

GET PLAYING, KIDS! CITY MOM WANTS TO GET OUR CHILDREN MOVING

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BY JENNIFER PARKS, EDMONTON SUN

As a child, there were summer evenings filled with games of Capture the Flag, Frozen Tag and Jail Break.

Racing our bikes through the streets and our neighbourhood park gave many of us our first taste of freedom and adventure, within the safe haven of our community.

Today, things have changed. Suburban streets are increasingly empty and quiet.

Parents fear for their child's safety in an unpredictable world. As a result, kids spend more time indoors playing with the computer or television set instead of with other children.

Edmonton mom Pearl Marko is all too aware of this reality, and wanted to do something about it.

A decade ago she created a program for city schools called Positive Playgrounds, geared towards bringing play back into kids' lives and inspiring parents and teachers to support this process.

"When my kids went into elementary school I started observing the playground. Kids weren't playing the games we used to. A lot of them weren't doing anything," says Marko, 42.

Recently this issue was addressed in the widely publicized book by Canadian Olympian Silken Laumann, called *Child's Play: Rediscovering the Joy of Play in our Families and Communities* (Random House, 2006).

Laumann calls for more support from parents and educators in transforming school yards and empty neighbourhood streets back into havens of play. She also encourages less over-scheduling of kids' lives so they are free to be kids again.

As of today, Marko has worked with more than 600 schools across Canada on her parallel mission: to put the "play" back into playgrounds.

Positive Playgrounds has grown into a part-time business, which she juggles with her work as a recreation programmer in a long-term care facility.

Her approach teaches children positive play strategies and new games to help develop social skills, physical fitness and to have fun.

The program portion includes a step-by-step checklist to guide teachers and game facilitators in the planning and creation of positive playgrounds, including how to organize equipment, volunteer and peer support, and monitor playground dynamics.

The games manual contains more than 190 games for the classroom, phys.-ed class or playground.

Marko has a staff member to run the workshops now. Sessions start at \$250 and manuals and resources range from \$15 to \$75.

She has never taken a wage from the business in 10 years, reinvesting all profits back into it to create new programming materials.

Some of the reasons Marko cites for the crisis in our playgrounds include cutbacks on schoolyard equipment, reduced recess times to accommodate heavier curricula and a lack of understanding of the link between inactivity and increased childhood obesity and diabetes.

Child's play is not only key to a healthy, happy childhood, she says, but it also provides some of the essential building blocks of life.

"We can supply everyone with basic needs, but play and recreational activities give us a reason to live," says Marko, who recalls, as a child, when her mother would open the door after breakfast and say, "Go out and have a great day."

Little did she know back then, but Hopscotch, Hide and Seek and Red Light, Green Light were how she and her peers connected and learned to negotiate a peaceful co-existence within the microcosm of their suburban playground.

"Through play and games we learned the rules of life. Games taught us compromise and social skills you need in life. You learned to get along, otherwise the game would be over and nobody wanted that," says Marko.

She adds parents at home need to be role models for shutting off the TV or computer and going and doing something recreational outdoors.

She agrees with Laumann, who writes: "When we give ourselves permission to skip that one music lesson and just hang out in the yard together, go for a walk, connect while shooting some hoops, we take the pressure off. It's child's play."

For more information on Marko's program visit www.positiveplaygrounds.com.

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WHAT YOU CAN DO IN YOUR CHILD'S SCHOOL

1. Ask how much physical activity your child is getting each day. Is the teacher trained to teach PE? If he or she is not a specialist PE teacher, when was the last time the teacher took a course on teaching PE?
2. Ask about the activities they are doing during gym class. Are they moving enough? Is there enough variety to engage everyone? How are reluctant students encouraged and included - or do they just sit out?
3. Let the principal know your child's health matters. Ask for a dedicated PE instructor, one who has received specific training in teaching physical education.
4. Ask about equipment: Are there enough skipping ropes, balls, etc., so that all of the children can participate?

5. Talk to the principal about replacing junk food and pop machines with healthier options.
 6. Volunteer to oversee a weekly after-school session of unstructured play.
 7. Engage the Parent Advisory Council in making child health a priority of the school.
 8. Tell your school trustee, MLA and MP that healthy, active schools are important to you, and that you want PE consultants rehired and elementary teachers trained to teach physical education.
- from *Child's Play: Rediscovering the Joy of Play in our Families and Communities* by Silken Laumann (Random House, 2006).