HEALTH AND RECREATION FOR CITY CHILDREN: BY BERTHA H. SMITH

O look at certain New York streets in summer, one would little suspect that anything was done to keep children off them. In the months of school vacation children swarm from doorway to curb and from curb to opposite curb until these streets resemble a piece of fly paper that has done its work well.

Yet to keep children off the streets during July and August the city of New York maintains one hundred and fifteen playgrounds, nine recreation piers, fifteen swimming baths, eleven roof gardens, and a half day session of vacation school in a half hundred buildings, while every day whole trainloads and boatloads of children are carried to the country and the seaside for a day or a week or a fortnight in God’s great open, which is scarcely more real to them than fairyland or heaven.

Any problem of city children is primarily a problem of the tenement districts. It is here you find the active adherents to the Rooseveltian theory of race perpetuation. Along the avenues of boarded-up doorways and drawn blue shades you may walk for blocks and never hear the patter of baby feet or a baby’s cry. What few children belong here have joined the summer hegira to other parts. To the teeming tenements, then, the people turned who one day awoke to the fact that children are entitled to some rights in a city and that they were not getting them.

Of the half million children set free in New York at the close of the school term, the vast majority make their way naturally to the only playground they know,—the street. Here they join perhaps a quarter of a million more, too young to go to school, but old enough to escape from busy or careless mothers and crawl over the sidewalk and alongside the curb in search of decayed fruit, bits of ribbon or broken glass thrown there by pushcart men. Children must play and it is not their fault that they have been shoved into the street by ever-encroaching brick walls. For a game of “Pussy cat” they will take their chances under horses’ feet and wagon wheels; for a game of craps they will beard the biggest policeman on the beat; for a game of ball or a plunge in a public fountain they will brave the terrors of the “Ref.” In a two-month of vacation they will develop more of lawlessness than can be overcome by a ten-month of school discipline.
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Hence the necessity of providing children of the street with a place where they can indulge to their heart's content in the child's natural pursuit, which is play.

The work of keeping New York children off the street is divided among three different departments of the city's service, church and college settlement workers and independent philanthropists. The latter began it. Perhaps they would rather be known merely as practical, everyday, common-sense people with an eye to the future. Letting it go at that, the thing they did was to rent an acre of ground in a crowded district and turn the children of the neighborhood loose in it to play. To be sure, many of the children knew no games, and none of them knew how to use the gymnasium apparatus with which the place was fitted. But they were not slow in learning, and this was the seed of the public playground system which has since been adopted as a part of New York's municipal policy.

Now there are fifty acres of these park playgrounds, distributed through the most densely populated parts of the city, and ten millions of dollars have been expended buying the ground, tearing down tenements, and fencing and fitting out these plots with necessary buildings and swings, sand piles, games and apparatus. There are nine park playgrounds, one of which alone, the William H. Seward Park, cost two millions of dollars and stands as the best equipped public playground in the world. There are instructors in all the playgrounds to direct the play, and here through the long summer days a hundred thousand children romp and run with the tireless energy of childhood, unconsciously learning something of the ethics of fair play, a lesson sorely needed by the children of the street.

Stop and watch a game of prison base and you will see the true spirit of sport is entirely lacking. The boy taken prisoner at once turns upon his captor and wrestles with him instead of acknowledging himself caught and going peaceably to prison and watching his chance for release. There is no admiration for a worthy foe, but rather rocks and rubbish and bad names for the victor, and sneers and taunts for the vanquished. Left to themselves none of these children would ever give place to another, and the best lesson they learn here is the lesson of give and take and the acknowledgment of some other right than might. These playgrounds are the part the park depart-
CORLEARS HOOK RIVER BATH ON A HOT DAY
A SUMMER KINDERGARTEN ON THE ROOF OF A NEW YORK CHURCH

PHYSICAL CULTURE ON ONE OF THE ROOF PLAYGROUNDS
ment takes in the work of keeping children from the streets in sum-
mer. Even after school opens the playgrounds are kept open during
the afternoon to give the children a place to play when school is over
for the day.

A half dozen years ago that watchful and conscientious municipal
nursemaid, the board of education, saw that its duties should not end
with five hours a day for less than two-thirds of the year. They saw
that lessons learned in the school term were unlearned with amazing
rapidity in vacation, and that other and ugly lessons learned in vaca-
tion were often never unlearned at all. So it was decided to supple-
ment the regular school term with a morning session during vacation,
devoted to nature study, manual training and domestic science. Books
and the regular routine of school are too taxing in hot weather,
and the vacation school had to be made interesting enough to attract
children, as the compulsory law does not require them to attend school
in summer.

About twenty thousand children are enrolled for the summer
work, and they look as if they like it. There is no sitting in straight
rows, no frowns from the teacher for whispering, and sometimes they
are allowed to sing as they make raffia hats and baskets, or crochet
caps and slippers and capes from gay-colored yarns, or cut brackets
and miniature furniture with fret saws and jig saws, or hammer and
twist thin bands of iron into pretty shapes. And the children may
talk together about the birds and fishes kept in the nature study room,
and the plants that grow up from the seed and sometimes blossom in
the boxes where for the first time many of them learn some of the
mysteries of outdoor life.

It takes tact and ingenuity on the part of the teachers to hold
these children, for many of them are old enough to know they are
not compelled to stay, and if a teacher does not make it interesting
for them at one school they will go to another where some friend
reports a better time.

