

# BEST PLAY



WHAT PLAY PROVISION SHOULD  
DO FOR CHILDREN



A PARTNERSHIP  
PROJECT

children's  
playcouncil



This publication is the result of a partnership between the National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council. The work was funded by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

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# BEST PLAY



## WHAT PLAY PROVISION SHOULD DO FOR CHILDREN

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## The National Playing Fields Association (NPFA)

is an independent Royal Charter organisation, committed to acquiring, protecting and improving playing fields, playgrounds and playspace where they are most needed – in particular for children of all ages and people with disabilities. The NPFA offers independent advice on the design and safety of playgrounds.

Between 1996 and 2000, as part of the NPFA's pursuit of quality play experiences for children and young people it entered an agreement with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to deliver children's play services. These services included play safety, playwork education and training and the dissemination of information about play.

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## The Children's Play Council

aims to raise awareness of the importance of play in children's lives and to stimulate better play opportunities and play services for all children. An alliance of national, regional and local organisations, the Council's work reaches wherever children play: at home, in play areas, parks, school playgrounds and streets, in play and childcare centres, in hospitals and community health settings, in cities and in the countryside.

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## PLAYLINK

was originally established in 1962 as the London Adventure Playground Association. Since 1993, when it became national, it has engaged with play providers in a number of ways. We give advice and information, publish guidance, run seminars and conferences, participate in national forums developing strategic policy on play, carry out projects to test new ways of working and deliver health and safety inspections, training workshops and consultancies to clients in the voluntary and local authority sectors. Underpinning this practical and theoretical work is the conviction that children's needs and wishes should be reflected in public provision for their play and that every child should be able to access opportunities for free play particularly outdoors.

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### Best Play

*'Best Play: What play provision should do for children'* has been produced as a result of a partnership between the National Playing Fields Association (NPFA), PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council (CPC). These organisations have benefited from the advice and assistance of the wide variety of individuals and organisations listed in the acknowledgments section.

Best Play is a response to a number of pressing issues within the field of children's play. Most importantly, this publication shows that a body of knowledge has accumulated which allows the fundamental need for children's play to be asserted, bringing with it a commitment to the view that there should be public provision of high quality environments suitable for play. The consultation process leading to the publication of Best Play has shown that playworkers and service providers look forward to the identification and dissemination of best practice as a means of giving recognition to the value and quality of their work.

But there are other contexts for the work, including the implementation of Best Value in local government, the requirements of actual or potential funders and the National Childcare Strategy and the emergence of Early Years Development and Childcare Partnerships. Best Play is also a response to the direct challenge issued by Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport for the field to work together to develop a statement of the benefits which are derived from play and play provision.

Best Play has been developed over a period of ten months through a sequence of draft documents, which have been commented on by a readers' and advisors' group made up of a number of specialists within the field. The final public draft was opened to consultation between October 1999 and January 2000 through a series of nine dedicated national consultation seminars, and made available for download from the NPFA website. The statements of objectives for play provision together with the suggested evaluation methods were tested during March 2000 in a variety of settings. These included an adventure playground, a play care scheme, playschemes and after school clubs. Best Play incorporates suggestions and comments received during the consultation process and trials. Final responsibility for the content of Best Play rests with the project partners.

Children's natural propensity to play has been impaired by the loss of suitable public space, the impact of technology, such as television, the personal computer and the motor car, and the changing attitude of society towards children, reflected, for instance, in the increase in parental anxiety about child safety. Play provision should compensate for this loss. Ultimately, the aim of Best Play is to ensure that this compensation is adequate in the light of children's own needs, wishes, capacities and abilities.

**"I cannot think of anything else that offers so much to children - all those benefits and fun too! Play is not only important to the quality of life of children, it is of great importance for the country's future, to the creative industries and for the economy".**

Chris Smith, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport (1998).

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 and applies it to the field of public play provision, both supervised and unsupervised.

The work is based on values and principles about children and play developed by the playwork profession. These values and principles, stated in full in Section 3, are relevant to all settings and services that aim to provide play opportunities, whether supervised or unsupervised. The concluding parts of Best Play, the play objectives, are most applicable in supervised settings, and have only been trialed in these.

It is envisaged that Best Play will be used by a number of people and agencies. Its primary audience is play practitioners who wish to develop ways to evaluate the quality of the play experience offered by their provision. But it is also relevant to:

- ◆ Local authorities and the Audit Commission when determining Best Value
- ◆ Government Departments wanting information about the benefits of play
- ◆ Funding bodies when assessing applications from play projects
- ◆ Play organisations/projects when making funding applications
- ◆ Sector agencies when designing quality assurance frameworks for play provision

Best Play builds on existing work. Some of this work is not well known even within the playwork profession, and so may be useful to those who wish to make a better case for play provision, or to better understand it. The concluding sections, which set out seven play objectives, are the first attempt to identify the benefits of play provision in a form that can be the basis for evaluation and continuous improvement. Hence these objectives should be central to the development of management tools such as quality assurance systems and performance indicators.

Best Play starts with a definition of play and with a set of values and principles. Both the definition and the values and principles are well recognised within the playwork profession, though perhaps less so outside it. It then looks at evidence and arguments about the role of play in child development and the consequences of a lack of good play opportunities. It then considers the case for public investment in play. At this point Best Play focuses on supervised play provision, the type of setting where the issues are sharpest and where most work has been done, and looks at the added value of supervision and the distinctive features of a playwork approach. Best Play concludes with a set of seven play objectives, common to any play setting, that state what play provision aims to do for children.



**“Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child”.** This definition draws closely on the work of Bob Hughes and Frank King.

Play can be further described as follows: **“Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing, children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community”.**

This definition and description are widely accepted within the field, though they are sometimes expressed in slightly different ways. For instance they can be found in the National Occupational Standards for National Vocational Qualifications in Playwork and in the New Charter for Children’s Play (Children’s Play Council 1998).

The impulse to play comes from within the child, and is intentional only in the sense of being about what interests children themselves. This is the freedom which play allows for children when the interests of others, especially those of the adult world, recede into the background. The intrinsic motivation of play, the fact that for children play does not involve the pursuit of any external goal or reward - raises challenges when defining objectives for play provision, and especially when confronting the issues of assessment and evaluation. These issues are addressed further in later sections.

Play often, though not always, implies a sense of fun for the child. But it can also be serious, in two senses. The child may feel serious while playing, and/or the content of the play may be serious, that is, not trivial or light-hearted. Much free play is reflective. Play is as much in the approach as in the activity - a way of doing anything or nothing.

**“The main characteristic of play - child or adult - is not its content, but its mode. Play is an approach to action, not a form of activity”.**

Jerome Bruner, quoted in Moyles (1989)

Exploration is an important aspect of play, although it is not invariably present. A child at play is often exploring, that is, testing out all kinds of assumptions and theories about themselves, other people and the world. The child then responds to the feedback gained by adjusting or confirming those assumptions and theories. It is a process involving curiosity and creativity.

**“Play has been described as scientific research conducted by children”.**

Hughes (1996 and 1968) paraphrasing Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1970).

There is growing awareness of the complexity of the interaction between children and playworkers, which depends on the worker’s capacity to observe and respond to play cues, so that play is extended without being distorted. A play cue is a request for play or stimulation to the external world. This play cue decays over time, but if it receives a response, the return from that interaction further stimulates the playing mind, possibly resulting in more play cues being delivered, so continuing the play cycle (Else and Sturrock 1998).

