

Plan It Quality,
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Notes from the Workshops

“Way More than 10 Ways to Improve Your Outdoor Play Space”

Presented By

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- Not only is Peter Ashmore an ECE and administrator at the child care centre where he works, he also sits on the Canadian Standards Association technical committee (these are the folks who decide what equipment is “safe” and “appropriate” for children – and in many child care communities, only equipment approved by the CSA can be used in child care programs). He joined the committee in order to advocate on behalf of developmentally appropriate practices for children using play equipment; and also to ensure that less emphasis is placed on commercial play equipment by the CSA.
- When you are planning a play space for children, Peter recommends an exercise that involves thinking about a particular play space that was meaningful to you in your childhood. Think about: 1) What kind of space was it? 2) What was the quality or nature of the space that made it most meaningful to you? 3) Who was with you in this play space? He uses this exercise to illustrate that what we enjoyed as children and, often, what we plan for children in child care programs can be very different. Many people remember important play spaces where there was “freedom,” limited supervision, lots of moveable materials, even a bit of risk (i.e., rickety tree house; water-play in a creek, rope swings in a barn are just a few of my memories – oh the horrors!)
- Jumping from Jim Greenman’s list of 25 Ways to Improve Your Outdoor Space <http://www.brighthorizons.com/site/pages/ImprovingIndoor-OutdoorSpaceRR.pdf>, Peter has added a multitude of suggestions for outdoor space – many with a unique Canadian twist:
 1. Add hooks for hanging coats, hats, and dramatic play material to a fence (we do this indoors for organization, why not outdoors?)
 2. Incorporate hoses into outdoor play (make sure there is an on/off switch at the business end of the hose)
 3. Have some small ladders that can function as ladders -obviously, and also as bridges, as walls, anything, really. The ladders need to be small enough for one child to carry alone.
 4. Build little wooden bridges that can be moved around – arches really, that provide interest in tricycle lane; or on their side for a “puppet theatre in the round”
 5. Create more shade – summers (and winters) can be long in Canada

6. Have bug viewers available outside (and pocket guides to native bugs and birds, too)
 7. Build a big plexi-glass painting easel; one that can be sprayed off at the end of the day (with the hose you've installed)! A slide Peter showed had a river bed of stones for the "run off" of the easel water – yet another play space!
 8. If you can't make your sand area bigger (which almost everyone can!); then make it deeper!!
 9. Provide shelving and storage at the sand area. Again, organized materials are a consideration inside, why not outside?
 10. Create a "sand kitchen" with a stove and lots of pots and spoons.
 11. Borrow from Reggio Emilia and create a "piazza" for gathering together – for outdoor meeting time, circle time, or informal gathering. Gelato anyone?
 12. If your sand area is being threatened by roving cats, or the elements (sun, snow, etc), build a big sand gazebo with big shutters that can be opened or closed as needed.
 13. Put a short, big, round table in your sandbox – see what happens.
 14. If you have a small playground space, and really want a big, immobile play structure, put the play structure in the corner of the playground (with the appropriate safety elements!).
 15. Provide places for children to hide.
 16. Use plants in the playground, and plant them in places that invite children into *the plant*.
 17. Have lots of places for children (and adults!) to sit.
 18. Don't abandon outdoor play space in winter – keep sand dry, and it'll work all year 'round.
 19. Make a connection between indoor and outdoor space. For example a covered deck or a porch can be a very fine addition to any child care building (we talked about the possibilities that a porch can bring to children in Nunavut (snow!), on the north coast of BC (rain), and in southern Ontario (all of the above).
 20. Have grass in your playground. Research has shown that children almost universally say that they want grass in their playground. If you only have a small patch of it – do your best to protect it.
 21. Don't abandon activities that might be perceived as risky. Case in point: Ropes in the playground! Some workshop attendees shuddered of course; but many were enthused by the idea. Marc Battle, an ECE from Winnipeg told us that he uses ropes with the children in his program all the time. He convinced the licensors that ropes are essential to the children's learning and are part of the emergent curriculum that they use at his centre (all carefully documented as is consistent with emergent programming). He also told us that the children established their own rules about using ropes – and the most important one is that they can ONLY be used while being closely supervised. Also, the ropes are put away every night. Swinging idea, huh?
- Some books Peter recommended include:
 - Tumbling Over the Edge: A Rant for Children's Play by Beverly Bos & Jenny Chapman.
"Walking is slower, And not much fun, Sensible children, Always run."
 - Playgrounds that Work by Pauline Berry. The book "*makes useful suggestions for the development of playgrounds based on children's playground behavior, their interests and developmental needs.*"
 - A Sense of Wonder, by Rachel Carson