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Locality, Urban Space, and Playground Sport: The Lizzies of Toronto

In the summer of 1897, Toronto City Council implemented its first initiative to organize children's leisure by offering youth a free bathing service on Toronto Island. The new civic policy conformed with a changing conception of childhood that focused on the needs and interests of children beyond the home. The public discourse on children's leisure at the time was influenced also by the huge influx of non-British immigrants who mainly lived in crowded inner-city neighborhoods. Social reformers and civic organizations wasted little time creating public spaces and programs to combat delinquency and dismantle the barriers of ethnicity and class. Supervised swimming was most popular at the beaches and later in school natatoriums. Ice rinks, children's slides and toboggan slides were built to provide youth with free play during the winter. Organized public school sports were established in 1901 under the auspices of Toronto's Public School Board for extra-curricular athletics. Although the Board supervised a number of playgrounds by 1908, the first public agency to do so in Canada, in 1911 two playgrounds were founded by the city's Parks Department and supported exclusively by the City of Toronto. So successful were these and other playground ventures, two years later the Parks Department created a Playgrounds & Recreation Branch that led to a proliferation of playgrounds throughout the city.

This paper examines the emergence and evolution of the Elizabeth Street Playground, one of the two original 1911 sites, and the supervisors, teams and athletes affiliated with the "Lizzies" up to World War II. It discusses the ideology of play management and social control, the structure of urban physical culture, the construction of place, identity, and community, and how the playground movement sought to accelerate the process of Canadianization among foreign children. The paper argues that "geographies of exclusion" were also erected and resulted in various forms of resistance, conflict, and "feelings and images of difference." Thus, the conscious efforts of civic leaders and city planners to organize children's leisure did not always assuage the struggles and hardships experienced by immigrant youth. The paper contributes to our understanding of the history of the playground movement in Toronto and reveals both the successes and shortcomings of juvenile play, games and sport. City of Toronto archival material, newspaper accounts, personal interviews, and the historical records of the Lizzies Old Timers Association are the main sources of information.