Research and education for the promotion of physical activity inactivity among children (including their preoccupation with screen time) as an important rationale for building new playgrounds or refurbishing those in need of upgrading.

But a couple of important questions must be asked:

• How many of these new or refurbished facilities are interesting or creative enough to engage children, or entice them away from other “inactive” (or electronic) choices?
• Do the facilities actually contribute to improved outcomes (e.g., more physical activity) for children?

To fully consider such questions (and others), it helps to know something about the types of playgrounds that are found in North America and other parts of the world.

Traditional playgrounds are those that we most commonly find in our parks, school grounds and

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Designed Playgrounds that Engage Children in Physical Activity and More

Kim Sanderson, MA

It seems that every six months a new study is released describing the poor state of physical conditioning in our young people. In addition, we’re also hearing about an alarming increase in children’s “screen time.” To help counteract these trends, a fresh approach to playground design and development is needed. This article offers background information on the City of Edmonton’s experience with using a “design” approach for playground developments.

Getting the Attention of Children

Recent experience tells us (as parents, and as a society) that children’s play on electronic devices and in cyberspace – through sophisticated and enticing games, and other activities – can keep them occupied for extended periods of time.

In many cases, locally-formed playground committees will refer to the high levels of

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after school centres. They generally are purchased from a playground supplier and installed as fixed structures within a set “footprint.” While traditional playgrounds encourage physical play, they are seen to be less supportive of creative and social play.

**Designed playgrounds** involve a designer who works with the community to prepare plans that typically support a variety of play activities. While the design will often include manufactured equipment, the designer can often take advantage of a site’s unique features. For example, hills and berms might be designed to allow for sledding in winter, while natural areas can be included or tailored to promote connections to nature.

Innovative playgrounds or play spaces incorporate elements of the first two playground types, but most importantly, provide opportunities for the children to actually change or transform the site. “Adventure” play centres, “city farms” and “play buses” are examples of more innovative types of play facilities.

**Improving Playground Design in Edmonton**

The City of Edmonton has for a number of years explored a broader view of playground provision, with a particular focus on the design approach. During this time, the City has brought in leading designers to inform city employees and other stakeholders about new and updated views of play spaces.

An important step occurred in 1997 when the City adopted *Play for All Guidelines: Planning Design and Management of Outdoor Play Settings for All Children* to inform and guide the City’s policy development and front-line work related to new playgrounds.

The “Play for All Guidelines” publication outlines 17 play settings that make up a quality play space in support of a range of child development outcomes. It also discusses options for each setting with regard to programming, safety, accessibility and maintenance. Essentially, this resource takes a universal design approach, whereby children of all ages and levels of ability/disability are able to play.

The City of Edmonton now has a number of excellent examples of designed play sites that incorporate many of the play settings described in the *Play for All Guidelines*. In addition, it has supported pilot projects for both a city farm and an adventure play space, and has incorporated and promoted nature connections into much of its design work. While it still has its share of traditional playground facilities or play spaces, it’s fair to say that the City now promotes and supports all three types of play space provision, much to the benefit of its young people.
**Recommendations**

Given that the City of Edmonton has had a measure of success with a design approach, it may be of interest to many other Alberta groups or organizations, such as municipalities, school boards or out-of-school centres, and their associated playground development or oversight committees.

The following recommendations outline some of the key steps in the process, based on recent experiences. (The recommendations presume that some kind of playground development steering committee is in place.)

1. Become knowledgeable about design options, including play options as well as connections to the natural environment. There are a number of resources now available in this regard. (Note that it is only much later in the process that playground supplier catalogues should enter into the picture.)

2. Make sure the owner/operator and steering/oversight committee members support the direction being taken. Since the past norm for play space development was typically to go with fixed playground equipment, it may take an extra effort to convince all concerned of the benefits of a design approach.

   One option to consider is to work with the owner/operator to adopt or amend a playground policy that supports a design approach. (For a policy template, refer to the Useful Links associated with the online version of this article, at www.centre4activeliving.ca.)

3. Devote time to picking a designer. Just as you would search carefully for someone to design your own residence, check the qualifications, skills and track record of the playground designers you are considering. The initial research done by the committee regarding potential design options and the knowledge they gain during that process will come into play when interviewing potential designers, including landscape architects and architects. Additionally, a well-constructed policy document will provide a formal basis of understanding for everyone involved.

4. After a designer has been hired, the next step is to clearly establish your needs for the play space. A skilled designer will generally deploy a number of techniques to help in this process including, ideally, involvement of young people. Since a designed space affords an enriched array of opportunities that aren’t normally considered in a more traditional approach, this part of the process can be quite exciting for all participants.

5. Once the various needs and opportunities are identified for the play space, the information generated is typically summarized and analyzed by the designer, and then incorporated into what is called a “program statement.” For important reasons, this document must accurately reflect what has been put forward by the various stakeholders.

   First, information contained in this document becomes the basis for preparing the design. Secondly, in the excitement that surrounds the resulting design, it provides a sound means for the committee to review and evaluate the plans, and provide feedback to the designer.

6. As your committee attempts to broaden the opportunities for young people in a play space, it may meet with some resistance (e.g., inside the committee or from the user community). You may have to be ready to defend some or all aspects of the planned design. For example, including an area for wheeled activities such as skateboarding, nature connections and creative gathering places may raise questions about their use, cost and associated maintenance. Establishing small subcommittees to do further research on how others have successfully handled unusual, new or creative...
types of amenities is one way to get beyond initial concerns and keep for the project moving forward.

7. Following completion of the design, the next steps are similar to those of a more traditional playground development initiative. Plans need to be approved and signed off before a committee transitions to fund raising and construction phases. In many cases, the chosen design firm will have the experience to support completion of the project as intended. For instance, the firm may have the ability to “project manage” the site’s construction and have useful connections to skilled contractors and tradespersons.

8. One helpful advantage that arises by following the design approach is in regards to fund raising. The detailed information gathered for the project’s program statement along with the resulting plan, can be included as part of any grant application. This in-depth, up-front work signals to potential funders that due diligence has been undertaken and often helps to generate enthusiasm and support for a project, especially if the project is designed to broaden play opportunities.

Looking Ahead

In summary, every new playground development or refurbishment project has the potential to greatly widen play options for our children. If we are to provide active alternatives to screen time that bring health benefits and boost child development (physical and mental benefits derived from active, creative play), then increased use of a “design” approach is a good way to proceed. Best of all, the many young people who will be the beneficiaries of your playground committee’s work will thank you - for at least a generation or more!

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To view a list of References and Useful Links associated with this article, go to www.centre4activeliving.ca/publications/wellspring.html.

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