

The Relation of Playgrounds to Social Centers

by

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The Playground and Its Place in the Administration of a City

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THE RELATION OF PLAYGROUNDS TO SOCIAL CENTERS.

BY PROF. GEORGE M. FORBES,

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THE social centers of Rochester are unique in certain respects and these respects are profoundly significant. These centers are founded upon the idea of the use of public school buildings not for the people but by the people. New York City uses the public school buildings for the people, providing entertainment and instruction. Chicago has provided special buildings where the various existing organizations and social groups in the community may meet and develop their exclusive social interests. In Rochester the initiative is with the community itself, absolutely free from the spirit of exclusiveness, developing, in a most remarkable way, the community spirit and the community life, with the public school building as its center. The focus and center of this spirit of initiative, the dynamic in this communal life is the Men's Civic Club, an organization with the avowed purpose of developing the civic spirit and bringing it to bear for the betterment of the whole community.

Few who have not witnessed it can understand how party spirit, class spirit and even race spirit fade out in the intense civic and community atmosphere of these clubs. It is pure democracy getting its opportunity to inform itself, working itself free from prejudice and narrowness by absolutely free and unrestricted discussion of any question and then eager to apply its new-found spirit of brotherhood to the development and extension of community enterprise, *i. e.*; enterprises, the benefits of which all can share.

Political liberty alone, even when it finds expression in universal suffrage, cannot solve the problem of democracy. The participation in government which comes with suffrage may be used for exclusive interests, party interests, class interests, commercial interests, race in-

terests, local interests. Government which is the product of these clashing interests may be tyranny and may engender civil hatred and even civil war. Public officials who get their offices by serving special interests, who enter public life from selfish motives, exploit the public rather than serve it, and corruption inevitably results. The problem of democracy can never be solved by merely giving a man the right to vote. A government of mere majorities may be as despotic and corrupt as any that ever existed. The only salvation of democracy is in the development of the community spirit. This spirit is latent in every man. It only needs its appropriate stimulus to rouse it, the appropriate soil and atmosphere in which it may grow. Unfortunately the extreme individualism which manifests itself in competitive industry, competitive religion, and competitive social life is directly hostile to the community spirit, and our democracy has yet to develop institutions which are genuinely communal in the sense that they appeal to and develop the objective, the communal interest, that reveal the joy and satisfaction which come from co-operative effort for the common good; in short, institutions which break down the spirit and results of exclusiveness and bring the recognition of man as man, a spirit which neither seeks nor asks for any good in which all cannot share. Now the social center seems to be exactly the appropriate stimulus and soil to develop this civic spirit. It brings to the birth in a remarkable way the latent communal life and interest. The writer has never before seen any such expression of pure democracy, such complete disappearance of the exclusive and selfish spirit and such positive intensity of civic interest as is manifested in these clubs.

That the time is ripe for such a movement is indicated by the eagerness with which men enter these clubs and the enthusiasm and interest with which the work is carried on. The civic clubs indeed outrun the social centers in the

sense that they are being formed where no provision is made for fully equipped social centers.

The relation of social centers, and particularly of the civic clubs, to the playground movement is obvious. The great obstacles to the development of playgrounds are first, the prejudice, parsimony and narrow views of certain classes of taxpayers; second, the clash of selfish interests in their location and distribution; third, the hostility of immediate neighbors on account of the noise and disturbance of so many children at play. In overcoming all these it is impossible to overestimate the power and influence of the civic clubs. Their united action will become irresistible in determining appropriations adequate for proper maintenance and extension, in banishing from the problem of location and distribution the greedy, selfish spirit, the deals and dickers which grow out of that curse of municipal government, the idea that a man must grab all he can for his own ward or district, no matter what becomes of the rest of the community, and, above all, in furthering the profound educational work which the new science of childhood makes necessary. In the last analysis the playground movement, if it is to have a strong and permanent growth, must find a soil of public sentiment which comprehends a new revelation of the nature and needs of childhood, and replaces the hostility, condemnation and repression of much of the traditional, ignorant judgment of childhood with the keen sympathy and insight which sees the whole future of the child dependent upon the satisfaction of its instinctive cravings for activity in a wholesome environment. The development of social centers in Rochester, though in its very beginning, seems to indicate that no better agency can be devised for the support of playgrounds. It is in exactly the spirit above described that the social centers have thus far exerted their influence, and they are destined to create an atmosphere in which everything will flourish which makes for

sympathy with childhood, for the best education, for good citizenship, and for the common welfare.

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BY HIRAM H. EDGERTON,
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THE city of Rochester is very justly proud of the provisions for playgrounds which it has made during the last few years. That there is need of these open spaces for children in cities, where there is an ever-increasing population, no one can doubt. Exercise in the open air is good for all of us, it is especially beneficial to the child who is cooped up in a dense mass of houses much of the time, and whose days are otherwise spent in over-heated rooms, or dodging vehicles in crowded streets.

Nor is it health alone that the child obtains great benefit from these playgrounds, for they have a direct bearing upon its mind and character. Careful play supervision, at this period when the mind is plastic, naturally affects the child's tastes and habits, and gives it a better start for the battle of life. These playgrounds, in the congested districts of a noisy, dusty city, form small oases where children can catch a glimpse of nature and a breath of air, and where, under thoughtful supervision, they may be vastly strengthened in mind and body. Play is essential to the child. It is his natural right. Deprived of it, and he becomes prematurely old, a mere automaton, without the sparkle and zest which render him attractive and fit for development into successful manhood.

Not all of the good results of playgrounds necessarily belong to future generations. There are many substantial present benefits which the city administration feels. The police reports, for instance, show a marked decrease in the number of juvenile arrests during

the years since the playgrounds have been established, and this is especially true of those periods of the year when the playgrounds are open.

One of our coroners has gone on record with the published statement that "Rochester playgrounds, and the swimming-pools in the parks, have resulted in a much smaller number of accidental deaths of children during the past year than usual." His record for the summer of 1905 showed that only three children were drowned in the canals and other waters about the city, while the average in other years has been fifteen or twenty.

The great value of playgrounds has been established beyond reasonable ques-

tion. Undoubtedly there are difficulties to overcome, corrections to be made, and administrative improvements to be brought about through a wider experience with the problems presented. I believe these will be accomplished, for a movement, fraught with so many possibilities for good, will not be retarded by these objections which time will overcome. A large number of our philanthropic citizens are deeply interested in the development of Rochester's playgrounds. Their enthusiasm has been deepened and rendered more effective by practical effort, and the city administration is glad to co-operate with them in this important field of municipal development.