

# **A Practical Guide for Conducting a Playground Audit**

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# A practical guide for conducting the playground audit

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## **Rationale - Why bother with a playground audit?**

**Take another look at what is happening in your playground. You will see children participating, contributing with their peers, even playing traditional games that require them to follow rules and manage their behaviour when they are out or feel angry. You may see and hear conflict, teasing, name calling, and students left out, wandering. There may be opportunities for children to make good choices and find another way as they think through a challenge. You will probably hear children communicating their needs, thoughts, feelings and listening to others as they express theirs. You may see children relating to others, taking turns, joining in to get a job done, helping others, developing skills in cooperation and friendship. The key competencies are in action.**

**But there are few signs in our schools of an appreciation that break-times in the playground are considered valued contexts for mastery of the key competencies through play.**

**In fact many schools are making changes that marginalise time in the playground so that it is fast becoming a school's biggest wasted resource just when we desperately need a context for developing social competence.**

**Consider what is happening for students when schools shorten the time for play, over regulate, focus on negative behaviours, limit funding for resources or activities, ignore student voice or view time in the playground as merely time for students to 'let off steam' before returning to the classroom for 'real' teaching and learning.**

**You will bother to conduct the playground audit if you believe that play is significant in the lives of your students with valuable links with the key competencies. You will bother to gather data to inform the changes that you and your school community make.**

***Put play back into your playground***

## Background to the Playground Audit

In a city primary school in Christchurch New Zealand a large number of students were experiencing problems in the playground so it was decided by the senior management to use a playground audit to gather relevant data on which to base any further actions. Although the students were able to manage their behaviour in the classroom many were using physical violence, bullying, verbally abusive language, disrupting others in the playground and they were also often victims of negative behaviour.

The school had a referral system for playground incidences but this revealed that large numbers of the same students were being referred each day and spending their lunch time in the referral room. Duty teachers it appeared were also guilty of 'pouncing' on these students. It was time to question the existing practice of everyone including the design and structure of the environment in which the students were participating. It was found that very little research has examined the context in which students participate in the playground even though a lot of research exists around negative behaviours such as bullying (Leff, Power, Costigan, Manz, 2003).

While the primary concern for this focus was around the needs of the students who were having problems in the playground it shifted during the audit to question how the school play ground could be viewed by teachers, students and parents as an important curriculum resource for all students. After all conflict is a normal part of developing social competence and one function of time in the playground is to develop strategies to manage these difficulties (Blatchford, 1998).

Some school playgrounds are viewed as negative places (Blatchford, 1998) with a stress on unacceptable behaviour that occurs in them and as researcher Manuela Martinez (2000) found, *Empty playgrounds without materials or play equipment are the ones where more children are involved with bullying as victims, aggressors or both.* Despite the difficulties that some children have most are positive about time in the playground. For many children this may be the only opportunity for them to play and interact in a relatively safe environment, free of adult control. There are few other opportunities for children to form friendships and interact with their peers. Playing after school outside in the streets or on open ground or even in parks is rarely permitted today unless children are supervised by an adult. When children are driven to and from school (Blatchford, 1998. Pellegrini, 1995) opportunities for informal social interactions, meeting peers, forming friendships and spontaneous play are also reduced.

Traditional games have also declined and all but disappeared in one generation. When did you last see traditional games like Oranges and Lemons, What's the Time Mr Wolf? knuckle bones, marbles, hopscotch and so on happening? These games belong to children passed on from child to child without the need for adults.

The Opies, (1969) are very clear that adults have no role in children's play activities no matter how well meaning their intentions. This tension between control and independence requires a school to question the appropriate role of adults in the playground?