Play also manifests itself in a wide range of activities, behaviours and styles. Fifteen play types have been identified from the literature and are listed in Appendix A.



The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK Government in December 1991, recognises the importance of play for the child. Article 31 of the Convention says that:

**"States parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."**

Related to that right are the child's rights to freedom of expression and association, enshrined in Articles 12, 13, 14, and 15 of the UN Convention.

As Article 31 recognises, play is an important part of the cultural life of childhood. Some sociologists have gone so far as to equate play with the culture of childhood - that is, the arena in which children as social actors are most likely to express their values, their art, their music, their physical culture, and their language and humour (Prout and James 1997). It is, like its adult counterpart, a culture that can at times be creative or destructive, cruel as well as innocent.

Children play within their personal codes of behaviour, as well as those of their culture and society. At times, play tests those codes, and this gives rise to one of the community's key concerns about play and how adults manage it. Play is important to the child in providing an arena for behaviour that is not overwhelmingly dominated by adult views and values. It is an important part of the experience, which may look like mistakes or bad behaviour from other points of view, from which children learn the appropriate behaviours for their own adulthood. Some boundaries are required, but these need to be skilfully drawn and applied if the benefits of play for the child are not to be eroded.

Playworkers have developed a set of values and principles about children and play, based on the UN Convention and on understandings about play. They are, for instance, stated in the National Strategy for Playwork Education and Training (National Playing Fields Association 1998).

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.

- Equal entitlement** ◆ Every child, irrespective of gender, background, cultural or racial origin, or individual ability, should have equal access to good play opportunities.
- Respect for children** ◆ Children should feel confident that the adults involved in play welcome and value them as individuals.
- Children's abilities** ◆ The child's control of their own play activity is a crucial factor in enriching their experience and enhancing their learning and development. Adults need to recognise that play is something children do very well on their own.
- Play for its own sake** ◆ As the definition states, play is intrinsically motivated. Hence there should be no task or product required of the play by those not engaged in it. However, adults may need to support children in creating and determining their own goals and outcomes.
- The importance of risk** ◆ Play is a key element in children learning to appreciate, assess and take calculated risks, which is fundamental to the development of confidence and abilities in childhood. Children seek out opportunities for risk-taking and it is the responsibility of play provision to respond with exciting and stimulating environments that balance risks appropriately.
- The adult role in play** ◆ Whereas children may play without encouragement or help, adults can significantly enhance the opportunities for a child to play creatively, through the provision of an appropriate human and physical environment.
- Adult responsiveness** ◆ Children can sometimes unleash powerful feelings, in themselves or in their companions, through their play. The process often has valuable cathartic or therapeutic effects but can also be disturbing. Children are entitled to expect that adults involved in play provision will understand and be responsive to cues that they may be in need of comfort or reassurance as a result of their play.

The values, principles and understandings set out in the previous section, and the practice based on them, are in part a response to the historic body of observation and research into children's play and a growing appreciation of the complexity of play and its significance in childhood. The occurrence of recognisable forms of play in all cultures, and the persistence of play in even the most adverse circumstances strongly suggests that a drive to play is innate.

- Play theories** ◆ Observation of play in the young of various species gave rise at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries to a number of ideas about how play might confer survival benefits, strengthening the body, rehearsing adult roles, developing adult skills, releasing potentially destructive 'excess' energy. The prolonged childhood of the human young was seen as necessary to develop the more complex skills and capacities required to become effective as an adult human.

The twentieth century development of psychoanalytic thought emphasised the role of play in coming to terms with, and mastering, disturbing experiences. Through play, **"fear becomes a source of enjoyment rather than distress"**. (Abrams 1997).

In the 1940s, Piaget's interest in how children develop literacy, numeracy and social skills led him to identify play as less a behaviour or activity than a state of mind which allows children to become engrossed in what they are doing. Whatever activity is engaged in is done for the sheer pleasure of it. It is geared towards taking in the external world, rather than adapting to it, allowing the child to experience a sense of mastery, which is the source of pleasure.

In the 1990s the psychologist Jerome Singer, giving expression to a later strand of thinking about the function of play, proposed that children's play, with its repetitive and exploratory characteristics, represents **"a critically important feature of their development of cognitive and emotional skills"**. (Singer 1994).

However, it is play's potential role in human development and evolution that highlights its real significance. Alluded to at the turn of the 20th century in Hall's Recapitulation Theory (1904), and supported and developed in the 1970's, (Lorenz 1972, Bruner 1972, 1974, Bruner and others 1976, and Sylva 1977), play now features as an important consideration in the current rapid development of the brain sciences and the flood of neurobiological data (Hughes 1999). Citing Huttenlocher's work on brain imaging technology, Sutton-Smith (1997) states that in the first ten years of life, human children have at least twice the synaptic capacity as children over ten, whilst Bennet and others (1964), Rosenzweig and others (1971, 1972) and Zuckerman (1969, 1984), link this 'plasticity' to the effects of 'enriched' environments. This increasing understanding of the working of the brain is also leading to a reassessment of what is now called emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996). It is also giving rise to suggestions that play in young children may have a critical role in the enlargement of brain capacity.

Researchers and theorists agree that the role of play in child development is under-explored. However, the theories and findings do allow some reasonably firm proposals about the contribution play makes to learning, health and well-being. For a fuller discussion of play theorists see Smith and others (1998) and for one useful summary of psychological research see Pellegrini and Smith (1998).

**Play and learning** ◆ The exploration and learning that is central to play is open-ended. In play, interaction can change the player, the environment, the rules of the play and its meaning. The open-ended learning through play has been linked to psychological, personal and social development, as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

Particularly in children's early years, play is recognised as a major route to learning. For older children, it is less recognised but equally important. Play complements schooling by providing an opportunity for children to review and absorb and to give personal meaning to what they learn in formal educational settings.

**"The opportunities which playtime is providing (following a PLAYLINK Play at School project) are helping to develop skills - physical, language and social - and attitudes - concentration, tolerance, perseverance - in the children, and these are enhancing their ability to learn in more formal settings within the classroom".** (Caseberry 1998).

The importance of learning through play lies particularly in the way children learn how to learn. **"What is acquired through play is not specific information but a general (mind) set towards solving problems that includes both abstraction and combinatorial flexibility"** where children **"string bits of behaviour together to form novel solutions to problems requiring the restructuring of thought or action"**. (Sylvia 1977).

Play also has a social dimension, and is seen as an important element in developing children's social skills. Evidence for this can be found in the US High/Scope longitudinal studies, which strongly suggest that early free play experiences promote social development. (Schweinhart and Weikart 1997).

**Play, health and well-being** ◆ Play should not be seen however as simply a way of learning. It is also central to the development of good physical and mental health.

The physical activity involved in most play provides exercise, promotes physical coordination and develops skills for the growing child. In this way it supports children's healthy physical development - a view supported by two senior biologists (one the provost of King's College Cambridge):

**"The tendency of many parents to over-protect their off-spring also has worrying implications. Once-normal activities such as roaming about with friends, or even simply walking unescorted to and from school, are becoming increasingly rare... The activities of children are monitored and constrained to ensure that they come to no harm. They also take less exercise, becoming fat and unfit"**. (Bateson and Martin 1999).

Play is also important to healthy personal development. The Mental Health Foundation identified some children who **"are more resilient in the face of stressful life events than others, e.g. poverty or family discord will impinge more on some children than others"**. Many of the attributes enhanced by play are found to be helpful in developing resilience: **"Those children who have good communication skills, a positive attitude, a problem solving approach and the capacity to reflect tend to be more resilient. The ability to plan, a belief in control, a sense of humour are all qualities that can lead to resilience"**. (Mental Health Foundation 1999).

