A PLAYGROUND RAISING
Context for intergenerational relationships

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The playground project

The playground that is planned, designed, built, used and maintained by several generations is a grand participation project that brings a school and its community to life and uses an array of skills and knowledge. A playground project can connect young, old, and those in-between. It can unite families and provide a context for surrogate grandparent-grandchild relationships for those who have been alienated from their blood families for one reason or another. In the spirit of an old-fashioned barn raising, community members come together to raise a playground. The playground can become the context for a continued interaction between the generations. But, too often play and playgrounds are associated only with children. We must realize that playgrounds can and should be meeting grounds for all generations.

However, a good playground is not always available to provide and enhance an intergenerational experience. While there are some developmentally sound and safe playgrounds in this country, the vast majority are relics of past generations in need of serious repair and maintenance (Frost, 1992). There are three typical situations:

1. A decent playground exists, but a consistent maintenance schedule is needed.
2. A playground exists, is beyond repair, and needs to be removed before someone is injured.
3. A playground is needed, but none exists.

Each situation, though, has potential for intergenerational exchange. While different adults have different expertise and their own developmental needs, they have the opportunity to become a vital part of a playground project. Each situation can allow adults to have a hand in seeing that children have an adequate place to play and to benefit from that same environment. Let's look at these scenarios more closely.

If a decent playground exists, both children and adults can make sure it is maintained, is safe and meets specified requirements (Jambor, 1991). Maturing adults have the time, tools and years of experience to play and carry out maintenance needs on a regular basis. The community seniors become an integral part of the school community again and shoulder important responsibility in looking after the welfare of children within this important environment. They become more active members of the community family, while dispelling children's notions that growing old is bad.

If a *dangerous* playground exists, it must be dismantled, and who better to do the job than your senior citizen with all those tools, the time, the know-how, and the personal contacts that can be called upon gratis or for a nominal fee to help get the job done. Years of life mean years of experience, and years of solidifying connections in the work place and the community means a good chance that someone knows someone who owes a favor and can get the job done. To the school children, the seniors model the process of mutual support and earning each other's respect.

If there has been *no playground*, or one has been completely dismantled and a new playground is being considered, there are two possible solutions. First, one can browse through playground company catalogs to determine the style, material, aesthetic, and costs (see Jambor, 1991 for sample companies). There are many fine companies and products.

If a catalog company is affordable, a representative will help the school with the plan of design, purchase and installation.

Second, if the catalog price is too high, the school community can build the playground itself. This approach, the community playground project, saves money and involves the community. A community has all the people power necessary to turn unattractive or unused property into a playspace that is attractive, creative, and developmentally appropriate for children and adults. All communities have unexplored people potential and assets. It's only a matter of awareness and a need for purpose to activate. The school and its surrounding community can be a vast resource for carrying out a community-built intergenerational playground project.

The community is a natural body from which to draw participants, and the school is a natural entity from which to form an organizational base. Through the school's already established parent group (e.g. PTA, PTO) a framework can be quickly established to start carrying out the steps necessary for a successful intergenerational playground raising. The following sequence of steps are intended as an organizational guide to rewarding experiences and partnerships. The process is threefold: set-up, construction, and follow-up.

Set-up

Determining needs

Initial questions must be answered: "What are our playground needs?" "Do we renovate what exists, build from scratch, or do a bit of both?" "What are our financial limitations?" At the onset it will be necessary for the school governing group to appoint an enthusiastic leadership team to coordinate the project. The team should include someone representing the school's governing body, a teacher, a child from each grade level, and a senior citizen (perhaps a student's grandparent) from the community. Each member of the team has a responsibility, from initial needs assessment to maintenance to safety awareness programs (Jambor, 1991; Bruya and Langendorfer, 1988).

Selecting the site

The team reviews possible sites to determine important characteristics. The existing site may not be the best. Location with regard to distractions to classrooms, accessibility, drainage, shade, and land contour and consistency (sand, dirt, clay, rock, swamp) needs to be considered. Administrative approval, proper zoning, building permits, liability coverage, and location of underground utility lines are important.

Selecting a leader

There are two alternatives: One is to retain an outside consultant with expertise in playground projects. The other is to engage a local person with a background in design and/or construction, leadership skills, and the time and enthusiasm to follow through. A senior citizen, such as a grandparent of one of the schoolchildren, often fits this role well. This leader, whether from the outside or from the community, becomes the project foreman of the team. The project foreman needs to become familiar with and implement the recommendations in this article.

Design

The foreman must first decide how to select the best playground design. The foreman may want to copy or modify an existing playground. Since children are the primary users of a playground, it would be logical to have the children on the team be part of the initial design committee. The children can select friends of both genders and all grades to interact and react to equipment selection alternatives. This design committee may also review texts that provide designs, diagrams, and rationale for alternative structures, or purchase designs from an established playground builder. It should be remembered that while some pieces of equipment look great to adults, they often have limited play value to children. There is no sense in constructing an item that won't get much play. The children, then, are crucial advisors.

