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Problem solving

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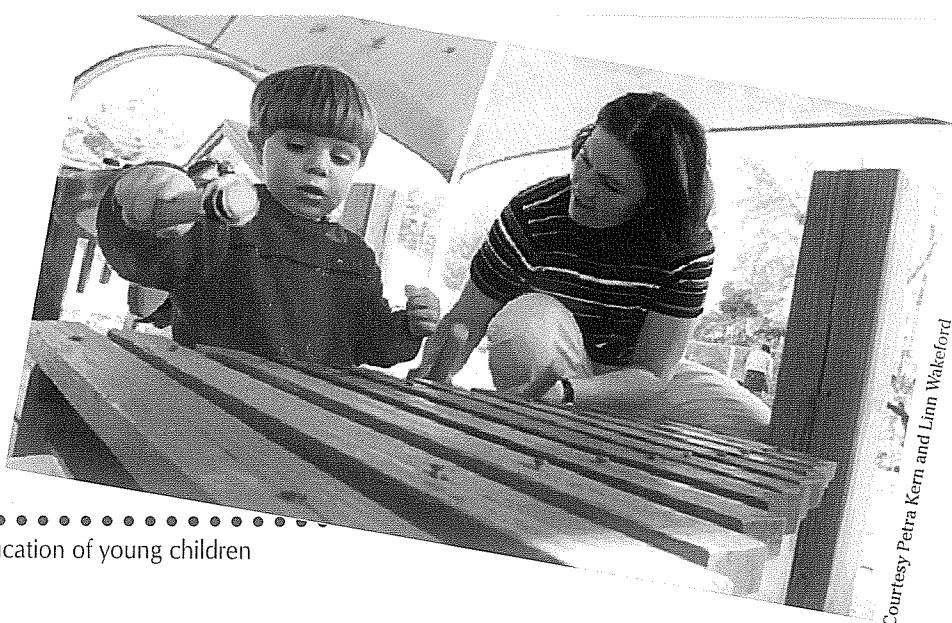
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Courtesy Petra Kern and Linn Wakeford



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Supporting Outdoor Play for Young Children

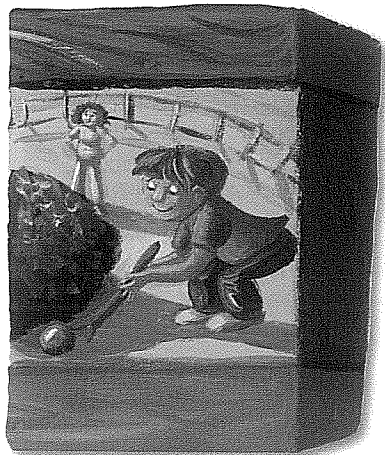
The Zone Model of Playground Supervision

Petra Kern and Linn Wakeford

Jennifer and Sam teach four-year-olds in a full-day preschool program. Their daily classroom schedules include one hour outside in the morning and one hour outside in the afternoon. Sam's eyes widen as he ventures outside with nine energetic preschoolers who are ready for outdoor play. The children run to all areas of a large and inviting playground, and he is the only adult supervising them. In a few moments, to his great relief, Jennifer joins him, as do other children and teachers. However, despite the

number of teachers available on the playground, it is still difficult to see where children are playing and what they are doing. Recognizing this problem, the teachers desire a more organized approach to supervision to ensure that children's outdoor play is both safe and engaging.

FRANK PORTER GRAHAM CHILD CARE PROGRAM (FPG) is an inclusive program affiliated with the University of North Carolina



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at Chapel Hill. FPG serves 75–80 children; about one-third of them have identified special needs. Diagnoses include autism spectrum disorders, cerebral palsy, developmental delay, Down syndrome, and other genetic syndromes. Many of these children have delays in more than one area of development.

The environment and reasons for change

At FPG, as at many child care programs, children play outdoors for large blocks of time. Given the importance of adult support to the success of outdoor play for young children, the teaching and therapy staff at FPG created the Playground Committee to define the roles and responsibilities of adults during outdoor play. The committee would also focus on expanding the variety of play opportunities and maintaining the physical playground environment.