As psychoanalysts suggest, play can help the child deal with trauma and emotional healing. Goleman (1996) wrote:

"One way this emotional healing seems to occur spontaneously - at least in children - is through games such as Purdy (a game developed by children who survived a playground massacre by a man called Purdy). These games, played over and over again, let children relive a trauma safely as play. This allows two avenues for healing: on the one hand, the memory repeats in a context of low anxiety, desensitising it and allowing a non-traumatised set of responses to become associated with it. Another route to healing is that in their minds, children can magically give the tragedy another, better, outcome: sometimes in playing Purdy, the children kill him, boosting their sense of mastery over the traumatic moment of helplessness."

Though the mechanisms by which children may learn, grow and develop through play remain a subject for further research, the importance of play for the child is beyond dispute.

## ◆ The benefits of play for children: a summary

### Benefits that are experienced at the time that the child is playing

Play:

- ◆ Provides children with opportunities to enjoy freedom, and exercise choice and control over their actions (see objective 1, Section 8)
- ◆ Offers children opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risk (see objectives 2 and 3)
- ◆ Offers a very wide range of physical, social and intellectual experiences for children (see objectives 2 and 4)

### Benefits that develop over time

Play:

- ◆ Fosters children's independence and self-esteem (see objective 5)
- ◆ Develops children's respect for others and offers opportunities for social interaction (see objective 6)
- ◆ Supports the child's well-being, healthy growth and development (see objective 7)
- ◆ Increases children's knowledge and understanding (see objective 7)
- ◆ Promotes children's creativity and capacity to learn (see objective 7)

Providing good play opportunities is, in part, a recognition of children's entitlements as members of society, in the same way that adults' entitlements in their free time are recognised through arts, sports and leisure provision. However, the case for public play provision is strengthened by evidence and argument about the consequences of what is sometimes called play deprivation.

Neuropsychological research on very young children suggests that early play experiences play a crucial part in the cognitive development of all young children, and add weight to the argument that play continues to have a role in cognitive development throughout childhood. **"The new scientific research... does suggest, though, that a radically deprived environment could cause damage... a brain can physically expand and contract and change depending on experience"**. (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl 1999).

Evidence from pre-school children has focused on the relationship between play and social development. Extensive studies on the US High/Scope approach to early childhood education (Schweinhart and Weikart 1997) and more recent Swiss Government-funded research in Zurich (Hüttenmoser and Degen-Zimmermann 1995), referring to what they describe as 'battery children', attribute play deprivation symptoms to a lack of play, resulting from traffic and parental fears of predatory adults. Battery children are **"often aggressive and whine a lot. By the age of five they are emotionally and socially repressed, find it difficult to mix, fall behind with school work and are at a much greater risk of obesity"**.

Recent studies also highlight the effects of stress, trauma and low levels of stimulation on brain development, Balbernie, (1999) states:

**"A child who has been traumatised will have experienced overwhelming fear and stress. This will be reflected in the organisation of his or her brain....by the same token, (a child) who is not being stimulated, by being....played with, and who has few opportunities to explore his or her surroundings, may fail to link up fully those neural connections and pathways which will be needed for later learning"**.

Turning to school-age children, the benefits of play, and the consequences of play deprivation, are under-researched. Two leading psychologists argue from the few experimental studies that play deprivation during school breaktime has adverse consequences, confirming the views quoted above from Caseberry (1998). For example, one study of primary school children found that **"breaktime maximised children's attention to school tasks when they returned to the classroom"**. (Pellegrini and Smith 1998).

However, there is a growing consensus about some of the possible implications of play deprivation, based on reasonable assumptions about the role of personal experience and self-directed activity in the development of a range of competences. Depending on the types of play opportunity that are lacking, children could be affected in the following ways:

- ◆ poorer ability in motor tasks
- ◆ lower levels of physical activity
- ◆ poorer ability to deal with stressful or traumatic situations and events
- ◆ poorer ability to assess and manage risk
- ◆ poorer social skills, leading to difficulties in negotiating social situations such as dealing with conflict and cultural difference

More generally, without a good range of play opportunities children may lose the chance to develop their emotional intelligence, independence, self-esteem and self-confidence, and to acquire self-management skills such as being able to see projects and tasks through to completion. In school and educational settings, a lack of play opportunities during playtime can impair concentration in the classroom, as suggested above, and can deny children the chance to apply their learning in concrete situations. Finally, it could be argued that children who never have the chance to try out a range of activities may have undiscovered or latent talents, abilities that might have developed if the right opportunities, encouragement and support had been available.

A lack of good play opportunities can also have adverse consequences on families and communities. The Zurich research mentioned above found evidence that families of children who were kept indoors had poorer local support networks and consequently found it more difficult to, for, instance, organise informal childcare. This supports the thesis that community play opportunities form part of the 'glue' that brings communities and families together - a view implicit in the UK Government's Sure Start programme, a major initiative to improve local support for families with young children. Thus it might be expected that families in communities that do not provide for children's play will have greater contact with the social services and criminal justice system, although this has yet to be properly researched.

Children play in a range of settings and contexts, and there is a need for more work to explore how gaps in the range of play experiences might affect children's development, how effective play provision is in filling these gaps and the broader relationship between play and family and community life. It is one of the aims of Best Play to inform this work.



Public play provision aims to provide spaces and settings in which children enjoy the benefits outlined above, in settings where play values and principles are put into practice and where children's rights and culture are recognised and validated. It aims to offer a wide range of opportunities and experiences for the child, complementing the home and school environments and compensating for the lack of opportunities to play in the social and physical environment. Homes and schools are spaces in which valuable play can often take place, but they can restrict children, their freedom and their choices in a number of ways. Outdoor play, in both the natural and built environment, is of special value in providing freedom, large-scale physical activity and a range of challenges to children. Appendix C gives ten criteria for a rich play environment, based on the values, principles and understandings already discussed.

There is a strong case for public support of play provision on the basis of what it offers to children themselves, as summarised in Section 4 above. However, in addition to the benefits for children themselves, there are other good reasons why families, neighbours, agencies, funders and government should be interested in the provision of good play opportunities.

There is evidence that community play facilities can reduce youth crime and vandalism. For instance projects examined by Thames Valley Police (Hampshire and Wilkinson 1999) showed significant reductions in vandalism and petty crime following the installation of play facilities and a youth shelter. The usual argument for this is that play provision provides a diversion for children, an alternative to anti-social or criminal behaviour. However the truth is likely to be more complex. Play can provide developmental opportunities for addressing some of the underlying emotional and psychological causes of such behaviour. Low self-esteem, lack of concern for the consequences of one's actions and poor empathic abilities are all closely associated with criminal or anti-social behaviour. As already argued, play provides opportunities for children to develop their sense of self-identity, self-esteem, to empathise with the situation of others and to grow more aware of the consequences of their actions.

Happier, more fulfilled, less frustrated children are the direct and immediate benefit for the community. Put simply: play provision benefits parents and carers because their children are enjoying themselves, are active, and will be learning at the same time. In particular play out of the home benefits families by allowing noisier and more energetic play than the domestic environment normally allows. It provides parents with resources for enriching their children's routine.

Good play experiences also support the development of autonomous adults, with a strong sense of personal identity, who are effective in society as parents, workers, informed consumers, active citizens, and in a range of other roles. These outcomes, which are in part the consequences of play, as well as of family life, genetic inheritance, education and so on, are of importance to a range of stakeholders. The potential benefits are of relevance to community health targets, social and economic regeneration and youth justice, for example.

