day all winter.

Children who are fit and hardy from spending much of their time outside will be ready to learn other physical skills. Also, children who are used to being outside are more likely to crave physical activity when they are inside. Eric Malmberg's *Kidnastics: a Child-Centered Approach to Teaching Gymnastics* offers a structured program in which all children will be successful and challenged. This program is so open that teachers will be able to adapt it to their own comfort level. Malmberg designs progressive challenges to develop skills in rolling, jumping, balancing, vaulting, hanging and climbing. He also has a good description of the fun activity of 'walking like animals: seal walks, bear walks, lame-dog hops, bunny hops and donkey kicks. Some of these gymnastic activities can be adapted to the space available.

My professional experience has all been in daycare centers. Although schools have a different purpose and mandate than daycares, teachers and daycare workers can work together to provide the best experiences to our children.

References

Malmberg, Eric. (2003) *A Child-Centered Approach to Teaching Gymnastics*. Human Kinetics. www.HumanKinetics.com. E-mail: orders@hkcanada.com