



**In a sense, you and I have always played in “adventure playgrounds.”**

We created a fort in the kitchen cabinets, jumped from couch to couch across oceans; we snuck out through a hole in the fence to a new world. We climbed trees and hid in bushes. We played in the mud and the rain. We chased each other, made secret worlds with our own language. We created spaces with whatever we could find around us. Some of us played in abandoned buildings, or barns, or vacant lots between buildings, used what we found and made up stories of our lives to be. We looked everywhere to find our space.

We made a children’s world in the city and in the country. Imagine, a place that provides all that, in the middle of a city. Here you go, hammers, saws, nails, wood, tires, rope, cloth, whatever you can find. Make it yours. You can change this playground right here, right now. You don’t have to make an appointment. You can walk or ride your bike, and there are people here to help and encourage you. What if you had that space? What if every child had that space?



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**ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS:**  
a children’s world in the city





## An afternoon ...

It is winter but the leaves are still on the ground. The playground is surrounded by a small wood in a city park. The fence around the playground is made from railroad ties and you can easily step over the fence, and they do; kids do not necessarily come in through the doors.

Sam arrives at the playground and steps over the fence. He spots Pete, the playworker, and he jumps and hugs him. Sam is 15 years old. He grew up at the playground and now volunteers as a playground helper. Sam and Pete sit down with the other staff around a wooden table and drink some tea.

Children start arriving at the playground, and they call from the window. Sam runs to the window, "Hello Beth!"

"I would like some nails and a hammer," she says and hands Sam her bike key. He puts the bike key with a Lego pirate, a sparkly bracelet, and other irreplaceable childhood possessions.

"Here you go," he replies. Beth is 10 years old with shoulder length brown hair. She's short for her age, and everyone thinks she is seven or eight. Beth comes inside with Matt. Matt is 9 years old and lives a couple of blocks from Beth.

"Pete! Pete!" she says, "Come play with us!" More kids surround Pete. Pete chases them out the door, and they run out of the building and jump onto a big cushy mat covered by a circus tent.

The kids bounce towards the edge of the mat and then hop back, tempting Pete to see if he can catch them. They try to avoid being captured, but not too hard. If they get pulled off, then they get thrown high up in the air and back down onto the mat.

On the other side of the playground a cluster of children slip out between the fence where the water flows through. The water creates rivers through the leaves and the children lay planks across the water and attempt to walk across without getting wet. The water is only a couple of inches deep but it doesn't seem to matter; the game is in their imagination.

Beth spots Sam and she is excited to see him. They have been hanging out all week. "Come help me and my friend Matt build something," she says.

"Sure," says Sam. Sam, Beth and Matt discuss the possibilities.

"We could build a pirate ship," says Beth.

"...Or a house and then we could build furniture," says Matt.

"We should build a tree house and a ladder to climb into it," says Sam.

"...Or a post office," says Matt.

"Yeah! And then everyone could have mailboxes so their mail wouldn't get lost," says Beth.

"Yeah, and all the houses could have numbers so they know where to



deliver the mail,” says Matt.

“That would be so cool!” says Beth. “Let’s do it.”

“Okay, so what do we need?” wonders Sam.

“Hmmm, okay Matt, you get three hammers and some nails...I’ll get the wood,” says Beth.

“Where should we build it?” says Sam.

“In the center of all the forts and houses in the playground!” says Beth.

“Yeah, how ‘bout next to Jaime and Molly’s house?” asks Matt.

“Awesome,” says Beth.

In a couple of minutes the carpenters meet up at the select spot carrying all the tools and wood. Sam has cleared “the lot” of a couple pieces of wood, a cart, and two tires. “Okay, Sam, you hold up that 4x4,” says Beth. She starts to nail a 2x4 (2 inch by 4 inch piece of wood) onto the 4x4 to start the base of the building.

Matt calls to Pete, “Come over! We are building a post office.”

“That is a great idea,” says Pete, walking over.

“Pete, can you hold the other 4x4 up so I can nail it?” Pete holds the wood up and Matt nails the 2x4 to it. They raise all the corner posts and then begin nailing in strips of wood around the sides, starting from the bottom and moving up. Some of the pieces don’t fit; they are too wide or too long, but they get nailed on just the way they are. They hammer at least one nail on each side of the boards. Sam says that it will be stronger if they put at least two nails on each side, so they do. They nail four 2x4’s around the corner posts and then lay strips of wood across the roof and nail them on.

