

# **Playground activity in primary schools – Consultations with year 3 students 2005**

**Conducted by Heather Frohlich (seconded primary school teacher  
Central Coast Health Promotion 2005)**

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## **Background**

The benefits of physical activity to children's physical health, and the potential of schools as a setting, are well documented.

Heather Frohlich was seconded from her primary school teaching position to work in Health Promotion during 2005. The consultations reported on here, resulted from earlier work conducted by Heather in her own school.

The earlier work involved the completion of a survey by teachers who asked the students in their classes what activities they participated in during lunchtime (self reporting). The survey was first done in 2001. It was repeated in 2002 following a raft of interventions including increasing availability of equipment, training of sports leaders, and rewards for active play. Encouraging increases in reported PA were demonstrated for both boys and girls. Further interventions were implemented including the trial of girls and boys playgrounds (segregation). A follow up survey in 2004 demonstrated a very significant increase in reported physical activity among girls and no change amongst boys.

The earlier work seemed to be suggesting that the presence of boys might be a significant barrier to girl's participation in active play. Heather presented this research to a group from HPU in 2005. Lyndon Bauer, representing the R&E interests of the Unit, recommended that further investigation was warranted and Heather planned and implemented a series of consultations during 2005. The consultations were designed to investigate the possible implications of Heather's experiences in her own school in terms of whether some clear direction could be gained for possible health promotion initiatives.

## **Aim**

- To identify patterns of playground activity in primary schools
- To identify barriers to physical activity
- To identify factors that improve the level of physical activity
- To investigate the impact of gender segregation in playgrounds

## **Method**

Consultations were carried out with groups of children from a sample of primary schools in the area. The interviews were designed to elicit discussion on a number of

issues related to activity in playgrounds. This included the types of activities undertaken, the level of inactivity amongst the children, what barriers there may have been to playing games, how the playground was organised and how this affects children's play, and ways that children feel the situation could be improved to encourage them to increase their level of play.

### *Sample*

A total of seven schools were included. These were chosen to produce a sample of schools with a variety of sizes from fairly small schools to large schools. The amount of recreational space per child also varied from limited space to a large amount of space. The majority of the schools segregated the playground into Kinder – Year 2 and Years 3-6, some had all children from K-6 sharing the same space and one school segregated the playground into stage groups. The children interviewed were all from Year 3 (69 girls and 45 boys in total). Year 3 were chosen because they are in the middle age group in a K-6 playground and the lowest age group in a 3-6 playground. The consultations were also separated into boys groups and girls groups. The size of the playground, the segregation arrangements, and the population of each school are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – schools participating in focus groups**

<b>School</b>	<b>No. of students</b>	<b>Number and gender of participants</b>	<b>Size of playground in relation to school population</b>	<b>SES</b>	<b>Playground structure</b>
Berkeley Vale	900+	9 boys 9 girls	small	middle	K-2, 3-6
Kanwal	900+	9 girls	small	middle	K-6
Holy Cross Kincumber	300	4 boys 10 girls	very small	middle	K-2, 3-6
Narara	350	11 boys 9 girls	average	middle	<b>stage groups</b> K-2, 3-4, 5-6,
Umina	700	3 boys 13 girls	fairly small	low	K-2, 3-6
Wamberal	520	8 boys 9 girls	small	middle/high	K-2, 3-6
Warnervale	250	10 boys 10 girls	large	middle/low	K-6

### *Questions*

The consultations were based on a number of standard questions that were addressed to each group. These included:

- Is there anything that makes it difficult to play the games you like to play?
- Are there some days when you just sit and talk?
- Do you like the way your playground is organised?
- What happens at your school in the playground that we might be able to tell other schools about?
- What do you think would happen if the playground changed so that the children could play anywhere? That means you could have all children from Kinder to Year 6 in the same space.
- What happens at your school that makes playtime more fun?
- Any suggestions for improvements to your playground?

