

Go Outside and Play!

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You might think that play comes naturally to children and that it is only recently that kids need encouragement to put aside technology and become active. Actually that is not the case. In turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh, many children, especially in the poorer sections of the city, had no green space in which to play, and when taken to a playground didn't know what to do.

In 1896, the Civic Club of Allegheny County began to take up a number of civic betterment causes, one of which was the lack of play areas for children. It began by opening school yards in the summer as playgrounds and staffing them with newly minted “kindergarteners,” women who ran programs for children. Targeting mill neighborhoods like the Strip District and South Side the club was surprised to find resistance from parents who saw no value in play

and wanted their children to have vocational training instead. Many children at an early age were already working in cigar factories and at industrial jobs. The kindergarteners reported that, “children on some playgrounds did not know why they were there.” Slowly they made inroads, teaching the children songs and games, folk dancing and gymnastics, in addition to skills like sewing, drawing, and carpentry. By 1908 they were able to organize a great “play festival” in Schenley Park attended by 3,000 youngsters from across the city.

Once the school playgrounds were up and running the women campaigned for recreation parks—much larger areas for children to congregate and play. The abandoned Bedford Basin reservoir in the Hill District was filled in and became Washington Park. Arsenal Park opened in Lawrenceville and other parks opened on the South Side.

After WWII the Allegheny Conference on Community Development took on a similar role campaigning for a wide range of civic improvements including the development of “parklets.” Through its Pa Pitt Partners program vacant parcels across the city were developed into small playgrounds for the burgeoning number of Baby Boomers.

Once again children had greater access to safe, accessible areas in which to play. ✪



Play equipment, minus safety features, Washington Park, 1907. Note that many of the boys are barefoot.

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Kennywood Park in West Mifflin also offered free playgrounds in addition to its kiddieland rides. From its founding, there were slides and swings available. A 1926 *Pittsburgh Gazette Times* article noted:

children find ceaseless activity and continuous amusement, ranging from the old-time down to monkeys, ponies, merry-go-rounds, coasters, the "bug house" with its unexpected thrills of crooked mirrors, slides fantastic floor and blasts of air, and the comic tableaux of the "old mill." There also are an athletic field, with diamond and cinder track, and Kiddieland, miniature amusement park in itself.

Many of the diversions are arranged on a smaller, safer scale, and there are also sand boxes and toys, shovels and buckets, slides and see-saws for the smaller children.



Kennywood's free playground was near today's Potato Patch in the 1920s.
KP 901104L



Hazelwood Parklet, 1950.

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