**All children have the right to a safe and happy playtime with their peers in their school playground.**

Some considerations to explore:

- The profile of an effective school will include a positive playground. (Doll, 2009) The status of time in the playground for teachers and students will improve if teachers view the playground as a valued curriculum resource for prompting social competence.
- Playgrounds are becoming complex places with very young students using aggressive behaviours. The referral room or similar is not effective if the same students are appearing. Effective schools are looking for other options such as restorative practices, the no-blame approach (recently known as the Undercover Approach) circle time and classroom conferencing.
- Inclusion means that all students should have a safe and happy time with their peers in their playground. Pellegrini, (2004) believes that, *positive peer relationships that form during playing games should foster positive attitudes to school.*
- Time in the classroom after a happy active time in the playground will ensure improved learning outcomes, less disruptive behaviours and a positive classroom for everyone. *The playground is often the context for a great deal of informal learning which makes an important contribution to the growth and development of the child* Hurni, (2001).
- Some students are frequently “placed” out of their playground despite this being the best place for skills in social competence to be practised and mastered. Using play to learn a rich repertoire of social skills has never been so important.
- Health and safety regulations have influenced decisions to the extent that some playgrounds are bland and boring. McMahon, (2002) claims that the, *suffocating obsession with safety is driven not by a desire to serve the best interests of children but to keep lawyers off teachers’ backs.*
- Student voice is limited and rarely considered. Reflect on the reasons why a number of activities or toys have been banned by adults from school playgrounds. *The playground is becoming as regulated as the classroom according to McMahon, (2002).*
- Some students have more problems and distress in the playground than anywhere else. The role of the duty teacher can become negative with a focus on labelled students. Blatchford says, (1998) *the dominant view of children’s behaviour at break time seems to be negative.*
- The physical features of a playground can influence activities in the playground. Even a pristine playground can fail to be a positive playground for children. Factor, (2004) says that, *generally, adult indifference to children’s play-lore often results in a lack of consultation with playground users when well meaning but ignorant landscaping of a school is undertaken.*

## Whose playground is it anyway?

### *Discussion starters for you and your staff*

There are differences between play and games. According to Pellegini, (2004) play that includes fantasy play has rules that are flexible, negotiated but not set in advance. Games such as soccer are rule governed and rules are set in advance and one can be sanctioned for breaking the rules. Play is hard to define. Brian Sutton-Smith, (1997) says, *every child knows what it means to play, but the rest of us can merely speculate.*

The playground is a setting where aggression and conflict can take place. Given the density of pupils and the often vigorous nature of their play there is enormous potential for falling out and for conflict. But these behaviours are best seen as opportunities to help children to negotiate and learn the skills needed to solve differences. The playground is the arena where this takes place Blatchford,( 1998).

Dr Perry(2000) who has written about the links between play and brain development in children says that if we want to help our children meet their potential, we must allow children free time, spontaneous play and provide safe and enriched play and learning environments. Yet many playgrounds have become as regimented as the classroom with opportunities for play stifled. Most educators agree that play is important to children's growth and development but today children's play is seriously threatened by adult decisions.

Adults may see the time in the playground differently from their students. Adults may see it as a time when the playground needs to be supervised and students guarded against potential dangers. *Avoiding all risks is not the solution* according to Little & Wyver, (2008) *as doing so limits children's participation in worthwhile experiences that promote their optimal health and development.*

Games that possibly lead to the school being sued in the case of an accident have led to a number of activities and games being banned. Tag, handstands, tree climbing, daisy chains, three legged races, skipping, marbles, rugby, yes and lots more.

Time in the playground is a student's time to make choices, to interact with peers, to learn how to win and lose, to enjoy physical movement and to have fun. Students can be experts in their playgrounds. They are capable of making up their own games and activities with rules to accompany them.

Play in early childhood settings is considered to be important but the playgrounds in primary and secondary schools have rarely been subjects for research. Maris O'Rourke investigated the role of adults in the school playground particularly the Duty Teacher in an article for SET in 1987 titled *In the Playground.*

**The playground is just as important as the classroom as a context for students' emotional, physical, intellectual and social development. A social curriculum exists in schools both inside and outside the classroom but it is essentially hidden Hargreaves, (1982).**

## Childhood Memories

While it is impossible for today's playground to even faintly resemble the playground of our remembered childhood it is an interesting exercise to reflect on the differences. When a group of about forty teachers recently completed the survey about remembered activities from their school playgrounds, grass, trees, dirt tracks, bushes and chasing games were named most frequently. The survey generated discussion about the range of differences evident within the group with extreme differences between the city and country school playground experiences. Reporting back to the group became a highly charged emotional exercise as both positive and negative memories were shared. Discussion moved to what has been lost and what can still be found in school playgrounds. Blatchford's research in 1998 also found 11 year olds played a wide variety of active games that mostly included chasing and ball games. This changed by the time the students reached sixteen when the most popular activity during break time was talking to friends.