“Let me try standing on the roof,” exclaims Matt. Matt jumps up and poses himself on top of the structure, grinning and laughing as the structure starts to sway slightly beneath him. “I guess we need to support this better,” he yells “Ahh, I am coming down.” He leaps off the roof as if it were a tall building, when in fact the post office is only 4 feet off the ground. “I made it,” he says. “Let’s go finish supporting the roof and the walls.” It has been about 2 hours since they started the post office and the outside is almost done.

“This is awesome,” decides Beth. “Tomorrow we can make a post office sign and decorate the inside.” Beth, Matt, and Sam sit inside the Post Office discussing their lives, school, their dreams, and eventually get around to how the post office will work.

At the end of the day, Pete does not bother to close the gate. He says it is winter and there are not so many children. As we leave, Beth and Matt and some other kids consider the details of their new postal system.

“Bye, Pete,” they all say.

“Bye,” says Pete. He knows they will watch the playground.





## Essence of adventure play:

### Learning & the Development of Social Relationships:

Children learn through contact--direct contact with different environments, materials and people. They learn through their relationships with other adults and children, they learn by doing things and manipulating their environments. At adventure playgrounds children gain knowledge through experience-based learning, by thinking through problems and ideas with adults and other children.

### Creation:

Children's ideas inspire the creation of their own activities, structures and games. Adventure playgrounds might be initiated by adults, but they are invented by young people. Children build the structures, create the activities, and in turn have an immediate impact on the nature of the playground.

### Community:

Community is important for children and for adults. Adventure playgrounds provide an opportunity for children to meet one another and make their own community through games, activities, and the development of friendships.

Adventure playgrounds become centers, accessible to the entire community, with both indoor and outdoor play areas. Adventure playgrounds can be located within a child's neighborhood, providing a free and open space that both children and adults come to whenever they want.

### Children in the City:

All children need a space that they can call their own, a place where they can be loud, dirty, silly, spontaneous and anything else they feel like. Adventure playgrounds can provide such a space even in the middle of a large city.

*"Adventure playgrounds were not the invention of an individual, but of the ingenuity of children everywhere who have always chosen the exciting never-never land of dump grounds, construction sites, and nature's areas for their play."*

*-Joe Frost, a professor of education*





# Why are Adventure Playgrounds important?

## A place for Play

Adventure playgrounds provide a space for children to play freely. Play is a right of all children as stated in Article 31 in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Play is essential for children to develop intellectually, physically, and emotionally.

At adventure playgrounds children get to play how they choose; they are not limited by fixed play equipment or by organized activities or games. Children are given the safety of an enclosed supervised environment. Playworkers are always present to mediate disputes between children and help them when necessary.

## A place for interaction

The environment of an adventure playground encourages social interaction. It is a social space in which children interact with adults and children. At conventional playgrounds, children tend to play mostly with their siblings, friends or caretakers. At an adventure playground, children create new relationships. Adults do not need to be present, stressing the importance of child-child interaction and relationships.



Children spend a great deal of time building structures, and doing so requires the help of their peers. Children converse to a greater extent with other children at adventure playgrounds than in conventional and contemporary playgrounds [two types of playgrounds with fixed equipment]. At an adventure playground children learn to negotiate their relationships.

## A community space, a space for children to call their own

A child at an adventure playground in Berkeley, California made a sign that said “our home.” Children feel ownership over the adventure playground, and they take responsibility for the space because it exists as a result of their efforts. Adventure playgrounds provide a space for children and adults which brings the larger community together.

## A place for development

Adventure Playgrounds provide a space for children’s developmental growth. At the Mark Twain adventure playground in Houston Texas a combination of surveys and standardized tests revealed that children’s aggressive behavior was reduced and opportunities for solving problems were increased. Children also made significant gains in social responsibility and social problem solving.







## Adventure Playgrounds around the world

T. H. Sørensen, a Danish landscape architect, noticed that children preferred to play everywhere but in the playgrounds that he built. In 1931, he imagined “A junk playground in which children could create and shape, dream and imagine a reality.” Why not give children in the city the same chances for play as those in the country. His initial ideas started the adventure playground movement.

