

The Thrill of Getting Grubby

By Galadriel Watson



- 1 A boy slices through thick cardboard with a handsaw. A girl grabs a hammer, nails, and scrap wood and starts pounding. A group of kids builds a bonfire with whatever they can find, their feet slipping in mud. Broken toys and furniture are piled around them.
- 2 Think “playground,” and you probably envision slides, swings, and monkey bars, not potentially dangerous tools and what looks like trash. And yet adventure playgrounds give kids just that: the raw materials they need to let their bodies and imaginations run wild.
- 3 Can you pronounce this word: *Skrammellegepladsen*? No? Well, you might want to play in it anyway. That’s because it’s the name of the first adventure playground: the word is Danish for “junk playground.”
- 4 The man who created it, landscape architect Carl Theodor Sorensen, noticed that children preferred to play in areas like construction sites and junkyards—not in neat playgrounds that adults have designed. He thought that children needed things they could move around and build with.
- 5 In 1943, he opened a new type of playground in Copenhagen, Denmark—not one with swings and slides, but one with wood, rope, canvas, old tires, pipes, wire, abandoned furniture, broken-down cars, and other loose parts. Right away, it was swamped with excited kids.
- 6 “Of all the things I have helped to realize,” Carl said, “the junk playground is the ugliest. Yet for me it is the best and most beautiful.”
- 7 In 1946, a British woman named Marjory Allen saw this messy playground and took the idea back

- to England. World War II had recently ended, and some kids there were already playing in sites that had been destroyed by bombs. She decided that those ruins could be turned into opportunities for play, where kids had the materials they needed to create forts, walls, swings, and more. The first adventure playground in the United Kingdom opened in 1948. Since then, many more have followed around the world.
- 8 Located on an island a short ferry ride from New York City, play:groundNYC is one of the newest adventure playgrounds. It opened in 2016. “What to many eyes looks like junk, to us is a magic wonderland,” says Rebecca Faulkner, executive director. “It’s endless, endless fun for the imagination.”
 - 9 Tools are crucial here. Visitors find saws, hammers, scissors, pliers, axes, and screwdrivers. Add to that lots of wood and old items of all types—including boats, theater props, exercise bikes, mannequins, and even a coffin. Kids construct objects and spaces like go-carts and hideouts. They can play in ways they’d never be able to at home or in a regular playground.
 - 10 Plus, parents aren’t invited in. Instead, staffers ask them to drop off their kids and remain in the grassy area on the other side of the fence. Staff members called playworkers watch over the kids but don’t step in unless needed. The goal is to let the kids make their own decisions. As a hand-painted sign attached to the fence says: “ADULTS SIT BACK AND RELAX.”
 - 11 Farther upstate, the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone at Ithaca Children’s Garden has another approach. They have a strong nature-based focus. This means that instead of broken-down cars and theater props, it provides loose parts that mostly come from nature: wooden stumps, driftwood, boulders, straw bales, and piles of mulch. And while it provides gardening tools, it only offers items like hammers and saws on special occasions.
 - 12 Without screws and nails, kids build forts, dens, and other structures by balancing items and propping things up. They play pretend and create alternate worlds. They climb trees and hang from them in makeshift swings and hammocks. They figure out what objects and materials can and can’t do.
 - 13 Parents are encouraged to stick around. But this doesn’t mean parents should jump in every time their children face challenges. Instead, they should step back and watch their child and be amazed. This is a space for children not to be perfect but to be learning and growing and exploring and experimenting.
 - 14 But why let kids take risks? Isn’t wedging yourself in a tree or hammering nails asking for trouble?
 - 15 Kids at play:groundNYC haven’t had any more injuries than you’d find on a regular playground. They’ve found, with support and guidance, that children can learn to use tools very quickly, are very adept at using them, and can take their own risks. And that sometimes involves a child hammering their thumb accidentally, but it doesn’t happen very often. You’ll find that even children at the age of six will be careful and risk-assess their own behavior.
 - 16 People encounter risks throughout life. In an adventure playground, children can practice how to approach and manage risk. These are learned skills, and kids need turf upon which to practice if they are to develop mastery.
 - 17 Risky fun also encourages kids to stay outside longer, keep their bodies moving, and socialize with others. Falling from up high hurts. That’s something kids may not learn if they fall onto the soft, rubbery surface of a typical modern playground. Learning the hard way may help them become better at facing risk as they grow up.
 - 18 Adventure playgrounds trust that kids are smart. If you let them be, they can figure out what they should—and shouldn’t—be doing all on their own. And they’ll have a heck of a good time while they’re at it!

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Test Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. **Reread paragraph 6. Why did Carl describe the junk playgrounds as “the best and most beautiful”?**
 - a. They are decorated nicely with beautiful plants, flowers, and trees.
 - b. They symbolize the importance of recycling.
 - c. They symbolize the beauty of the pretend worlds that kids create.
 - d. They are built on bomb sites from World War II.

2. **Which is the best meaning for the word *crucial* as it is used in paragraph 9?**
 - a. very common
 - b. extremely useful
 - c. hard to find
 - d. extremely important

3. **How are junk playgrounds different from regular playgrounds? Select all that apply.**
 - a. Junk playgrounds are built by adults, while regular playgrounds are built by kids.
 - b. Junk playgrounds have things for students to build instead of things that are built for them to play on.
 - c. Junk playgrounds allow children to construct objects from their imaginations, while regular playgrounds do not.
 - d. Regular playgrounds are much more dangerous than junk playgrounds.
 - e. Regular playgrounds don't offer as many opportunities for children to explore and learn from their mistakes.

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Test Questions (*continued*)

4. This question has two parts. Answer Part A first, and then answer Part B.

Part A: What are two main ideas from the article “The Thrill of Getting Grubby”?

- a. Risky fun has many advantages for children.
- b. Junk playgrounds are too dangerous for children.
- c. Traditional playgrounds are better for kids than junk playgrounds.
- d. Kids are smarter and more resourceful than we give them credit for.
- e. Children are better than adults at designing playgrounds.

Part B: Which two sentences from the article best support the answer to Part A?

- a. Think “playground,” and you probably envision slides, swings, and monkey bars, not potentially dangerous tools and what looks like trash.
- b. A group of kids builds a bonfire with whatever they can find, their feet slipping in mud.
- c. “What to many eyes looks like junk, to us is a magic wonderland,” says Rebecca Faulkner, executive director.
- d. Kids at play:groundNYC haven’t had any more injuries than you’d find on a regular playground.
- e. That’s something kids may not learn if they fall onto the soft, rubbery surface of a typical modern playground.

5. How are play:groundNYC and the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone similar?

- a. Both encourage the use of screws and nails.
- b. Both promote using natural resources.
- c. Both encourage exploration.
- d. Both believe in protecting the environment.