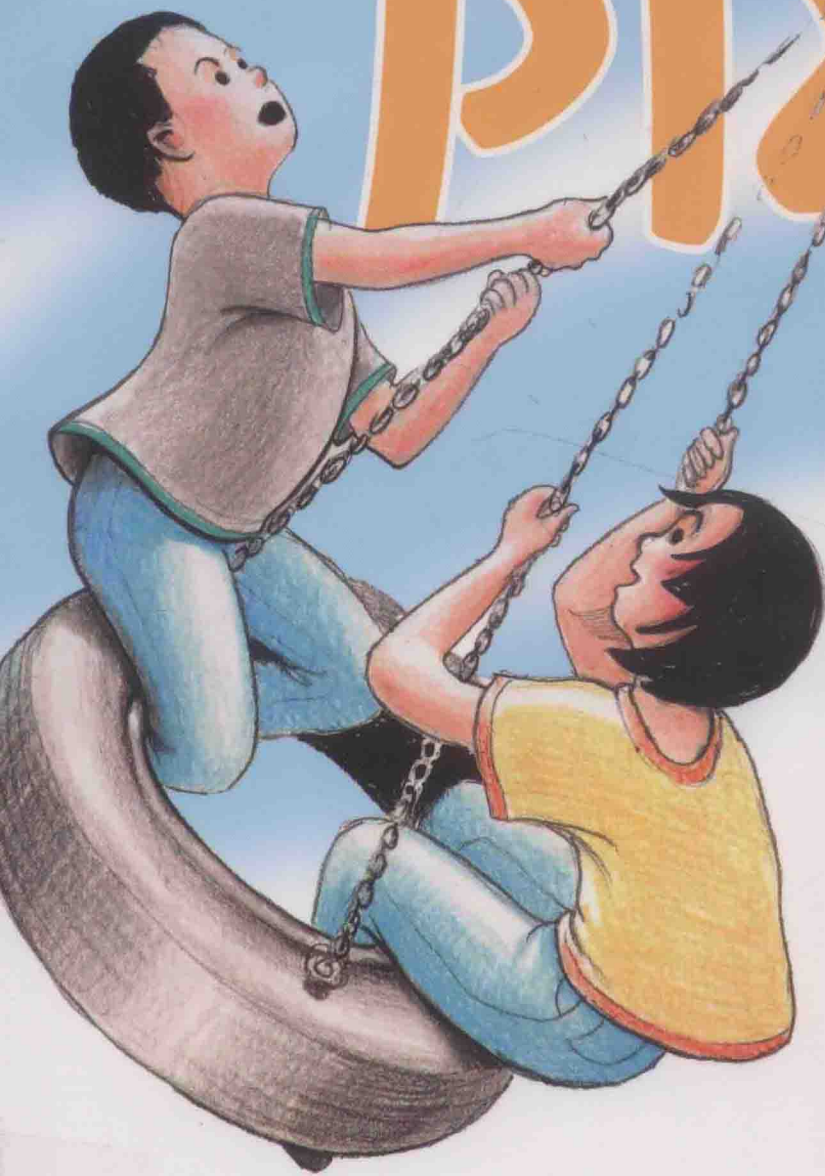


# Let's Play!



**Promoting  
Active  
Playgrounds**

Includes  
**CD-ROM**  
with illustrated  
assessment tools

**Jane Watkinson**

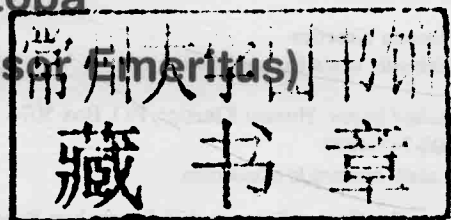
# Let's Play!

## Promoting Active Playgrounds

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# Preface

**W**hat do children love to do the most? Play! They especially love being on the playground before and after school and at recess time. It's their favorite time of day, but it's also a critical opportunity to engage in physical and social activity.

So it is disturbing for many reasons that some children do not, or cannot, take part in common playground activities. Withdrawal or exclusion from play can lead to social isolation, unhealthy choices, and low self-esteem. We know that children spend less and less time in physical activity at home, where the TV and the computer may be more attractive leisure options. This means they may go to school without the skills or practice they need in order to be active participants. But social and physical participation on the playground is important for them—to ensure healthy habits, to reduce the likelihood of childhood obesity, and to increase the likelihood that they will make friends and become part of the active social groups that form in unstructured free time.

