INTRODUCTION

Public playgrounds in the United States have entered a crisis stage in their evolution. They have been criticized as adults’ attempts to control children’s behavior (Wood, 1977), damned as irrelevant to children’s developmental needs (Frost & Klein, 1983), and described by children as boring, hurtful, and antisocial (Moore, 1989a). More often than not, these supposed spaces for healthy child development contain vast expanses of hot, hard asphalt, poorly maintained old metal equipment—oftentimes installed without adequate safety surfaces—water features that have not worked for years, pokey sandboxes without sand, and vegetation—if it exists at all—installed as an aesthetic buffer rather than as a play setting (Bruya & Langendorfer, in press). And yet these spaces where children spend so much of their time could very well support educational principles and stimulate child development (Schools Council, 1974b; Sebba & Churchman, 1986).

Poor environmental quality goes hand in hand with a poor safety record. There has been a long history of concern extending back to 1909 when the first soft swing seat was introduced (Frost, 1986). But progress has been slow. Several massive suits in recent years (Sweeney, 1987) have made public officials apprehensive about what they should or should not be providing in the name of playgrounds and very cautious about accepting design innovations for fear they might be defined as “attractive nuisances” in a court of law.
The purpose of this chapter is to provide a perspective on the current state of public playgrounds in the United States and to propose research and policy directions to support their improvement as viable places for child development. A frame of reference drawn around children's use of the outdoors and children's right to play is briefly sketched. The main issues current in the field of practice and arising from a review of the empirical literature are discussed in depth. They include playground use, safety, the play value of different types of setting, adventure play, site planning, and the characteristics of settings that support social integration. A national action-research program is proposed. Emphases include play leadership and animation training, the implementation of risk-management models, the use of new media for public education, improvement of designer awareness, and the need for increased public-private partnership. Last, a detailed action-research agenda (Appendix) describes interventions required to solve specific problems associated with the design and development of particular play settings.

Children's Use of the Outdoors

It is a clearly proven empirical fact that children are the major users of the outdoor environment in residential areas of the city (Björklid, 1982; Cooper Marcus, 1974; Moore & Young, 1978; U.K. Dept. of the Environment, 1973). It has been well documented that even in the most constraining environments children will wring the play potential from whatever is at hand: each other, street furniture, parked cars, vegetation, found objects, etc. (Moore, 1986a, 1987; Moore, 1989a). One may argue that developmentally this is the best of circumstances. It offers children a maximum opportunity to explore, to discover, to acquire knowledge of themselves and their surroundings through interactions with what van Vliet (1983) has called the “fourth environment,” where they develop that sense of autonomy and self-esteem so critical to individual well-being (van Vliet, 1985).

The problem is that even though children are very resourceful in discovering free-play opportunities, often they are simply not available; or if they are, the perceived physical and social dangers are too great for parents to sanction their use. High-profile news stories about child molestations, attacks, and kidnappings (the large proportion of the latter perpetrated in custody battles) have made parents wary of allowing their children “free range.” Social safety is a serious barrier to children’s free play. “Fear of strangers” is deep-rooted among parents (Moore, 1986a). In a study of 8 to 12-year-olds’ use of the San Francisco Bay Area landscape (Moore, 1980a), when asked the reasons why travel to certain places was prohibited, 27% of the children’s replies covered social fears (fear of attack, assault, and kidnap; threats from other children; and nonspecific social apprehension, e.g., ‘There’s a lot of strange people around here.’).