The committee identified the following goals for staff during outdoor play:

- Create a safe environment for outdoor play.
- Ensure accountability for all children's safety.
- Organize activities and the use and maintenance of materials and equipment.
- Educate students, interns, and temporary staff on playground supervision.
- Create clear procedures for supervision of playground activities and make them available to parents, visitors, and staff (including temporary staff and student interns) by posting them in accessible playground locations.
- Enhance playground time for all FPG children.

As the committee developed and articulated these goals, we acknowledged that to achieve them, we needed a more structured way to provide playground supervision.

The outdoor environment offers learning opportunities that are different from those found indoors.



Investigating outdoor play

As the committee began to strategize about potential changes to the playground and to outdoor play, we explored research and other literature on the topic. The following concepts and results emerged from our literature review.

During the child care day, children spend large blocks of time in outdoor play, with the most time spent in physical and creative play (Cullen 1993; Nabors, Willoughby, & McManamin 2001; Veitch et al. 2006). While it is recognized that there are social and "free play" elements to outdoor play (Cullen 1993; Christensen 2003), there is also a need to view this time as a part of the overall curriculum and to provide activities that support learning and development (Cullen 1993; Nabors, Willoughby, & McManamin 2001; DeBord et al. 2002). The outdoor environment offers learning opportunities that are different from those found indoors. It is important to offer a variety of materials and activities that target different developmental levels (Nabors, Willoughby, & McManamin 2001). This is especially important in inclusive child care settings, where children may have a broad range of interests and abilities.

The role of the teacher is crucial for both typically developing children and children with special needs. Research indicates that children with special needs require a significant amount of adult support to engage in meaningful outdoor play (Nabors & Badawi 1997; Fujiki et al. 2001;

Adult support in providing and adapting activities and negotiating social play contributes to the success of outdoor play experiences.

Nabors, Willoughby, & McManamin 2001; Kern & Wolery 2002; Kern & Aldridge 2006), and evidence indicates that teacher support of social, creative, and constructive play enhances overall participation and persistence for all children (Cullen 1993; Nabors & Badawi 1997). Outdoor play is an important activity for child learning, and adult support in providing and adapting activities and negotiating social play contributes to the success of outdoor play experiences for both typically developing children and children with special needs (DeBord 2002; Flynn & Kieff 2002; Kern, Marlette, & Snyder 2002; McGinnis 2002). In spite of this body of literature, there is little written that suggests or proposes an actual model for adult supervision focusing on safety and enhancing learning on an inclusive child care playground.

