Evolution of American Playgrounds

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Common usage claims broad application for the term playground including school playgrounds, park playgrounds, wilderness playgrounds, zoo playgrounds, arboretum playgrounds, camp playgrounds, casino playgrounds, dog playgrounds, cruise playgrounds, street playgrounds, rooftop playgrounds, loose parts playgrounds, check-a-child playgrounds, wilderness playgrounds, imagination playgrounds, accessible playgrounds, intergenerational playgrounds, natural playgrounds, etc. Even politicians play with the label. For example, “No Child Left Behind is a playground of Left Wing (or Right Wing) social engineering.” Playgrounds vary by location, play materials, functions, and purposes. In this review “playgrounds” refers to outdoor spaces with natural and/or built materials and equipment selected, set aside, created, or designed for children’s play. The primary focus will be the evolution of American playgrounds beginning in the 19th century, including influences of European innovations on the gestalt of modern American playgrounds.

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Genesis of Natural and Developmental Playgrounds

German influence was instrumental in the emphasis on physical development and early apparatus equipped playgrounds in the United States. This emphasis prevailed in schools and parks for older children into the 21st century. The history of playgrounds for younger children and emphases on child development was also rooted in Germany, notably with Frederick Froebel. American psychologists and educators, including John Dewey and G. Stanley Hall, later joined Froebel in positioning playgrounds for young children as fundamental for child development and essential in the educative process.

During the last quarter of the 19th century, Froebel, the originator of the first kindergarten (garden for children) in Germany in 1837, was influenced by the work of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Luther, and other prominent figures. His extension of play beyond its value merely for physical or social development to emphasizing its impact on the total development of the child, set the stage for the invention of a “natural” child development playground. (Froebel, 1887) p. 54). His playground was a natural progression from the child’s early work experiences and his daring early adventures of exploring caves and streams, climbing trees and mountains, and roaming the forests. Froebel’s students continued such experiences in building canals, bridges, and dams in small streams, cultivating gardens and fruit trees; tending plants and flowers, observing beetles, butterflies, and birds, exploring old walls and structures, and caring for pets. His pupils engaged in free activities now called rough and tumble – wrestling, running games, ball games, and war games. He believed that “…every town should have its own playground.” (Froebel, 1887, 113-14). Many kindergartens and nursery schools in the United States followed Froebel’s tenets by adding playground apparatus, gardens, and various toys for “creative activity” and making free play tempered with direct instruction central in the educative process (Blow, 1909:158). Froebel’s emphasis on many unstructured play materials influenced emphasis on natural creative materials or “loose parts” by theorists and playground designers to the present time. (Frost & Sunderlin, 1985; Frost, 1992). Throughout history children sought out such creative play materials when allowed access to environments and opportunity, just as they have always been drawn to creeks, hills, forests, animals, and nature for free, spontaneous play.

John Dewey (1915, 1916) was also instrumental in forming the roles of play and playgrounds in American schools for young children. Like Froebel, the influence of Rousseau and other early philosophers was seen in his work. His school at the University of Chicago emphasized periods for outdoor nature experiences - games, carpentry, exercise, and other forms of “natural” activity. During the early 1900’s, the relative merits of Dewey’s and Froebel’s philosophies about free play versus directed play were vigorously debated at meetings of the International Kindergarten Union. Yet, when
the spirit and philosophy of the two prominent men were carefully examined, the differences were reduced. The various materials for proponents of both sides eventually included indoor and outdoor play and learning environments - bean bags, wooden soldiers, tools, blocks, footballs, hammers and nails, lumber, workbench, spoons, brooms, balls, sand boxes, wagons, tricycles, etc., - eventually overshadowed Froebel's famous didactic materials; his "gifts" and "occupations." (Weber, 1969). The influences of Froebel, Dewey, and their predecessors continue with modifications to the present time, primarily in child development programs for preschool children. Schools and municipal park playgrounds for post - kindergarten children continued to follow influences linked to physical development.