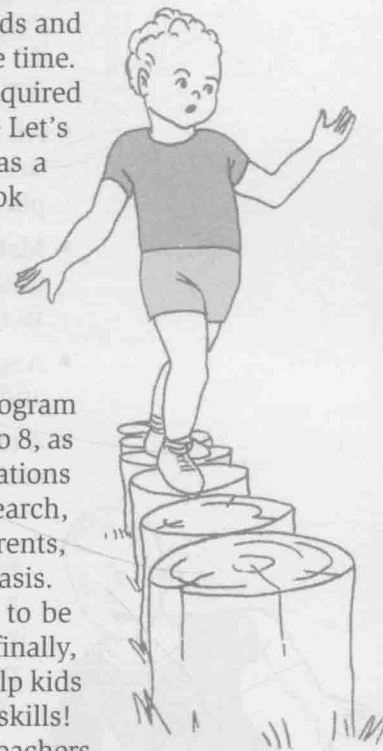
Being physically active starts early in life, and having the skills required for physical activity is critical. This book and CD-ROM, based on the Let's Play! program, prepare you to ensure that every child you know has a repertoire of movement skills to be active on the playground. The book includes a checklist of important activities that children play between the ages of 3 and 8, a friendly method of assessing the specific skills required for taking part in these activities, and simple tips for teaching playground skills and games.

The Let's Play! program was developed in the Pat Austin Research Lab at the University of Alberta over many years. The research program investigated the movement skills and play patterns of children ages 3 to 8, as well as their perceptions about their own competence and their motivations for engaging in play on the playground. During the course of our research, we discovered answers to many of the questions that concern parents, teachers, day-care professionals, and recreation leaders on a daily basis.

And we have a lot of good news to share! First, every kid *wants* to be active. Second, every kid *can* be active, regardless of ability level. And finally, we have created a friendly, intuitive method for identifying how to help kids who are not fully engaged in play with their peers to improve their skills!

The methods presented in this book rely on the common sense of teachers and parents; expertise in physical activity or sport is not a requirement. And these methods are actually fun! They feature a device for screening children to determine if they are doing what their peers do on the playground (the *playmap*) and assessment checklists organized by equipment (called the *playlists*) that will help parents and teachers look closely at individual children to see what they can and can't do on the playground.

The initial screening requires that children simply play for a period of time, then report their activities using illustrated materials that are easy for them to understand. Children whose screening shows that they are not fully participating



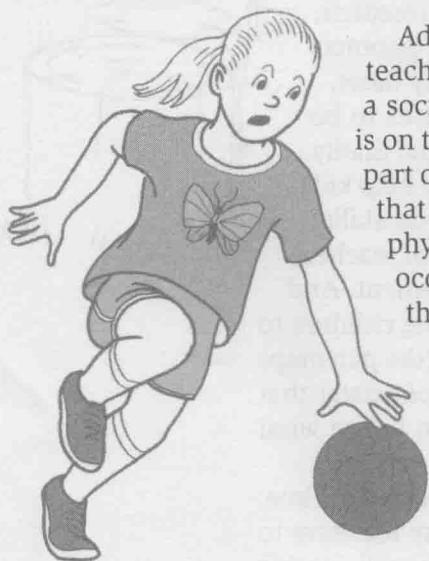
in play with their peers can be further assessed in naturalistic settings, with other children present, and preferably in the midst of free play. Follow-up interventions employ a simple teacher-helping system that has been used with children with and without disabilities during the course of the *Let's Play!* research (Watkinson & Wall, 1982a). The assessment protocol itself is consistent with individualized instructional techniques and can guide the instruction of movement skills by teachers who lack specific training in movement skills.

This is the first book in the physical activity field to provide an assessment protocol for children's gross motor play on the playground. The playground is the most universal play space for children in the United States and Canada, yet participation at recess has been taken for granted until now. We assume that every child can play, but children need movement skills to take part in unstructured free play on playground equipment. This book has unique features that will help you make a difference in the play time of the children you know:

- Attractive and original illustrations appeal to parents, teachers, and children.
- A protocol allows for the screening of 30 children in 30 minutes to help you identify children who are not actively participating during free time on the playground. This protocol uses children's own reports of their activity, an after-recess activity that is fun.
- An assessment protocol details the specific skills needed for the activities. It allows testing to be carried out in the midst of regular outdoor play without disruption.
- Materials are designed for teachers and parents who have no specific training. These are based on illustrations rather than written material, so there is little time needed for preparation.
- A specialized method identifies children who are at risk of isolation in play and a method of intervening (without labeling) helps them acquire skills.
- A large inventory of exciting skills and activities—developed with children and tested with children—stimulates playground activity.