The zone model of playground supervision

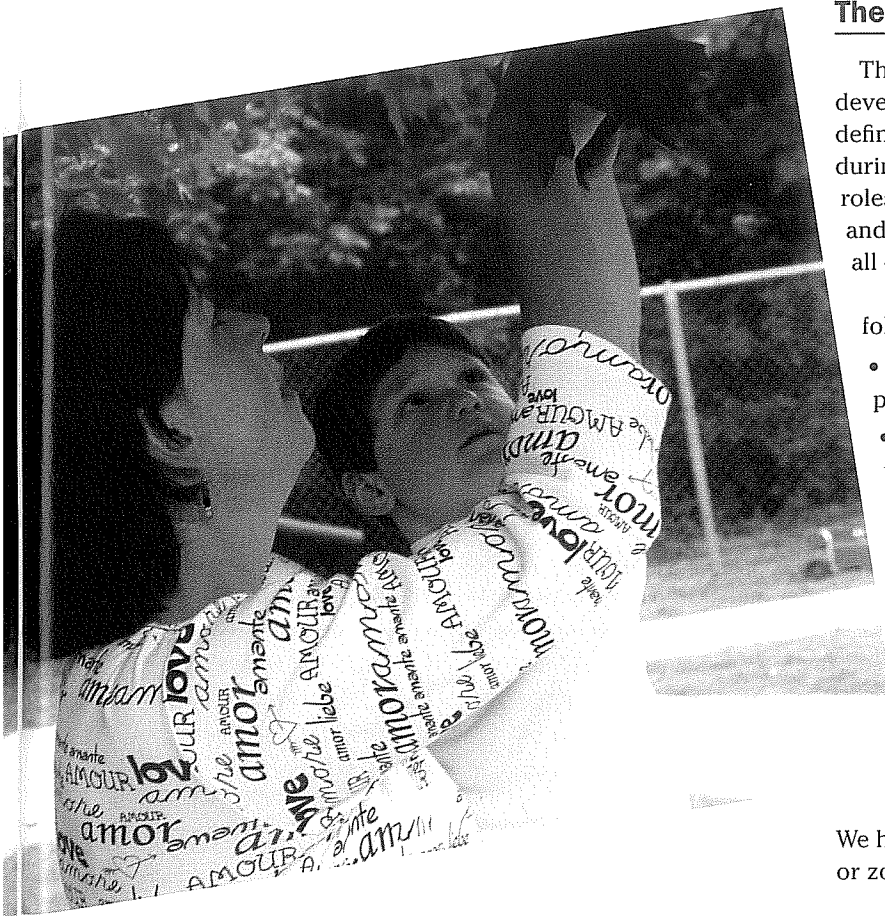
The zone model of playground supervision (ZoMPS), developed by members of the FPG Playground Committee, defines staff child care roles and structures adult support during outdoor playtime. We use this model to organize the roles of adults on the playground in order to create a safe and stimulating outdoor play environment and to support all children's learning and participation.

Overall philosophies for the use of ZoMPS include the following:

- All staff are responsible for all children on the playground.
- Staff should work collaboratively, with accountability to one another across classroom boundaries.
- Children should lead and develop their own play as much as possible, with adults offering support only when needed to ensure safety and purposeful engagement.

FPG staff use ZoMPS when most or all of the classrooms are on the playground together, typically between 10:30 a.m. and noon. The schedule varies somewhat by season, but generally there are one to one-and-a-half hours of common outdoor playtime requiring a high level of adult supervision.

We have divided the playground environment into sections or zones and assigned staff to zones based on required



child:staff ratios. At FPG two staff members (not from the same classroom) are assigned to each of five zones, and three "floaters" cover teachers' scheduled breaks (15 minutes), which often occur during this outdoor play period. Floaters also take children to the bathroom or cover a zone while another adult attends to the needs of a child. Zone assignments rotate weekly so teachers can supervise and support play in different areas.

At least one teacher or staff member must be present in a zone for it to be open. A zone may be closed when no staff member is available to cover it or when child:staff ratios dictate the need for more supervision in other areas. Teachers make reasonable attempts to keep all zones open by using floaters and trading zones with other teaching staff (for example, if a zone temporarily has no staff, but an adjacent zone has two staff members).

Because children with special needs may require individualized attention to participate in outdoor play, teachers may trade assignments to move with a child from one zone to another. This allows teachers to embed intervention strategies in outdoor play for short periods of time without having a significant impact on the overall level of supervision available for all children. Also, outdoor play is often a time when therapists, university students, and volunteers spend time with children with special needs to support their engagement in playground activities. When these nonteaching staff or volunteers provide intervention and support for children with special needs, teaching staff can operate within the zone model as assigned.

To support the use of the zone model of supervision, each zone has an action card that defines supervision duties and identifies particular safety concerns (see "Zone 3: Large Climber & Music Hut"). The card suggests simple play activities for the zone and tells where to find necessary supplies. Action cards also describe maintenance and cleanup procedures for the zones.

