Managing playworkers and working with other adults

Playwork guides – volume 4

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Contents

Introduction

We have produced four playwork guides, creatively titled volume 1, 2, 3 and 4, as a collection of resources for all those who work primarily or as a part of their role with playing children. Equally, those not working with playing children but fascinated by children's play and wanting to learn more may also find them of interest.

The playwork guides introduce and explore some of the core theories, concepts, ideas and practices that are at the heart of working with playing children. The guides are by no means an exhaustive account. Children and their play are complex, as are the multiple ways we can work with their play, so there is always much more to learn.

In preparation for working with playing children, the guides begin with Volume 1, taking a look at some of the theories that influence the way adults understand children, the role of play and childhood, as well as the ethics of working with playing children. Having developed some foundational understanding, volume 2 explores the multiple ways those working with playing children can create or enhance environments so that they are fit for play, and at practices for directly supporting playing children. Following this, volume 3 looks at planning, setting up and managing a staffed play project, whilst volume 4 deals in more depth with issues related to the management of staff and working with other adults.

Throughout these guides we use the terms playwork and playworkers. Playwork might best be understood as the art of working with playing children. Playwork is a sensitive and reflective role that values play for its own sake, not just as a means to an end. Playwork is both child-centred and play-centred, focused on enabling children to direct their own play experiences and tries to ensure play is the central concern of the adult-child relationship.

Playwork seeks to create environments that are suitable for good quality playing to happen and attempts to reduce any power imbalance between children and adults, aiming to create a parallel working relationship as opposed to the more common hierarchical one between adults and children. For many, playwork

is their profession, their main work role, and their vocation – for others it is a role they occupy as part of other broader responsibilities. Within these resources the term playworker applies to all those who find themselves facilitating and supporting children's play.

Volume 1: Childhood, play and the Playwork Principles provides an overview of the professional ethics and theoretical perspectives that underpin playwork practice and playwork views of childhood. There is of course much more to learn about children, play and playwork but the contents of this volume are essential to those thinking about working with playing children.

The first section – Play and the Playwork Principles (1 and 2) – explores some of the ideas, concepts and theories of child development and childhood that have influenced and continue to influence understandings of children and their play and as a result are important to those practising playwork.

Section two – Playwork Principles in Practice – looks at the playwork role and how it both affects and is affected by the environment and the children. It considers how the play process is given precedence and how playworkers balance the developmental benefits of play with children's wellbeing.

Volume 2: Practising playwork enables those new to playwork the opportunity to explore some of the ideas, concepts and frameworks, and the practical application of tools and approaches at the core of playwork practice.

Section one considers concepts such as affordance and the affective environment, which enable those practising playwork to identify, create or enhance places for playing.

Bob Hughes, a lead scholar and practitioner in the field of playwork is then introduced along with his taxonomy of play types and his ideas about play mechanisms. This is valuable for appreciating the various forms and combination of forms play can take but also in developing a shared language to talk about children's play. We also explore his playwork curriculum, a useful framework for thinking about the scope of opportunities for playing that those practising playwork should offer.

Having looked extensively at indirect work with playing children in section one, section two looks at a range of ideas that have and continue to influence direct work with playing children. This section will introduce Else and Sturrock's play cycle and accompanying intervention modes, as well as reviewing some every day intervention approaches. The section concludes by exploring issues related to risk and uncertainty in children's play and approaches to risk assessment, chiefly risk-benefit assessment.

Volume 3: Developing and managing a playwork project focuses on the practicalities of developing and managing the day-to-day delivery of playwork provision. It is underpinned by the Playwork Principles and produced for those with a good understanding of play and playwork theory and practice, focusing less on playwork concepts and theories, and more on the managerial duties of senior playworkers.

This volume is divided into three sections. Section one – Planning for play – looks specifically at the essential aspects to consider when making preparations for a playwork project.

Section two – Developing an organisational framework – will help readers identify and appreciate the role and function of policies and procedures in supporting playwork practice, meeting our duty of care to service users and protecting the reputation of the organisation.

Finally, section three – Evaluating quality – explores issues related to evaluating the quality of play provision, looking at ways in which we can continue to review and improve the quality of the provision we are responsible for.

Volume 4: Managing playworkers and working with other adults is aimed at those with line management responsibilities for other staff including managers and management committees.

Section one – Taking on management responsibilities – explores subjects including leadership styles, creating effective environments for teamwork, skills for managing change and providing effective feedback.

Section two – Supporting professional development – focuses on the essential role of reflection, including methods and models to support and promote reflective practice. The section also covers mentoring, supervision and staff appraisal.

Section three – Working with other adults – acknowledges the importance of working with other adults beyond the staff team. It considers a range of associated issues from the less formal to the formal, including the value of positive first impressions, developing and maintaining trusting relationships with parents and working with other professionals.

Finally, section four – Handling conflict, criticism and complaints – establishes why conflict may occur and explores various styles for handling interpersonal conflict and how self-awareness can support effective communication.

Welcome to *Volume 4, Managing playworkers and working with other adults*. Like volume 3, this guide is aimed at senior staff who have management responsibility within a playwork project and is intended for those with a good understanding of play and playwork theory and practice.
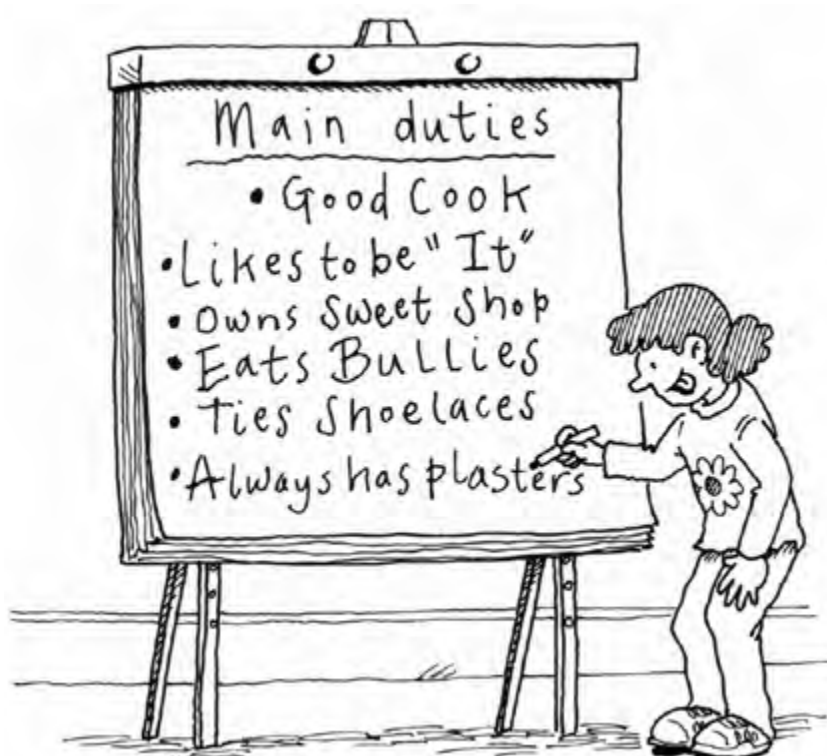
This guide therefore focuses less on playwork concepts and theories, and more on the managerial duties of senior playworkers. For more information on play and playwork theory and practice please see: volume 1 and volume 2.

If the role of the playworker can be seen as cultivating the conditions for play, the role of the playwork manager may be understood as cultivating the conditions for playwork. This includes establishing and maintaining an organisational framework and management systems that support playworkers to practice in accordance with the Playwork Principles.

This guide focuses on the role of senior playworkers in terms of managing other staff and working with other adults, including parents and other professionals. More information about other aspects of the senior playworker's role, including developing policies and procedures to support playwork practice, can be found in *Volume 3 – Developing and managing a playwork project*.

This guide is split into four sections:

1. **Taking on management responsibilities** – explores leadership styles, how to create effective environments for teamwork, the importance of communication, skills for managing change and giving constructive feedback.

2. **Supporting professional development** – covers reflective practice including how to support and encourage others to do it, various methods and models to aid reflective practice, the importance of mentoring new staff, what is involved in good supervision, and staff appraisals.

3. **Working with other adults** – considers the importance of first impressions, developing and maintaining parental trust, getting parents involved and working with other professionals.

4. **Handling conflict, criticism and complaints** – establishes why conflict may occur and various styles for handling interpersonal conflict, as well as the importance of self-reflection in identifying our own triggers and how awareness of these can support effective communication.

Main duties
- Good Cook
- Likes to be "It"
- Owns Sweet Shop
- Eats Bullies
- Ties Shoelaces
- Always has plasters

Taking on management responsibilities

If we are in charge of a play setting, we have a responsibility to ensure that children are supported to play within that setting. However, we are also responsible for ensuring our team of playworkers follow the policies and procedures of the organisation and work within the parameters of current legislation.

Taking on management responsibilities inevitably means acquiring and using new skills beyond those we might use in our day-to-day playwork practice with children. The pressure to prove we are competent in all these new areas can sometimes lead us to expect we must do everything – and do it better than everyone else! Clearly this is impossible – no one person can excel at everything required by such a diverse role. Fortunately, it isn't necessary to be a 'super-manager' to be effective. A good leader and manager will be judged by the quality of their team. This means a good leader engages and supports their whole team and surrounds themselves with people who have a diverse range of knowledge and skills.

Being a manager and overseeing the delivery of a service can often nudge us away from directly facilitating children's play. Some of our new responsibilities may seem far removed from facilitating play and perhaps some of the reasons that initially drew us into the profession. We may have to spend considerable time dealing with other agendas from organisational procedures to legal requirements and maintaining appropriate records. However, it is critical that we remain true to our professional ethos and continually remind ourselves that the essence of our role is to facilitate the play process (Playwork Principle 3). Whatever else we may do and however important we may feel, this process takes precedence (Playwork Principle 4).

