



Developing and managing a playwork project

Playwork guides – volume 3

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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.

This guide is aimed at senior staff who have some management responsibility within a playwork project.

This might include:

- Dedicated facilities such as adventure playgrounds or out of school childcare
- Playwork sessions that revisit the same locations, for example playschemes in parks
- Peripatetic projects, for example play ranger or street play projects
- Temporary 'pop-up' projects.

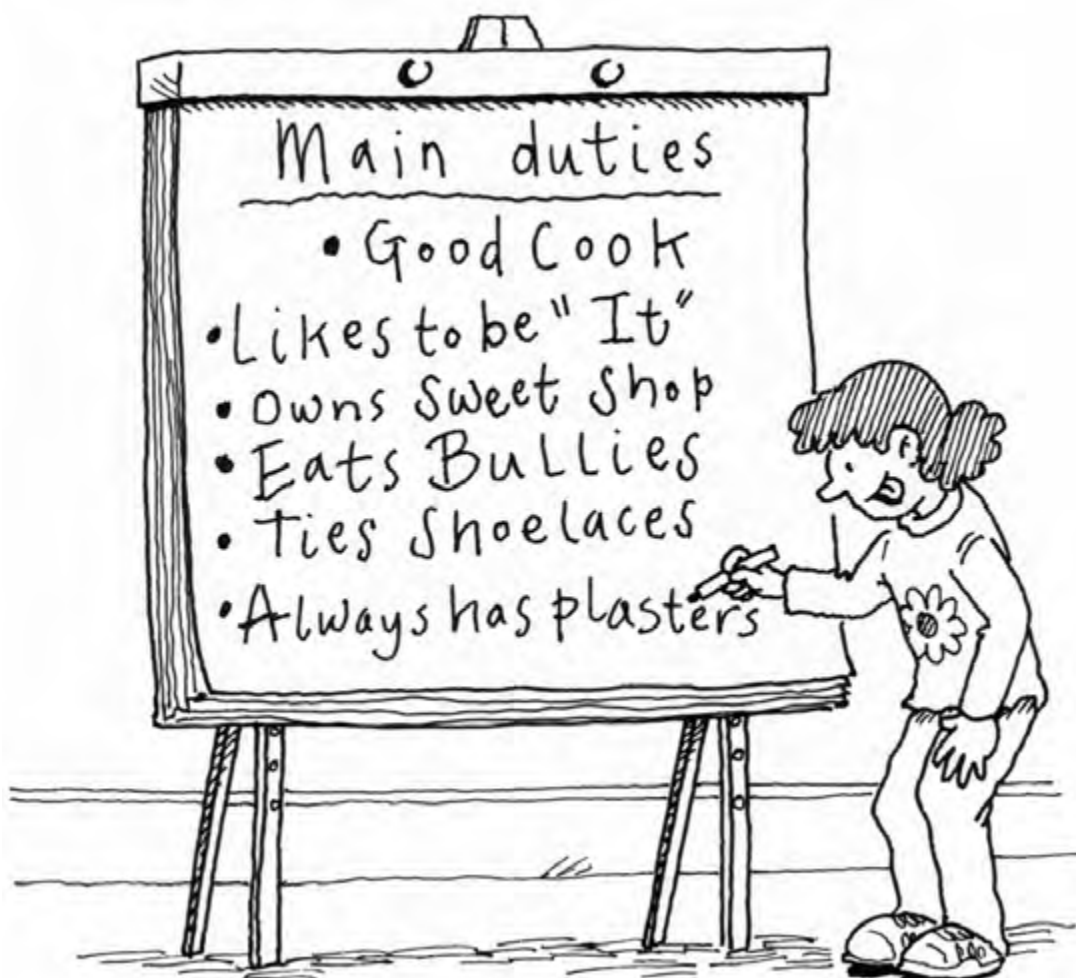
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For more information on play and playwork theory and practice please see [volume 1](#) and [volume 2](#).

As part of setting up a playwork project, this guide addresses issues associated with recruiting, selecting and inducting staff. Issues associated with the ongoing management of staff are addressed and included in greater detail in *Volume 4 – Managing playworkers and working with other adults*.

This guide is split into three sections:

1. **Planning for play** – essential things to consider when making preparations for a playwork project
2. **Developing an organisational framework** – ensuring that our policies and procedures support playwork practice as well as meeting our duty of care to service users and protecting the reputation of our organisation
3. **Evaluating quality** – looking at ways in which we can continue to review and improve the quality of the provision we are responsible for.

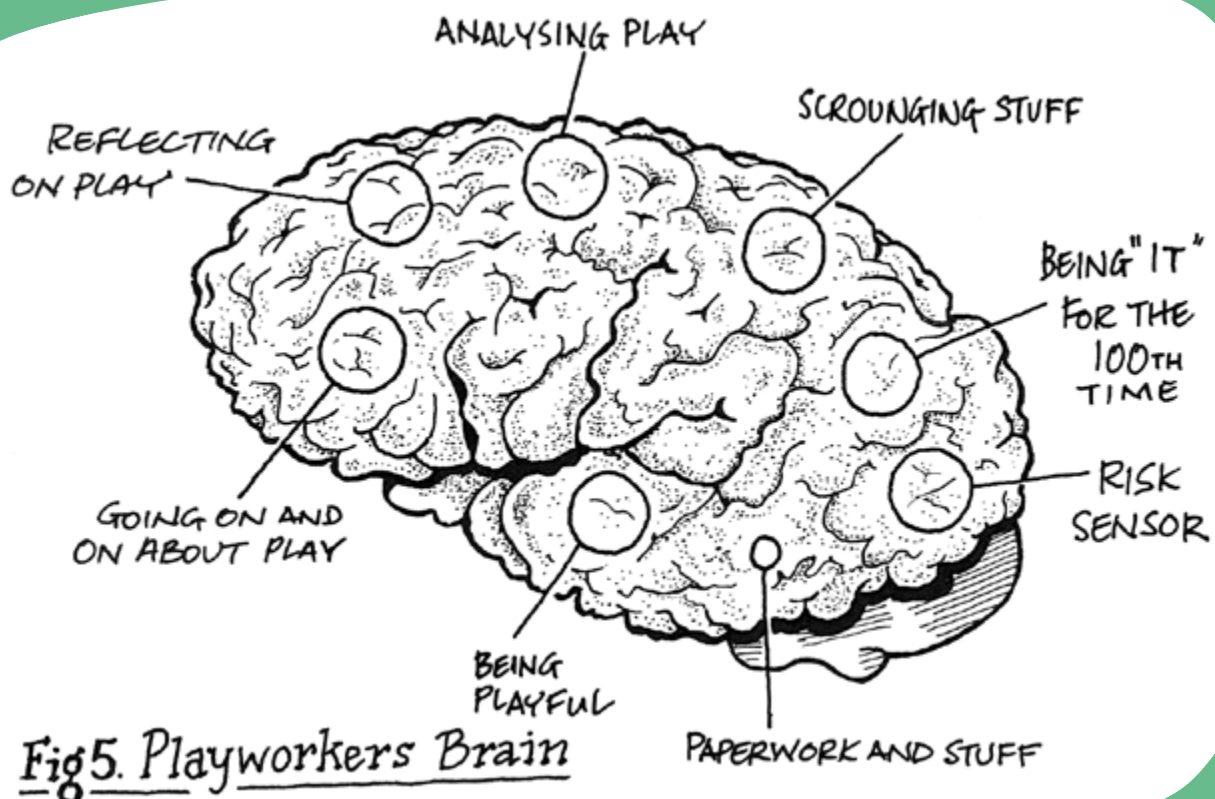


Personal and professional skills and qualities of a senior playworker

The playworker with responsibility for the day-to-day management of a play setting has many different titles – playwork supervisor, senior playworker, playworker-in-charge, playwork manager. We shall use the term senior playworker to refer to this role hereafter.

To manage play settings, we use many professional skills and personal qualities. We are playworkers as well as managers of the setting and the leader of a team – even if that team is only two of us. Kilvington and Wood¹ suggest that a senior playworker requires skills in the following areas:

- Accessing and managing information and resources – ongoing research using a range of sources, the results of which are available for use, as well as day-to-day recording and administration
- Budgeting, planning and overseeing financial resources
- Communicating and networking with other professionals and sectors – keeping playwork alive, developing links and keeping in touch with other sectors that work with children as well as sharing the playwork message
- Communicating well – using the widest range of communication techniques to aid understanding
- Delegating – allowing other playworkers to take responsibility
- Developing the team – helping individual playworkers to develop their team and individual skills
- Having a vision – knowing what the provision is aiming for
- Knowing your team’s strengths and weaknesses – recognising team members as individuals, all of whom have something to offer
- Listening – not just hearing without true understanding
- Making decisions – and taking responsibility for those that are made
- Monitoring and evaluating – using best playwork practice benchmarks
- Overseeing the work of the team – knowing what is being done, why it is being done and who is doing it
- Recruiting, selecting and keeping staff.



Planning for play



Planning is simply the process of adopting a scheme or course of action to achieve our aims and objectives. It involves thinking ahead, anticipating needs and actions, and establishing priorities. Effective planning is dependent on having a clear purpose and a sense of what we want to achieve. When planning, we should always be mindful that we are planning for children's play – and that play belongs to the children. We plan for children to freely express their play behaviour, not to fulfil our own desire for order and to be in control. A good starting point for any playwork project is to think about what it is we are aiming to do. What is the purpose of the provision we are developing? What do we want the outcomes to be? How will we best achieve those outcomes? And how will we know if we are achieving them?

Different types of planning

Different circumstances require different approaches to planning and planning can occur over different timescales depending on its purpose. Below are some common types of planning that senior playworkers may find useful:

- Long-term or strategic planning is concerned with our vision and what we ultimately want to achieve. Examples of long-term planning might include, building a new play space, advocacy and marketing.
- Tactical planning is usually medium or short-term and is concerned with how things are done and ensuring that the aims of our strategic plans are met. Examples of tactical planning might include getting the local councillor to be supportive of our cause or re-engaging children with the playwork provision who had become disengaged.
- Contingency planning is identifying and preparing for what could go wrong, for example, having some different opportunities planned if the weather is terrible.
- Recurrent planning refers to regular routine events such as staff meetings, rotas or gathering materials.
- Day-to-day planning involves the immediate preparation of resources for play.
- Project planning refers to a specific project with fixed timescales such as preparing for a special event.