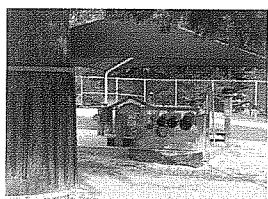
Zone 3: Large Climber & Music Hut

Action Card (front)



Safety guidelines

- Pay attention to all children on the climber, especially two-year-olds and any child with balance problems or impulsive tendencies.
- Make sure children are safely using the equipment (e.g., climbing on top of the tunnel or on chairs on the open platform is *not* safe).
- Keep the fall zones clear of all equipment (i.e., chairs, toys, blocks).
- Uncover/cover the drums in the morning and at the end of the day.
- Make sure children use musical equipment appropriately (e.g., drumsticks are for drumming) and safely (e.g., climbing on the ocean drum is *not* safe).
- Keep the Music Hut free of tricycles.
- Put the drumsticks in the designated boxes.



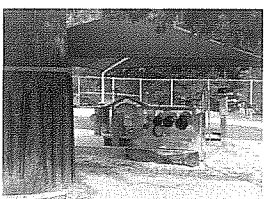
Zone 3: Large Climber & Music Hut

Action Card (back)

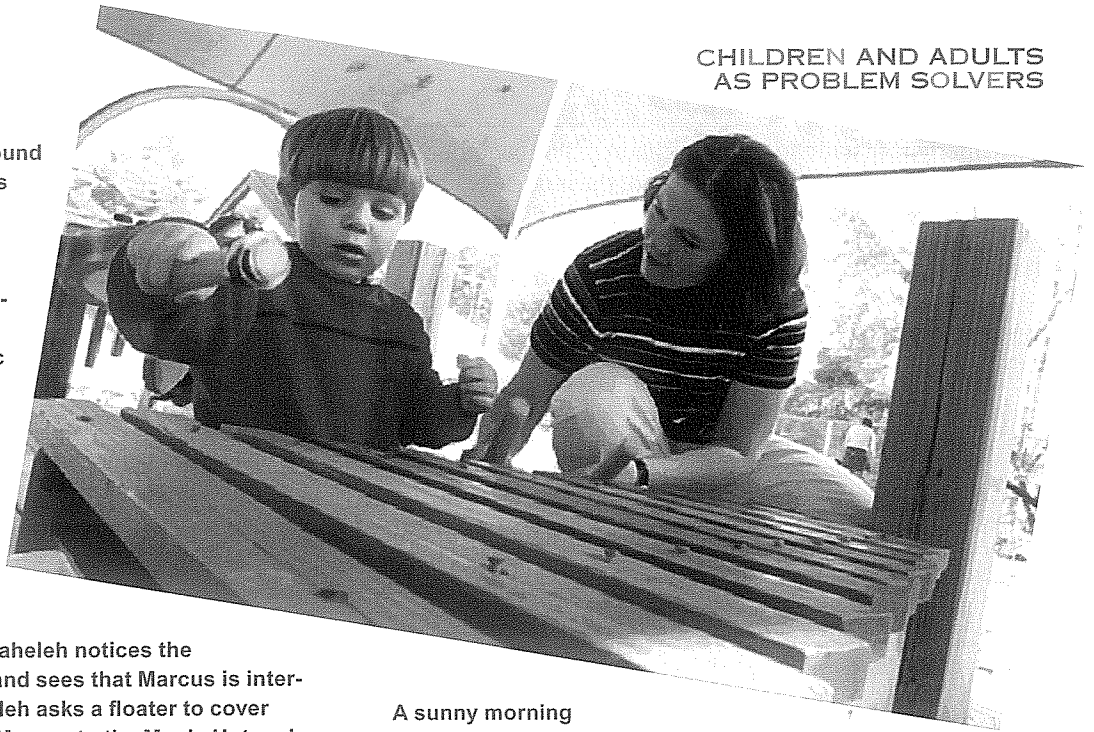


Suggested activities

- Help children develop safe climbing skills on platforms and rope ladders (i.e., using appropriate handholds, being aware of edges of platforms).
- Help children develop different ways of sliding (e.g., sitting, lying on their backs, lying on their tummies).
- Hang streamer or scarves from the monkey bars.
- Use the climber for dramatic play (e.g., bus, boat, fire station, castle, or bears hibernating under the climber).
- Prompt boxes are available and located under the staircase.
- Use a hose to make a water slide.
- Play and/or sing along to the "Songs for the Music Hut," and other children's music. A songbook and a CD player are available in the first floor hallway.
- Play and imitate: loud-soft, fast-slow, high tones-low tones.
- Use instruments for acting out stories (e.g., "Three Billy Goats Gruff," *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom*; "Ten Little Monkeys").
- Jam and make up songs and rhythms using ideas from children.
- Play musical chairs.
- Dance to music; play freeze games with live music.