"For people to be able to operate within the market (of labour and goods and services), they have to understand society's customs and practices. That is what I mean by common knowledge, and common knowledge does not come exclusively from the market place. Much of it comes at an early age from school and some of it will certainly come from play". (Graham 1998).

Play provision can also make a significant contribution to fostering a positive attitude to cultural diversity. The UK is a racially and culturally diverse society where understanding and tolerance of other people's way of life, and other cultures and values, as well as confidence in and enjoyment of one's own culture, are essential attributes. Play provision offers children the opportunity to acquire and explore these attributes.

Play provision provides an important context in which children can counter the effects of poverty and deprivation. Where the home environment is poor or there is a restricted range of stimuli, play services and spaces offer variety and even comfort. Good play provision offers a welcoming space where children can meet on a more equal basis. For this reason play provision can be the starting point for tackling social exclusion, engaging with marginalized families and communities and working to build their capacity to improve their social, environmental and economic circumstances. (Hill-Tout and others 1995).

There is a need for a variety of play provision, play areas, playgrounds, playing fields, adventure playgrounds, play centres, after school clubs and holiday playschemes, to meet the complex and diverse needs of children, families and communities. This should not be restricted to the issue of childcare for children. Open access or open door play facilities, where children are free to come and go as they please, have a valuable role to play in increasing children's choice and opportunities to play. They can reduce the segregation (through work and school) of children within communities and contribute to the development of "social capital" by providing parents and carers with a focus for informal networks of family support.

## ◆ Benefits of play provision for families and community: a summary

- ◆ Helps reduce the involvement of children and young people in anti-social behaviour, in the short term; and plays a part in promoting social cohesion in the longer term
- ◆ Supports families and communities, by providing a focus for informal networks of family support, and by allowing children autonomy within an environment which parents feel secure about
- ◆ Makes an important contribution, in parallel with education, in developing adults who are creative and effective in the social and economic sphere
- ◆ Offers opportunities for exploring cultural identity and difference
- ◆ Provides a focus for tackling social exclusion through community development

## ◆ The playworker role

'Playworker' is the term used to describe people, whether paid or voluntary, who work within services which aim to provide for children's play. These services may have play as their sole objective, such as adventure playgrounds. Alternatively, play may be one of a number of services they provide, such as after school clubs. Or the service may have entirely different objectives which are addressed through playwork, such as play in hospitals.

Because of the developmental importance of children's free play, and the satisfaction and pleasure they obtain from playing freely, playworkers aim for the minimum intervention in children's activity consistent with keeping them free from harm. This approach has been characterised as 'low intervention, high response', a style of working which supports rather than directs the child. The limitations of the setting, or constraints imposed by the nature of the service, may limit the extent to which playworkers are able to work in this way. However, playwork skills are founded on the values and understandings described earlier and a good playworker will always aim to intervene in children's play as little as possible.

- Enrichment of play** ◆ The playworker's core function is to create an environment which will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. A skilled and experienced playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting. Without violating the principle of low intervention, they are a channel of access to new materials and tools and can act as a stimulus to children to explore and learn. They are available to participate in the play if invited.
- Managing risk** ◆ Risk taking is a natural and desirable aspect of children's play that they will seek out for themselves. A site that is permanently staffed by skilled playworkers can build into its design opportunities for children's risk taking to a degree not possible in unsupervised settings. Policy will be based on understanding the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable risks and the site will be managed so that children are not exposed to unacceptable risks. Playworkers are able to exercise their judgement about when and how to intervene to prevent harm to children without unnecessarily disrupting their play. A playworker's ability to maintain the site and equipment and to interpret children's behaviour supports the creation of more exciting and attractive play environments, allowing greater scope for risk taking.

## ◆ Other roles

The playworker, or other adults involved in work with children in play settings; also take on a number of other roles and functions.

- Significant adults** ◆ Skilled permanent playworkers in neighbourhood play settings often act as confidants when children are troubled or unhappy. For many children they become significant adults, offering alternative role models and different ideas from those they encounter at home and school. Valued relationships can build up over many years and outlast the children's use of the playspace. It is not unusual for children who have used a neighbourhood adventure playground to come back as playworkers themselves. These relationships are particularly important for children whose home lives and social contacts are restricted by poverty and deprivation.

- Custodian and advocate** ◆ Children's play in public spaces is often interpreted as antisocial behaviour. The places children prefer for their play may seem untidy, unsightly or even dangerous to their community. The playworker has the role both of custodian of the play-space, securing its use by children, and advocate on behalf of children's needs and wishes. There is often a major task of social negotiation for playworkers, or others closely associated with the provision, to ensure that children are taken into account in balancing the competing demands of local groups.
- Supplementing what parents can offer** ◆ Many parents who have experience of successful neighbourhood play spaces, such as adventure playgrounds, recognise that these are able to offer children scope for play which cannot be provided at home and which as parents they are not prepared to allow their children to seek out by roaming freely. They value the range of play experience which their children can access through such provision in terms of social interaction, the use of outdoor space and the chance to experiment freely, and often messily, with a variety of tools and materials. Perhaps most important, parents understand that children enjoy and will seek out risky activity. They can rely on skilled playworkers to ensure that a site where children are deliberately offered the opportunity for risk taking will not endanger them, though it will challenge and absorb them. There are very few families where this type of experience is available in the home setting.
- Low-level supervision** ◆ Low-level supervision, for example of fixed equipment play areas by staff in parks, can add to a sense of security for both children and their families. Children cannot play freely when they feel insecure. Oversight by a sympathetic adult, perhaps as part of more general park supervision duties, may be all that is required to give children confidence to relax and play freely. This is particularly so in the case of young children who, rightly or wrongly, may feel threatened by the presence of teenagers. Parents are often anxious about their children's safety in public spaces, with varying degrees of justification. As a result their children are denied access to play opportunities from which they would benefit. A degree of supervision can help to overcome the problem by providing reassurance to parents.

The sections above highlight the need for play providers to state clearly and concisely how they are both respecting children's rights and culture and allowing children to grow and develop through play. Best Play meets this need by setting out seven play objectives: objectives that should apply to any provision which aims to offer children good play opportunities. The objectives are broad statements, which are intended to set out how the definition of play and the underpinning values and principles should be put into practice. They form the basis against which play provision can be evaluated.

### ◆ The Seven Play Objectives

#### 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.

## ◆ Outcomes

The focus in Best Play is on the benefits that children gain from their play and the role of public provision in creating spaces and services that allow those benefits, what we have defined as the 'outcomes' of play provision, to be achieved. This guidance is therefore, in itself, neither a quality assurance (QA) scheme nor a set of standards. It looks at play provision from the point of view only of children's needs and wishes in relation to their play. However, the seven play objectives set out above are designed so that they can form the basis for QA systems for any supervised provision that aims to provide for play. They will also have some application in unsupervised play settings.

How well provision is able to meet these objectives will depend in part on acceptance of the underpinning values and understandings in relation to children and play set out in Section 3. Outcomes in this sense are qualitative and cannot usually be measured numerically. Suggestions for evaluating effectiveness in delivering the benefits to children are set out below. Success in using these evaluation techniques will depend significantly on the playworker's skill in observing and interpreting what they see happening within the play provision on a daily basis and their ability to reflect on this.

