



Making sense



playwork
in practice

This book has come about as part of PLAYLINK's Wonderful Places to Play project, funded by Bridge House Estates Trust. The book meets several aims within the project by helping playground staff and management to develop skills and knowledge in order to sustain a high quality play service.

PLAYLINK is committed to high quality in play provision – children deserve no less. This book aims to contribute to a wider understanding of the nature of playwork and to assist playworkers in showing how they meet quality standards appropriate to play settings.

Play is an essential part of children's life and vital to their development. It is the way children explore the world around them and develop and practice skills. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, for intellectual and educational development, and for acquiring social and behavioural skills. Play is a generic term applied to a wide range of activities and behaviours that are satisfying to the child, creative for the child and freely chosen by the child. Children's play may or may not involve equipment or have an end product. Children play on their own and with others. Their play may be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative, light-hearted or very serious.

The New Charter for Children's Play 1998, Children's Play Council





introduction

Imagine a place where can you find challenge and security, thrills and relaxation, exploration and consolidation, mystery and understanding, fantasy and down to earth reality. For many children adventure playgrounds are just such places, not only giving them somewhere to relax and enjoy themselves but also providing opportunities that help them to develop the skills, knowledge and experience they need for living in our increasingly complex world.

Through play we learn those things that can't be taught, explore our world at our own pace, try new skills until they are mastered. Play is so important in a child's development that the opportunities for play we offer to children need to be of the highest quality.

This book describes a series of everyday play experiences that have occurred in staffed play settings. They demonstrate the richness of play and the complexity of playwork. The examples show that quality playwork depends more on the experience and understanding of the workers, and their commitment to the values and principles of playwork, than on the amount of money spent on a project.

This is the type of work that goes on at play projects all over London, and the stories show the reasoning, beliefs, commitment and imagination that underpin the development of the play environment and the people within it.

Whatever your interest in play, be it as a child, parent, funder or worker then this selection of real life stories will shed some light on what play facilities offer, their worth to society, the enthusiasm that inspires them and the promise they hold for our children.





how to use this book

You may be reading this simply to get a flavour of what goes on at play projects. The stories themselves should provide that flavour. Those of you that have a deeper or more professional interest in play will find the 'Playwork Focus' after each story gives an insight into why these are examples of good practice.

The 'Playwork Focus' following each story provides an analysis of the elements of good practice demonstrated by the story. Although each story has a particular emphasis, the 'Playwork Focus' indicates that many aspects of good quality playwork are illustrated by each scenario.

Playworkers who need to provide evidence of quality in their service will be able to see how they can demonstrate the link between their own daily practice and the play values, play objectives and quality areas given in the appendices. These come from two very significant documents that many workers are using to improve their service, Hackney Play Association's quality assurance scheme 'Quality in Play' published by London Play, and 'Best Play – What Play Provision Should Do for Children', a distillation of current thinking in playwork produced jointly by the Children's Play Council, the National Playing Fields Association and PLAYLINK and funded by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. Examples of the links that can be made are shown in the text boxes alongside the 'Playwork Focus'.

The importance of these play values cannot be overestimated. Readers are recommended to relate the stories to the values set out in the appendix in order to put play provision into it's social perspective.



a taste for life

The smell of freshly baked bread wafted along Larkhall Lane on a September morning. The 'nothing quite like it' aroma was drifting from the Oasis Children's Nature Garden, a haven of greenery amid the inner city hustle and bustle.

Most play projects will do cookery but bread making at Oasis is special because they grind their own flour, from wheat they grow themselves, from seeds the children plant. Being involved in the process from start to finish is a very enlightening way of learning; it is experienced rather than taught. At the Nature Garden this belief runs through a great many of the activities available to children, not just in the things they can make but in the way they care for the space; the plants, the creatures and other children within it.

Planting and cultivating your own ingredients for cookery can be a slow and difficult process but, as the children noticed when they bit into their warm, buttered bread that morning, it has a very satisfying flavour indeed.

playwork focus

1. This play space provides an alternative to its urban surroundings.

- a) It is good for children to experience a variety of environments. The inner city very often only provides buildings, tarmac and paving; while these can generate their own style of play, trees, shrubs, plants and grassy areas give a stimulating alternative.
- b) Access to the elements is an important part of play. Gardening brings these elements together in a fun way, making the land more than something you just stand on and the rain not just something to avoid.
- c) Things change. The Nature Garden allows children to experience the need for changes and helps them understand the cycle of the seasons.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 3. Freedom to play
- 7. Play for its own sake

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 4. Range of opportunities
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement
- 6. Play Audit

2. The garden and its contents are central to the activities.

- a) Because many of the activities available to children are related to the natural elements within the garden, the variety of activities is ensured as the garden changes with the seasons.
- b) Much of the project is based around environmental issues. This has meant that much of the play is very topical. Schools regularly use the Nature Garden to help deliver aspects of their curriculum. For most children, though, the play is freely chosen.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 4. Range of opportunities
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement

3. The nurturing principle has become a metaphor for the children's behaviour.

- a) The fact that so many of the Nature Gardens activities are directly related to the care of the play space itself has, staff believe, had a knock on effect in the way the children behave when they are there. There is very little vandalism and the children care intensely for the space and the creatures in it.
- b) Occasionally the children experience challenging behaviour from others that are new to the project. The regulars are quick to let them know what sort of behaviour will not be tolerated. The project ethos has effectively spread to include the way the children relate to their environment and each other.