The first adventure playground opened in Emdrup, Denmark in 1943, during World War II. In 1946, Lady Allen of Hurtwood visited Emdrup from England and was

impressed with ‘junk playgrounds.’ She brought the idea to London. These ‘junk playgrounds’ became known as ‘adventure playgrounds.’

From then on the movement grew to provide adventure playgrounds for children with disabilities and included the formation of the Handicapped Adventure Playground Association, currently known as Kidsactive. Adventure playgrounds spread throughout Europe, particularly to Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, the Netherlands, France and Germany. In Switzerland, the first two playgrounds opened in 1955, and in Germany in 1967.

Currently, about 1,000 adventure playgrounds exist in Europe, largely in Denmark, Switzerland, France, Germany, The Netherlands,

and in England. In Germany alone there are some 400 adventure playgrounds. Japan has a significant number of adventure playgrounds as well.

In the U.S. there are currently two adventure playgrounds, in Berkeley, California and in Huntington Beach, California. The Adventure Playground in Berkeley celebrated its 25th birthday in 2004. The adventure playground in Huntington Beach was one of the first adventure playgrounds in the U.S. and has been around since the 1970’s. Up until this year there were three adventure playgrounds in Houston, Texas as well as a Houston Adventure Play Association. They closed due to a loss of funding. Many of the adventure playgrounds that existed in the U.S. closed for

similar reasons, either loss of funding or loss of the lease on the land.

In 1999, Berlin hosted a worldwide conference entitled Anima21: Adventure Playgrounds and City Farms for the 21st century. The conference included workshops on working with animals, children as experts, diversity training, and local activities including felting, basket making, solar toys, wind games, creative wood work, and sound sculpture. The documentation of the conference is available online, with the link in the appendix.

Many people are working to make adventure playgrounds an available space for young people and still others have already integrated adventure play ideas into their existing playgrounds and community centers.

# Frequently asked questions

## Are Adventure playgrounds safe?

One of the main concerns about adventure playgrounds is that they are potentially dangerous. As Clare Cooper Marcus, a landscape architect, notes:

“It is true that the site is often rough, structures built by children may be hazardous, tools could be used in a dangerous way--but all available evidence indicates that the children are so absorbed in what they are doing, and so cautious in attempting anything beyond their present capacities, that the accident rate is in fact lower than that on conventional playgrounds with fixed equipment.”

Conventional playgrounds are safe only if children use them in the way adults intend them to i.e. if children do not climb where they are not supposed to, stay behind railings, and don't climb on top of certain structures. Children do not necessarily abide by these rules and often get injured at conventional playgrounds.

“The safety record of adventure playgrounds is excellent,” states Joe Frost, a professor of education. The Mountain Park adventure playground in Houston, Texas recorded few injuries. Only .014 percent of the 15,000 people attending the park during its first 4 months of operation sustained injuries and these were mostly skinned knees, scrapes, and hammered thumbs.

## What type of supervision is there?

Adventure playgrounds are staffed, whereas conventional playgrounds often are not. Every adventure playground has staff called ‘playworkers’ or ‘playleaders’ to supervise the playground. The playworkers are well trained in child safety and remain constantly aware of what is happening at the playground. Because children are part of the process of building adventure playgrounds, they are more aware their surroundings.

## Are there rules?

Ideally adventure playgrounds are unstructured spaces for children, but one must also provide a safe environment. Many adventure playgrounds deal with structuring a free environment by creating some basic guidelines and then letting the children do what they want within those set parameters. One of the ways to create order and safety in a playground is to have different areas of the playground designated for specific activities, for example,

for fire building, so that fires are not lit near wooden forts and huts.

A few rules are more useful than a long list that children don't remember. If children are aware of all the rules at the playground and do not get into trouble for rules they don't know about, the playground functions smoothly and the children are barely aware that the rules exist.

## What is the usual age of children attending?

Many playgrounds do not allow children under the age of five or six. Some allow younger children, but only if they are accompanied by adults. Children can come and go as they please. Adventure playgrounds are places children choose to go to, not a substitute for day care. Playgrounds that have smaller children have specific areas for those children that do not have older children or tools. At the Adventure Playground in Berkeley, California children six and older can be dropped off for a period of three hours at a time. Most playgrounds let children over five and six stay at the playground for the whole time the playground is open, sometimes for a fee. The playground usually has contact information for the parents of the children that attend. The playground does not take responsibility for keeping the children on the site.

