[Amanda Wagner was a junior psychology major at Kalamazoo College when she wrote this article.]

Get Off the Slide: Stopping Playground Bullying
Amanda Wagner

Bullying is a very powerful force in schools across America and the rest of the globe. From children in elementary school through adolescents in high school, bullying is destructive at all ages. Research shows that the most common locale for bullying is on the playground, closely followed in frequency en route to and from school (Boulton, 1999). Also, according to Pepler and Craig, bullying that occurred on a playground was observed by monitors, adult playground assistants, on the playground only 17% of the time, and monitors intervened in only 23% of the observed cases (cited in Sullivan, 2000). Action must be taken to make school playgrounds a safer place for all children, and Sullivan suggests two broad paths that may achieve this goal: i) administrators, teachers, staff, and other adults can work to maintain a stricter measure of control on the playground, especially in areas that seem to be prone to bullying, and/or ii) these same individuals can attempt to create a more cooperative and engaging school environment (2000). This paper will provide some measures to improve the playground atmosphere through evaluating the type of play that is evoked from different types of playground equipment, addressing logistical concerns that accompany playgrounds, and suggesting a whole-school approach to behavior and rules on the playground.

TYPES OF PLAY ON PLAYGROUNDS

Four general types of play can categorize the way that children interact on the playground (Wardle, 1999). Functional play encourages gross motor activity such as balancing, climbing, and jumping. Constructive play involves creating new objects like artwork, play forts, and gardens. Dramatic play is often referred to as pretend play, and involves creating situations that may or may not be based in reality. Group play involves cooperation and may include social play or games with rules.

Dramatic play and group play may be the most difficult types of play to encourage because they call for creativity and socialization, but by encouraging these types of play, prosocial play will most likely increase as well. By integrating certain features when constructing a playground, specific types of play are promoted. Bridges, tires, and monkey bars can be used as connectors between different pieces of equipment, these are called linkages (Wardle, 1999). Linkages can also unite children in a central location, which will inevitably provoke social interaction. Providing loose parts on the playground will also foster dramatic or constructive play. Often too, the use of flexible materials can bring children together to work cooperatively in building.

It is also important to provide equipment that has different levels of difficulty to ensure that all the children that use the playground will play at the appropriate level. Research shows that when older children are not adequately challenged, they will attempt to create

their own challenges, which may risk the safety of themselves and others. Pellegrini found that there was a higher rate of passive and noninteractive play in the area of the playground that has equipment; further, there was more vigorous play in this area as well (1995). These two extremes might be more centralized if the equipment is gradated for different levels of play. Furthermore, when older children are forced to play on equipment typically intended for younger children, they will monopolize the equipment, thus displacing the younger children. Other equipment that may elicit prosocial play includes seesaws and swings (requiring children to work together) and wide slides and suspended and attached tires (allowing more than one child to use at the same time).

As mentioned earlier, when children are bored they tend to put themselves and others in danger; in addition, they may turn to bullying to make school more exciting (Olweus, 1993). Therefore, it is important to create well-planned, attractive, and enticing playgrounds. Adults may also become more interested in children's activities when the playground is attractive. In one school district, they noted increasing problems with roughhousing, aggressiveness, and antisocial behavior; and in an attempt to reduce these behaviors, they redesigned their traditional playground (Weinstein & Pinciotti, 1988). After the Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) and a parent/consultant met to decide the goals for the new playground, a builder was contracted and debriefed on the goals. The playground equipment was constructed using only tires. Goal setting prior to construction, the novelty of this type of playground, and the well-planned design all proved to be very appropriate and successful at this elementary school. They found that roughhousing decreased while active play increased, and uninvolved behavior decreased.

LOGISTICS OF RECESS

There are other logistical means of creating prosocial playgrounds. First, if there is overcrowding on the playground or if there seems to be a lot of aggressive play, the school can stagger the recess schedule (Sullivan, 2000). Allowing a limited number of children on the playground at a time increases the amount of space that each child has to play, as well as decreasing the number of children playing on specific equipment. Both of these outcomes help to lower the number of aggressive encounters. Also, the presence of adults on the playground decreases bullying (Olweus, 1993), and increasing supervision seems to have an inverse relationship with bullying. The more duty teachers or playground supervisors that are available to watch and intervene in escalating situations, the less likely it is that bullying will occur.

A WHOLE SCHOOL APPROACH

Finally, approaching the problem of bullying from all levels can be effective. Using the elementary school that created a tire playground to increase prosocial play as an example, it is important to set goals for behavior and learning on the playground. An example of a goal may include growth of social skills, and it can be accomplished by utilizing equipment that promotes perspective taking, sharing, and joint attention, (Lovell & Harms, 1985). In order to understand what the goals are, it may be beneficial to include the students in the decision-making process. Not only will it give children a sense of

ownership regarding the playground, but it may also shed light onto the problem of bullying and the role of bystanders, victims, and bullies (O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999). By creating a whole-school/community approach to designing or revamping a playground, more people's ideas can be heard, and it can be a more educational experience for all. Also, in accordance with the idea that using attractive equipment on the playground increases enthusiasm and excitement, it may be valuable to plant flowers on school grounds and repaint and repair play structures to improve the attitude about schools. Again, to create a sense of worth and accomplishment for the students, they can be included in some of these activities, especially flower planting (Sullivan, 2000). Approaching playground design from the whole-school approach is a valuable technique.

Though bullying can occur under a variety of conditions, in the child's best interest, it is important to create a playground that lowers the potential for bullying and raises the potential for functional, constructive, dramatic, and group play in prosocial terms. Different features and equipment can create an intriguing environment; staggering recess schedules and providing more playground monitors can increase the attention and play space given to each child; and goal setting and approaching the redesign of the playground as an entire community may give ownership and unity to the effort. Children use school playgrounds at least once a day, five days a week during the school year. The behaviors and relationships that emerge on the playground are important to the growth of the child; therefore, prosocial interactions should be encouraged.

Summary of how to build a more prosocial playground:
- using linkages between playground equipment
- using equipment that allows for different levels of challenge in play
- using attractive play equipment
- scheduling time slots for class recess
- increasing adult and student supervision
- setting goals as to what should be accomplished on playgrounds
- sprucing playground up by planting flowers, repainting equipment, etc.

* This paper contains no information about safety precautions and guidelines for playgrounds. For more information on this topic consult the references below. U. S. Consumer Product Safety Commission Handbook, 1991. (call 800/638-2772) American Society for Testing and Materials Handbook, 1995. American Academy of Pediatrics, 1994.

References

Boulton, M. J. (1999). Concurrent and longitudinal relations between children's playground behavior and social preference, victimization, and bullying. Child Development, 70, 944-954.

Lovell, P., & Harms, T. (1985). How can playgrounds be improved? A rating scale. Young Children, 40, 3-9.

O'Connell, P., Pepler, D., & Craig, W. (1999). Peer involvement in bullying: Insights and challenges for intervention. Journal of Adolescence, 22, 437-452.

Olweus, D. (1993). Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do. Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers.

Pellegrini, A. D. (1995). School recess and playground behavior. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Sullivan, K. (2000). The anti-bullying handbook. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Wardle, F. (1999). Play environments. In J. E. Johnson, J. F. Christie, & T. D. Yawkey (Eds.), Play and early childhood development (pp. 244-282). New York: Addison-Wesley.

Weinstein, C. S., & Pinciotti, P. (1988). Changing a schoolyard: Intentions, design, decisions, and behavioral outcomes. Environment and Behavior, 20, 345-371.