### **Analysis of Responses** – Individual responses were grouped together into themes

#### *Types of activities undertaken*

Children reported participating in a large number of activities. Amongst the girls this included activities such as running games, skipping, hula hoops, ball games - soccer and handball, play equipment, imaginative play (clubs, make-believe games), cartwheels, handstands and hopping. Boys particularly highlighted soccer as a popular activity, but also reported playing handball, basketball, running games and other active games such as skipping and using play equipment.

#### *Level of inactivity*

Very few children reported regularly sitting out at lunchtime from physical activity. The majority of children however reported sometimes sitting out. The main reasons cited included a lack of enjoyment in the activities available, a lack of equipment or space available to play their preferred activity and lack of friends. Often the girls described lunch time as an opportunity to catch up with friends or to plan social events. A few children used lunch as an opportunity for ‘alone time’. If children had been injured or games were continually being interrupted, they would report sitting out. Boredom and a lack of variety of games were also cited as reasons for children not to participate in physical activities.

#### *Barriers to Play*

There were several recurring themes highlighted across all schools, age groups, and genders relating to barriers to play. Children were asked whether there was anything that made it difficult to play the games they like to play. The answers were generally related to structural (safety, space, equipment), personal, and social issues.

**Safety** – This was a major concern for a large number of students. Many children raised the issue of safety in relation to age, that is, many younger children were concerned for their safety when playing in areas dominated by older children. They felt that crowded play areas also increased the risk of accidents. The appropriateness of facilities affected play, for example cemented areas limit the ability to play running games due to risk of falling. Some games were perceived to be particularly dangerous, such as dodge ball. Other safety issues that were raised included limited space to play soccer in certain areas, and environmental factors such as lack of grass on the oval increasing chance of injury.

Space – This was seen as another major limitation to play cited by a large number of children. Crowding in particular limited the ability to play certain games. Comments such as “Heaps of people get in our way” were given. Furthermore, there were disruptions to play due to interference from other children or stray equipment such as “flying balls”. In schools which had segregated play areas, some children commented that this contributed to crowding, as children chose instead to play in the unsegregated areas in order to be with their friends.

Equipment issues – The limited availability of certain equipment such as hoops and balls was seen as a barrier to play. Some children said that there was often not enough equipment to go around. Defective equipment, such as flat balls, could also be a limitation. Children reported that some days they were unable to borrow equipment as the stall providing equipment was not open, or only open for a limited period of time. At one particular school, several students stated they did not use equipment available because the stall was located some distance from their usual play area. Furthermore, due to the geographic location, popular equipment was often already taken by the time they got there. Sometimes the ovals would be closed for routine maintenance/ upgrades. Inappropriate clothing could also hamper efforts to play, such as not having a hat so unable to play outside, wearing a dress which limits ability to participate in certain activities, or poorly fitting shoes.

Personal issues – Level of physical ability was cited as a reason why some children felt unable to play as much as they would like, for example if they felt they had inadequate skills. This was particularly the case if younger children want to play with older children, or the girls want to play with the boys. Some would be put off playing because they ‘kept getting out’. Some children felt they lacked knowledge of the rules of various games. Health reasons such as asthma limit ability to play certain games. Some children said they got puffed out or tired when playing lots of active games.

Social issues - There were multiple social barriers to play highlighted by many children. Perceptions of bullying were prevalent. Many children described deliberate acts by other children to interfere with play. Commonly girls complained that boys, and in particular older boys, would often attempt to disrupt games. Similarly, younger boys reported interference by older boys. Types of bullying included intimidation such that children would move to a different play area, physically harming other children, stealing equipment off younger children, interfering in games or making themselves a nuisance, excluding certain people from play (perception that big kids only let the “cute” little kids play), cheating or choosing not to obey the rules of the game. However, the older boys also complained of interference by “little kids” running through their games. Some children did not participate in lunchtime activities due to social isolation. Reasons included a lack of friends, such as if someone were new or all their friends chose to play a game they weren’t interested in, all their friends were away, there were arguments between friends, or no kids in their age group to play with. This was particularly highlighted in schools which had segregated play areas. One girl commented the reason she chose not to play was that she was “really shy”. Some were reportedly not interested in the games that the children chose to play.

