No. 14

THE HOME PLAYGROUND

BY

JOSEPH LEE

REPRINTED FROM
PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND ANNUAL PLAYGROUND CONGRESS
FOR THE
PLAYGROUND ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA
1 MADISON AVE., NEW YORK CITY
AND THE
PLAYGROUND EXTENSION COMMITTEE OF THE RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION

THE HOME PLAYGROUND

The home playground I have in mind is a piazza 36 feet long and 11 feet wide, on the roof of an L, behind a city home. It has a brick wall 3 feet high on one side, and a green fence, with the pickets too near together for a boy to get his toes between, and surmounted by a chicken wire, on the other. The piazza opens by a French window from a small room next the parlor, and I think it particularly fortunate that there is neither an ordinary window to bump your hat in nor a flight of steps to render the transportation of velocipedes and rocking horses difficult—nothing, in fact, but a sill to step over.

Most home playgrounds, perhaps, would be backyards rather than piazzas; but I think much the same treatment can be used in both, though, of course, clothes drying may interfere somewhat with their more serious and important uses in the case of the backyards. The use of this particular home playground (or rather of its predecessor, which was much like it) began with a baby in a clothes basket; and perhaps I might be permitted to linger a moment over the subject of clothes basket psychology. It is a curious fact, and one that seems to be received with difficulty by most mothers, that babies do sometimes need rest—that they do not always want to be chirked and chucked and tossed and worried and made to cultivate habits of observation; there are times when the cry on being let alone is a cry of relief, the first symptom of getting down to normal bearings. Children need, sometimes, as grown people need, to follow the advice of Dr. James Jackson, one of America's first and wisest physicians —to first lie down until they feel tired, and then keep on until they feel rested.

Still, the letting alone process should not be carried to fanatical extremes. When a baby gets her head through the bars of the crib, it is perfectly permissible to interfere before she strangles. Of course, also, at this clothes basket age, children need the appreciation, and indeed whole repertoire, of mother play, with its hundred forms of reciprocity.

Also, very soon after the purely motion plays of kicking his

legs and flourishing his arms and talking, there comes purposeful play. I think there is no more interesting thing in life than to see a baby find its hands for the first time. Certainly there is no greater epoch than that which he is then going through. Just think what it means! Those white clouds out there that he has long seen shifting and wavering about, moving in all sorts of fantastic lines across the sky—those strange fleeting intermittent phenomena—seem somehow to be connected with this sort of grunting and kicking power that he is himself inside of. There is a connection between the movement inside and the motion of the heavenly bodies, and he seems somehow to have hold of the steering gear. It is the first experience, beyond the comparatively indefinite one of hearing his own voice, in producing outward appreciable results, of being a cause. From that time forward this being a cause would be the center of his keenest interest. "The rattle of Archimedes," Aristotle says, "is good for children of this age." The rattle was perhaps the greatest discovery of that great scientist of the ancient world. Its advantage over an ordinary stick or spoon is that it attests the reality of results produced not only to the eye, but to the ear. There is nothing else, except possibly his little sister's hair, that combines these elements of satisfactoriness to the same degree. Not until he buys an automobile and so can make his record also on the sense of smell will he achieve a more inclusive satisfaction.

And Froebel was right when he said that soft, bright worsted balls were good playthings for this age. They are nice to grab; they are remunerative to look at. And they are better measures of the universe than most other things. The world, that is to say, is more reasonable when its contents are classified as round and not round, than when you try to arrange them as hair-pins and not hair-pins. So the physical impulses to grasp and wield find their best satisfaction when the desires for realistic achievement and for cultivating mental grasp are also satisfied.

Therefore, besides a chance to be let alone and a chance (when it is not too cold) to flourish his arms and kick his legs, the child of the clothes basket age needs a mother, a rattle, a ball, and a few other of the more primary playthings.

We now come to the earliest walking, but as yet not too obstreperous age—say from one and a half to six. (Of course, these ages overlap and, of course, they are not ages by the cal-

endar, but by the stage of development—what has lately been called the physiological age, based upon something of the same idea as was conveyed by John Boyle O'Reilly when he said that life is not measured by years, but by heart beats.) At this time of life I think the most useful adjunct of the baby's existence is a pen—not to write with, but to live in. Certainly in my own experience I have found that the pen is mightier than the nurse—at least in producing a contented mind. Ours was 5 feet square by about 26 inches high, a good height to stand and hold on by and to shake. It had a bottom of some waterproof material, buttoned on at the corners, that was good after a rain, especially on grass, and made it easier to move all one's worldly possessions at once.

The pen has a most interesting physiological effect in the direction of contentment. Children seem willing to spend hours and hours playing in it when they will soon get fussy if left outside. Often even after a child who has been running all over the playground or the room has already become tired and cross, he will, if taken up and put inside the pen, quiet down and play contentedly, singing to himself. There is evidently something about an insuperable, and therefore accepted, limitation that is very soothing to the childish mind. I suppose the reason is in the need of the simplification, simple life, of escape from a maddening crowd and a plethora of resources, of retiring to one's country home. The feeling is the same that, as reported by Mr. James, has driven many weary souls to seek the monastery; the desire to escape confusion and attain simplicity at any cost. Also you can look the other way, and know that he will not kill himself before you can look back.