Playwork involves working with the complexities of children and their play and as such we should not expect the management of it to be simple. However, if done effectively management will be very rewarding as the playwork team will work well together and the children will enjoy better provision for their play. Effective managers have good communication skills and support good teamwork.

Leadership styles

It is useful to consider different models of management and leadership to help us decide what kind of senior playworker we might need to be. It is important that

we find a style that suits the situation that needs to be managed. One size does not fit all. The more we are able to adapt our style to suit the situation and the members of the team we are managing, the more successful the work of the team will be. Ultimately, this will result in better provision for children's play.

1 Our leadership style is the combination of traits, skills, and behaviours we use as we interact with our colleagues and other adults. Here we consider three different models:

In the modern era, Kurt Lewin conducted one of the most influential studies on leadership with school children in Iowa in the 1930s[1]. His research revealed three distinct styles:

- **Authoritarian** – The authoritarian leader dictates orders to their team and makes decisions without any consultation. This manager likes to control the situation they are in. Decisions are quick because the playwork team is not consulted and work is usually completed on time. However, this type of management style can decrease motivation because when staff are not consulted, they do not feel valued, and they are more likely to leave.

- **Democratic** – A democratic leader delegates authority to their staff, giving them responsibility for completing their own delegated tasks thus empowering them. Playworkers can complete tasks using their own style of working though tasks still have to be completed on time. Playworkers are involved in decision making giving them a sense of belonging, but decision-making can take longer.

- *Laissez-Faire* – A *laissez-faire* manager sets tasks and gives playworkers freedom to complete them as they see fit. There is minimal involvement from the manager. The manager is there to give instruction or to answer questions if required but generally lets things go on by themselves. This empowers staff but can lead to tasks not being completed if staff are not personally motivated or not sufficiently competent or experienced.

Each of these styles can be effective in different circumstances. An authoritarian approach may be best when decisions need to be made urgently or when staff are unmotivated and need direction.

A democratic approach can be effective when it is important to record everyone's opinion and when complex and wide-ranging information is needed. A laissez faire approach can be effective when staff are highly competent and motivated. This laid-back style can be seen as a sign of confidence and trust in their abilities, facilitating professional autonomy.

Generally, the more capable, experienced and mature the person we are leading the less direct control we should adopt. In other words, if we are leading others who lack the knowledge, confidence and experience to work on their own then we should be giving plenty of direction (at least until they become more experienced in their role). On the other hand, if we are leading playworkers who are already highly skilled and confident then we should adopt a hands-off approach and delegate more.

2 Goleman[2] suggests another approach to leadership. His approach draws on the idea of emotional intelligence, that is, how we perceive, understand and manage emotions in others and ourselves. Goleman suggests there are six different styles an effective leader can choose from, that can be adapted to suit any given situation. Choosing which style to use and when is a skill in itself. They are as follows:

- **Visionary** – The visionary is imaginative and good at identifying new directions for the work to go in. Visionary leaders are great developers, but they need other people to become responsible for ensuring the work is completed.

- **Coaching** – The coach works with individuals to help them to develop their own skills and to enable them to recognise how their own goals link with the goals of the setting. It works well with people who want to develop. It does not work well with people who have gone as far as they want and do not want to improve.

- **Affiliative** – This style emphasises the importance of teamwork and helps the team to work well together. This approach works well when we need to rekindle a good team feel or want staff to feel like a team. It relies on group, rather than individual praise and therefore the senior playworker needs to watch for workers who are not pulling their weight within the team.

- **Democratic** – This is a collaborative style and draws on every team members' knowledge and skills. Because everybody is consulted it creates group commitment to the resulting goals. It works well when new approaches are needed. This consensus building approach is not appropriate if quick decisions are required as it can be time consuming. For example, during a fire we don't all sit around and agree what needs to be done and offering the opportunity for someone to take on the leadership role.

- **Pacesetting** – A pacesetter sets high standards for performance. They work hard and long hours, set high standards for themselves and expect the same from every member of their team. It should be used sparingly but can be needed when we have something very urgent and important to achieve. This style can undercut morale and make some feel as if they are failing. 'Driven' leaders sometimes mistake normal working as 'slacking'.

- **Commanding** – This is a model of 'military' style leadership and many of us may have experienced it. It is rarely effective in the long term because it involves little praise and frequently employs criticism, which undercuts morale and job satisfaction. It is effective in a crisis, when an urgent turnaround is needed or for example after an accident or during a fire evacuation. This style of leadership links to the authoritarian style of management that effects short-term success but fosters long-term discontent.

3 So far, we have talked about leadership and not management. While some sources do use the words interchangeably there are significant differences between the two terms. Below is a model developed by Weaver and Farrell[3]. It considers the differences between a leader, a manager and a third role – facilitator.

Essentially, when we influence and inspire people and set the direction for our team, we are acting as a leader. When we accomplish something, organise, plan or problem solve we are acting as a manager. When we help others understand and achieve, we are acting as a facilitator.

Which role we adopt will depend on the situation and the work that needs to be done. If the task is about helping our group see the bigger picture or setting the long-term direction then the leader role is best. If the task is about delegating, setting deadlines or administration then the manager role is preferable. If the task is complex and needs to involve others to complete then we should choose the facilitator role[4].

Leader	Manager	Facilitator
Concerned with doing the right thing	Concerned with doing things right	Concerned with helping people do things
Takes the long term view	Takes the short term view	Helps people find a view and articulate it
Concentrates on what and why	Concentrates on how	Helps people concentrate and be clear in the here and now
Thinks in terms of innovation, development and the future	Thinks in terms of administration, maintenance and the present	Helps people think, and helps them communicate their thoughts
Sets the vision – the tone and direction	Sets the plan – the pace	Helps people make meaning of tone and direction, and to function well at the required pace
Hopes others will respond and follow	Hopes others will complete their tasks	Hopes others will engage in the process
Appeals to hopes and dreams	Monitors boundaries and defines limits	Helps others make meaning of hopes and dreams – pushes appropriately on boundaries
Expects others to help realise a vision	Expects others to fulfil their mission or purpose	Helps others articulate a shared vision and common mission or purpose
Inspires innovation	Inspires stability	Helps people respond to things that are new and things that remain the same

Teamwork

When a senior playworker and the team of playworkers work well together the play provision works well. A good team is adaptable, enthusiastic and shares the same vision. It is committed to play and playwork and communicates well.

However, everyone is different. A team is made up of individuals – all of whom have their own personalities and each brings something unique to every situation. The most effective teams are those with a blend of skills and aptitudes.

It is the senior playworker's responsibility to understand this and create the best team they can in which all team members are valued and can give their best for children's play. A popular method of identifying how people behave, contribute and interrelate with others is described in Belbin's *Management Teams – why they succeed or fail*[5]. This theory describes nine major team roles:

- **Resource Investigator** – Uses their inquisitive nature to find ideas to bring back to the team.

- **Teamworker** – Helps the team to gel, using their versatility to identify the work required and complete it on behalf of the team.

- **Co-ordinator** – Needed to focus on the team's objectives, draw out team members and delegate work appropriately.

- **Plant** – Tends to be highly creative and good at solving problems in unconventional ways.

- **Monitor Evaluator** – Provides a logical eye, making impartial judgements where required and weighs up the team's options in a dispassionate way.

- **Specialist** – Brings in-depth knowledge of a key area to the team.

- **Shaper** – Provides the necessary drive to ensure that the team keeps moving and does not lose focus or momentum.

- **Implementer** – Needed to plan a workable strategy and carry it out as efficiently as possible.

- **Completer Finisher** – Most effectively used at the end of tasks to polish and scrutinise the work for errors, subjecting it to the highest standards of quality control.

Individual team members may be able to perform more than one of these roles but it is both highly unlikely and undesirable that any one individual can or should be expected to do all of them. The aim of the manager is to try and create a team where all of these roles are fulfilled. Importantly, some of these roles could be provided by others outside of our immediate staff teams. For example, some of the most effective playwork teams are supported by highly organised admin workers. More information about the Belbin approach can be found online.

Creating an effective environment for teamwork

There are important aspects of team management that will help to create a good teamwork environment. As a senior playworker we will be most effective when we role model teamwork skills to our staff on an ongoing basis. The following suggestions are adapted from Bennis[6]:

- Provide focus for the work of the team by helping playworkers concentrate on priorities and work towards the vision and aims of the play setting, which exists for the benefit of the children, not the staff.

- Create a trusting environment by role-modelling trustworthiness and showing trust in the team by delegating responsibilities.

- Demonstrate courage by taking responsibility for tricky decisions, facing up to detractors and standing up for the team when necessary.

- Challenge the views of others in a friendly and appropriate manner. This will create lively debate, keep the playwork practice dynamic and developing, and encourage the team to change and grow.

- Exchange and rethink ideas for the good of the team.

- Give up our own position of power or control for the good of others, for example allowing others to lead on a project or accepting someone else's way of doing things.

- Consult staff prior to decisions being made, sharing the knowledge and information available.

- Openly communicate about what went right and what went wrong.

- Use communication methods that are appropriate for all involved such as regular focused team meetings that are run efficiently, one-to-one supervision sessions where we listen carefully to what individuals have to say and providing concise written information to clarify a decision or situation.

Motivational skills

As a senior playworker we cannot expect all our team to be motivated all of the time or by the same things. However, there are things that we can do to help keep staff motivated and enthusiastic. Having fun and celebrating successes together can help to create a sense of belonging within the organisation. Most people work better when they feel they are wanted and needed and enjoy their time at work. Everyone feels good when they have achieved something so acknowledging the good work people have done is likely to motivate them to want to achieve more.

