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There had been a huge, violent snow storm in western Massachusetts which had closed all roads, downed massive trees, and isolated people in their houses because driveways and roads were impassible. When children returned to school, there was much activity in the classroom play time. Two boys managed to use two playstands each as stilts. They “walked” to a place in the room where other children had made a shelter with more playstands and cloths. Many children were gathered inside. Reaching their destination, the playstand boys began to make buzzing, mechanical noises as they reached up and out from where they were standing. Inside the shelter, children were gathered around one little girl with a baby doll under her shirt. There was suddenly a gasp of awe. The baby emerged from underneath the shirt and the children quietly celebrated. . .

What were they imitating through play? The boys with their play-stand stilts were emergency workers who had come with chain saws to release power lines and saw limbs which were trapping residents in their houses. One class family was expecting a baby. The mother had gone into labor when there was no way to get to medical assistance. So the baby had been born at home. . . Play—the means to make sense out of huge experiences.

Observed by a visitor to Hartsbrook School, Hadley, MA

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How Adventure Playgrounds Nourish Play

— Ryan Rayniak

My first daughter led me to the Waldorf kindergarten. I was a stay-at-home Dad with a one-and-a-half-year-old little girl and we needed to get out of the house and meet other kids. Honestly, I needed to get out and have some adult interaction. I had no idea what I was doing as a Dad and was looking for something to inform my parenting. I was vaguely familiar with the teachings of Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy via an interest in biodynamic gardening, and while looking for a parent-tot program I found a Waldorf school that had just pioneered a program in the fall.

I was drawn in by the calm surroundings created by the subtle colors and simple natural toys. I was held by the rhythm and repetition of the day, as it was foundational for me as a new parent and eventually becoming a kindergarten teacher myself. Holding hands and singing was always a bit uncomfortable, but there were a couple of other dads in the circle and the

mood this brought the children eventually helped me overcome any apprehension I may have had.

The thing that captivated my attention and curiosity the most was the presence of the teacher. Her appearance was that of a stereotypical Waldorf early childhood teacher, with a long dress and apron. She had long gray hair, a twinkle in her eye, and a gentle smile. She spoke objectively and simply but was always upright, joyful, and firm, especially with us knucklehead dads.

This was her outward appearance, but when I became a teacher myself I realized that the picture she held inwardly of the children and the adults in her class created the calm and warmth I felt. This person was the model of goodness, truth, and beauty inwardly, which then outwardly created the mood for the adults and children to live into. It was her mood of soul that created the magic in the classroom.

It is this mood of soul that I would like to keep in mind as I further explore the idea of Adventure Playgrounds or Loose Parts play. At the heart of this theory of play is the principle that the child is the director of the play, held by the attitude of the playworker or the caretaker in charge.

In the UK, “playworker” developed as a term for adults who facilitate children’s play, and who assist in the creation of adventure playgrounds. With a wide variety of open-ended objects, typically gleaned from the waste stream, a space is created which invites children into meaningful self-directed play. The role of the playworker is foundational in the success of the environment. Playwork organizations and training courses have emerged to support children’s freedom to play, which is severely endangered in our time, and have spread beyond the UK to the US and other countries. In these movements are many parallels to a play-based, child-led Waldorf kindergarten.

It was at the end of World War II, that the idea of adventure playgrounds and their therapeutic advantages was first championed in the UK by Lady Allen, whose work eventually crystallized into the National Playing Fields Association. She was a landscape architect, aristocrat, and advocate for children’s play. She observed that the play spaces being offered to children were not conducive to the health and freedom of play, but were rather quite unfit for child development. Children would naturally gravitate towards piles of rubble rather than the sterile spaces that were provided. See the Reference list below for a couple of films from this era that are both informative and entertaining.

The development of an Adventure Playground play space is left up to the children. It could potentially look like a chaotic mess or a junkyard, and present more risk than adults may be comfortable with, but for children, it presents infinite opportunities to create their imaginary world and self-direct their experience.

Rethinking our play spaces and attitudes about risk and safety may enliven our play spaces and enhance the children’s experience. When children are given the opportunity to play in an environment held strongly by the calm of the caretaker, who carries a supportive inner picture, the therapeutic and healing aspects of play are palpable in the environment and foundational to the well-being of children. Partnered with the introduction of a myriad of open-ended objects,



Water play. Photo courtesy of Leslie Burchell-Fox

endless opportunities for incarnation are available and can downright be a lot of fun.

To stand beside a child with an attitude of trust and respect for their struggles and joys is a gift we can give to children in their play. It is our attitude of reverence, freedom, and respect that helps them unfold their gifts, rather than our imposition of an ideology, a set of rules, or our own relationship with fear. It is necessary for children to have the opportunity to unfold into the world and create their own world, rather than the world folding them into adult concepts. If the teacher feels safe and trusts the surroundings and the child’s process, the children will inwardly imitate this feeling of safety and also trust their own process of becoming. They may meet their challenges, developing a pathway to their gifts. Our mood of soul supports the potential for their play to be a source of healing.

Play is an opportunity for children to experience themselves, the environment, and others to the fullest. They are able to follow their deepest spiritual gifts and impulses and share them with others. The five foundational senses are constantly being engaged and shared. The unseen will forces are made visible through lively movement, imagination, creation, and destruction. The existence of boundaries, both within oneself and through meeting the other, is discovered. The mysteries of the incarnational forces are given the opportunity to be realized, as the children seek out and find the encounters that will assist them to incarnate more fully.

The simple introduction of a few different types of objects in a Waldorf kindergarten play space could give the children endless opportunities for work and play. Objects extracted from the waste stream can be introduced to the play space, to be engaged with in an imaginative manner by the children. The introduction of milk crates, discarded lumber pieces, wood rounds, and pine boughs left over from a winter spiral could enliven the benefits gleaned from the Adventure Playground and Loose Parts play paradigm. The possibilities are limited only by our own childlike imagination. ♦

References

- On YouTube, search for “Lady Allen Adventure Playground Chelsea, Circa 1970s” and “Children play in World War 2 bomb site rubble.” These vintage films give a glimpse of the origins of the Adventure Playground movement.
- On YouTube, search for “The Land: A Movie and Discussion about Adventure Play, Part 1.” In this presentation from the Boston’s Children’s Museum, a short documentary is shown that gives a modern view of an Adventure Playground and the Playworker’s role. The film begins at 00:05:23.

A couple of websites to visit:

popupadventureplay.org
playeverything.wordpress.com

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