

Chwarae Cymru

Play Wales



Playwork – what's so special?

www.play.wales

Playwork is unique and can be described as the art of working with playing children. Playwork is child-centred and ensures that play is the main focus. Playworkers facilitate children's play. In 2005, the Playwork Principles were developed to help share an understanding of what playworkers do.

There are eight Playwork Principles. The first two describe the process and importance of play. More information about play and its importance can be found on the Play Wales website: www.play.wales/play

Playwork Principles 3 to 6 describe how playworkers facilitate children's play, and Principles 7 and 8 describe the impact of the playworker and their intervention on children's play and the play space. This information sheet explores these Principles.

'The Playwork Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.'

Playwork Principle 3

The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.

The role of the playworker is unique because its reason for being is primarily to facilitate children's play. The United Nations General Comment no. 17 on Article 31 sets out adults' important role in giving children the support they need to realise their right to play. It notes:

- Adults can support children's development by relating to them through play.
- Adults who participate in children's play get unique insights and understanding into a child's perspective.
- Children benefit from activities involving adults. However, these benefits are fewer if adults control play, undermining a child's efforts to organise and lead their own play activities.

Playwork has the child's agenda as its starting point – playing. Playing is a process, it is driven by the child for the child. Playworkers ensure that the process of play and how it is facilitated informs involvement in play policy, strategy, training and education.

Children who lack opportunities for play do not develop to their full potential. Translating this thinking into planning, policy, strategy, education and training is the best way to ensure the quality of playwork as a profession, the quality of delivery of play opportunities, and to secure quality play provision for all children.



Playwork Principle 4

For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.

Playing brings many benefits and is central to children's physical, mental, social and emotional health and wellbeing. For children themselves, playing is one of the most important aspects of their lives. They value time, freedom and quality places to play.

When asked what is important to them, children consistently mention playing and gathering with their friends¹. When they play, children contribute to their immediate wellbeing and to their own development.

Playworkers do their best not to be distracted from their primary role as playworkers. Fitness, crime reduction and education are important adult agendas but are not immediately important to children and their play.

When playworkers interact with others on any adult agenda, it is their role to ensure that they keep the child's agenda – the play agenda – in the forefront of thinking.

If playworkers are to advocate for children's play it is essential that they understand and can explain what children do when they are playing and how playworkers can support that process.

This is vital because if we allow adult agendas to dominate the work playworkers do with children, they adulterate the play process. As adults in children's play space, we already affect that play space – children will not play exactly as they would if we were not there. It is the playworker's job to try and ensure that children have the best chance of playing as naturally as they would if adults were not present, and to intervene as little as possible.

Playwork Principle 5

The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.

The space that is created for children to play is extremely important. One of the keys to a successful play space is the sense that it, and all that happens within it, is owned by the children. Children must feel empowered to change and alter the space, choose what happens in it, and to have as much control over the space as possible.



Playworkers aim to provide a rich play environment for children. A rich play environment is varied and interesting – the Welsh Government describes it as a space:

‘which is flexible, adaptable, varied and interesting. It maximises the potential for socialising, creativity, resourcefulness, challenge, and choice. It is a trusted public space where children feel free to play in their own way, in their own time, on their own terms’.

The Welsh Government also says that: ‘quality play provision offers all children the opportunity to freely interact with or experience the following:

- Other children – of different ages and abilities with a choice to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, fall out, and resolve conflict.
- The natural world – weather, trees, plants, insects, animals, mud.
- Loose parts – natural and man-made materials that can be manipulated, moved and adapted, built and demolished.

- The four elements – earth, air, fire and water.
- Challenge and uncertainty – graduated opportunities for risk taking; both on a physical and emotional level.
- Changing identity – role play and dressing up.
- Movement – running, jumping, climbing, balancing, rolling, swinging, sliding and spinning.
- Rough and tumble – play fighting.
- The senses – sounds, tastes, textures, smells and sights.’

The possibilities of what children can do differ from setting to setting. If provision is operating in space shared with others for example, this can restrict opportunities to give children choice and control, particularly if those who are sharing the setting are not sympathetic to children using the space. But, playworkers see this as a challenge rather than a restriction. They can be inventive: choosing resources carefully can overcome many situations, as can serious negotiating, goodwill and politeness.

Compensatory space

A play space is a compensatory space and it is important. It is a space that makes up for children’s loss of a natural play environment due to factors such as parental fears arising from living in a highly populated area, high levels of traffic, anxieties of stranger danger and a perception that allowing children out unsupervised is disapproved of.

The natural environment and spaces such as woods, beaches, community gardens and rivers support children’s play. Specialist play equipment isn’t necessarily needed. Water, trees and bushes change with the seasons and children can use them in a variety of ways, getting a lot out of playing with what is there naturally. For a compensatory play space to feel as natural as possible and for children to have the freedom they need to play, they need to feel permission from the adults within that space.