Early Development of Built Playgrounds

During the first decade of the 19th century, Gutsmuth, following the influence of Rousseau, introduced outdoor play and exercise training in Schenpfenthal, Germany. In 1812 Kathariniunc, Corninus, and Koch, extended Gutsmuth's ideas in the Jahn gymnastic associations and organized the first system of school play (Koch, 1908). The early play movement in Germany was influenced by physical fitness, health and nationalistic motives e.g., fitness of men for military service, women to be mothers of a vigorous race, and reduction of childhood disease. The play movement in England was linked to the spontaneous expression of the life styles of the people, holding the development of habits and character in view and considering the effects of the "mean streets" on children. In the United States, the late 19th century emphasis was on social factors, especially protecting children from temptations and socially and physically dangerous streets of large cities. (Curtis, 1917).

Outdoor Gymnasia

A German inspired outdoor gymnasium was started without supervisor or instructor in 1821 at the Latin School in Salem Massachusetts. Mero (1908) attributed the initial inspiration for this "outdoor gymnasia" or playground to New England physical training sources. But at least two events suggest probable German influence: first, the chronological proximity of the initial development of the German and American sites (Schnepfenthal and Salem) and second, the establishment of a plot of ground at the Round Hill School in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1825 for play and gymnastics using German type apparatus and supervised by Charles Beck, a former student of Jahn in Germany (Mero, 1908).

As a child in Boston, Hale (1908, p. 31) witnessed the development of the first outdoor gymnasium in America and played on the equipment and confirmed that the idea for the outdoor gymnasia originated in Germany. The yard behind the Latin school on Tremont Street, then called Washington Gardens, was designated a playground and equipped with parallel bars, a vaulting horse, and other indoor type gymnastic equipment. The Tremont Street was only about 30' X 30' in size, allowing limited space for children and equipment. (Space limitations remain a problem today in most schools.) At this time both indoor and outdoor play spaces were called "playgrounds" and breaks for play were called "recess" or in the UK, "playtime". The outdoor gymnasium of the early 1800's succumbed to lack of interest by 1830, and only a handful existed during the next half century. The demise of early efforts hindered subsequent efforts until about 1887 when Berlin's sand gardens for young children were adopted. During this period the plight of children in the slums of large cities was strikingly evident.

Play, Playgrounds and the Early Child Saving Movement

The influences of Froebel, Dewey, and their predecessors continue with modifications to the present time, immigration from many countries and rural American resulted in massive pockets of poverty in America's largest cities. In these ruthless slums thousands of homeless children lived and fought to survive in streets under demeaning, sadistic conditions. (Zacks, 2012). A New York City law prohibited playing in the streets and thousands of children were hauled into court. (Brace, 1889: Riis, 1890, 1902, People's Institute, 1910). Gulick, 1920; Frost, 2010). The plight of these children eventually became so destructive that social reformers, charitable groups, and other organizations formed a movement for play and playgrounds – part of a much wider initiative (some productive and some destructive) known as the child saving movement. (Zacks, 2012; Frost, 2010; Cavallo, 1981; Boyer, 1978; Davis, 1967; Rainwater, 1922; Addams, 1909; Riis, 1890, 1902). The introduction of sand gardens was a primary factor in the movement.

Sand Gardens

During the 1880's Von schenckndorff, a German political leader placed piles of sand in the public parks of Berlin where children played (Sapora & Mitchell, 1948). An American visitor to Berlin, Dr. Marie Zakerzewska, recommended these playgrounds to the chairman of the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association in 1886, and piles of sand were placed in the play yards of the Children's Mission on Boston's Parmenter Street. These were called the first organized and supervised playgrounds in America and credited with creating the first serious play movement for young children in this country (Playground and Recreation Association of America, 1915).

The eminent American psychologist, G. Stanley Hall (1897), authored a delightfully revealing little book relating the story of two boys, Harry and Jack, playing in a pile of sand in their back yard. This sand pile became such a center of focus that "all other interests gradually paled (p.3)." Hills, roads, ponds, bays, bridges, wells, tunnels, and islands emerged through an abundance of representational play. Boys up until about the age of 15 accomplished valuable training in industrial and mercantile pursuits, law environment, topological imagination, and civic training through sand play p.18). The popularity and developmental benefits of sand play have been extensively studied and confirmed since that time. Credit for the first book published in America, addressed exclusively to playgrounds, was claimed by Stoyan Vasil Tsanoff: "No books seem to have been written on playgrounds and no organized efforts made to regulate them" (Tsanoff, 1897, p. 1).