## How does the playground get insured?

In the U.S. liability is a major concern, in spite of the fact that the accident rate is lower at adventure playgrounds than it is at conventional playgrounds. Lawsuits are much more of a common practice in the U.S. than in other countries. The good news is that adventure playgrounds can be covered under the same insurance as any other part of a city park's or recreation program. The adventure playground in Berkeley, CA is covered in this way. Roughly 3.5 million children ages 14 and under are treated for sports-related injuries each year in the U.S. More than 200,000 children are injured each year on playgrounds at childcare centers, parks, and schools. Falls onto playground surfaces are a contributing factor in 70 percent of injuries requiring hospital visits.

Many playgrounds in the U.S. are not supervised by trained staff. Adventure playgrounds have trained adults supervising the playground. They also do not have typical “playground surfaces”; they are usually covered in dirt, sand, and sometimes gravel to allow for vehicles to bring in supplies. Also, the majority of activity at an adventure playground involves building, construction, and talking. Children do climb to particular heights at adven-



# Get Involved! How to start an adventure playground in your community

Visit <http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu> for more info

*Building/Creating Materials:* most anything can be used for building

- **Wood-**
  - 2x4, 4x4, 2x6's are essential.
  - Use pallets, plywood, and other wood in moderation
  - Do not use: press board, pressure treated wood, or old painted wood
- **Tires-** all kinds, racing tires are good for hinges and other uses that require flexible rubber
- **Bricks/Cement Blocks**
- **Various cloth and carpeting**
- **Paint-permanent/water-based**
- **Foam**
- **Cardboard**
- **Furniture**
- **Stones**
- **Branches**
- **Rope/string/wire**

*Animals at the playground:* some playgrounds have animals and the children take care of and feed the animals.

**Including:**    • **Chickens**    • **Rabbits**    • **Guinea pigs**    • **Sheep**

*Games/Activity Materials:* At some playgrounds children can borrow equipment to ride around the park or play a game of hockey in the playground. They can also use equipment and supplies indoors.

- **Roller skates**
- **Bicycles**
- **Soccer balls**
- **Tricycles**
- **Playing Cards**
- **Board Games**
- **Hockey equipment**
- **Paper/Cardboard**
- **Pens/Markers/Crayons/Paint**

*Acquiring materials and equipment:*

Materials can be obtained from local businesses and organizations. Send letters and follow-up phone calls asking businesses to donate time/money/supplies. Contractors and other people doing construction are often happy to hear that they can give you their left over wood for free. It usually costs them money to dump their wood.

*Hiring Staff:*

The playworker watches over the playground but is not intrusive. Her or his job is to meet children where they are in the process of building, playing etc. and to help and support them where they need it. As Jack Lambert, a British playworker said, "I try to be all things to all children." They are an ally to young people. It is useful if a playworker is a friend and has the practical skills necessary, such as carpentry, to help children build.

Playworkers should be thinking about what is in the best interest of the young people attending the playground and what each of them would need in order to enable them to get the most out of the playground. Playworkers should be respectful of children and their capacities to do a lot independent of adults.

*Opening hours:*

- should be open after school 3 or 4 days a week for a 3 or 4 hours per day
- open on weekends and school vacations for longer periods
- some playgrounds are closed on Sundays and Mondays

*Borrowing equipment & rules:*

Most playgrounds have some rules concerning the borrowing of equipment. Some playgrounds have the children give in a bike key, or a playground ID to make sure that the tool is returned. The playgrounds maintain a list of all children in the playground and as children borrow and bring back tools, they check the tool off the list.

*Tools:*

- Hammers- brightly colored or marked for retrieval
- Hand saws- the shorter variety
- Nails-non-galvanized (easier to put in and take out), varying lengths
- Shovels- for children to dig, to distribute sand in fall areas
- Wheelbarrow- for carrying tools and supplies
- Tool boxes: for children, check out tools in toolboxes

*Activity ideas:* try simple projects using natural and found materials.

