

## **“Working together, supporting one another” SmartUs playground keeps fitness and spirits high**

“Throwing a ball is the best because it is good for practising technique. At first, I was just throwing it around without really thinking about it but then I realised that that kind of throw goes nowhere,” explains 9-year-old **Heikki Korteniemi**, referring to throwing a ball aimlessly with a limp wrist.

Throwing a ball is the collective favourite of all the third year pupils of the Kauko School in Rovaniemi. The playground features a wall with holes into which the balls need to be thrown and a scoreboard for monitoring progress. Sometimes the children make up their own teams and choose a distance from which everyone must aim.

### **Learning numbers through play**

Heikki’s class has come to the playground with their teacher to play games for the duration of their PE lesson. This also creates a great opportunity for learning maths and geography, for example, at the same time: Heikki is part of a team in a game where the participants need to run around the playground collecting numbers from the posts scattered in different parts of the playing field. Each post represents a set of different numbers and each team has to collect numbers on their wristbands and add them up to make a certain sum. Heikki also has a go at Surf, which is a kind of net with little islands, and is becoming quite an expert. The net can also be used for practising mathematical skills.

“I hardly ever fall off the islands now,” Heikki says, proud of his progress on Surf. “I also really like the Spinning Machine because you can go all the way around in it. And it does not make you at all dizzy if you keep your eyes closed,” he explains, instructing first-timers.

The pupils are clearly comfortable using the playground and even like roping their parents into coming along to watch. The teachers and designers also have reason to smile: the playground has given the children a new kind of environment where they can get exercise while also learning the same skills as in a classroom. Moreover, the children have begun to devise their own games independently and to hone their tactics working together as a group.

### **Physical exercise in a playground also gives a boost to the elderly**

Amidst the children it is also possible to spot a number of elderly people who have never seen most of this equipment before. With that said, the elderly are not completely new to the playground; they have been coming in for a weekly exercise class for three years now. According to **Laina-Liisa Niva** who gives her age as “over 70”, the weekly exercise class has turned Mondays into something to look forward to and an important part of her weekly routine. The one-hour exercise class includes a thorough warm-up session as well as a stretching and relaxation session at the end of the intense workout on the playground equipment. Both 66-year-old **Tuulikki Lehmusvuori** and 68-year-old **Elli Kiviniemi** name the exercise track that they describe as “jiggling” as their absolute favourite.

“I now have a lot more courage to leave the house and go out walking even when it is slippery. At home, I have no problem climbing onto a stool to reach up. Others seem to fear for me a lot more than I do for myself,” Elli Kiviniemi says, sniggering.

“The track has given me a whole new kind of belief in my own physical abilities,” Tuulikki Lehmusvuori adds.

Her husband, 68-year-old **Eemeli Lehmusvuori**, has found that the motor skills that he has developed at the playground have come in especially handy when picking cloudberries in the forest. He now feels more agile and is able to pick the berries a lot faster than before. Moving in the forest has also become a lot easier and even the narrow walkways laid over boggy areas

present no challenge now that he practises a similar kind of coordination at the playground all year round. Walking is often the only form of daily physical activity for many elderly people, and this is not enough for maintaining agility and vital motor skills.

### **Children and adults working together - supporting one another**

Right from the first year, the elderly were joined by a number of preschool-aged children at random. Both Tuulikki Lehmusvuori and Elli Kiviniemi feel that having the children involved and being able to do things together has been a great added bonus for the playground classes: the children and the elderly help each other through the difficult parts of the course. Being able to spend quality time with their spouses has also been important.

"Having my husband involved has been extremely important to me. It is great that we are doing something together and not just moping about the house," Tuulikki Lehmusvuori says.

Everyone agreed that the social aspect of the playground is a key factor - whether they are socialising with contemporaries or with children - as is the need for a positive attitude, naturally, and a twinkle in the eye. Tuulikki Lehmusvuori stresses the importance of keeping a playful attitude: that way everyone can laugh both at themselves and at others.

"Of course people of our age are not used to playing! I would probably not come to the playground on my own even though it feels perfectly natural with friends and naturally with grandchildren. On the other hand, it could well be that in the future playgrounds are used equally by everyone," she concludes.

### **Dragonflies learn on the hopscotch grid**

A hopscotch grid comes naturally to the 6-year-old **Nora Reku, Camilla Tolkkinen** and **Joska Mattanen**. The pupils of the Dragonfly Room of the Rovaniemi-based Nivavaara Nursery use the grid almost on a daily basis. Their teacher, **Riitta Kari**, has noticed improvements in many of the children's skills since the arrival of the grid:

"Their awareness of space and their own bodies in particular has improved. Spatial awareness develops because the children have to adapt what they see to the movement as they jump on the grid," she says.

The alphabet game has taught the children different letters and phonemes. Nora prefers the animal memory game where the children have to bring up pictures of different animals on the screen by selecting different parts of the animal on the grid. Camilla favours the alphabet game that requires fast reactions for jumping from one square to another.

"You need to be able to jump high and far," Camilla demonstrates.

A gifted young athlete, Camilla is one of the keenest users of the grid, and according to Riitta Kari, the teachers occasionally have to remind their pupils not to take the games so seriously. Joska also prefers the alphabet game, as it involves a lot of jumping which Joska also does at home on a trampoline.

"I have been practising my jumps on the trampoline at home. I can do a forward somersault and a back somersault," Joska explains, proudly.

### **Everyone learns through play**

Just as people are different, everyone learns differently. Lively children in particular struggle to achieve the best results through traditional methods of learning from books. According to a study by the Rovaniemi University of Applied Sciences, a playground can be an efficient learning environment for the mathematical skills of preschool age children, for example. The children's

ability to add and subtract improved especially well. Riitta Kari reports noticing that the hopscotch grid affects both learning and motivation.

"Like any educational institution, we also have children who are not that interested in learning. However, the negative attitude is often a result of a feeling of frustration when the child feels unable to complete a task.

Using the hopscotch grid is a game and there is no pressure, which suddenly turns learning into a positive experience. The children are then able to recall the newly learned letters and mathematical skills when they are learning from a book later," she says.

"We have tried to emphasise that this is not about scoring points and that everyone is allowed to fail every now and then. This also helps the children to deal with disappointment better and it boosts their self esteem when they see that others make mistakes just like they do," Riitta Kari explains.

During her career she has noticed that although children are often extremely bright, more and more of them struggle with concentration and social skills. Working together in a team and taking others into account is no longer something that children pick up naturally.

"Today's children spend a lot of time playing on a computer on their own. Parents no longer read stories to their children or take them out to the park, leaving less chance for one-on-one interaction. In a playground children work together naturally, spurring each other on. It is also important for adults to provide encouragement and a good example in these situations," Riitta Kari adds.

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