Healthy Parks and Playgrounds

A new **old** way to think about play

Central Square Study Committee
March, 2012
Why do we care about play?

We dedicate space for play because it is a public good.

Public play shows how a community values imagination and creativity.

Play is important to the health and development of individuals and the community at large.

Play invites participation from all segments of the community.
How do we think about play?

- Contained areas
- Flat surfaces
- Fixed-in-place climbing equipment
- Safe for very small children
- Limited opportunity for upper age groups
- Few movable features
- Very few natural materials
How could we think about play?

Play is **NOT**

- Just for little kids
- Just burning calories
- Just wasting time
- Just for playgrounds
Start at the beginning – What is Play?

How is play healthy?

• Part of human development

• Part of public life
Play is an integral part of human nature

- Play happens everywhere
- Play happens all the time
- Play is for everyone (kids are just better at it!)
Play is free, often unstructured and can be messy

- Play is a process, an activity
- Purposeful, but not a means to an end
- Self-directed
- Participatory
- Improvisational
Play is fun and makes people happy

- Emotional health and well-being
- Lifelong benefits
Play is a self-directed learning process, self-initiated

- Active thinking
- Players make their own rules
- Independent learning
- Applied knowledge
- Testing ideas
- Following ideas to conclusions
Play is exploratory, creative and imaginative

- Exploring the unknown
- Building new things
- Storytelling
- Not unlike the process of artists, innovators
Play is experimental, challenging and sometimes risky

- Inventing, pursuing new challenges
- Physical, cognitive, emotional abilities
- Confidence, self-esteem
- Reasonably safe, but not risk-proof
Play is physical

- Uses energy
- Improves circulation, reduces stress
- Coordination, balance and motor skills
- Thinking and movement
Play is learning about the outside world

- Natural and urban
- Using all senses
- How objects and materials interact
- Manipulating materials, objects
- Plants, soils, sand, water
- Fresh air, sunshine, greenery
Play can be solitary or social

- Sharing
- Communication
- Cooperation
- Competition
- Trust
- Reflection
- Introspection
- Independence
Goals for “Healthy Parks and Playgrounds” in Cambridge

- A direction for how the City’s public space can evolve over time
- What does it mean to be a “play space”?
- The City as Playground
Parks and playgrounds should be **integrated play environments**, not just collections of play features in an enclosed area.
Play environments should balance the need for a reasonable level of safety with the need for challenge, adventure and risk-taking.

Play environments should support curiosity, creativity and imagination.
Play environments should stimulate **physical activity** with many different types and combinations of **movements**

- Strength
- Balance
- Coordination
- Safety awareness
A diverse range of play environments should be provided across the city to serve a full range of age groups and interests.

Play environments should be community places.
Meaningful play opportunities should be available to all levels of ability

Play opportunities should be provided during all seasons of the year and all weather conditions
Beyond Parks and Playgrounds

• Inviting play throughout the public realm
• Inviting all ages to participate
Vision for the Future

Parks and Playgrounds

- Different parks for different needs – 
  *one size does NOT fit all!*
- More focus on “environment” than “equipment”

The Public Realm (e.g., Sidewalks, Plazas)

- Playfulness and whimsy in unexpected places
- Spaces for imaginative interaction
- Spaces for socializing, community
www.cambridgema.gov/healthyplaygrounds