**Stick bread:**

- Wrap dough for bread around a stick like a snake.
- Hold over fire for 10 minutes or so. Ingredients: Flour, yeast, water.

**Water play:**

- Create a changeable water funneling system moving down a hill
- Use rocks, wood stoppers and shovels and sand to change the flow of water
- Make a mud slide, put a hose on top of hill, let ground get muddy, slide away!

**Tunnels/Digging:**

- Make a hole through the hill, tunnels, and underground crawl/walkways from one fort to another
- Make a maze out of wood, with a covered roof

**Camping:**

- Have an overnight at the playground or go somewhere else. Children can sleep in their own forts/houses.





## Appendix-References

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**“Making a fire and building are the best things to do! When you start to build a hut, you can't see the shape of it, but after a few months you see a wonderful hut, standing on the top of a mountain.”**

-Jonathan Ziyp, 19, a volunteer, has been coming to Kinerparadijs since he was 10 years old





## Web sites-

### International Links

**IPA [International Play Association] "Promoting the Child's Right to Play"**

<http://www.ipaworld.org/>

**Study of Adventure playgrounds and city farms in Europe and what they contribute to sustainable urban development**

<http://www.bdja.org/oli/index.html>

Lectures and documentation from the conference: **Adventure Playgrounds and City Farms for the 21st Century** [Berlin 1999]

<http://www.bdja.org/anima.htm>

### Adventure Playgrounds & Organizations

#### Canada

Canada's Office of Urban Agriculture-

**Rediscovering the Animation Playground**

<http://www.cityfarmer.org/AnimationPlayground.html>

#### Germany

**AKiB-** a federation of adventure playgrounds and children's farms in Berlin

<http://www.akib.de/english/english.html>

**BDJA-** Association of Adventure Playgrounds and City Farms in Germany

<http://www.bdja.org/english.htm>

#### Japan

**IPA Japan-** Japan's international play association

<http://www.ipa-japan.org>

#### Switzerland

**Speux** [Spiel und Jeux-Play and Play]-

Speux is the union of adventure playgrounds and children's programs.

<http://www.speux.ch/>

**Robi-Spiel Aktionen-** a Swiss Organization of Adventure Playgrounds in Basel

<http://www.robi-spiel-aktionen.ch>

#### United Kingdom

**Kidsactive** (formerly HAPA-Handicapped Adventure Playground Association)

<http://www.kidsactive.org.uk/>

**London Play-** "for every child in London to have high quality, accessible, and inclusive play opportunities."

[www.londonplay.org.uk/](http://www.londonplay.org.uk/)

**Playlink** - Playlink supports local groups in creating play opportunities for young people

<http://www.playlink.org.uk/>

**Fairplay-** promoting the child's right to play

<http://www.arunet.co.uk/fairplay/home.htm>

Intro to Adventure Playgrounds-

<http://www.arunet.co.uk/fairplay/facts/ad-play.htm>

#### United States

**Projects for Public Spaces (PPS)-** dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities

<http://www.pps.org/>

**Children's Environments Research**

**Group (CERG)-** provides a link between research and design, policy, and programs that improve environments for children

<http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/>

**Natural Learning Initiative-** promotes the importance of the natural environments for children

<http://www.naturallearning.org>

**Adventure Playground-** Open Year-Round **Berkeley, California**

<http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/marina/marina-exp/adventplgd.html>

**Adventure Playground-** Open Summers **Huntington Beach, California**

[http://www.ci.huntington-beach.ca.us/CityDepartments/comm\\_services/facilities/Huntington\\_Central\\_Park/Adventure\\_Playground.cfm](http://www.ci.huntington-beach.ca.us/CityDepartments/comm_services/facilities/Huntington_Central_Park/Adventure_Playground.cfm)

## About the Author:

Lia Sutton graduated from Hampshire College with a Bachelors of Arts in May 2005. This booklet was a part of her senior independent research project, *Kinderparadijs (Children's Paradise): Advancing the Adventure Playground Movement*. Sutton is a photographer and has photographed adventure playgrounds in California, The Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. She has worked at the Adventure Playground in Berkeley, CA and volunteered at Kinderparadijs in The Netherlands. She is interested in starting more adventure playgrounds in the United States and in making more people knowledgeable about adventure playgrounds and their importance.



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