

Choosing Beverly's best playgrounds is hard work

By Esther Baird

Beverly Citizen

NEW! Wed Jul 25, 2007, 04:43 PM EDT

Beverly, Mass. -

“Ok, go play!” I pushed my 3-year-old daughter towards the looming play structure at Herlihy Park. “Remember you only have three minutes. That’s time for one slide and a run around the jungle gym. Then we’re off to the next playground which is . . .” I consulted a printout map I’d wadded into my day-timer “. . . Dix Park!”

While she ran, I looked around and scribbled comments on my map. “Big park. Hot – no shade. Decent play equipment, but weird chain balancing thing. Busy. Mostly moms. Easy parking.”

Then, and not for the first time, I sighed and forced myself to remember that this had been *my* idea.

It all began when I read the “Readers Choice” guide a few weeks ago. I noted that we were not polled on our favorite playgrounds. Since I spend considerably more time pushing swings than I do at a hair salon or restaurant, I decided to create my own “Mommy’s Choice” guide to Beverly’s playgrounds.

I thought I had been to most of them — there are 10 within just a mile or two of our house — but after a brief chat with Bruce Doig, the Beverly Parks and Recreation Director, I learned that the city has a whopping 24 playgrounds. He also informed me that the Parks and Recreation Commission has recommended that one playground a year be renovated with a \$30,000 annual budget.

That was great I thought, but what was really, really, great was that I had obviously overlooked entirely new places where I could take — exhaust — my daughter. It was like a neon sign in my brain that wouldn’t stop blinking: NEW PLAYGROUNDS, NEW PLAYGROUNDS.

So I did what any reasonable, sleep-deprived, highly caffeinated, mother would do. I made a map of the playgrounds we had not visited, hired a sitter for my new baby and whisked my 3-year-old off for a “Playgroundpalooza.”

I explained to my daughter while driving, “Now sweetie, we have a sitter for only two hours. So we are going to try and visit as many playgrounds as we can in that time.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Well because Mommy wants to take notes about each one and see which one you like the best.”

“Why?” she continued.

“For fun!” I chirped. “And,” I took my voice up an octave to super-duper-neato, “we can only stay at each playground for three minutes. Won’t that be exciting!?” She stared at me in the rear view mirror with an insightful 3-year-old look that suggested that, just possibly, her mother had gone mad.

And we were off.

If you want to truly exhaust yourself, your child, and your supply of bribery-goldfish a playground tour-de-force is for you.

Sometimes the playgrounds were fun, but the setting was questionable such as Holcraft Park with its off-putting view of the Cummings Center parking garage or the Park Street playground with its industrial, backside of Dunkin’ Donuts, location. Other times the setting was great but the playground was not. Dane Street Beach for example. It is one of Beverly’s most scenic, visited locations yet it has a dull, unusable, non-playground.

And sometimes the playgrounds were just bad: Frightful, splinter-causing, relics such as the Cove playground and, my nominee for the Worst Playground of Beverly: Longfellow Park.

But the good playgrounds more than made up for the bad ones. Obear Park had lovely water views, tennis courts, benches and a super fun jungle gym. Dix Park offered a fabulous play structure with a bajillion options for every age. Of course Lynch Park was a given, but we discovered that Gillis Park also had a great waterfront playground, a fun slide, a big sandpit, and tranquil views for the beleaguered parent to enjoy.

Other playgrounds had unique offerings. For example Cahill Park had a side-by-side, nearly vertical, child-launching slide. Others such as McKay, Bartlett, Herlihy and Balch had adjoining courts and fields.

I looked at my watch. “Ok, times up! Time to go, go, go! We’ve only got 45 minutes left!”

In the end we managed to visit eight parks in our two hours. I ran out of goldfish and stamina, and my daughter simply . . . ran out.

But I was pleased with our effort, pleased with the majority of Beverly’s playgrounds, and frankly, pleased that I’m not often in the reader’s choice business.

The Parks and Recreation Commission will be deciding sometime in September which playground will be the first to receive the \$30,000 makeover. For a link to the Google

map with the “Mommy’s Choice” list and comments I created, visit:
www.estherbaird.com.

Note: Esther Baird is a Beverly writer. Her column appears regularly in the Citizen. Please contact Esther with suggestions or comments about The Baird Facts at: esther@estherbaird.com, or visit her Web site at: www.estherbaird.com.