WHAT THE PLAYGROUND CAN DO FOR GIRLS

Paper of Miss Beulah Kennard

The playground as we now understand it may be defined as a system of social education essential to the proper development of the children of to-day, supplying for them what they have lost through changes in home and school environment, and becoming, if it is a well-organized playground, an important factor in making them happy and useful members of society. It matters not whether the playground is a part of the school system or is operated independently; it has these characteristics and possibilities, and we are beginning to realize that we have grasped the big end of a very big undertaking. In spite of our efforts to keep up with the playground idea, it is constantly surprising us with new problems in a wider field. We have met the boy and he is ours. Although we cannot supply all that is lacking in his home and school, he knows that we are doing our best, and he comes to the playground with an open mind, eager to attempt anything that looks interesting, no matter how new or how hard it may be. Why have we not been equally successful with the girl? If the girls are everywhere our weak point, as Mr. Joseph Lee said some years ago, which is at fault—the girls or the playground, and what can we do about it?

Our girls are certainly more difficult to reach than boys. They have no need to work off steam in play because their physical condition is almost always below normal, and they often have cares which burden their childish souls and take away all desire for play. We have counted thirty-six babies among the hundred and fifty children on a girl's playground. To the initiated that meant a corresponding number of sister mothers, about one-fourth of all the girls, who could not play
at all unless we started a sort of coöperative day nursery for their spoiled charges.

Unless she is very little, the playground girl thinks it improper or ungraceful to run and jump. Her nearest approach to activity is swaying in the basket swing, which is about as exciting as a rocking-chair.

The playground could do so much for these girls. They are sure to have less time to play than their brothers, as well as less inclination and greater need. Their free hours should be treasured and used to the best advantage, while nothing should divert us from our purpose to secure for them the greater possible enjoyment and the most symmetrical development. We should multiply attractions and devise new and fascinating games that we may beguile them into youth. At present the best playgrounds fill their office but lamely.

We have often had to bribe girls with sewing in order to entice them to enter our enchanted play castle, but the time for sewing has always been strictly limited, and no offense met with such stern disapproval as the lengthening of the sewing hour. However, this limitation is but a negative virtue on our part. The craving for sewing is so nearly universal that it must arise in a normal primitive instinct for industry, and that instinct cannot be thwarted without injury to the girl. We would let her sew if our objection rested on a theory of play alone. A more serious physical and psychological objection is in the size of the tool used in sewing. Tools form a very important part of the play equipment of the boy. According to his natural instinct and the best pedagogy, he begins with tools requiring only the use of his larger muscles, gradually substituting more delicate tools as he acquires skill and dexterity. The favorite and often the only tool given to girls of seven or eight years is a cambric needle. Yet we wonder that motor memories begin to decrease among females between ten and eleven! At the same age they increase among males. Having observed the sitting position in nearly all of her occupations, and the decline in running plays after the age of nine, we still say that the subsequent phenomenon is due to a difference in sex.

It is time for us to study the social inheritance and the environment of our boys and girls before generalizing about these secondary differences in sex. The woman's gifts to civilization have been many. The field of her earlier occupation
was wide and in manufacture her artistic touch was sure. Who
that has seen the basketry or the pottery of those early women,
with its originality of design and exact reproduction of con-
ventionalized forms, can doubt her power? It has been authori-
tatively stated that when women invented basketry they made art
possible, and again that the whole body of decoration that has
come out of the textile industry originated in a woman's brain.
When manufacture was commercialized, it became a man's
business. Both the product and the women have thereby
suffered somewhat in quality. The instinct for creating is still
in the girl, but more or less perverted by utilitarian standards.
If she is willing to work, we ask for immediate practical returns
from her labor. The playground, which is concerned in the
making of men and women rather than of things, should turn
this primitive instinct into channels in which it will develop
the girl instead of causing arrested development. Here is the
place for primitive industries, weaving, basketry, pottery,
embroidery, and the lighter forms of woodwork, which all have
educational value and yet may be essentially play interests,
as they were to the primitive girl. Since the advent of machinery
women have lost instead of gaining in creative imagination. On
the industrial side their training is far narrower than it used to
be. If we would restore to art the dignified feminine grace of
the early women's handicrafts, we must enrich and lengthen
the youth of our women in order that they may have complete
development.