Of course, from a very early age, you will want a sand-box. Ours is four by four feet and a foot high and has a cover, the legs of which stick up in the air when it is shut and support it on a level when open; when, also, it has an edge to keep the sand from getting pushed off. The extraordinary attraction of sand to work in has often been spoken of. Children never tire of it. The very day of their return from the seashore, where they had lived actually on a sand beach, ours rushed out and began playing with the sand-box as if they had never seen a handful of such material before. The reason, of course, as I have elsewhere stated, is that sand is plastic to their hand, and more, that it takes the form they imagine for it instead of following

some preconception of its own. Molds are good, and iron spoons, and receptacles to be filled, and sticks and stones that can be stuck up to make a garden, and water for ponds and rivers—though these last are rather soaky and disappointing. The pen, of course, can be pushed up beside the sand-box, and one can, as it were, have the advantages of a country and city home combined. The sand should be what is called "fine beach sand," not the coarse yellow kind which is sometimes too atomic in its bias, while the really fine sand the masons use is unnecessarily expensive. Bank sand is all right for the children. They are entirely impartial about dirt. It is merely a question of washing.

When a child has just learned to walk, he has a vast interest in the question of balance. He likes much to stand up on the box and feel it jiggle. He will perhaps undertake a rocking chair, with results in rapidity of vibration that are often interesting if your nerves are strong. A child likes to stand up on a toboggan. Above all, he likes to run down any kind of a bank; and the best is, of course, the one that makes a noise when he does it, such as may be produced by tilting a board up on the sand-box on one end. Having, as I supposed, invented this not very complicated piece of apparatus, and introduced it on our playground, I was both disappointed (because of the vanished opportunity for a world-patent) and gratified to learn that it was adopted by the Japanese in their institution for soldiers' children. I had my board hooked on the sand-box, so that it would not slip off and be a cause of grief. But any object on a playground, like any new institution elsewhere in the social fabric, is apt to produce other consequences than those foreseen. A board, whether supervisory, executive, or otherwise inclined, may be put to uses not intended by its designer. Ours, with one end on a chair, served as a bridge, as a boat, and—in conjunction with another board, with a gate that had become unhinged, and other objects of bigotry and virtue—as a sleigh for Santa Claus. Also it gives very good results when laid across one of the rollers of the sand-box so that the end hangs down when you run across it. Also it makes one side of a coast.

For as soon as the snow comes, we shut the sand-box, roll it to one end of the piazza (with its back to the sun so as to minimize melting), pile the snow up on it, and make a coast. The last day of coasting we open it again and it reënters on its office as a sand-box.

Interest in piling up—not necessarily coupled with efficiency —is marked from an early age. But from a still earlier age (perhaps three), and continuing I don't know how long (I am sure it lasts at least to forty-six), the interest in coasting is phenomenal. I have seen a boy of five, by no means lacking in discrimination of what is real life and what is not, coast all the afternoon on a wedge of snow one foot high on the top by three feet long at the base. To be sure, it was icy and perilous. This same boy at the age of seven, though he now fully appreciates the more exciting coasting on the Common, will still use the piazza coast all the afternoon when nothing better offers; and all the children have now used it pretty steadily from the ages of five to eight.

Of course, blocks are good on any playground for small children, but ours seemed to prefer the house to outdoors, even in warm weather. A rocking-horse has been used at intervals; also driving-reins for quadrupeds of the paradoxical two-legged variety. A velocipede, affording a valued variety in the game of tag, has been a great resource; also a carpenter's bench, which has spent part of its time on the piazza (under a rubber cloth at night) and part of it in a small adjoining room.

This vestibule, or annex, by the way, has been of much importance, affording a safe shelter, within easy reach, for things that don't like to get rained on, and being used as a general base of supplies.

Diabolo goes everywhere; likewise baseball, when the age comes for it. Snow-balling next door sets in at about six for boys.

Dolls have been a very present joy, including Teddy bears; and to the proper care of these an apparently indestructible doll carriage has contributed much.

We have flowers in boxes on our piazza, planted there; and the seeds planted in them, in May, are a good deal appreciated by the children, and very much so in some cases by the English sparrows. The interest in growing things is very strong when it takes hold—as it has done in one case out of four with us. A dog and a kitten seem, however, to meet the nurturing impulse more effectively in our case. (It is an interesting thing, by the way, that our dog, when he played tag, at first thought it necessary to grab up a piece of wood. I think he considered it a bone, and that you were chasing him to get it away.) Boys

seem to me to have toward animals fully as much of the maternal instinct as girls; and it appears, from facts reported by Darwin, that they have a good right to this inheritance.

We have also an indestructible vine (Boston ivy, of course) and an awning—necessary in summer.