By 1891, playgrounds were increasingly diversified and growing at a rapid rate. The original Charlesbank "outdoor gymnasium" site in Boston ...was fenced, parked, equipped with swings, ladders, seesaws, a one-fifth mile running track, a sandgarden, and provided with wading rowing, and bathing facilities, all free to the public. Land and equipment were contributed by the park department, operated by private associations...The children's and women's divisions were entrusted to the Massachusetts Emergency and Hygiene Association.* (Rainwater, 1922, pp. 28-9). Boston initiatives to provide playgrounds for boys and girls of all ages, collaboration of public and philanthropic agencies, and integration of sand gardens, outdoor gymnasia, built equipment, and organized sports attracted at least nine other cities to consult with Boston...
John Dewey (1915, 1916) established a school at the University of Chicago in 1896 to test his educational theories. Disagreements about Dewey's American school age children had access to playgrounds but the influence of PRAA continued to expand, primarily in urban areas, to match the organization to Playground and Recreation Association of America (PRAA). The name of the official journal, The Playground, was changed to Recreation Commissions. These were usually by far the most expensive, occupying several acres with well-equipped field houses, containing park and playground facilities and sports fields manned by physical directors. By mid 1910, with the playground idea spreading rapidly, PAA leaders decided that the term “playground” was too narrow and changed the name to the organization of PAA forty-one cities were operating playgrounds. In 1924 this number had expanded to 5,006 playgrounds, employing 15,871 workers. In 1914 the Russell Sage Foundation identified 50 high schools, and the playground teachers will be the regular athletic instructors for the schools…. (Lee, 1902: p.182).

During the 1880’s playgrounds for young children grew in popularity and observers noted that, “Even big boys hung around and looked wistful,” at the creative activities and play spaces of young children (Playground and Recreation Association of America, 1915:3). By 1917, playgrounds were appearing in small towns, and schools were setting aside periods of play for young children. Even the progressive industrial plants including southern cotton mills and northern industrial plants were setting aside playgrounds for employees and their children (Curtis, 1917). Thanks in large part to the work of civic and charitable organizations and the Playground Association of America the playground movement was alive but not altogether well across the United States.

Despite the growing interest in public play and playgrounds in municipal parks during the latter decades of the nineteenth century, a U.S. Bureau of Education Bulletin claimed that most public school yards were little changed, hazardous, and unfit “for any advantage that has come to the school or the children.” (Curtis, 1913: p. 5). Curtis recommended that playgrounds be larger, provide play equipment, be supervised, and remain open after school, Saturdays, and during the summer. In 1910 the PAA Committee on Equipment published recommendations for supervised public playgrounds. Manufacturers were featuring wood, steel, and iron playground apparatus in their catalogs and were “settling” playground problems “with a scheme of material appliances.” (PAA, 1910). As motor vehicles in urban areas began to multiply, children were prohibited from playing in crowded streets and playgrounds were developed in vacant lots, closed streets, housing areas, and backyards to complement those in parks and schools (Stevens, 1926; Jenkins, 1934).

The Playground Association of America

In 1906 Henry Curtis and Luther Gulick led the founding of the Playground Association of America (PAA), (Lee, 1915; Cavullo, 1981). Gulick was elected president, Theodore Roosevelt honorary president, Jacob Riis honorary vice-president and Henry Curtis secretary and treasurer (PRAA 1925). On the day of its organization, PAA organizers met with President Roosevelt at the White House. In the second business meeting in Chicago, a committee for a Normal Course in Play was appointed, and a publication, The Playground, was initiated. This journal was instrumental in the growth of the play movement, inspiring most of the courses for play leaders in normal schools (teachers colleges) (PRAA, 1925). At the time of the organization of PAA forty-one cities were operating playgrounds. In 1924 this number had expanded to 5,006 playgrounds, employing 15,871 workers. In 1914 the Russell Sage Foundation identified 50 high schools, colleges, or normal schools offering training courses for play leaders and by 1916 the number of training programs had doubled. The early playground movement was split into two parts, one for schoolyard playgrounds, consisting mainly of seesaws, swings, slides, and sand bins and other built apparatus. The second type, municipal or park playgrounds, were usually developed and operated by Park Boards or special Recreation Commissions. These were usually by far the most expensive, occupying several acres with well-equipped field houses, containing park and playground facilities and sports fields manned by physical directors.