One type of planning we would want to avoid is known as crisis management. This is not really planning in the traditional sense as it involves repeatedly dealing with threats after they have happened. It constantly reacts to situations rather than plans ahead for them.

Planning with timelines

If we are involved in preparing particularly complex or lengthy plans, we should consider using a timeline. A timeline is simply a graphical representation of something showing the passage of time. It allows us to see at a glance when key actions must be started and completed and whether we are on track with our plans.

Getting to know the local community

Ensuring that all children have the opportunity to access rich and varied play environments is part of our role as playworkers, as Playwork Principle 5 tells us: 'The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play'.

To understand what we should offer, it is important to consider the local community in which children live. We can do this by following three lines of enquiry:

- 1. Availability of opportunity** – We need to know about children's local environments and what they offer for play. What types of opportunities are available and how accessible are they to children? Where are children allowed to go and where are they not? What can children do in the places where they are allowed to play? Does the environment favour or have a bias towards particular types of behaviour? What, if anything, are children missing out on?
- 2. Culture and attitude** – We also need to know about the culture and attitudes within the local community. How does it view children and their position in society? How much value do adults place on children's play? How do parents and carers feel about their children engaging with risk in their play? Are they aware of our type of provision, its rationale and how it operates? Although our focus is always on children, we should not forget that most parents control how much access their children have to opportunities for play outside the home and that we act as advocates for play (Playwork Principle 4).

- 3. Geography and demography** – We also need to gather information about the geography and demography (the study of population size, density, and distribution) of the local community, as well as the location of schools and other provision for children, for example youth clubs.

When we know what is available to children, we can assess it against what children actually need and want. We can then use this information to inform where, when and how we deliver our provision to best meet our aims and objectives. Our lines of enquiry will also help establish what we might need to do to ensure we are reaching all the children in our community. This might include identifying extra-ordinary barriers to play experienced by some children and doing further work to overcome them, for example targeted advocacy or marketing.

Local community audits with children

In simple terms, an audit is a checking system or an evaluation. It's a way to find out what we have, what we don't have, and what we should have.

An audit can be about both quantity and quality. A child at play will instinctively interpret a space and make changes to it, or else simply move on because the space doesn't offer, or has ceased to offer, what they need or want. For playworkers responsible for auditing a local community, the most reliable source of information will be the children. However, when we are auditing, we need to remember that this is our agenda and not theirs. We need to be mindful not to infringe on their time for play, but if children are to feel the play provision belongs to them, their participation is beneficial in supporting a sense of ownership. Without duress and with some guidance there are a number of ways children can inform an audit of their local environment.

Looking at maps with children can be a good way to analyse the geography of an area and begin to understand how children are playing within it. It is critical that we do not share precious information on children's secret places with other adults who might stop children playing in those places, unless there is an urgent and serious danger.

Other methods that can be used with children include:

- Drawing pictures of what they like to do
- Interviewing other children about their interests
- Producing and completing questionnaires with their peers
- Taking photos of places the children value for playing.

Going out into the community, sensitively observing children playing and chatting to them will also help gather information. If we do this, we should make sure not to look too 'official' as children are likely to scatter and disappear!

It is important to remember in any of our work with children not to promise things we can't deliver. What we are doing at this stage is mapping and interpreting the space and what happens within it to support decision-making processes. If at any point through the process we convey mixed messages over the future development of the setting or resources, children will feel disengaged and their sense of ownership damaged.

Location, location, location

The success of our playwork project will depend on where it takes place. There is no point running provision in a remote location where children can't

access it. The provision needs to be easily accessible to as many different children as is reasonably practicable and this is likely to mean being in close proximity to where they live. However, where we run provision is also likely to influence the opportunities on offer. When choosing a location for our provision we should consider the following:

- **Where children want to play** – It may be that children want the project to run in a place where they already play, or they may want us to support them in accessing a new space. Either way, the best way of establishing this is to ask the children who we want to attend.
- **Where children are allowed to play** – Speak to parents and carers about where they are prepared to allow their children to play and how far their children are allowed to walk or ride without them. It may be that in the early days we have to run very close to people's homes but over time, as trust and confidence in the provision grows, we might move further away to make use of more interesting spaces.
- **Where we are allowed to run provision** – Even when running provision in public spaces it is important to check that we are allowed to do so. This might include contacting the landowner and/or local authority.



- **Where we can be seen** – If possible, the provision should be in the view of local residents so that passers-by can see what’s going on, making them more likely to come and take a closer look and hopefully making them feel more at ease with children’s playful behaviour.
- **Where we can be accessible** – Children need to be able to access the site by foot and are unlikely to walk long distances from home. A central location within the community can be ideal. Alternatively, the project may move between several different sites, encouraging children from different areas of the community to attend. As far as is reasonably practicable, measures should also be taken to ensure the site is accessible to all children. This includes giving consideration to access for disabled children, including those who use wheelchairs.
- **Where we can offer a varied and interesting landscape** – Ideally this would be a natural environment with grass, trees, bushes, slopes, earth and water. Such elements will encourage a wide range of play behaviour even before the environment is enhanced by playworkers providing additional resources. Where this is not possible the responsibility is on us as playworkers to find alternative ways of providing these types of opportunity.

(Above section adapted from Wrexham Council’s Community Playwork Package)

If developing a dedicated site for play, for example an adventure playground, there may be considerably more work involved in securing and constructing the play space. This is likely to include working with surveyors, planners and builders as well as seeking specialist advice to overcome challenges.

If we operate in a shared space, we often need to advocate for children’s play with other users of the space and with the governance of the premises. For example, a typical village hall has multiple uses and requirements. It is essential that we inform other users of the times we will be using the building and the outdoor space. It is also helpful if close neighbours know when children will be playing, probably noisily. We need allies rather than being seen as ‘that rowdy lot with all those kids just mucking about’.

Getting the basics right

Children will struggle to play if their basic survival rights are not met. These include protection from violence, exploitation, abuse and neglect, as well as access to food and water, shelter and warmth, toilets and hygiene, and medical treatment. This raises two important issues.

Firstly, part of a playworker’s role may be to help address infringements on other rights to enable children to play. This might include working with other agencies, becoming involved in child protection issues or feeding hungry children. This also highlights the importance of having appropriate safeguarding policies and procedures in place before we deliver provision (see section 2 – **Developing an organisational framework**).

Secondly, when providing for play we need to consider the extent to which we should provide for other rights and this is likely to depend on the type of provision we are facilitating. For example, in a dedicated setting we might have access to toilets, wash basins and even a kitchen but if running a mobile playscheme in the centre of a housing estate, children might easily go home to get food, if available, or use the toilet. We should also consider the extent to which shelter from the weather will be required and, for all types of provision, we need to be able to provide first aid in the event of an accident and have a procedure in place should emergency services be required.

Thinking about diversity and inclusion

‘The concept of diversity encompasses acceptance and respect. It means understanding that each individual is unique and recognizing our individual differences. These can be along the dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies. It is the exploration of these differences in a safe, positive, and nurturing environment. It is about understanding each other and moving beyond simple tolerance to embracing and celebrating the rich dimensions of diversity contained within each individual.’²



An inclusive play provision is one that upholds the right of every child to play, regardless of the diversity of their life experiences. As playworkers we must be proactive in challenging discrimination, prejudice and inequality by enabling children to access our provision. When planning our playwork project it is essential to think about how we will provide for a diverse range of children, recognising that some will require more support than others to access their right to play. Whilst there is much more to inclusive playwork practice than explained here, this guide is primarily concerned with what needs to be in place to make our provision accessible to as many different children as possible. This includes developing physical environments, staffing structures, policies and procedures appropriate to the work.

The Social Model of Disability

There are many ways children may be disabled from accessing our play provision and there is much to be learnt from the disability rights movement, which identifies some useful models for understanding the challenges and informing change. The Social Model of Disability recognises people with impairments as being disabled by a society in which they do not have access to the same rights as other people. This model argues that our society needs to make changes to accommodate people with impairments. Investing in accessible transport, for example, may enable a person with mobility issues to get to a place where they want to play. This approach is different to the medical model of disability where people tend to be identified by the name of their impairment and this label leads to assumptions being made about what that person is like, can or can't do.

As senior playworkers we are responsible for managing the environment to accommodate and provide for the play of every child, ideally without them being aware of our work. This mirrors the expectation that society has to adapt to meet the rights of people with impairments.

Universal design

Another practical outcome from the disability rights movement was the growth of universal design. The philosophy was that through simple design measures society could become far more accessible to far more people. A classic example is the 'dropped curb' that is commonplace now so that we do not give it a second glance. A parent with a buggy, a person who uses a wheelchair or who has mobility or perceptual issues, or an elderly person, finds it easier to negotiate the pavements and roads because of this.

When choosing a location or designing a space for our playwork provision we need to think about how it can be made accessible to a wide variety of different children whilst simultaneously offering a varied, flexible and exciting place to play. The play setting has to have a quality play offer for every child. Not all children need to be able to play with or on all things, but they all need the fullest possible range of play options. A play setting with a good supply of loose parts (explained further in [Resourcing the provision section](#)) can enable every child to create whatever they want for themselves.

Specialist equipment

Some children with severe and complex impairments may require access to specialist equipment to enable

them to access our provision. However, the extent to which this is possible will depend on the resources available, the type of provision we are facilitating and its setting. A dedicated facility like an adventure playground should have accessible entrances and doorways and toilets large enough for two playworkers. It might also have a wheelchair, a hoist and a changing table available. It might even have a shower room and a laundry room complete with drier and spare clothes storage.

However, whilst all of this may be desirable it is not always practically possible. It is lovely to have a soft play room for rough and tumble, but a mattress, giant bean bags or gym mats will do just as well. We can decide to invest thousands of pounds in ball pools and sensory rooms but outdoor spaces can provide for similar experiences equally well – places where children can lie on the grass, splash water, dig in sand, horrify people with mud, and be quiet or noisy. A good supply of loose parts (see Resourcing the provision section) is again essential.

Ensuring adequate staffing levels

Arguably the most important element in any staffed provision (other than the children) are our playwork colleagues. How we respond and react and the attitudes we display will directly influence the atmosphere we create for playing and, therefore, largely govern the success or failure of our provision.

If we have responsibilities for staffing, we need to ensure we have adequate numbers of staff available and that those staff have the personalities, motivation, knowledge and experience to support playing children. This includes having sufficient capacity and the necessary skills in our staff team to provide individual children with higher levels of support when necessary.

