

The Tiddly Diddly Outdoor Board

An award-winning, interactive design for creative play

The Tiddly Diddly board is a two-sided board that aims to encourage children to spend more time outdoors, taking initiative and using their imagination. The idea was designed and entered for the SPARK Social Enterprise Awards. It was inspired by the need for more traditionally indoor board games to be used outdoors by children.

The appeal of outdoors

Children should be excited to go outside, no matter the weather, knowing they have the joy of self-expression and the options that the Tiddly Diddly board provides. To enjoy the natural roof of the beautiful skies with their droplets of endless water fun or the bright warm rays of the sun, carpeted by the beautiful plush natural green grass or perhaps the whiff of earthly coloured ground to which our feet are accustomed. Stretching out their arms in the endless space with no boundaries, breathing in and out nature's gift of life.

Inspiration for the Tiddly Diddly board

The Tiddly Diddly outdoor board is a two-sided board that consists of a building-block section and a magnetic-chip section. The idea behind it is to encourage children to spend more time outdoors using their initiative and taking ownership of their play. Most of the outdoor spaces created for children are designed with equipment that is quite rigid and does not provide enough scope for imagination. The board is adaptable and durable and promotes optimal development across all the domains of children's developmental milestones (NCCA, 2009; CECDE, 2007).

Creativity is not univocal, and so the idea of an outdoor board to provide options for children was born out of the necessity for continuity of play indoors and out. Having spent a year in an autism unit during placement, I noticed that some of the children did not like spending time outdoors – perhaps due to their sensory processing disorders or their desire for continuity with their indoor play; going outdoors then meant they would have to halt what they were playing with.

One day, for example, a child who loved playing with jigsaw puzzles had not finished their puzzle before break time and so was hesitant to play outdoors, knowing they did not have the option of outdoor equipment



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with puzzles. Well, I thought that if they knew they could continue their chosen activity outside, irrespective of what they were playing with at the time, they would love the alternative of the outdoor space – knowing that it could be sustained.

And so the aim of trying to create such an interactive board was born. Creating a diversified board that could be used outdoors to provide endless fun for children became an objective for me.

Outdoor space and time

A lot of children, teenagers, and even adults get bored when they are not occupied with an activity that interests them. Two of the main activities that children of any age, ability, and capabilities enjoy are playing with puzzles and building blocks. But these activities are mostly confined to indoor areas, which creates restrictions when children need to play outdoors.

Through my observations and curiosity, I noticed that most outdoor play areas did not provide spaces that encouraged children to play with indoor board games outdoors. A lot of fights and bullying happen in school yards because children are left to run around and sometimes, out of boredom, use their imaginations in ways that might not be very productive.

The Tiddly Diddy board was to provide a space where children could build and create stories using puzzle pieces, building blocks, and other games that are traditionally considered indoor games. There was a need to encourage more indoor games outdoors, because research indicates that children do not engage in outdoor activities as much as they should (Dietz and Gortmaker, 2001).

Children not spending enough time outside has had negative impacts on their health and mental wellbeing, leading to an increase in childhood obesity and other health challenges that can be curbed with more outdoor interactive games (ibid.; Greene et al., 2010). Outdoor play is necessary to support children's optimal development, upon which a wholesome independent adult is predicated.

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Uses and objectives of the board

The core objective of designing the Tiddly Diddy board was to support children's outdoor play by creating materials that could be used seamlessly both indoors and outdoors. Creating the board was also intended to help educators pay great attention when designing educational facilities (Bilton, 2014). When a child knows that they can pack up a bag of traditional indoor games activities, such as building blocks or puzzles, and bring them outdoors, they would be encouraged to spend more time engaging with

these resources outdoors. Creating stories and taking ownership of their play fosters confidence and independence in children (NCCA, 2009).

The board is divided into two sections: a section with base plates for building blocks, and a magnetic chip section for creating puzzle pictures, magnetic letters and numbers for literacy and numeracy skills, match the buttons, and shape sorters. Most parks, back gardens, and school playgrounds provide play areas and equipment that are mostly rigid. When a child plays on a climbing frame, for example, it is about sliding and swinging, which does not usually keep their attention for long, because it becomes monotonous. Open-ended materials like building blocks can only be impeded by the imagination of the child. They can be extended as much as possible in play while fostering the creativity and imagination of the child.

It is important to foster creativity and imagination from the early years, because the critical period of plasticity of the brain applies not only to injuries or developmental disorders but also to the environment and social factors that the child experiences (Fox et al., 2010). Research suggests that the part of the brain that sends negative messages becomes less active when a child is provided with materials that they enjoy playing with and that are adaptable to the directions they want their play to take.

To assuage my curiosity about the need for this kind of interactive outdoor board, I visited community playgrounds, preschools, and other privately owned play centres. I realised that there were no designated areas for building blocks or puzzles, which children love to do.

Creating a prototype

A bit of research introduced me to magnet boards created by Ikea that could be used indoors. I also discovered homemade building-block boards on the internet that had been designed by parents for their children. Having checked popular toy shops (in person and online) and finding no outdoor dual board, I designed one.

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The Tiddly Diddy board is very different and innovative because it is designed to serve the needs of both neurotypical and neurodivergent children. If tested and approved for outdoor spaces, it would be very beneficial. The board is universal: for example, it can be used by a child in a wheelchair by just pulling themselves against the board with minimal support.

It is simple to use, does not require any expertise, and in Ireland can be linked effortlessly to the curriculum (Aistear) and quality frameworks (Siolta). It is affordable, adaptable, and simple, and it supports the developmental milestones of children. These qualities were the main reasons that the Tiddly Diddy board was picked as the winning idea for the SPARK competition regionally.

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