By mid 1910, with the playground idea spreading rapidly, PAA leaders decided that the term “playground” was too narrow and changed the name of the organization to Playground and Recreation Association of America (PRAA). The name of the official journal, The Playground, was changed to “Recreation” to match the shift in focus from playgrounds to a wide range of social, recreation, and civic affairs. In 1930, less than one fifth of American school age children had access to playgrounds but the influence of PRAA continued to expand, primarily in urban areas, to match broadening recreation and leisure interests of citizens. Consequently, the “restrictive” name “playground” was removed from PRAA and changed to “National Recreation Association” (NRA) (Knapp & Hartsoe, 1979:104). In 1966 the NRA merged with several other organizations to form the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) - a powerful organization that reignited its emphasis on play and playgrounds during the first decade of the 21st century while strengthening its work for intergenerational play across the broad field of leisure and recreation.

The New Psychology, Child Study Movement, and Play Schools

John Dewey (1915, 1916) established a school at the University of Chicago in 1896 to test his educational theories. Disagreements about Dewey’s
and Froebel's philosophies led to heated debates in the International Kindergarten Union between eminent groups of child development scholars. Yet similarities were seen in emerging demonstration schools at major universities for all championed play and playgrounds as essential components in child study and a whole child approach focusing on all dimensions of child development – physical, emotional, cognitive, and social.

For example, at the Horace Mann School at Columbia University spaces and materials for outdoor play were expanded to include a rooftop playground with a small garden, sandbox, sand box, sand toys, slide, swing, horizontal ladder, walking boards, seesaw, wagons, bricks, balls, blocks, ropes, swings, tricycles, doll carriages, and toys (Garrison, et al, 1937). Construction areas were stocked with small and large building blocks for construction, assorted art materials, woodworking tools, work areas and tables. Materials and spaces for science and exploration included an aquarium and fish, cages for animals, gardening tools, seeds, containers, magnets, magnifying glasses, hourglasses, and thermometers. Indoor and outdoor spaces and play and work curricula were complementary and integrated. The play school philosophy in schools for young children emerged as a reflection of the need for a wider interpretation of the child as a spontaneous, active being rather than a reflexive mechanism – early shadows of current "teach to the test" schooling.

“The time has come when men are beginning to realize that the stifling of the child’s developing enthusiasms in life through a back-warping, chest-cramping, nerve-breaking, mind-deadening desk and schoolroom program of “studies” is as cruel as the Spanish inquisition.” (Hetherington, 1914: p.697).

Early Playground Development

- **1837** – Friedrich Froebel developed the first kindergarten (garden for play) he called a “playground.”
- **1872** – First legislation to purchase lands for playgrounds in Brookline, MA.
- **1876** – First park playground, Washington Park, Chicago.
- **1887** – First sand garden established in Boston, Mass. (This was marked by many as the beginning of the playground movement of the late 1800’s)
- **1890** – First New York City playground for children; by Society for Parks and for Children.
- **1891** – First school garden - George Putnam School, Boston.
- **1894** – First “model playground” (with modern type equipment) established at Jane Addams’ Hull House in Chicago.
- **1894 -1898** – First “modern” playgrounds established in Philadelphia, Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, and Denver.
- **1896** – John Dewey established his school at the University of Chicago.
- **1906** – Playground Association of America (PAA) formed.
- **1907** – PAA journal, The Playground, and the Normal Course in Play formed.
- **1909** – Massachusetts Playground Act adopted in 40 cities and towns by popular vote, requiring all towns of 10,000 to establish public playgrounds.

Playgrounds during the Great Depression and World War II

The Great Depression and World War II applied the brakes to rapid development of the early playground movement. During the Depression, in 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration (WPA), one of several federal assistance programs to put the unemployed back to work. Among many work projects, 3 million WPA workers built highways, schools, hospitals, airports, playgrounds, and more (Brechin, 2010). Gray Brechin (2012), historical geographer and author, described the vast art, parks, and other projects created in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland during this period. Then came World War II and more pressing priorities of industrial production resulted in murals being painted over, metal equipment sold for scrap to build war material and works by prominent artists lost or stolen. Playground supervisors were lost and parks, playgrounds and landscapes suffered from lack of maintenance and went into disrepair. Many playgrounds were eliminated, but around the country, vestiges of valuable WPA era creations continue to function and are being renovated as historical sites.