We should also pay attention to what individual playworkers say and do. This will give us an indication of their strengths, allowing us to shape their responsibilities towards those aspects of work that motivate them the most. In doing so, we shouldn't assume that everyone is motivated by the same things. For instance, some people like public recognition while others dislike having attention drawn to them (private praise suits them better). However, everyone needs positive recognition.

Effective communication

Effective communication is vital when working with children or managing a team of adults. As senior playworkers, we need to think about how we communicate and role model these behaviours to others. Drawing on the conclusions of Petrie[7] we can summarise the principles of effective communication as follows:

- Effective communicators are willing to listen. This is demonstrated in our posture, body language and facial expressions, and our tone of voice. It is also demonstrated when we avoid or remove distractions.

- Effective communicators reflect back what they hear. Actively listening and reflecting back what we hear demonstrates that we have heard and understood what has been said and encourages others to communicate.

- Effective communicators recognise feelings. We pay attention to the emotions behind other people's words and are aware that meaning is often dependent on feelings, mood and context.

- Effective communicators are able to appreciate another person's point of view. For example, we notice a worker on their first day at the play setting looking extremely anxious as a child climbs a tree. Although no words may have been spoken we are able to recognise and respond appropriately to their feelings of concern, and understand the tension they feel as they attempt to balance the anxiety they feel with the benefits of the experience to the child.

- Effective communicators respect other people. In our role as a playworker we meet people from a range of different cultures, backgrounds, and ethnicities and with a variety of opinions and views. Respect involves acknowledging all these individuals and treating them equally. It means avoiding stereotyping other people and not using judgemental language that controls or denigrates. Respect also means keeping private information confidential, unless there are situations where children's safety and wellbeing are in question.

Skills for managing change

As senior playworkers there will be times when we have to manage change. Change to our policies and practices may be brought about by many things, for example:

- through analysis of reflective practice and observation of children playing

- because of information gained through training and education

- changes in funding forcing us to restructure our service

- responding to feedback from children, parents or other professionals.

Managing change requires particular use of a manager's skill, as some people can be resistant to it. We can support our playworkers to cope with change by involving them throughout the process. This includes making them aware of why change is needed and giving them opportunities to share their concerns, voice their opinions and contribute their ideas. We must also make sure they understand any decisions taken, the reasons for them and their implications.

People may need time to come to terms with significant changes. If necessary, we ensure staff have access to appropriate professional development to support them in adapting to change. When changes are taking place and becoming embedded into practice we continue to 'check in' with staff, providing further opportunities for discussion through team meetings and supervision sessions.

Giving constructive feedback

Sometimes as part of our role as senior playworker it is necessary to give feedback to the team. Positive feedback is easy. But sometimes negative feedback is necessary, and this takes more careful consideration and thought to ensure we handle it in the best way.

First, we should examine the reasons for giving negative feedback and think about what we would like to happen as a result. Is it something that someone is doing wrong, or is it something that just makes us feel annoyed? The section on 'triggers' at the end of this guide may help us decide if negative feedback is really necessary. If someone is doing something wrong then negative feedback may be necessary, but it could be that another approach, like providing some simple coaching is all that is needed to correct the situation.

If we decide that feedback is needed, we should choose an appropriate time and place where we can talk in private. A situation like this should never be held in public as we risk humiliating the individuals involved or conflict may arise that shouldn't happen in front of others.

It is important to recognise that there may be particular reasons why someone is not handling a situation well. They may be struggling with personal issues or have some form of hidden impairment or it might be a simple misunderstanding. Either way, we shouldn't jump to conclusions and should try to find out the underlying reasons for their actions (or lack thereof).

Depending on the response, we may be able to clear things up immediately. If not, we try to find ways to resolve the situation. In doing so, we may need to make ourselves absolutely clear to ensure there is no misunderstanding. For example: 'Would it help if I said I'd like you to work outside all the time, unless I specifically ask you to work inside?'

Whilst there may be occasions when negative feedback is necessary, it is important to also acknowledge people's strengths, although the time to do this may not be when you're offering a critique of their practice. Providing staff with access to professional development opportunities can also encourage them to critique their own practice.

Supporting professional development
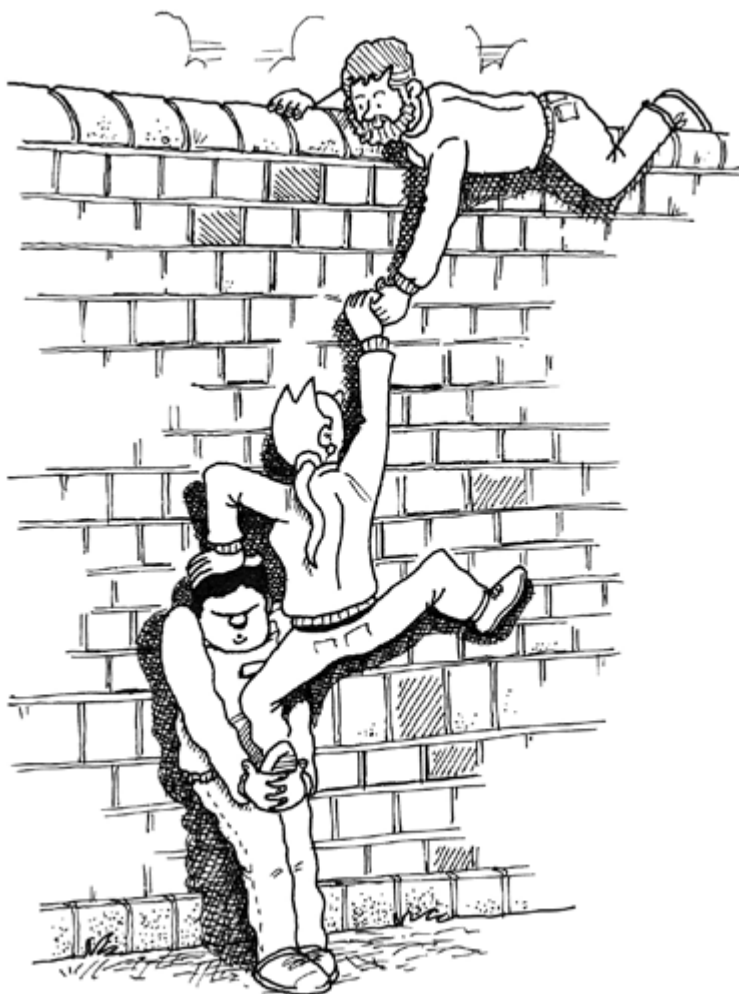
Children have an instinctive and innate drive to play, which, as playworkers, we try to support and facilitate. To do this we need a broad range of skills and understanding, and in practice it is a dynamic process. Just as play provides a mechanism to deal with change and the unexpected[8], as playworkers we need to be able to adapt and respond to change in our practice.

As its name suggests, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is a mechanism to support our lifelong journey of learning and personal and professional development. As professional playworkers, we have a responsibility to keep our knowledge and skills current, and CPD can help ensure we remain up-to-date, professionally competent, and able to meet the play needs of children now and into the future.

By supporting staff to engage in CPD we enhance their confidence and effectiveness and ultimately improve the quality of our provision and children's play opportunities. However, balancing the different needs of individual staff requires us to assess, prioritise and plan as CPD impacts on staffing levels and has budgetary implications.

CPD activities can be both formal and informal. Formal activities are usually structured learning with clear outcomes such as qualifications and training courses that include an element of assessment, but they might also include conferences and seminars, for example. Other more informal CPD activities include reflective practice, team meetings, professional discussions, workshops or forums, coaching and mentoring, independent study, online groups, reading, networking, audits of the play space and supervision.
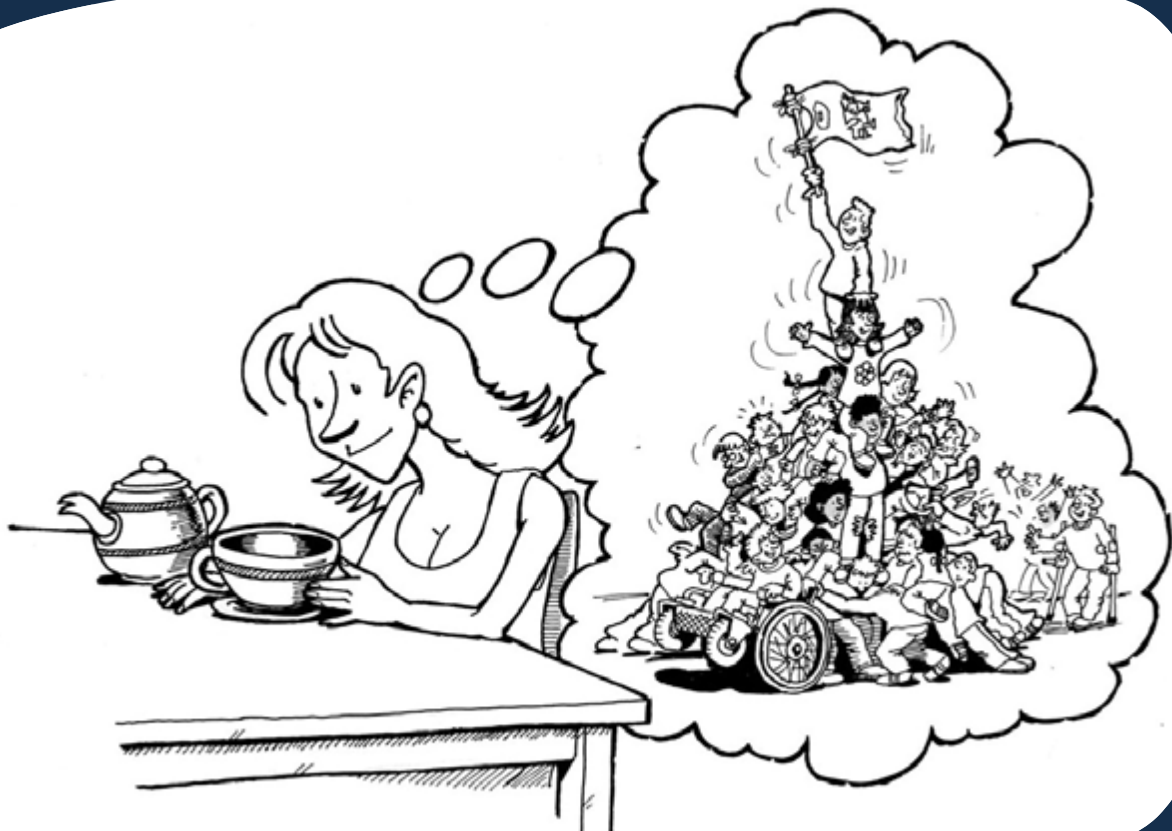
Reflective practice

Playwork Principle 6: The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.

