

A whimsical illustration of a hand holding a sun, moon, stars, clouds, and a balloon. The hand is drawn in a simple, sketchy style. It holds a bright yellow sun with rays, a yellow crescent moon, three white stars, a fluffy orange cloud, and a colorful balloon with a purple-to-green gradient. The balloon has a small black string tied to it.

*The*  
Playwork  
Primer

Penny Wilson

2010 EDITION

ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD

*The*  
Playwork  
Primer



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Alliance for Childhood



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## *Preface*

Penny Wilson is a playworker in London's adventure playgrounds. Play is her work and is at the heart of her life. Her specialty is supporting children with disabilities as they play with their siblings and peers. For years she ran the Chelsea Adventure Playground in London, where children of all abilities played freely together.

She has collaborated with the Alliance for Childhood in the U.S. for over six years, introducing play, playwork, and adventure playgrounds to parks departments, children's museums, schools, and educators across the country. Like all professions, playwork has its own language, made all the richer by the quirky playfulness of the workers themselves. As an introduction to the ideas and practices of playwork we thought it would be helpful to capture Penny's playwork language in a glossary or primer. We also wanted to introduce to U.S. audiences many of the fine thinkers about play and playwork in the U.K.

When people first hear of playwork, they often misunderstand the role of the playworker. "What? Must adults now tell children how to play?" they ask indignantly. "Can't we just let them play as they want?" This is a healthy reaction. Children need to organize and direct their own play. But the reality is that few of today's children are allowed out to play freely, as earlier generations were. Many have little experience with play and don't know how to get started when given a chance. In recent surveys parents say they want their children to play freely, but with some adult support. Playworkers fill this need. They create playful environments, support children's own play, assess risk, and help out when needed, without directing or controlling. They strive to be as invisible as possible.

The Alliance for Childhood wants to establish playwork as a profession in the U.S. We hope that soon there will be regular courses

and even certificate and degree programs in playwork. We are grateful to Penny Wilson and to the parks departments, children's museums, universities, and other organizations that are working hard to restore play to children's lives. See the list of play organizations at the back of this book.

Finally, we want to thank the funders of this project, including the Kalliopeia Foundation and the Foundation for Global Community, and MOM's Organic Market. Without your commitment to children and play this work would not be possible.

Joan Almon and Ed Miller  
Alliance for Childhood  
College Park, Maryland  
April 2010

## *Author's Note*

Feeling slightly proud of herself, the author took a copy of the first edition of *The Playwork Primer* in her hands.

Then came the divine banana peel. It shows up every time she feels a little smug, to bring her back down to earth with a splat.

My U.S. editor and I had batted ideas for the title of the book back and forth across the Atlantic via e-mail and settled the question without ever actually speaking the title out loud to each other. Neither of us had realized that we are indeed two nations separated by a single language.

"I'm a little surprised that you decided on *The Playwork Primer*," Ed said, pronouncing the word American-style—"primmer."

"Oh, but it's pronounced pr-EYE-mer," I said.

"What? Like paint?"

"Well, yes, I suppose so," I said. "It primes the way for the next work to happen."

"Oh, okay. Now it all makes sense," said Ed. "It just didn't seem like you to want to sound prim."

Penny Wilson  
London, April 2010

# Introduction: What Playworkers Do

We aim to provide a play environment in which children will laugh and cry; where they can explore and experiment; where they can create and destroy; where they can achieve; where they can feel excited and elated; where they may sometimes be bored and frustrated, and may sometimes hurt themselves; where they can get help, support, and encouragement from others when they require it; where they can grow to be independent and self-reliant; where they can learn—in the widest possible sense—about themselves, about others, and about the world.

—Stuart Lester<sup>1</sup>

Through play we become human.

—Arthur Battram<sup>2</sup>

People always want to begin by defining play, but playworker and play theorist Gordon Sturrock says, “Trying to define play is like trying to define love. You can’t do it. It’s too big for that.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, playworkers and theorists describe play this way:

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

You probably just read that and didn’t really take it in. Go back and read the sentence again and think about what it means and what this playing might look and feel like.

Play is a process, not a product. We have to learn to trust to the innate wisdom of children and allow them to get on with it. Sturrock also says that play is both doing and becoming. It is in the moment and should be valued as such.

Arthur Battram<sup>4</sup> says that it is through play that we become human. Play informs our adult worlds. Not that we are thinking of this when we play as children, of course. As adults, however, we should be aware that real playing is almost the most important thing that our children can do.