By 1940 the economy was surging back to life with industrial production of war equipment and further accelerated with the onset of World War II in 1941, and the WPA was suspended. During the war years, 1941- 1945, metal was diverted to the war effort and production of steel playground equipment virtually halted. Children in many schools were allowed to take periods from school to gather scrap metal from nearby farms or businesses and place it in piles at the edge of schoolyards for military trucks to pick up. To the child gatherers, this was play! (Frost, 2010, 2012). But even as these war events were occurring, a simple but revolutionary playground fantasy - the "junk playground" - was brewing in Denmark.

Adventure Playgrounds and Loose Parts

The concept of a “junk playground” was first proposed by Carl Theodor Sorensen (1936) a Danish landscape architect. His proposal was tested during the German occupation in 1943 when he created a “junk playground” in Emdrup, a housing estate on the outskirts of Copenhagen (Kozlovsky, 2007). Long before World War II, indeed over centuries, children played in construction sites, garbage dumps, junk yards and wild places, found and borrowed their own tools, built their own dens, forts and houses, and played their own creative games – all without the unwavering supervision of adults. Sorensen’s dream included trained play leaders. John Bertelsen was the first play leader at Emdrup, enabled by architect and former seaman Dan Fink. True to Bertelsen’s views, the central idea of Sorensen’s junk playgrounds was to make play and playgrounds the imagination of the child - not the imagination of the architect or builder. Children themselves, with assistance from playleaders, later called playworkers in the UK, would create playgrounds for themselves and choose their own play objects and forms of play (Brown, 2008). To modern eyes, attuned to fixed, immutable playgrounds, dominating cyber play and endless prescribed regulations, all this reverberates as romantic, archaic, and even threatening.

As the Emdrup reputation spread, visitors began to encourage the concept in Europe, Asia and the United States. All this did not go unnoticed but needed the keen insight of such pioneers as Sorensen, Lady Allen of Hurtwood (1968), and Arvid Bengtsson (1970, 1972) to communicate the idea of “junk play” or “adventure play” and spread the movement. Lady Allen introduced junk playgrounds to the UK in 1945, coined the term “adventure playground,” established several adventure playgrounds for “handicapped” children, and influenced many accessible playgrounds for all children.

In 1950, McCall’s Magazine sponsored the first adventure playground in the United States in Minneapolis. This endured for only twelve months but was followed by several “vest pocket parks,” an American scheme for using vacant lots for play and recreation. Over time, the adventure play concept
was explored in several states. The Lenox-Camden playground in Boston, operational from April to October 1966, was similar to adventure playgrounds. In 1976 the American Adventure Playground Association (AAPA) was formed with Bill Vance as president but suffered a brief life. In 1977, the AAPA identified sixteen adventure playgrounds in the country but many others, patterned after the concept by American visitors to Denmark, Sweden and England were operational in California, Texas, New York, Pennsylvania and Georgia – few with trained play leaders yet rich in child and community involvement. (Hogan, 1974; Frost & Klein, 1979; Frost & Sunderlin, 1985).

“For a playground to succeed, its ultimate users must be its builders. This does not mean only that the adults of a community must build and be responsible for that community's playground; it also means that the children must be involved.” (Hogan, 1974).

“The playgrounds of a society are a visible expression of the esteem granted children by their elders. When adults care, really care, they dig beyond the superficiality of letting others decide what children need or of merely buying gifts for their children.” (Frost & Klein, 1979: p.105).

The life span for most American adventure playgrounds was short, due to concerns about junky appearance, expansion of safety regulations, fear of injury and liability, shortage of funding and play leaders, and lack of support from community leaders. Despite their strong reputation among developers, child users, and involved parents, most disappeared but a few model examples remain.

In 1979 an adventure playground was formed at Mountain Park in Houston on eight acres featuring trained play leaders, a garden, office, nature center, animal habitats, storage, building area, sand and water, arts and crafts, picnic area, and games area (Sarahan & Hager, 1980, 100). Within four months of opening 15,000 people had used the Mountain Park playground and the positive reports led to the formation of the Houston Adventure Playground Association and adventure playgrounds at Mark Twain Elementary School and Freed Park in 1986; (Reese-Learned & Martin,1996). Typical of early adventure playgrounds in America, all had ceased to function by 2002. (Mauldin & Giles, 1989).

