

## Pictures for Reflection

### Bubbles and Balls in Belize: A New Perspective on Play

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Dr. James Hoot, professor emeritus, University of Buffalo, provided photos of an adventure playground. He was responsible for building an adventure playground in Tanzania, shown in the photographs. This adventure playground was developed to support the first comprehensive school for girls in rural Kitanga, Tanzania. Wooden structures were formed from eucalyptus trees harvested by the local community and brought to the site via water buffalos.

Margaret Mead, a pioneering American cultural anthropologist of the 20th century and recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, once said, "If a fish were an anthropologist, the last thing it would discover would be water." Her tongue-in-cheek reference to the study of human behavior is a reminder that the familiar aspects of life are often overlooked because they seem unremarkable. In contrast, when placed in a new and unfamiliar environment, we become keenly aware of the behavior, habits, and customs different from our own.



Children explore in both natural and manmade spaces in this Tanzania playground. (Photo by James Hoot)

This was the case when I traveled to Belize City, Belize where I had the opportunity to interact with young children during a local church's summer program. With twenty-five years of experience as an early childhood educator, I felt well-equipped to assist with all facets of planning and implementing the program including organizing groups, preparing the environment, and providing developmentally appropriate materials. Not knowing exactly what to expect, I included various craft supplies and some simple gross motor toys along with the personal belongings I packed in my luggage.

Within the first few minutes of arriving at the facility, I realized that I was in unfamiliar territory. The small, rectangular area designated for outdoor play was situated between the main building and another building so that there were walls on three sides and a chain link fence across the far, narrow end. You stepped out the door of the main building onto a narrow patch of uneven, broken cement that ran the length of the area opposite the fence and this place was also covered with an assortment of construction materials and tools currently being used to replace a well-worn tin roof during hours when the children were not present. Nearby was a fruit-bearing tree, which offered very little shade in the scorching July heat. Fallen fruit resembling greenish-white grenades littered the ground in various stages of decay. Many had been trampled creating a squishy mess that filled the still air with a pungent odor. The hard ground had a thin, patchy layer of grass over packed dirt strewn with broken cinder blocks, trash, and other debris. Broken wooden pallets and plastic garbage bags lined the periphery. A discarded metal desk and chair set in one corner.

I immediately focused on the hazards and began to imagine the many possible scenarios of children playing in this space that could result in injury. I was nervous and anxious as 20+ children ages two to six years entered the space later that day, but no one tripped or fell. The rotten fruit was not used to bomb others, and the building materials did not become climbing apparatus. The children simply enjoyed being together with the blue sky overhead. In the absence of any toys or the desire to offer organized games, several adults began blowing bubbles within the children's reach. There were excited squeals and much laughter as the children ran around chasing the floating bubbles and jumped wildly in attempts to pop them between clapping hands. Soon, the children were taking turns blowing the bubbles and the fun continued with no one fighting for a turn, crying over spills, or complaining of soap in their eyes.



*Play Experiences become open-ended dramatic play. (Photo by James Hoot)*

The next day, about 50 colorful, crushproof plastic balls (the kind found in some fast food restaurant ball pits) were distributed among the children for their use in the play space. While there was a lot of carrying, some were tossed about, and others were rolled around. I noticed a boy about four years old placing his ball at the end of a discarded piece of gutter about three feet long and using his hand to push it to the other end. I joined him in this activity and demonstrated how lifting one end of the gutter off the ground would result in the ball rolling down the gutter without being propelled. He quickly located part of a brick nearby and used it to support one end of the gutter. As I walked away, he was joined by others who each placed their ball in the top of the now slanted gutter and thrilled at its journey to the other end. Before long, the children were

racing the rolling balls alongside their improvised track and, then, releasing multiple balls at one time to create a parade of moving color.

As the days progressed and my fearful imagining of worse case scenarios failed to occur, I began to consider the space and children playing there from a new perspective. Upon closer examination, I started to see that this space I previously deemed so lacking actually possessed the core qualities of an adventure playground. It was fenced and filled with loose parts. It challenged children's imagination and physical skills in support of constructive and manipulative play with adult oversight that never reached the point of controlling the children's play. The children asserted independence and were keenly aware of other's needs. Limited access to elaborate materials resulted in an appreciation for the simplistic and fostered creativity in an environment where nothing was wasted. I was repeatedly reminded of children's ability to produce enjoyable and inspired ways to play with everyday items by repurposing something often viewed as worthless into a thing of awe that could occupy their attention for an extended period of time.



*Children move in and out, swing, and climb in the adventure playground. (Photo by James Hoot)*

As the author of many articles suggesting how teachers can appropriate space and materials to create the best possible learning environments for young children, I had to stop and wonder if the typical housekeeping centers and outdoor playgrounds found in American child care and preschool facilities were not too prepared resulting in an over sanitized and, possibly, restrictive place to play. Stories of children's preference for the cardboard box over the elaborate toy it contained are legendary. Similarly, children may abandon the commercial playscapes found in many parks and school playgrounds to make their own fun by playing with rocks,

sticks, and sand, when permitted to do so. The many benefits of outdoor play are well-documented, as is our understanding that many of today's children are spending much less time outside than previous generations. While the reasons for children being inside vary and include such factors as increased exposure to electronics and involvement in numerous scheduled activities, access to adult designed playgrounds with traditional gross motor equipment should not be one of them. As I recently discovered, all children really need to play outdoors is access to it.

*[Note: Pictures of Belize were not available.]*

Related Resources:

- Berry, E. (2018, March). In Britain's Playgrounds, 'Bringing in Risk' to Build Resilience. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/world/europe/britain-playgrounds-risk.html>
- Keeler, R. (2015). The Recess Renaissance. *The Phi Delta Kappan*, 96(8), 14-21.
- Keeler, R. (2020). *Adventures in Risky Play: What is your yes?* Exchange Press.
- Kinard, Timothy A. (2015). Our Proud Heritage-Playground: A Historical Context. *Young Children*, 7(4), 92-95.
- Wallace, E. (2018, May). Inside the Rise of 'Risky' Playground Design. *Architectural Digest*. <https://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/risky-play-design>