Best Play Values

- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 5. Children's involvement
- 7. Equalities and inclusion
- 9. Behavioural boundaries

4. The learning process has been brought to life through play.

- a) We all know that children acquire many skills through play. We are also used to children gaining aspects of knowledge through play. Although many things can be taught, learning through experience has a value all its own.
- b) The understanding that has come about through the children's contact with this way of working has been assimilated into the way they relate to each other. The richness of the experience has born fruit in an unexpected way, but then that is the nature of play.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 5. Children's involvement



the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune

Amid the costume making, open fires and merriment of Shakespeare Walk Adventure Playground's medieval week there were a couple of children who asked if they could make bows, arrows and slings. Staff were aware that some people might be concerned that weapons should not be considered play things. They were also aware that some might consider them too dangerous to play with. Nevertheless they decided to give the children the opportunity to explore all these issues and agreed to their request.

The children were quick to consider these problems themselves and so, before anything had been made, the children drew up 'ye olde rules for slingers and archers'. These rules included not pointing arrows at people, using the bows and slings in a certain area of the playground that was easy to section off and only firing at targets when there was no one in front of the firing line.

These rules were photocopied and the children set up a bow, arrow and quiver production line, with everyone having to read and agree to their copy of ye olde rules before they could begin making their bows. Targets were set up along side the play building, creating a secure area to shoot the arrows and sling the 'stones'. Eighty children made bows or slings, and the whole thing passed off in good humour and without injury.

playwork focus

1. Children are well used to taking the initiative over their play.

- a) A play environment that encourages children to use its resources as they choose can provide a wider range of opportunities than one that is purely adult led.
- b) This method implies trust for the children and values their input. This respect is upheld in spite of several reservations, the problems becoming issues that can be discussed and negotiated in a reasoned manner.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 5. Respect for children
- 8. Importance of risk

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 4. Range of opportunities
- 5. Independence & esteem

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement

2. Young people can make sound judgements relating to safety.

- a) The rules were sensible and countered the children's fears as to what could make their play dangerous. Problems were identified and solutions reasoned out.
- b) Children drew up the rules, and the rules were respected. Peer pressure is just one aspect of this; the fact that they were part of the process is probably the greatest influence.

Best Play Values

- 6. Children's abilities
- 8. Importance of risk

Best Play Objectives

- 3. Balancing risk and safety
- 5. Independence & esteem

Quality in Play Areas

- 1. Health and safety
- 5. Children's involvement
- 9. Behavioural boundaries



sara's way

What are the milestones we use to measure a child's development? Walking, talking, riding a bike without stabilizers? Being left without crying, going to sleep without a light on, making friends with other children?

For most children these would be significant landmarks, but they are landmarks that are soon passed as the child's development moves on. For some children such milestones may take an age, for some they may never be reached.

Sara had been going to Chelsea Adventure Playground for several years but she always maintained a distance in her dealings with staff. At first, like many other autistic children, Sara didn't speak, did not interact with others nor did she appear to get much pleasure from playing, though she did seem to feel comfortable at the playground.

Chelsea Adventure Playground specializes in working with children who have a variety of abilities and needs, and, after discussion with Sara's mum, staff combined two techniques to structure their work with Sara while she was at the playground.

These techniques used 'the living mirror', a system where workers copy children's play actions as a means of communication and validation, and a similar programme called Options which encourages workers to shift their perspective to that of the child. The combination had an instant effect.

Sara loves to clap, playing with different rhythms, sounds and hand shapes. Very soon she was rushing onto the playground to greet each member of staff with their own individual clapping sequence. They, in turn, would have to repeat it. Sara would patiently correct any parts they got wrong, and when it was perfect she would move on. In this way she would tour the playground, infectiously drawing more staff and children into her game.

A few days later Sara's mum burst onto the playground barely able to contain her excitement. She had taken Sara to the park where Sara had used her clapping game to initiate a friendship with another girl her own age. They played the clapping game for twenty minutes before they moved on to the swings, together.

Sara had made a friend and reached another milestone in her development. For Sara's mum, it was a milestone she could not have been really sure Sara would ever reach.

1. Staff have created a relaxed atmosphere through the accepting way they respond to the children's needs.

- a) There are many things that help create a welcoming atmosphere for children, using their artwork for decoration, furniture that asks to be sat on rather than shouts to keep off, activities that are achievable and staff that are approachable all contribute to the child centred environment.
- b) Sometimes, when dealing with children with special needs, it is difficult to see through the medical label to the child beneath. Valuing the child, and their basic play needs, cuts through many preconceptions about ability.
- c) This atmosphere has helped parents to feel they can work in partnership with the staff in addressing their children's needs.

