

Playwork and Play

What is play?

For children, play is like eating and sleeping—one of the vital signs of health. And yet it defies definition, just as creativity and love do. Professional playworkers in the United Kingdom (see below) describe it this way:

Play is a set of behaviors that are freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.

There are many types of play that fit this description: make-believe, rough-and-tumble play, mastery play, games where children make up or modify the rules, and more. Organized sports and board games, where children follow adults' rules, are different from child-initiated play. Video games, similarly, are created by adults for consumption by young people. They may be fun, but they do not satisfy the child's deep need for spontaneous, open-ended, creative play.

Access to simple open-ended materials—also known as “loose parts”—enhances play: sticks, stones, cloth, ropes, boxes, and so on. Most of today's commercial toys are linked to television shows or other adult-generated stories, and tend to undermine children's own imaginative play. Electronic toys are the worst. The child watches while the toy plays. When play is filled with adult-designed toys or is directed by adults instead of by children, we say it is “adulterated.”

What does a playworker do?

Playworkers create safe but adventuresome places for children to play. They are a watchful presence. They do not direct children's play but help when necessary.

In today's world many parents are reluctant to let children play without an adult present. Professional playworkers meet that need by supporting and facilitating children's play.

Playwork is a respected profession in Europe and Japan. U.S. parks, zoos, children's museums, after-school programs, and camps are increasingly interested in playwork. Workshops and courses for playworkers are now being conducted and planned across the country.



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What is an adventure playground?

Adventure playgrounds began in Denmark and the U.K. after World War II when people noticed that children loved to play in the rubble of bombed-out buildings. These sites inspired adventure playgrounds, exciting spaces for play, supervised by adult playworkers.

In adventure playgrounds children use loose parts—fabric, ropes, old tires, wood, tools—to create their own play environments. Playworkers provide advice and help when needed. In “hammer-and-nail” playgrounds, children learn basic

building skills and erect forts and playhouses. There are 80 adventure playgrounds in London alone. There are three in the U.S. The Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit organization devoted to restoring play to children's lives, would like to see an adventure playground in every community.

Resources for Play and Playwork

Resources on play

- Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.org
- Carol Torgan's 100+ play resources: www.caroltorgan.com/100-top-play-resources
- International Play Association: www.ipaworld.org
 - USA Branch: www.ipausa.org
- KaBOOM!: www.kaboom.org/help_save_play
- New York Play Coalition: www.nycplay.org
- Playing in the Neighborhood: www.playborhood.com
- Play Wales: www.playwales.org.uk
- Play England: www.playengland.org.uk
- US Play Coalition: www.usplaycoalition.edu



Resources for playworkers

- Play stories by Penny Wilson: www.flickr.com/photos/playtowerhamlets/4001537099
- Free Play Network photo exhibit: www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk
- Playwork partnerships: www.playwork.co.uk
- London playwork: www.playworklondon.org.uk



Resources on adventure playgrounds

- Lia Sutton's adventure playground web site and photographs: <http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu/index.html>
- Web Urbanist, with links and photos: www.weburbanist.com/2007/11/27/urban-adventure-playgrounds-the-coolest-places-you-probably-never-played-as-a-kid
- Adventuresome Playgrounds in the U.S.
 - NPR report www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5254026
 - Huntington Beach, Calif.: www.beachcalifornia.com/adventure-playground-kids-vacation.html
 - Irvine, Calif.: www.cityofirvine.org/cityhall/cs/commparcs/specialfac/adventure_playground.asp
- Imagination Playground, New York City: www.imaginationplayground.org
- Teardrop Park, New York City: www.nytimes.com/2004/09/30/nyregion/30park.html; nannyinnewyork.blogspot.com/2006/09/teardrop-park.html