One of the issues that came out of the teacher survey was around the changes that some schools have recently made so that time in the playground is in shorter chunks. In some schools this is further regimented into eating time being separated from playing times. Further research with several Canterbury school principals is exploring the reasons and results for this action. Blatchford,(1998) found the two reasons given by schools in his research was to increase time spent teaching to meet the new requirements and to reduce behaviour problems.

### Teacher Survey questions:

**Give a definition for your understanding of play**

**What was the best game that you played at school?**

**What do you remember most about you playground?**

**What was playtime like for you? Where and what did you play?**



## Steps for Making Changes

### Meeting One:

1. Appoint a minute taker
2. Appoint a key facilitator for the playground audit
3. Decide on a vision for your school's playground
4. Complete the Values and Beliefs diagram and plan for how to implement.
5. Share background readings about play and playground environments.
6. Develop a timeframe with next meeting dates and individual responsibilities.

### What is your vision for your playground?

Schools that have explored their values and beliefs about play and their playground have found that this involves the whole school community. When everyone shares the same understandings changes are embedded in practice and more likely to be sustained.

Everyone, means everyone; the principal, Board of Trustees, teaching staff, Resource Teachers Learning Behaviour, teacher aides, support workers, parents and students.

However the principal and senior staff will be the key facilitators and as for all curriculum professional development they will lead the playground audit.

Visions may include some of these or your own statements.

- A playground is a safe place for everyone.
- A playground provides links with the key competencies
- A playground is where everyone is occupied and can have fun.
- A playground provides choices for students both physical and not so physical activities.
- A playground encourages students to experience the natural environment.
- A playground shares responsibility for management with teachers and students.
- A playground supports the school curriculum in different ways. (Useful outdoor spaces for groups or presentations, gardens and trees that support the natural cycle of living things, social play that supports oral language development.
- A playground is constantly changing and rejuvenating and is too exciting to be placed out of.
- A playground is a pleasant place to be in as duty teacher.
- A playground is adequately resourced ( a variety of sports equipment, training of student leaders, shade requirements reviewed, trees and gardens maintained, sandpit refreshed with working toys , relevant playground markings, water fountains regularly cleaned and toilets monitored.)

## Values and beliefs diagram for school community (teachers, teacher aides, caretakers, BOT, senior management)

*This survey needs to be the starting point for your school.*

*Begin with a statement such as, I believe that all children should be able to play in their school playground.*



**Meeting Two:**

1. Feedback from previous meeting
2. List and reflect on existing initiatives that are already in your school using the following questions:

**What is working well in the playground?**

**What is not working well in the playground?**

**What do you think is happening in the playground?**

**What needs to be explored?**

## *An example from a school*

### *What is working well/not so well in your playground?*

- PALS (Physical Activity Leaders) Year 7/8 boys and girls who are trained to lead other students in organised games and activities. *This had been let slide for a year without teacher input and needed urgent attention or the training from previous years would be wasted.*
- Playground Angels Mostly Year 5-8 students who operate on a roster and are nominated by classroom teachers for the role. They support the Duty teacher and often mediate and assist younger students. *Few students were using the Playground Angels so this was in need of teacher input.*
- Sports shed monitors. Senior students open, distribute and collect equipment at morning tea and lunch time. *Observations showed that this was a problem area. Monitors were being little dictators. Some students spent their whole playtime lining up and didn't know how to use the equipment when they did get it. A Frisbee was thrown into a tree and then retrieved and taken back to the shed. School now places all equipment on the fields in big boxes by the monitors with no lining up or signing required.*
- House Captains. Students who organise events twice a term for the whole school. *This was working well.*
- Kapa Haka Student and teacher led special events. *This was working well.*
- Teacher Aide support for some students who are unable to join in structured activities without learning the skills to play a game. *Teacher aides needed training to ensure that they were not getting in the way of peer friendships. Groups of students were preferred rather than individual students.*
- Student librarians who issued and processed books during lunchtime. *This support had become a chore for many student helpers with the whole library experience in need of a review. Some students were not turning up.*



## Meeting 3 and future meetings as required

1. Complete the Communication, Systems and Organisation Review Diagram
2. Consider the results of this activity.
3. Data gathering using the following templates.
4. Sharing information with all concerned.
5. Planning for future action and changes.