As an intergenerational playground, however, the overall design will need to accommodate more than just children's play. Soft ground covers may be difficult for seniors and children with "hardware" (e.g. braces, crutches, walkers, wheelchairs, etc.) to cross, so firm pathways that weave through the playground should be part of the design. Another design consideration might be the inclusion of large shade trees with picnic tables. They not only provide an escape from the sun but also allow for rest points, a place to be alone or to interact in a quieter area with others: adults with adults, children with children, children with adults.

School-community meeting

The team plans a public meeting to deliver a "sales pitch" to the school's families and other interested community members. Using slides, sketches, or photos, the foreman and team present the playground project with the enthusiasm and confidence needed to inspire an audience of listeners to want to become active participants. During the presentation, a participation sign-up sheet should be passed across each row of the audience to ensure getting each person's name, phone number(s), occupation, and indication of ability to secure items that will be essential to the process - from heavy machinery and building materials to lunch and child care. The people who show up for this initial meeting are those who will be central to the committees that will be formed.

Establish committees and responsibilities

Serious individual commitment starts here. Committee responsibilities are assigned. As mentioned, the vast majority of senior community members have established skills, an array of contacts, and leisure time. They are perfect candidates to lead or co-lead committees. Now important intergenerational relationships can be established through triads of grandparent, parent, and child.

A committee may need to look to the school and the community of volunteers and "adopt" a child, parent, or grandparent/senior citizen to complete the triad. Committees should strive for triads and meet when all members can attend. Remember, this is a mentorship relationship. Learning occurs from models, through imitation and actual participation.

Committee Responsibilities

Materials and Machinery Committee

This committee develops a master materials list and establishes subcommittees to seek out sources and machinery. The objective is to build with quality material at as little cost as possible. The project is built on the assumption that within any given community, someone knows someone who can get what you need for free or at a nominal cost. The senior generation will most likely provide the most contacts.

Once a contact has been made, it has to be maintained to ensure on-time delivery. Only when you have the item in your possession can you safely put a check in the "item received" column. It is not uncommon to have a "sure thing" fall through. Anticipate this from the beginning and always have a back-up or two. It also helps to have a realistic timeline and a sense of humor.

Structure Committees

Each structure to be built is assigned a captain and crew. Captains are responsible to the project foreman. Captains should have good communication and organizational skills and feel comfortable directing a construction crew. Each crew member is given an overview sheet showing a plotting of the entire playground with the crew's specific assignment marked, a diagram of the assigned structure, the starting time, a list of crew members' telephone numbers, and a list of hand tools to bring on construction day.

Budget Committee

This is the perfect committee for a retired bookkeeper and young mathematicians. The keepers of the treasury will be on frequent call as funds are obtained from other budget lines, fund raisers, contributions, etc. and then distributed as needed. Providing this committee, as well as all the committees, with "official" office space in the school helps give intergenerational participants frequent access to each other. Committee relationships can easily overlap into classroom relationships. For example, children may host their senior committee partners in class to talk about real-life math.

Publicity Committee

This groups keeps the community informed and enthusiastic about the project. Publicity assignments should include arranging television, radio, and newspaper interviews and promotional spots, writing newsletters, designing posters, and assigning a project photographer to record each stage of the project. As a multimedia committee, it must rely on a multitude of experiences. This means an intergenerational participation bonanza! Children with compatible interests can be assigned to work with senior members and parents who work in various news media.

Refreshment Committee

Food and drink are the fuel for a successful playground raising. An intergenerational volunteer committee can solicit donations and plan menus. Restaurants may donate foods and parents and grandparents may prepare foods. The latter is better because it can involve all ages in more hands-on experiences.

The committee might assemble a child-adult team at each grade level to coordinate breakfast and lunch "potluck" style. Kindergarten families could supply breakfast items, first-graders can bring drinks and dessert, second-graders the cold and hot salads, etc. Breakfast can be doughnuts and coffee or a sit-down meal. Lunch can be sandwiches or hot dogs on the grill or a full family-style buffet. Leftovers will be very popular as afternoon hours pass by. Food and drink runners should make frequent rounds of the work areas. When food and drink are provided, the family stays together at the site and the work force stays at maximum strength.

Safety Committee

This committee monitors areas in which vehicles, large machines, or electrical tools are in use. It also patrols the grounds for risks such as improperly-placed rakes, axes, and chainsaws; boards with protruding nails, or children trying to use structures before completion. It is extremely important to take safety precautions. At least one on-site committee member should have first aid training.

