



LEARNING CORNER

Play is serious business

Vinita

Parents who take their children to the park often do not realise what a rich learning space it is. Outdoor play helps children exercise their muscles, develops endurance, and refines their motor skills. It also offers children opportunities to interact with one another; across age, gender and ability. Along the way, it builds language and social skills, self-confidence, and intellectual development.

Despite substantive research and literature to validate these enormous benefits of play for all children, many parents, teachers and caregivers do not regard play as crucial to child development.

Given its tremendous developmental value, play assumes much greater significance for children with disabilities. It is distinguished from other therapeutic activities initiated and directed by adults. At the same time, ensuring play for children with disabilities is not only about meeting their special needs. It is rather about promoting an inclusive environment that welcomes their participation; meeting every child's needs for play, recreation, socialisation and challenge in the same place and in a variety of ways.

The work of Kilikili, a Bangalore-based trust founded by parents of children with disabilities, is pioneering. While many parks dot the city of Bangalore, they are not welcoming to children with special needs. For over two years now, Kilikili has helped make Bangalore's play spaces open to all, using play to demonstrate what an inclusive, equitable world could be. The pleasure of bringing special children out to play with others is important for parents too, balancing their visits seeking therapy and medicine.

How did Kilikili go about creating an inclusive park? First, by finding out the views of diverse children. Then consultations with development paediatricians, occupational therapists, special educators and designers. This resulted in a blueprint to make Coles Park in Bangalore an inclusive play space – *the first in the country!* The City Corporation and local firms were brought on board to support the initiative.

PLAY EQUIPMENT: SOME SAFE INNOVATIONS

- A sensory integration track – with grass, sand and varied textures on ground-level and at a height for multi-sensorial (especially tactile) stimulation.
- Basketball hoops at two levels suited for wheelchair users.
- A bucket swing for children with no upper body support.



Coles Park, Bangalore: the city's first inclusive park

New play equipment with universally accessible design was fabricated; and the play area redesigned to promote gross and fine motor development.

Kilikili recognises that besides physical barriers, children with disabilities also face attitudinal and social barriers that determine how they use the play area. Weekly activities and regular events are organised at the park for children of all abilities, to encourage healthy interaction through play. Schools and families nearby are also roped in to reinforce their role in fostering an inclusive environment. The result: many parents and schools are bringing their children to the park for the very first time! The environment is conducive for interaction between children of all abilities, and has resulted in richer play experiences for all.



Bucket seats are safe for all children.

Being a pioneering initiative, Kilikili does face its share of challenges. For instance, the absence of prototypes in the Indian context for the universal design of play space and equipment has meant learning from experience and revising, as necessary. Most parents and institutions perceive themselves as recipients of a service and see Kilikili as being responsible for maintenance. The State sees itself offering support, rather than assuming responsibility to ensure such facilities.

Kilikili also asks us to rethink the predominant adult model of developing the limited green spaces available (mostly focused on landscaping and jogging tracks!), particularly in the urban context.

Visit www.kilikili.org to know more or write in to info@kilikili.org



TEACHER TALK

Froebel's 20 gifts for children

Mandira Kumar

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) is best known as the founder of the "kindergarten". His educational philosophy drew from a wide range of formal disciplines that he studied – spanning architecture, crystallography and education. Nature touched his soul; and observing nature, he began to appreciate form, symmetry and pattern.

As a young boy, Froebel chanced upon some builders at work in a neighbouring church. This triggered off a desire to play with sticks and stones, and a feeling that young children should be provided with a carefully chosen set of materials to play with. Froebel's encounter with the educator Pestalozzi in Switzerland, and his practical experience of teaching children over 20 years helped him refine his philosophy. He felt that if children observed geometric objects from their infancy, these ideas would come back to them again, deepening with each new level of sophistication.

Perhaps Froebel's enduring legacy to kindergartens can be seen in the 20 "gifts" or manipulatives that he believed should be provided to children from the ages of 2-8. These gifts are a remarkable series of beautiful play materials that progress from concrete three-dimensional shapes to more abstract two and one-dimensional material. Together, they are the alphabet of geometry, teaching children about shape, number, measurement, counting, part-whole, patterns etc.

The first eight gifts

Gift 1: *Knitted balls in six colours, warm and easy to grasp, beautiful to hold.*

Gift 2: *A sphere, cylinder and cube made of wood, each with unique properties.*

Gifts 3 to 6: *The building gifts - a variety of cubes and blocks, teaching children about part and whole.*

Gift 7: *Triangular pattern tiles.*

Gift 8: *Sticks of varied lengths.*

Froebel referred to the activities that children undertook with these materials – their constructions and creations – as "occupations". It is no great accident that the two great architects of the modern era – Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier – had in common their formative years in Froebel kindergartens. As Wright says: "Eventually I was to construct design in other mediums. But the smooth cardboard triangles and maple wood blocks were the most important. All are in my fingers to this day."



A cast of puppets with various disabilities

SPOT LIGHT

Puppets teach children about inclusion

Thirty years ago, the Pacer Centre was set up by a group of parents of children with disability in Minnesota, USA. They came up with the idea of Pacer Puppets, a multicultural cast representing children with various disabilities. These were introduced to classrooms of kindergarten through Class 4. The puppets, each a unique work of handcrafted art, were created as an innovative teaching tool to educate children about their peers with disabilities, and assist schools in efforts to teach children about inclusion as well as child abuse.

The puppets come to life through the puppetry techniques of trained volunteers. The 'Count Me In' shows include scripts on blindness, deafness, spina bifida or cerebral palsy, and Down's syndrome. Supplementary scripts on a variety of disabilities have also been developed.

The goals of the 'Count Me In' project are to provide an opportunity for children to explore disabilities in a comfortable learning environment, gain acceptance of disabilities through understanding, and foster positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities.

The 'Let's Prevent Abuse' puppet project was added in 1984 because of awareness that people with disabilities are more vulnerable to maltreatment. In the 'Let's Prevent Abuse' show, which lasts about 35 minutes and is designed for children in Classes 1-4, the puppets talk to students about child abuse, and that abuse is never the child's fault.

PACER's puppet shows are entertaining as well as educational. Children easily identify with the puppets and are able to interact with them through questions and dialogue.

Email: puppets@pacer.org

Visit: <http://www.pacer.org/puppets/index.asp>





WHAT'S NEW

RAFT: Low cost magic spun from cast-offs

A volunteer from RAFT – Resource Area for Teaching – was in Bangalore recently to share the work of this unique teacher membership resource centre and store.

RAFT is a non-profit centre based in San Jose, the heart of Silicon Valley. It was founded by Mary Simon, a former teacher. RAFT volunteers successfully transform the surplus of companies into hands-on kits that are linked to the curriculum. Cardboard tubes, foam, wooden cubes and file covers are bundled with a few add-ons and become science, math and art kits with evocative names. Finger Phones, Area Antics and Colours of Light help children explore sound, area and light.

RAFT successfully addresses the gap that many teachers experience – the lack of affordable learning resources. Teachers become members of RAFT for a nominal fee, and can browse among barrels of material at the warehouse, picking up a bunch of kits that are about 2\$ each. The educational team at RAFT also offers low cost workshops that keep teachers excited and motivated.

HOW RAFT WORKS: A COMMUNITY EFFORT

DONATIONS AND VOLUNTEERS

- Businesses donate waste, overstock, packaging and computers
- Volunteers bundle materials into kits at the warehouse
- RAFT educators make these come alive as they interact with teachers

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Do mail this on to colleagues and friends so we can create an early learning network!

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