Objectives 1 to 4 focus on the benefits to children at the time they are playing. It is therefore possible to evaluate how well the provision is delivering them in the relatively short term. Evaluating objectives 5 to 7 is more problematic, not only because it requires evaluation over time to identify longer term benefits but also because children are subject to a range of influences outside the play provision which equally affect their growth, welfare and development.

Broader, longer-term outcomes for children are likely to be influenced by many other life experiences, beyond the control of the play provision. It is not the responsibility of playworkers to evaluate how these outcomes may derive from play. Local and national play agencies and other stakeholders will need to establish research programmes and innovative methodologies, probably in partnership with research institutions, in order to evaluate these longer-term outcomes of play. Establishing the relative influence of play experiences on children's lives, in the context of other factors such as family and school, will be a valuable biological, sociological and psychological project.

Evaluating the impact on the wider community of good play experiences in childhood is an even more complex exercise in view of the many contributing factors. It is beyond the scope of Best Play.

## ◆ Inputs and outputs

Effectiveness in the provision will depend on the nature of the inputs to the provision, and how the provision responds to the corresponding outputs. Best Play uses the terms in the following way.

Inputs are broadly speaking those elements which are put in place before the provision opens its doors. They include staffing with specific qualities, experience, attitudes, training and qualifications; the physical features and social environment of the play setting; the policies and procedures for running and managing the provision; the materials, tools and equipment on offer.

Outputs are the direct results of the inputs. They include the level and nature of service offered; the number of children served; the range of children's activities and behaviour exhibited; the range of play types shown; the atmosphere generated; the incidence of children taking control of their play; the number and nature of relationships with the local community and relevant professionals.

Many, though not all, of these inputs and outputs can be counted, measured or listed. There will inevitably appear to be overlap between outputs and outcomes. The important distinction is that the term 'outcome' is used to refer to the difference that the provision makes to children, whether in terms of their enjoyment and satisfaction or in terms of their growth and development.

### ◆ Indicators

Because inputs and outputs influence outcomes, we suggest some indicators which might be used in relation to them. Indicators provide a framework for evidence as to the efficiency of the provision, demonstrating the relationship between the resources expended and the service obtained. Input and output indicators may also provide some evidence of effectiveness in meeting service objectives. They cannot of themselves act as a tool for assessing quality of service. Qualitative evidence and judgements are required for this.

Many of the input and output indicators will be common to a group or all of the objectives. Examples might be: input indicator - staff trained in a specific range of skills relating to play settings, with an understanding of when and how to intervene without disrupting children's play; output indicator - 50 school age children using the provision on a frequent and regular basis.

In other cases, the inputs and outputs will suggest indicators specific to particular objectives. For example input indicator relative to objective 2 - the provision has a specific agreed and written policy on behaviour which indicates how staff will respond positively to children testing boundaries; output indicator relative to objective 4 - the full range of 15 play types can be observed on the playground.

Quality assurance is the process of using standards against which practice can be assessed by collecting and evaluating evidence and continuously reviewing and improving policies, procedures and practice. At least two play-specific quality assurance schemes were in the process of development as Best Play was being written. There has been wide consultation on the objectives set out here with the intention that they will be consistent with the way Hackney Play Association's 'Quality in Play' and the Play Wales 'Playwork Quality Assurance Measures Development Project' are constructed. These schemes will give much more detail on indicators and evidence than can be accommodated here'.

### ◆ Using the indicators for evaluation

Researchers, play practitioners and managers will need to refine the indicators and develop observation techniques or frameworks which capture the development of good practice. In developing indicators and methodologies, it is crucial to ensure that children's play experiences are not distorted or intruded upon. Approaches will need to respect that one overall aim of play provision is to make time and space available for play. They will also need to avoid implying to children themselves the setting of specific goals.



Evaluation of input and output indicators within the Best Play framework could be carried out either as self-assessment by playworkers or managers (paid or unpaid), or as an inspection or audit process by external independent assessors. Although some of the input indicators might suggest an audit, the overall approach is that evaluative judgements need to be made, in both self-assessment and external evaluation. For example, as well as checking whether certain policies have been developed, a judgement needs to be made as to whether they are policies which are relevant and appropriate to the objectives, regularly reviewed, familiar to staff and children where appropriate, and so on.

As well as the indicators, which are mostly accessible to observation at the time of any evaluation, there is an expectation that play workers and their management are continuously reviewing the quality of their service, in order to change practice in response to their developing understanding of the effect of what they do, and the children's changing needs. This reflective practice will be an important source of qualitative data. It is the underlying assumption of Best Play that reflective practice is the basis for evaluation of the human and physical play environment. Evaluation will therefore also look beyond the immediate activity in the play provision, to practice development and management processes that explain what is happening at any given time.

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

◆ **Underpinning values**

Children's views; freedom to play; children's abilities; play for its own sake

◆ **Possible evaluation methods**

**Observation and recording**

- ◆ Observing and recording the play types expressed by children during play sessions
- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers

**Formal monitoring**

- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision
- ◆ Monitoring the expression of playwork values in the provision

**Evaluation by children**

- ◆ Listening to what children say about the physical environment and resources

**Evaluation by adults**

- ◆ Evaluating the records of children's influence on the play provision, (such as in workers' plans or notes of discussions with children)

**Reviewing**

- ◆ Reviewing the range of materials and play opportunities that support children's choice and control in play
- ◆ Reviewing the policies and procedures of the play provision that support children's choice and control in play

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

◆ **Underpinning values**

The importance of risk; children's abilities; adult responsiveness

◆ **Possible evaluation methods**

**Observation and recording**

- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers

**Formal monitoring**

- ◆ Monitoring the understanding and implementation of policies by workers (lines of accountability on safety, behaviour, risk management etc.)
- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

**Evaluation by children**

- ◆ Listening to what children say about the physical environment and resources
- ◆ Listening to what children say about the rules and their acceptance of why the rules exist

**Evaluation by adults**

- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to use of physical resources (staff and other)
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to use of physical resources; roles and skills of playworkers
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to policies
- ◆ Evaluating policies such as on risk assessment; training and support for staff on behaviour, risk management and safety
- ◆ Evaluating monitoring procedures (Health & Safety checks, accident books etc.)

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

◆ **Underpinning values**

The importance of risk; adult responsiveness; access to rich, stimulating environments; children's abilities

◆ **Possible evaluation methods**

**Observation and recording**

- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers

**Formal monitoring**

- ◆ Monitoring records of consultation processes (with children)
- ◆ Monitoring the understanding and implementation of policies by workers (lines of accountability on safety, behaviour, risk management etc.)
- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

**Evaluation by children**

- ◆ Listening to what children say about the physical environment and resources

**Evaluation by adults**

- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to use of physical resources (staff and other)
  - ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to policies
  - ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to use of physical resources; roles and skills of playworkers
  - ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to policies
  - ◆ Evaluating policies such as on risk assessment; training and support for staff on behaviour, risk management and safety
  - ◆ Evaluating monitoring procedures (Health & Safety checks, accident books etc.)
-

## The provision maximises the range of play opportunities.

### ◆ Underpinning values

Access to rich, stimulating environments; respect for children; the adult role in play; freedom to play

### ◆ Possible evaluation methods

#### Observation and recording

- ◆ Observing and recording the play types expressed by children during play sessions
- ◆ Observing and recording the play environments in use, checking the range of environmental and resource features

#### Formal monitoring

- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

#### Evaluation by adults

- ◆ Evaluating the records of children's influence on the play provision (such as in workers' plans or notes of discussions with children)
- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to use of physical resources (staff and other)
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to use of physical resources; roles and skills of playworkers

