
What is it about the monkey bars?

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While this research was done in 2007 it is still very relevant to today's children illustrating how important it is to get the children outside using playground equipment.

Abstract

Background

The outdoors has long been seen as a significant and important aspect of children's lives within New Zealand. Early childhood educators have historically recognised the benefits of being outside and physically active. Today, many more experts and researchers from a variety of fields posit strong arguments that play in outdoor settings is very different from play that occurs indoors, and has a unique role in the holistic (intellectual, social, emotional, physical and spiritual) development of children. The context of this study is one where the significance of the outdoor environment in early childhood settings for young children's (aged between two and five) holistic development has rarely been investigated.

Methods

This semi participatory case study took place over 14 weeks and explored: 14 young children's views on their outdoor experiences in an early childhood education setting; parents' and teachers' views on the value and role of the outdoors in young children's lives; and participants' views on the role of the teacher in the outdoor environment.

The outdoor setting contained a variety of structures and areas including an aviary, a sandpit, wilderness areas, a vegetable garden, low moveable equipment and a water feature. The moveable equipment included various sized boxes, bridges, planks, slide, tunnels, attachable climbing walls and monkey bars. This equipment provides the opportunity to develop brachiation skills (co-ordinated, rhythmic, body motion) and upper body strength.

Cheryl used multiple methods to collect her data including observation; photography; drawing; and child conferencing conversations.

Results

From the analysis of all the child data and her own observations, it became apparent that the children preferred spaces where they had the opportunity to: be physically active; learn, try out and practise new skills; take risks; and increasingly move their whole bodies in more complex ways – in particular, the large, flexible, climbing area.

Observation data showed the large climbing area and the monkey bars, in particular, had the highest usage, and in response to the child conferencing questions, all of the 14 children mentioned that the large, flexible, moveable equipment was one of their preferred areas to play – 12 out of the 14 identified the monkey bars as a particular favourite. The slide was also mentioned as a favourite for nine of the children.

The findings indicated that the children sought out, on a daily basis, the equipment that enabled them to hang upside down, swing their bodies, and engage their bodies in more complex configurations. The monkey bars and the rope ladder bridge, when placed horizontally between large boxes, appeared

to provide a combination of benefits and factors that no other equipment in the centres outdoor setting did.

Conclusion

The children's preference for climbing, sliding, balancing, and being challenged was evident in the large, flexible, climbing equipment being the outright favourite. One explanation for this appears to be that this equipment facilitates the integration of the three main areas of movement – locomotion, balance, and manipulation. In particular the monkey bars and rope-ladder bridge offered vital opportunities for physical, emotional and cognitive challenges. These opportunities included risk taking, the need to move in ever increasingly complex ways, pure enjoyment, creativity, stretching, and the "look what I can do" factor.

Teachers need to take responsibility for providing a range of activities, space, resources, and equipment within the outdoor environment that will promote and allow for children to develop "increasing knowledge about how to keep healthy; increasing control over bodies, including locomotor skills, non-locomotor skills, manipulative skills and increasing agility, co-ordination and balance."