It is worth noting that children all over the world, when allowed to play freely, develop very similar play patterns. It is through this playing that children integrate their internal and external worlds, according to Winnicott (see below). A diverse group of children sharing time and space will play together. It would seem that play is, universally, a primary language of children.

### **Children need to play**

Children are people between birth and the late teens. The older ones are sometimes called youth or young people. They all need to play, although the playing they do changes as they grow. Especially when they are young, children need to play for many reasons. They need to be in control of the *content* and *intent* of their play, as the Playwork Principles in the U.K. say. If they are given time and space to do this, then they will experience a broad range of play types. This has a positive impact upon their full development, including neural development.



Human infants are born with a brain that is not fully developed. The architecture of the human brain changes rapidly in the first few years of life. Animal researchers have shown that the brain grows largest in proportion to the body in animals that play the most. It is easy to imagine that similar growth happens in human beings. But it is also easy to imagine what happens to children who do not have this experience in their lives. The study of children who suffer from play deprivation is just beginning.

### **The first adventure playgrounds**

In 1946 a quirk of fate led Lady Allen of Hurtwood<sup>5</sup> to visit a junk playground in Copenhagen-Emdrup, designed by the architect C. Th. Sorensen in 1943. He was commissioned by the authorities to create a place for children to play in response to increased levels of child delinquency during the German occupation. So Sorensen went back to look at other playgrounds that he had designed. He found them empty. Where were the children? They were playing in the wreckage of bombed-out buildings. So this is what he created: A place with materials that children could manipulate, where they could spend hours rooting around unnoticed and lost in their own worlds.

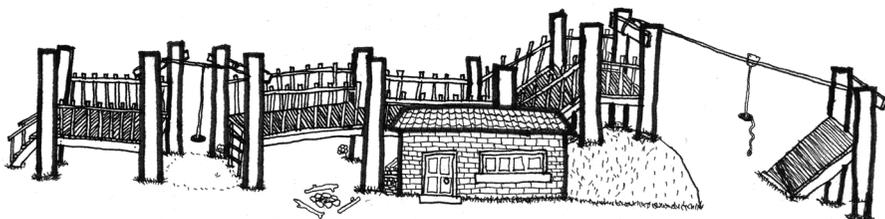
Lady Allen said of her visit to this playground, “I was completely swept off my feet by my first visit to the Emdrup playground. In a flash of understanding I realized that I was looking at something quite new and full of possibilities.”<sup>6</sup> She brought the concept back to London and gave it the name “adventure playground.”

At that time London children had little space to play except for bomb sites left after the Second World War. Here they spent their time building, making fires, digging for treasure from the dead homes, and generally scrubbing around on their own. Lady Allen had had a very playful rural childhood. She thought that her own experiences had been ideal and recognized in the sites she created with local communities a “compensatory environment.” By this she meant they were the nearest thing to her rural childhood that could be created for urban children.

Think of an adventure playground as an urban countryside, where children can experience all sorts of play that they might have only with great difficulty in the city. Its adult designers should examine the environment around it and compensate for the deficits. If children have no access to trees, then work with them to build something they can climb. (When asked what the big structures were for on his adventure playground, Bob Hughes<sup>7</sup> said, “They are for trees.”)

An adventure playground should be in a constant process of change, directed, informed, and executed by the children and their playing and supported by the playworkers. It is a space that allows for all the different types of play to be discovered by children. It is a place of psychological safety and calculated risk.

It may be helpful to think of an adventure playground as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total artwork,” a space and time where all one’s senses are engaged.



## From warden to playworker

The first bomb-site adventure playgrounds were staffed by “wardens.” These persons kept the keys for the tool sheds, which held the building materials and bits and pieces that the children needed for their playing. This role rapidly developed. As the wardens watched the children they realized something of the wonder that is play. One of the first adventure playground wardens, Pat Turner, wrote a book about his time at Lollard playground that he called *Something Extraordinary*.<sup>8</sup>

The wardens became advocates for children’s play. They gathered materials and local support and facilitated the play processes of the children. As wardens exchanged information, they realized that they were all seeing similar things. They became “play leaders” and then “playworkers,” because they understood that they must not be leading the play of children—rather, they should be working with the play.

Playworkers like Bob Hughes and many others began to research and write about playwork. This was new. All previous work on play had had a different purpose, such as education or therapy, which framed the theory and writings. To write about play itself was a challenge and demanded a whole new way of thinking. Working with play became a respected profession. Today, playworkers frequently work with regional and national play associations and help develop play policies. They are well trained and can earn vocational certificates or diplomas in playwork at the bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral level.