## Data Gathering

The following templates can be used to gather data which will guide decisions for making changes to school systems, teaching practice and your playground environment. It is good to develop a time frame that suits your school but most schools have taken about a term to complete the surveys. Changes can then be made during the next term and reflection on the changes the following term.

It is useful to keep a flexible, evolving approach to the changes while using the data for reflection on practice and eventually for decisions about change.

Some schools began making small changes while gathering data for bigger changes.

- Some schools moved beyond their first vision and immediately invested more time and resources into their playground than ever before.
- Some schools seriously questioned existing practice of adult decision making.
- Some schools decided to bring back what they had previously banned, marbles, toy cars, skate boards, bull rush.
- Some began by simply expanding or creating a sandpit.
- Some schools invited their teachers to choose their duty times.
- Some schools created zones for playing with a wide variety of equipment and toys.



## Review Diagram

### Communication, Systems and Organisation

*Senior management, teacher and teacher aide representatives should complete this survey early in the audit.*

**How do all the stakeholders communicate with each other?**

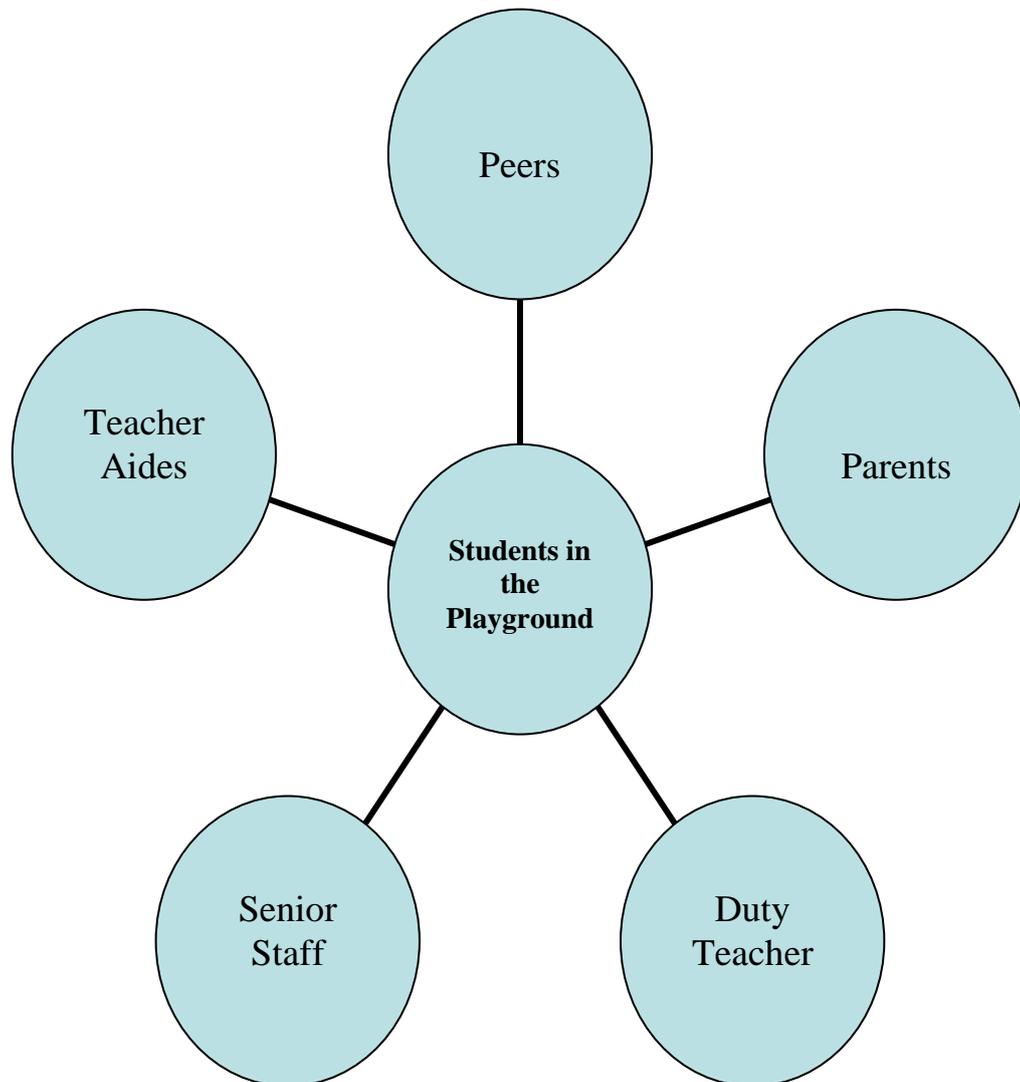
**What rules and regulations are in place at the moment?**

