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Child's play

BY KATE PASTOR

Classes may still be getting under way, but recess is already in full swing.



On a recent school day in the renovated playground at The Robert J. Christen School, PS 81, hordes of excited kindergarteners and first graders poured out of the doors leading from the lunchroom, managing loads made up of lunch boxes and backpacks too large for their bodies, ridding themselves of these burdens as if play time were an emergency of the gravest kind.

A renovation completed over the summer by the non-profit Out2Play with funding help from City Councilman Oliver Koppell and design help from last year's fifth graders has brought a painted track, slides, climbing equipment, hopscotch and other games to what was a plain but spacious slab of fenced-in concrete before.

Where there was nothing, now there is a jungle gym, a baseball diamond and four basketball hoops. The painted ground is colorful, with metal benches dividing two sides of the yard.

Nina Velazquez, the school's parent coordinator, says the gym teacher can now make use of the track and the yard

provides more opportunities for structured play. A detractor pointed out that a small, cordoned-off play area with gym equipment made it easy for kids to disappear from sight, that the benches were placed in the sun with holes just large enough to fit children's fingers and that the baseball diamond now has to be kept clear of children who obviously run straight through it, providing new opportunities for conflict.

But those are the concerns of adults. Students love recess in whatever form it comes in.

"Before, this was like a plain-old area, then they put race tracks and baseball things and basketball courts," said first-grader Amanda Lutchman.

One of her favorite activities, she said, is to race on the track.

"We just run around," she said.

Recess words to live by, with or without painted lines to guide you.

Another student, William Torgoff, described his favorite recess activity.

"I act like Hercules," he said.

He did, however, have a design complaint about the yard. After running off, he returned to offer this insight:

"And what I think about that playground is they shouldn't have put the fence on it," he said, referring to the jungle gym part of the yard which administrators are trying to create a sharing schedule for. Families in the neighborhood use that and other parts of the yard when PS 81 students are in class — a long-standing practice the school does not plan on abandoning now that their playground is snazzier.