Best Play Values

- 3. Freedom to play
- 4. Equal entitlement
- 6. Children's abilities
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 6. Respect and interaction

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 7. Equalities and inclusion

2. Staff are enthusiastic about new developments and are prepared to participate.

- a) Although many playworkers have a great deal of experience in working with children it is important not to sit back when it comes to finding ways to improve the play opportunities we can offer to children.
- b) When children play they give out 'play cues'¹. These are invitations, often to workers, to join in with a particular activity. Workers need to be aware of the roles they play in this communication and respond appropriately.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 6. Children's abilities
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 4. Range of opportunity
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 7. Equalities and inclusion
- 8. Information

3. The playground has a valuable role in the wider community.

- a) The self-esteem and confidence that Sara developed through her play on the playground has clearly had an influence on her ability to socialize with other children.
- b) Whilst resources are important, inclusion is more about mutual respect than it is about equipment.

Best Play Values

- 3. Freedom to play
- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children

Best Play Objectives

- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Play for its own sake

Quality in Play Areas

- 7. Equalities and inclusion

¹Perry Else & Gordon Sturrock 'The Colorado Paper – Playground as Therapeutic Space: Playwork as Healing' (Paper to USA/IPA Triennial National Conference, Colorado US 1998)



the big leap

The queue of kids snaking its way through the play structures at Shoreditch Playpark was a dead give away that something special was taking place.

The day had begun with staff checking the site and finding an old mattress beneath a beam, recently put up to strengthen a play structure, indicating that the playground had been used when they were closed. It was evident that children had been jumping from this beam onto the mattress, an activity that the workers felt was dangerous due to the poor state of the mattress. The children positioned a set of play mats in its place and staff made a quick risk assessment of the activity.

Two of the workers decided they should try out the jump and stood together on the beam. Both were taken aback by how high up it seemed and though neither are afraid of heights they were definitely scared to make the jump. Playfully they argued over who should jump first, each trying to convince the other as to who had the most to live for. The crowd of children were in fits of laughter, then suddenly fell hushed as one of the workers jumped. The silent leap seemed to last for ages, then the playworker landed to a loud cheer. She got off the mat and the other worker jumped, again to the cheers of the children watching.

As the sun began to set the queue of children dwindled. Many of them had done the big leap that day, though some of the younger ones decided to jump from a lower beam. Staff bring the mats out most holidays and supervise this rite of passage for children who have vowed to do the big leap next time.

playwork focus

1. Children consider equipment as ‘loose parts’².

- a) Playworkers are familiar with the idea of making items available for children to use in a variety of ways. This not only recycles equipment but also allows children to develop problem-solving skills and actively encourages them to think freely about how things work.
- b) The fact that children think of equipment as their own to manipulate shows a healthy relationship of trust exists between staff and children.

Best Play Values

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 5. Respect for children

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 6. Play audit

²Simon Nicholson ‘How Not to Cheat Children – The Theory of Loose Parts’ (Landscape Architecture Oct 1971)

2. Risk assessments are made quickly in order to keep play free flowing.

- a) Risk assessment is the means by which playworkers judge whether an activity is a danger to the people involved. It is based on making a judgement on the degree of injury that could be incurred and the likelihood of that injury occurring. A variety of factors can influence the outcome of those judgements and the workers take these into account.
- b) By making this judgement quickly the impetus behind the activity could be maintained. Delaying the process only disappoints children and can build a feeling of injustice if the issue is dismissed out of hand without due consideration.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 6. Children's abilities
- 9. Adult role in play
- 10. Adult responsiveness

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 3. Balancing risk and safety
- 4. Range of opportunities

Quality in Play Areas

- 1. Health and safety
- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

3. Workers are prepared to play and be seen to be vulnerable.

- a) While children are quite capable of playing on their own there are times when adult intervention can really enhance their play. Knowing when to intervene is a skill in itself. Children often give adults play cues. It is up to workers to interpret these correctly and respond appropriately.
- b) Most professional adult/child relationships are founded on authority; signs of weakness are felt to undermine that dominance. The open relationships that underpin good playwork develop mutual respect and displays of human fallibility are accepted for what they are and nothing more.
- c) It's plain to see how an adventure playground environment can assist with a child's physical development but some aspects of play, especially social and emotional development, are much harder to understand and cannot be predetermined. The playworkers felt and showed fear, but they overcame that fear. The same held true for many of the children that made the jump.

Best Play Values

- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 4. Range of opportunities
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 5. Independence & esteem
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

- d) In order to understand the importance of play to children we have to experience it through their eyes. Much of the time we can do this through memories of our own childhood experiences but sometimes we just have to get in there and do it. In this way workers can empathize with the children, not just experiencing fear but also the elation of success, the joy of adulation and the warmth of comradeship that all exist in the moments between standing on the beam and getting off the mat.

