



Tools for Teaching Improvisation

Percussion Playground

What You Need

- a public playground structure made of metal and/or plastic
- a variety of striking implements, either found or invented

Directions

Step 1: Find or make enough striking implements for all participants. You will need at least two types of strikers: drum sticks and soft mallets. If you cannot secure enough wooden drum sticks for all of the participants, you can use $\frac{3}{4}$ inch wooden dowels or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (inner diameter) rigid PVC electrical conduit cut into 16 inch lengths. For soft mallets, you can use concert bass drum or hard felt gong mallets, or you can construct your own using tennis balls (or similarly-sized rubber balls) affixed to the end of wooden or PVC sticks with strong adhesive.

Step 2: Once you have created enough striking implements for all participants, find a playground "jungle gym" type structure made of plastic and metal. Encourage participants to make music on the playground structure, treating it as a giant percussion instrument. Ask participants to find as many different sounds as possible. To begin, at least one person should play a consistent rhythmic pattern using a soft mallet on some part of the structure such that it yields a deep, bass drum-like tone (plastic slides often yield such sounds). This will lend some cohesion to the improvisation and give participants (especially younger ones) something to grab onto musically. This foundational rhythmic pattern can be as simple as a steady quarter note pulse or something more syncopated such as a 3-3-2 rhythm (counted **1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2**). Against this rhythmic ground, other participants can superimpose various rhythmic figures as they explore the playground for its sonic potential. This exercise works particularly well with children ages 5 through 10.

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