

More than Recess!

The Transformation of a Typical Playground into an Outdoor Learning Center



"Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning. They have to play with what they know to be true in order to find out more, and then they can use what they learn in new forms of play."

Fred Rogers, U.S. children's TV personality and author
1983, *Mister Rogers Talks with Parents*

The Florida sun was warm and the brightly lit playground was alive with the activity of preschool children and their parents. The setting was typical of any standard playground but there are several notable exceptions. A 20' alphabet banner with bright blue letters from A through Z was attached with bungee cords on the chain link fence beside the playground. Magnet signs were attached to the metal frame with words that defined colors (red, black, blue), directions (up, down), numbers, and other words in the playground area such as bench, swing, stairs, and slide.

The environmental print was specifically selected to reinforce the curriculum used in the Family Literacy Program that offered Adult Education Classes, Early Childhood Classes, Parent Education Classes and PACT (Parent and Child Together) Time. Time spent together on the playground was especially beneficial as parents and their children actively engaged in a variety of learning activities. Parents were provided on opportunity to demonstrate reading strategies that were modeled and practiced in the classroom. As a learning environment, activities designed for the playground easily incorporated different learning styles for visual, auditory, and kinesthetic/tactile learners.

The research of Hart and Risley¹ showed that the magnitude of children's accomplishments depends less on the material and educational advantages and more on the amount of experience children accumulate with parenting that provides language diversity, affirmative feedback, symbolic emphasis, gentle guidance, and responsiveness.

A key factor to this successful transformation was the integrated lesson planning for the different classes and providing resources that enhanced language development. Initial planning meetings focused on several objectives designed to enhance student outcomes by changing the learning environment to actively engage both students and their parents. The Region III Adult Literacy Center provided classroom and playground resources and guidance on instructional design to integrate essential reading components of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension into the family literacy curriculum.



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In addition to materials created for the playground, materials were also purchased for the classroom and were integrated into the lesson plans. This allowed the parents and children an opportunity to learn new skills that were reinforced through activities on the playground. Large foam boxes with letters on all sides were very popular with children and parents.

The same strategies were also applied to the learning centers inside the classrooms. Magnetic letters in different colors soon turned metal storage cabinets into fun writing surfaces. Nap time became a special treat as magnet words were attached overhead to metal strips to create ceiling story boards.

All areas of the classrooms and playground were examined to determine how reading practice could become an integral part of the learning environment. With a little planning and a few additional resources, the playground was quickly transformed into a fun and engaging outdoor learning center.

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¹ Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children, Betty Hart & Todd R. Risley, 1995