Whilst the whole team should be able to work with every child, some children may need almost constant support, which will require a playworker to focus their attention on them. The team may also need to manage intimate care tasks, supporting children with toileting or changing them if necessary. Consideration must be given to how and where this will happen and the confidence of staff to carry out these tasks.

The numbers of staff required may also vary throughout the year and we will have to anticipate demand, for example, by ensuring additional playworkers are available during holiday periods or when opening hours are longer. Our planning might include ensuring we have the right blend of knowledge and skills in our team or making sure we make the best use of playworkers with specialist skills.

Our project needs to have enough staff to ensure that the sessions are adequately supervised, and the number of staff required will therefore depend on the number of children expected to attend. We may also be required to comply with staffing ratios set out by relevant inspectorates in our country.



Recruiting and selecting staff

The quality of play provision is dependent on recruiting, selecting and retaining appropriate staff with appropriate attitudes and knowledge for the job role. Effective recruitment and selection must always be carefully planned to ensure children are getting a competent effective playworker who is able to meet their needs, and that they are protected from inappropriate poor practice. Careful planning also helps to ensure the organisation meets its legal responsibilities for fairness and equality and helps match up the right applicants to the correct post. When creating staff posts and recruiting staff we need to consider:

- **Staff hours** – In addition to the time staff work directly with children they need to be given additional hours for other duties. This might include site checks, collecting and preparing resources, packing away, producing monitoring, publicising provision and following up on concerns about individual children. Time should also be given for staff to reflect on their practice as an essential element of improving the quality of provision.
- **Qualifications** – What playwork qualifications will staff be required to hold prior to their employment? In Wales to meet the National Minimum Standards at least one staff member must have a level 3 qualification in playwork. Some staff will also need to hold a first aid qualification.
- **Job descriptions** – It is important that all staff have a job description that outlines their general role and responsibilities. This may include to whom the position reports, specifications such as the qualifications or skills needed by the person in the job and the salary range.
- **Pay scales** – Staff pay scales must reflect the responsibility and skills required in the role, which for playworkers includes the supervision and care of children. The rate of pay should also be in line with that of staff in similar roles across the local area.

- **Contracts** – All staff employed on the playwork project should have a written contract. This should include the person's contracted hours and rate of pay.

Anyone wanting to work with children needs to undergo checks to determine whether or not they are 'suitable' to do so, and this includes a check on any past criminal record. In England and Wales, a DBS check is required from the Disclosure and Barring Service. However, it is important to recognise that criminal record checks are only a part of the equation. Safe recruitment should be a robust and holistic process, where both employer and employee take responsibility. This means that a job applicant is open and honest, and the employing organisation has clear recruitment and selection procedures that recognise both the importance of conversations at interview about previous work and life experiences, and the necessity to seek proper references and follow these up.

Employers should always:

- Ask for photographic documentation to confirm identity
- Check qualification documentation
- Have at least two people on an interview panel and use the interview to explore candidates' understanding of their responsibilities when working with children
- Ask for, and take up, written references from at least two people who are not family members
- Verify references and record them properly in staff files.



Employers should also have:

- A code of practice which clarifies what is expected of all staff and volunteers.
- A whistle-blowing procedure so that if the behaviour or practice of any successful applicant does give cause for concern later on, there is a clear process to raise and deal with this.
- A sound induction and training process to welcome new employees on board, clarify roles and responsibilities and ensure they are equipped to carry out their work. Induction needs to be properly planned and consistently delivered to ensure that we treat all new employees fairly and that they receive the same information.
- Regular supervision and appraisal of all employees.

Securing sufficient funding

Ultimately, the success and sustainability of our playwork project is likely to come down to money and how much we will need will depend on the type of provision we are developing. For example, there may be many more set up and running costs involved in establishing a dedicated site like an adventure playground compared to a temporary 'pop-up' project in a park.

Organisations may need to access a number of different funding streams to get all the money they require. For example, the costs for staffing and insurance may come from one funder while extra money for equipment and staff uniforms could come from another.

It is also important to identify which costs are critical to the running of the project (for example staff wages), and which would be beneficial but not crucial (for example funding for a van to transport resources). Most projects take several years to become properly established and so it may be useful to create a long-term action plan rather than expecting to have everything in one go.

Organisations which have charitable status are often best placed to access the widest range of available funding streams and therefore are more likely to be able to find enough resources to support their continued work.

When calculating how much funding is required it is important to think about all the potential costs that may be incurred, this includes:

- **Management costs** – Will someone be employed to provide line management and supervision of staff working on the playwork project? If so, how much of their time will this take up and what are the potential financial implications of this?
- **Staff wages** – How many staff, how much will they be paid and how many hours will they be paid for? We also need to consider holiday and sick pay and any other employment benefits our organisation might offer.
- **On costs** – When calculating staff costs it is important to include the on costs for each staff post. This is the percentage added on to a person's rate of pay to cover things like tax and pension contributions.
- **Pay roll** – Who will provide pay roll for the organisation, including calculating staff's tax contributions?
- **Insurance** – All organisations responsible for the delivery of staffed play sessions must have appropriate employers' and public liability insurance.
- **Utilities** – Will our organisation have bills to pay from the energy and water used when running provision and if so how much is the annual cost likely to be?
- **Resources** – A busy playwork project will go through resources at a considerable rate. So, it is important that there is a budget available for buying resources at the start of the project and some additional money to replenish stock on a regular basis.
- **Publicity** – What are the plans for promoting the playscheme within the local community and how much are these likely to cost? Posters and flyers can be produced at a low cost but may be less effective than large banners, colourful flags or uniforms.

- **Transport** – Will staff be expected to transport resources in their own cars or will a van or other suitable vehicle be provided? If a vehicle is provided will it be leased or bought and how will the running costs, including tax, insurance and fuel, be covered?

(Above section adapted from Wrexham Council's Community Playwork Package)

Resourcing the provision

When developing a playwork project it is important to think about the range and type of opportunities we intend to provide for children and therefore the types of resources or 'props' we want them to have access to. Our role as senior playworker includes overseeing the collection, inspection, preparation, maintenance and storage of sufficient and suitable resources for play. There is likely to be equipment that we have to spend money on, for example first aid kit supplies or tools. However, much of what we will need can also be sourced for free.

Loose parts

Simon Nicholson's 'theory of loose parts' is based on his assertion that 'in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it'³. Loose parts refer to 'anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, piled one on top of the other or combined to create interesting and novel structures and experiences'⁴.

Loose parts can be natural or synthetic and have high play value because unlike a purchased toy or game, they do not prescribe how they should be played with. This leaves all possibilities open and provokes increasingly imaginative use. When we audit our play space we should see a prevalence of loose parts over less flexible, more expensive resources that have a singular use or purpose. If the resources provided for play have little monetary value it won't matter as much if children damage them or use excessive amounts, meaning we won't have to intervene as often. Loose parts are not difficult to provide, and many can be found for free or at very little cost, if you know how and where to look.



The art of scrounging

Scrounging is foraging or scavenging around in an attempt to get something for free (or perhaps very cheaply). We can scrounge almost any kind of 'stuff' – waste and left-over materials, boxes and pallets, paint, or furniture and equipment.

We can also negotiate the use of premises or land for free and persuade others to donate their time or services. The list is endless.

Scrounging does not mean stealing, and we should always gain consent from the owner of any equipment we take. In particular, we ask permission before taking anything from a skip. Most people will be happy to donate what they don't want, particularly if we make them aware it is for children's benefit.

To be an effective scrounger we need to be resourceful and use our imagination. We need initiative, creativity, guile (or craftiness), local knowledge and an awareness of what might constitute a hazard to health or safety.



Top tips for being an effective scrounger:

- Don't be embarrassed – scrounging is an important playwork skill and often we are doing our sources a favour or making them feel good by helping us.
- Find out where 'stuff' can be found – which people, organisations, businesses, homes, or shops (sources) have 'stuff' that we might want or that is worth having.
- Work out the best way to approach the source to scrounge effectively – for instance, which ones can we chat to in person, or who should we write to formally? It may be worth keeping a record of what method worked with which source, and the names and interests of people who were helpful so that we can approach them again and make them feel that they are important to us.
- If we are making a visit, we think about our communication style and how we present ourselves. We want these people to do us a favour, so we need to make a positive impression.
- If writing a letter or email, we keep it short, polite and to the point. We explain clearly why we want the materials. We explain how a donation will benefit the children in ways that will be important to our source.
- We keep our sources happy. We show our gratitude and keep our organisation in their minds. We send thank you letters and feature them in our newsletters and make sure they know how we are getting on by including them on information mailing lists.
- We never let sources down by not turning up to make a collection. We remember the name of the person we approach and use it. If we borrow 'stuff' we make sure it is returned in good condition and on time.
- We keep proper records of sources and contacts that have been made so that they can be used again, and so that we don't return to a source too soon or appear to be nagging. It is worth keeping a record of potential sources for ongoing use.
- We will win some and lose some – it is important that we aren't 'put off' if we are turned down or ignored sometimes.

To make decisions about whether the 'stuff' we collect is safe enough for children's play, we risk-benefit assess all scrounged materials and if in doubt we don't use them. In particular, we avoid toxic, poisonous or explosive materials, mouldy surfaces, sharp edges, damaged objects and electrical goods (unless they have been certified safe by an appropriate person).

Specific resource planning

There is a large distinction between making sure there are new opportunities available and imposing a planned activity programme. Our interventions should enable children to extend their play but not completely take over. However, there are occasions when the children decide they want to do something special that could require additional planning. For example, borrowing the local scout tent for a sleepover, borrowing large mats to play 'WWF' wrestling, or working out how you can build a rocket out of wooden pallets. This will mean putting arrangements in place, possibly with a lead-in time for large equipment. To ensure all the key health and safety aspects are covered see the [site checks section](#).

