

## The Magic of Sand— Indoors and Out

The basic elements of the Ancients were: *earth, water, fire, and air*. This may explain the yearning in every child to play with water and sand in the fresh air, and sometimes light a fire. A space to play without sand is a *no-play space*. Sand has magic and magnetic qualities to which all children gravitate. It has been so through the ages. Pictures by the Dutch painter, Pieter Bruegel,<sup>1</sup> show us games on sandy soil in the town square and innumerable references occur in literature. A young Swiss gentleman, for example, wrote in the year of 1550: "Wherever I could find a little bit of sand, or earth on the streets, I started to dig holes, and with found stones I built castles and towers. I loved to mix lime and clay, and not even hard and frequent spankings could discourage me from this activity which I enjoy to the present day."<sup>2</sup>

As one travels through the world, whether it be here or abroad, you find children most happily at play on a pile of sand; while the parents work in the fields, or the mother sits chatting with a friend on a bench under a tree. The sand area is the place where the most absorbing play takes place. Play for the child is work, a kind of research and adventure which should be an enjoyable experience from which the child returns fully satisfied, joyous,

and gay. Sand areas represent the most flexible play, renewable, inexpensive, and "earthy" play material. Today, with increased costs, natural materials should be used wherever possible. At the present time we are too conscious of hygiene to use this basic material more frequently. With this attitude we are depriving all our children from a play-learn experience and not making it ready for the work-leisure cycle ahead.

Søren Kierkegaard, the famous Danish philosopher of the nineteenth century, observed: "you learn to know a child by observing it in play."<sup>3</sup> Have you ever observed children at the beach? Why not make miniature play situations indoors or outdoors possible? Sand has qualities that no other material can muster. It has:

texture  
colour  
pliability.

What can you do with it?

You can sift it through your fingers,  
You can tip it from your hands,  
You can dig in it,  
You can eat it,  
You can cover yourself with it,  
You can make imprints of your feet,  
your legs, your hands,  
You can collect grasses, feathers, sticks,  
shells, little rocks and you make  
yourself a garden or you can,

Take empty tins or ice-cream containers  
and wooden spoons to the beach, or  
You can strain the sand with an old  
colander,  
You can fill old cooking pots, or funnel it  
into plastic bottles or you can shovel it  
into paper cartons,  
You can load it onto trucks, pull it around  
in carts and wheelbarrows,  
You can weigh it,  
You can build roads and tracks for Dinky  
Toys and,  
You can use it to shape cakes for an  
imaginary birthday party,  
You can smooth it out and draw in it with  
your fingers or sticks,  
You can make sand castles and buildings.

Now these are just a few things you can do with sand. It is endless in its shapes and its texture is appealing. In combination with water, sand takes on different shapes. You can make yourself a little lake on which you can float paper boats or pieces of wood—you may jump into it—you paddle in the pool—you make mud pies with water, you water your garden, and if you can visualize that all these wonderful play experiences can be had with just two ingredients, namely sand and water, it certainly should be mandatory that all playgrounds are designed for sand play, indoors as well as outdoors.

For indoors a finer sand is used, and there are several ways of making sand-play possible. Indoors:

A sunny playroom with plants should be used, where a box filled with sand sits on a table with or without castors. The box should be 57 centimetres by 72 centimetres by 7 centimetres. The playroom should have shelves holding boxes with toys so that the child may choose whatever it wants to play with or act out.

However, in the hospital setting one should ameliorate the impact of the environment on the child. Sand-play could help to relieve this impact and allow the child to play for fun, for learning. It is this type of play which will help develop the person and give this child a feeling of trust of the outer world. It will encourage dexterity amongst the handicapped—grasping, visualizing, discovering. The sand tables should be in a playroom with shelves filled with colourful tiles, clay, old and new toys, wooden toys, trees, houses, blocks, so that it will make a rich environment in which the child can play. Water should be readily available, maybe in the form of a watering can or a miniature hose connected to a sink. For some patients a sand box on wheels may be the answer and for some, a sand box in a covered area.

Mutterings will be heard "But what a mess!" These pictures will show you that this does not need to be so. [If] a table with four legs, or [a] box placed on a table with four legs with a wide margin around it, and a suitable cover be used, it will not be a mess. In hospital settings, a whole room can be filled with pliable sand and

a wooden floor around it, so that the child is exposed to a complete play environment.

For the out of doors, the sand area should be large enough for everyone to claim a territorial space. That is 10 to 25 square metres per child, which is 30 to 75 square feet per child, which means for 10 children a sand area of 300 square feet (or 15' × 20') is necessary. The sand area should be located in a secluded, wind-free, sunny spot, with some trees for shade and seclusion. It must be at least 3' deep to allow for digging large holes and lined with rock to drain the water away. Sand used for outdoors is a coarser sand that falls readily off the clothes. There should be a ramp for access, for the handicapped, with seats around for play leaders or parents, or it could be bordered with stones or wood. Then there is a space for creative and experimental play. Children love to create things, and the first step is always finding out about the materials and how to use them. The child who experiments with a new material or medium often finds he has something new and exciting, and here the versatility of sand is unsurpassable. There are examples of sand play with platforms built into the sand box which are helpful. It is wise to locate play areas at the hospital so that these may also be used by children in the community. It makes for a friendlier atmosphere all round.

And last but not least, there is one more form of sand—the soil—if we add to it peat and humus, we have good gardening soil. This leads me to another aspect, namely the magic

of growing things. In hospital settings, as well as in nursery schools, or on play areas near our homes, there should be places where the children will watch beans, peas, or nasturtiums grow, or anything else they would like to plant. To give gardening lessons to children is the most exciting of tasks—luckily here at the Van Dusen Botanical Gardens in Vancouver, a young lady on the staff would be delighted to come with her kit of tricks to show how one can garden with children in schools or hospitals.

### Conclusion

The international year of the child will be celebrated in 1979; why don't we look at our communities and see how we can find inexpensive places for playing and learning?

- 1 Editor's note: Pieter Bruegel, the Elder (c. 1525–30 to 1569). See, for example, his 1560 painting, *Children's Games*.
- 2 Editor's note: This appears to be a reference to Andreas Ryff (1550–1603), a merchant, politician, and historian, whose autobiographical writings record his life until 1574. See also this volume, 105n2.
- 3 Editor's note: Attribution uncertain, but the same text is quoted in Lady Allen of Hurtwood (Marjory Allen), *Space for Play: The Youngest Children* (World Organisation for Early Childhood Education, 1964), 7.