Adventure Playgrounds

**Overview:**
Adventure playgrounds are abundant in Europe, giving children access to create whatever they can imagine. They have been around since World War II, introduced by Theodore Sorensen, a Danish landscape architect who saw children’s delight in playing with rubble and scraps. Unfortunately there are currently only three Adventure Playgrounds in the U.S.

**What Is It?**
Play can happen nearly anywhere, with nearly anything, and under nearly any circumstances. Adventure playgrounds are places where kids create and change their own environment. Instead of typical playground equipment like swings, slides, and loose pieces of wood, tires, and whatever else can be found is used to create whatever the kids want it to be.

**Benefits:**
Adventure Playgrounds facilitate learning through exploration and imagination by allowing children to take ownership in their projects.

On an adventure playground, children can build, construct, and interact socially with other kids and adults. Kids spend time building structures that help them think through problems and it often requires the help of peers. They are creating their own community through games, activities, and the development of friendships.

Other benefits include: problem solving, cooperation, collaboration, experimentation, mathematic and spatial skills, and much more! (See our information on Loose-parts play.)
**Risk and Liability:**

Liability is a major concern in the U.S. This is likely one factor that prevents a lot of adventure playgrounds from thriving as they do in places like Europe. Adventure playgrounds offer kids substantial freedom, and with that freedom comes greater risks. Nonetheless, the accident rate is lower in adventure playgrounds than in traditional playgrounds, and studies have shown that allowing reasonable risk to exist is actually much safer for children.

According to Alex Gilliam, author of the Public Workshop Blog, children learn to assess risks appropriately when they are afforded an acceptable amount of risk. He says: "Even if you just spend fifteen minutes watching closely, you will witness children testing their creation for sturdiness, stability and load. Testing in this fashion is how they learn. Sometimes their solutions for an overly flexible bridge or a sagging railing are not the most aesthetically pleasing or efficient material wise, but they will keep adding, shifting or changing until it feels safe."

In terms of insurance, adventure playgrounds can be covered under the same insurance as any other part of city parks or recreation program. Check with your community’s parks program to see what options your city can offer. Waivers are also important to consider.

**Safety:**

Adventure playgrounds are usually enclosed, supervised environments. Children usually range in age from seven to 13. Some allow younger children only if they are accompanied by adults. The kids are allowed to run around freely, but the playground is staffed by “play workers”. These play workers, trained in child safety, provide basic guidelines and allow the children to play independently within those guidelines. The play workers also maintain the area, supply additional loose and found parts, and help facilitate play.

**Cost:**

Some adventure playgrounds that have existed in the U.S. closed because of loss of funding or loss of the lease on the land, like the one in Houston, Texas. These adventure playgrounds were often owned and operated by city and municipal park
districts. Sadly, because of tight budgets affecting the city and parks, funding for these playgrounds were cut and the playgrounds had to close.

But an adventure playground doesn't need to be expensive. You can use a variety of donated items. Material from a housing project can be useful, i.e. lumber, drywall, concrete, etc. Old tires can also be great addition to an adventure playground. The key is to pay attention to what the kids enjoy using to create their structure, and then seek out those materials. Reusable Resource Centers can be a great place to turn for materials. Search out manufacturers and utility companies that might be willing to donate.

Whatever items you choose to include, keep it safe. Don’t use heavy, bulky, awkward items, or really sharp materials on which children could cut themselves.

How to Incorporate Adventure Features into Your Community?

There are several ways to create a play area with adventure features in your community, and they don’t have to be expensive. Many adventure playgrounds in Europe are community-focused. You can create a board of parents and community members in the neighborhood to oversee the playground. Everyone has a role and helps out. Combine your resources and materials to use for the adventure playground whether it be materials, tools, or time.

Use volunteers to act as supervisors. Ask parents, teachers, grandparents, neighbors, service clubs, or high school and college students to help. Often, high school and college students need community service hours to graduate; contact school service learning coordinators to see if you might establish a partnership.

Think about creating mobile adventure playgrounds, such as those organized by Pop-Up Adventure Play.

Case Study:

Mercer Island Adventure Playground: Ann Grabler

While studying Recreational Management in college, Ann learned about Adventure Playgrounds and fell in love with the idea. She was working in the Community Relations Office for the city of Mercer Island, WA, when her boss brought her in and asked her if she would like a promotion to run an adventure
Paul West was the senior naturalist on Mercer Island and had just been to a conference at which he learned about adventure playgrounds. He decided he wanted to put an adventure playground on Mercer Island and had the funding for it. Neither Paul nor Ann’s boss knew very much about adventure playgrounds, so they asked Ann for her assistance.

The Mercer Island adventure playground has since struggled to stay open due to budget cuts on the municipal level. Ann is currently working on a Native American Reservation as a recreation Specialist with youth.

*Pop-up Adventure Playgrounds*

In New York City, a team of play and child professionals, designers, artists and filmmakers are pioneering Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds, in which children create their own worlds out of everyday items that are not normally considered "toys."

Just as play can erupt spontaneously, a Pop-Up Adventure Playground can pop up anywhere -- in a park, a front yard, a plaza, on a sidewalk... the possibilities are endless. The idea is simply to get kids playing outside with other kids, in an environment that flexes their creative muscles. The best part? A Pop-Up Adventure Playground doesn't have to cost a dime. While it may be difficult for adults to envision the play opportunities presented by, say, a stack of newspapers, children will inevitably turn them into hats, or curtains, or faux snowballs.

**More Information on Adventure Playgrounds:**

- History of Adventure Playgrounds
  - [http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu/index.html](http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu/index.html)
- Pop-Up Adventure Play
  - [http://popupadventureplay.org/](http://popupadventureplay.org/)
- New York Coalition for Play
  - [http://nycplay.org/upcoming-events/](http://nycplay.org/upcoming-events/)
- Adventure Playground in Irvine, CA
  - [http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/contentdisplay.aspx?id=8656](http://www.ci.berkeley.ca.us/contentdisplay.aspx?id=8656)
- Defending Adventure Playgrounds
  - [http://defendadventureplayground.wordpress.com/](http://defendadventureplayground.wordpress.com/)
• Ann’s Adventures
  o http://adventureplaygrounds.net

• Articles
  o http://www.good.is/post/adventure-playgrounds/