Facilitating children's play is a complex and demanding role. To help us, we can draw on our knowledge of the play process and we can be guided by policies and procedures specific to our role and setting. However, these alone are not enough. The sheer variety of play behaviour by different children with different characteristics means we can never adopt a 'one size fits all' approach. Moreover, as individual playworkers we each bring our own experiences and attitudes that influence our practice.

Reflective practice can improve our professional practice by developing our critical thinking and promoting an enquiring approach that asks questions about what we do and how, and why we do it. Bolton[9] considers reflection to be 'learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us'. This process of questioning and being self-critical can help us become more competent playworkers and can lead to a lifetime's continuous learning and development. Experience alone does not guarantee insight. Reflective practice is amongst the best methods we have to get to the heart of our practice and analyse our core beliefs and values.

Critical reflection and reflective practice can help us uncover the assumptions behind our actions and question whether what we say matches what we do. It raises the possibility that the way we behave and act may be influenced by socially conditioned beliefs and habits, which could be at odds with our playwork philosophy or principles. However, being open to critique such as this is an essential part of flexible learning. Reflective practice can help us maintain a healthy balance between unquestioning routine and uncertain chaos. Too much certainty means we will take things for granted and become defensive of our approach. Whereas too little certainty can mean we are paralysed by indecision and unable to act on any new knowledge. Maintaining this balance and being open to critique can be an uncomfortable process at times and so the support of our colleagues can be invaluable.

Promoting reflective practice in others

If we are in a managerial role or have responsibility for other playworkers then we need to promote reflective practice for everyone at the setting and build a work culture where thinking about practice is both expected and valued. However, just telling others about the benefits of regular reflection is unlikely to be enough – playworkers need to experience it first-hand. This way they can see the relevance to their own practice and are more likely to make it part of their personal beliefs and values about playwork practice.

As senior playworkers we can help by ensuring our staff have time and opportunities for reflective practice. We can also provide practical tools to support playworkers in recording their observations, thoughts and feelings, together with models that help them to reflect on their experiences.

Diaries and logbooks

Providing staff with diaries can allow them to record their private thoughts and feelings. Diaries can give us the time and space to try to make sense of events. Returning to a diary entry a few days or weeks later can reveal new perspectives and provide evidence of progress or stagnation. Diaries can be structured around a series of key headings (such as description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, action plan), or else left unstructured and can include drawings, diagrams or doodles.

Not everyone likes writing in diaries, some people may want to avoid additional written work and will benefit from alternative ways of recording their thoughts and observations. This might include video, pictures, mindmaps or audio recordings. The important thing is to find a method that works for each person and their preferred way of learning. Whatever the preferred approach, it's best to record our thoughts and feelings as soon as possible after the event, otherwise we can over-rationalise or censor them.

Whilst diaries are typically private, we might also provide a team logbook, where staff can record an overview of each session and any key incidents. This can help with monitoring and evaluating the provision and can be reviewed in team meetings to celebrate successes and discuss challenges.

Using a reflective practice model

Put simply, a model can provide structure and consistency to reflective practice. It can provide a means of organising thoughts and actions and so encourage more effective problem solving. Some models are suitable for reflecting after the event when time allows for deeper more considered reflection, what Schön[10] referred to as 'reflection on action'. Other models are more suitable for reflecting during the event itself, otherwise referred to as 'reflection in action'[11].

Rogers[12] describes how most reflective models begin the process by identifying a problem and searching for a solution. Next they gather more information about the event to support a change in the reflector's thinking or lead to new experiences. Finally, they involve taking action and putting a change into practice. This whole process is often thought of as cyclic and continuous in which new understandings lead to new challenges and additional opportunities for reflections.

SLLRRRP – reflection *in* action

One model used in playwork to support reflection *in* action is fondly referred to as 'slurping' or more accurately SLLRRRPing. The acronym SLLRRRP stands for:

- **Stop** – Resist the temptation to jump right in. We give ourselves time to consider the best response.

- **Look** – We gather more information by observing the children playing, paying attention to their actions and body language.

- **Listen** – We also pay attention to what children and other people are saying and how they're saying it.

- **Reflect** – We consider whether we should intervene and if so, how? What would be the effect of our intervention, or non-intervention?

- **React** – Having considered our response, we react to the situation. This may mean doing nothing.

- **Reflect** – What impact have we had on the play process? Has our intervention helped or hindered the play process?

- **Practice** – We continue to reflect and develop our practice. Consistently adopting a sensitive intervention style requires continual practice and development.
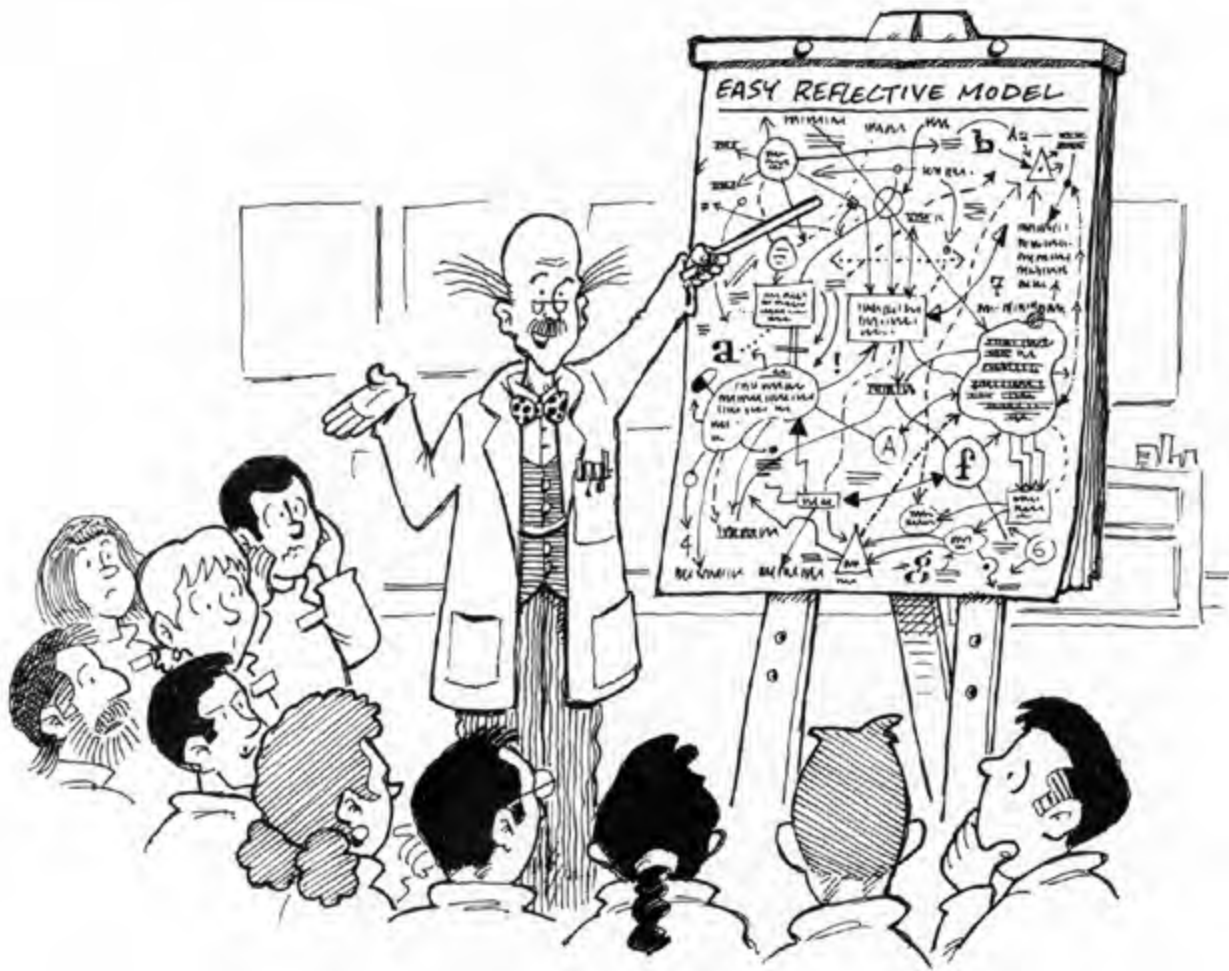
This model encourages playworkers to give themselves time to understand the situation and reflect before intervening, helping to prevent us from responding unthinkingly. This model has been used particularly effectively in supporting and describing the processes playworkers go through when dynamically risk-benefit assessing children's play.

IMEE

At the point of reflection in the SLLRRRP process it may be useful to practice using another reflective practice model developed by Bob Hughes called IMEE. This is a method that enables us to be more analytical in our reflections. It requires us to consider a situation and the potential for intervention, not only as things are unfolding at the present time but also in relation to our:

- **Intuition** – about what a good play environment/moment/intervention should be like.

- **Memory** – of our own good play environments moments in childhood.

- **Experience** – of good play environments/moments/interventions in our professional practice.