In 2012 three adventure playgrounds remained in California; Berkeley, Huntington Beach, and Yorba Linda. A fourth, in Irvine, opened in the 1970's and was closed in 1983 for redesign while evaluating public comments and reviewing other playgrounds. In 2011 a new master plan, including a variety of play experiences, was approved by the Community Services Committee, and in 2012 the plan was available for public viewing (Irvine Adventure Playground, 2012). The oldest true adventure playground in the United States opened in 1974 in Huntington Beach and was moved to a new site in 1981. True to tradition, the playground features such “to kill for” adventures as a 16 feet mud slide, rafting pond with rope bridge, tire swing, tools and scrap (donated material) for building and outdoor showers and changing rooms. Six “counselors” oversee these and other activities such as overnight campouts. The playground was named recreation program of the year by the California Parks and Recreation Society. (Berman, 1992).

The Berkeley adventure playground opened in 1979. Here children seven and older play in adventure play tradition, focusing on wind, earth, fire and water (Hughes, 2012) with a wide range of creative materials for building forts, towers and boats. Children younger than seven only play in close proximity to play leaders or other adults and safety rules are supported. Berkeley leaders attend to safety, accepting only scrap materials and activities meeting their rules (Berkeley, 2012). Adventure playgrounds are not rule-less. The Yorba Linda playground opened in 1983 on a 2.2 acre plot. “Campers” register in advance for theme sessions. Kids bring hammers, nails, saws and paint, build forts, and play games. A zip line deposits them in a mud pit and they test their skills in an obstacle course. (Kaak, 2012). Failure of the European adventure playground movement to thrive in America is a deleterious phenomenon in our playground history, yet exceeded by the current wave of circumstances that divorces children from their traditional grounds for play.

American playgrounds during the 20th century were never formed nor operated from a common mold. While model playgrounds, manufactured equipment playgrounds, natural playgrounds and adventure playgrounds were co-existing, yet another form emerged – novelty or imaginative playgrounds.

**Novelty Playgrounds: The Fantasy or Imaginative Era: 1950’s -1970’s**

In an effort to complement or compensate for typical municipal playgrounds with paved surfaces, fences, and traditional equipment the “novelty era” emerged (Frost, 1989). In order to replace or compensate for sand, slides, swings, and jungle gyms , designers created novelty, imaginative, or fantasy sculptures - rockets, vehicles, and historical pieces, utilizing massive molded, concrete climbing forms with tunnel mazes and a labyrinth of shapes and spaces intended to exercise the imagination of children (National Recreation Association, 1954, 1957.). These were essentially fixed and resistant to change or movement by children and described by some as more appealing to adults than to children. Planners, architects and “handy-men” expanded playground design concepts as never before.

The motives for novelty playgrounds were to compensate, complement, or substitute for the paved surfaces and equipment (slides, swings, and jungle gyms) on municipal playgrounds and the amusement park concept of “amusement for amusement’s sake” (Nichols, 1955). During this era a number of cities developed imaginative playgrounds and creative playgrounds, or modified existing playgrounds – 60 parks and squares in Philadelphia alone (Crawford, 1956). The Los Angeles Park Department built a wide array of equipment – theme villages, novel slides, multiple purpose exercise equipment, and theme equipment such as shark and octopus rockers (Frederickson, 1959). Manufacturers predicted that steel, action oriented equipment would remain a priority, plastic would replace steel in some applications, play sculptures would become more popular, molded swings in the shape of animals would be developed, equipment would be designed for specific age groups, equipment would be lower in height and installed in gravel and bark pits for greater safety (National Recreation Association, 1962). These predictions turned out to be surprisingly accurate but they failed to predict the popularity of wood equipment during the 1970’s and 1980’s and the development of playground safety guidelines and standards during the 1980’s.
The "standardized playground" era (Frost, 1989, 1910; Frost et al., 2004), reflected the design and redesign of manufactured playground equipment, primarily the four S's - swings, slides, see-saws, superstructures, and the prevalence of surrounding hard surfaces typically seen on American playgrounds throughout much of the 20th century. During the 1970's and 1980's standardizing playground equipment developed simultaneously with concerns about playground injuries, increasing lawsuits, and formation of task forces to prepare national standards for playground equipment safety (Kutska, 2011). Executive Director of the International Playground Safety Institute, authored the most comprehensive reference addressing current playground safety data.