#### Reviewing

- ◆ Reviewing plans to increase or vary the range of physical features, equipment, tools, materials for children's use

## The provision fosters independence and self-esteem.

### ◆ Underpinning values

Children's views; children's abilities; the importance of risk; respect for children; play for its own sake

### ◆ Possible evaluation methods

#### Observation and recording

- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers

#### Formal monitoring

- ◆ Monitoring the understanding and implementation of policies by workers (lines of accountability on safety, behaviour, risk management etc.)
- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

#### Evaluation by children

- ◆ Listening to what children say about the play provision and how it feels to them
- ◆ Listening to what children say about relationships between children and adults in the provision

#### Evaluation by adults

- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to children's relationships with others
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to use of physical resources; roles and skills of playworkers
- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to use of physical resources (staff and other)
- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to policies
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to children's relationships with others
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to policies

#### Reviewing

- ◆ Reviewing practice in relation to children who are withdrawn, slow to join in or get excluded by other children

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

◆ **Underpinning values**

Respect for children; children's abilities; equal entitlement; adult responsiveness

◆ **Possible evaluation methods**

**Observation and recording**

- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers

**Formal monitoring**

- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

**Evaluation by children**

- ◆ Listening to what children say about relationships between children and adults in the provision

**Evaluation by adults**

- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to children's relationships with others
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to children's relationships with others
- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to policies
- ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to policies



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

◆ **Underpinning values**

Access to rich; stimulating environments; the importance of risk; freedom to play; respect for children; children's abilities

◆ **Possible evaluation methods**

**Observation and recording**

- ◆ Observing and recording children's spontaneous expression of enjoyment or achievement
- ◆ Observing and recording the relationships between children, and between children and playworkers
- ◆ Observing and recording children's changing use of the space and the resources from day to day

**Formal monitoring**

- ◆ Monitoring the policies and working procedures of the provision

**Evaluation by adults**

- ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to differences observed in children over time
  - ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to differences observed in children over time
  - ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to use of physical resources; staff and other
  - ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to use of physical resources; roles and skills of playworkers
  - ◆ Documented discussion with playworkers reflecting on their practice in relation to policies
  - ◆ Documented interpretation and explanation by those responsible for the provision of what they observe in relation to policies
-

The longer-term benefits of play for the development of young people need careful study in order to strengthen the arguments about the benefits of play.

There remains a major challenge to academics, researchers and practitioners to find methodologies and to resource research programmes that can further explore the role of childhood play experiences in people's lives. Some ideas for measures and methodologies are offered as possible components of such a project. Play services also need to be included as part of the wider research agenda considering the impact of social, economic and environmental policies on children.

### ◆ Possible outcome measures

- ◆ A young person with growing confidence in their ability and personality
- ◆ Young people able to assert themselves in a range of situations
- ◆ Young people used to making choices and other decisions about what affects them and their interests
- ◆ Young people who are informed about people who are different from themselves, and understand different perspectives
- ◆ Tolerant young people, confident in a range of social situations
- ◆ Young people who are able to challenge discriminatory behaviour
- ◆ Children's achievements
- ◆ Healthier, more skilful, more knowledgeable, more creative young people

### ◆ Possible outcome methodology

- ◆ Histories and biographies and portfolios
- ◆ Evaluation of:- observation, mentoring, monitoring
- ◆ Longitudinal studies of children and young people
- ◆ Development and repeated application of personality profiling instruments
- ◆ Focus groups
- ◆ Bringing together achievement records across health, education, and play for a sample of children

Best Play has put forward a case for investment in public provision for children's play. Research is also needed to investigate ways of identifying the costs of investing in enhanced play provision and relating them to the social benefits indicated in Section 6.

Best Play demonstrates a growing consensus about the necessity to provide for children's play in public spaces and services in a way that adequately reflects children's needs and wishes. It points to much further work that needs to be done both in research and in refining the tools to ensure consistent development in provision for children's play. The joint project on outcomes and the publication, *'Best Play'*, that has come from it are firmly based on a set of values and principles which keep the child in focus. We hope these principles will continue to inform the work as it develops.



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Warrington Borough Council, Play Development Service

Wokingham Out of School Clubs Demonstration Project, Wokingham District Council and Reading Children's Information Centre

### Others

Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management, Children's Play Panel

The Children's Society, Children in Communities: North East

Bernie Morgan, formerly National Playing Fields Association

Kate Moorcock, Families for Freedom

Oxfordshire Playing Fields Association



### Play types

The following fifteen play types and explanations are adapted from those given in Hughes (1996b).

#### ◆ Symbolic play

Play which allows control, gradual exploration and increased understanding, without the risk of being out of one's depth. For example using a piece of wood to symbolise a person, or a piece of string to symbolise a wedding ring.

#### ◆ Rough and tumble play

Close encounter play which is less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength, discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display. For example playful fighting, wrestling and chasing where the children involved are obviously unhurt and giving every indication that they are enjoying themselves.

#### ◆ Socio-dramatic play

The enactment of real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature. For example playing at house, going to the shops, being mothers and fathers, organising a meal or even having a row.

#### ◆ Social play

Play during which the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended. For example any social or interactive situation which contains an expectation on all parties that they will abide by the rules or protocols, i.e. games, conversations, making something together.

#### ◆ Creative play

Play which allows a new response, the transformation of information, awareness of new connections, with an element of surprise. For example enjoying creation with a range of materials and tools for its own sake.

#### ◆ Communication play

Play using words, nuances or gestures for example mime, jokes, play acting, mickey taking, singing, debate, poetry.

#### ◆ Dramatic play

Play which dramatizes events in which the child is not a direct participator. For example presentation of a TV show, an event on the street, a religious or festive event, even a funeral.

#### ◆ Deep play

Play which allows the child to encounter risky or even potentially life threatening experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear. For example leaping onto an aerial runway, riding a bike on a parapet, balancing on a high beam.



### Play types

#### ◆ Exploratory play

Play to access factual information consisting of manipulative behaviours such as handling, throwing, banging or mouthing objects. For example engaging with an object or area and, either by manipulation or movement, assessing its properties, possibilities and content, such as stacking bricks.

#### ◆ Fantasy play

Play, which rearranges the world in the child's way, a way which is unlikely to occur. For example playing at being a pilot flying around the world or the owner of an expensive car.

#### ◆ Imaginative play

Play where the conventional rules, which govern the physical world, do not apply. For example imagining you are, or pretending to be, a tree or ship, or patting a dog which isn't there.

#### ◆ Locomotor play

Movement in any and every direction for its own sake. For example chase, tag, hide and seek, tree climbing.

#### ◆ Mastery play

Control of the physical and affective ingredients of the environments. For example digging holes, changing the course of streams, constructing shelters, building fires.

#### ◆ Object play

Play which uses infinite and interesting sequences of hand-eye manipulations and movements. For example examination and novel use of any object e.g. cloth, paintbrush, cup.

#### ◆ Role play

Play exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature. For example brushing with a broom, dialling with a telephone, driving a car.





## Appendix B

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### Criteria for an enriched play environment

The following criteria for an enriched play environment are adapted from those given in Hughes (1996a). The examples given for each section are in no sense exhaustive, merely indicative.

