



Using the Playground Environment to Develop Skills

Play is considered to be one of the primary occupations of childhood, particularly for pre-school children. Play is what children choose to do and what they are expected to do. One of the things that OTs focus on is enabling children to engage in the occupation of play. Through play children develop the skills necessary to function on in to adulthood. The playground therefore can be considered as a naturalistic environment in which children can develop and practice these skills. Often children with difficulties find it harder to access play and play opportunities and need more support from their parents/therapists to facilitate this. Sometimes the playground is too busy and noisy, or they may stand and watch rather than get involved because they either don't know what to do or it is too overwhelming. Helping your child engage in the playground environment is possible and worthwhile with a few adaptations. Listed below are some ideas how to 'play' with the equipment found in playgrounds depending on your child's needs, whether they be sensory, motor, or both! You can also work on attention and concentration by getting your child to stick with an activity for a certain number of repetitions or length of time. As they progress children could also plan a simple obstacle course making it even more fun! The equipment below is all available in the Cabinteely playground. There is a list of playgrounds here [http://www.dublin.ie/maps/map#what="Playgrounds"](http://www.dublin.ie/maps/map#what=), as I know some parents find Cabinteely a bit too big and open. Remember to start small so your child can experience success and give as much support as needed until they feel more confident. Observe your child and see what they like or don't like, what they find exciting and what they find calming. Have a plan before you go to the playground on what you would like to do. You could also try a social story (see previous info emails) so everyone knows what to expect. If your child is a bit older involve them in the planning process as another opportunity to practice their emerging skills!



The Climbing Frame: climbing frames are great for 'heavy work' and help develop proprioception, body awareness and general muscle tone. Children can hang by their arms or legs, be upside down, climb up high or stay low, and jump off. I know some parents have mentioned having to practice their own skills while extracting the child who gets stuck at the top so maybe go for something smaller to start with!!!



The Roundabout: Some children just love twirling and spinning and need this vestibular input to stay alert and focused. If this is your child, it might be best to start with the playground equipment that access this need and move on to other things when they are ready. Remember to spin both ways, to the left and to the right! Also, any parent who has pushed one of these things around knows how heavy they can be, hence it's also great for muscle tone and general strength. Get your child to push you or their siblings to work on this.



The Rocking Horse/Car: Very gentle back and forth movement can be calming for lots of children. If your younger child gets anxious in the playground this might be a good place to

start. Gentle movements back and forth may relax a child who is sensory seeking while very fast movements may help your child become more alert.



Swings: Swings are great! You can push someone else for great sensory feedback and heavy work. You can swing in them for vestibular input and jump off them for crashing activities. There are lots of different types of swings out there from 'whole seat', round basket ones and your standard swing. The big round ones are especially good as they go back and forth and round and round. Your child can lie, sit, or stand so they have lots of options depending on their needs. Swinging can be calming or alerting so observe your child to see what they like.



The Zip-Wire: I've been to a couple of playgrounds where there are zip-wires and they are very popular. For a lot of children you will need to grade this activity (unless they are very brave!). You could start by just watching other children, then holding your child while they sit on the seat and walking slowly to the other end until they can manage themselves. The zip wire is great for children who need both proprioceptive and vestibular input. It's also a great way to build upper extremity strength, muscle endurance, and self-confidence as children challenge themselves to hold on long enough to make it to the other end. For children with sensory processing needs zip lines are a great tool for heavy work to help give their muscles extra input that will calm and relax them when they are done. For other children with sensory integration difficulties who are fearful of vestibular input, it is a great way to enhance their ability to integrate and tolerate movement. With help and support from an adult, they will be able to build their confidence slowly until they master it on their own and take pride in their increased abilities.



The Fireman's Pole: you can hang from it, climb up it, slide down it or spin around it. Great for heavy work and crashing and falling. If you've tried this yourself, you'll know how hard it can be to get up one of these! Children can pretend to be firemen to make it more fun!



Sand and Water: Many playgrounds have sand and water areas and these can be a calmer place to be when the playground is busy. Watching water fall can be a relaxing activity and a great way to introduce an anxious child to the playground. Because of all the little grains, sand can be a great sensory activity and get little fingers ready for writing. Children can also bring their buckets and spades and get creative. All of which helps emerging motor and planning skills.



Balance Beam: having good balance skills helps make lots of daily activities easier. Vary the activities by using large steps, little, steps, going sideways. You can grade the

activity easily by first holding the child's two hands, then one, then none. Don't forget to jump off at the end!



The slide: another very useful piece of equipment. Climbing up and down the slide, going on your tummy, sitting up and lying down can all help develop motor skills and improve sensory integration depending on your individual child's needs. Even just having to get up there in the first place involves some effort!