The subject of playground injuries is commonly seen in historical documents but extensive records such as those available today (Consumer Product Safety Commission; National Electronic Injury Surveillance System; Frost & Sweeney, 1986;) were unavailable. Curtis (1902) reported that at North End Park in Boston “…with a modest supply of apparatus without sand under it, succeeded, in two weeks, in breaking a total of seven arms belonging to six boys, besides other casualties not reported.” It was suggested that some of the blame for these injuries rested with the city boy not seeming to know what he could do and what he couldn’t, and needing more “looking after” than boys brought up in the country. This is perhaps a form of early support for current opinion and evidence that engaging in reasonable risks and mastering physical challenges through early, consistent practice on developmentally appropriate playgrounds helps children develop cognitive and physical skills needed to avoid serious injuries. The history of American playground safety standards, regulations, and guidelines, not addressed here, is quite a story.

The following chronology links to the modern era of playgrounds, easily the most complex and extensive era for scope and breadth of research, professional involvement, and innovation in the history of American playgrounds. Consequently only a succinct overview of events shortly before and after the turn of the 21st century (modern era) will be presented.

**Genesis of Modern Playground Development**

- 1943 – First “junk” (adventure) playground established in Denmark.
- 1950 – First (short term) adventure playground in America (Minneapolis).
- 1950’s - The “novelty” or “imaginative” playground era began.
- 1974 – The oldest “true” adventure playground currently (2012) existing in America established in Huntington Beach, California.

**The Modern Era: Integrated Playscapes for Play, Health, and Learning**

The modern era, building slowly during the late 1990’s, entered about the turn of the century into a full-blown play and playgrounds movement of unprecedented speed and scope. Even before 1990, play and playground research and experience were demonstrating that the nature and scope of playgrounds must be extended beyond the typical standard equipment. “No matter how ingenuous or radical play equipment may become, it is merely one important ingredient in the child’s play environment….we must now direct our energy to the development of the total play environment: natural features –living things, plants, animals, dirt, hills, streams, portable materials – blocks, tools, utensils, building materials, support structures – natural shade, shelter, paths, cooking facilities, wheeled vehicle paths… (Frost, 1989:23). American playgrounds are expanding to accommodate broader purposes and more diversified play materials and spaces, leading to frequent designation as “playscapes.” The term “playground” is taking on even broader meanings to include people of all ages, (intergenerational playgrounds), natural and built (integrated playgrounds), provisions for people of all abilities (accessible playgrounds) and electric powered (cyber playgrounds).

Good play environments have magical qualities that transcend the here and now, the humdrum, and the typical. They have flow qualities-qualities that take the child to other places and other times. They are permeated with awe and wonder, both in rarity and in imaginative qualities. Bad play environments are stark and immutable, controlled by adults, lacking resiliency and enchantment. Few dreams can be spun there, and few instincts can be played out. The wonders of nature, the delights of creating are all but lost for children restricted to such places (Frost et al, 2001).

Approaching the turn of the 21st century, many kindergartens and early child development centers were still using traditional apparatus, portable materials, and natural features, both indoors and outdoors. American public schools continued to follow a didactic program employing limited time (or no time) on playgrounds, and park systems continued to provide playgrounds primarily created for physical development. Nevertheless, by the 21st century a movement among professional organizations was building to create and expand playgrounds and enhance play for building fitness, health, brains and bodies. The 1990’s were named the “decade of the brain” with 3,000 American brain researchers and $1 billion in research funds making unprecedented progress in understanding the role of experience, including play, in human development. (Barker, 1996). Given progress in brain science toward understanding the role of play in human development, we may aptly label a future decade the “decade of the brain on play.”

By 2012, “integrated” playgrounds or playscapes were expanding, buoyed by research and experience on the value and processes for integrating built materials, habitats, gardens, tools, junk, wild places, nature areas,
shifted from the children to adults. 

In too many homes, schools, and parks, too many children no longer have the freedom to roam, create, and imagine because places rich for imagination are closed to them and the imagination element has been shifted from the children to adults.

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A playground, playpark, or play area is a place specifically designed to enable children to play there. It is typically outdoors. While a playground is usually designed for children, some target other age groups. Berlin's Preußenpark for example is designed for people aged 70 or higher. A playground might exclude children below a certain age. Modern playgrounds often have recreational equipment such as the seesaw, merry-go-round, swingset, slide, jungle gym, chin-up bars, sandbox, spring rider