Sam again enters the playground with his preschool class. This time, as the children run off to play, Sam joins Linda in Zone 3, where together they check that children are climbing safely on the slide structure. Sam moves to the Music Hut where he helps Michael and Daija play the drums, following suggestions on the action card: "soft and loud" and "fast and slow." At the same time, Raheleh is working in Zone 2 with Marcus, a child with special needs who has goals regarding peer interaction. Raheleh notices the interaction in the Music Hut and sees that Marcus is interested in the drumming. Raheleh asks a floater to cover her zone so she can go with Marcus to the Music Hut and support his interaction with Michael and Daija.



What can happen within the zone

Adult supervision on the playground is important both to ensure children's safety and to support their engagement in learning and play activities. Within each zone, teachers observe and interact with the children to support child-initiated play routines but also to scaffold and expand play. We have developed prop boxes containing materials for constructive and dramatic play, and we rotate gross motor items (balls, hula hoops, bowling pins, and so on) to create novelty and interest for both children and teachers. Sidewalk chalk, paper and markers, paints, a CD player, and other supplies for creative play are stored on or near the playground. Some zones have child-size furniture, such as tables that can be covered with large pieces of paper for drawing or used to play "restaurant." A Music Hut stocked with a variety of percussion instruments allows children to explore and engage in musical activities independently or with the help of a teacher or other adult. Teachers can use the items to structure play and engage children in the Music Hut, and children also learn and interact with one another as they create their own music.

Within each zone, teachers observe and interact with the children to support child-initiated play routines but also to scaffold and expand play.

A sunny morning prompts teachers to think about activities to keep the children engaged outdoors. In Zone 4, Clarise is helping the children use the firefighter prop box at the playhouse. After helping them choose roles and use the materials, she steps back and allows the dramatic play to unfold. In Zone 5, Antoine has set up the plastic bowling pins on the sidewalk. One of the preschoolers asks Paula if they may get out the parachute, so in the grassy area of Zone 1, Paula and two other staff members are helping the children play a "popcorn" game, bouncing toy animals in the air with the parachute.

Outcomes of using ZoMPS: Successes and challenges

We implemented ZoMPS at FPG as a pilot model for 13 weeks in fall 2004 and continue to use this model, with changes primarily to the ways in which teachers are assigned to zones. While originally we mixed teachers from different classrooms in a zone, the teachers felt it was easier to provide coverage for teacher breaks and indoor activity set-up time if they were assigned as teaching teams (that is, classroom teachers working together in zone assignments). The observational data we collected on the FPG playground prior to implementing ZoMPS were consistent with published research, indicating that helping children stay safely engaged in play and providing additional support for children with special needs were crucial roles for adults. However, there was no structure in place at that time to ensure that all staff consistently filled those roles.

After the 13-week pilot, 19 of 25 staff members responded to a survey about the use of the zone model. Most of the staff indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that ZoMPS was helpful and was working well on the playground. The majority reported that they agreed or strongly agreed that the zone model had improved both their own

experiences and those of the children during outdoor play and supported the continuation of the model.

Because parents had expressed concerns about playground supervision and engagement, we solicited and attended to their comments. Parent responses in general have been positive, like the following e-mail sent to the director of the child care program:

I just wanted to comment briefly on the subject of the playground shifting to a "zone" management strategy. Until you made your comments [the director had explained the new approach to this parent], I had not realized that any formal change had occurred, but for several weeks prior I had noticed a huge difference—although I was unable to articulate what was different. The teachers seem much more engaged with the children, and all of the children . . . seem to be being watched much more actively. I think this has been a positive change for the center, and I hope that the staff agree.