Play provision should provide opportunities for:

- ◆ **A varied and interesting physical environment**  
Examples: Things at different levels, spaces of different sizes, places to hide, trees and bushes as well as things that have been made, places to inspire mystery and imagination.
- ◆ **Challenge in relation to the physical environment**  
Examples: activities which test the limits of capabilities, rough and tumble, sports and games, chase.
- ◆ **Playing with the natural elements - earth, water, fire, air**  
Examples: campfires, digging, playing snowballs, flying kites.
- ◆ **Movement - e.g. running, jumping, rolling, climbing, balancing**  
Examples: beams and ropes, soft mats, bike riding, juggling equipment, ladders, space.
- ◆ **Manipulating natural and fabricated materials**  
Examples: materials for art, cooking, making and mending of all kinds; building dens; making concoctions; using tools; access to bits and pieces of all kinds.
- ◆ **Stimulation of the five senses**  
Examples: music making, places where shouting is fine, quiet places, different colours and shapes, dark and bright spaces, cooking on a campfire, rotting leaves, a range of food and drink, objects that are soft, prickly, flexible, large and small.
- ◆ **Experiencing change in the natural and built environment**  
Examples: experiencing the seasons through access to the outdoor environment; opportunities to take part in building, demolishing, or transforming the environment.
- ◆ **Social interactions**  
Examples: being able to choose whether and when to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, compete and resolve conflicts. Being able to interact with individuals and groups of different ages, abilities, interests, gender, ethnicity and culture.
- ◆ **Playing with identity**  
Examples: dressing up, role play, performing, taking on different kinds of responsibility.
- ◆ **Experiencing a range of emotions**  
Examples: opportunities to be powerful/powerless, scared/confident, liked/disliked, in/out of control, brave/cowardly.

### ◆ Trial A: an after-school club

- Key findings** ◆ The staff felt that Best Play's play objectives were relevant and appropriate to their setting, and that they collectively captured their own beliefs about the benefits of play for their children and about what children gained from attending their provision.

While the staff had some suggestions about linking evaluation to their practice and procedures, they did not feel that outcomes or benefits needed to be evaluated by them on an ongoing basis. They felt that parents would not support formal outcome evaluation methods such as documented observation or discussion: not because of lack of interest but because parents would feel it was inappropriate in an after-school setting.

- The provision** ◆ This trial took place in a term-time after-school club set up as a voluntary organisation and running on a fee-paying basis. The club is based in a junior school and caters for up to 24 children from this school, a nearby infants' and 'rising fives' from a nursery unit. The core staff comprises three playworkers, two of whom have other roles in the junior school (one is a teaching assistant and the other a lunchtime supervisor). The club has been running for a year and successfully applied to become a demonstration project for the area. The development worker, who still has regular contact with the club, supported this trial.

- Style, ethos and activities** ◆ The club aims to be child-centred in its approach and has an explicit recreational focus (although children can do homework if they wish). Sessions usually start with the children arriving and gathering round a table for registration, food and drink (all of which the children help with). This period also provides opportunities for informal social interaction. About an hour and a half of 'main activity time' follows, when children can choose freely from a range of indoor and outdoor activities (weather permitting - in poor weather the school hall is available). Each week one planned activity (for example circus skills or collage-making) is available alongside regular offers such as indoor and outdoor games, dressing up, art/craft activities and quiet space, and these regular activities are themselves frequently varied. As parents come to collect their children at the end of the day the games and materials are gradually cleared away, with help from the children.

- Views on play objectives** ◆ The staff felt that the play objectives were appropriate to their setting. They further felt that the objectives were relevant, reflecting their aims and beliefs about how children benefit from attending. They commented that the objectives would need to be evaluated in ways that were sensitive to the preferences and personalities of individual children. For instance, they felt that different children might test boundaries (objective 2) in different ways or to different extents, and hence that this objective should not be read as an injunction.

- Views on evaluation** ◆ The staff undertook some ongoing processes that could contribute to evaluation against the play objectives, including holding planning sessions and completing planning sheets, conducting regular risk assessments, reporting to the management committee and participating in local networking with other school-age childcare providers.

The staff felt that there were strong arguments against their involvement in any formal evaluation of the benefits children might be gaining from their provision. They felt that it would be difficult to document ongoing playwork practice in ways that tried to capture the benefits for children, for the following reasons. First, they felt that there were no expectations that such documentation would be



## Appendix C – reports from trials

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undertaken - from parents, the school or regulatory bodies. Indeed they felt that parents might be actively concerned about such a prospect. This did not, in their view, indicate a lack of interest from parents or others about how children might be benefiting. Rather, parents would see such practices as unnecessary and inappropriate, and would expect to make their own judgements about any issues involving their child's development, in discussion with playworkers if appropriate. Second, they felt that in general playworkers would resist move for their practice to be 'documented' in outcomes form, seeing it as inappropriate.

On the question of evaluation methodologies, the development worker supporting the trial has undertaken a separate evaluation of this club amongst others, using surveys to ask parents, school staff and children their views about the difference the clubs make. Staff and the development worker agreed that this was a more appropriate way to evaluate outcomes or benefits. Interestingly, though parents, school staff and children were all happy to participate in this research, there was no evidence that they were interested in its findings. Again, the implication is not necessarily that they are not interested in how their children were benefitting; it might be that they are happy to rely on their own judgements.

- Views on the trial experience** ◆ The experience of trialing Best Play was a positive one, helping the staff to reflect on their practice. Having initially been nervous about the process, they ultimately felt that it has validated their work and reassured them that they are doing a good job.

### ◆ Trial B: an adventure playground

- Key findings** ◆ The Objectives as set out in Best Play were found by the staff to reflect accurately the service they were aiming to deliver, representing their strongly held values in relation to children and play. They did not consider that anything had been omitted. They found the ideas described familiar from their recent experience of developing a citywide play policy which has had a considerable influence on their practice. They had no discomfort in principle with using the evaluation methods suggested though, in practice, it proved a demanding process. It is significant that the management of the playground allowed regular and sufficient time for non-face-to-face work. This meant that discussions about the trial with staff, and by staff amongst themselves, were able to fit naturally into a pattern of daily staff discussion about policy and practice on the playground. '.....there is a huge amount that has been unearthed....just scratching the surface gives some indication of the potential for workers that this document can provide.'
- The provision** ◆ This adventure playground is one of a number run by the city authority working within a play policy that has been developed in the last three years covering all elements of the city's play service. The staff meet regularly with staff from other play projects and the whole service draws on a common set of policies in relation to such matters as health and safety, child protection and equal opportunities. It operates as a classic neighbourhood, drop in adventure playground regularly serving children from 5 to 13 after school and in the holiday periods. It has been in operation since 1981 and has a longstanding and intimate relationship with the surrounding area which forms a discrete and identifiable part of the city. Parents and other family members drop in and some stay with their children though workers try to ensure that this does not impede children's freedom to play. Turnover in the full time staff team of three is very low.



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Three of the six regular sessional workers and one of the full timers used the playground as children. The site is about 100m x 30m, within the boundaries of a public park and next to a hard area where older children who no longer fit within the age range can play ball games and 'hang out' under the distant eye of the playground staff. The trial was carried out in term time and included the week of half term when a day long observation took place.

