

In the Spotlight

Pearl Marko, founder of Positive Playgrounds

Canada Camps: What is Positive Playgrounds?

Pearl Marko: Positive Playgrounds is a program that I developed 10 years ago. It is a tiny tool that camps can use to teach kids to be more active on the playground. It includes a book with many different games that require minimal equipment, if any, such as tag games, field games, marbles, hop-scotch and jacks. It is not only about games, but also about ways to handle different situations that may arise while playing at the playground, like how to deal with someone who wants to join the game that has already started and how to role model positive behaviour.

CC: Why did you create Positive Playgrounds?

PM: I was volunteering at my young son's school when I went out to the playground and noticed, despite this massive structure of playground equipment, that a lot of the kids weren't playing any games or doing anything that was physically active. It was like they had forgotten how to play or organize themselves to start a game. Today, kids are involved in structured activities: schools are focused on academics, we drive our kids to all of their sporting events organized by a coach and then we get them back into the house, instead of sending them outside out of fear of what might



be out there in society. I think the change in society and the focus on technology has effected how children play.

CC: What skills and/or lessons does playing on a playground teach children?

PM: Playing games teach children the rules of life: how to get along, how to get physical activity, how to feel better about themselves, and how to accept criticism and give praise. Nowadays, we try to totally control our children's life in that they shouldn't experience anything negative, and that everything should be positive. No one should win or lose, but that's not life. I'm not saying games should always be about winning and losing, but I think that is a part of playing games. This is a whole different society and as recreation leaders and camp directors, we really have to look at what kind of kids are coming to us and what skills do they have.

CC: What advice do you have for camps when it comes to using their playgrounds?

PM: My games aren't new, but I think camps should keep in mind what society is like nowadays. If you do have a playground, ask yourself: What is its main focus? Are you dealing with behaviours on your playground? Are the kids having a fun time? If not, that is when you think of structuring your playground and the best way to do that is not by having a bunch of people standing around monitoring the behaviour and going up to a child and saying, "We don't do that." What about teaching them some games. Kids will gravitate to a game and I think the one great thing about games is that they appeal to everyone. The universality of games transcends cultural differences, age differences and different skill levels.