*Factors that improve play*

The children's perceptions of factors that could improve play centred around the following areas: Equipment, variety of activities, social factors, teacher involvement, available facilities and playground organisation.

Equipment - Provision of sporting equipment by the school, such as basketballs, volleyballs and soccerballs, was something the children felt was important. This included the provision of a range of different types of equipment to choose from.

Variety in activities – Variety in the types of activities available, including sports such as soccer, basketball, netball and other “games” such as tips was seen as positive by many children. Some also felt there should be non-sport activities such as colouring in competitions available, others wanted to be able to use the library or learn about nature.

Teacher involvement - Some students enjoyed teacher involvement in sporting activities, such as student versus teacher games, or teachers refereeing games.

Social factors – The children felt they were more likely to play where there was a friendly, sharing play environment which is inclusive of other children, where “people let other people run”.

Facilities - Children made a variety of comments about school facilities. The size of playing fields and amount of space to play were cited. Some liked the “calm and peaceful” environment at their school with a reserve “to help people learn about nature”. Access to the library or classrooms on certain days was said to be positive by some.

Playground organisation - With respect to playground segregation by gender, age or type of activity, both positive and negative aspects were expressed.

Positive comments centred on increased space availability, with less crowding and interference. This would also enable participation in certain running type games that require more space, and allowed for more variety of activity. “It changes every day” which enables “lots of people get to try different things”. Some felt there was greater equality in the segregated system, with everyone getting access to games and the chance to “have a go”. Some felt that the current playground organisation reduced bullying by older boys, and was a less crowded, friendlier environment in which everyone was able to have a turn. They noted greater use of certain areas, including the oval which may previously have been monopolised by older children. Some children felt safer as areas were less crowded, with less chance of being hit by balls. In terms of gender segregation in particular, positive comments included less distraction or annoyance by the opposite sex, with the opportunity to leave the mixed area if problems with the opposite sex occurred – “If the girls keep annoying you, you just go to a different playground”. Many of the girls also felt that this might address the fact that soccer had previously been dominated by the boys, and they were keen for older boys to be separated from them in the playground. Those playgrounds that were unsegregated reported more problems with older boys in terms of pushing, crowding and arguments. Age segregation was generally more supported by the children than gender segregation, with many suggesting that some activities were more appropriate for some ages than others. For example - “Stage 3’s... usually want

to play running games”. Some asked for “Markings for where the kindys can play”, and also for exclusion from certain pieces of equipment - “Kindys aren’t allowed on the monkey bars because they used to fall off”. A number of older children also felt that if ages were segregated they wouldn’t have to look after their younger siblings and be able to play themselves.

On the negative side, it was reported fairly often that the roster system resulted in a loss of freedom, limiting children to certain play areas/activities. Some did not like the rotation of activities as they would prefer to do the same activities all of the time. They also felt that segregation by activity may mean that friends interested in different activities might spend less time together. Children also felt that segregating boys and girls was negative because it split up friends. Comments included, ‘the girls wouldn’t get to know the boys – should be able to play together and get along’. There was a feeling that certain playground areas were being wasted through segregation. “You’re not allowed to go there even if no one is playing there” due to allocation to a different stage. There were a quite a few negative comments regarding gender segregation. Girls said that they wanted to be able to play with boys their own age, some wanted to be able to ‘challenge the boys’. They also felt it could cause wastage of certain areas by genders that might not utilise them. Some suggested that bullying of younger students could still take place – “Big boy and girls can still bully the little boys and girls”.

## **Discussion**

A variety of suggestions could be made based on the analysis of the responses. These can be classified into themes of safety, social changes (including regulation), equipment, facilities and activities, and segregation.