Adults who work with young children devote plenty of time to teaching them letters and numbers. Although this is important, from a social perspective the most important period of the day for children is on the playground, where friendships are made and children become part of social groups. Children need to learn a range of movement skills that allow them to take part. Classroom teachers, child-care workers, physical educators, adapted physical educators, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, recreational leaders, and parents will find this book useful because they will recognize the importance of arming their children with play skills and they will find the illustrations attractive and easy to understand.

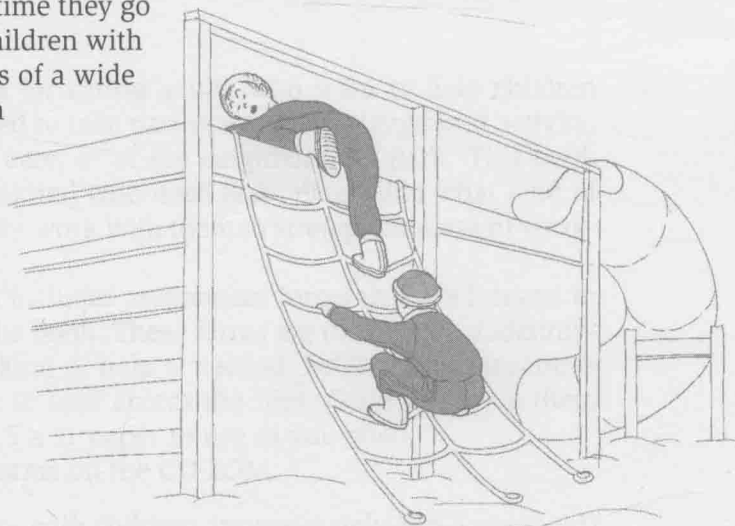
The book will also be of interest to physical educators, playground supervisors, recreation therapists, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists concerned with the development of movement skills in children who have special needs or are at risk of social isolation.





Concerned parents of children ages 3 to 8 will also be interested in this book since it is easy to apply in children's daily lives. Playground skill assessments are informal and can be carried out unobtrusively by parents at local playgrounds. Furthermore, the assessments do not lead to labeling or direct comparison to other children but rather to the identification of skills that can be learned or practiced so that children can use them every day on the playground. For parents of average, gifted, or athletic children, there is a wide range of activities to encourage. These children can see pictures of other youngsters doing skills that they might like to try next time they go to the playground. Parents of children with disabilities will find illustrations of a wide range of skills that children can learn that will allow them to move confidently on the playground.

For children, play really matters. The playground is their world. With the *Let's Play!* book and CD-ROM, the adults who care about them are equipped to make that world a better place, one child at a time.



# How to Use This Book and CD-ROM

**T**he Let's Play! program is for caring adults who want to help children acquire the skills they need to take part in everyday playground activity, whether it is at recess, at day care, or at the neighborhood park. This book explains how to identify the children who need help, determine what kind of help they need, and methodically work with them to strengthen areas of weakness that prevent participation.

The accompanying CD-ROM includes assessment forms that are integral to the program and discussed in the book. These forms are the means of identifying who needs help and what kind of help is needed. Follow the instructions found in the back of the book to best access the files. Once you have them open, you can print them on 8.5 x 11 paper to use as you wish.

You will find the following forms on the CD-ROM:

- Preschool playmap (to use with children approximately 3 to 5 years old)
- Grade-school playmap (to use with children approximately 6 to 8 years old)
- Playlists organized by equipment or skill (slide, bars, or swing, for example)
- Blank playlist (which may be customized by pasting in illustrations included on the CD-ROM)
- Blank report card (which may be customized by pasting in illustrations included on the CD-ROM)

You can print as many copies of the forms as you need, depending on your situation. For example, if you are trying to determine which playground equipment your four-year-old daughter is able to use and prefers, you can print one preschool playmap to take with you to the playground as you observe. Or say you are a first-grade teacher interested in knowing which of your 25 students are not actively engaged on the playground; you can print 25 copies of the grade-school playmap so that each student can indicate after a play period which activities he or she chose, then you can print another playmap to tabulate the students' responses and discover which activities are most important for this class—and who is being left out.