Promoting the provision

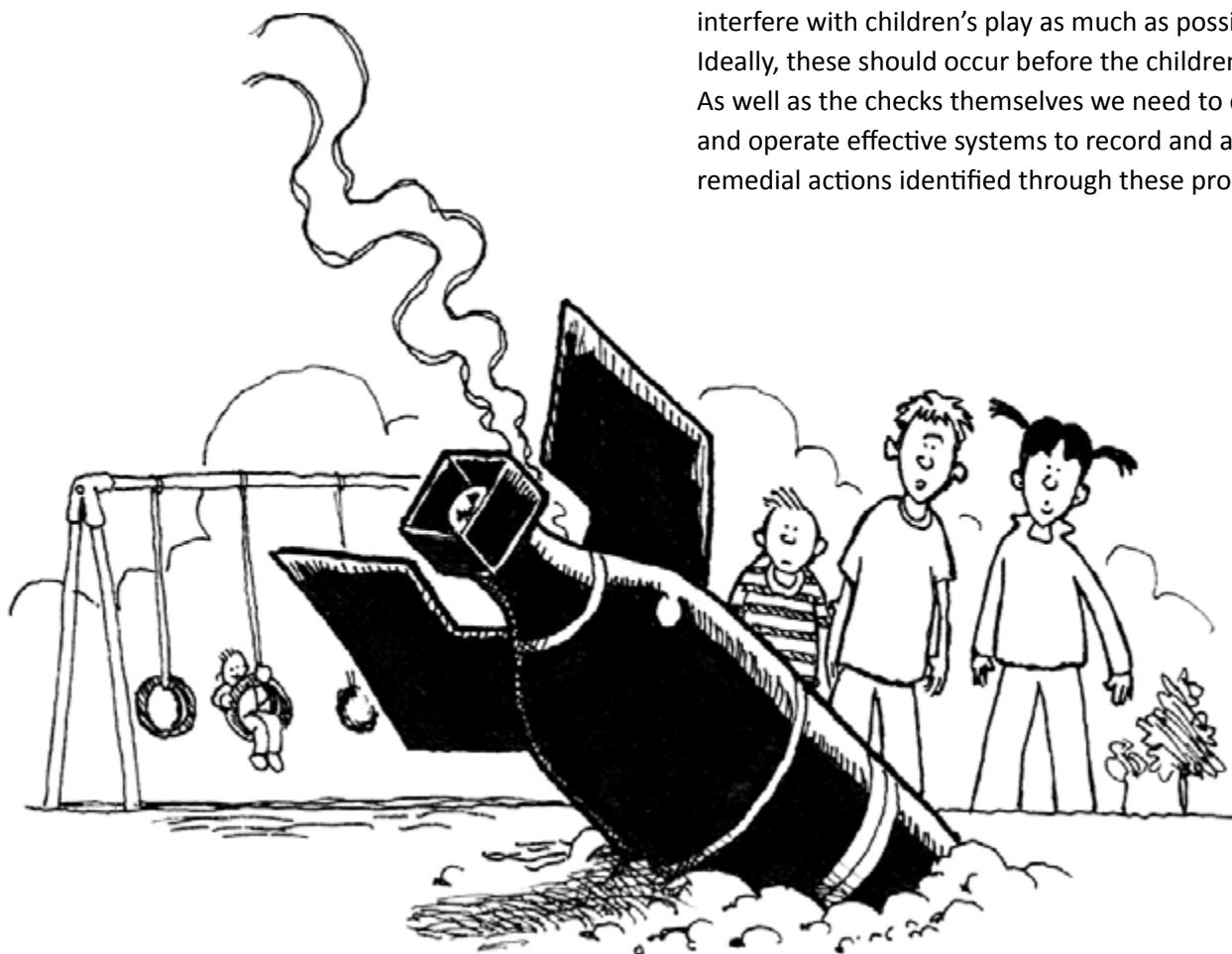
It is good practice to have literature that advocates for the child's right to play and promotes our setting to children, parents and carers, the community and other professionals. These might include information packs for parents and carers. Equally, this could include posters that you put up around the play space to raise awareness of the value of play or taking risks in play, for instance.

Planning for trips

If we are responsible for trips then our planning might include organising transport, administration, providing information, managing staffing levels, planning for individual children's support requirements, and setting roles and responsibilities. It is also advisable to go on a 'dry run' to identify any potential shortcomings in the plan.

Planning maintenance, repairs and site checks

Regular checks and repairs of our site and resources should be scheduled and planned so as not to interfere with children's play as much as possible. Ideally, these should occur before the children attend. As well as the checks themselves we need to establish and operate effective systems to record and act on any remedial actions identified through these processes.



Developing an organisational framework



An organisational framework refers to the policies and procedures that employees and volunteers are expected to adhere to. These documents guide what we do and how we do it and therefore influence how the play setting operates. It is important that our policies and procedures support good playwork practice, as well as ensuring we meet our duty of care to service users and comply with the legal responsibilities of our organisation.

Playworkers work to the Playwork Principles but we also work within the law and other regulations specific to our type of setting or employer. The laws, regulations and guidance, laid down by governments and government supported organisations, continually change and are updated. Balancing these different agendas while ensuring the play process takes precedence in our work can be a challenging task. Among the laws, strategies and policies we must never lose sight of the playing child. Playworkers exist to support the play process⁵ and we must be vigilant to uphold the child's right to play in the midst of powerful and competing adult agendas.

Playworkers in different nations may have to work to different strategies, policies and regulations dependent on their country's government's orientation towards children. How play is viewed varies from nation to nation and ranges from a tool to implement social policy to an indispensable right vital for children's wellbeing and development.

Playwork provision in each country may also be subject to particular inspection regimes. For example, in Wales there are specific regulations and minimum standards relating to childcare and staffed play provision, which is regulated and inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). Senior playworkers should be aware of the particular responsibilities laid down by these inspectorates.

In this section, we will look at some of the policy agendas or areas of societal concern that are likely to influence the way in which playworkers operate. Where possible, examples from the UK are provided to illustrate the types of requirements placed on playworkers.

Developing policies and procedures

The policies and procedures required by a play setting will depend on its size and its level of formality as well as any specific legal duties, statutory guidance, regulations and standards it is required to comply with. To be in line with the law we need to:

- keep up to date with changes
- know about legal requirements and non-statutory guidance and standards
- question and challenge ourselves and others to ensure that the way the law (including regulation and guidance) is interpreted supports children's play.

As a general guide our policies and procedures should address the following topics:

- Play and the purpose of our provision
- The role of the playworkers
- Equal opportunities, inclusion and anti-discriminatory practice
- Admissions and access including registration of children and procedures for arrivals, collection and departure of children
- Health and safety – including risk-benefit assessments, food hygiene and the control of substances hazardous to health (COSHH)
- Administration of medicines and guidance for children who are ill or infectious
- Safeguarding – including child protection procedures, anti-bullying guidance and whistle blowing policy
- Responding to children's challenging behaviour
- Code of practice for staff and volunteers
- Complaints and grievance procedure for children, parents and other members of the public
- Data protection and confidentiality
- Staffing issues including recruitment and induction, qualifications and training, grievance and disciplinary procedures, appraisals and professional development.
- Visits and outings – trips off site.

This collection of policies and procedures should form the basis for staff induction and should be easily accessible and available to all staff, service users, funders and inspectors.

Play and children's rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underpins playwork both in concept and practice. This puts a responsibility on us from the highest international level to place children's right to play at the centre of our policies and procedures.

The UNCRC has been ratified by more countries than any other human rights treaty in the world. Some countries, like Wales, have gone further by adopting the UNCRC as part of domestic law, placing a legal duty on policy makers to consider impacts on children's rights.

In 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted General Comment no. 17⁶ that clarifies for governments worldwide the meaning and importance of Article 31 of the UNCRC, which includes children's right to play. This General Comment enhances understanding of Article 31 rights and provides guidance on the procedures necessary to ensure its implementation for all children without discrimination.

More information about the General Comment can be found at: www.play.wales/play/right-to-play/

National legislation in each country will vary in the extent to which it is supportive of children's play. In Wales, there is strong commitment to play and playwork through the Welsh Government Play Sufficiency Duty. In general terms, whilst play may be recognised as valuable in some policies it is often not followed through with performance measurement⁷. The key policy focuses tend to be on, play and crime reduction, play and early learning or play and obesity.

As recognised in General Comment no. 17, adult-led, structured activities are more commonly endorsed and tend to be favoured over play and informal recreation. It is therefore vital that our settings have a strong and clear play policy that emphasises our commitment to upholding children’s right to play and focuses on this as the purpose of our provision.

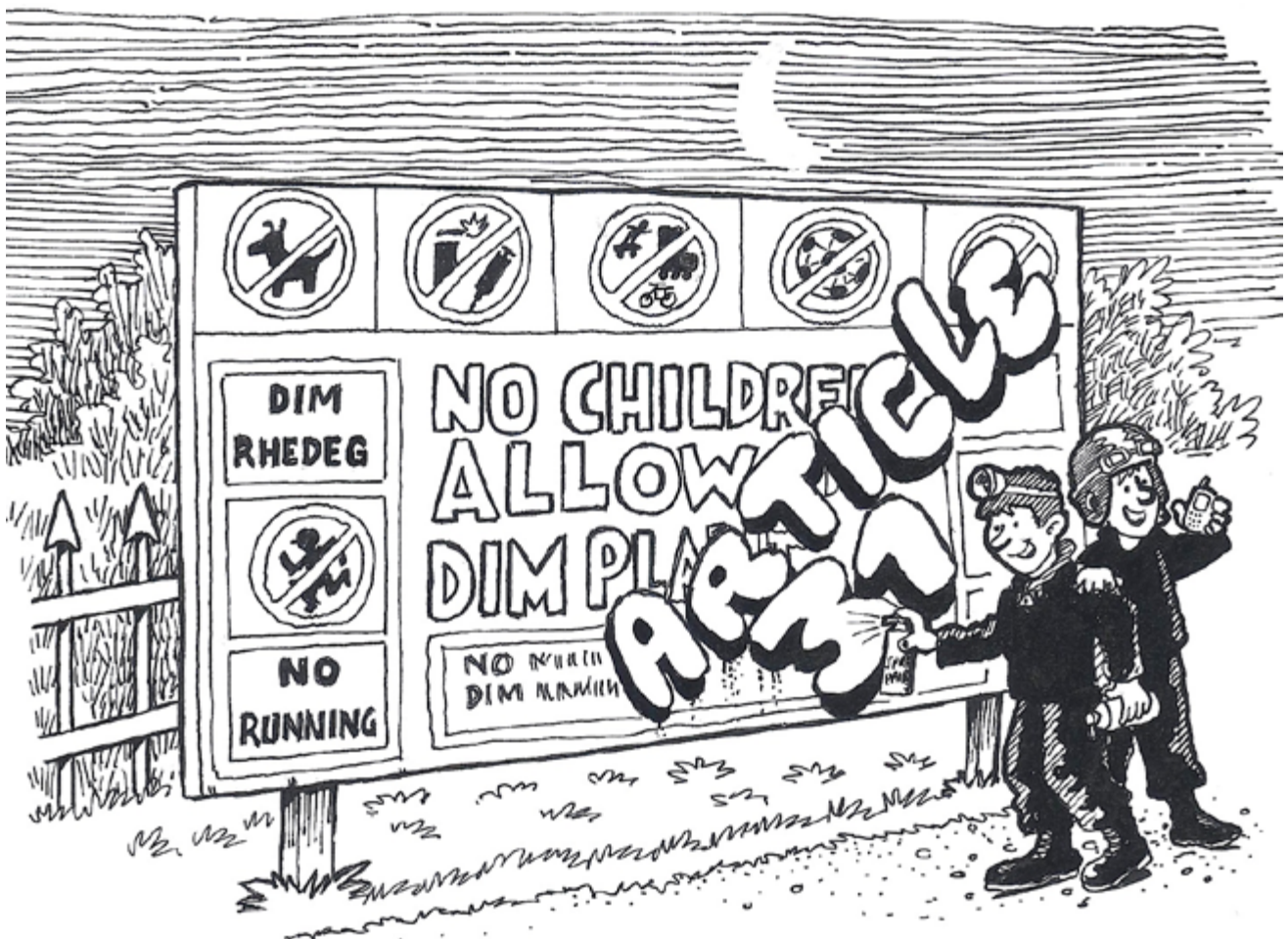
Our play policy needn’t be long or complicated but as a minimum it should outline that:

- Play is crucially important to children’s wellbeing and development and provides wide-ranging benefits to children both now and in the future
- Play is a natural instinctive process that needs to be under the control of the child
- All children have a right to play although their opportunities have been increasingly restricted by modern society
- Stimulating and flexible environments can support and encourage play
- Children want and need to take risks as part of their play.

The policy should also include statements about the role of the playworkers and how they facilitate play at the setting. It should describe a playwork approach that is inclusive, holistic and non-judgemental, and underpinned by the professional and ethical framework – the Playwork Principles. The essence of our beliefs about play and how we support it should also feature in the information we give to parents. Not only does this make it clear what, how and why we facilitate play opportunities, it also forms part of our responsibility to advocate for the importance of play.

Equality

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010 places a general duty on organisations to eliminate unlawful discrimination and victimisation, advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations between people. These considerations should be apparent in the day-to-day business of playwork providers and should be reflected in our policies and service delivery.





The act asserts that everyone has the right to be treated fairly and protects them from discrimination on the basis of certain characteristics such as disability, race, religion, gender or age. It also protects against indirect discrimination, for example treating a person unfavourably because of something connected with their particular characteristics or failing to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled people⁸.

The term 'reasonable adjustments' can refer to:

1. Changing the way things are done (such as changing an organisation's policy or practice)
2. Changing physical features (such as removing barriers or providing reasonable alternatives)
3. Providing extra aids or services (such as additional support for individuals).

Making reasonable adjustments means ensuring that a disabled person receives, as close as possible, the same standard of service usually offered to a non-disabled person. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) suggests that 'reasonable' is defined by the effectiveness of the proposed change, its practicality, its cost, and the organisation's resources and size. The duty to make 'reasonable adjustments' is 'anticipatory', that is, we cannot wait until a disabled child wants to use our provision, but should think and act in advance about what disabled children with a range of impairments might need.

To prevent discrimination, employees should be guided by an appropriate equality policy, have clear terms of employment, and should have access to relevant information, for example through equality

training. The duty is also a continuing one and we should regularly review our provision to determine whether we are effectively and fairly meeting the needs of all the children who attend. This could be through an access audit.

Further information about the Equality Act 2010 can be found at: www.equalityhumanrights.com

As playworkers we assert that all children have the right to play because all children need to play. 'We focus on the playing of the children while at the same time meeting their individual needs so that we remove disabilities'⁹. This comment by Penny Wilson sheds light on a number of crucial points in our approach to equality and inclusion.

- It is the play that is important. Our primary responsibility as playworkers is to facilitate and support the play process. For children, play is the chief means of making friends and forming supportive relationships, and 'a sense of inclusion is more dependent on friendships and fun than simply being in the same location as others'¹⁰.
- Different children experience childhood in different ways – it is not a singular, universal phenomena¹¹. Different children have individual experiences and competences. However, they all have a right to play.
- Our approach to equality is an active one. It is not enough to want participation of all children – we must continuously enable participation to happen¹². Frequently, the biggest barriers to play are not physical but fearful attitudes and beliefs¹³.

Health and safety

While everyone would agree that health and safety is important and nobody wants to see a serious accident happen to a child or anyone else, health and safety legislation has, on occasion, been used disproportionately and with the unachievable goal of eliminating all risk. Legislation that was designed for hazardous industries has been applied in a blanket style to all occupations, including ones where serious dangers are extremely rare, like playwork. Concerns about litigation and the aggressive marketing of claims management companies have led many to adopt a fearful, defensive approach to working with children that, we would argue, does not put their play and wellbeing first.

Fortunately, many in the playwork and childcare sectors, as well as many parents, are challenging this climate of fear that has developed around health and safety. Crucially, it is also being challenged by the regulators and by government itself.

In the UK, play provision is legally governed by Health and Safety at Work and Occupiers' Liability legislation. These Acts of Parliament 'impose a duty of care on providers and occupiers'¹⁴. Importantly, the level of care required implies that service providers must do what is reasonable to protect service users from harm. As explained in *Managing Risk in Play Provision – Implementation guide*:

'There is no legal requirement to eliminate or minimise risk, even where children are concerned... the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act requires that risks be reduced "so far as is reasonably practicable".

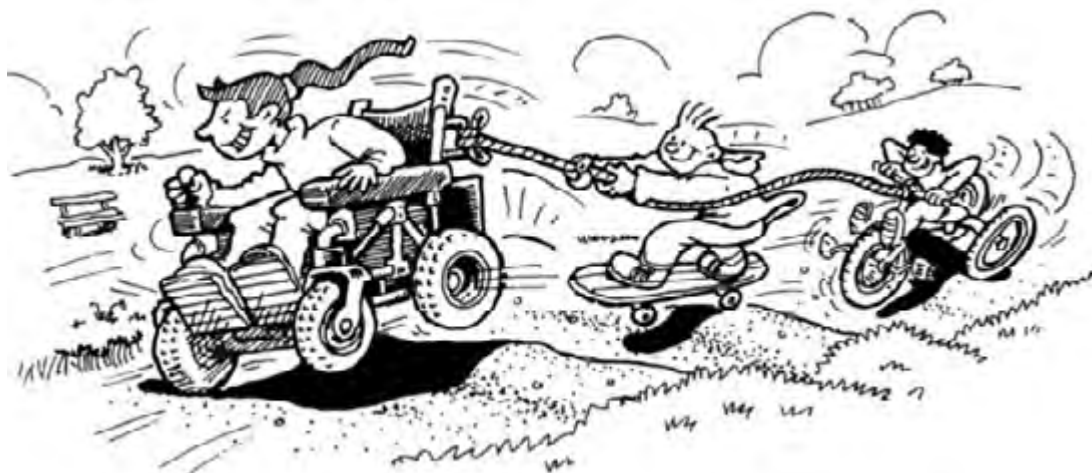
The legal requirement to carry out risk assessments implied by this principle was stated explicitly in the *Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations...* These regulations impose a legal duty on providers to carry out a "suitable and sufficient assessment" of the risks associated with a site or activity, and to act accordingly.'

The authors go on to further emphasise the principle of 'reasonableness' and the importance of paying attention to children's capabilities:

'The Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 states: "The common duty of care is... to see that the visitor will be reasonably safe in using the premises". It also states that "an occupier must be prepared for children to be less careful than adults". However, court judgements show that, while the courts view children as being less careful than adults, they do not view them as careless, incapable or vulnerable in an absolute sense. As they grow up, they can be expected to take on ever more responsibility for their own safety.'¹⁵

They also point to legal support for thinking about the benefits of play alongside any potential risks: The Compensation Act 2006 states that the courts may take into account the benefits of activities when considering the duty of care.

In 2010, the UK government published *Common Sense, Common Safety*¹⁶, which recommended taking a 'common sense' approach to health and safety, and moving from risk assessment to risk-benefit assessment. It also considered reviewing the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to separate out play and leisure from workplace contexts. As for children's play spaces the report notes:



‘There is a widely held belief within the play sector that misinterpretations of the Act are leading to the creation of uninspiring play spaces that do not enable children to experience risk. Such play is vital for a child’s development and should not be sacrificed to the cause of overzealous and disproportionate risk assessments’¹⁷.

Health and safety legislation in Britain is enforced by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), the national independent watchdog for work related health and safety. In 2012, the HSE published a high-level statement¹⁸ promoting a balanced approach to risk.

This statement makes clear that:

- Play is important for children’s wellbeing and development
- When planning and providing play opportunities, the goal is not to eliminate risk, but to weigh up the risks and benefits
- Those providing play opportunities should focus on controlling the real risks, while securing or increasing the benefits – not on the paperwork
- Accidents and mistakes happen during play – but fear of litigation and prosecution has been blown out of proportion.

The HSE has also endorsed the Play Safety Forum’s influential guide *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide*. This guide recognises that children need challenge and uncertainty in their play and describes how play providers can balance the benefits of play against the risks. This process of risk-benefit assessment is now recognised ‘as an appropriate approach to risk management across play, leisure and education’¹⁹.

Risk-benefit assessment

Before we consider the specifics of what a risk-benefit assessment might look like it is vital that we have a ‘philosophy, a rationale, or agreed purpose, and to state what it is’²⁰. Decisions need to be made against a policy background that makes clear the values and principles on which we base our decisions about risk, and why risk is an essential component in children’s play. The ethos of assessing both risk and benefit

should also be reflected in the information we give to parents and other adults, to both inform them and challenge any risk averse attitudes.

The process of evaluating a wide range of risks and benefits can be complex and demanding and requires a detailed knowledge of both, but it needn’t be onerous or excessively bureaucratic. The point of carrying out a risk-benefit assessment is to manage the health, safety and wellbeing of children so they are able to play. It is not primarily about avoiding liability. Playworkers in the UK are required by law to keep records detailing their risk assessments and managing and monitoring a clear audit trail is part of good risk management. As a senior playworker, we ensure that our risk-benefit assessments are accessible, secure and up-to-date and that they are informed by the organisation’s policy and understood by all staff.