- *Safety issues* – An increase in grassy areas or replacement of concrete areas with rubber tiles or poured synthetic surfaces may help children to feel safe whilst playing balls games and running. Separation of ball games from less vigorous activities also increases the sense of safety and the likelihood of increased activity.
- *Social changes* – Making the playground as friendly and inclusive as possible encourages play. Many children highlighted their wish for more regulation of play with monitoring and referees for games. The perception of bullying was a major deterrent to many children and any methods to decrease the opportunity for this is likely to increase levels of play. They suggested there could be monitors from the older years to oversee their games, others preferred more teacher involvement. For those children that are shy, feel they don’t have friends, or are excluded, it could be beneficial to have occasional organised activities that all can be included in. There were a few children who clearly felt much more confident doing quieter activities such as reading, or sitting in designated nature areas and learning about nature. It seems important to allow this opportunity to build their self-confidence in a way that won’t be possible in a busy playground, however maybe it is possible to find ways to work in some physical activity in these areas.
- *Equipment* – A wide range of well-functioning, fully available equipment will also encourage play. It appeared the children were more likely to use it if it

was available close to the areas where it is used. If they found it unavailable on some days this discouraged them in the future. Some children also highlighted the need for equipment other than balls – such as hula hoops, and they also asked that popular equipment be rotated so it could be available to all. As a number of children felt unable to play because they didn't have hats it may be useful to have a supply of old hats.

- *Facilities and activities* - A variety of aspects regarding the improvement of play environments were raised by the children. The addition and better maintenance of grassed areas, repair of cracks in the concrete, better fencing of areas, and a rubbish-free environment to play were all suggested. In general children felt that the larger the play space and the more varied the range of activities the better.
- *Segregated play* - Separation of students into different groups based on age, gender, or both, produced both negative and positive responses. It did seem that some level of segregation would be popular in order to facilitate the more vulnerable younger children or girls to play. However there were also reasons why it might limit play for some, for example to those who play with children from different ages or gender. It appeared that segregation by age was more popular than by gender although this also showed some variation. Many children supported the mixing of boys and girls and their comments highlight the importance of the genders mixing as part of learning to socialise. However the girls often wanted to be separated from older boys. Soccer games seemed to cause a lot of problems for those that wanted to play other games, therefore separating soccer games from other activity would be useful. This was the area in which gender segregation was more positively received as girls seemed unlikely to play soccer with boys. It appears that if segregation is to take place it may be most effectively implemented if based on the local dynamics of each individual school and further local research might be useful before implementing segregation, in particular gender segregation. Suggestions where segregation does take place include a rotation system for different year levels to access the facilities, more age appropriate activities, and division of facilities between different groups.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The responses to the consultation clearly support a number of issues as very important to promoting physical activity. These are;

- adequate space
- convenient provision of a variety of equipment and activities
- a safe, friendly, and sharing play environment (keeping soccer matches away from other activities is a useful and simple tactic to promote this)

A couple of issues raised that are interesting but were not particularly common in the consultation were;

- the value of provision of more supervised activity by older students or teachers
- a need for decent fundamental skills to encourage joining in.

The issue of segregation, particularly on gender basis, is not clear, with significant arguments for and against. In some instances the social barriers such as isolation appeared to be worse in segregated playgrounds. Age segregation appears to be a more popular strategy than gender segregation. Further investigation (pilot study?) would be required to further define the value of segregation as a strategy. It is likely that individual school dynamics will have a significant impact on the value of this approach.

So, what does this mean for Health Promotion..... Encourage schools to

- offer a variety of interesting equipment (check out the excellent 'Let's Play' resource developed by Heather during her time here) and an effective loan scheme (there are plenty out there – check out Wyoming P.S for example on our Schools on the Move resource).
- make as much space available as possible for active play. Resist the urge to limit play in certain areas.
- offer a variety of activities during breaks. HPU has been teaching schools yard games through the PDHPE Network. New activities for breaks can be taught during PE lessons. Fads such as skipping ropes, handball, hoola hoops should be regularly revisited.
- provide a safe environment through adequate supervision. Many kids respond to teachers getting involved
- continue to focus on fundamental movement skills as the cornerstone of primary school PE
- consider segregation based on age if the school's environment will support it. Success is likely to be a very individual thing.

#### Useful Reference

'In the Zone' - Sports Council Wales – strategy for increasing physical activity during lunchtime