In addition, some of the forms can be customized to your needs. For example, you can create a playlist that shows the specific skills you want to work on with a child by opening the blank playlist form, copying illustrations that show the desired skills, and pasting them into the blank form and saving it. Teachers or children's program leaders can also copy and paste illustrations from the playlists and playmaps into the sample report card form in order to create individualized report cards to share with their students' parents.

The book and CD-ROM have been designed to work together to guide you through the process of helping kids become full participants in the vital context of the local playground. By helping them develop the skills to participate, you are helping them develop the social tools needed for a happy childhood and the physical tools needed for an active lifestyle that lasts well into adulthood.



# Acknowledgments

I wish to acknowledge first, the many children, parents, and teachers from Edmonton, Alberta, Wolfville, Nova Scotia, and Winnipeg, Manitoba, who played with us on their playgrounds and were participants in our research program over the years.

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I want to acknowledge most particularly the insights and experiences of my son, Andrew Terry Watkinson, whose stories of life on the playground were daily tests of the theoretical underpinnings of the research program.

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# Understanding the Value of Play

## CHAPTER 1

**T**here is little debate about the importance of free play for children. The very fact that dozens of new playgrounds are built every year in our communities indicates that we believe they are valuable additions to our schools and neighborhoods. Parents take their children to the playground regularly. Day-care providers build outdoor play time into every morning and afternoon and sometimes lead little caravans of children (hooked together for safety) along blocks of sidewalk to get to a good playground. Schools also provide regular recess times on the playground at least two times a day, with another free-play time at lunch. Thus we clearly hold a firm belief in the importance of free play in a child's day—especially the kind of whole-body activity that occurs on outdoor playgrounds. And for most children, playground time is the best time of the day!

It is common to hear statements about the importance of free-play time. Books abound that advocate free time as being critical to a child's development in all areas of life: social, emotional, physical, and cognitive. Some suggest that freedom to play may help children learn to interact better with their peers, learn rules, learn self-discipline, and learn to understand their fellow human beings. Others argue that games with lots of rules offer children an opportunity to acquire "social intelligence" by prompting them to practice using skills such as supervising (when leading a game), negotiating (when making up rules for an informal game), organizing (when deciding who should play which position on a team), and persuading (when handling disagreements about whether someone has broken the rules). Such skills may serve a child well later in life. Others say that during play children learn to express themselves, establish and maintain friendships, solve problems, accept responsibility, and persevere. Playing outside is also believed by many to help children pay attention when they go back into the classroom.

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**“We have talked to many children about their lives on the playground. What they say can help us understand their perspectives, values, feelings, and thoughts about their play engagement. The quotes in this book come from children who are 6 to 8 years of age, in grades 1 to 3, who may or may not be having difficulty on the playground. We often asked these children questions about “another child just like you” so the children being interviewed didn’t have to reveal too much about themselves directly. We did this to make it easier for them to talk about things.”**

---

While such claims may sometimes be a bit exaggerated, a compelling case can be made for the importance of free play in children's lives. We know from studies of orphanages in developing countries, for example, that children can experience developmental difficulties if they fail to have opportunities to play. So we might support free play because we think it is a sacred right of children. We might also use it as a reward for good behavior. We might be convinced that free play helps our children engage constructively in class. We might understand that active play helps children develop skills of diplomacy. And of course free play can be challenging for the body as well. Playing on the playground can help children develop movement skills and give them opportunities to use those skills. In all of this, it is crucial to recognize that play skills are necessary in order for children to play vigorously enough to experience health benefits and gain entry into the games and social activities of other children.

## PHYSICAL BENEFITS

Playgrounds are built to encourage many kinds of movement that push kids to make their bodies work hard at having fun. Slides and climbers just beg children to climb up and slide down, bars and horizontal ladders invite hanging, and open space between the equipment calls for running and jumping. We wouldn't necessarily refer to such structures as "exercise equipment," but that is precisely what they are—equipment that invites exercise of all kinds for young people. Unlike the treadmills and elliptical steppers that we adults often buy for our own exercise, playground equipment accommodates many forms of movement and is able to withstand the activities that children dream up as they grow older and try new things. The slide is not just for going down; you can also pull yourself *up* the slide. You can climb up the edges of the spiral slide. You can sit on top of the tube slide. These various activities require children to use different muscles and muscle groups, thus producing the exercise that is necessary for the development of strong bodies. Muscles improve with use; the more they are pushed, the stronger they get.

