

A Plan for Playground Games

The Peaceful Playgrounds program reduces discipline problems and promotes development of social and motor skills.

by Emily Graham, PTO Today Magazine



Recess is meant to be a break from the classroom, a time for making friends and make-believe. But in reality, recess often involves intense competition, playground bullying, and conflicts that carry over into the classroom. As enrollments have risen at elementary schools across the country, playgrounds have become crowded, increasing the risk of accidents and hot tempers sending children to the principal's office.

Former teacher and elementary school principal Melinda Bossenmeyer launched Peaceful Playgrounds 15 years ago to address discipline problems and advance social and motor skills development. The Peaceful Playgrounds concept takes a resource most playgrounds already have—open space—and transforms blacktops and fields into play areas for different age groups with activities such as tetherball, wall ball, and Frisbee golf.

About 7,000 schools in the United States and Canada have implemented the program to some degree, according to Bossenmeyer. Starting up the program, from training and planning to painting game outlines, takes about six weeks. Many schools choose to teach children the new games during physical education periods.

With more choices during recess, children are more likely to engage in physical activity. But the program is about more than playing hopscotch. Peaceful Playgrounds includes a component to teach children conflict resolution skills to reduce discipline problems. School staff members receive training and then teach students the new schoolwide rules.

Using a consistent set of rules, equipping children with conflict resolution skills, and providing them with more playground activities caused the number of children sent to the principal's office to fall dramatically at E. Hale Curran Elementary School in Murrieta, Calif.

In the school's first year of implementing Peaceful Playgrounds, injuries on the playground requiring medical attention fell by 66 percent, and discipline referrals to the principal from the playground and the classroom decreased 64 percent, according to a study conducted by Bossenmeyer. "Teachers reported they spent less time dealing with issues that spilled over into the classroom from recess, and more children were physically active," she says.

School Rules

In addition to heading up Peaceful Playgrounds in Canyon Lake, Calif., Bossenmeyer, who has a doctorate in educational leadership, is director of the North County Professional Development Federation for the San Diego County Office of Education. From her years as a physical education teacher and school administrator, Bossenmeyer knows plenty about what goes wrong on playgrounds. As she developed the Peaceful Playgrounds concept, she observed playgrounds to see what was not working.

"Children were arguing about rules, and it was really through no fault of their own," Bossenmeyer says. "One class was playing by Mrs. Smith's rules, and another class was playing by Mr. Jones' rules. The first thing we did was set up one set of rules for games for the whole school."

Too often, children were sent from the playground to the principal's office or the school nurse. Bossenmeyer developed a method to teach simple conflict resolution skills. Through the program, children in a dispute are taught to walk away, talk it out, or resolve the disagreement by playing the game "rock, paper, scissors." If children continue to argue, a teacher will remove them from the game. When faced with the choice of resolving disagreements or sitting out from recess, most students choose to settle disputes by playing "rock, paper, scissors."

At Casillas Elementary School in Chula Vista, Calif., students learn the playground and game rules at the beginning of each school

year. This saves time and reduces disputes over the rules later on, says Principal John Nelson. The school implemented the program in 2001.

“We spend a lot of time going over the rules of these games to ensure understanding by all,” Nelson says. And students take the problem-solving strategy of “rock, paper, scissors” from the playground into the classroom, he adds.

“What you realize is children can handle their own problems if only we give them a few skills,” Bossenmeyer says. “In a rapid fashion we see a difference in the way children interact with each other. It really affects the school climate.”

A New Way to Play

During most school recess periods, students congregate in a few areas on the playground, such as sports fields or playground equipment. Only 15 to 20 percent of students take part in game play such as four-square or basketball, while most others engage in free play, where injuries and fights occur more often. Still other children hang around the edges of the playground, and large areas of the playground go unused.

Peaceful Playgrounds sells templates for painting outlines for galloping tracks and jumping grids on the playground, giving children a choice of competitive and cooperative games.

After six months using the program, as many as 80 percent of children voluntarily participate in game play, according to Bossenmeyer.

The program can help growing schools make the most of their playgrounds. “Today, especially in urban schools, it’s not unusual to have 300 kids on the playground at once,” Bossenmeyer says.

Peaceful Playgrounds sells kits for \$995 that include templates for marking the playground, activity guides, and staff training materials. Kits are available for age groups from preschool to the sixth grade. At many schools, parents have painted the play areas, spending about \$150 on paint, Bossenmeyer says. The game patterns also can be painted onto canvas or a vinyl rug and used in the school gym during inclement weather.

For more information on the program, visit www.peacefulplaygrounds.com.

5 Components of a Peaceful Playground

1. Implement a consistent set of rules. Without consistent rules, children may play by different rules or make up new rules themselves. Children should be taught the rules at the beginning of the school year and be expected to follow them throughout the year.

2. Teach children to resolve conflicts. When they are taught conflict resolution skills, children can resolve most confrontations without adult intervention. The Peaceful Playgrounds program teaches children to walk, talk, or rock—walk away from a dispute, talk it out, or settle it by playing “rock, paper, scissors.”

3. Add game markings to open space on the playground. By adding game markings to open space, schools can affordably add new activities to their playgrounds.

4. Make sure there is enough playground equipment. Peaceful Playgrounds creator Melinda Bossenmeyer recommends having at least one piece of equipment (balls, jump ropes, etc.) for every 10 children on the playground, or one piece of equipment per game. Playground equipment is as important to recess as pencils and paper are to the classroom.

5. Have consistent expectations. After teaching students the new games, make sure they follow the rules. Playground monitors, as well as teachers and principals, should know the rules.