Best Play Values

- 7. Play for its own sake
- 10. Adult responsiveness

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 5. Independence & esteem
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 6. Play audit

4. Children are encouraged to go at their own pace.

- a) The children watching that day learnt that fear is normal and that it can be overcome when you are ready to face it. There was no pressure to make the jump and children have been encouraged to work up to it.
- b) The activity requires supervision to ensure that the mats are properly stacked as they sometimes move after jumps. Children that come to the playground who have not experienced this type of play environment have wanted to do the jump with one or even no mats underneath. The supervised playground encourages children to make their own risk assessments and they have a deeper notion of safety as a result.

Best Play Values

6. Children's abilities
7. Play for its own sake
8. Importance of risk

Best Play Objectives

3. Balancing safety and risk
7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

1. Health and safety
4. Range of activities



the pictureless children

One of the great things about play is that it doesn't require a huge amount of equipment. Sometimes all that's needed is a little imagination.

A parent brought two children aged five and seven onto Shoreditch Playpark and, after looking around the building, asked if it was alright to leave them. The worker said yes, but that it was an open access site and explained how that meant that although the playground was supervised the children were free to come and go as they pleased. The parent then told the children not to go outside the playground and left.

Once the parent had gone the two children immediately made their way over to some bushes deep inside the playground and played there on their own.

When the parent returned just over an hour later, he looked round the building and not seeing his children anywhere asked the playworker where they were. She told him she thought they were still playing in the bushes and that was what they had been doing all the time they were there. The parent was horrified that they hadn't been indoors doing a picture under the watchful gaze of a playworker.

The children were indeed playing in the bushes, both of them had been having a great time 'playing in the jungle' and have, despite their father's initial horror, both come back to the playground on several occasions.

playwork focus

1. Play provision should be about a child's choice.

- a) The basic freedom to be somewhere or not is fundamental to the open access play site. Children are central to the decisions made in such settings, although there may well be external pressures imposed on the children, like being told to stay by a parent.
- b) Very young children are capable of making their own choices about what they want to do and are usually quite capable of playing without coming to any harm.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 2. Stimulating environment
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

2. Supervision does not mean intensive scrutiny

- a) Playworkers do not need to intrude in play to make it safe. An intrusive adult presence restricts or even closes down children's play.
- b) Skilled supervision is an important part of any playground, offering both security and risk. Workers are quick to notice problems as they develop, or children that may need more support than others, and judge their degree of intervention accordingly. They are always available if support is needed.

Best Play Values

- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 3. Balancing safety and risk

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

3. Play needn't have a product, tangible or otherwise.

- a) Although drawing and painting are popular activities on all playgrounds arts and crafts are just one aspect of what is available. While it is often good for children to make something, it is very often an adult expectation that prompts them, as there is something tangible for the adult to focus praise on.
- b) Playgrounds try to offer the opportunities for as many different play types³ as possible so that as many children's needs as possible can be met.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environments
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 4. Range of opportunities

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

³Play types are categorized by Bob Hughes, 1996, in A Playworkers Taxonomy of Play Types, PLAYLINK, London UK



sorrow swing

Robbie and Becky clung tightly to each other and the rope that supported the tyre swing they were sitting on, slowly swaying backwards and forwards, slowly turning round and around. Their father had recently died.

A playworker stood a discreet distance away, close enough to suggest the offer of support if required, far enough away to respect their need for solitude.

Occasionally children would approach the worker, complaining that Robbie and Becky's turn on the swing was over. She would simply say that they needed more time. Each time the two came to the playground they made their way over to the swing and sat there, drifting backwards and forwards, alone with their thoughts. The other children had begun to respect the swing as being their space when they wanted it, although the worker continued to maintain her strategic position just in case.

After a few days Robbie and Becky approached the worker and asked if they could do some painting. She led them into the building and their gentle re-introduction to regular playground life had begun.

playwork focus

1. Play has a tremendous therapeutic value.⁴

- a) Regrettably people very often face great trauma early in their lives. The playgrounds often become places of security for children in their changing world and for some, the workers become significant adults in their lives.
- b) Play therapy has long been used with children that have suffered trauma. Very often, though, children create their own ways of solving their problems.
- c) Play is not always fun.

Best Play Values

- 7. Play for its own sake
- 10. Adult responsiveness

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment

⁴ Else & Sturrock 'The Colorado Paper' page 13

2. Open access play provision offers children the choice to engage at whatever levels they want, at times they want.

- a) Open access means that children are free to come and go at the play setting. Sometimes children will visit for a few minutes, sometimes for several hours, sometimes they will leave and return many times.
- b) While staff may have a variety of activities on offer there is no obligation on the part of the child to take part in those activities. In structured play settings the freedom for a child to meet their own needs is restricted.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 3. Freedom to play
- 7. Play for its own sake

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 4. Range of opportunities
- 6. Respect and interaction

Quality in Play Areas

- 2. Opening times
- 3. Welcoming environment
- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

3. The worker allowed the young people to control their play while offering support.

- a) The worker was quick to read the signals in the children's body language and responded appropriately. She allowed the children to use the swing to meet their needs while maintaining the link between their private thoughts and the outside world.

