

# The playground: Place of wonder and imagination



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**I**T is a peculiar thing but the past seems to linger much longer in the playground.

Whilst politicians constantly change the rules of the game, in the playground the rules are passed from one generation to another, with little variation. Thanks to an oral history, playground games have survived.

The danger today is that this wonderful link that may even go back to medieval times is now being broken by TV and computers which are now inventing new games and new rules.

In the 1970s Iona and Peter Opie, in their book *Children's Games in Street and Playground*, reported that games were flourishing in the playground and that there was a local name for many of the 164 distinct games they recorded.

In my own little village infant school we played hop, skip and jump and tig, sometimes wearing old army gas masks, left over from the war. When the girls skipped or tucked their skirts in their knickers to do handstands, we boys simply ran round shooting each other or gave each other 'Chinese burns'.

Many of the games we played are still going today - piggy in the middle, ring a ring o' roses, the farmer's in his den. Whilst yoyos and wooden spinning tops had been around since Ancient Greece, Hula Hoops, invented in 1958 by Arthur K 'Spud' Merlin, were the new big thing. We played marbles endlessly and 'booled' car tyres. Geordie comedian, Bobby Hooper once described booting a tyre with a stick all the way to Whitley Bay, 'then when I lost my stick I had to walk back'.

When I entered the junior school things changed. First of all there were two yards - one for boys and one for girls. Football began to dominate the boys' yard. The growth of the beautiful game was the death knell for boys' games. Once teams were picked the rest of the school simply had to stand aside. We swapped shooting each other for shooting goals.

My memories of the playground, inside and outside of school range, from a warm recollection of adventure and discovery and a place of danger and anxiety. The fun bit was mainly after school and at weekends.



► Playtime can't come soon enough for these pupils back in 1962

The perilous place full of threat and menace was the school playground. I reckon our school playground was so dangerous the school magazine should have had an obituary section.

However, I did learn one big skill - how to dodge and avoid collisions. Most of the boys' games consisted of a chase, a capture and then a release. Perfect training for our sports people of the future. Perhaps the demise of playground chase games is the reason why English football has not won a World Cup since 1966.

In my secondary school the bullies dominated the playground. It was they who controlled the illegal trade in cigarettes and decided which part of the yard was a 'no go area'.

Playgrounds were never seen as part of my school education. They were places where another form of education took place. There were rituals such as having my new school cap being stuffed down the toilet. It was also the place where I learned to spit through cigarette smoke rings - a skill which I no longer apply.

So are playgrounds better today? Certainly playground equipment is safer, there is better supervision. It is a safer, less challenging and possibly a less interesting place. In many schools the playground is a 'no go area'. Playtime is reduced so there is less opportunity for 'disruptive behaviour'.

Today there is a new playground. It is easy to get in and hard to keep people out. The modern playground is outside the school playground and the local community. It is now through social media that young people invite each other to parties. Snapchat is the playground, no longer the yard or the woods. As American actor Albert Brooks comments, 'Twitter is the Devil's playground'.

Today I collect my grandchildren from school. I stand amongst mainly mothers with the odd grandfather or dad. To observe your own children in the playground will tell you more

about them than any conversation at tea time. Here is the dilemma. If the playground is their private world, then surely we should not encroach. Yet if we care about our children surely we would want to be assured that they are safe.

The advice I would give to every parent is teach your children about how to behave in the classroom and the school playground. 'In the classroom be quiet and listen to your teacher and ask good questions, but when you go out to the school playground, as long as you are safe, be as daft as you like.'

The loss of the playground is a serious thing. In playgrounds we discover our identities - not always favourably.

Some learn to give way as others govern the yard, the gentle stand silent as bullies dominate the playground, the non-athletes crowd together and watch as the sports people demonstrate their skills.

The danger is that these behaviours will influence other arenas - the classroom and the workplace. Perhaps we should start a programme called 'How to survive the playground and avoid it influencing the rest of your life'.

The playground can also be a source of a person's uniqueness and creativity. It is a wonderful environment for developing our capacities and talents. Today my playground is increasingly the internet. Occasionally I find it populated by the idiots and bullies who name-called and taunted us in the school yard. The internet can be the worst kind of playground as the bullies are anonymous.

Even so I want to hang onto to the belief that the playground, including the internet, continues to be a place of wonder and imagination - just like the school yard. I have worked hard all my life - time now to play!

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