**How were they decided?**

**How are the rules and regulations communicated to everyone?**

**Are they working? How do you know?**

**How are the rules and regulations discussed and reviewed?**



## Evaluation: How will you know if the changes are working?

**Decide on a measuring tool to evaluate the outcomes from changes to the playground. One school decided to use their Recorded Incidents records for negative playground behaviours supplied by Duty Teachers for quantitative data. Your choice will be closely aligned to your school's culture and systems for monitoring behaviour in the playground.**

**OR**

**You may decide to use the three Articles from the Treaty of Waitangi as a framework to evaluate the implementation of the audit. Bishop and Glynn(1999)**

**Partnership. How inclusive was the working relationship? Were relationships balanced to generate active learning communities?**

**Protection. Who decided what? Did consultation include all of the stakeholders including students?**

**Participation. How effective has the audit been? Are the changes embedded in the school culture?**

*However other qualitative issues can be noted;*

- 1. duty teachers comments about now enjoying duty,*
- 2. students returning to class without issues that need teacher management,*
- 3. the adventure playground is no longer overloaded*
- 4. socially interactive games increase e.g. hopscotch, four square ,*
- 5. students happier and quicker to engage in games and creative play*
- 6. students with special needs successfully included in more interactive activities*



**Playground Observation sheets**

*Observations need to include wet and sunny days, various times, different observers and for as many days as possible. Print out several sheets. Total up the findings and reflect on cumulative results.*

**Zone                      Date**

Time	Observer		Weather		Ages	Where?
	Alone	Pairs	Small group ¾	Large group 5+		
What are the students doing?						
Talking: friendly						
Talking: unkindly						
Reading						
Sitting						
Watching						
Walking around						
Walking with adult						
Skipping						
Running/Chasing						
Circle games *						
Clapping games *						
Singing/Dancing *						
Playground marked games, eg hopscotch						
Senior Adventure Playground						
Junior Adventure Playground						
Play fighting						
Playing with:						
- beanbags / toys						
- hoops						
- balls						
- ropes						
-						
Team games:						
- soccer						
- netball						
- basketball						
- rugby						
-						
Games led by adult or senior student:						
- Jump Jam						
-						
Other areas:						
- obstacle course						
- benches						
- sports shed						
- rails						
- steps						
- fantasy play						
- sandpit						
- swimming pool						
Other						
<b>Teacher: Interacting positively</b>						
<b>Interacting negatively</b>						
<b>Walking past (engaged)</b>						
<b>Walking past (non-engaged)</b>						

### **Duty Teacher Interview questions**

*All, means all duty teachers to get the best information.*

A survey of teachers about their time on duty in the playground can include the following questions. It can be a paper survey or an interview which will probably allow the participants to expand their responses.

**What do you like about doing duty?**

**What don't you like about doing duty?**

**What do you consider to be your role when you are on duty?**

**What do you think the students consider is the role of the duty teacher?**

### **Playground Duty**

When it comes to playground supervision, teachers regard playground duty as “*a necessary but generally unwelcome task,*” (Evans unpublished ).