- **Evidence** – of what the literature suggests is related to good play environments, play behaviour and intervention.

By practising this on a regular basis our knowledge of when and how to intervene gradually becomes more and more informed. We will be learning from ourselves, our colleagues and our interventions, the children and their play, as well as from people who are considered experts in the field of play and playwork.

Gibbs' model of reflection *on* action

Another possible model to support reflection *on* action was developed by Gibbs[13]. Gibbs' model allows for description, analysis and evaluation of an experience. It is popular within the education and health sectors. It emphasises the importance of drawing conclusions and setting action plans that highlight what the reflector would change in the future and how they would improve their practice. Here Gibbs' model is combined with prompts adapted from Tawil's synthesis of reflective practice models[14]:

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle Model with prompts adapted from Tawil's synthesis of reflective practice model

DESCRIPTION

What was/am I trying to achieve?
What happened/is happening?
What did I do/have I done?
What did others do/have done?
What was/is the result?

FEELINGS

How did/does it make me feel?
How did/do other people make me feel?
How did/do other people feel?
How do I know how others felt/feel?

EVALUATION

What is good or bad about this experience?
What could have been/can be better?
What have I/we done right or wrong?
What else could I/ we have done/do?
What were/are the consequences?

ANALYSIS

What did/does motivate me to act this way?
Whose interests are served by my practices?
What factors constrain my practice?
What knowledge did or could have informed me?

CONCLUSION

What have I learnt from this?
What more do I need to know?
What do I need from others?
What do they need from me?

ACTION PLAN

What can I/we do differently?
What should I/we do next?
Do the actions I'm considering align with playwork philosophy/principles?

These models are tools to promote reflection and critical thinking – they are not protocols or procedures to be followed slavishly at all costs. If we are going to support our staff to improve their practice through reflection, they need to feel some sense of ownership over the process. If it is going to be meaningful, we cannot force them into carrying out reflection.

To use the models we have described effectively requires personal motivation and a desire to improve our own playwork practice. It will also require support from our colleagues, our manager and our organisation. Including diagrams of these sorts of models at the front of staff diaries and logbooks can help encourage reflection in and on action.

Facilitating reflective practice sessions

When we encourage collaborative reflection, it is important we are clear about our role and the type of relationship we want to encourage. In a relationship between peers and equals roles are characterised by support and active listening. The emphasis is on helping others to solve their own problems. However, in a more uneven relationship such as between an expert playworker and apprentice playworker, or between a manager and an assistant playworker, the roles are slightly different. Here the relationship may be more focused on giving advice and suggestions. The emphasis is often on helping solve someone else's problem.

Encouraging others to reflect requires skills and understanding on our part. Tarrant[15] suggests a range of facilitation skills required in these situations:

- Good body language and eye contact

- The ability to listen and then respond appropriately

- To be able to ask open questions that encourage others to analyse their practice

- To be able to restate what they have heard

- The ability to reinterpret so the reflector can see how their practice appears

- To be able to summarise and support the setting of targets.

While reflecting in pairs usually establishes a natural dialogue, larger groups need specific handling. One common issue that affects many groups and teams is the challenge of balancing the contributions from different playworkers. Some individuals are confident to express their views while others are less forthcoming and prefer to listen. If we are the facilitator for a reflective group then we have to ensure that everyone is heard, and that no one individual, including us, dominates the discussion. Less confident speakers need to be supported so they can contribute, while self-assured playworkers have a responsibility to listen to others and resist dominating the discussion. Enabling everyone to contribute is a shared responsibility.

Mentoring new staff

The induction programme for a new employee may involve several people because of their particular roles. It may be useful to appoint a 'mentor' for the new playworker. The mentor can act as a guide and advisor during the induction process and during the first few months as the new playworker settles into their new work environment.

When we are mentoring, we establish a relationship in which a more experienced colleague uses their knowledge and understanding to support the development of a newer, inexperienced or less competent member of the team.

The mentee draws on the knowledge and experience of their mentor to help them to take on new roles, progress through an organisation or make important transitions in the workplace. Effective mentoring relies on the mentor having a direct experience of the work of an organisation and the roles and responsibilities of the mentee.

Mentoring is used to 'support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be'[16].

When mentoring, our role is to develop and foster an on-going relationship that may last for a long period of time. The mentor supports a very flexible approach with meetings taking place as and when the mentee needs them.

When mentoring, we create a positive relationship and climate for open communication. When we don't have the answers or solutions to specific issues, we refer our mentee to other people or other sources of information. This again allows mentees to take responsibility for their own development as well as showing them that nobody has all the answers.

Supervision sessions

Reflective practice should be understood as an ongoing process embedded throughout playwork practice. Supervision sessions then refer to more formal, although hopefully relaxed, one-to-one meetings arranged on a regular basis. Whilst some practitioners may have peer supervision sessions, here we focus on managerial supervision where the supervisor is also the supervisee's line manager and therefore has overall responsibility for the performance of the team.

Supervision is a process of critical reflection[17] primarily concerned with improving the quality of the service offered by the supervisee to their service users[18] by analysing existing practice, relating it to theory and considering ways in which it might be improved. In this sense, supervision is a form of quality assurance with the emphasis being on supporting professional practice and developing people's ability to make good professional judgements. The primary focus of supervision is therefore the work rather than the worker[19], although the wellbeing and competence of the worker will obviously have a direct effect on their ability to carry out their role. Supervision is generally understood to have three main functions[20]:

- **Normative or administrative** – these terms generally refer to the element of supervision that is primarily concerned with ensuring work is performed on time and in accordance with the agreed standards and procedures of the organisation.

- **Educational or formative** – primarily concerned with the professional development and competency of staff, this element is about analysing practice to identify learning opportunities and the sharing of constructive feedback.

As the supervisor, we should produce a written record of each supervision. This doesn't need to be extensive but should capture the main issues discussed, any concerns raised, the actions agreed and who will be responsible for progressing them. We should then ensure a written record from the previous supervision is available so that agreed actions can be reviewed.

Developing a supervision agreement can help to clarify the purpose of supervision, the roles and responsibilities of those involved and how it will operate within the team.
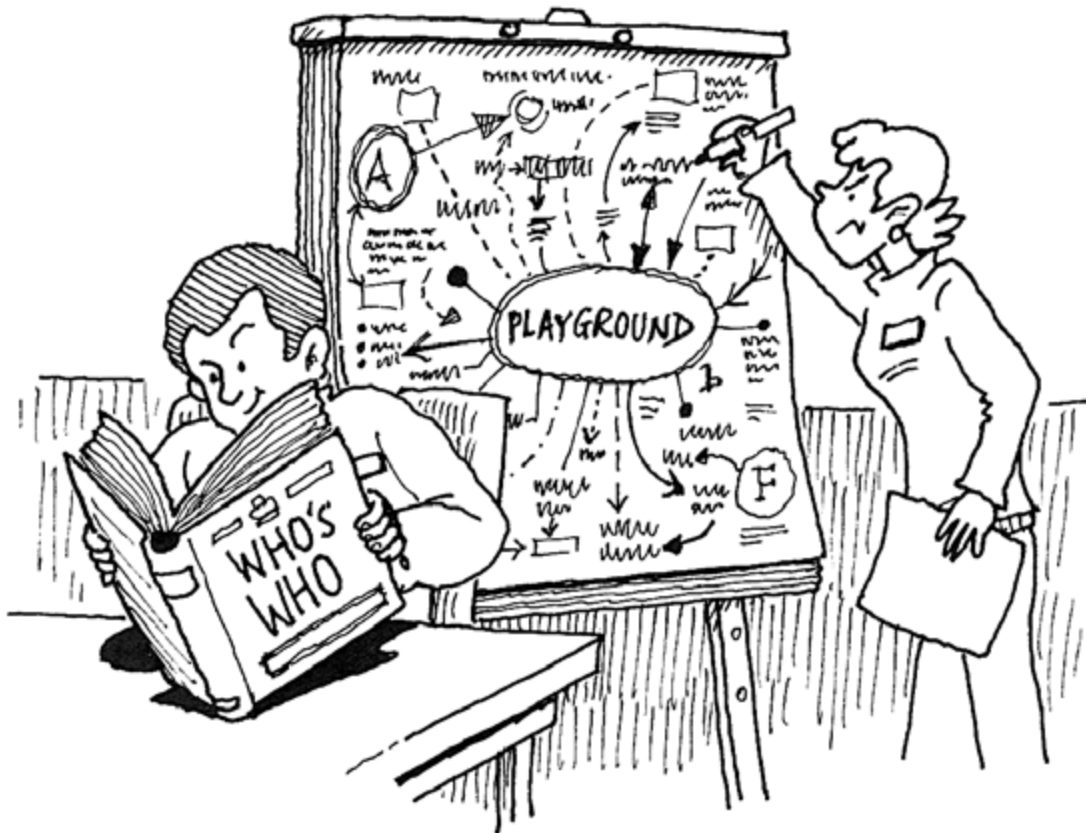
Staff appraisals

Appraisals are usually annual, one-to-one performance reviews, intended to evaluate the performance of an individual staff member over a particular period of time. These more formal assessments provide an opportunity to discuss how staff feel about their role in the team and where they see themselves going in the future, identify strengths and areas for improvement within their practice and plan any further professional development required. Some organisations also use the appraisal process to make decisions about salaries or promotion.

For newer staff, appraisals are often held a few weeks after the worker starts, or toward the end of the induction period. As well as exploring how the worker is settling in, we can use this first appraisal to review the recruitment and selection process and the induction programme.

Appraisals work most effectively when they are part of a supportive culture within an organisation committed to learning and development. It is highly unlikely that appraisals will be valued if they are seen as an annual 'tick box' exercise and they work best when there are also regular supervision sessions between the manager and playworker.