The term *playwork* is deliberately oxymoronic. It is a craft filled with paradoxes. The playworkers are aware that in an ideal world they should not need to exist. They manage the spaces for children’s play, but this work needs to be as invisible and unobtrusive to children as possible. The ideal playworker leaves the children free to play for themselves but intervenes in carefully measured ways to support the play process. She is aware of her own playfulness, but does not impose it upon the children. She must necessarily be devoted to the playing of the children, but shun the popular role of Pied Piper. Play is the children’s business.



# The Playwork Primer

## Adulteration

One of the most basic underpinnings of the craft of the playworker is to understand that the play of children within the boundaries of a play setting must remain unadulterated by external agendas. This means that playworkers do not try to educate, train, tame, or therapeutically treat children in their time and space for play. They do not coach sports or teach art, drama, or dance, or even circus skills. They do not do “activities.”



A good playworker will have resources as readily available as a first aid kit so that if and when children come and ask for face painting or a deck of cards these materials or their approximations can be furnished to them. What a playworker does not do is schedule events and say, “This afternoon we will be face painting and playing canasta. Then you will do 30 minutes of ‘keep-fit’ and then have a healthy snack.” This contaminates the play frame and corrupts the freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated playing that children must experience.

## Biophilia and Biophobia

These terms are borrowed from the well-known biologist and naturalist

E. O. Wilson. They always sound a little

foolish to playworkers hearing them for the first time. When you start to explain what they mean, however, their importance becomes obvious.



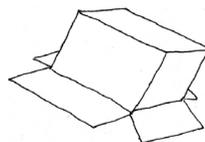
*Biophilia* describes the natural love that children have for the living world. There is a deep affinity between the playing child and the stuff of the planet.

*Biophobia* describes a fear of nature, which we are seeing increasingly in the children we play with. So divorced are they from the planet by the unnatural settings in which we surround them that some become like one little girl I was playing with, who said to me, “I am not going to sit on the grass. There’s dirt under there.”

“Dirt” in England does not mean soil. It means filth. One parent who had spent her childhood in the Middle East explained to me that, when she was a child, to play in the dirt meant playing in open sewers. Children were forbidden to do this for their own protection. In this case, for her child to play in the mud of London was entirely safe. But this parent had a different conditioning from her childhood, and we needed to share this information to understand each other and move on. Is it true, as Bob Hughes suggests, that the business of play deprivation alienates us from our home planet to the extent that it will lead ultimately to the destruction of our species? Fortunately, in the United States Richard Louv has had great success in awakening the public about this risk through his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, and through the Children and Nature Network that he helped found.<sup>9</sup>

## Cardboard boxes

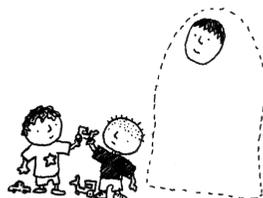
It is a truth universally acknowledged that a child will play more happily with the box than with the present that came in it. Perhaps this is why the Strong National Museum of Play inducted the cardboard box into its National Toy Hall of Fame.<sup>10</sup> “Cardboard City” is an experiment that you can try. Give a group of children some time, some cardboard boxes, tape, and a supportive but not directive adult, and they will create all the wonders of the world. We tried this in an elementary school in Flint, Michigan. For one hour the classroom was given to the children, to create whatever they wanted from boxes, tape, rope, and fabric. You can see some of the results in the PBS documentary *Where Do the Children Play?*<sup>11</sup>



## Cloak of invisibility

This item is another essential ingredient in the tool kit of the playworker. (See *Adulteration*.) Go back to your most vivid childhood memories of play. Chances are you were playing outside with no adults present. Part of the oxymoronic nature of playwork is that we need to be present and not present at the same time. For those of you with a cloak of invisibility this is easy. For the rest of us, we have to learn skilful modes of intervention that allow us to support the play process without adulterating it with our own agendas.

As part of our reflective practice we have to be ever aware that not only do our presence and our reactions have a direct impact on the children, but the playing of the children has a direct impact upon us. (See *Playwork Principles*.) The cloak of invisibility also protects us from transference/projection, which is described below. The very awareness of transference mitigates its effects in our practice. With a cloak of invisibility, playwork is easy. Without it, we have to find ways to manage, and this means knowing the theories of play and best practices of supporting play and then applying these theories and practices.



