

A Renaissance in Playgrounds?

by EDITH LEWIS

"A sort of renaissance in playgrounds." This was the expression used by the executive officer of the Swedish Council of Children's Play when I visited her in Stockholm a few weeks ago. "A child's greatest need in the play area is to be able to enjoy the natural things," she said, "the woods, the meadows and the sea shore."

How far away it all seemed from the tubular steel monkey bars, the concrete paths and the drain pipes which ornament so many of our playgrounds here in Australia.

As we talked she showed me slides of the latest play areas. She explained that when land was purchased for playgrounds, existing farm buildings were left on the site and so many playgrounds quite close to Stockholm have a real barn or cow shed. If trees are not already there, they are planted before the building is started. Quick growing trees are placed close together so that by the time the rest of the area is ready there is a little wood for the children. Different types of grass are planted and allowed to grow without mowing, so that different kinds of seeds and pods can be discovered.

Snails, caterpillars and ants are kept and cared for. Wild birds are encouraged. Fruit trees are planted so that children can recognise different fruits and learn how they grow. Herbs and vegetables are grown and a compost heap teaches children the importance of garden refuse.

Hoses and water play are very popular. Garden tools are plentiful and on a hot day a paddling pool can be made very quickly. A few willing diggers, a large sheet of plastic and a hose and there is a makeshift pool which can be put away after use. Sensibly the children wear no clothes for this operation which is messy to say the least. A noisy showering all round afterwards ensures that the children go home reasonably clean.

A large fireplace is essential and here the children learn to light fires under supervision and when potatoes are ready, these can be cooked.

The ground surface in play areas is considered most important and thick sand is universally used. Old rubber tyres are used under some equipment, slides are all on mounds and swings have fences around them. In the gentle, falling snow I watched children in parkas and gloves digging holes and climbing and playing outside.

Supervision of play areas is the key to success of all this and I saw supervised playgrounds everywhere in Sweden and Denmark. Great use is made of these areas — preschoolers in the morning, rostered primary school children in the afternoon, bigger children later on. Parents may also visit at the weekends.

Latch key children (or paper bag children as they call them) are encouraged to come to these playgrounds. (Parents leave afternoon tea or even dinner in a paper bag on the doorstep for the children returning from school.)

A grant was received last year for a survey to be done on some of the older type playgrounds to see which type of equipment is best being used and which is the most popular. The psychologist who carried out this survey

explained how surprised she was to find that some quite expensive equipment was not used at all or perhaps tried once only.

Later, I visited an older type playground and met the play leader in charge. Inside their building ping pong was in progress, busy little carpenters were sawing, children were painting and playing with large wooden blocks. The moulded, plastic equipment they used was most attractive.

There are now 157 supervised playgrounds in Sweden whereas in 1937 there were only nine. These playgrounds are financed by the Government and are used by five million children each year. Accidents are not a problem because of the supervision but it was admitted that playgrounds in Sweden are pretty messy. After all — who ever expects children to be clean while they play?

If playgrounds are messy in Sweden they are even more messy in Denmark. At Tinghberg Housing Estate in Copenhagen where 10,000 people are housed in an inner suburban area, the playground had a farm. Seventy rabbits in separate straw-lined hutches were there for children to have as pets. Some had collars and the children could take them for walks on leads. There were also 15 tame, brown goats and several lambs, horses, donkeys, ducks, hens, peacocks, turkeys and a pig. They were all beautifully cared for by two full-time outside men.

Inside the building on the farm were children baking cakes, there were pottery classes, a carpentry room and a billiard table. Boys of 17 were learning to service their bikes and go-karts. A little shop run by bigger children sold coffee, fruit and sweets. Younger children were listening to a story.

As well as animals, outside there was a huge play area where children build their own houses. Tools and nails and adult help were available.

There are 20 on the staff at Tinghberg and it is open from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. every day.

There is a holiday camp, a riding school and two boats away from the playground, which are used by the children in school holidays, etc.

The whole program is run with a government grant which provides 40% of the costs. Another 40% is met by the community and 20% by the occupants of the housing estate who pay a very small amount towards the upkeep of the playground. A single parent family with several children would not need to pay anything.

In England, there are apparently quite a number of accidents in the old-fashioned unsupervised play areas in parks — e.g., on the fixed swings, slides and monkey bars, etc. However, existing playground standards are being revised and redrafted. Maintenance is considered very important and regular inspection reports are recorded in a book.



Mrs. Edith Lewis is Manager, Home Safety of the National Safety Council of Australia, Victorian Division. She recently returned from a study tour of Europe which included children's playgrounds.

The large adventure playgrounds of which there are 50 in London itself and 200 in surrounding areas, are supervised by trained staff and few injuries occur. They are surrounded by an eight-foot fence and are locked at night. But here again maximum use is made of these and school rosters enable children of different age groups to use the playgrounds during school hours. They are considered useful for the development of the children educationally and socially and for fostering a community spirit as well as for recreation and fun.

Built originally for children from underprivileged areas, it was discovered that middle class and rural children also needed the playgrounds where they would have the attention of play leaders and somewhere to climb or to light fires. Again, supervision is considered essential and the surface of the play area and the maintenance of equipment come next in importance. The huge climbing areas and ropes to swing on seem very popular in England. The enormous number of children who use the playgrounds regularly seems proof of their effectiveness.

Handicapped children are not forgotten. I visited the famous Chelsea Playground for handicapped children in London where a similar exciting and adventurous program exists.

Safety is considered most important. In spite of the attractiveness of apparent danger in an adventure playground, the play leaders I met stressed the fact that children need to have confidence in the safety and trustworthiness of the equipment as well as in the play leaders themselves. A leader needs the skill to be able to judge a situation and know when there is real danger as opposed to exciting adventurous activity. Great care is given to the site, the structures, the wood used, the surface, the ropes and the tools.

In Australia in general, we do not have the same problem of overcrowding of inner areas or the lack of space to play. But children growing up in high rise flats and the built up areas of our cities do require areas which contain the real things of nature. Beautiful parks and gardens where children may not play or touch anything do not fulfill this need.

It is up to us, the adults who did have real places to play and develop, to encourage this renaissance so that generations to come will know and love the simple wonders of this world.