- **Supportive or restorative** – primarily concerned with ensuring staff can cope with their roles, this element focuses on staff moral, job satisfaction and the off-loading of concerns to help avoid 'burn out'.

Good supervision acknowledges and balances all three functions and is a two-way learning process with the supervisor acting as a 'problem poser' rather than simply an 'overseer' of work. In doing this, supervision should be empowering[21] and reinforce the professional identity of those involved.

Trust is essential to an effective supervision relationship[22] and so both the supervisor and the supervisee must take responsibility for developing and maintaining an open and honest dialogue, which includes active listening and the sharing of critical feedback[23]. In managerial supervision, both people must also accept that the supervisor has what Turnbull[24] describes as 'legitimate power' given by their position within the organisation. The emphasis is then on the supervisor to recognise the limits of their authority and model anti-oppressive practices by ensuring this power is not overextended[25].

Supervision sessions should take place in an environment where both people feel comfortable, however this will preferably be a private space where we are unlikely to be interrupted.

Working with other adults

Good playwork projects are part of the community. On a fundamental level, children are not just individuals but part of their communities with a complex web of relationships. Their play is both part of those relationships and a response to them. We cannot effectively advocate for play without knowledge of, and consequently an engagement with, the community in which we work. If our communities are genuinely to become play-friendly places then there must be a wider dialogue about children's right to play, and we have to involve other adults in this process.

Furthermore, for playwork provision to be sustainable, what happens there must be valued by not just the children who attend but by their parents and carers and other members of the wider community. An unloved play setting will likely fail. As playworkers it is important that we engage positively with parents and are in turn known, recognised and trusted by them. Of course, this won't happen overnight and may not be straightforward. Many playworkers are limited in the amount of time they have available for anything other than working directly with the children who

attend their setting. But, there are practical strategies we can use to ensure people know who we are and what we do.

We make sure we are seen and heard. We attend school fairs, concerts and performances for example. We use local shops and sometimes drop into the local cafe for a drink and a chat. We happen to find ourselves talking to parents as they wait to pick up their children from school. We source scrap at local businesses.

We advocate for play at every opportunity. We tell people what we do and why it's important. We meet key influential locals. This could be the local councillor or a local religious leader. It could be the headteacher or the school crossing guard or the parent who always seems to 'know a man who can'. All these various ways, although each may be small and appear insignificant, add up and contribute to the visibility of our provision and to a wider appreciation of the importance of play and playwork.

Seeing what happens and hearing why that is important from a committed and passionate playworker can act as a powerful counterweigh to more negative stereotyping around children and their play or to the prioritising of other agendas that serve to constrain children's opportunities to play. It is vital that we explain the ethos of our provision and in particular why it values and promotes children's right to play.

First impressions matter

When we meet someone for the first time their initial impressions of us will be especially influential in shaping their opinions, and this is true of children and adults. By creating a positive impression of ourselves and of our provision, we make it much more likely that parents will allow their children to attend. Are we welcoming? Have we clearly explained the playwork approach? Are we clear about how the provision operates and why? Have we answered any concerns, such as questions about our access policy or our approach to managing risk? Have we managed to explain all this in a clear and accessible way?

There is no substitute for clear and accessible first-hand information at the beginning of any relationship between playworkers and parents. By avoiding misunderstandings at the start we can prevent many of the most common difficulties in these relationships. Parents should also be given clear written information about the setting so that we can be confident they are aware of the type of provision they are allowing their children to access.

Maintaining regular contact with parents also has benefits when keeping information about children up to date. Parents are able to provide vital information and context that can help us make sense of their child's play behaviour and how it changes over time.

Parental trust

Without trust playworkers cannot operate. Most parents care deeply about their children and recognise, sometimes instinctively, that children need to play to grow and develop and be happy. Most parents too recognise that modern society is increasingly hostile to children playing out and that dedicated staffed play provision can help to address these constraints. However, if parents and their

children are to take full advantage of our provision there must be a level of trust in playworkers and how we operate.

How can we develop the level of trust between parents and ourselves? Warrell[26] highlights that trust is made up of three elements and each of these parts is relevant to our role as a senior playworker:

- **Competence** – Parents who believe we are capable in what we do will be more likely to trust us. We can enable trust by clarifying that we have the required knowledge, skills and experience to fulfil the role of the playworker. The information we provide to parents should also explain how we are able to meet the play needs of all the children who attend the provision. (Of course, some parents' views on what constitutes an effective playworker may be very different from our own).

- **Reliability** – We demonstrate to parents that they can count on us to do what we say we'll do. For instance, the setting should open and close on time. It is important that we behave in a consistent and dependable way.

- **Sincerity** – We mean what we say, that is, we genuinely care about play and playwork. We are fair, consistent, truthful and ethical in our approach and we demonstrate integrity.

We cannot force people to trust us, but by demonstrating these traits in our practice we can make it more likely that we will build trusting relationships with those around us.

Confidentiality

As we build relationships with parents and carers in our area, it is normal that they will tell us about their lives and their community including information about other adults and children. It is important that we keep any confidences we have been given and generally stay out of matters that are beyond our concern as playworkers. It is unprofessional for playworkers to gossip about other people's personal concerns. By respecting information that is private or sensitive we will gain the reputation that we can be trusted and this will increase the respect in which we are held as well as for the setting in which we work.

However, it is important to recognise that this commitment to confidentiality does not override situations where children's safety and wellbeing are in question. Passing on our concerns about a child is not the same as gossiping[27] and we should always follow our own setting's safeguarding policies and procedures.

When parents and their children's interests differ

There may be times when the views and needs of parents and their children differ. For example, a busy parent may ask us 'not to let their child get dirty', meanwhile their child is planning to finish their secret den in the bushes, dig for bugs, and play with water. A parent may ask us not to let their child play with another child who they disapprove of, but the two children consider themselves good friends. A parent may tell us that their child is not to leave until a certain time at an open access scheme, while the child wants the freedom to come and go with the other children. In all these cases, the parent's values and needs do not coincide with those of their child's or of the play setting.

While it is important we recognise and respect parental views about their children, these views do not override the policies and principles of the play setting. In most cases, first listening and acknowledging parents' views and then explaining carefully how and why we operate the play setting will be helpful. This is particularly so when we've been able to develop friendly relations over some time. Of course, this doesn't mean we are indifferent to requests that are entirely reasonable and appropriate. For example, a parent who is concerned that their child is being bullied is entirely correct to speak to us about the situation and should expect that we would respond appropriately. However, it would not be acceptable for them to aggressively confront and threaten the alleged bully in the play setting. Similarly, if children can only attend an open access playscheme with particular arrangements for collection or dropping off we should seek to work together with parents to find a workable solution that is in the child's best interests.

Sometimes, adults may have unrealistic expectations, for example they may assume that a school-based playscheme will have exactly the same rules as the school. They may also be misinformed about the

purpose of the play environment. For example, they may assume that the playworker's role is to entertain the children, or they may feel that the play environment should be risk free, or they may want a list of activities that a child can do. In practice, most of these situations can be dealt with through developing friendly supportive relationships, by listening courteously, and by giving constructive feedback when necessary. It is essential that other adults are aware of our professional responsibilities, and in particular what our role is as playworkers facilitating and supporting play.

Getting parents involved

To be sustainable, play provision needs the support of local adults and one area where they can be especially effective is in campaigning and advocacy. Parents can have considerable influence on local policy although many may not realise it. Local people have access to their local councillors who they directly elect to represent their interests. Consequently, they can campaign and advocate for play in ways that may not be available to us as playworkers.

Parents and carers can commonly become involved in our play setting in a number of different ways including as advocates but also fundraisers, resource gatherers and providers, sitting on management committees and even becoming a volunteer playworker. If parents become volunteers, again, there must be very clear rules on their roles and responsibilities including proper supervision, mentoring and training. It is our responsibility that volunteers adopt an authentic playwork approach and, however well meaning, do not adulterate the play space with their own agendas.

If our relationships with them are handled well, parents can make a valuable contribution to the running of the play setting – one that enriches the play environment and supports children's control over their own play, rather than one that overrides or diminishes it.

Working with other professionals

As well as parents and carers, it is important we have good relationships with a range of other local adults. Depending on the setting, these might include teachers, health professionals, social workers, police officers, registration and inspectorate services, park

and leisure management staff, and caretakers and cleaners. All of these adults need some understanding of play and playwork but it is a mistake to assume other professionals automatically share our views on the importance of play and the role of adults in facilitating it. It is essential we are able to explain what we do and why we do it and can highlight our professional framework and its theoretical basis. Of course this is no easy task and will happen over a period of months and years.

Everything about developing good relationships with parents also applies to other adults. Listening, reflecting back, recognising feelings and respecting differences are all important in forging and maintaining good relationships. It is also helpful if

we have some understanding of other professional approaches and where they differ from ours in their attitudes towards children's play. In practical terms, inviting these adults to see first hand what happens in the play setting can be an effective way of combating biases and misinformation about playwork provision.