Best Play Values

- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 6. Respect and interaction

Quality in Play Areas

- 7. Equalities and inclusion

4. The worker defended the siblings right to the swing and after a while so did the other playground users.

- a) The rules for the swing usually stipulate a time limit if people are waiting for a go. However, the sheer depth of these children's sadness made such limitations inappropriate.
- b) Without the need for great debate over the issue, the moment had an effect on the other users who then respected the sensitivity of the situation and the poignancy of their play.
- c) Equality does not mean treating everybody the same. It must always be relative to need.

Best Play Values

- 4. Equal entitlement

Best Play Objectives

- 6. Children's abilities
- 7. Play for its own sake

Quality in Play Areas

- 7. Equalities and inclusion



the crazy dens of kennington

Two boys, one carrying a packet of biscuits the other a bottle of coke, ran from their flats and across the grassy bank to the adventure playground. Once inside they made their way past children busy with hammers and nails, saws and paint, to a den made of wooden planks. A face popped out from the planking “What’s the password?” “Abracadabra!” came the reply, and the two boys joined their friend in their den for their secret feast.

Theirs was not the only den on the playground. Lots of them, all shapes, sizes and colours, were springing up on Kennington Playground as part of a project to involve the children in developing the outside play area. All of them contained groups of friends playing freely in their own private space.

After a few weeks the children designed bigger things to build. These included an American swing (a large rope swing with a circular platform) and a tree house. The drawings themselves were filled with fun and wonder. The workers have now ordered wood for the swing and are keen to get started on building with the children and some older volunteers. The tree house will follow shortly, just as soon as they’ve worked out how to build one without any sturdy trees!

playwork focus

1. Children are involved in the playground.

- a) Construction is an important feature of adventure playgrounds. Children are encouraged to learn the skills needed to use hammers and saws and, if appropriate, other tools that are fundamental in building whether it’s a den or a go-kart. Allowing children to build their own play environments, rather than having it done for them, creates a whole new perspective on the way they treat the play space and each other.
- b) Not only can the children influence temporary aspects of the playground, they have a great long-term influence. Permanent play structures take a lot of work and are a crucial part of any playground. Allowing children to take a significant part in such developments values them as individuals and as a force in the community.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children’s abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 5. Independence & esteem
- 7. Child’s development

Quality in Play Areas

- 5. Children’s involvement
- 7. Equalities and inclusion

2. It's good for children to be able to play on their own.

- a) Although some children may initially need some help with the construction side of den building, workers will withdraw once their input is no longer required. The moments children spend playing with friends away from adult intervention are often the most significant for them.
- b) Children need to learn how to cope with a variety of social situations on their own. They can best do this by being allowed to deal with them on their own. If they encounter problems along the way there are workers that they can trust to support them if asked.

Best Play Values

- 6. Children's abilities
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 5. Independence & esteem
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 1. Health and safety
- 6. Play audit
- 9. Behavioural boundaries

3. Young people will continue to be involved in building the structure.

- a) The actual building process will involve skills that are new for some children. Acquiring these skills is important. More important are the development of self-esteem, ability to co-operate and respect for the worth of others that such a project generates.
- b) Construction on this scale is an exciting way for children to make a worthwhile contribution to their community. Even though individual children may reap the benefits of a new structure to play on, there is a valuable aspect of co-operation and doing something for their friends and others.
- c) Although Kennington has a cut off age of 16, playworkers often have contact with young people who are now too old for the playground. Some of them become volunteers, a sign of the significance the place has for them and their willingness to put something back in return. Such loyalty only occurs when there is respect for the workers or an insight into the true value of the playground.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 5. Independence & esteem
- 6. Children's abilities
- 7. Play for its own sake

Quality in Play Areas

- 1. Health and safety
- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement

4. The tree house idea has not been abandoned.

- a) Despite the fact there are only a few trees on site, none much bigger than saplings, the sheer wonderment that is present in the children's drawings of tree houses is too intense to be ignored. To create a truly child centred environment such dreams need to be made real.
- b) Playworkers are prepared to explore new ways of working to help the children achieve the things that they want.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 5. Children's involvement

Doesn't legend say that the claw of the ghoul causes temporary paralysis, the gaze of the mummy causes irrational dread, the touch of the zombie causes the numbing of the mind? For anyone involved with committees, though, those three little letters AGM induce a more potent mix of stupefaction and fear than an entire army of undead. Imagine, then, the effect on children!

At the Annual General Meeting of Shakespeare Walk Adventure Playground, however, the children turned out to be the perfect antidote to dullness.

Not only did the children actually turn up to the AGM, they took over; each playing the role of an officer to read out the typed reports for the year. Even the local beat bobby delivered his report, via walkie-talkie, through a child wearing a toy policeman's helmet. The AGM became an impromptu play, and a very satirical one at that.

The children have 'run' two more AGMs since, each a little more challenging than before. The children have attended other committee meetings and have welcomed their chance to have their say. The Committee has enjoyed having the children's input too. As a result of this involvement children have been able to put demands to the Committee and are all much wiser as to how the playground operates.

playwork focus

1. Children are invited to be involved in all aspects of playground development.

- a) It isn't just control over their own choice of activity that is a hallmark of quality play practice. If the children are respected and their opinions valued then it is a logical step to allow them control over the manner in which the play site operates. After all, nobody cares about the play space as much as the children that use it.
- b) Simply because children do not have the appropriate skills does not mean they can't make a valuable contribution. In this case the children were ignorant of the procedures used at an AGM. Nevertheless they proved to be a welcome breath of fresh air and have now learnt what the procedures are.