Playworkers create an environment where children have that control over the space and what happens in it. The more control children have, the greater the level of permission they feel. All good spaces for playing offer a rich play environment with lots of play value for every child.





Playwork Principle 6

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

The playwork approach is one where children are able to control their own play. Playworkers are required to respond to sometimes subtle, complex cues and signals, and to keep an open mind without jumping to conclusions or prejudging a situation. Added to this there may be organisational and managerial demands to balance. This is a complex role to master, and demands an honesty about our own motives and beliefs. Reflective practice allows us to examine thoughts and feelings and to question judgements. Using reflective practice before, during and after play can help playworkers 'practice with principle'.

Playwork Principle 7

Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.

As adults, it is our responsibility to make sure children have the time, space and freedom to play. Playworkers help make this happen.

It is vital that playworkers understand what they do and how that alters both the play space and the play itself, either positively or negatively. There are several key aspects to adults' relationships with children that allow all of us to minimise our impact on the play space. This knowledge and understanding informs all playworkers' practice.

Being respectful – children choose to be with people who respect them. In staffed open access play provision the children attend if the playworkers respect them, and although they may not be able to leave of their own accord in a care setting, the children are much easier to work with if they are shown that they are respected. Respect is a two-way street – if playworkers want respect from children they must give it back.

Not judging – playworkers are not employed to form moral judgements on children, or teach them how to live their lives. Their role is to create an environment where children feel emotionally and physically safe. To be effective, a playworker needs children's trust, to feel they can share their problems or sorrows,

or just ask advice. Children will be reluctant to do this if they think they are going to be told off or that they might be thought of as a bad person.

A respectful and non-judgmental approach is important because it supports the principle that children are able to play in a space that is as close as possible to a natural play environment, with adults having as little impact as possible. Most children, given free choice, will play away from adults, and will generally only go to them for food or if a serious problem occurs such as an injury or bullying. To keep a play space as authentic as possible we need to consider how children would play freely in an adult free environment.

Playwork Principle 8

Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children.

Playwork intervention is a conscious act. To avoid adopting an automatic, unthinking response playworkers first need to be alert to a range of options and then select the approach most likely to extend playing. This approach may well be subtle, non-intrusive or may even involve not intervening at all.

There are times when immediate intervention is necessary to prevent serious or imminent harm. Harm must be a real possibility to make intervention essential and not just because of a personal fear of heights, for example. Even intervening in such a situation, it may be possible to remain playful. These approaches require weighing up the likely benefits of a particular action and comparing them against potential risks to decide whether a risk intrinsic to a play opportunity is worth taking.

Since the publication of the Playwork Principles, approaches that balance risks with the benefits of play to children have been formalised in a number of strategies and guides, including advice from the Health and Safety Executive².



Checklist for facilitating a compensatory space

- There is no formula. To offer effective compensatory play, playworkers must be sensitive and thoughtful and have clear aims.
- The way a compensatory play space is set up needs to be based on research and analysis into the play opportunities available in the local area with the participation of the children and teenagers.
- The space must not be adulterated by adult agendas. Playworkers can set themselves up to fail if they have an idealised vision of what a play space can be. They must be wary of simply fulfilling parents' and schools' needs or those of politicians, to the detriment of children's play needs.
- While the children have control over decisions and choices regarding their play within the space, they do not run it or staff it.
- The space needs to be secure enough for children to feel that their space is protected, without the overall effect of a prison or zoo.
- An affective compensatory play space may not conform to a narrow, stereotypical view of a play space: it will look like it looks.
- It may be a wholly outdoor space or may have covered provision – this is immaterial as long as it provides compensatory play.
- An exciting, challenging space with committed and well-supported staff who work to their full potential will attract more children and be more successful.

Above all, it will be a place where both clear and hidden permission is given to play.

Further reading

For more information about the Playwork Principles visit:

www.play.wales/playwork/the-playwork-principles

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For more detailed information about play and playwork read our playwork guides:

- **Childhood, play and the Playwork Principles (volume 1)** looks at the role of play in childhood and the ethics of working in settings where children play.
- **Practising playwork (volume 2)** is ideal for those who are new to playwork and explores how to identify, create or enhance places for playing.
- **Developing and managing a playwork project (volume 3)** looks at the practicalities of the delivery of playwork provision and explores the managerial duties of senior playworkers.
- **Managing playworkers and working with other adults (volume 4)** looks at managing staff and working with other adults, as well as handling conflict, criticism and complaints.

References

¹ Children's Commissioner for Wales (2018) *Spotlight Report: Article 31*. Swansea: Children's Commissioner for Wales; Dallimore, D. (2019) *'I learn new things and climb trees' What children say about play in Wales*, Cardiff: Play Wales.

² Health and Safety Executive (2012) *Children's Play and Leisure: promoting a balanced approach*, Health and Safety Executive.



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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.