The great need which the girl brings to the playground is
the need for a longer childhood, with time and material for
growth. President Hall has said of women that "At their
best they never outgrow adolescence as men do, but linger in,
magnify, and glorify this culminating stage of life, with its all-
sided interests, its convertibility of emotion, its enthusiasm
and zest for all that is good, dutiful, true, and heroic." Evi-
dently Peter Pan is the normal feminine type, charming, illusive,
with much convertibility of emotion and zest for the true, the
good, and the beautiful, but, if we read youth aright, without
stability or sound judgment or the perfection of ripe maturity.

We have long wished to know what was the matter with us,
and this authoritative diagnosis is most illuminating and satis-
factory, if not pleasing to our vanity. It is true that our
deficiencies and many of our troubles are caused by our never
growing up. No Rabbi ben Ezra can say to a woman, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be," for she cannot do it. Her culminating stage of life is in the past. As Dr. Hall defines the perpetual adolescence of women it sounds rather attractive, as if he had said, "Women never grow old." If we could believe that, we should be perfectly happy, for none of us wants to grow old. But unfortunately other psychologists as well as our own observation forbid us to understand it so. Girls and women under ordinary circumstances grow old faster than boys and men. At puberty girls are only a year in advance, but the difference steadily increases unless checked by an unusual development on her part. The obvious cause of the youthfulness of certain women of our leisure class is their freedom from labor or care of any kind. Among the poor both sexes age fast, yet the women keep well in advance. Arrested development and early senility accompany each other, so that there is no contradiction in the apparent youth and real age of women. Have-lock Ellis says plainly that women show signs of arrested development in adolescence, the greater youthfulness of physical type being a radical characteristic, and the proportions of women tending to approximate those of small men and children. Among primitive peoples, on the contrary, the height of the women was often ninety per cent. of that of men. The early aging of women is sometimes pathetically and unconsciously admitted by themselves, as in the case of two women who were lying in adjoining rooms of a New York hospital. Each was recovering from a painful operation, and during the long convalescence they became much interested in each other. One was a city woman of education and refinement, and she frequently sent flowers and messages to the country villager on the other side of the thin board partition. It was the country woman’s good fortune to recover first. She came to say good-by to the dainty little creature who had helped to make her loneliness more endurable, and exclaimed: "You look just as I expected you to! I have been lying there wondering how you looked, because you were the only woman I ever knew who was always laughing. You laughed when your husband came in and when he went out. You laughed with your daughter and with your nurse. Sometimes you scolded, but you always laughed at the end. I did not think that women who were grown up and married could laugh, but now I am going home to learn to laugh myself."
Among the poor the art of play is so early lost and forgotten by girls that the members of working-women's clubs have very little idea of amusing themselves. They are not self-governing, but depend almost entirely upon the initiative and wit of the leader, while men's clubs in the same districts require only a meeting-place. Leaders of these women's clubs find childish games the most successful and debates must be fitted to a pathetically childlike intelligence. One club in this city took as a topic for discussion, "How long after the hair is out of curl papers is it becoming?"

The games which girls do play without direction cannot be called social games in any proper sense. Ring games, such as the Farmer in the Dell, which might be taken to represent the disintegrated family, King William, Little Sally Waters, Round and Round the Village, and the others which are favorites among girls have no organization beyond the choice of a partner, and no team spirit. Nearly all of them have a sickly sentimental tone which does not make for childish unconsciousness. If we can judiciously and carefully substitute for these frayed remnants of an essentially pernicious system of girls' games the wholesome fun of Jacob and Ruth or Three Deep, dancing games like Killie Ma Krankie, and the long list of folk dances, and especially team games from the simple "Gathering Nuts in May" to Prisoner's Base and basket ball, we shall have opened to the girl a new world, in which she feels herself a new creature, no longer passive and subjective, but acting with others in an orderly scheme of things, and she will be far better for having somewhat less "convertibility of emotion".