One day in London's Mile End Park I watched as Joe, a playworker, worked with a group of children at the Festival of Earth. He set up the clay and water table with a perimeter wall of clay and then idly played with it himself, seeming to explore not only its potential but to validate the messiness of it. Then the children came, and he seemed to disappear. This happened time and time again. A child would be stuck, perhaps needing something like a small world toy. Rather than have the child surface from her immersion in the play, Joe would become briefly visible, the item or support that was needed would quietly appear near enough for the child to discover it for herself, and then Joe would fade away again. Yet he never left the space that the children were in. I watched him doing this and still could not work out quite how he managed to be so effective and so invisible at the same time.

## Commodification of play

We spend a fortune on toys for children, on experiences and entertainments. Big business has targeted childhood as a captive market. Sell parents the concept that an idyllic childhood can be bought and sit back and count the zeros. Childhood is spent with screens and plastic geegaws. Birthday parties cost a bomb. Days out are bought times.

Because of this materialistic approach to play and childhood, many children have gotten the message that valid experiences are bought experiences, a financial deal. If we take them to the beach, sit back, and let them play for as long as they like, they don't necessarily know what to do. Because there is no price attached to the experience, it does not feel valid to them. Have you had your play validated today?

If we focus on the validation of play through intelligent observation and reflection we can create a different currency. Let's go back to the cardboard box as a loose part, a simple, open-ended play material that can be used in dozens of ways. This is a truly marvellous play opportunity.

I visited a family in San Francisco. They had recently discovered that their very small children did not need to join clubs and after-school activities or watch videos to have a rich and fulfilled childhood. I went into the house and the eldest child called out for permission to get the boxes from the den to make a building. He and his little sister built and imagined and negotiated while they explored my playfulness as a safe stranger in their home, under the aegis of their mother, and showed me illustrations from their books of the animals that they were being in their games.



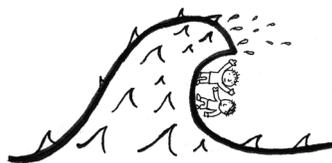
Their mom had spoken about the peer pressure she felt to send her children to art-soccer-drama-gym classes. These were very young children who had narrowly escaped being sorted by age into adult-organized activities. And here they were, playing richly together, developing physical, emotional, linguistic, and social skills and so much more than they would have had the chance to do if they had been ferried around from class to class as part of a purchased childhood. Gordon Sturrock<sup>12</sup> mischievously suggests a “penny on the pound” tax on all childhood marketing and products, the revenue to be turned over to the play sector.

We need to validate playing in a real and personal and local way, not sit back and allow the process of childhood to be stolen from our children. Childhood should not be for sale.<sup>13</sup>

## Complexity

Complexity theory is a way of understanding natural systems. We look at a flock of birds or a school of fish moving in magnificent order and symmetry and wonder how they can do it. Both are examples of complex adaptive systems. In these natural systems, order is not the result of a pre-established plan that maps out, say, the flock's flight path. Instead, the overall order, the graceful flocking, emerges from a few very simple rules about finding a direction, keeping a certain distance from other birds, and so on, that govern individual birds' flying behaviors.

The theories of complexity provide some interesting metaphors for understanding playwork. Arthur Battram<sup>14</sup> describes an ideal state for a play setting by likening it to



a wave. Before the wave breaks, there is stasis, order. After the wave breaks, there is turbulence and chaos. At the curl of the breaking wave there is a delicate balance between order and chaos.

If we relate this to a play setting then the static, ordered state is a very controlled setting. It is rule-bound, highly organized, and prescriptive; timed activities will take place. There is no room in this play setting for the creative spontaneity of playing children. If we look at a chaotic play setting, it is poorly organized. The hours when it is open are irregular. The toilets might not work. The staff might display a wide variety of moods and temperaments, with unpredictable attitudes towards the children and their playing.

Look at the curl of the wave, which is where we surf because that is where the power is. We see the meeting of order with spontaneous activity and unpredictability. Thus, an underlying order can support freedom and unpredictable play. It is a framework for creativity.

Battram offers us the image of surfing on the edge of chaos and order as a metaphor for how a play setting works. It is our role as adults to understand this and create the solid foundations on which the children play.