Best Play Values

- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 4. Range of opportunities

Quality in Play Areas

- 5. Children's involvement
- 7. Equalities and inclusion
- 8. Information

2. Play allowed children the opportunity to be heard.

- a) The children may not have known the formalities of an AGM but they did know how to play. By turning the situation into a play setting the children were instantly able to relate to what was going on and had the confidence to explore the situation.
- b) While children very often voice concerns to playworkers they usually have limited access to committee members. Playworkers often act as advocates on behalf of the children but the message can become diluted when it is being passed on.
- c) The Committee clearly has a good understanding of play values. Their own commitment to the play process allowed children this opportunity to take part in such a novel way.

Best Play Values

- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children's abilities
- 7. Play for its own sake
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 5. Independence & esteem
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities
- 5. Children's involvement

3. The children have been involved in a two way learning process that has tested the Committee's views about their role.

- a) Children have been able to test the boundaries placed upon them by the demands of the adult world. The 'committee speak' of constitutions and service level agreements seems a world away from the real life of the children's playground. Good practice needs to inform policy, before policy can support practice.
- b) As a result of being so involved in the AGM the children have been able to set demands on the Committee as to how members should behave. Examples are that at meetings they should be focused on playground issues rather than on getting home, and that they should not be half hearted in the decisions they take. In all, there are twelve such demands, each reinforcing the commitment expected of those who have responsibility for the children's precious play space.

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 5. Children's involvement
- 8. Information

- c) Committee members have learnt to view things from a child's perspective. The children have come to understand the demands put on management committees and the processes they have to go through. They are now familiar with the decision making process in the adult world and some of the skills such a system demands.



the last straw (but one?)

A large group of young people, aged between 12 and 18, had been causing trouble at Hornimans Adventure Playground in varying degrees and over a period of time.

Staff tried a variety of ways to encourage them to behave more responsibly on the playground. They tried working with them as a group, working with them in smaller groups and working with individuals. They tried positively rewarding good behaviour and focusing on activities of interest to these young people. They tried short term bans and informed parents about the problems the playground was experiencing with their children's behaviour. Some parents flatly refused to accept that their child would intimidate children and staff, very often in an extremely abusive way. However, staff did make some progress with the group. As a result, when the young people asked if they could have a disco the staff agreed, provided the young people arranged it all themselves and finished at 10 p.m.

The disco finished on time and was a great success, so much so that staff bought a music system for the playground hoping that a corner had been turned and that at last the playground was being respected.

It lasted two days.

The group came in, played their music on the new music system, then smashed it to pieces on the floor before leaving. Staff felt that enough was enough and that there was no alternative but a complete ban for the whole group. The trouble with permanent bans is that those banned feel they no longer have anything to lose and the intimidation continued from outside the gate, creating a strained atmosphere for everyone.

When staff heard that a local youthworker had recently been given resources to work specifically with young people at risk of offending, the playworkers referred this group to him. This crime prevention initiative operates using points for good behaviour and positive input, which can then be exchanged for activities, such as camping. The excluded group has been included in this initiative and is aware that causing trouble for the playground will negate any points earned in that week.

So far there has been no more trouble and some have been back to ask if they can do 'community service' at the playground to earn themselves more points.

1. Despite young people having the choice to attend, sometimes their behaviour is unacceptable.

- a) With open access play provision you might expect young people that weren't getting anything from the place simply to choose not to go. The reality is that they are still getting something, even if it isn't necessarily what they think they want.
- b) Anti social behaviour could be interpreted as a cue to respond to a young person's needs. It may be, however, that their needs cannot be met within the provision. While efforts may be made to try to address these needs, the play needs of other children have to be not only taken into account, but actively defended.
- c) Young people need to be aware that there are consequences to their actions.

Best Play Values

- 5. Respect for children
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 6. Respect and interaction

Quality in Play Areas

- 9. Behavioural boundaries

2. There is no 'right way' to deal with behaviour problems.

- a) Each worker has different strengths and each young person responds in different ways to the manner in which they are approached.
- b) Every incident on a playground has a number of factors that a playworker will take into account in how they assess and deal with that particular situation.

Best Play Values

- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 9. Behavioural boundaries

3. While workers will try a number of ways not to exclude young people from the centre, there are times when there is no choice.

- a) Most playgrounds are deeply rooted within their communities. Very often the support of the community is vital to the running of the centre. By the same token there is a responsibility to the community to uphold the rights of the other users.
- b) Exclusion is seen as a last resort in protecting the rights of others and protecting the values of the playground.
- c) Whereas the community may be supportive, there are individuals within that community that may show misplaced loyalty to their children by abdicating any responsibility when they misbehave, or at worst denying it to themselves. Working positively with young people in such circumstances is extremely difficult and specialist referral may be the only realistic option.