Children don't even notice the stresses and strains that are being put on their muscles, their lungs, and their hearts as they move around the playground. But this is serious business for children's health. Experts recommend that children get 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous physical activity each day. *Moderate* activity involves breathing more heavily than usual but not to the point of feeling tired. You can usually keep talking when you do moderate activity, such as walking, bouncing a ball, hanging or swinging on a bar, or throwing and catching. When doing moderate activity, you may not notice that your heart rate is increased, but it is—and this is good for you. *Vigorous* activity involves a fast breathing rate and a high heart rate; it's the kind of activity where you can feel your heart thumping or where you can't talk because you are out of breath. Running, jumping, or climbing a ladder quickly can make us feel this way. We need daily bouts of moderate *and* vigorous activity in order to become and stay healthy. We can achieve this goal through one long bout of activity or through shorter but more frequent periods of activity such as those provided by recess breaks.



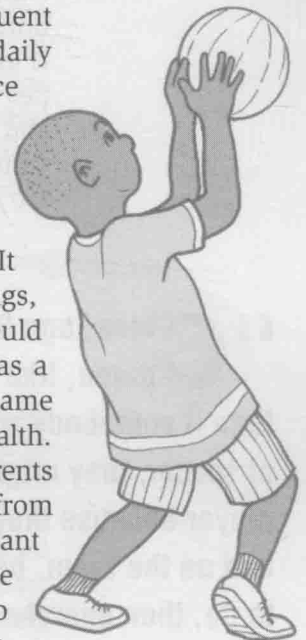
The playground, then, is a good place for children to look after their health. It is where the majority of active play takes place. It can be hard for children to be really active at home unless they have a big backyard or a quiet street to run on, but a playground invites children to run and jump and play, and children typically are more active there. In fact, children are even more likely to be vigorously active on a playground than in physical education or exercise classes. At least this seems to be true for boys. If you watch children as they enter the playground, you see a great burst of high-energy activity during the first few minutes before they settle into less vigorous forms of play. During recess, children are generally active for about 30 percent to 60 percent of their time on the playground. The percentage increases if they have to wait a long time until recess or if they are bored in class before recess begins.

Free-play time is often in jeopardy as adults strive to fill children's days with more reading, writing, and arithmetic. The American Academy of Pediatrics says that half of elementary-age children do not get enough daily physical activity to benefit their hearts and lungs. We should be increasing—not decreasing—the amount of free-play time our kids have. One way to do so is to provide frequent recess periods at school, but this alone does not provide the recommended daily amount of moderate and vigorous physical activity for children. In fact, since children are usually active for only part of a given recess period, such periods provide only about 20 percent of the needed vigorous activity.

In light of the health benefits of free play on the playground, it is clearly not a good strategy for parents or teachers to offer recess or play time as a reward or to reduce it as a punishment. Play time is critical to health. It is extremely important to the growth and development of the heart, lungs, muscles, and bones of the body. Therefore, it should be protected. We would not withdraw opportunities to practice reading or writing or arithmetic as a punishment for poor behavior. Free play needs to be treated with the same respect. It is just as important, if not more so, because it is critical to good health.

Many people are concerned about obesity rates in North America, and parents may worry about a child's weight or size. Obesity does not result entirely from lack of physical activity; other factors, such as nutrition, play a very important role. But daily physical activity—including both vigorous and moderate periods of play—can contribute to a healthy body size, and children who are overweight can still have a healthy heart if they are active regularly. We should work to ensure that they get the recommended 60 minutes. To take advantage of such opportunities, though, children need a good repertoire of movement skills. Recent evidence says that children who are not skilled will not be as fit and healthy as children who are highly skilled.

Parents might be tempted to make children exercise by doing regular workouts like many adults do. Our advice would be quite different: Give an overweight child many opportunities to be active on a playground. The same goal will be met, but with a better chance that the child will sustain the activity because it is enjoyable. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) believes that adult structuring of free play denies children the opportunity to be independent and resourceful. The AAP also says that adult intervention can interfere with children's improvement of physical fitness because children are not as active when supervised. Many professional groups, such as the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education



and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education, recommend *free* play on the playground every day, in addition to teacher-directed physical education in school.