Construction

This is a two-phase process, with each phase carefully planned. The preconstruction phase entails small committees preparing for the construction phase. The construction phase takes a single day and involves people from throughout the community.

When scheduling work days, consider conflicts such as ball games, holidays, other scheduled community activities, possible poor weather, etc. Because of all the intense planning and schedule commitments by participating community members, it is essential that work be carried out on set dates. Stringing out dates beyond those originally scheduled is counterproductive and often results in an unfinished product. Organization is absolutely crucial for success. Plan, plan, and plan some more, then follow through on schedule to sustain momentum and optimum enthusiasm.

Preconstruction

The needs. The project foreman examines the selected playground site to determine preparation needs. Does existing play equipment need to be removed'? Is the ground surface in need of bush-hogging to remove undesirable vegetation or grading to insure proper drainage? If so, a crew must be formed and a day selected to prepare the site. Community youth and senior groups may be tapped to carry out this task.

The review. The project foreman meets with all structure captains and their young mentees to review designs and discuss political problems and general information. Construction concerns such as water drainage from tires, hardware fastening techniques, and finishing details are emphasized. Captains are reminded to keep their crews informed and ready with the designated tools, and to be at the site no later than the stated starting time on construction day. The steps that follow will also engage small specialization crews. These are the first "construction" crews to take action and will get together after the general meeting to get specific instructions to carry out their roles.

The "stake-out." With playground design plans in hand, the project foreman oversees one child and one adult who assists the foreman in measuring and staking precise spots where each structure's pole/post holes are to be drilled. A wooden stake is driven into the ground at each measured point and marked for hole depth and angle projection. This process should take place the day before scheduled drilling. At this time, posts and poles going into the holes have been: secured, cut, and marked for each structure. This tight sequence is very important since stakes protruding from the ground pose a danger as well as an attractive discovery for uprooting by the curious child.

Drilling and placements. The project foreman and/or another stake-out crew member oversees the drilling to insure that every hole is drilled as specified. Drilling alternatives range from utility company and Army Corps of Engineers heavy duty drilling rigs to a tractor with an auger attachment or gas-powered manual hole digger. Another specialty crew now has the responsibility of placing, positioning, and plumbing poles in respective holes. High-stress poles get concrete footings to within 6" of the ground line. The remaining poles have packed dirt footings. This process should take place at least four weeks before the construction weekend for two reasons: Concrete footings need time to set and

the mere sight of numerous poles extending from the ground generates an excitement and feeling that the playground project is indeed becoming a reality.

Deliveries. The Materials Committee captain and crew keep tabs on deliveries and arrange a storage area at the school where materials can be inventoried and separated for each structure. Under the guidance of a senior leader, the child on the committee gets good experience in inventory procedures and distribution. All manageable items are bagged, boxed and labeled with the respective structure number, and stored until construction weekend. To avoid undo stress, set a deadline of at least two weeks before construction for having all materials on hand. If promised donations or "deals" fall through, last-minute retail purchases may be needed. Remember, the key to success is to have everything set and ready to go on construction weekend.

Construction Weekend

A word of caution: The only snag could be rainy weather. Do not cancel construction because of a prediction of bad weather, or a rainy night before, or even a rainy early morning of construction. Think of all the detailed planning and preparation that went into this project for this one weekend. Enthusiasm is at a peak and everyone is ready to go. Weather can be unpredictable, and weather forecasters have been known to be wrong. It is, therefore, important to inform every school and community member involved that the show will go on, with the cancellation decision made only by the project foreman, and only at the time the Saturday construction is to start. If the scheduled playground raising must be canceled it is very important that everyone involved knows the predetermined alternative construction weekend.

Friday. This day is dedicated to heavy machinery use and the playground proper is off limits to children. Under the project foreman's direction, a specialty crew digs trenches, moves large equipment size tires into place, positions around cover, and places lumber, railroad ties, etc. in approximate locations. This sets the stage for Saturday's onslaught of community and school participants. The late afternoon and evening is spent confirming crew readiness, doing a last-minute materials and tools check and saying a good weather prayer!

Saturday. This is it: the full community participation playground raising day! Start no later than 7 am. The objective is to complete the entire playground by sundown. With breakfast out of the way, crews with plans in hand gather at their structures, power sources are turned on, and simultaneous construction begins. As the work crews build their assigned structures, the project foreman moves from location to location, monitoring progress. The foreman's role here is to advise, solve problems, and make sure that everything is constructed as specified. The foreman also reinforces the adult-child work relationship and their ongoing progress.

As the day passes, crews complete structures. Crew captains call for a final completion inspection by the project foreman. If all is right, the crew christens the play unit by being its first users. It's a joy to see young and old playing side-by-side, eyes sparkling with pride and ownership for their finished playground structures! Once the crew has had their fun, the structure is open to all to play on. At this time the captain should observe the structure as both children and adults use it. Like any new "toy" it will get its most intense use and stress during initial use. Thus, any needed adjustments (e.g. tightening, raising or lowering, reinforcement) can be observed and taken care of immediately.

