

Defining The Role of Soft Modular Play

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Editor's Note: Randy White will be a featured speaker at Leisureexpo '95. This article covers some material that will be included in his presentations.

We can't prove this, but it sure is tempting to believe that Jack Pentes got the idea for children's soft modular play equipment [SMP] after watching a hamster scurry through a Habitrail. The key element of SMP is that it safely contains children while they play, rather than allowing them to fall like they can on jungle gyms or swing sets. As such, SMP has been a lifesaver for parents, who can let the kids loose in SMP without worrying about them landing on their heads.

Just a dozen years after Pentes invested SMP in 1982, soft modular play has replaced generations-old play equipment for pre-adolescent children. It's safe and it's physical, but does it have staying power, or is SMP a fad that has peaked? And if so, what might the next generation of play equipment look like?

Jack Pentes invented SMP as a way to eliminate playground falls, the most prevalent cause of injuries on outdoor playground equipment. Jack's first SMP units went into outdoor theme parks and tourist attractions. SMPs went indoor when Showbiz Pizza purchased the equipment, and the rest is history.

In just a dozen years, the industry has grown to at least 15 SMP equipment suppliers with thousands of units installed at fast food and other restaurants, family



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and children's entertainment centers, and retail and other destinations throughout the world. It didn't have to happen this way. The turning point was one decision Pentes Designs made shortly after Pentes invented SMP.

Pentes went to his company's lawyers for advice about whether to patent the equipment. It would cost at least \$150,000 a year in legal expenses to defend a patent for a product with such potential for popular appeal, they said, and for a small, entrepreneurial company, that continued litigation would drain management energies and time. Pentes decided not to patent SMP. Instead, he reasoned, he would put the \$150,000

into research and development, generating innovations that would beat his imitators.

So there it was, free for the taking, an idea that transforms children's play. Soon, the SMP product was available at competitive prices in an industry growing much faster than if orders were bottlenecked with just one supplier. The result is that today, Pentes Designs has a large piece of a larger pie, as one of, if not the largest, supplier of SMP equipment. And because Pentes chose not to throw resources into defending the patent, the research dollars have kept Pentes Designs consistently at the front of industry innovators.

There was another milestone in SMP in 1989, when partners Ron Matsch and Al Fong opened the first indoor center featuring SMP. That center, which opened in Kansas City, was the beginning of the Discovery Zone chain and SMP pay-for-play centers. That event coupled with the opening of the first Jungle Jim's Playland in 1988 in San Antonio, featuring indoor children's rides, and the opening of Tickle Fun Factory in Colorado Springs in 1986, featuring SMP, art experiences and construction play, signalled the start of the children's pay-for-play industry.

Discovery Zone just acquired McDonald's Leaps and Bounds chain of SMP centers, growing to more than 300 units. Industry estimates are that at least that many more SMP centers are owned

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Each age of play has unique play requirements based upon the stage of development, but two conditions run through all the stages:

- 1). The play environment must provide the child with an adequate range of experience, and
- 2). The play environment must allow for some measure of control by the child.

Pre-adolescent children need more than just motor or physical play. They

What we're finding is that SMP equipment alone is not able to meet the diverse play needs of children.

need play with opportunities for social, cognitive and emotional development. Children naturally seek out opportunities to pretend, to construct, to invent games and create their own play patterns.

One of the most important types of play, especially for pre-schoolers through age seven, is social pretend play. Children at this stage are virtual reality machines. They crave the chance to imagine private worlds and create private places. Research shows that social pretend play is linked to all aspects of a child's development — emotional, cognitive, linguistic and social. Nature has linked play with fantasy as a means for children to process experience and test hypotheses about themselves and the world, not to mention that it's fun.

"Play is the child's life and the means by which he comes to understand the world he lives in."

Dr. Susan Issacs

SMP alone does not offer the rich and diverse play environment that engages children at this age. Their muscles may get a workout, but their imaginations atrophy. After a while, they are just plain bored. Children need dynamic, stimulating play environments filled with a wealth of opportunities to exercise their sense of discovery, individually and with other children. After a few trips through the SMP, it offers children about as much chance for discovery as the daily drive home from work does for their parents.

Limitations of an SMP-anchored Center May Prove Fatal

"A play environment should not be an environment that acts upon the child but should allow children to act on the environment."

Joe L. Frost

Anyone who's seen a kid eat mashed potatoes, or spend more time playing with the box than the present that came in it, knows that children need to impose their imagination on and reshape their environment. Research backs this up.