Best Play Values

- 4. Equal entitlement
- 5. Respect for children

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 6. Respect and interaction

Quality in Play Areas

- 7. Equalities and inclusion
- 8. Information

4. Staff have sought and managed to maintain contact with the group and on reasonable terms.

- a) The biggest problem with exclusion is the breakdown in communication with the young people. However they behave, they are at least having their values challenged when they are coming into contact with the caring and responsible environment of the playground. In this instance staff took the trouble to ensure that another skilled worker was able to make positive inputs into the group.
- b) When there is nothing left to bargain with, in this case being allowed in, then the young people may feel they have nothing to lose by misbehaving and step up hostilities as a result. Maintaining contact, especially in such a positive way, has meant that the young people have been able to communicate with staff in a reasonable manner.
- c) There is a big age difference in the group. While the playground officially focuses on 5-16 year olds, there is a mandate from the community to occasionally look at the older age group; as a result young people over 16 can now be welcomed onto the playground as volunteers.
- d) The needs of the excluded 12-year-olds will not be the same as those of the older youths. It is possible that some younger members of this group might be allowed back in at some point in the future provided there is a significant change in their behaviour. This can only be determined by maintaining some form of contact.

Best Play Values

3. Freedom to play
4. Equal entitlement
9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

2. Testing boundaries
5. Independence & esteem
6. Respect and interaction
7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

1. Health and safety
3. Welcoming environment
7. Equalities and inclusion
9. Behavioural boundaries

Best Play Values

5. Respect for children
9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

6. Respect and interaction
7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

5. Children's involvement
7. Equalities and inclusion



that talent vibe

The hall erupted into loud cheers and applause as sixty children took the accolades from the watching crowd. Filing by, they shared the spotlight, which was as it should have been because this was a performance that was about far more than individuals.

At the start of the summer holidays a volunteer came to Max Roach Adventure Playground who had training in dance and theatre. She came in to help with a talent show for 5-16 year olds that had, following two previous shows, become an annual feature of the playground.

When the volunteer had to pull out after the first two weeks, staff and children had to decide whether or not to cancel the performances for that year. In true show business tradition, the show went on, with the children taking responsibility for developing all aspects of the performance, from lighting and publicity to costumes and choreography.

The children took care to make sure that all ages took part. Not only did they encourage each other to achieve their goals but they were sensitive to difficulties that some children experienced and worked well as a group to support them.

At the end of the summer holidays sixty children put on a stunning performance. The entire show lasted 1½ hours but it produced a buzz around the playground that lasted for months.

playwork focus

1. Drama and dance provide additional activities to those traditionally associated with adventure playgrounds.

- a) For many people adventure playgrounds conjure images of children swinging around on play structures but they actually offer a great deal more. Arts are an important feature of every play setting and are part of a diverse range of activities that playworkers offer to the children.
- b) Not only do dance and drama provide a means of self expression they also allow for the development of self esteem for some children that might not excel at other things, such as sport or academic achievement.
- c) Creativity is an important aspect of a child's development. It has an impact on how they see the world and their ability to influence it.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 4. Range of opportunities
- 5. Independence & esteem
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 4. Range of activities
- 6. Play audit

2. Children were consulted about the progress of the project and control was handed over freely.

- a) Children on play projects are not pupils being administered a curriculum. They are a part of a fluid process and can interact in that process at whichever level they choose.
- b) At the highest level of participation comes control. Because of the open relationship between playworkers and the children on their sites, this control is handed over willingly provided the children are ready to take on the responsibility. Workers are always on hand to give support if needed, and stay out of the way when necessary!⁵

Best Play Values

- 1. Children's views
- 5. Respect for children
- 6. Children's abilities
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 5. Independence & esteem
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 5. Children's involvement

3. Skills were allowed to develop.

- a) Many children developed new dance skills, some learnt costume making skills and some developed other skills directly related to putting on a performance.
- b) Perhaps above all these, the children involved in the production developed skills in the way they related to each other. The social skills required to negotiate, support and organize a production of this kind were developed and polished in the space of a few weeks.

Best Play Values

- 2. Stimulating environment
- 6. Children's abilities

Best Play Objectives

- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 4. Range of activities

4. The children upheld playground values.

- a) Playworkers have a set of values that underpin their work. Among these are the principles that all children have equal entitlement and that they are respected as individuals. Despite the range of ages and abilities the children carried these values through themselves and this feeling of respect and support was a mainstay for all concerned.

Best Play Values

- 1 – 10 Appendix 1

Best Play Objectives

- 2. Testing boundaries
- 6. Respect and interaction
- 7. Child's development

Quality in Play Areas

- 6. Play audit

⁵ Else & Sturrock 'The Colorado Paper' Methods of Involvement, pages 32-33

5. Play can have a product but it isn't a necessity.

- a) In the case of the Talent Vibe there was a very tangible product at the end of it. This is not always the case with play. In this instance the children defined their own goals and outcomes. With this done, the workers involvement became one of support.