## Graduated access

I remember once when my cat had kittens I watched them for hours as they learned to stand up and negotiate the world. Most entertaining was the stage when they realized that cats are supposed to be able to jump. They would tremulously climb onto a slim paperback left on the floor and then prepare themselves to leap the 1.5 inch drop to the carpet. They crouched and wriggled their stubby tails and built up their courage and finally managed an undignified tumble. Mother cat opened a lazy eye to watch and then closed it as the kittens tried to regain their dignity and go back for another try. Each at its own pace, the kittens managed bigger and bigger jumps leading to major bounds up and across obstacles. They played this for hours on end.

A good playground is designed not into age-segregated zones, but with structures and equipment that can be explored by children of mixed ages to test themselves and work their way up to more challenging levels. If they are discouraged from trying after their first ungainly tumbles, children will never acquire the gross motor skills, strength, agility of mind and body, confidence, problem solving skills, and much more that they get from this simple and essential play. They will never grow up to be proper cats!



## Inclusive play

We were playing in a courtyard on a housing project in the East End of London. We took a few loose parts—buttons, ribbons, dry powder paint.

The playing was going fine, but it had reached a cadence and was ready to begin a new movement when Harry, who attends a local special school rather than the one the other children go to, ran into the courtyard and, untypically, joined in with the other children. The playworkers supported this.

Harry found a golden button on the floor. “Look, look, I’ve found gold. I’ve found gold.”

Suddenly all the children were hunting for gold. Harry loved golden things and was fond of a computer game that involved questing after golden coins. His imagination took him into a fusion of his computer play and the playing of his life. This playing was turned into a wonderful treasure hunt, which all the other children caught hold of and shared. The new strand of playing ran though as a recurring theme on the site for many days.

What can we unpack about playing with children with disabilities and their peers from this?

1. The playworkers had identified a space in which children were not playing but could be, so they started to facilitate play in this place.
2. They did their research and found that there were loads of kids living around the site including at least one with a recognized disability.
3. They found out who his mum was and talked to her, found out what he needed to have to support him in his playing, and what his passions were so that they could understand and anticipate him. They invited the mum to watch the playing for as long as she wanted to.
4. They took loose parts that would be interesting to all the children

and that would also have a special appeal to him.

5. They supported him through his reticence to join in. They supported the other children in welcoming him by finding out how to play with him and doing it themselves.

6. They helped the other children join in the unique inspiration that he brought to the session.

7. They knew, because they all had experience working with children with disabilities, that as soon as the playing of children with disabilities is liberated, their peers are inspired to share a whole new open-mindedness of possibilities.

8. They also knew from experience that when children are validated to do this, the playing relationships last. Understanding of playing and living beyond difference starts to change attitudes and create a shared understanding of the wider world.

9. They stepped back and let the children get on with it, always watching closely in case they were needed.

Is this worth doing?

Well, yes.

Apart from achieving social inclusion and moving forward the fight against apartheid in play, the quirkiness of the playing of a lateral thinker destroys the “cool” that stops children playing freely. It introduces elements of the surreal and magnificent worlds of difference.

## Lens of play

Playworkers have long been frustrated by the difficulty that some practitioners of other well-established disciplines have in grasping that playwork is an equally valid craft. For example, a teacher may tell you that she knows all about play, that “play is learning.” It is easy to react to this, to snap back: “Actually, learning is a subset of play. You know nothing about it!” This sets a tone of mutual disrespect and starts a fight.

As a way of placing playworkers in a school in London at lunchtime play sessions, we had to develop an “ambassadorial” style of playwork. We had to believe that more than one thing can be true at any one time. To sum this up:

The doctor sees children through the lens of medicine.

The teacher sees children through the lens of education.

The playworker sees children through the lens of play.

## Liminal spaces

These are spaces of undefined purpose, becoming different things at different times. The seashore is water at one time, rock pools at another, and a dry, rocky, sandy stretch at a third. We know that these spaces appeal greatly to us. They draw us to them. Why do folks gather and walk on a beach? Also remember that Simon Nicholson, who created the term “loose parts,”<sup>15</sup> cited the seashore as being the richest of spaces because of its manipulability, its loose parts. The ultimate loose part is the sea and the earth and the space where they meet.

Traditionally, liminal spaces are connected with magic and have a mystical quality. They are the spaces of poetry and myth. In play terms, children are drawn to spaces that are neither one thing nor another, but can be whatever the children need them to be. Using this theory, we looked at an area at the corner of Mile End Park in London where the canal meets the “countryside” of the park. It was overgrown and brambly. We have been observing this space for a year, watching its usage patterns.

