

Title: The Influence of the Environment on the Quality of Social Interaction Among Children During Play

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Abstract Synopsis:

The influence of a play environment in supporting children's social interaction with peers is explored by analysis of the environmental elements and quality of social interaction during play in a typical play environment (home or playground) and play in a nature-based camp environment.

Abstract:

Children's free play is decreasing, and as a result, children are losing opportunity for the developmental benefits that occur with free play, particularly to promote social skills. Researchers reported that not only are children playing less, their outdoor play time is decreasing, and their play activities are more often directed by adults, limiting the playfulness of activities. To counteract the decline in play, specifically outdoor play in natural settings, researchers have begun establishing play environments with natural opportunity for children to explore. However, research does not extend to how the environment influences social interaction skills during play.

This study utilized the Evaluation of Social Interaction (ESI), a standardized criterion-referenced, occupation-based evaluation, to evaluate the quality of social interaction among children in two different play environments: a typical play environment (home or playground) and a nature-based camp designed to promote play and social engagement using child-directed play. The Test of Environmental Supportiveness (TOES) is also used to examine characteristics of caregiver support, playmates, objects, play spaces, and sensory opportunities.

Participants, 12 children aging 4-8, were recruited and evaluated. The results suggest that the quality of social interaction among the children differed in the two play environments. The interactions in the two play environments specifically differed in their supportiveness regarding the objects available, space available, and sensory opportunities. Environments that offer greater opportunities of play objects, space, and sensory exploration may support better quality of social interaction. This research has the potential to guide parents, child-care providers, and teachers in providing an environment that promotes child-initiated play and social interaction for children.