

# Bay Area children taught how to play

By Jill Tucker

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RICHMOND — The sound of laughing children playing tag or hide-and-seek isn't often heard on the streets of Richmond's notorious Iron Triangle.

Gunshots are too common, producing an unexpected casualty: Some kids have forgotten how to play.

They grow up these days inside sheltered places, with electronic playmates at home and extra study hours in the classroom to boost test scores while recess is canceled.

"Kids are so restricted in some places they're not allowed to be kids," said Olga Jarrett, an associate professor of early childhood education at Georgia State University. "Some children have so little chance to play that they almost need some guidance from adults on how to play and not get into fights, for instance."

And so, on dozens of school playgrounds across the San Francisco Bay Area, kids are being taught — or perhaps reminded — how to play.

On a cold winter morning, children burst through the doors of Lincoln Elementary in Richmond, running headlong onto the playground.

Within minutes, there were two games of four square, two games of tag, dodge ball, kickball, soccer, three groups playing basketball, two lines of jump rope, a handful on the jungle gym, and a few kids tossing a football.

A half-dozen first-graders stood waiting their turn at a jump rope.

Recess used to be a headache for the school's principal, Stephen Riave.

Almost every day, students were sent to the office from the playground for fighting or bad behavior, resulting in 10 suspensions or so per month.

Those who weren't arguing were often sitting around or aimlessly walking the blacktop.

The students didn't know why there were four squares painted on the asphalt. The kickball court sat empty.

for Sports4Kids in Oakland, a nonprofit that promotes physical activity and play for children. The Lincoln Elementary students call her "coach."

Teachers and school staff say she has transformed the schoolyard.

In September, none of the first-graders knew how to jump rope, Ramirez said. "There weren't many games going on. The girls weren't playing at all.

"They didn't know the rules of the games," she said.

The first game Ramirez tried, a tag game called Fox, lured 50 children to the otherwise empty kickball court.

"The first question I got was, 'Can I play?'" she said.

During a recess earlier this week, Ramirez ran from game to game, standing in line for jump rope and then for four square before jumping into a mass of kids vying for a soccer ball in an everyone-plays game.

Sports4Kids started in 1996 at a couple of schools in Berkeley. Now there are coaches at 131 schools nationwide, including 92 in the Bay Area.

It's a job requirement to play with the kids, said the organization's founder Jill Vialet, to help them work through winning, losing and picking teams.

"Who knew you could build a whole organization around the power of rock, paper, scissors," she said, describing the group's preferred approach to resolving a conflict.

Kids don't always have the skills to play together, she said. They're not always learning that in schools or their neighborhoods anymore.

Studies show play increases academic achievement and teaches children a wide range of skills, said David Elkind, author of the 2007 book "The Power of Play."

"A lot of learning takes places through their bodies," he said. "They're learning to take turns. They're learning body language and communication. A great deal of social learning goes on. That's very important too."

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