

Collapsed cardboard boxes, plastic bottles, three car tires, a tarp, a pile of fabric, paper towel tubes – lots of them, a pile of forest green blinds, streamers, a pile of abnormally large straws, all kinds of tape, and a bamboo pole. These are just some of the things scattered around a grassy area on a bright and warm Sunday morning. These seemingly “junk” materials are prized parts that turn visions into reality. Throughout the day, these materials will turn into a space ship, a wheel-barrow, a house, a hideout area, a hat, and a wool compressor, amongst many other things. These are community adventure play experiences.

Community adventure play experiences can be set up anywhere there is space, a collection of loose parts, and a creative mind. The groundwork is done. The materials have been collected and donated by local families and businesses. Facilitators have sorted the materials and set them up at a secured space. A community has come together to embrace its youngest members: the children who will play here. Anything is possible. There are no instructions. This is a place where old materials are used in new and unconventional ways. It's a place where there are second, third, fourth chances; as many chances as we want, to see if we can make our ideas a reality. It's also a place where it's okay to abandon the ideas that don't work, or perhaps are no longer interesting.

Some children march right over to the materials. They know exactly what they are looking for. Others meander, weaving in and out of the materials, picking things up and putting things down; waiting for something to speak to them. Sooner rather than later, every child is busy exploring something, testing things out, and finding new uses for those ubiquitous paper towel tubes. There are two-year olds and ten year olds playing side by side; each one busy working on their own creation. Do you know what it sounds like when window blinds are dragged over grass really quickly? I do, because that is exactly what a child did with the blinds. To the left of the cardboard box pile are lightsabers. Not the traditional kind, but the kind that are made out of individual pieces pulled out from the blinds that had been previously dragged all over the grass. Two four year olds have discovered that if folded a few times, the blinds become the perfect thickness for lightsabers. And, wouldn't you know it? A clothes pin not only secures the thickness, but also doubles as a handle.

“Excuse me, be careful, there's water right there,” a second grader warns me. “There is?” I ask, wondering how the water got to the area since I know that it was not part of the materials. “Yes, I needed it for my wool-compressor, but it spilled a little.” The paint pails, of course: they make fine water transporting containers from the water fountain. This is a thing that happens a lot at community adventure play experiences: if there is a need for something that isn't readily available, the children will usually find a way to acquire or substitute it through creative means.

The materials are plenty, but not endless. Two boys have realized that they are both coveting the same three tires. They decide that the only way that they will both be able to use the tires is if they use it together. Soon they are hard at work, sharing ideas and constructing while carefully navigating the delicate balance of what it means to work with another person.

Upon first glance, it might be hard to spot the adults in community adventure play experiences. There are indeed adults; however, they are usually in the periphery. If they are in the middle of the children's play, it is to facilitate: cutting things, holding things up, carrying things that are large. The children seem to have a natural understanding that the space for community adventure play experiences is sacred and theirs, but there are adults available to help them. They know that we are here to make sure that everybody feels safe enough to take risks, to try out new ideas, to explore.

Later in the afternoon a multi-age group makes a time machine out of many boxes. There is much discussion about how it should look, where it should be placed, where the time machine will take people; the topics are endless. When it is done, the tallest boy has a concern: "The door is not big enough for my body, can we cut it and make the door bigger so I can fit, too?" Of course, the door must be cut! Not a single builder must be left behind. Suddenly, there are several pairs of eyes systematically scanning the area. As I am spotted by the builders, determined footsteps come my way. "We need your help. We need to use some scissors to cut the time machine door but it's a little difficult. Can you do it?" It is my honor to make the door large enough for the tallest time machine builder.

No matter how many community adventure play experiences I observe, I am always amazed at how wonderfully different all of our ideas are. Of course, sometimes the ideas are similar. I have seen many, many houses built at community adventure play experiences; it seems that a house is something that many people have a desire to build. However, I have yet to see two houses built the exact same way. Community adventure play experiences not only places where one can actually see that no two minds are exactly alike, but more importantly, they are places where one can see how important it is to celebrate the different ways in which we think and create. It is a space where minds meet and ideas connect. It is fertile ground for exploration; it is a place where visions come to fruition, for innovative thought, or as we call it: play.

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