



Play Trends





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Introduction

Play is intimately connected to people’s lives. As our lives evolve with the changing world, play evolves, too. Shown here are some current trends in play. You may not see all of these happening right now in Alexandria, but they may be coming soon. Not all of them apply directly to 2-5-year-olds, but the play of that age group happens in the context of all play, so these trends may help to inform steps to take to improve play for the target group of this study.



Trends in Play

- Multigenerational Play
- Destination Playgrounds
- Play Assistants
- Skate Parks
- Splash Parks
- Natural Play
- Climbing Features
- Electronic Play Equipment
- Theming
- Movable Things and Parts
- Learning Landscapes—School Yard Initiatives

Multigenerational Play

Children, even 6-12-year-olds, rarely play without adults present these days. In order to make playspaces more available to children, they must be made more engaging to adults, so that they will take their children to play.

In addition, play has benefits for people of all ages. It gives parents a way to connect with their children and each other. It gives active older adults a way to strengthen their bodies. It gives everyone the chance to improve their health and, therefore, their quality of life. And best of all, play provides an opportunity for people of all ages to interact, spend time together, and learn from each other.



Recognizing this, opportunities are being created for people of all ages to play together. For example, gardening, nature study, and art are activities that children and adults can engage in together. Incorporating opportunities for these activities in playspaces allows everyone to participate. This suggests the development of multigenerational parks where a central goal is increasing health and wellness for everyone. Society needs more opportunities for families and individuals to be physically active, across the spectrum of age.

Along this line, fitness for older adults is now being incorporated into “play” features that can be placed adjacent to children’s play areas so that adults can be active while their children play nearby.

Destination Playgrounds

While offering playspaces near homes is important in getting people to play, the creation of places where families can have an outing, spend more time, and enjoy a variety of activities will entice them to get out of the house for longer periods of time. Destination playgrounds are ones that attract people through interesting themes, special features, and compelling locations, and by providing comfort and convenience features that allow people to stay longer, such as restrooms and perhaps even food and drink. These playspaces can be located near cultural centers, shopping districts, and other destinations that bring people from a wider area to stay longer.

Play Assistants

Staffed facilitators have been a part of European playspaces for a long time. Until the 1960s New York City playgrounds were all staffed by “parkies.” Playground leaders and day camp programs were once a mainstay of American parks and playgrounds but have largely disappeared in the past few decades. However, monitored playgrounds could make a comeback as a way to address the need for play in a world of fear, insecurity, and a lack of time to spend at the playground with children. Programs are already occurring at recreation centers and other indoor facilities where monitoring and controlled access is easily accommodated. This concept could be extended to outdoor playspaces with relatively little infrastructure improvements, especially at schools and other locations where monitored play already occurs during the day.

This type of activity is present in Alexandria now in the form of playgroups, which are proving to be popular ways for newcomers to find places to build community while their children play.

Playgrounds with Moveable Parts

It has been found that outdoor playspaces that contain materials that children can manipulate—sand, water, mud, plants, pathways, and other loose parts—offer more developmental and play opportunities than spaces without these elements.





Imagination Playgrounds

David Rockwell, an architect in New York City, has promoted a playground concept called Imagination Playgrounds that is designed to encourage child-directed, unstructured free play. It includes three core concepts that foster a dynamic, child-centered environment:

- Loose parts—consisting of large foam blocks that can be manipulated and arranged by children in a variety of ways
- Sand and water
- Play associates—trained adults who monitor the playspace and provide a safe and secure environment while ensuring a diverse, creative playspace

Cities like New York are using the Imagination Play concept to create mobile playspaces that can be set up where they are needed, whether indoors or out.

Alexandria has its own version of a playspace with moveable parts, thanks to contributions from local residents. At Beverly Park, also known as “The Pit,” neighbors leave loose play parts scattered about for all kids to use.



Source: www.imaginationplayground.com

Splash Parks

Splash parks provide safe ways to allow children to interact with water. Children find ways to manipulate the water to make it behave in different ways, including squirting, flowing, or streaming, allowing for creative play as well as physical play. Splash parks can be quite elaborate, with a huge variety of water play activities, or as simple as a few jets of water that cycle on and off, or even basic mist nozzles that spray very little water but offer a chance to interact with water and cool off without getting wet.

Natural Play

Richard Louv’s book Last Child in the Woods has become a call to arms for proponents of connecting children to nature. In his book, Louv coined the term “Nature Deficit Syndrome,” which describes a phenomenon in which children are so removed from nature that they are afraid of it and retreat from it. This causes a variety of social and emotional effects that can last through adulthood.

Playspaces that combat this syndrome offer children the opportunity to experience nature through direct contact and in the process come to understand the natural world and their connection to it. This does not have to take place in “the wilderness.” Simply being outdoors and in contact with grass, bugs, and bushes is a good way to expose young children to the natural world.





Pop-Up Playgrounds

During a two-month period, seven civic coalitions in New York neighborhoods like East Harlem and the South Bronx got permits from the city to close certain local streets to traffic for designated periods of time—say between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. on a summer weekday. Working with the police and other city agencies, they redesignated the areas as temporary “play streets,” encouraging neighborhood children to use them for exercise and offering a range of free games, athletic activities, and coaching. Data collected indicated that families visited the local play streets for one to two-and-a-half hours on average according to the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. This is time that might otherwise have been spent being sedentary.

Javier Lopez, the director of the NYC Strategic Alliance for Health, notes that many play streets are located close to underused parks or school playgrounds. He says he hopes that this will have a double effect: First local residents will be inspired after the pop-up playgrounds disappear to make use of these nearby facilities; second, as demand increases, the city’s parks department will be spurred to perform more and better parks maintenance in those areas.

