



Werner gets fit (DM)

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THIS IS A PENSIONERS' PLAYGROUND

EXCLUSIVE

By Matt Roper Matt.Roper@Mirror.Co.Uk 05/06/2007

PASS the horse liniment, Horst. Willkommen to Pensioners' Park where, amid the crack of stressed ligaments and dodgy knees, retired Germans enjoy an afternoon in the first playground for the elderly.

The outdoor play area has become a massive hit with the city's OAPs since it opened last month in a secluded corner of West Berlin.

There are none of the traditional swings, slides or roundabouts.

Instead, the elderly swingers amuse themselves with leg trainers, flexibility machines and back massage poles - designed to improve strength and balance and stimulate the circulation.

The whole point of this German "greyground" is to help older people make friends, while keeping fit at the same time.

Today the playground is full of OAPs, many of whom have left their walking sticks nearby as they move from one stainless steel and plastic machine to the next in the warm morning sun.

Werner Herrick, 68, has been here every day since the park opened on May 2.

"This place helps me forget I'm getting on a bit, and helps keep me active," he says. "It's the highlight of my day. A lot of us old folks come here at the same time every day, so I've already made quite a few friends."

Marlit and Hans Kimert are enjoying a relaxing back massage. Marlit, a whippersnapper at 59, says: "People think that all pensioners need is a cup of tea and a high-backed chair, but we like to be active too."

"It takes a while to get the hang of the equipment but once you know how to use it, you really feel the difference it makes.

"We used to take our grandchildren to a playground at the other side of the park, but now they come with us to ours. Now they say to us: 'OK, gramps, we'll let you play for 10 minutes!'"

At the other side of the play area Robert Wuthrich's grandchildren are getting restless as he swings back and forth on the leg trainer.

The pensioner - who once ran the London marathon - says: "I've started to get arthritis, but just in the few weeks I've started using this equipment I've felt so much better.

"My grandchildren complain, but why should they have all the fun? They can wait until I've finished."

Now some British experts are calling for similar play areas to be introduced here.

Robin Gargrave, the director of YMCA fit, which runs exercise courses for older people, says: "Rediscovering your inner child and having fun is incredibly beneficial, physically, emotionally and psychologically.

"Your risk of coronary heart disease increases with age, so any physical activity will reduce this risk by half. If you are female, the chance of getting osteoporosis, the brittle bone disease, goes up with your age - and exercise can have a really positive effect on delaying onset."

Age Concern's director general, Gordon Lishman, believes the schemes are a great idea. He says: "Getting out in the fresh air and meeting people is really important. Socialising with others can alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression.

"It's really important to have safe public places where people feel comfortable exercising and meeting up with friends."

Despite this, the Department of Health say there are no plans to introduce OAP-playgrounds anywhere in this country.

At £14,000 for the eight graffiti resistant pieces of sports gear, the equipment at the Berlin park comes at a fraction of the price of building a children's playground.

Apparatus in the area includes a pole where pensioners try to stretch as high as they can, and a machine with two red pulleys and handlebars to gently strengthen the arms.

The playground is part of a social experiment aimed at making elderly people more physically and mentally agile.

It is the brainchild of engineer Renate Zeumer, whose inspiration came from a trip to China.

There, she saw how older people used simple pieces of government provided equipment to exercise in parks, on the streets and even in subway stations.

Renate's company, Play fit, now hopes to open more playgrounds for pensioners all over Germany.

The country has 16 million people over the age of 65, and by 2050 a third of the population will be over 60.

But nothing ever runs smoothly. The park's serenity is suddenly shattered by a group of rowdy schoolgirls who immediately monopolise the machines.

With no wardens, the pensioners abandon their toys, pick up their walking sticks and head for home.

The last to leave is an elderly woman who shakes her cane at the youngsters as she storms off.

"This is our playground! Go and play with someone your own age," she shouts.

They ignore her...

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