Schools take one of two approaches – they focus on managing behaviour and the school environment to keep children safe from injury and bullying or they focus on making the playground an interesting and challenging environment where children can manage their own play.

In 1987 Maris O'Rourke investigated the role that adults especially teachers, have in organizing and participating in children's play. Research showed that play increased significantly when equipment was available, opportunities to perform were increased and interacting adults were provided.

When the role of the duty teacher moved from policing to participating negative behaviours decreased in fact when the numbers of duty teachers was increased so did the negative behaviours. It was also found that the first ten minutes of time in the playground was important and if students became engaged in positive play during this time they tended to stay engaged.

**They can either 'police' or 'participate'.**

Duty Teachers who “police” often wear fluorescent vests so they are highly visible and therefore easily avoidable by those students intent on breaking the rules, they carry folders or packs, and walk in an often predictable and prescribed route keenly looking out for possible trouble spots. Interactions with children are limited to solving problems and enforcing playground rules, and are most often negative or directive.

*Teachers were caught in a dilemma of wanting to be as non-interventionist as possible when on playground duty whilst at the same time having to respond with assistance to pupils. One consequence is that playground contacts tend to be officious and managerial* Blatchford and Sharp, (1994).

Other schools are taking the opposite approach - they 'participate' in the children's play, encouraging the development of language and independent social skills through positive interactions because research shows that playtimes provide vital learning opportunities for children. If children have plenty of options to be creative, competitive, co-operative or just playful, issues with behaviour management are markedly reduced. In these schools teachers work as a team to provide equipment, to teach games and skills and to play with children, while still providing adequate supervision and giving attention to problem-solving. Teachers' interactions with the students are restorative, positive and respectful.

**The school-wide philosophy on both behaviour management and the value of play**

**In a student's learning and social development determines the nature and specific role of duty for the teacher in the playground.**

One school that considered this research as part of a playground audit increased the numbers of designated participating teachers/and teacher aides while decreasing the numbers of teachers on duty. They also placed a variety of play equipment in big boxes around the playground to overcome the problems that were occurring for duty teachers when large numbers of students lined up for equipment. The whole playground is now being used with a big decrease in the number of students being placed out of the playground for negative incidents. Easy access to new, fun equipment was the key to the change in student behaviour.

**The challenge for all schools is to achieve a balance between ensuring student safety through vigilant care over student behaviour, and facilitating student independence and social development through opportunities to engage in play.**



### Board of Trustees survey sheet

*Involve your BOT from the start and keep regular reports available.*

**What do you like about your school playground?**

**What don't you like about your school playground?**

**What would you wish was in your school playground?**

### Parent survey of playground

*To get a good response give house points or similar for all returned surveys.*

**What do you like about your school playground?**

**What don't you like about your school playground?**

**What would you wish was in your school playground?**

*An example of a parents' survey from a school.*

<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Wish List</b>
Play equipment (17) Separate senior/junior areas (10) Good variety (8) Obstacle course (4) Open spaces (4) Safety matting (3) Trees (2) Slide (1) Playground Angels (1) Access after school (1) Sports Shed (1) Friends (1)	Overcrowded equipment (10) Lack of equipment (8) Shade issues (4) Inadequate court area (4) Other safety (3) Bullying (3) Poor matting (2) Untidy and bare (1) Mud puddles (1) Banned games (1)	Swings (10) More equipment (7) Shade cloths (6) Flying Fox (4) Less crowded equipment(3) Sheltered seating (3) Sandpit (2) Garden areas (2) Slide (2) Increase jungle gym (2) Better matting (2) Trampoline (2) Junior climbing wall (2) Rock climbing wall (2) Goal posts (1) Markings (1) Bigger wall (1) Separate netball and basketball courts (1) Rope swing (1) More sports equipment (1) Seesaw (1) Monkey bars (1) Spiders Web (1)

### **Student survey of playground**

*Young children can draw pictures. Some schools selected the last 5 names on the roll for each class.*

