

# ON BEING AN ARCHAEO-PARENT...

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I'm an archaeologist who doesn't get to do much 'archaeology': like many of my age, I've foresaken the pleasures and pressures of life in the field for the greater stability and higher pay of a desk job... The only problem with that is it makes for a pretty dull DOA post... Because I spent today doing essential but unexciting admin for my employer. It all counts towards the 'greater good' of the historic environment, but it doesn't make for an exciting blog post... However, the reason I took my current job does raise some interesting archaeological questions: namely, what kids tell you about archaeological site formation processes. I have my current job because I'm the proud co-parent of an avid 3 year old experimental archaeologist (and want to support them in every possible way to my utmost), one who likes to spend a lot of time transforming their environment and challenging social expectations. Give my small person a tool, toy, food or for that matter any space, and they will rapidly inhabit, manipulate and challenge those spaces, places and objects. As an archaeologist I observe this activity with ill-disguised fascination and have to admit to gently testing the experiment by adding in or taking away elements just to see what happens... I've also, as a part of this, become (gently) obsessed with spaces designed for small people and what the medium-long-term development of those spaces tells us about past site formation. Playgrounds in particular are great for this: like any parent I spend a lot of time in playgrounds. We each of us (me, my co-parent and my small person) have our favourites; we also inhabit these spaces differently, and have our own views about these areas pros and cons. The more time you spend in a play area the more you also get to reflect on their design and evolution: few public (ie government funded) play areas are all of one 'phase' to use an archaeological term: through simple observation of the wear patterns, design forms, layout and other physical evidence you can almost always observe if not a clear chronology of change then at least undelineated change, as play equipment and spaces evolved through wear and tear, deliberate and accidental damage, and changes in educational philosophy and approach. All of this is deeply archaeological in its analyses. Even more archaeological is the observation of the subtler areas of patterning, especially the spaces un- or under-used in playgrounds: I mean here especially the spaces between, underneath or inaccessible from play equipment. Here, you can often observe growths of plants, mosses and lichens (often moisture loving ones as such spaces are often in shade or on drip-lines from play equipment); also differential wear marks where generations of little feet have followed one-another, leaving some areas worn smooth, others untouched or polished to a shine through accidental rubbing by clothes. All of this is deeply archaeological and raises – a topic of periodic discussion with other archaeo-parents on social media – a host of questions about similar patterns observed on archaeological sites. Are those comparable wear, growth and drip lines surrounding, for example, Iron Age round-houses what we take them for? Where are the children of the past and their physical impacts on archaeology? Once this chain of thought begins, it makes you wonder about a lot of 'archaeological' interpretation of sites from prehistory to the present... And makes me among others wonder about how much reinterpretation we might need to undertake of the history of archaeology to take better consideration of the impact of all our small people... So, desk-bound I might be, but this archaeo-parent keeps on learning all the same.