In essence ‘risk-benefit assessment is a tool for improving decision-making in any context where a balance has to be struck between risks and benefits’²¹. For playworkers, typical situations requiring risk-benefit assessment could include children’s use of fire or water, children climbing and playing at height, children using tools, self-built structures, the construction of rope swings and so on. The point of the process is to come to an informed and reasoned judgement. Importantly, this process might include the input of expert advice. There are situations such as those requiring detailed technical understanding that are beyond the competence of many playworkers. For example, what is the appropriate timber for building and the implications of any industry standards. Such experts are able to offer helpful advice and guidance but the final decision, and responsibility in law, about balancing risks and benefits rests with the provider²².

Below, we have included a generic set of questions taken from *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide* that could make up the basis of a risk-benefit assessment²³. The aim is to evidence reasonable and practicable judgement and as such you should consider including sources to the information you have used to form your judgements. A risk-benefit assessment might prompt you to consider:

- What are the benefits for children and for others? They might include the range of benefits that play

has on children's wellbeing and development, benefits to the local community, benefits from reduced costs, and/or benefits from a reduction in undesirable hazards.

- What are the risks? These might include the risk of harm and injury to children, risk of complaints or litigation, risk of environmental damage, and financial risks.
- What views are there on the nature of the risk and how authoritative are they? These could include technical specialists, guidance from accident prevention organisations, and authoritative publications from national play organisations.
- What relevant local factors need to be considered? This could include the characteristics of the local environment and the likely users.
- What are the options for managing the risk, and what are the pros, cons and costs of each? Options should be evaluated, and any new information discussed. Possibilities include increasing the opportunities that led to the assessment, reducing or removing the risk, doing nothing, and monitoring the situation.
- What precedents and comparisons are there? These could be from comparable services or spaces as well as from other providers.
- What is the risk-benefit judgement? These are dependent on the policies and objectives of the provider as well as local circumstances. Judgements should be monitored and periodically reviewed.
- How should the judgement be implemented in the light of local political concerns, cultural attitudes and beliefs? This could include taking account of the views of local parents and other adults, of local providers, and considering local traditions.

Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide advocates for a descriptive or narrative approach to risk-benefit assessment, which does not feature numerical calculations and values assigned to risks and benefits. It makes no sense to try and score a cut knee against the thrill of a zip line ride. Neither does it make sense to grade the effects of occasional bad publicity from overprotective adults against the benefits of children directing their own play and developing resilience and independence. For these purposes a descriptive approach is preferred.

Ball and Ball-King²⁴ are clear that local people are the best source for making accurate risk-benefit assessments because they know the local situation and are more likely to be familiar with local policy objectives too. Even when special expertise is required they note that the HSE has indicated that local expertise is again preferable. For us, this means that specific risk-benefit assessments are best carried out by local playworkers who have a detailed knowledge of the children they serve and the environment and community in which they work.

Play equipment standards

Many countries have agreed standards concerning the provision of fixed play equipment and the surfacing around them. These standards are likely to be of use in dedicated play facilities like adventure playgrounds that have manufactured or self-built structures. For example, there are standards set by the European Standards Agency and published in the UK as British standards. However, these are not compulsory, and compliance is not a legal requirement²⁵. Rather, these standards should be considered as guidelines representing 'sensible precautions' and one key resource in the process of risk management not a single requirement²⁶.

'A "suitable and sufficient" risk-benefit assessment ... is the vehicle for making judgements as to whether or not a standard, guidance or advisory note is applicable in a particular situation'²⁷. In other words, it is risk-benefit assessment that is the primary means of making judgements about the quality of play provision.

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment

Crucially for the process of risk-benefit assessment, levels of risk will vary for each child depending on age, ability, experience, temperament, and the local and social context and conditions. Children are instinctively driven to explore and try out new behaviours that can be complex, changeable, and dependent on countless variables. This unpredictability is beyond the scope of any practical written assessment.

Dynamic risk assessment is not a replacement for written assessment but a natural partner. Dynamic risk-benefit assessment is the 'minute-by-minute observation and potential intervention by adults who have oversight of children in staffed provision'²⁸. It is a crucial part of the risk management of staffed play provision and an essential skill for all playworkers. To be effective it requires:

- A close working knowledge of the children who attend the setting
- An understanding of risk and its role in children's wellbeing and development
- An understanding of different play behaviours and what they look like in practice
- A level of self-knowledge and an awareness of personal 'triggers'
- An appreciation of local conditions and the culture of the local community
- The ability to think on your feet and adapt to circumstances even when under pressure.

As playworkers we must continually share and discuss our understanding of risk and how we manage it within our team. Reflecting, sharing with our colleagues and learning from one another offers a way of communicating best practice, of learning from things that went well and things that didn't go as well as hoped, and ensuring a level of consistency at our setting. As senior playworkers, we can support this process through training and providing staff with simple tools, like flowcharts, to guide their practice.

However, as Gill writes: 'too much guidance, at too great a level of detail, can be counterproductive, because it can reinforce a distorted approach to risk management that focuses on technical compliance rather than critical thinking and proactive problem solving'.²⁹

Site checks

Site checks are another important part of our risk management routines and involve regular inspections of the spaces where children play to identify undesirable hazards and take action to remove or remedy them. This can include inspecting our resources, checking for damage and wear and tear, carrying out routine tests and maintenance of structures and cleaning up after play sessions. Site checks should be carried out in a formal recorded fashion to ensure there is an ongoing record of issues identified and any actions or maintenance undertaken. Should an injury occur, recorded site checks provide evidence that the play provider has maintained the site to a reasonable level.

Depending on the nature of our playwork provision, these site checks may range from daily inspections of the general environment through to annual inspections of play structures. All staff should be involved in maintaining a suitable environment free from unnecessary hazards and learning how to carry out comprehensive site checks can form part of a playworker's induction and professional development plan. However, as senior playworkers we are responsible for ensuring that what needs to be done is done.



Where more specialist knowledge is required, for example when inspecting the condition of play structures, we may decide to commission a report from a registered inspector. It is also essential to have suitably qualified people to call on if we identify hazards that we cannot render safe ourselves.

Other risk management concerns to be aware of

- **Food hygiene** – In the UK, food hygiene is framed by the Food Safety Act 1990 and later by the Food Standards Act 1999, which established the Food Standards Agency. Other legislation includes the Food Hygiene Regulations 2006, which applies across the UK. Specific guidance on implementing food safety is provided by the Food Standards Agency as well as by local authorities.
- **Reporting of injuries, diseases and dangerous occurrences** – In the UK, playworkers must record and notify the HSE in the event of serious injuries (such as ones requiring hospital treatment) and certain diseases.
- **Control of substances hazardous to health** – In the UK, playworkers should assess and evaluate the potential health risks of substances that could be hazardous and implement control measures. For example, ensuring paints are non-toxic or that harmful chemicals like bleach are securely stored.

Insurance

Playwork providers have to have both public liability and employers liability insurance. It is useful to regularly review insurance cover and discuss it with other providers to identify insurance companies that are sympathetic to the playwork approach. Insurance plays an important role because it provides a financial safety net for providers in the event of accidents or other losses. However, insurance is not intended to prevent accidents or losses, and should not be the driver of risk management or service delivery.

Our risk management policy and risk-benefit assessments should be discussed with insurers, to ensure an agreed approach and to assist both providers and insurers in containing the number of claims that are placed.

Safeguarding children

As the UK government has clearly stated, safeguarding is concerned with the action we take to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm³⁰. Child protection is of course an important part of this wider safeguarding role and there is a very real need for children to be protected from predatory adults, exploitation, deliberate and serious harm, domestic violence, neglect and bullying. However, this protection must not be sought at the expense of children also enjoying the everyday freedoms necessary for them to play, as it is through playing that children maintain and develop their capacities for looking after themselves and each other.

As playworkers, our emphasis should be on supporting and empowering children, maintaining a wide view of our safeguarding role, whilst also ensuring that we sufficiently cover our role in realistically protecting children. From this position, safeguarding can be seen as another risk management concern requiring a balanced approach.

Again, there is much more to a playworker's role in respect of safeguarding children than discussed here. This guide does not address specific child protection concerns or the ways in which these might be identified or disclosed and responded to. Rather, it focuses on the organisational systems that need to be in place to support playworkers in safeguarding children. Having sound policies and procedures is an essential part of this but safeguarding shouldn't stop there. As senior playworkers, we can help cultivate an open and honest organisational culture where everyone understands their responsibilities and feels supported to share their concerns.



Our relationships with children are at the heart of safeguarding processes for it is through listening to them and from our conversations with them that trust and understanding thrives. Cultivating relationships with parents, carers and families is also essential if we are to support both them and their children. Making connections and developing relationships with other professionals and organisations is also vital, for it is only in working together that safeguarding has any real foundation.

Child protection procedures

Our child protection procedures should explain what to do if we are concerned about a child who may be suffering abuse or neglect. Individual countries are likely to have their own national guidance for making child protection referrals, for example in Wales there are the Wales Safeguarding Procedures. These procedures detail the roles and responsibilities of practitioners, their duty to report concerns and how to do so. As a senior playworker, it is essential that we understand our local reporting mechanisms and are able to support other staff in making referrals, especially if we are the designated safeguarding person within our organisation.

Whistle-blowing

Safeguarding policies should refer to a whistle-blowing procedure in the employing organisation – this is likely to be kept separately, because it deals with how to raise all aspects of poor practice, not just safeguarding concerns.

If it is hard to make a referral based on concerns about a parent or carer, it is sometimes even harder to take further a concern about a colleague. But this is part of our overall safeguarding responsibility – very occasionally, people can still slip through the safe recruitment net or induction and training processes (although the better these are, the less likely this will be).

A whistle-blowing procedure spells out how to express any disquiet we may feel about a colleague's behaviour and takes into account any fear, worry or guilt in doing so. It ensures that staff and volunteers are not punished for raising genuine concerns, even if these prove to be unfounded. It should also make it clear what the consequences would be for anyone maliciously reporting a false concern.

Allegations against staff or volunteers

We should have clear procedures within our safeguarding policy about what to do if a child alleges that a staff member or volunteer has caused them harm or put them at risk. It should be clear who should inform whom – in ordinary circumstances this would include the Chief Officer or head of the organisation and the designated safeguarding person. Should the allegation have been made against either of these people, the procedure should make clear who to contact.