Slowly the brambles have been cleared, except for one stand that forms a protective arm around the space. Here they have been cut so that children can pick blackberries. The faint hints of desire lines have been marked out in bark chip pathways. Bit by bit the space will change. Maybe a bench will be moved for parents to overlook the area. We may create a way to have a shimmering in the trees. (Are they shimmering or not? Do trees shimmer?) Or there might be a swinging gate or a wall to climb over to gain access to what will remain an unfenced area. (The idea of this is that children enjoy moving through boundaries and all that is prohibited and all that is not.) There will be a swinging seat, too. I would like vines planted against the wall that is a backdrop to the space. Can we pick and eat the grapes or is it forbidden? These contribute to the mystery of the space.

The approach to this project is to be cheap. It is experimental; it informs adults about playspace design. It is not age-specific and should ideally be used by different people at different times of day, including the late night punters of the adjoining comedy club. (Solar powered fairy lights are what I want for them.) I see this as a woodland clearing. Is there a faraway tree? Does Bambi graze there and disappear before you reach the spot? Is there a circle of magic on the ground? It should be constantly changing in very subtle ways, yet always have the same enticing, uncatchable flavor.

## Loose parts

In Nicholson's theory loose parts refers to anything that can be moved around, carried, rolled, lifted, piled on top of one another, or combined to create interesting and novel structures and experiences. Loose parts include wood, containers, shapes, toys, animals, plants, and so on.

Loose parts allow children to take an object that has a loosely defined purpose and use it to be anything that they want for their playing. Thus a cardboard box can be a den or a car or an airplane, a bed or a tortoise shell. Loose parts do exactly the opposite of battery-powered toys that require the child only to push a button to send the toy into an ecstasy of beeping and flashing and tinny music. Such toys do the playing while the child is reduced to the passive role of an audience. Play itself, with these toys, is turned into a space of exclusion for children. They're kept outside the play circle, which is dominated by the moving toy. Loose parts liberate the imagination and creativity of the playing children and allow them to master the world around them in ever-changing ways and communicate more effectively through their playing.

## Mirroring

See *D. W. Winnicott*



## Mollycoddling

Mollycoddling is what we do when we fall into the parent trap.

I was sitting next to a friend at a play conference one day and he showed me a video clip of his toddler daughter on the streets of Manhattan. She was teetering beside a stand of apples that, like buttercups on a chin, gleamed their autumn colors onto her rosy cheeks. She turned her face up to beam at her dad and then shifted her attention to a passer-by, whom she charmed with a smile and engaged in a game.

Proud Dad, aglow with the wonder of the fresh watching of the scene, explained how this little girl embraced the world. How she delighted in each new human being that she discovered. As we watched the video he told me what had happened one day when she had moved, in her usual way, to embrace a little girl and experienced her first

rejection. The girl pushed her away. As he told me this story, Dad and I both winced at the pain that his daughter must have felt.

“She cried,” he said, “not because she was physically hurt, but because no one had ever met her with that response before.” I sensed that this had been a turning point in this lovely man’s fathering. He knew the deep emotional hurt that the shock of the rejection had caused his tiny, vulnerable, sweet-natured daughter.

He knew from his work and from his heart that the child has to be let down by the world, that we have to experience a range of hurts and traumas of the ordinary everyday kind. The insult from another person, the scraping of a knee, the shock of falling, the unpleasant truth that other people may disagree with you. There comes the horrendous realization that we are not the center of the universe and the apple of everyone’s eye.

The mollycoddled child is prevented from learning these things because the deep love of the parent manifests itself through a desire to bubble-wrap the child and protect her utterly from the possibility of experiencing any of the harshness of the world.

This father, however, allowed his beloved child to experience this insult because he loves her so very much.

Children are often denied experiences because parents ache to keep them as pristine and tenderly perfect as they were when that first tsunami of love swept over them, when they first saw those tiny fingernails and their hearts melted, and they relinquished their entire being into the service of this omnipotent yet utterly vulnerable new life.

If we refuse our children the chance to play because they may get a bump, or a cut, or a scrape, or get into an argument, if we try to make sure that nothing in the world upsets them, if we stop kids from having the chance to experience the perilous range of human experience, then we are not protecting them. We are endangering them. They will develop no coping mechanisms for themselves. They will have no resilience, no depth of character. They will not understand how to come at the world. They will consider themselves to be precocious little gods and goddesses, probably inclined to tyranny.

That is what mollycoddling does to a child.

As Lady Allen said, “Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.”

