Observation Paper: Playground Environment Check List and Rating Scale

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**Introduction**

I observed playground structures and their environment at Caper Acers and Bidwell Bowl. Both parks are located in Chico, California. The observation took place on Sunday 10/26/14 from 1:00-2:00p.m. The type of observation form used was the *Playground Environment Checklist/Rating Scale,* focusing on the developmental domain in motor skills.

**Observation Summary**

The play areas in both parks included a hard surface area with space for games, equipment for active play including slides, swings, and climbing structures, ample space for various types of large-muscle exercise and movement. They also had equipment to encourage balance, coordination, and strength, grassy areas for chasing and organized games. Both parks had natural areas that can attract birds, butterflies, and bugs, shaded areas, tables and benches and areas for social interactions with peers. Caper Acers had a stage for dramatic play and contained a sand play area, but did not provide equipment to support sand play, castle or boat structures for creative play. Bidwell Bowl did not have a sandbox area for play and neither of the parks had play equipment available such as balls, jump ropes, bases or nets, a garden area, or a water play area. Playground safety for both parks encompassed a protective fence separating hazardous areas, shock absorbing surfacing material under all climbing and moving equipment and the equipment matched the size of children it was designed for. Areas were clean, free of litter, broken glass, and paper, equipment was free of sharp edge, with no broken parts and in good repair, and children were within eyesight of playground monitors. Types of play opportunities found in both playgrounds were inviting with easy access, promoted creativity with versatile equipment, encouraged socializing and provided graduated challenges to foster physical development. Neither of the playgrounds had equipment that was movable to conform to children’s creative play or accessible for children with disabilities. The complexities of the playground equipment were measured using a rating scale, both parks rated differently in each category. At Caper Acers swings were rated a 1 out of 2 because there was only a single set of swings all the same size with simple sling-seats. Bidwell Bowl swings rated a 2, having multiple swing sets with limited size variations. Slides at Caper Acers rated a 3 out of 3 because they had multiple slides with various heights, widths and shapes. Bidwell Bowl rated a 2 with multiple slides at various heights but are not different in size or shape. Climbing structures at Caper Acers rates a 2 out of 3 because the structures were more complex with multiple levels. Bidwell Bowl rated with a 3 because the structures were complex with multiple level and multiple climbing surfaces. Creative play structures at Caper Acers rated 3 out of 3 because it contained multiple play structures with multi-dimensional play focus and multiple play areas. Bidwell Bowl was rated with a 0. There was no creative play structure observed. Playground appeal was also measured using a rating scale (1-3) based off of functionality of equipment, comfort level of equipment and general area, visual appeal and creative appeal. Both playgrounds rated a 3 for functionality of playground equipment, and creative appeal, both exceeding expected function, and encouraging various types of creative play in children at various ages and levels of motor skill development. Caper Acers’s comfort level equipment and general area was rated 3, because their equipment was non-metal, Bidwell bowl rated a 2 because all their equipment was metal. Both parks included a grass area, tables, benches and a shaded area. For visual appeal, Caper Acers scored a 2, being colorful and interesting and Bidwell bowl scored a 3, being bright and stimulating.

**Conceptual Overview**

Our class textbook *Middle Childhood Development a Contextual Approach* highlights the importance of middle childhood motor skill development (Zembar & Blume). Gross motor skills use large muscle movement. During the school-aged years, running, jumping, throwing, and balancing are the motor skills being incorporated and further developed. Playgrounds provide children the opportunity to refine these skills through play structures and large open areas. Fine motor skills include more precise and controlled movements of smaller muscles such as hands, wrists and fingers and are not as easily found on playgrounds. Perceptual- motor skills are the abilities that extensively incorporate both sensory and motor systems together. During middle childhood the four main perceptual motor abilities that change from early childhood are, a shift in the dominant sensory system from using taste and touch to visual information, intrasensory communication increases using multiple senses instead of one, discrimination among the senses improves, and perception of body awareness develops. The optimal playground provides a variety of equipment and ample play space, which facilitates cooperative and sociodramatic play.

**Research Comparison**

The research article *An Investigation of School Playground Safety Practices as Reported by School Nurses,* examined safety practices of school playgroundsin accordance of school nurses who attended a school safety workshop at the annual National Association of School Nurses conference (Hudson, Olsen, & Thompson, 2008). Seventy-five nurses who represented elementary schools from 25 different states were asked to fill out a two-page questionnaire, 64 of those participants were returned and useable. The questionnaire used the S.A.F.E ModelTM practices to measure supervision policies and procedures, appropriate play areas based on age of development, location and upholding of surfacing below and throughout the playground equipment and the equipment’s maintenance methods.

The study found that there is an absence of attention in providing the best practices for supervision, playground maintenance, proper safety and creating age-appropriate obstacles. This creates a lack of safe environments for playgrounds in schools. The nurses are, however, aware of the many problems for preventing these issues and strive to be more proactive in preventing playground injuries through proper communication with administrators and improved incident documentation.

Regarding the safety of Caper Acres and Bidwell Bowl based on this study; I would say that both playgrounds seemed to be safe for children. I observed every child being supervised by a parent or adult from a close or an appropriate distance. No broken structures or equipment were observed. Caper Acers had a structure that was closed off for maintenance, showing the playgrounds are being maintained. Caper Acers also displayed age appropriate signs for each play structure. Bidwell Bowl had an over all age recommendation for their playground. Both playgrounds also had proper safety rails on structures that were higher up.

**Reflection**

I really enjoyed doing these observations; it was neat seeing different playgrounds in Chico. The Caper Acers playground blew me away! It was the biggest playground I have ever seen. I thought it was well made and the castles were incredible! It was fun seeing all the children running around all over the place. I thought that Caper Acers promoted imaginative and cooperative play more that Bidwell Bowl. Bidwell Bowl was different in that the playground was more focused on developing motor skills; they had so many different climbing structures and monkey bars. They also had other structures that tested balance and coordination.

References

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