- Style, ethos and activities** ◆ The playground offers a wide range of resources and activities. These include 2.5m (max.) high structures with platforms, steps, ramps and slides and an aerial runway, grouped around a large sandpit, a planted slope acting as a wild garden, a splash pool used in summer and a raised vegetable plot. There is a small walled yard intended for ball games but these more usually develop in front of the building. There is also a space, surrounded by sitting height non-tarry railway sleepers, where bonfires frequently take place. The two storey building provides a number of spaces for arts and crafts, dressing up, face painting, drama, soft play and quiet recreational activities. Access to the kitchen is allowed for cooking and snacks. The office computer is available for some supervised use. The atmosphere is generally rugged rather than comfortable though upstairs rooms are provided with squashy sofas and chairs. This clearly encourages children to feel at home and to make easy, sometimes messy, use of the spaces and resources. The ethos is one of 'can do' and a positive response to the children's wishes whether openly expressed or identified by observation of their use of the playground. The staff organise sleepovers at the playground in response to children's demands. In the summer groups of children are taken on camping trips. It is a principle that staff intervention in children's play is kept to a minimum consistent with health and safety and the comfort of children. Staff participate when invited. The issue of when to intervene is a live one and discussed between staff.
- Views on play objectives** ◆ The staff found no difficulty with the formulation of the objectives. They noted that the issue of inclusion was not specifically mentioned but would fall under the objectives covering respect and tolerance. This was consistent with their city policy. The underpinning values were familiar to them and were already a fundamental and explicit element in their work which had changed significantly as a result of implementing the city play policy. The principles on which the playground operates are painted up on a notice board near the gate.
- Views on evaluation** ◆ The evaluation methods suggested in Best Play were thought to be appropriate. The main focus of the trial was on identifying ways in which staff could show evidence by which to evaluate their practice in relation to the objectives and determine how children were benefiting from the provision. In practice, it emerged in discussion that the staff used a range of methods with considerable skill and imagination. For example, the special, relaxed atmosphere of sleepovers allowed children's wishes and responses to the playground to come out in conversation with staff in ways which were not possible during the ordinary playground day. Staff used them specifically as a means of hearing and understanding what children wanted. The problem that emerged was that there were no records of the processes by which staff came to their decisions, responded to children, planned change, reflected on their own practice and evaluated their performance, although these processes were clearly going on. The method adopted for the trial was the creation of written 'stories' to illustrate specific cases. These included the story of the most recent development of the play structures and sandpit, the story of the play that never was, the story of an ex-user reflecting on what the playground had



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meant to him, the story of how a new child was welcomed and how the behaviour policy evolved. The stories contained very rich material, which enabled staff to demonstrate and reflect on the degree to which they were meeting the objectives and what some of the results had been. A former user of the playground was asked, as part of the trialing process, to reflect on what the playground had contributed to him. He mentioned a long list summed up in his phrase 'In effect the playground and its staff allowed opportunities to approach complex issues that adolescents face and pass through'.

### Views on the trial experience

- ◆ Despite the tight timetable and the demands made on them by the story writing process, the staff response to the trialing experience was enthusiastic. The conditions for a positive response already existed. 'Staff have worked hard to establish a structure that allows flexibility in our working practice and...City Council support their staff with the time and autonomy required to develop reflective practice. I am certain that the enormous benefit we have gained from being part of this process would have been lessened were it not for these freedoms.' Of the story writing the senior worker said 'Previously the only times this type of work was ever done was in response to complaints, when playworkers could be given their chance to explain the detail of their decisions and actions....The pieces of work themselves seemed at first fairly mundane examples of the every day things that happen on play sites. Recording them has given them value that was probably not recognised at the time. These detailed examinations of the thinking employed by playworkers became touchstones of good practice, giving credence to the profession and motivation to the individual.'

Anyone interested in reading the stories themselves should contact PLAYLINK.

### ◆ Trial C: After-school and breakfast clubs, care schemes and playschemes

### Key findings

- ◆ Reviewing their service against Best Play caused a huge shift in the playleaders' perception of what a children's play service should look like. They found the document easy to read and to use. It reminded them of what their own play experiences were like.

Their management felt that the document would be useful for making the case for playwork with other council departments and hoped to use it when accessing additional funding opportunities.

### The provision

- ◆ The trial was conducted by six staff who were each employed for part of their working week in a number of different settings as part of a local council play service. All but one of the staff were employed part-time. The trial included a weeklong holiday playscheme in addition to the one-day a week before and after school clubs and the every weekday after school care schemes. In each setting, a minimum of two staff is employed. Sessions generally attracted 18 to 25 children. No children over 11 are catered for. All of the provision has been running for several years.



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- Style, ethos and activities** ◆ The trial settings were all 'closed access' play care type facilities and offered a range of activities. Each setting would plan their sessions and select a small range of equipment such as painting or board games from a wider range available to each venue. Because all of the facilities are dual-use, playleaders usually had to transport much of their equipment from place to place. The play facilities were characterised by their very organised approach; children had little say in the choice of activity apart from within the smaller choice provided by the staff. Not all of the facilities were able to offer outdoor play.
- Views on play objectives** ◆ The staff felt that the objectives represented what they should be providing but were currently not. Comments about working with the document included that it had 'challenged our routine' and 'allowed me to bring back to children what had been taken away' (their free choice). Staff felt that the objectives accurately described what they already knew but were not currently implementing.
- Views on evaluation** ◆ Due to time constraints, staff were not normally in a position to reflect on their practice. For the purpose of the trial they agreed to keep personal diaries and to meet together to discuss their findings. They also varied their practice by offering several sessions where no equipment was set out prior to the children's arrival and by offering sessions in which 'loose parts', in this case clothes horses, sheets and dressing up clothes were offered in addition to the more traditional board games, computer games and craft activities. During these sessions the staff observed the play taking place, responding only when specifically approached. The staff experienced some difficulty in minimising their own interventions in the play, feeling at times 'left out' by the children, however they commented that the sessions seemed 'calmer' and the children appeared to be more 'settled and relaxed'.
- The playleaders felt that all of the suggested evaluation methods would be appropriate for use in their settings.
- Views on the trial experience** ◆ The staff team were inspired by the experience of reading and implementing Best Play, commenting that it 'changed the way I thought' and 'It's been challenging for us and will be for the kids, parents and teachers'.
- Their management intend to introduce the seven objectives to all of the provision right across the service and will be altering the focus of team meetings to allow for more emphasis on reflective practice.

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## Play Environments: A Question of Quality

sets out a process for creating and assessing quality in children's play environments. Raising fundamental questions about the nature of play and the role of the playworker, its purpose is to increase awareness and stimulate debate.

## A Playworkers Taxonomy of Play Types

draws on the literature of child development and the experience of playworkers to identify fifteen different types of play and assess their role in the life of the growing child.

Both researched and written by Bob Hughes.

## Measure or Value

papers from the 1998 PLAYLINK/PORTSMOUTH national conference exploring ways of looking at outcomes from play provision. It includes contributions from Andrew Graham, acting master of Balilol College on the economic case for public investment in play provision and Deb Caseberry, a Headteacher on the impact of her school participating in the PLAYLINK 'Play at School' scheme

All of the above available from PLAYLINK, FREEPOST, EDO 5600, London SW9 6BR  
Tel 020 7820 3800

## The New Charter for Children's Play

is a clear statement of children's play needs and how they should be met. Written by the Children's Play Council in a direct, straightforward way as a series of action points, the New Charter serves as a catalyst for anyone whose work impacts on play to examine, review and improve their services. A complementary full colour A2 poster is also available.

Available from the Children's Society, Tel 020 7841 4415, fax 020 7841 4500

## The Six Acre Standard

is an essential book for planners and leisure management. The Six Acre Standard is the nationally recognised method of calculating sport and recreation space in local authorities. It is fully outlined in this comprehensive publication. Details of the Children's Playing Space Standard, a three tier hierarchy of children's play provision are also included in this latest edition.

## NPFA Playsafe

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