Allegations must be sensitively handled and resolved quickly, without compromising a nevertheless thorough investigation. Suspending the member of staff or volunteer for the duration of the investigation is not a matter of routine – this should only happen if there is sufficient early evidence to justify this. Both child and member of staff should be kept informed throughout and should have access to support. An organisation that fosters an open culture, promotes reflective practice and puts people at its heart, will handle these incidents with far more flexibility and sensitivity than those who have a more rigid perspective.

Data protection and confidentiality

In playwork settings, gathering personal information about children and their families is an important part of safeguarding service users and can help us to shape our service around them. Personal information is any data that could be used to identify an individual.



The types of personal information we might collect includes: names, addresses and telephone numbers, emergency contact details, allergies and dietary requirements, impairments, medical conditions and personal support plans. We might also want to use images of children in our marketing. Anyone who uses personal data like this must follow rules about how the information is stored and used.

Once an organisation has created a record about a child or adult it needs to have a policy and procedure in place regarding the retention and storage of that information. If you are creating records about the children or people that use your services or activities, it is best practice to advise them at the outset that you hold such records and their purpose.

In the UK, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) governs the way in which organisations can collect, use and store personal information. This legislation is supported by the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), an independent authority set up to uphold information rights. Extensive information about data protection can be found at its website: www.ico.org.uk.

The ICO explains that the GDPR sets out seven key principles regarding the way in which organisations must handle personal data:

- **Lawfulness, fairness and transparency** – you must identify valid grounds for collecting and using personal data.
- **Purpose limitation** – you must be clear about what your purposes for processing are from the start.
- **Data minimisation** – you must ensure the personal data you are processing is adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary.
- **Accuracy** – you should take all reasonable steps to ensure the personal data you hold is not incorrect or misleading.
- **Storage limitation** – you must not keep personal data for longer than you need it.
- **Integrity and confidentiality (security)** – you must ensure that you have appropriate security measures in place to protect the personal data you hold.
- **Accountability** – you are required to take responsibility for what you do with personal data and how you comply with the other principles.

While larger organisations will likely have dedicated processes and resources for managing data protection, the ICO recommends the following five tips for smaller charities and third sector organisations³¹.

- People should know what we are doing with their information and who it will be shared with. For example, we ensure that parents and carers know why we need certain details about their child. Parents should also know who we will share information with (such as social services) and who we will not share this information with (such as other parents).
- Make sure staff are properly trained about data protection. For example, if we are the senior playworker then we should make sure that our staff are aware of how GDPR affects them.
- Use strong passwords to protect information stored electronically. Paper records should also be kept securely.
- Encrypt any portable devices. This includes things like laptops and memory sticks that have personal data on them.
- Only keep people's information for as long as necessary. For example, we should not keep detailed information about children after they no longer attend the play provision.

Paperwork

Robust paperwork is essential for supporting the implementation of our policies and procedures. It is pointless having systems in place if we do not follow them. Accurate and up-to-date paperwork ensures an improved standard of delivery that both meets legal requirements and demonstrates good working practice. This is an essential part of openness and accountability. This evidence serves to protect us, the children, the play setting, and helps us with planning. However, while we must retain what is essential and relevant, we shouldn't be afraid to shred redundant and irrelevant paperwork – shredded paper is a wonderful play resource!

The paperwork we produce may include:

- **Registration forms** – If we are a registered setting, the National Minimum Standards (NMS) appropriate for the nation we work in will require various pieces of information to be kept on each child as well as other desirable information. See the relevant NMS to ensure forms include the required details. It is also useful to gather details of specific requirements for issues such as intimate care.
- **Consent forms** – These are forms that give us consent from parents and carers, for example, taking a trip or using photographs and film footage of children in publicity. Consent forms must be signed. How long we keep consent forms will depend on our policy or that of our local authority. Ideally, consent forms for the use of visual images of children should be kept for the length of time the image is still in use.
- **'Me books'** – Books about 'Me' are an inclusion tool that supports disabled children in expressing who they are, what they like and don't like to eat, and whatever else they want to put in them. They are a way of supporting everyone to move past the medical model of a disabled child and look at them as an individual.
- **Daily registers** – If we operate in an out of school childcare setting we are required to keep a record of the children attending the setting. This is not mandatory for an open access setting though some settings may use a signing in system.
- **Site and safety checks** – Any records of safety checks such as daily, weekly or monthly checks should be kept.
- **Accident and incident records** – Accident records are sensitive data and should be treated as such. We must keep the record for at least three years from the date on which it was made.

- **Safeguarding records and child protection referrals** – concerns about the welfare or safety of a child must be recorded, as should concerns about the behaviour of an employee or volunteer. It is vitally important to record all relevant details, regardless of whether or not the concerns are shared with either the police or children’s social care. All records should be signed.
- **Daily diaries, reflective diaries, peer reflections and group reflections** – These are records of personal and peer and group reflections that we undertake as part of reflective practice. They can support the auditing of the play space and help improve our personal practice and that of our team. Keeping these records for reference can help us support each other when we face similar situations and decisions.

- **Logbook** – As well as keeping a personal record of our reflections we keep a general logbook in which all staff can and should regularly record what happens at the setting. Recording information in this way allows staff to come together and organise their thoughts, and then comment, reflect and jointly evaluate the play session. It also provides an historical record that can be used to analyse events, trends and behaviours. Finally, it serves as an agreed record of what occurred and can be used in formal proceedings as evidence.
- **Staff supervision, reviews and CPD records** – Holding recorded supervision sessions and annual reviews with staff is part of good practice. Discussing workload, being clear about responsibilities and roles, enabling work to be planned and progress monitored, and ensuring that learning and professional development requirements are planned for, is all part of what we record to help us manage teams and the work successfully.



Evaluating quality, improving practice



Evaluating our provision is an essential part of improving the range and quality of experiences that children can access. This process of examining the physical and affective environment and how we facilitate it should be a regular part of our role as senior playworkers.

Quality improvement is a continuous process that should be part of every playworker's practice. Improving the quality of our provision means involving the whole staff team and the question 'How can we better meet children's play needs?' should be a permanent feature of every staff team meeting. It should also be at the root of our personal and shared reflections on practice. In this way, we establish a culture of quality improvement in which all staff expect to maintain high standards.

Improvement for many playworkers is usually through the accumulation of small realisations and insights, blending observations and personal reflections, with those of colleagues, and a growing understanding of playwork literature.

How attractive is the play space to children?

The most obvious answer to how attractive the play space is to children is simply to count the number of children who attend. An empty play space is not providing for any child's play regardless of the policies and procedures or the way it is run. However, this only gives us an approximate indication of its success and no guarantee of quality. There may be few real alternatives or low numbers of children in the area the play space serves. Simple numbers tell us nothing about how the children are behaving and what level of engagement they have with the environment. Are they bored and listless or totally absorbed and in a state of flow?

Children's perspectives

Children need to feel welcome and drawn into a space. They need to feel comfortable and confident that the adults they trust have done everything in their power to welcome them into an inspiring and well managed space where their play is valued and protected.

As playworkers, we need to try and see spaces from a child's viewpoint³². Different children will see space differently. If you crawl around the play setting so you can see it from the physical viewpoint of a five-year-old, does it look as interesting and exciting when you are only three foot tall? We might find that all we can see are the legs of chairs and tables, walls, or vast empty spaces. If we sit in the places where children sit or hide, we start to see the world through their eyes.

If they have the freedom, children may decorate their play spaces with random things – found objects like wheels, painted stones, saucepans, old dolls, a pretty piece of fabric, cut outs from magazines, vases of weeds, bugs or sand in jam jars, even old bits of machinery. Things we might see as old bits of junk to be cleared away can be children's treasures.

When we establish our indicators for auditing the play space, we need to consider how children's views of the setting are evidenced in its modification and use. Evidence of play behaviour in inappropriate places can be a sure sign that the setting is not offering all it should. Water play in toilets is a classic example of provision not being made for it elsewhere. Children will jump off things they shouldn't, draw on walls and toilet doors, play with matches, set fires, and come into settings to play during closed hours. These can be signs of play not being provided for rather than antisocial behaviour and children trying to play when they cannot access it. We should always consider the likelihood that antisocial behaviour is an indication of play needs not being met.

Ownership

Children's sense of ownership of a space and them feeling they have permission to play are key indicators that a lot is working well in a play setting. We can consider some examples of the kinds of things we should see:

- Playworkers should be considered part of the furniture, as a resource, a listening ear, someone who helps if you need 'stuff'.
- Language should be that of children. It shouldn't be modified because there is an adult present. Children should have their own names for the particular features in the space such as 'the big tree', 'the big swing', and 'the shady den'.

- Constant requests for permission should not be heard, especially not for the toilet, but also pens and paper. All matter of things that can be safely made available should be. A steady flow of children getting 'stuff' is likely.
- Children might bring things from home and leave them for their own or other children's future use.
- Space should constantly be modified by the children with evidence of den making or digging holes for example.
- Bikes, scooters, roller skates, coats, hats, gloves and scarves are likely to be littered around the place.
- Children cooking or eating and getting glasses of water.
- Children should appear happier, more independent and confident. There also may be the odd weeping session after a minor fall, or an argument here and there. Generally, the space should feel both relaxed and energised in turn with a natural rhythm of its own.
- Children will be protective of the space if they think it's endangered and will also question the appearance of strange people being present.

Risks

Children want to take risks in their play. From the gentle uncertainties of a game of peek-a-boo to a game of high-speed chase on tall structures, or sending a secret note to someone you like to the first performance of an impromptu talent show, some level of risk is always present in children's play. Indeed, we have seen that part of the very nature of play is to adapt to and deal with uncertainty and change, often by deliberately introducing uncertainty and consequently risk, into play³³.

Opportunities for intellectual, social, emotional and physical risks might include:

- Climbing, jumping or swinging from height
- Meeting new people, developing and maintaining relationships
- Running, riding, or sliding at great speed
- Creating and taking part in a performance
- Using tools such as saws

- Engaging in working out tough problems
- Interacting with potentially dangerous elements like water and fire
- Experiences of the dark, and scary stories
- Wrestling and rough and tumble play.

While we can observe most physical risks, assessing the availability of social and emotional risks is more difficult. These risks can occur separately but almost inevitably accompany physical risks too. For example, a child deciding whether to leap off a tall swing in front of peers is taking a risk with their status as well as the obvious risk of physical harm.