I am not advocating negligence. We have to assess the risks that our children take. Do the benefits outweigh the hazards? I would stop

my children from trying out sword swallowing or sticking their fingers into electrical sockets, but it is not always an easy judgment to make. My own son broke his arms and wrists in skateboarding accidents. We were regular visitors to the emergency room. Did we ever consider stopping him from skating? I don't even remember thinking about it.

Then there is our slender elfin daughter who found her natural element in the air on a trapeze. Does my heart sink as I see my daughter soar, as I watch her creating a world without gravity, straining my neck to look up at her forming elegance in the air? Yes, of course it does. But how could I deny her life's passion?

Watching our children take chances and handle risk demands more from us than from the children. It takes courage.

## Neophilia

Introduced in *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytic Practice* (Hughes, 2001), this term was coined by Desmond Morris of *Naked Ape* fame. He was the curator of mammals at the London Zoo and spent much time watching apes. He realized that they had a constant desire to have new experiences, or to re-invent familiar experiences.<sup>16</sup>

*Neophilia* means the love of the new. Hughes says, "Children are stimulated to play by the new, the novel, the attractive and the interesting. ... They ... create their own neophilic context using imagination and fantasy."<sup>17</sup> This relates closely to Winnicott's<sup>18</sup> idea of creative living, in which there is "a lifetime burning in every moment."<sup>19</sup> There is a zest for life, a drive to discover and create and re-create, a passion for discovery and invention to master the world, understand it, and experience it at first hand, to push the boundaries of the known and find out the flavor of newness. Watch children at play and you will see this in action.

One often hears grumbling that children on the autistic spectrum will play the same thing over and over again without apparently moving the play along. If you join such children in their playing, however, you will soon learn to observe the minute variations that they are introducing to their games. If you continue to play with them you will see that the play actually moves on in leaps and bounds.

## Play audit

As a part of the process of reflective practice, playworkers can audit their

play site. There are many different ways of doing this, depending on the reason for the audit. One can base the audit on the goal of including all the types of play. Or one can audit with the specific needs of children with disabilities in mind, or the compensatory nature of the play site against the context of the neighborhood.

During a play audit you are on the lookout for deficits. You are doing a bit of play archaeology, looking for clues about how the site is used and how it could be used. This need not be a negatively critical process, though it can be used for troubleshooting or whistle-blowing purposes. An audit should be written up with sensitivity, to be shared with the playworkers on a site as a part of their ongoing tool box of resources. It might also prove useful to include a potential assessment. This is a little like a risk assessment, but is designed to test the hypothetical potential of a new piece of equipment or change to the site. It is also possible to use a Risk Benefit Assessment to increase the challenges offered by the site. What will the children gain from being able to take reasonable risks?

## Play deprivation

It is difficult to discuss play deprivation without becoming melodramatic. Studies carried out in Romanian orphanages, in Northern Ireland, and of murderers in the U.S.<sup>20</sup> show that there are links between a play-deprived childhood and atypical behaviors, both socially aggressive and emotionally repressed. Play-deprived people may be physically desensitized, show symptoms of severe learning disabilities, physical ineptitude, or erratic behavior, be depressive and withdrawn, or have difficulty in forming bonds.



If we lock poor or orphaned children in an institution, chained to their beds and deprived of human interaction and stimulation, and deprived also of their right to play, then we must expect the horrific results that we were all so shocked by in Eastern Europe. If we plan and plot every second of our children's waking time from their very earliest years and cram into it activities designed to train them for adulthood and teach them to regard their own urge to play as insignificant, then we must expect an extraordinarily troubled nation of adults coming up. When psychiatrist Stuart Brown interviewed murderers in prison he found that play deprivation was a common feature of their childhoods.

There is a plague of play deprivation. We are seeing the first signs and symptoms of the sickness that comes from it. The bad news is that it looks as if it is spreading worldwide and that the projected outcomes will be disastrous for human communities and for the planet itself. Widespread madness? Do I go too far?

The good news is that there is a cure and we have it at our fingertips and it is utterly free.

## Play rules

I have been to many playgrounds where children were given a list of rules that they had to agree to abide by as they joined the project. On some adventure playgrounds, these rules are painted in big letters on the walls. My work has always been to enable children with disabilities to participate in play projects that are local and suitable for them. Or better yet, to have a choice of play places available to them. So these rules have always presented me with problems.

Many of the children that I work with do not read. Asking them to comprehend in advance the things that they may or may not do is a considerable challenge. If you are a child with Tourette's syndrome, you may not be able to abide by the "no swearing" rule, however much you might wish to. In fact, the whole notion of creating finite rules for a playspace is fairly absurd if you are following the Playwork Principles. At one place the rules written on the wall had been added to and added to, with increasing tightness of regulation. The last rule read: "Be happy and cheerful." (Sigh.)