**What do you think is the role of the duty teacher?**

**What do you like about your school playground?**

**What don't you like about your school playground?**

**What would you wish was in your school playground?**

### **Sport's shed anecdotal observation guidelines**

*The observer needs to complete several observations particularly at the start and end of playtimes. Information from this observation is very important.*

*Watch for;*

- *Time it takes to get equipment*
- *Same students lining up*
- *Equity of distribution (friends)*
- *System for tracking who has what*
- *What is the return procedure?*
- *Choice adequate for all ages, girls and boys*
- *How is sports equipment maintained?*
- *What happens if equipment is lost*
- *Location of the sport's shed*



### **Eating at lunch time, anecdotal observation guidelines**

*Several observations by different observers will give the best results. This is an important time in the life of a student.*

*Watch for;*

- *How can students socialise while eating?*
- *How does seating allow for eye contact?*
- *Are students seated inside or outside and why?*
- *Does this feel like a happy time?*
- *Describe the role of the duty teacher*
- *What happens to rubbish?*
- *Who decide when students have eaten enough?*
- *What happens for students without a lunch?*

### **Adventure Playground /Jungle Gym anecdotal observations guidelines**

*Several observations by different observers at different times will give the best results. Comments from these observers are very relevant for future planning.*

*Watch for;*

- *The most popular activity*
- *Activities that are verging on dangerous*
- *Students who go to some point and socialise*
- *Numbers of students on an area at any one time*
- *Gender preferences*
- *Age preferences*
- *Give examples of games that have been devised using the Adventure Playground*



## Summary Comments

The playground audit is the first step to looking at the environment in which your children spend a significant amount of time. Rather than placing the blame for negative behaviour on individual students it can be a lot more productive to change the way adults view the playground as well as considering how well the physical environment is providing opportunities for play.

Much of what you will learn from the audit will come from listening, observing and responding to the children in their playground. Many students will remember their time in the playground as the highlight of their day. Sutton-Smith ((1990) claims that, "*The school playground still provides the one assured festival in the lives of children.*"

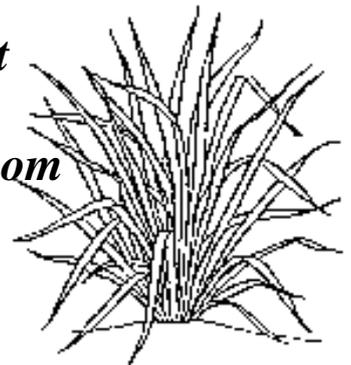
Developing friendships and having friends is an important feature of children's lives and this includes students with disabilities or behavioural needs. *The school playground is a critical social context for the development of friendships*, according to MacArthur and Gaffney (2001).

Children's play and the value of time in the playground has been neglected by researchers and recently there is growing concern that break times, playtime or recess are being reduced or even eliminated while more students are presenting with difficulties with social competence.

An audit can help schools value what they already have but also enable decisions for change to be based on robust data. Some of the changes will be to do with school systems and the physical attributes of the playground while others are with the whole school community reflecting on their values and beliefs around the value of play and the needs of all children for social interaction, play, fresh air and exercise.

**Put play back into the playground.**

*Atawhaitia te rito  
Nurture the tender shoot  
Kia puawai te tamaiti  
So that the child will bloom*



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## Evaluation of the Playground Audit.

Please send to Llyween Couper

[llyween.couper@pg.canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:llyween.couper@pg.canterbury.ac.nz) or [llyweenc@rtlb34.school.nz](mailto:llyweenc@rtlb34.school.nz)

or post to PO Box 3051 Waikuku Beach North Canterbury 7448 New Zealand.

School Name

Key Person

Email contact address

Date of completing the playground audit

Give a brief description of the concerns that you had about your playground before the audit.

What changes did you make and why?

Identify the most useful part of the audit for identifying the changes required?

How could this audit work better?

Thank you,

Dr.Llyween Couper

## The Convention on the Rights of the Child

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted by the General Assembly of the UN., (November 20 1989)

*states that the child has a right to leisure, play and participation in cultural and artistic activities.*

Ratified by the New Zealand Government in 1993.

