



Active playgrounds

There is a growing body of evidence worldwide to suggest that due to the pressures of modern life, children and adults are participating less and less in physical activity. The World Health Organisation (WHO) states that children between the ages 5-18 require “60 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity physical activity each day that is developmentally appropriate and involves a variety of activities”. Moderate activity is defined as activity which causes one to become slightly out of breath and vigorous can be described as activity that causes one to become quite breathless. A more detailed definition can be found at http://www.who.int/dietphysicalactivity/factsheet_recommendations/en/index.html. The report from the National Taskforce on Obesity (2005) states that the emphasis in all schools should be on increased physical activity and that all school children should be enabled to avail of a dedicated period of 30 minutes of physical activity every day (p.88). The task force also states that this should be **in addition to** the discrete time of one hour PE per week.

School breaks and lunch times provide ideal opportunities for children to engage with physical activity that is developmentally appropriate to their needs. They are also a chance for children to receive some of the 60 minutes physical activity recommended by WHO. Many teachers argue that the school yard can, in fact, discourage physical activity. Reasons for this include a predominance of traditional sports such as football on the yard or insurance concerns. Although this article will not seek to address such issues, it will outline some commonsense ideas that schools may find helpful in increasing physical activity on the school yard. There are many simple



strategic changes that can be introduced and some of these are suggested below.

Rules

The school yard can be a challenging place for the teachers on duty, particularly during times of inclement weather when children may be restless from spending long periods indoors. The classroom environment is highly structured and is often supported by a contract or a set of rules, drawn up to ensure that boundaries are set and recognised. In many cases, breaktimes provide the only opportunity for children to have the freedom to truly ‘play’ and interact in a less confined space. It may sound very obvious, but yard rules are as important to establish as classroom rules. These rules could be drawn up with the children at the beginning of each school year during discrete SPHE time

various forms of illicit play – for example, fighting, teasing and annoying other children.” (Evans, 1989)

Conflict on the yard may be offset by ensuring that there are a variety of activities available to suit the needs and aptitudes of all children. In England the Youth Sport Trust outlines the use of zoning as a useful strategy. One way of doing this is to use colourful multimarkers (plastic domes used in PE) to mark out the various zones on



the yard. Children could be given the responsibility of laying out and collecting these markers on a rota basis.

The teacher could devote some time to teaching these procedures during PE class at the beginning of the year.

An example of a zoned play area is illustrated below and demonstrates where certain activities can take place on the yard.

Careful thought needs to be given to the location of activities to ensure safe play for all. For example children should not have to walk through the invasion game zone to get to another zone.

Markings

Yard markings are colourful, child friendly and very suited to

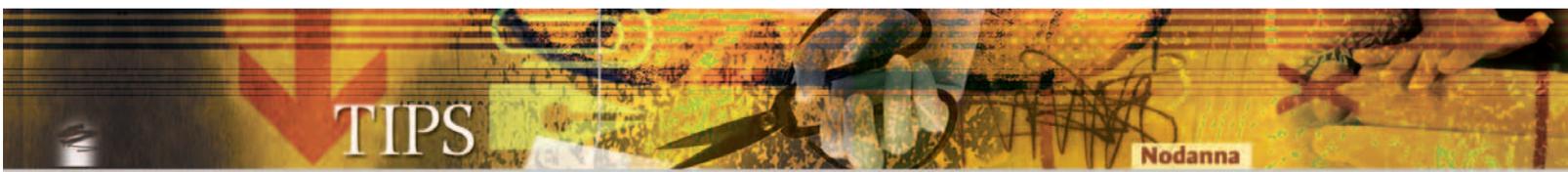
as part of the strand unit safety and protection. Alternatively rules could be agreed at whole school level, recorded clearly on large charts and displayed prominently in classroom windows facing out onto the school yard. Some ideas for yard rules can be found on http://www.ctf-fce.ca/e/publications/health_learning/Issue3/Issue3_Article1_EN.pdf

Zoning

“Children with little to do during their play time may resort to seeking adventure through

Example of Zoned Play Area

| | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------|
| Invasion game : basketball | Skipping | Frisbee |
| | | Golf putting practice |
| Grassy area | Target Throw | Hopscotch |
| | | Rest Area |



younger children. Many activities that involve the use of yard markings develop the essential skills of agility, balance and co-ordination. Some good examples of playground markings and activities can be found at: <http://www.curriculumsupport.education.nsw.gov.au/primary/pdhp/assets/pdf/csarticles/activeground.pdf>

The majority of yard markings may not be appropriate for older children, but coloured chalk could be used to create hopscotch-type games which feature on the website above.