Cultivating good working relationships with these adults is important for the effective running of our provision and its reputation and contributes to the wider process of promoting and advocating for play and playwork. As discussed in greater depth in *Volume 3 – Developing and managing a playwork project,* local community audits provide a good starting point in terms of getting to know your local community and the people and places in it.
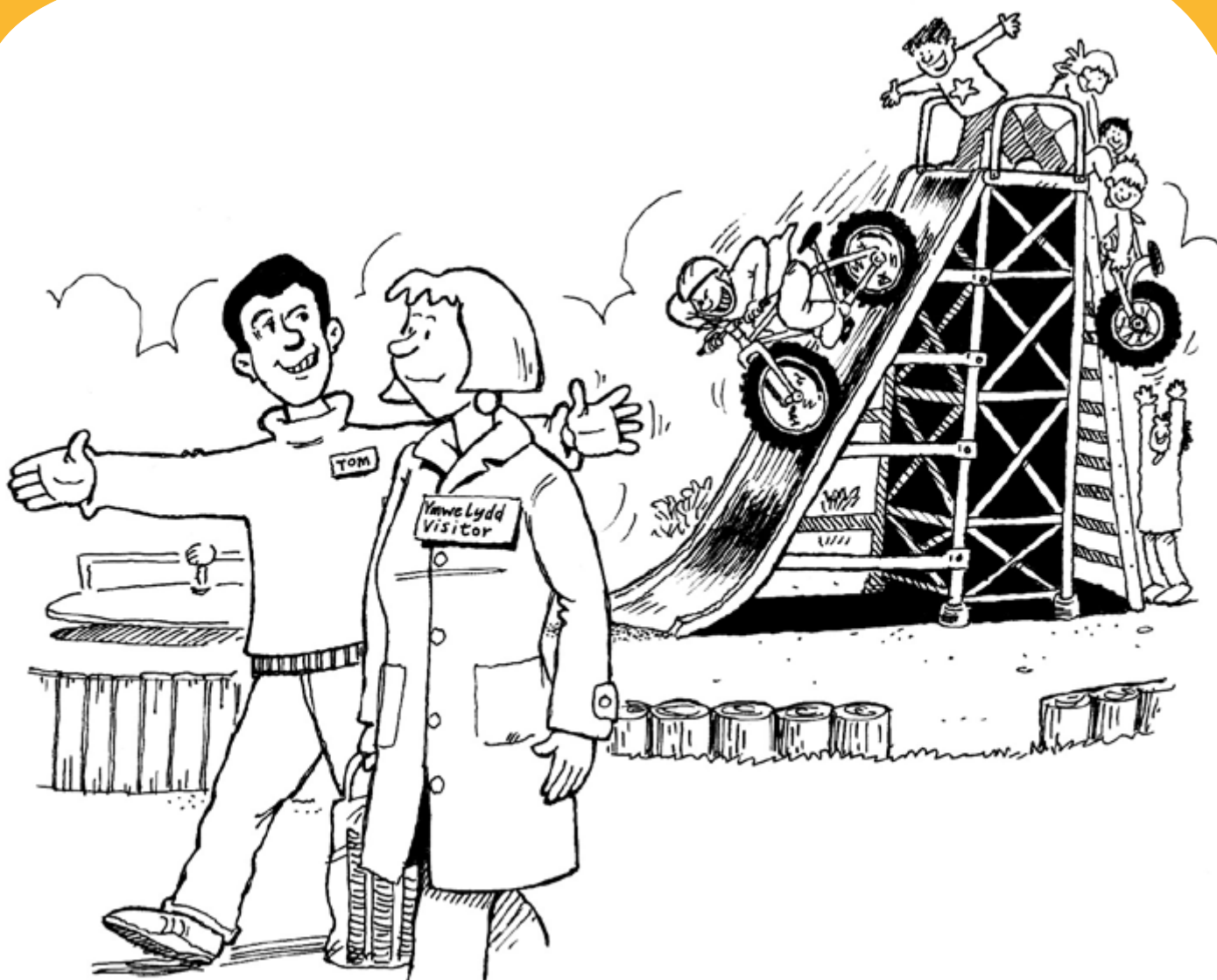
Handling conflict, criticisms and complaints

There are three C's that most senior playworkers wish to avoid in a play setting – conflict, criticisms and complaints. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts it is likely that these challenges will emerge from time to time because we are working with a diverse range of people, each with their personal opinions, beliefs, values, experiences and characteristics.

Even with sound induction, regular supervision, support and appraisal systems in place, conflicts can arise within our team. This can create tension, which we as managers have a responsibility to manage. As managers, we invest much time and energy into establishing a commitment to shared ideas, namely, facilitating opportunities for children to exercise their right to play. But, it is also important that we recognise that effective playwork teams are diverse. It is often the individual differences of playworkers that enable our teams to work successfully in the communities we serve.

That said, just because we value and recognise differences not everyone will always get what they want or always get on together. This sometimes means that playworkers have to do something they don't wish to do or go along with a decision that they do not fully agree with. When disagreements present themselves, it is our responsibility to try and help others in resolving them.

We might also receive complaints or criticisms from children, their parents or carers, other members of the public or other professionals. Dealing with them requires the use of our communication skills as well as personal qualities such as empathy, non-judgemental attitude, patience, confidence and professionalism. Listening is a critical skill in these situations. If we do not listen, we will not be able to fully understand the situation nor resolve the matter effectively. We always adopt a courteous and respectful approach but if we need to challenge someone's point of view, we do so constructively and in a way that makes clear our professional boundaries and the play setting's rationale.

If we receive complaints or criticism it is essential that we follow our setting's policies and procedures. Again, whatever the nature of the complaint, we should listen, try to empathise and try to take it professionally and not personally. How we behave will influence the complainer's behaviour and their perception of our provision, so we remain calm and focused on the issue and not the person. If the complaint is received in writing, we make sure we follow up any resolution in writing.

Why conflict occurs

People can have disagreements about a whole range of particular issues but in situations where these develop into more serious conflicts there are often other more fundamental underlying influences that we need to be aware of. Drawing on the work of Rahim[28] and Adirondack[29] these may include:

- **Different priorities and values** – People's values influence their behaviour and their attitudes towards what is right and wrong. For example, some adults will feel strongly that swearing in a play setting is wrong while others will feel that it is a normal and important part of children's self-expression and play cultures.

- **Misunderstandings** – People can misread and misinterpret communication and form opinions and judgements on erroneous or incomplete information. For example, a parent may sign a consent form without reading all the details and instead rely on their assumptions or what others say.

- **Interpersonal differences** – People have different personalities and temperaments that can clash and make it difficult to get on with one another. For example, one playworker feels it's important to share all their feelings with colleagues in regular peer reflection sessions, while another more private playworker finds this embarrassing and unnecessary.

- **Displaced emotions** – Sometimes conflicts occur because of displaced emotions such as when a person redirects their feelings onto a safer alternative. For example, a parent struggling to cope with a stressful situation at home or worried about the welfare of their children might turn up and shout at playworkers about something else that seems fairly insignificant.

- **Perceived unfair actions and decisions** – When things such as money, resources, and attention are, or appear to be, unfairly allocated, conflict can result. For example, a manager of a busy summer playscheme feels it is unfair that they have the same budget as a much quieter scheme with far fewer children.

- **Insufficient resources to meet the needs of the service** – Where resources are limited, competition for those resources can increase or it may mean that we are unable to offer a level of service that people expect. For example, if an event or activity becomes first come, first serve say, because of a lack of available places then competition and conflict may result.

- **Inappropriate organisational structures and procedures** – If our policies or procedures are unclear or non-existent this can lead to confusion and inconsistencies in the way our service is delivered.

Different styles for handling interpersonal conflict

What strategy should we adopt when we want to resolve a conflict? Should we force the issue and try to get our own way? Should we try to find a collaborative or compromise solution? Or should we try to avoid the situation altogether? There are several theoretical models that reflect these approaches. Rahim[30] outlines a model with five different styles to resolving conflict:

1. **Integrating** – This approach emphasises openness and collaboration towards solving problems to the satisfaction of both parties. Integrating involves two stages. First, confronting the problem through clear communication and analysing the causes of the conflict. Next, problem solving so both parties benefit. The goal of this approach is 'I win, you win'.

2. **Obliging** – Also known as accommodating, this style plays down any conflict and emphasises common values and interests. An obliging person may give up some of their own concerns to satisfy the concerns of another person. The goal of this approach is 'I lose, you win'.

3. **Dominating** – Also known as competing. A dominating person stands up for what they believe to be right at the expense of the views of others. They will use their authority and power to win at all costs. The goal of this approach is 'I win, you lose'.

4. **Avoiding** – This approach involves postponing, side-stepping or ignoring a conflict. It is also known as suppression and an avoiding person may deny any conflict exists. Consequently, they ignore their own and others' needs and concerns. In this approach, it's often a case of 'I lose, you lose'.

5. **Compromising** – People who adopt a compromising style take the middle ground and favour solutions where both parties give up something. Compromisers give up more than those who adopt a dominating approach but less than those who take an obliging approach. They explore a problem in more detail than the avoiding style but in less detail than the obliging style[31]. The goal of this approach is 'I win some, you win some'.

Each of us will have a natural preference for one or two of these styles but in fact, all of these styles can be appropriate depending on the circumstances. When should we adopt each of these different styles? Rahim[32] summarises each as follows:

1. **Integrating** – This approach is helpful when there are complex issues to be resolved and that need time and commitment from all parties to produce better solutions. There is some evidence that this approach is the most constructive and the most effective in managing social conflicts[33]. For example, we are planning a joint project with another organisation that has a slightly different but related agenda and ethos. For the project to be successful we need to use the ideas and skills of both parties so that any solutions are appropriate to both organisations' policies and attitudes.

2. **Obliging** – This approach is helpful when maintaining relationships is vital and the issue is more important to the other party. It's also appropriate when we believe we may be wrong. For example, we failed to pick up some scrap from a local business as we thought the arrangements were for another time. The other party feels aggrieved as they went to a lot of trouble to help. We consider this relationship to be much more important to us and the setting than simply arguing over a date, so adopting an obliging style seems to be the most helpful approach.

3. **Dominating** – This approach is best when the issue is trivial and when a speedy decision is needed. It is also appropriate when unpopular actions need to be taken and when technical decisions need to be made but others around us don't have the necessary expertise. For example, it is a hot, sunny day and some children at our setting say they want to go to the local beach. A parent offers to drive, saying he can get most of the children in his large van. Sadly, we have to decline the offer, as we know that this would go against all the procedures our setting has for off-site trips. Perhaps we can find an alternative that will meet the children's request?