But for every age, up to perhaps eleven, and on every kind of playground, there is, besides the desire for this and that particular thing, a desire for things undifferentiated. Almost anything will be put to use by a child. They want to handle the universe and get used to it, and almost any object is material for investigation or adventure. One child of eight, whom I was talking with about the resources of her backyard, said, "Well, you see we are very lucky, because we have barrels." I could see that the condition was a fortunate one; but I did not at first perceive exactly what form the good fortune assumed, until she continued: "You see there is a little bank, and we get inside the barrels and roll down." Of course she was, as she had stated, an unusually fortunate young woman; but I think if it had not been a bank, it would have been some institution equally remunerative. Like the little girl who was "very lucky with a lamp before the door," my little girl's father also was a banker, and perhaps that had something to do with it.

I have sometimes meant to make an inventory of the objects presented on opening our sand-box, but never felt quite equal to the task. I remember a very solid copper coal-hod. I don't think I ever saw it used for anything, but I feel that it must be satisfactory to know that it is there. There are many bits of wood of different shapes and sizes, a tennis ball, two rollers to move the sand-box, and several pails.

Precisely what a child from three and one-half to four years old did every morning from 10 to 12 I am unable to record, except that she was always happy, always occupied. This last winter, at the advanced age of four and one-half to five, she can be partly accounted for as a kindergarten child; that is to say, one whose resources have been definitely developed—instead of being left to nature, which is a modern name for the uneducated nursery maid, so that she is able to do things for herself. I know that dolls and the baby carriage have a great deal to do with it; but also I think that absorbed and contented occupation will generally result in the case of a child full of life in any place where there are things to visit, handle, and pretend things about.

Of course, this was the case of a rather remarkable child; but then, every other case is like it in that particular respect, as one can always ascertain simply by asking the mother. But one caution should be suggested: if a child is not happy under such conditions, do not be fierce and unreasonable, but supply the resources which it seems to want.

Another case, which, though it is of a house on the seashore, is also that of a backyard, and largely the story of a little apparatus. The whole lay-out consists of a horizontal beam 12 feet long, supported by three uprights at a distance of 10 feet from the ground, running parallel to a fence about 10 feet off and 2 feet lower than itself. Between the two are three nearly horizontal ladders, all supported at the fence on one end; one supported on the beam and the two others on a bar and vertical ladder respectively at a height of about five feet from the ground. There is also a slide running down from the said bar on the side away from the fence. The fence connects with a piazza about 10 feet long, so that when you drop from a ladder or go down the slide, you can run up onto the piazza and escape back onto the ladders along the top of the fence.

The essential cause of the popularity of this apparatus—which has been very great and fairly continuous among children varying in age from four to fourteen, and especially between the ages of six and ten—has been the fact that tag can be played on it; that is to say, the popular thing has not been doing stunts, but playing the game. I think, also, the complication of the arrangement, including the use of the piazza, has been essential. I know I tried a similar lay-out on a city playground, minus the piazza, and nothing satisfactory has resulted.

Also I remember an English elm on which I once assisted in rigging up a couple of old well ropes, tying them pretty near the top of the tree, and bringing each down and hitching it with a turn near the end of various branches until it reached the ground. There were thus three ways of getting up the tree,—two ropes and the stem,—and we played "jaguar and monkey" there with great satisfaction for several summers.

A curious experience to me in connection with this apparatus was the discarding of swings. I am a believer in swings on a city playground. They are popular in all weathers; the falling and rising, pull and relaxation, going forward and back, seem somehow to fit our sense of rhythm—like sleeping and waking,

working and rest, society and solitude, Republican and Democrat, tweedledum and tweedledee. A little hypnotic, perhaps, but there is also training for the imagination. With me it was wolves and Indians, but almost any kind of galloping adventure will meet the requirements.

Nevertheless, we discarded swings. I think that, as compared with a strenuous game, it seemed trashy, sensational; an emotional experience rather than an exercise of character. Also it led to quarrelling. The above ruling against swings, however, is not to be so construed as in any way to prejudice the right of walking up the inclined poles of the slide by means of a rope attached to the swing fastening in the beam above, and then jumping off near the top of said slide and holding by the rope in such a way as to obtain a suitable swing, and so landing on your feet—or as fate wills—at the end of it. The exercise of this reserved right is valued at least at the age of five.

The apparatus has proved especially valuable to a child who was a little hysterical about trying almost any physical feat. From being unwilling to venture going hand over hand under a ladder, she got in a year to go along skipping two rungs and swinging by the third.

A tilt was useful for a while; but the board was afterward needed to make a coast; and when one boy had got a splinter sufficiently large into his toe by that process, the board was promoted to serve as the basis of a raft, which position it now holds.

Of course, do not think that any home playground is enough. Other people's cellar doors have fascinations as well as our own. There must be variety of scene as well as of employment. There must be nature—real grass to rub your nose in, and things to bring home in your pockets to excite inquiry as to the source of fascination on the part of one's denser elders. Also a boy of seven who can shoot the waves all day in his own boat, or one who can perform even greater feats in private war, will sometimes feel that he has a soul that no sand-box or things that savor of the sand-box can always and entirely fill.