## SOCIAL BENEFITS

Playing alone can be enjoyable, and most children spend some time alone at play, even when other children are nearby. This is not something for parents or teachers to worry about. However, as children mature, they do play together more and more, and being good at movement skills is important for playing with others, especially as children get older. In the classroom, things are different. Being good at math, reading, or writing may not enhance a child's social acceptance or ability to build friendships. In fact, during the later school years, exceptional talent in classroom activities may even lead to lower degrees of acceptance and status for some children. Overall, doing well academically in school is usually unrelated to having friends. But doing well in playground games and activities is important to having friends, especially for boys. Competence in doing activities such as running, playing tag, throwing a ball, and playing soccer is strongly and positively related to social acceptance. Skilled children are often the most valued friends on the playground, and children without movement competence are less likely to be socially accepted. This seems to be the very hard fact of life on the playground.

**“Chloe, age 8: If you're playing a team game, like soccer, where you have to run, then if somebody wants to play who's really bad at soccer, they might argue about who gets what player because they think . . . if one person is bad on the team, because they don't know what to do, then everybody else basically won't have any [fun]. . . . [I]t's like a puzzle with one piece missing, because the whole team has to be good and work together . . . and if somebody doesn't have those skills then . . . they might not be wanted to play on some of these teams.”**

It is not just the doing of a skill that is important but also the speed and efficiency with which it is done. One child may be able to climb the steps to the top of the slide, but another child who can do it *quickly* and *smoothly* in order to avoid being tagged is granted a special status by peers. It is a sad truth that children who lack movement competence tend to be less popular and have fewer friends. In fact, children who lack playground competence can become isolated at school, and this isolation is damaging to their self-esteem.

Skilled children, on the other hand, become informal playground leaders and thus gain experience in decision making and choice making that may not be available to children

who are less skilled. For example, athletic boys in elementary school typically assume dominant roles in activities on the playground at recess. They often control who can and cannot participate in games, whereas children who are left out of an activity have no say in who does, or does not, take part. Exclusion leads to even less practice of the skills required for inclusion, thus exacerbating the situation. This is why children with poor movement competence need to

be identified early in their lives and helped to develop sufficient skill to gain entry into play activity before the cycle of exclusion, loneliness, and lack of practice takes hold.

Being left out is very hard to handle. When children don't play, when they withdraw or are excluded, they can experience long-lasting negative effects on their feelings about themselves. Their memories of their time on the playground will be vivid and painful. Children who withdraw will lose the opportunity to practice the skills needed to be active on the playground, and this loss can start a cycle of inactivity that may last for years. In fact, experts think this cycle may be one cause of obesity, and it certainly lies at the heart of children's isolation from peers.

We often make assumptions that all children can automatically play on the playground, but a significant number of children are isolated and inactive. Some of these children feel they are not skilled enough to take part. Others are worried about being hurt by flying balls or falling from climbers. Children with mild to severe disability are often intentionally left out of playground activity, and this exclusion is hurtful and damaging to their feelings of self-worth. Some children are deliberately excluded because their movement and social skills don't measure up to the expectations of their peers. Whatever the reason for being uninvolved, this lack of participation can lead to a cycle of developmental problems: lack of practice, increasing deficits in movement and social skills, lack of fitness, unhealthy bodies, and few friends. Most important, being left out can lead to sadness and loneliness.

## WHAT CAN ADULTS DO TO HELP?

To engage in play, children must have sufficient movement competence to be accepted into their peer group activities. The key is sufficient skill. We need to ensure that children have sufficient skill before they enter school. We also need to be able to identify children who lack the skills to participate during their school years and provide them with the extra teaching and practice they need in order to develop a good repertoire of skills for play. For some children, being able to do one or two things well might be enough to provide them with entry to playground activities. For most kids, though, having many skills, and being able to do them all well, is the ticket to complete engagement with their peers. So they need a *repertoire* of skills that they can do, and the broader and deeper this repertoire is the more movement success they will have on the playground.

A good skill repertoire does not, however, appear automatically: The more free-play time available to children, the greater the chance that their repertoire will expand. It takes practice and opportunity; for some children, it also takes instruction and coaching.

### ***The Right Repertoire for a Child's Age***

Very young children may start to acquire playground skills by learning how to go down a wide slide into the arms of their parents. They may walk across a suspended bridge while holding a big brother's hand. They may climb a small ladder with wide rungs. A very young child may simply find it fun to hide under the climber, to run from one piece of equipment to another, or to be put