4. **Avoiding** – This approach is best when the issue is unimportant or when a cooling off period is needed. For example, at a management meeting one of the members is angry that their special 'prize' mug has been used by someone else and left unwashed in the sink. We decide it's best not to get involved and instead carry on with business.

5. **Compromising** – This approach is appropriate when the goals of each party are mutually exclusive and consensus cannot be achieved. It is also applicable when an integrating or dominating style has not been successful. For example, we have two members of staff who both want the same period off for their holiday. To resolve this situation fairly, both sides may have to compromise.

Being aware of our own triggers

'Triggers' refer to those instinctive feelings and thoughts that prompt us – or trigger us – to react and respond in the ways that we do. Examining and exploring our triggers is an important part of reflective practice when we question our motives, emotions, underlying beliefs and assumptions.

As well as looking at triggers that impact on our intervention with children, we should also consider triggers that can impact on our interactions with adults, for example our colleagues, other professionals, and parents and carers we meet through our playwork.

Personal experience and prior knowledge

We all have our own history and prior experiences that affect our reactions to present situations. Our brain is designed to keep us alive, alert and surviving. So, consciously or unconsciously, it looks for patterns or similar situations that relate to our current experience. Whether we remember them or not, our previous experiences – positive, negative and seemingly indifferent – all come to the fore to 'help' us respond in the present. The reality is that sometimes this is helpful and sometimes it isn't.

We cannot help but bring and apply what we already know to a current situation. However, we don't know everything and neither does anyone else. There is always more to learn. Through research and understanding, what we knew yesterday might be different today and again tomorrow. So, it is important that we are always open to new learning and to change.

Beliefs

Beliefs are similar to knowledge and may be rooted in knowledge, but what we **believe** has much more emotional power and greatly influences our attitudes. We all have our beliefs, whether these are handed down to us or forged through our experiences. They can be religious, political, spiritual, personal or social. Some of our beliefs may be clear in our minds whereas others can be in our subconscious.

For some of us, certain deeply held beliefs could become absolute and therefore unquestionably 'correct'. But are they true, do we have the right

to impose these on others and how do they influence our perspective, reactions and responses? We need to be aware that our beliefs shape our view of the world and when something happens or is said that challenges that view, we experience to a greater or lesser degree what is called 'cognitive dissonance'[34]. This term describes the discomfort and tension we feel when we are presented with information that contradicts or conflicts with what we already 'know'.

In the playwork sector, we tend to have a view of children that regularly conflicts with many adults who largely see children as needing protection or correction. When we present our view and advocate for children's rights, especially the right to play, adults who hold that view will experience cognitive dissonance and so it is quite understandable for them to be uncomfortable or dismissive. Recognising this helps us manage those conversations in a more supportive way.
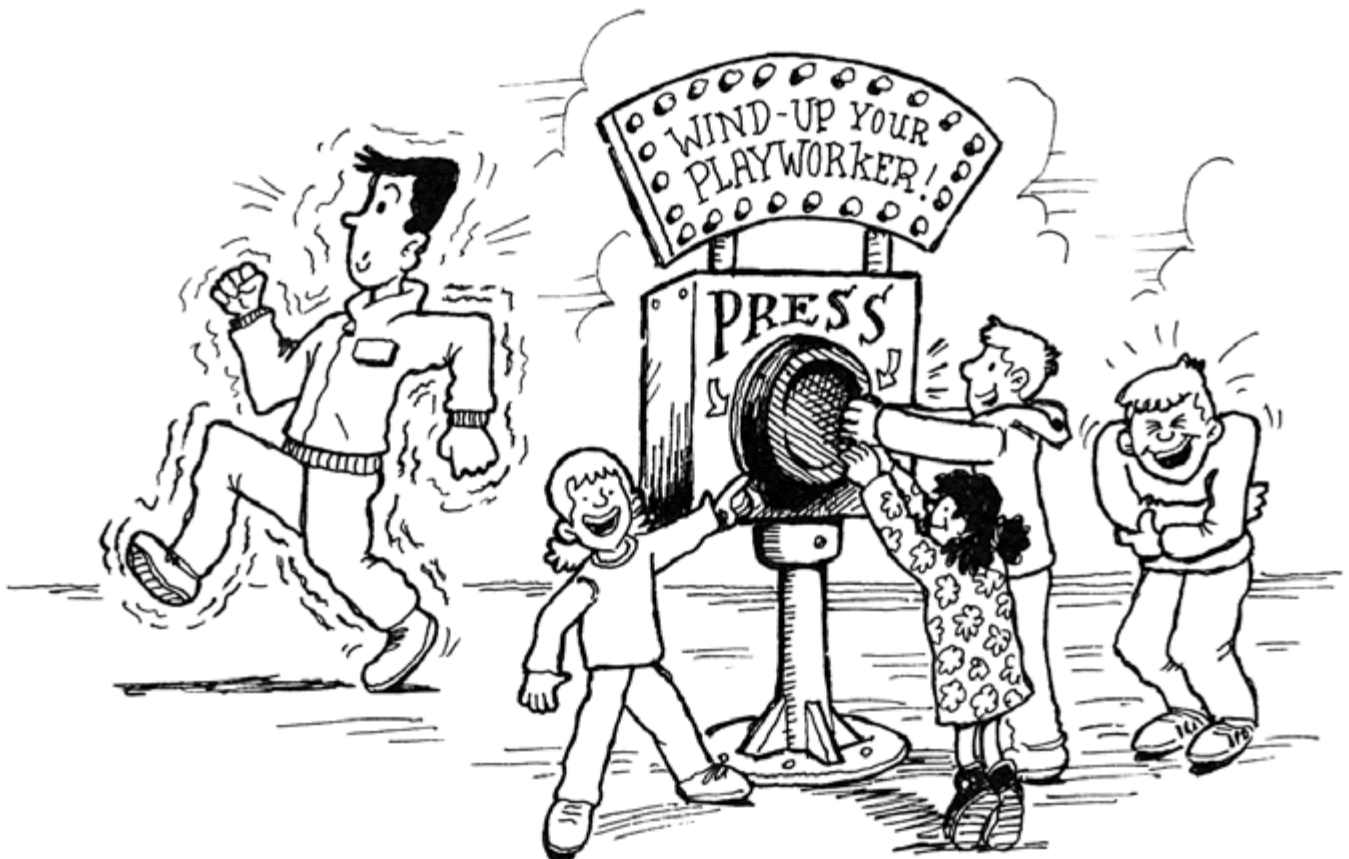
Personality

We all have different personalities, and these of course affect how we behave. This is not right or wrong. But we do need to be aware of how our own particular personality impacts on other people and events, so that we can use this positively where appropriate, or modify our words and actions accordingly. 'Who we are' is not set in stone – we will have both characteristics that we have genetically inherited and traits that we have developed through experience. Through our future experiences and through personal choice, we can change.

It is useful for us to understand our own and other types of personality, as it deepens our comprehension of different perspectives and actions. There are many personality type tests available. Some, with just a few questions and a quick result, are not very useful. Some are more tried and tested than others, for example the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator[35]. However, it is generally recognised that human beings are not easily 'typed' – that is predicted or categorised, and that personality itself is somewhat of a 'moving feast of traits' as we go through life. It is beneficial to explore and understand the genuine differences between extroverts and introverts and finding out where on that spectrum you most comfortably fit and why.

Culture

We often connect the word 'culture' with religion or nationality. We often connect it with other people rather than ourselves not recognising we all have our own culture. This is too simplistic. The *Oxford Dictionary* describes culture as the 'customs, civilisations and achievements of a particular people or time' but this is not restricted to whole nations or races. Culture is the result of all the daily conversations and negotiations between members of a group, family or organisation.

The people involved are continually agreeing (sometimes explicitly, usually tacitly) about the 'proper' way to behave and do things and how to make meanings about events around them.

How is the culture of your family (both now and as a child) expressed? What is the culture of your work organisation or staff team? What symbolises the culture of the area you live in? Is there a playwork sector culture? Are you aware of children's own culture?

Our culture can trigger our reactions and responses. And for the most part, our culture feels 'normal' or 'right' and everyone else is 'different' or 'odd'. We can immediately see how this might be a cue for misunderstanding. If however, we understand that culture is personal and not general, we will seek to understand the cultures of others – adults and children, as well as recognise the influences of our own.

Emotions

How we feel at any point in time is likely to be the most common trigger for what we say and do. Our emotions may be indicative of our state of health – that is, we may be indifferent because of insufficient sleep, or irritable because we have a headache, or withdrawn because of ongoing back pain. Beyond this though, our emotions are usually the first indicator of our underlying thoughts, assumptions and beliefs – this is why when we are reflecting, we should ask ourselves what we feel/felt and why.

Developing an awareness of what we are feeling and why, is crucial for analysing and understanding our interventions with both children and with adults and for developing better practice. Sutton-Smith[36] provides an exploration of the links between our primary and secondary emotions and play as a survival mechanism.

Conclusion

Throughout all aspects of their lives, children's opportunities for play are directly and indirectly influenced by adults. The primary focus of playwork should always be children and their play. However, the quality and success of playwork provision is dependant on the actions and attitudes of the adults who facilitate it. Like children, each of those adults is an individual with their own characteristics, preferences, thoughts, feelings and experiences.

The role of the playwork manager is to support and guide those individuals, using the Playwork Principles to establish and maintain a coherent and consistent team ethos and way of working.

Doing so will require time, effort, reflection and continuous communication. The result of which will be better play provision for children.

Equally important to this role, is the building of positive working relationships with parents, carers, other community stakeholders and adults outside of the playwork profession. Again, time and effort spent developing and maintaining these relationships will improve other people's understanding and perception of playwork. This means that more people value the provision and as a result helping to reduce the likelihood and severity of potential conflicts. Also, advocating for play in this way can positively influence children's opportunities for play beyond the playwork project.

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Notes

www.play.wales

Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.