Best Play Values

- 7. Play for its own sake
- 9. Adult role in play

Best Play Objectives

- 1. Choice, control & freedom
- 5. Independence & esteem

Quality in Play Areas

- 3. Welcoming environment
- 5. Children's involvement



APPENDIX 1

Best Play – What Play Provision Should Do For Children was written in response to a number of pressures within the field of children’s play. It draws on the accumulated body of knowledge about play and child development to assert the need for children’s play and to underpin commitment to sustaining high quality play environments.

Best Play is about how children benefit from play opportunities. It is also about how play services and spaces can provide these benefits, and how they can show that they are providing them. It draws on research, theories and practice from a number of disciplines to identify seven objectives for play provision. It is relevant to both supervised and unsupervised settings although the suggested evaluation methods are most applicable in supervised settings.

Best Play - Values

- 1. Children’s views** - Children are “active in the construction and determination of their own social lives”. (Prout and James 1997). This has implications for playwork and for the development of better play provision. The voice of the child, their opinions and reactions, should be taken into account to the maximum degree consistent with health, safety and respect for the needs of others.
- 2. Access to rich, stimulating environments** - There is a poverty of play opportunities in the general environment, and it is the responsibility of the community to ensure that all children have access to rich, stimulating environments that are free from unacceptable risk, and thereby offer children the opportunity to explore both themselves and the world, through their freely chosen play.⁶
- 3. Freedom to play** - Children’s freedom to play, and children’s sense of freedom, needs to be preserved. Many pressures increasingly dominate the lives of children in the UK. Public fears about safety, including the threat from traffic and from other people, lead many parents to restrict their children’s freedom to play and get around on their own. Commercial interests intrude into children’s lives through targeted marketing and advertising campaigns. Religious and cultural organisations believe that theirs is the right mould with which to shape children. Educational policies and practice take a curriculum-centred approach that places increasing demands on children’s time and energies in pursuit of educational attainment, and constrains their free time.
- 4. Equal entitlement** - Every child, irrespective of gender, background, cultural or racial origin, or individual ability, should have equal access to good play opportunities.

⁶ Bob Hughes 1996, A Question of Quality, PLAYLINK, London UK



APPENDIX 2

Best Play – The seven objectives for play provision

Objective 1

The provision extends the choice and control that children have over their play, the freedom they enjoy and the satisfaction they gain from it.

Objective 2

The provision recognises the child's need to test boundaries and responds positively to that need.

Objective 3

The provision manages the balance between the need to offer risk and the need to keep children safe from harm.

Objective 4

The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.

Objective 5

The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.

Objective 6

The provision fosters children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction.

Objective 7

The provision fosters the child's well-being, healthy growth and development, knowledge and understanding, creativity and capacity to learn.

**Best Play – What Play Provision Should Do For Children (ISBN 094 6085 33) can be obtained from: The Children's Play Council, 8, Wakely Street, London EC1V 7QF
Tel 020 7843 6016: email cpc@ncb.org.uk: web site www.ncb.org.uk/cpc**



APPENDIX 3

Quality in Play is a quality assurance scheme which aims to help play and childcare providers develop their practice against a set of standards in a measurable way. The approach bases the standards and quality measures on play specific values, the emerging research on play theories and concepts and on good practice in playwork that has children's needs at its centre. The quality areas and standards relating to service delivery are mainly concerned with play environments provided for children of school age.

The quality areas are based on the assumptions and values from the Play & Playwork NVQ Occupational Standards; the play and playwork concepts in Best Play – What Play Provision Should Do For Children; the draft Care Standards for out of school provision and on work by practitioners, trainers and theorists in the field of play and playwork to ensure that the standards and measurements reflect current thinking and good practice.

Quality In Play is designed to be used as a stand-alone system, but the relevant sections can be used with other systems such as Aiming High or PQASSO to develop play specific quality assurance measures.

It is based on self-assessment, supported by a portfolio of evidence, which can be used internally by providers, or as part of externally accredited quality assurance schemes. Quality in Play is being submitted by London Play to the DfEE for formal accreditation as a quality assurance system.

Quality in Play- Quality Areas 1-9 (of 18)

The play environment – meeting the play needs of children

- Quality Area 1 Personal and physical health and safety**
- Quality Area 2 Opening times and days**
- Quality Area 3 A warm and welcoming environment**
- Quality Area 4 Choice and range of activities**
- Quality Area 5 Children's involvement**
- Quality Area 6 Play environment audit**
- Quality Area 7 Equalities and inclusion**
- Quality Area 8 Information, notices and displays**
- Quality Area 9 Behavioural boundaries**

Quality in Play can be obtained from:

London Play, Units F6/7, 89-93 Fonthill Road, London N4 3JH.

Tel 020 7272 2464: email londonplay@lineone.net



Further Reading

In addition to the quoted papers, other helpful publications on the play cycle, play cues and further applications of psycholudics are available from:

**Gordon Sturrock, The Play Practice,
020 8673 5996**

or

Perry Else, Ludemos, 0114 255 2432

The First Claim, a new quality scheme which focuses on the nature of playwork and the play environment, can be obtained from **Play Wales, tel 029 2048 6050.**

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