Something of the wholesome awe of teachers and principals, how-
ever, remains in the minds of most children even in vacation, which is
well for teachers and principals in vacation schools. For it happens
now and again that mischief-making boys drop in from the street, not
to join the classes, but to find out "what's doing," or it may be to see
what is lying around of tools and material that they might have for
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the taking. Woe to such if the principal catches them loafing about. They are marched to some class room and put to work on odd jobs, such as tempering iron for the Venetian iron workers, or turning the ice cream freezer for the girls’ cooking class, with particular instructions to the teacher not to give them any ice cream when the task is done. This of a hot summer morning is a sentence that would fit even a greater crime. The cooking class is usually popular, as they cook ice cream very often, and this as well as all other cooking is always served to the class when the lesson is over.

Individual profit in its material sense is one of the magnets that draw children to the vacation school. All materials are furnished by the school board, and all finished articles belong to the children who make them. When wire and raffia are distributed in the millinery classes, or wool to the crocheting classes, or wood and iron and strips of cane to the boys, there is a heightened interest when the teacher says “Yes” to their eager questions:

“Do I get this for myself?”

“Do I take this to my house when it’s done?”

While doing the work for money is not encouraged, many a boy has made a nice little sum of money caning chairs for his neighbors, while one little girl bought herself a dress with money earned knitting slippers at the vacation school.

One particularly practical feature of the work is a short talk given to all the girls’ classes by a trained nurse. In districts where the death rate among children mounts up to a thousand a week in summer, it is a good thing for the “little mothers” to know something of simple remedies and first aid to the injured. Plenty of practise cases are found for the latter in the manual classes. Indeed, so fond did the boys become of playing patient to the young nurses that the teachers have had to keep a sharp lookout to keep accidents down to a reasonable number, and to be sure that all cuts and scratches complained of were really cuts and scratches.

IN addition to the playgrounds maintained by the park department there are more than a hundred afternoon playgrounds maintained by the board of education. School yards and basements are thrown open, school roofs have been covered with wire netting for the safety of the children, and vacant lots and corners of the large
parks have been pressed into service to increase the work. Instructors are there to direct the play, and games are varied with drills of different kinds. These children from the street are exacting and must have a variety of entertainment else they will wander back to the street again. For the kindergarten tots there are dancing games, singing games, running games, games played sitting down, and games with bright bits of paper. For older children there is everything from wand drills to basket-ball and football.

In a few of the schools, as in two of the park playgrounds, there are free baths, and both boys and girls will stop their games as often as they are allowed to get under the shower so pleasant on hot days. These school baths are not their only chance, however. For many years the city has maintained swimming baths along the river front on both sides of the island. There are fifteen in all, and these in a measure take the place of the swimmin' hole, which somehow seems to be a boy's natural right. With water, water everywhere and not a place to swim, Manhattan island would be a dreary waste to any normal boy, and no one could blame him if he dodged the policemen on the docks, slipped out of his two little summer garments and into the river for a swim in the days when these swimming baths were not. To be sure, a tank is never as much fun as the open river, but it is the next best thing and city boys can't be choosers as to ways and means of swimming; so all day and every day there stands a long line of boys waiting their turn, and after the allotted twenty minutes they issue forth shiny as to face and sleek as to hair, ready to sneak into line again for another turn if the guard has not too watchful an eye. Three days in the week the line is made up of women and girls instead of boys and men, for these baths have a purpose of educating people in cleanly habits as well as furnishing recreation. Swimming teachers are placed there by the board of education, and both boys and girls are given free lessons in swimming. To give boys and girls this chance has cost the city a third of a million dollars, with an annual expenditure for maintenance of about one hundred thousand.

In addition to berths for these fifteen baths the city has saved from the encroachments of commerce space enough along the river front for nine pleasure piers. But for these the people of the tenements would be cut off entirely from a view of the rivers, and the cooling and reviving breath that sweeps over them even in the hottest weather.
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All day long mothers come here with their children to sit as on a veranda and watch the busy traffic of the water thoroughfare before them. Kindergarten teachers are sent to each pier to care for the small children who wander there alone and to ease the cares of the "little mothers" and the "little fathers," too, for one sees almost as many boys as girls taking care of younger brothers and sisters. At night bands are stationed here as on the school roofs, and the crowd of children is augmented by equal numbers of their elders who are glad to get away from the stuffy, ill-smelling holes they call home. These piers represent another half million dollars, and another hundred and twenty-five or fifty thousand dollars annually for maintenance.

Piers, baths, playgrounds, vacation schools,—so much the city does to keep the children off the streets in summer. Besides, there is the Fresh Air Fund. The Fresh Air Fund is a great and unknown quantity. No one can more than guess at its size or the good it accomplishes. Churches have their Fresh Air Funds, settlements have their Fresh Air Funds, newspapers raise Fresh Air Funds; and the result is that free excursion tickets are so plentiful that almost any day you can hear little street urchins offering extra ones for sale at bargain prices to other urchins who have not learned how to get more than they can use. Indeed, some youngsters have grown quite blasé over free excursions, even as their mothers do about free turkeys at Thanksgiving and Christmas time. When the mothers are taken with the children, it is no uncommon thing to hear them discussing the relative merits of this place with the place they were taken last summer, and their criticisms are as harsh as those of any summer boarders who pay for the privilege of criticising. But there are always plenty who have no scruples on the subject, and no car or boat ever leaves New York for a fresh air home with vacant seats.

With a conservative guess at the size of the Fresh Air Fund, there is a good round million of dollars spent during July and August to keep children off the New York streets.
WHAT SOME CHURCHES ARE DOING IN PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

A SUMMER DAY IN THE WOODS FOR CITY BOYS
BASKETBALL IN A VACATION PLAYGROUND

A RIVER BATH IN NEW YORK