Traditional playground games

The *PE Teacher Guidelines* state that "playground games help the child to move effectively and to interact with others" (p.10). Suggestions for each class level can be found under the strand unit creating and playing games. It is possible to foster links with the History Curriculum by encouraging parents and grandparents to talk to children about some of the games they used to play as children. The strand units 'When our grandparents were young' and 'Games in the past' present opportunities for children to explore the childhood activities of past generations. Traditional games such as *Queenie* or *Ring a ring o roses* lend themselves to playground activity and are a wonderful way of arousing children's interest in the past. Parents or grandparents are sometimes invited into schools to teach these games to small groups of children. Log on to www.teachingexpertise.com/files/Traditional%20playground%20games.pdf for a host of ideas in relation to playground games and rhymes.



Yard leaders

Many schools across the country have systems in place whereby the children from the senior classes are taught how to lead physical activity on the school yard at break times. In Canada this is referred to as the Active Recess and a useful resource in relation to this can be downloaded from <http://www.myhamilton.ca/NR/rdonlyres/A44936F7-092B-4C9C-8E5D-0F5EC3F6A42B/o/ActiveRecessManualREVISEDforurl2007.pdf>

A similar programme called Playground Activity Leaders Scheme (PALS) is currently being promoted in some schools in England. A video clip outlining the programme including testimonials from participating teachers and children can be downloaded from <http://www.teachers.tv/video/12072>

There are benefits for all to be derived from such peer tutoring schemes. The younger children will enjoy increased physical activity that is structured and well managed. The older children will develop a range of other skills. They will need to be very familiar with the activity they are leading. It will require them to enable the younger peers to participate in the activity through clear demonstration and explanations. They may have to support particular children who are having difficulties and ensure that the activity is being carried out properly. In addition to all of this, they will more than likely assume responsibility for the layout and collection of equipment.

Activity of the month

A popular concept promoted in schools is Activity of the Month. This is where the children outline the activity for others using the procedural writing genre. This work can be transferred to larger charts and displayed in windows facing

outwards onto the yard. Children could take digital photos of the activities and accompany the written procedure with the images. This is an



ideal way of integrating PE with literacy and an example of how to undertake this is fully explained and illustrated on pages 17-19 of the PPDS curriculum magazine *lámha suas*.

If your school does not have windows facing the yard, use a games card box. This box is brought to the yard at break-times, and children choose cards which contain the instructions of various games/activities. The cards could be produced by the children as above or could be selected from other manuals such as the *GAA Fun Do Nursery Programme*.

It is preferable for the children to have encountered these activities in the PE class before engaging with them at break-times.

Rest area

The SPHE curriculum *Teacher Guidelines* recommends that children have the opportunity at least once a week to experience some quiet time during the day. Similarly it is good practice to ensure that there is a rest area on the playground. Not all children will want to be active all of the time as some may be tired, recovering from illness, or perhaps just want to chat to a friend. It would be prudent to monitor this area as some children may decide to opt out of activity altogether. In such an instance, the teacher should encourage the child to engage with a low intensity/non threatening activity such as target throwing.

Active School Flag

The Active School Flag review process is especially designed

for schools who are seeking to improve or increase physical activity provision. It is a non-competitive initiative and considers every school's unique context. Perhaps you and your staff have ideas you would like to share with other schools and teachers. If so, consider sending materials to eolas@activeschoolflag.ie. Each school that submits materials for the active school flag website will get official

recognition on the site. The HSE also offers support to schools in the areas of physical activity and health promotion. Contact your local health promotion office for details.



References

- Blatchford, P (1993) *Bullying in the Playground*. In taltum, D. (Ed) *Understanding and Managing Bullying* (pp. 105-118). Heinemann Educational.
- Government of Ireland (2005) *Obesity The Policy Challenges: The Report of the National Taskforce on Obesity*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1999) *Social, Personal and Health Education: Teacher Guidelines*. Dublin: Stationery Office.
- Government of Ireland (1999) *Physical Education: Teacher Guidelines*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Other useful links

- http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/_doc/9047/Sporting%20Playgrounds%20A4%20Poster.pdf
- www.surreyhealthyschools.co.uk/downloads/PT_promoting_active_breaktimes.doc
- www.traffordsouthssp.co.uk/docs/Helen/Active%20Playground%20Rota.doc
- <http://www.kidscape.org.uk/assets/downloads/ks2owayssaferplayground.pdf>
- www.active.schoolflag.ie
- <http://www.youthsporttrust.org/page/zp/index.html>

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