

The 'Cat and Mouse'

Judy McKinty

During a playground survey¹ at Princes Hill Primary School in one of Melbourne's inner suburbs I discovered a strange piece of playing equipment that seemed to be a remnant from an earlier time. Its original purpose is still a mystery – perhaps it was meant to be used exactly as it is being used now, for play. The children who have played there over the years have helped to maintain one of the most enduring playground traditions at the school.

The 'Cat and Mouse' is a wood-and-metal structure near the entrance gate at the front of the school. It is a unique feature of the school and has a special place in the cultural landscape of the playground. While other play areas have undergone significant transformation, the 'Cat and Mouse' remains happily untouched.



The 'Cat and Mouse' was designed and built to last. Recently I asked the children if anyone in their families might know anything about it, and a message was delivered by a Grade One girl that it was there when her grandfather was at the school – 'and he's seventy-seven!' If correct, this information traces its history back as far as the 1940s – remarkable longevity for such a plain and solid structure, when most if not all of the playing equipment from that period has been removed from parks and schoolyards and replaced by modern, brightly-painted metal-and-plastic units. The sturdy, grey metal rails have been polished by children running their hands along, or climbing, sitting, hanging and swinging on them, and the ground around the brick paving has been scuffed by countless running feet.



At first glance, there seems to be no real purpose for the shape of the construction, but when I talked to the children an unusual play tradition was revealed. They call it the 'Cat and Mouse' after the chasing game they play there. The game seems to have been associated with the structure since the 1980s.

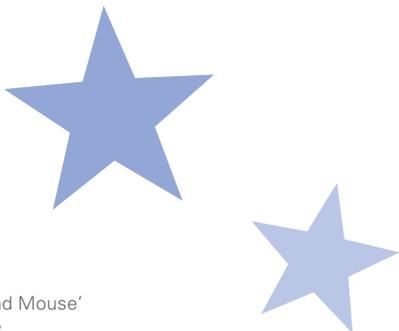
The children learn the rules of the game in Prep Grade, when they start school. Their 'buddies' in Grades Five or Six explain it to them as part of their school orientation. This is how the tradition has been kept alive at the school and passed down through generations of children – the younger children learning directly from the older children and passing it on in turn, sometimes with variations. In common with much traditional playlore, this game has been passed on without adult knowledge or involvement – it is a part of the children's own play culture.

The rules of the game relate directly to the shape of the structure, and a nearby tree is also utilised. Here is how the rules were explained to me by a girl in Grade Two:

- First, do 'Dip Dip' to see who goes 'It'. 'It' is the cat and everyone else is a mouse.
- The cat has to chase the mice and try to tag them, and whoever is tagged becomes the cat.
- There are four 'holes'.

From the right:

- The first is the bob-down hole. If the cat's going to get you, you quickly bob down in there and you're safe.
- Next is the cat hole. It's only for the cat to rest. If a mouse goes in there they turn into a cat. (They take the cat's place as 'It'.)
- Next is the mouse hole - for mice only. You can stay in there for ten seconds.
- The next is the 'free' way. Anyone can run through it.
- In the corner is the dungeon (on the left, with a barrier across it). When you're caught they bring you to the dungeon, and there's a key, usually a stick or twig, that can unlock the dungeon. The cat hides the key and the mice try to find it to set everyone free.
- The gaps in the fence mean you can run through there to get away from the cat, but the cat can run through too.



ABOVE The 'holes'

FAR LEFT The 'Cat and Mouse'
Photographer – J. McKinty

The 'Cat and Mouse'



A Grade Four girl had similar rules for the 'holes', with the substitution of a 'freeze' hole ('You can't move – if the cat sees you move, you're the cat'), and a mouse hole instead of the dungeon. Additional rules were:

- The cat is not allowed on the seats, but can catch the mice from the ground – but the cat can go on the section of the seat where there is no rail.
- The tree is 'time out' to catch your breath. Touch the tree and say 'Time out!'

No doubt there are other variations at different levels in the school. At one stage some Grade Prep and Grade One children sought out an older girl because they couldn't agree which version of the rules was the 'right' one. Playground arbitration in action!

The 'Cat and Mouse' is, as far as I know, unique. It is an example of the strong relationship that can develop between play and place, and an indication of the rich play and learning experiences that can emerge when children feel a sense of ownership of their playground and are able to play freely among themselves. It is a valuable and irreplaceable play resource at the school, and has a strong presence among the school's traditions.

If there was a National Register for the preservation of historically significant play equipment, this would be a fine example to add to the list.

Thanks to Marion Turnbull, Princes Hill Primary School archivist, for her collaboration in researching the history of the 'Cat and Mouse'.