As the afternoon wears on one structure after another is completed. The feeling of mutual satisfaction seems to be contagious. Both young and old stand in awe of their accomplishment, not believing they, together, worked through the process and realized their goals. To see children and adults of various ages shaking hands, hugging, marveling at

their team accomplishment with arms around one another is a sight to behold. This experience creates a bond between young and old.

Sunday. If any details need to be completed this day is a must work-day for a small select crew. Finishing touches (e.g. sanding, covering bolt/nut protrusions, etc.) must be completed before children arrive at school Monday morning. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to keep children off a new, exciting playground during the school-week that follows. So, in the name of safety and accident and injury prevention, weekend completion is a must.

Follow-up

Open for business

The first week the new playground is open should be one of community celebration, a grand opening gala affair, where all the parents, seniors, and community support people are invited to participate in a week-long interaction with children during play periods. After-school and weekend participation should also be encouraged to promote and continue intergenerational relationships.

Invite the news media and those politically associated with the school and community to the grand opening. Show off the product, but stress the intergenerational process. Such publicity will bring more potential community participants to the school door. Generations are waiting to be given a chance to showcase their well-honed skills. All they need is a place and a project.

Expressions of appreciation

This week will also begin a period of thank-you correspondence from children to those school and community people who helped make the playground a reality. Receiving an official letter of appreciation from the school administration or teacher is nice, but receiving a personal note (maybe even with drawing of the writer's favorite play space) from a child is heart-warming. Other ways of conveying thanks would be through school newsletters, local newspaper, and conspicuously placed posters listing contributors. To be thorough and not to leave anyone out, it is imperative that meticulous records be kept of everyone involved.

Playground maintenance

The playground can be a fine project with a fine result, but it would be a shame to see it fall into disrepair from neglect, become an eye-sore, and endanger children. To prevent this, an informal daily and a formal weekly safety inspection must be carried out. There are several published playground safety texts available that provide excellent tips on playground maintenance, inspection, and safety awareness strategies (Jambor, 1991; Wortham and Frost, 1990; Hogan, 1988; U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 1991). It is suggested that this information be obtained before construction takes place to insure planned implementation from the playground's opening day.

Again, we can call upon an intergenerational effort to meet this need. Seniors who participated in the playground planning and building process are usually eager to continue the relationship and volunteer to be in charge of safety inspections and maintenance. With construction skills, a multiple of tools, flexible time schedules, and now an emotional investment in the playground and the children who use it, seniors are naturals to fill this role. Accompanied

by student assistants, they can file formal weekly safety inspection sheets in the school's administrative office as ongoing documentation of inspection and maintenance needs and remediation.

Playground safety awareness program

Classroom teachers with the assistance of parents, grandparents, and "adopted" seniors can develop an education program to influence children's everyday playground action, attitudes toward safe play, and awareness toward safe play environments in general. The following are some "safety action" curriculum suggestions that provide opportunities for intergenerational participation both within the classroom and on the playground:

1. Implement a "School Playground Safety Council" of children, teachers, parents, and seniors to coordinate school, classroom and curriculum activities that promote playground safety awareness and practice. A student at each grade level could be appointed or elected.
2. Develop general playground safety needs, and specific safety characteristics to look for at the site and on the equipment.
3. Take a "field trip" to the playground to investigate playground safety conditions. Investigator teams can search for potential problems and hazardous conditions. Each team then reports its findings and recommends how to solve problems and prevent injuries.
4. Develop guidelines for equipment use and play behavior. Reevaluate as needed.
5. Establish a student safety patrol to help monitor playground guidelines, to receive problem or hazard "tips" from students, and to convey needs to the proper authorities for remediation.
6. Produce posters that convey proper vs. improper equipment use and play behavior, and display in the hallways, lunch-room, etc.
7. Post photo of the "Hazard of the Week," with essays on how to fix the problem.
8. Develop a safety publication for the school. This periodical can be an accumulation of playground "Hazard of the Week" photos, essays, artwork, recommendations, editorials, etc., that is developed and published by an intergenerational staff. It can be distributed to all students, teachers and administrative personnel, with a select mailing to senior citizens and community people who are involved with, or have potential to be involved with, the school playground (Jambor, 1991).

Conclusion

Activating an intergenerational partnership builds more than a playground. It builds bridges of understanding, positive associations, and attitudes of mutual respect and admiration. It helps reestablish continuity within the culture by providing that "living presence of at least three generations" (Mead, 1970). Establishing intergenerational relationships is a start. Continuing and nurturing them may take more effort.

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