Tips for Planning Playground Supervision

Here are some suggestions for establishing an organized approach to adult supervision on the playground that ensures that outdoor play is both safe and engaging for all the children in your program.

1. Establish a small work group or playground committee to develop an appropriate plan for your playground.
2. Use a collaborative or democratic process to make final decisions, so that there is consensus about implementing the plan.
3. Divide your playground into logical zones by observing and evaluating where children play and where adults are most needed.
4. Develop a weekly rotating schedule, assigning teachers to each zone and establishing who will be assigned the "floater" role.
5. Make sure that everyone feels comfortable with his/her role and responsibilities, particularly those in the floater position.
6. Post a zone map and the supervision schedule in locations visible to staff, parents, and visitors.
7. Create action cards for each zone, including safety hints and activity and maintenance instructions.
8. Once the plan is in place to address safety and supervision needs, support teachers in engaging all children in meaningful play.
9. Consider developing special playground activities and prop boxes to support inclusion of children with disabilities and provide a variety of play opportunities for all.
10. Reevaluate your plan and its implementation regularly.



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While the implementation of ZoMPS has resulted in a number of positive outcomes, there continue to be challenges and unmet goals. Even with the change in how teachers are assigned to zones, when part of a teaching team is absent, teachers continue to struggle to schedule breaks and set-up times for indoor activities. The role of the floater is sometimes difficult. A floater is quite active and must attend to and communicate with all other adults on the playground, and some staff simply do that better than others.

Before ZoMPS, teachers and therapists acknowledged that they had some difficulty supporting and supervising the children with special needs, particularly in terms of implementing specific intervention strategies. This was due in part to the size of the playground and the pace of play. This continues to be true while using ZoMPS. Teaching teams with a fair amount of experience or who have been together for two or more years are more adept at providing supervision in their zones while embedding simple interventions for particular children. Other teams tend to need more support from therapists and others to implement intervention on the playground.

Other issues included the need to develop more variety in creative, constructive, and dramatic play activities; the potential for making zones smaller or closing them more easily; and the need for full cooperation from all staff. Over the past three years, more prop boxes and planned play activities have been developed, and teachers have become more comfortable with trying new constructive and pretend play activities outdoors, rather than just indoors. We have also added a wooden stage area to the playground.

We addressed the need for a little less space on the playground by fencing off a rectangular section, and we slightly reconfigured the zones so that teachers could more easily see all areas of their zones. The smaller fenced area provides a place for gardening as well as small-group outdoor activities, such as simple woodworking. The area also houses a rabbit hutch in which two bunnies live, and children can go in smaller groups to feed the bunnies or let them out to run around.

In terms of staff cooperation, as with many policies or procedures implemented in programs with a fairly large staff, there are always those who do not fully agree with or adhere to those procedures. Consistent administrative support and some turnover in staff has increased cooperation with the model procedure, although there is still an occasional need for reminders from the program director.

Conclusion

The purpose of the pilot project was to provide a safe and engaging outdoor play environment for preschool children enrolled in an inclusive child care program. The use of a zone model of supervision resulted in positive changes in both adult and child experiences on the playground and a higher level of satisfaction overall with outdoor play for teachers, therapists, and parents.

As we continue to attend to the participation and safety needs of the children on our playground, we expand on

The use of a zone model of supervision resulted in positive changes in both adult and child experiences on the playground.

and refine how to use ZoMPS. Although currently we have a good model in place, we are thinking ahead about better ways to address scheduling issues and maintain the proper balance of familiarity and novelty in children's play opportunities. We also are working on systems that will allow us to provide more individualized attention to the children with special needs. Ultimately, we strive for a realistic but organized approach to adult support and supervision on the child care playground that will enhance the potential for all children to participate in safe, meaningful, and exuberant outdoor play.

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