Researchers gave children a choice of different types of outdoor playgrounds. The clear winner of children between ages 5 and 8 was dramatic play. In one study using a playground with a wide range of play opportunities, the manufactured, fixed, multipurpose play structure was chosen only 13 percent of the time over other play options. Other findings include:

- Children prefer equipment that moves versus static equipment.
- Equipment designed primarily for exercise is not sufficient to satisfy the wide range of desires that children have of play.
- Children prefer materials and equipment that can be adapted to their play schemes and support complex dramatic play, as they need to manipulate the environment.

Research in play clearly shows that no single structure or combination of structures like SMP designed primarily for gross motor or exercise play can really accommodate all the play options that children want. They want materials and equipment that they can mess with. They want to create. They want to select from among options rather than adapt themselves to the limitations of the play equipment.

Little if any of this can children get from the SMP-focused pay-for-play center. This deficiency, along with some SMP centers' inability to meet the needs of parents, may doom these centers to failure.

Discovery Zone has the financial resources to survive and regroup, although their existing centers have built-in functional obsolescence due to size and layout. Many of the independents who copied the first Discovery Zone stores, however, will not survive. In many respects, participants in the pay-for-play industry have acted like lemmings, guided by what others are doing rather than by objective measures.

A New Approach Can Keep SMP Fresh

Pay-for-play children's centers, and SMP equipment, are not doomed. SMP equipment provides safe, physical play in a compact space with high capacity. Kids need physical play, and parents need the safe place. SMP cannot, however, be a child's sole diet and it cannot alone draw kids back time after time.

Third- and fourth-generation children's pay-for-play centers are appearing on the drawing board and in real life. They have learned from the pioneers, whose failures provide the foundation for future successes.

The newer concepts include rides, hands-on and discovery events, entertainment and different forms of physical play. Most, but not all, include SMP equipment. The centers our company is producing for clients do include SMP, but it never consumes more than 25 percent of the floor space dedicated to play.

We have found that if SMP suppliers are to increase SMP's age range, play value and repeat appeal, they must address the following issues:

- 1). The equipment needs to provide events with a broader range of challenges and to offer graduated levels of safe risk-taking (as perceived by the child). The challenges should be tailored to different developmental stages, and need to be continuous. The child should have the

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dual experience of having mastered some events while knowing that there are other events yet to master.

2). The child needs the choice of when to undertake the next challenge. Any play event should give the child the chance to check out the challenge, maybe even go part way, while holding on the chance for a face-saving retreat.

3). Pretend play opportunities need to be integrated into the equipment, including unstructured and unthemed manipulative components.

4). Resting, socializing and special places should be created.

5). Although SMP design philosophy creates structured limitations, designers should try to create opportunities for what is known as continuous play loops. Continuous play loops encourage socialization and imaginative play by linking play activities in the SMP unit or with other type play activities adjacent to or near the unit. This means that SMP would be integrated into a whole play environment rather than treated as a free-standing, isolated and independent structure.

6). Children should be able to decide and choose what they can do WITH the equipment rather than what to do ON the equipment.

One of the most important types of play, especially for preschoolers through age seven, is social pretend play.

7). Include events that require co-operative and sequential co-operative social play.

8). Break out of the mold of designing the SMP play experience as a totally contained environment.

9). Don't make the equipment so safe that there isn't some risk. Children learn through mistakes. I know one SMP supplier who is so safety-obsessed that the design committee, if given the chance, probably would never have approved the sidewalk.

Improvements Should Meet the Needs of Children

Even at its best, SMP equipment will never satisfy more than 25 percent of preschool children's play needs. However, some SMP design innovations are moving in the right direction. For example, Pentes talking tubes break the mold. Omni has designed SMP elements that move as children pass through them, such as their see-saw, rocking tube, tumbler and caterpillar.

Other innovations call into question whether the designers were ever children themselves and are downright silly to anyone who has a clue about children's play. One of the worst examples: Discovery Zone and several SMP suppliers are trying to incorporate electronic technology into their units. Although talking tubes, sound effects and light features will have novelty value and probably will help sell units to adult buyers, they will not address the root cause of how to increase the long-term play value and attractiveness of SMP for younger children.

Children's natural play has changed little if any down through the years. Edison's invention of electricity had little impact on play for younger children, and neither will the silicon chip.

"Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for theirs."

Jean Jacques Rousseau

Children are not tiny adults and are certainly not hamsters. Children will seek out and enjoy play the most in an environment that engages their imaginations, and provides social interaction and control over their environment. Physical activity alone is not enough. In today's society, parents need the pay-for-play environment, and SMP can be an important part of the mix. But keep in mind what children need, not what we want to give them, because to a child, there is nothing more sacred than play.

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