Let kids play in peace: Cracking down on noisy children in playgrounds? Worst idea ever

BY DARELL HAMMOND

Thursday, January 27th, 2011

Does an adult's right to peace and quiet trump a child's right to laugh, scream, sing and generally make a ruckus? Not in Berlin, where last year the city dismissed hundreds of complaints about noise levels in outdoor play areas in one fell swoop - by legally granting children the "right to be noisy."

We should consider passing similar laws in this country - starting here in New York City.

The debate over boisterous children has gotten loud recently in Ditmas Park, Brooklyn. The Public School 139 playground is now open evenings and weekends as part of Mayor Bloomberg's "Schoolyards to Playgrounds" initiative.

For the surrounding community, that's meant more noise. Not the worst noise pollution like trucks and jackhammers, but something that's more tolerable - to most people, anyway: kids screaming.

Grumpy members of the Beverley Square West Neighborhood Association wrote to the city requesting that the playground be closed on Sundays. When the city denied their request, some residents turned to Plan B: They hired a lawyer.

Last month, one neighbor told the Daily News: "There's yelling. There's screaming. . . . I have double-thick windows and it's no good. The noise fills the house. . . . It's really harmful. You can't hear your own thoughts. It raises my blood pressure."

Suddenly finding itself in the midst of a controversy, the board posted an open letter on the Ditmas Park Blog under the headline: "BEVERLEY SQUARE WEST NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION DOES NOT HATE CHILDREN!"

I doubt that the association hates children. But I also doubt that it has the children's best interests at heart. As much as adults need their rest, children need to play. With dual working-parent households and increasingly structured after-school activities, the weekends offer a chance for families to spend time together.

Ditmas Park is not an isolated case. Last year, two women in Douglas, Mich., launched a public fight to close the playground at an early childhood center. And a condo association in Methuen, Mass., fined residents for letting their kids play outside.
Children need and deserve more opportunities to play, not fewer. In April 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported what should be a wakeup call to everyone who cares about the well-being of children: Only one out of five children in the United States lives within a half mile of a park or playground. Although it might seem self-evident, scientific studies prove that kids are more likely to be physically active when they live near a place to play.

During the school year, recess offers nearly half of the opportunity to promote physical activity among children - but recess is increasingly absent from the school day. Little surprise, then, that American children spend 50% less time outside than they did just 20 years ago - and engage in nearly 7.5 hours of screen time a day.

The consequences are weighty: One in three kids in America is considered overweight or obese. And beyond those physical problems, when children don't get the chance to run around and interact, they suffer cognitive, social and emotional harm.

While I realize that the sound of screaming children isn't always welcome, can't neighbors of PS 139 find a common way forward that doesn't deprive children of precious weekend play opportunities - and that doesn't entail scurrying to the nearest lawyer?

Our children's right to play is in jeopardy. Someone had better rise to their defense.

Hammond is the CEO and co-founder of KaBOOM!, a national nonprofit dedicated to saving play for America's children.