



Providing Guidance on the Playground

How much is too much?

Three teachers are supervising children on the playgrounds of their preschool programs. Mr. Moran joins a group of four-year-olds in a chasing game. One child is playing the part of the “scary monster,” running after his delighted peers while making growling noises. Mr. Moran begins to run away from the monster, as well, and leads the children up and over a hill, under a climber, around a tree, then under a play bridge. “This will be our cave, where monsters don’t go,” he suggests. Once children are interacting with each other and moving more vigorously and in new and interesting ways, he withdraws from the play to allow children to continue chasing on their own. Ms. Sanchez has organized a game with a group of children who have been relatively inactive on her playground. She sings a song and children dance; when she stops singing, children must freeze. She sings faster, then slower, louder, then quieter, trying to “trick” the children into moving after the singing has ended. She continues with this game for nearly the full outdoor play period. Ms. Gupta moves around the playground, carefully observing children’s play. Occasionally she jots notes about the interesting social and physical behaviors of individual children she sees. She enters play rarely and very briefly, only to settle a dispute or help a child join the play of peers. Mainly, she stays out of their

Most teachers recognize that some adult involvement with children on the playground is important. Although teachers might take a moment to relax during outdoor play to chat with a colleague, they are aware that their responsibility on the playground is no different than it is in the classroom: to actively and continuously facilitate children’s learning and development. What is less clear is the precise role of a teacher during outdoor play. Should the teacher briefly play along with children, as Mr. Moran is doing? Should longer, more



organized, teacher-guided games and activities be initiated, as Ms. Sanchez has planned? Is outdoor play time a period for observing and recording development, like Ms. Gupta has chosen to do? Research on children's play suggests that teachers should do a little of all three things.

When children cannot play at all or are limited in their play by challenging conditions (such as a toy that is too complex or a peer who is too aggressive), a fairly direct method of guidance may be most appropriate. An example is Ms. Sanchez's decision to engage a group of quieter children in an organized game to get them moving and interacting. If children are already playing independently and in developmentally useful and meaningful ways, adult involvement may not be needed or helpful. Simply observing, as Ms. Gupta is doing, might be most beneficial. Mr. Moran demonstrates a third role that adults can play: enhancing play and learning when children can play independently with just a little guidance. Mr. Moran models a new element to a chasing game to create new running challenges, but quickly withdraws once children are playing in a more advanced way on their own. The amount of support an adult gives should be related to what the child needs at a given moment. There needs to be a good match between how a child is playing and how and whether an adult intervenes.

“I know a game we can play!”

Guiding children directly

Just sending children out onto a playground does not mean that they will play in useful ways. Some children with disabilities can't play at all, or they may play in ways that are not supportive of development. Without fairly direct assistance from an adult, their outdoor play would be very limited. Some children who live in poverty or face family stressors, such as multiple foster care placements, may also need more support in order to play. All children periodically need some direct guidance to get them moving, interacting socially, and learning new skills. Studies have shown that a large percentage of children on playgrounds do not engage in enough vigorous or sustained activity to ensure good health and to prevent problems such as obesity. So, it is sometimes the case that teachers need to take a direct approach in guiding motor play.

The most common way that teachers offer direct guidance is by initiating spontaneous and planned motor games and exercises:

- A teacher plans an activity in which children walk round and round on several tires that are placed on the playground. As they walk, the teacher announces new ways of moving—shuffling sideways, walking backwards—each more challenging than the last.
- A teacher provides a large wooden target with holes of different sizes and bean bags to toss through them. A hula hoop is placed on the ground a short ways away, in which children must stand to throw. The teacher periodically moves the hoop farther and farther away from the target. “Can you throw the bean bags through the holes if you stand way back here?” the teacher challenges.
- A teacher introduces the game “Stop and Go” with a simple rule: children run as fast as they can when the teacher says, “Go,” and freeze when “Stop” is announced.

“Which ball can you kick the farthest?”

Providing indirect guidance

Many times children are playing independently, but could use a brief nudge to get them moving, interacting, or learning a new skill. In this case, the most helpful adult strategy on the playground would be indirect guidance. This might include asking a question, posing a challenge, or suggesting a new direction in play to encourage a new motor skill. It could involve efforts to encourage more language, social interaction, or make believe. Teachers working with children with disabilities often provide indirect guidance by adapting or providing new materials or equipment.

Research has shown that such an indirect approach, if it is what children need at the moment, is most effective in promoting on-going play and learning. This is a particularly tricky form of interaction to implement, because there is a risk that the adult will interfere with children’s play in progress. The teacher must carefully observe what children are doing and decide on an intervention that supports, rather than interrupts, play. An important step in indirect guidance is withdrawing soon after enriching play, so children can play independently.



Examples of indirect playground interactions:

- Children are kicking balls of a variety of different sizes. A teacher moves over and asks, “Which ball can you kick the farthest?” Children pause to study all the balls, then begin kicking each and discussing how to figure out which goes the farthest. After children are fully engaged, the teacher withdraws from the area.
- Children are rolling down a small hill on the playground. As they appear to grow weary of this game, a teacher asks, “Rolling down is fun, but can you roll up the hill?” “Up?” one child says, excited. “Let me try it.” The children all struggle to roll up the hill; the teacher watches awhile, then moves away.
- Children are pedaling a variety of riding toys around a path on the playground. Several other children stand watching and waiting to ride. A teacher says to the children who are standing, “Do you think we can run and keep up with Jamal on the big wheel?” The teacher and children begin to jog beside Jamal and he playfully starts pedaling faster. After they race the full distance around the playground, the teacher says, “Can we keep up with Sara?” As the children start taking turns riding and running, the teacher stops and watches.

“No thanks. We’re not playing with you right now.”

Letting children play on their own

Many times the best way to support children’s outdoor play is to carefully set up the environment to support active play, but then stay out of children’s way and let them choose their own activities. Sometimes children remind us of this. A teacher recently tried to introduce a game to children running on the play ground. “No thanks,” a child said politely. “We’re not playing with you right now.” The National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommends that half of all outdoor activity for young children be unstructured and self-directed. Play is valuable, in part, because it allows children to make choices and regulate their own behavior. When children are engaged in vigorous, social, and meaningful play, adults should not interfere. This does not mean teachers should sit with colleagues and chat during outdoor time. Children’s high quality, self-directed play offers a window to development, an ideal context for observing and assessing physical, social, and intellectual development.

What to watch for in motor play:

- Do children demonstrate locomotor skills (running, skipping, etc.) and object control skills (throwing, catching, etc.) that are typical for their age?
- Do children engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity when they are on the playground? Or do they sit or stand still for much of the time?
- Do children show social skills in play, such as cooperation, conflict resolution, or the ability to make contact with peers and enter play groups?
- Do children show the signs of being motivated to learn new skills, such as positive affect, expressions of pride, and persistence at challenging motor tasks?
- Do children show an ability to think and talk about their physical activities? Do they show evidence of planning their play and motor activities?

There is growing evidence that what is needed for effective interactions with children on the playground is what is needed for so many aspects of good teaching: ensuring that the support provided matches the needs of individual children. By carefully observing children to determine what kind of support is needed at any given moment, teachers can provide just the right type of intervention to stimulate children to engage in regular, active play.

Additional Resources

For more information about supporting children’s physical play, including videos with ideas you can try in your own classroom, visit www.easternct.edu/cece.

For **references** for this tip sheet, visit: www.easternct.edu/center-for-early-childhood-education/about-us/publications.html.

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