Dr. Gulick calls the plays of adolescence socialistic, demanding courage, self-control, endurance, bravery, loyalty, and enthusiasm. They are most of them team games, in which the individual is more or less sacrificed for the good of the whole, with obedience to a captain and cooperation among all the members. But the girls, who are deficient in the idea of organization and team spirit, as well as in some of the other "heathen" virtues, cease to play during these years, and so miss the advantage of that marvelously complete system of social education.

We need not wonder that the high soul of youth rebels. Not lack of womanly qualities, but the lack of an adequate womanly ideal, causes so many of our young girls to wish that they were men.
A well-organized playground with its varied and spontaneous social activities may be the school of a woman who shall in the present order fill the place of her prehistoric grandmother whose works do follow her. First, the playground will free and strengthen her body. Carmen Sylva notices that "the women of the present day all wish to become Amazons because they have found that they are bringing too weak a race into the world." She says, "They call it sport, but in reality it is the instinct of self-preservation and motherhood, a realization of the fact that the coming race must be hardier if it is to meet life and its conditions successfully."

The playground will free her mind from false notions, sentimentality, and foolish traditions by giving it poise, self-control, and a healthy tone. In all discussions of the peculiar dangers of adolescence much has been said of the necessity for boys to have an outlet for their nervous energy in order to avoid pathological conditions. Unfortunately, the dangers of girls have not been so clearly seen, because girls are more passive and more secretive. Would that the chivalrous opinion of Jacob Riis, that "all girls are good," were according to fact. Only those familiar with girls in reformatory institutions have a just idea of the amount of uncleanness of mind and sometimes of body that is found among them. The vicious and depraved are rare, but the girl filled with morbid curiosity and open to unhealthy suggestions is far too common. Another class is pure-minded but weak, and so lacking in self-control as to become the easy prey to stronger natures. A large number of perfectly good girls show an excessive sentimental development. They are overfond of fiction, dissatisfied with life, often petulant and depressed. But all the cobwebbed corners of their minds are swept clear by the invigorating air of the playground. I have seen a girl almost transformed by a season of basket ball and tennis. She was not only brighter and happier, but more truly womanly. The playground can have no more vital or important mission than the substitution of healthful, bracing, character-building play for the idleness and enervating amusements of these future mothers of sons. When we have a race of women pure-hearted, large-hearted, and brave, we shall not need to be concerned about the social evil.

In the girl's general development the playground is a school for initiative and organization, strengthening all the qualities
in which she is naturally weak, but its greatest gift to her will be breadth of view, enlarging her horizon to include those outside of her class or clan, and begetting in her the social consciousness which alone makes the individual life complete.

There is a woman in our city to-day whom we have made and are still making in our tenements, factories, and sweatshops, who is the lasting shame of our modern industrial system. Her sculptured type is Michael Angelo's "Night", that lies in San Lorenzo, a woman with sad, undeveloped features, the spirit shining dimly as through a veil. Chained to her destiny she lies, prostrate, stricken, and dumb. We cannot bear the burden of this woman unless we place beside her the vision of the larger, freer, nobler woman that is to be. Shall we inquire of the Greeks, who saw the ideal woman, though they did not make her? Shall our vision be the Venus of Milos standing in her maternal dignity and absolute repose, to whose skirts little children may safely cling; or shall it be the Winged Victory in her swift progress, whose strong, firm feet are on the earth, but whose splendid wings are for the upper air?

Mr. William J. McKiernan, Secretary of the Board of Playground Commissioners in Newark, N. J., will read the next paper, on "The Intelligent Operation of Playgrounds."

In our little army of playground workers throughout the United States we have many hard-working men and women who are attacking the problem in a practical, hard-headed way, and, while they are laboring at the tasks before them, never lose sight of the high ideals all their labors point to, and in their secret hearts they may have dreams of idealistic playgrounds, but their ideals and their dreams do not interfere with the practical problems to be solved in their daily work before the ideals can be accomplished or their dreams come true.