A supportive non-judgemental atmosphere where children do not face ridicule or condemnation will greatly enhance the likelihood of children being prepared to take emotional risks. We should look for evidence of children experimenting with novel behaviours, trying things out for the first time, and appearing independent, confident, trusting and at ease³⁴.

Playworkers as auditors

Look, listen, learn and record.

The audit methodologies we use should include ways to make accurate, timed and recorded observations of children playing during a session.

It is worth periodically monitoring what happens when the children arrive at our setting. How are they welcomed? What do they see when they first enter the space? What do they gravitate towards? What spaces do they first occupy and what spaces do they avoid? If a parent or carer wants to talk to someone is there a playworker free to listen? How is an individual child feeling today?

Children can be unpredictable and behave differently from day to day. Sometimes they may be out of character because they have experienced something,

perceived or real, since we last saw them. Not every child will arrive feeling buoyant and ready to play every day. It is important that we acknowledge and accommodate the range of feelings and moods that individual children bring into the setting.

We should also observe and record the use of, or lack of, space and resources. An area that isn't used much may need sensory enhancement, an injection of colour, some loose parts, or it simply may need to be more accessible for some children.

Wear and tear on resources and the frequency of replacing resources should be checked. Which resources need constantly restocking – or not, can give us useful information including how they are being used. Resources that need to be replaced, especially those with significant cost implications, should be carefully planned. We can only know all this if we have carried out periodic inventories.

The layout of space, where things are, and how children have modified spaces and have moved things around, are all clues to children's need to play and individual preferences. New fads, interests and influences together with a changing demographic can all influence how we plan and operate in the future and we need to be flexible and adaptable in response. Recording the outcomes of regular play audits over a period of time can usefully inform the medium and long-term management of the play provision and the governance of the play organisation.

Observing children regularly means we don't suddenly appear different. If we change our everyday pattern of work behaviour and wander around with a clipboard the children will stop playing and we won't capture their natural behaviour. Using a notepad or recording our thoughts on a phone can be useful methods for capturing the moment providing we are not intrusive. We should never let our need to gather information significantly interfere with children's right to play. If we do carry around our tools for observation, then we can capture things as they happen as well as planning when and where we conduct observations. However we choose to observe children, if we are seen doing it regularly the children will be less interested in what we are doing and will just get on with their play.

Collecting information about the play space is essential in evaluating quality and practice. That information also needs to incorporate playworkers' reflections on their practice. Reflective practice is critical in ensuring that our attitudes, ideas, or even our good intentions are not having a detrimental impact on the space and the play within it. It is easy over time to have fallen into particular practices, incorporated rules as generic when initially they were context specific or allowed something to become the norm that hasn't actually been given much thought. Taking time out to reflect as a staff team about this range of things can ensure the playwork offer is a thoroughly intentioned one and that you are assured of its quality.

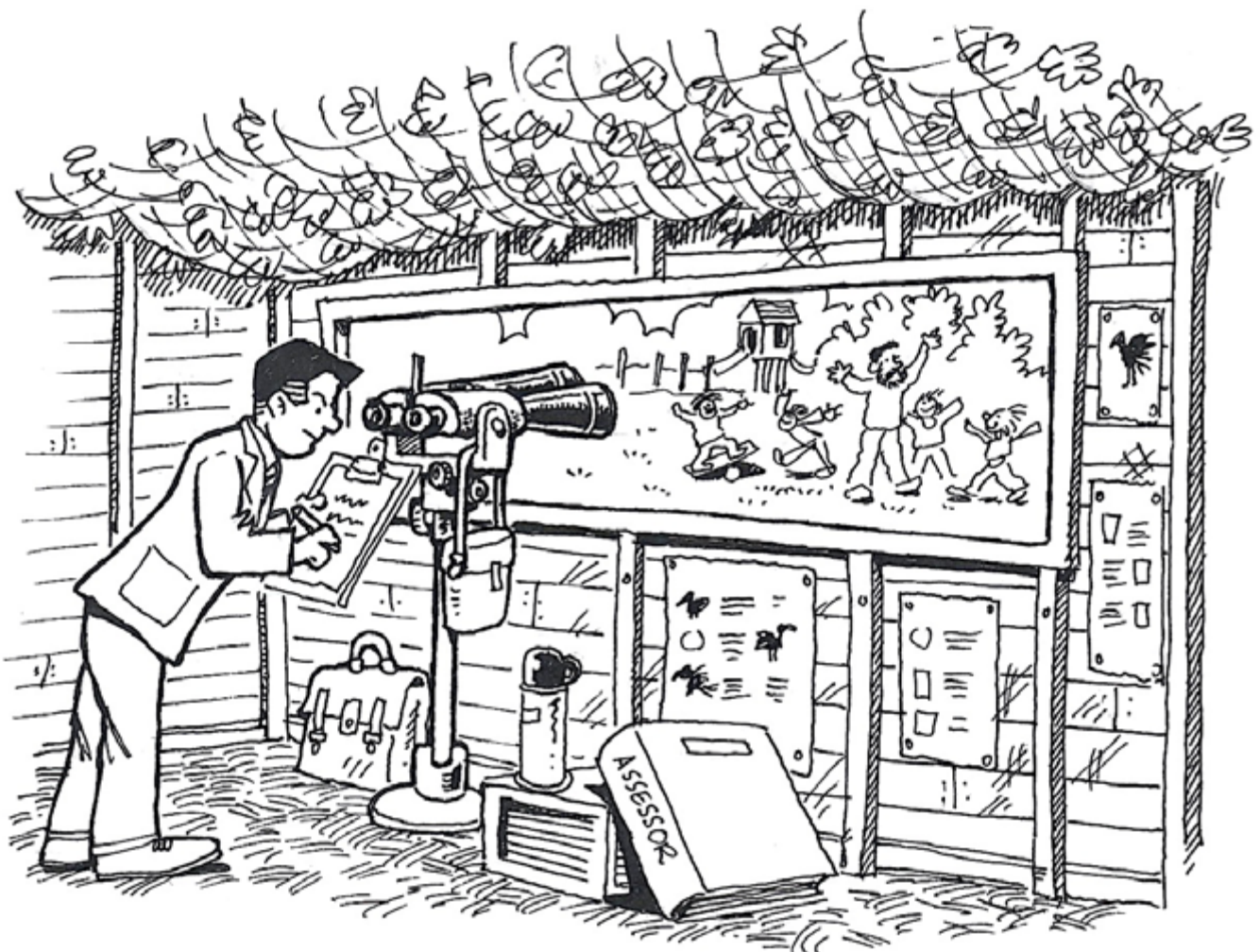
Choosing an evaluation tool

There are a range of tools available that can support us in determining the effectiveness of our project. These tools vary in their reach and complexity and the

range of their underpinning theory, but all of the good ones assert that the playing child should be at the centre of the process. That is, does the play provision offer a secure, rich and flexible environment that is genuinely open to all children where they are able to express a full range of play behaviours?

Any tool that we use to measure quality must be able to accurately judge what we are doing against what we should be doing. This means how we record our practice must be accurate, representative and manageable, and we must measure it against principles that are valid, relevant and explicit. Ultimately, whatever method we choose to evaluate quality, we must ensure that it measures what is special and particular about playwork.

Good examples of quality assessment or assurance schemes can be found by visiting the websites of national play organisations in the UK.



Conclusion

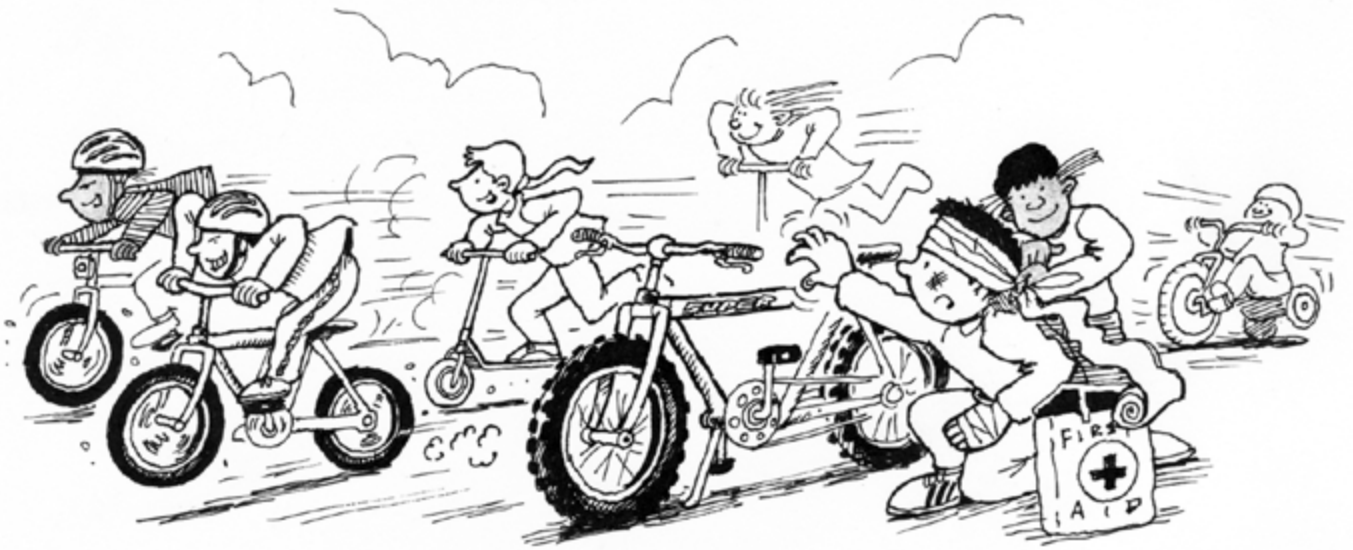
Setting up, developing and managing a playwork project is no small task. The role of the senior playworker is diverse and requires a broad set of skills. Those with management responsibilities for a playwork project are likely to have many other duties that take them away from direct work with children but all of which are essential to the ongoing delivery of high-quality playwork provision. The senior playworker must ensure that all the fundamental elements are in place prior to delivery and that necessary routines are maintained throughout. They are also responsible

for the reputation and profile of the provision and, perhaps most importantly, keeping things interesting and exciting for children. Of course, one person cannot do all this alone and the success of the provision will depend on the strength of the staff team.

The role of the senior playworker requires organisation, communication, resourcefulness, knowledge, experience and enthusiasm. Whilst the role may be demanding, senior playworkers have the opportunity to shape the provision they are responsible for and to further the aims and aspirations of the Playwork Principles.

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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.