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THE PLAYGROUND AND THE COMMUNITY

HENRY S. CURTIS, PH. D.*

The playground is a specialized reaction of the play impulse on city conditions. In the popular mind it is often confused with play, but play has a much wider significance. As the city grew, and congestion became more and more acute, vacant spaces were built upon until there was no place where the children could play, or even be out of doors with safety. The streets were thronged with automobiles and traffic, and where the children played on vacant lots, loafers took charge and seldom gave them a fair chance. They were often bullied and maltreated, the language was often indecent, and the sportsmanship was a general training in unfairness and dishonesty. Where, on the other hand, little groups of idlers were gathered together, the conversation and even conduct often tended toward sex impropriety. The children also learned to swear, to smoke cigarettes, and to plan all sorts of objectionable adventures. They grew up weakly from the lack of physical exercise.

Toward the solution of this situation, the playground offers an opportunity for the children to be out of doors, away from the dangers from automobiles and the traffic of the streets, away from the domination of bullies, and the evil language and conduct of street loafers and idlers. In these days, when the work of children has disappeared, vigorous play is essential to giving them physical stamina and health. It is in their play that they form nearly all of their friendships and the habits of companionableness, honesty or dishonesty, and the like. So far as life and experience are concerned, the play life of the child is his real life, the school is only an incident. The person in charge of the playground is copied and sets standards of conduct as no one else does.

There are people who do not wish their children to go to public playgrounds, as they think they will hear language they ought not to hear and perhaps acquire bad habits. It is almost impossible to keep cliques from getting together on playgrounds, as elsewhere, and where a little group are idling by themselves, one can never guarantee that their language or conduct is what it should be. The only remedy is to keep them busy. The playground is the most democratic place on earth; but there are parents who do not wish their children to be democratic. They would shelter them from the evils of the world. But the great difficulty with the sheltered life

*Dr. Curtis, whose home is in Olivet, Michigan, is the former Secretary of the Playground Association of America and the National Child Welfare Conference; author of "Play and Recreation," "Education Through Play" and "The Practical Conduct of Play."

is that it shelters from life itself and its experiences and gives little preparation or training to stand trials and temptations. Its virtue is of the flabby kind that has never learned how to resist.

Perhaps the greatest danger of the playground is that it offers the mother an easy way to shirk the responsibility of the care of her children. She may send them there in order that she may read novels or go to the theater or play bridge whist, but she can never be sure that the children are not on the street.

Probably there is no municipal playground system in the United States that secures an average attendance for fifteen minutes a day of the children of school age. In most cases, if the hours of attendance were divided by the number of children between five and fifteen, it would show an attendance of not more than five or ten minutes per day. The playground as an institution is not the solution of the problem of idle hands in the city. Perhaps its greatest function is that it gives the children new games, teaches them the principles of sportsmanship in their play, and gives them new ideals to copy. But neither is play alone the solution. The child does not wish to play all the time.

For the adult, the playground should offer an opportunity for relaxation and recreation. It is very desirable that the parents should come with the children, and that they should often aid in the organization of their play, and there ought also to be opportunity for adults to play tennis, to pitch quoits, to play volley ball or indoor baseball, and to have bowling on the green. There should be music and community center activities in the evening. The largest attendance at the playground will always be from five o'clock to nine or ten P. M. if the grounds and buildings are lighted at that time.

During the last five or ten years the cities of America have been putting play into the program of their schools, until now probably in the majority of the larger cities, during the first four or five grades at least, the children have in the school program an average of an hour to six or seven hours a week of organized play. This time is much more in the aggregate, than the amount devoted to play on municipal and other playgrounds. It is also sure to increase very greatly in the next few years. The New York state law, which went into effect last year, probably provides two or three times as many hours of organized play as the whole country has had before. California passed a law requiring two hours a week, six months ago, and Massachusetts will probably pass a law requiring five hours a week within the next few months.

It seems likely that, while the playground is to continue and to be needed as a specialized institution in modern city life, its greatest

message will be the reformation of the public school. The oldtime school, which required the children to sit still and memorize lessons which to the child were mostly words, was much at variance with child nature. We are growing toward a school which is more like life, which will have domestic economy, manual training, gardening, excursions of various kinds, Boy Scouts and Camp Fire Girls, music, motion pictures, organized play, etc. From a school of this type, the child will need no long vacations, and the day may well be six or seven hours long.

THE EDUCATIONAL FUNCTIONS OF CIVIC-COMMERCIAL ASSOCIATIONS

FRANK GIBSON WARD, PH. D.

Commercial clubs under various names, city clubs, and women's clubs make a convenient division of the theme. As to communities, each one is peculiar unto itself and their group organizations with community consciousness and community conscience differ as one star differs from another. By and large, cities of a hundred thousand and over are in another class in respect to these features from the smaller places. However, it is the opinion of one who has a right to a judgment that the welfare service which stands out in bold relief in the club life of a large city is being rendered in a less defined but very real way in the less pretentious organizations of the town. That which is proclaimed in the weekly bulletin of the Chicago Association of Commerce or of the Women's City Club may be read in substance in the minutes of similar organizations in Lansing, Michigan. This discussion rests upon that conviction.

1. The oldest group under consideration is of the commercial order. A valuable study of these bodies is given by Mr. Kenneth Sturges in a prize essay upon American Chambers of Commerce. The first organization was founded in New York in 1768; in 1801 there were four; "in 1858, according to one authority there were ten chambers of commerce and twenty boards of trade in the United States." Their names tell their original purpose.

The evolution of a century has changed the emphasis so that they are no longer to be known as of the "money-grubbing" type. Of 2930 local commercial organizations in the United States and

*Dr. Ward who is the Dean and Professor of Religious Education in the Chicago Theological Seminary, was requested to prepare this statement so late that he has not been able to make all the investigations he wished. Yet it is necessary to include the organizations he treats in any survey of community agencies. Although, as he expressed it, he "did not have time to go home and change his mind," he has furnished a basis for discussion.