Because the adventure playground that I worked in was so very inclusive, we had to think hard about a system of shared understanding. We came up with this rule: "Have the best time that you can while you are here and try not to hurt yourself or anyone else." This allowed us to deal with many different ways of perceiving the world, to deal with accidental or unwitting hurt, emotional upset, and damage to things that really mattered. The rule was fluid and flexible. There was no line drawn in the sand, so children did not spend much time testing boundaries as they often do with rigid rules.

We did not believe that a binary approach worked. To tell a child "No" frequently arouses



an equal, opposite, and defiant “Yes.” To avoid this binary opposition requires the playworker to be subtle. A fine example of this comes from Joan Almon,<sup>21</sup> who remembers a time when two little boys, long-time competitors, both wanted to be king of the castle. They stood on a table and each declared himself king. She walked past quietly muttering to herself, “There was once a country that had two kings.” The play frame was at once opened up to new possibilities.

Boundaries are there on the inclusive adventure playground. The place is not anarchic. It surfs on the curl of the wave between order and chaos. (See *Complexity*.) It is adaptable and mostly harmonious, allowing children to be tolerant and to appeal for fairness.

Perhaps this concept goes hand in hand with the “finite and infinite games” as described by James P. Carse<sup>22</sup> in a book of that title and applied by Battram to playwork. A finite game is bound in time and space and agreed-upon conventions—like a football match. There is a preordained outcome: someone wins and someone loses. An infinite game, like “Silly-Rules Football,” which I watched as it was played by a child in a wheelchair pushed by a playworker, a boy with extreme dyspraxia, and whoever else was around, has no rules. In this game there were many serious lows and highs that were spontaneously decided and no sense of competition to be better than the other. It lasted several hours, on and off, and took place in many places, with many children and in many forms, with balls, flicked paper, thrown grass—anything and anyhow. We need to think very carefully about what the adult desire for competition does to the psyche of our children.

## Play types

There are many differing ways of identifying types of play. Until you have stopped and considered this, it may seem like utter nonsense.

“Play is play!”

Not so.

Think about this. A fixed playspace in a park will offer one type of play, the sort that uses big body movement. It offers swings or climbing frames or slides.

But if I asked you how you played as a child, I think that you would remember many things that were not like this. You may remember playing with grandma’s perfume bottles—the touch and smell and

beauty of the objects. You may have put on shows, dressed up, or pretended to have weddings. You may have played hide and seek and perhaps played with fire or water or mud or sand.

In the U.K. Bob Hughes has rooted through all the literature he could find and has identified through research and observation of children 16 different play types. These are what we use in the U.K. to inform our practice.

Perhaps the most intriguing of these is what he terms “recapitulative play.” This is based on the knowledge that the human brain is born incompletely formed in terms of size and complexity. (It has to be, for logistical, birth-related reasons.) So the brain grows very quickly in the first ten or so years of life. The fine points of its architecture change. It develops more filing cabinets and the capacity to fill those filing cabinets with stuff, and creates a complex network of connections between the cabinets. The theory goes like this—children learn through their early playing the skills that are responsive to the environment and vital to the survival of the species. This has happened throughout the development of humankind. We learn to make shelters and run and hide and climb and dam streams and irrigate fields and absorb the individual customs and identities of our tribe, child care practices, communication, relationships, and much more through the practice of play.

Bob Hughes has gathered information about all the types of play in what he calls a “taxonomy of play.” It is a useful diagnostic tool for playworkers. They use it to check the availability of equipment and materials of a play setting along with the opportunities that it provides for diverse forms of play.

An excellent example of this comes from observations on a play site where the staff noticed that there was no obvious invitation to children to experience the dramatic play types. They built a stage out of tables and made a Heath Robinson<sup>23</sup> curtain and before this work was done the children had started to put on “Little Orphan Annie.” This dramatic play continued long after the impromptu production was ended, with dressing up and performance and domestic dramas being acted out all over the site. It was as if a deep thirst had been quenched and the children now felt liberated to indulge in these types of playing. Some three years on, these same children spoke excitedly about this memory.

Here are Hughes's 16 play types with some illustrative examples:

*Symbolic play*—when a stick becomes a horse

*Rough and tumble play*—play fighting

*Socio-dramatic play*—social drama

*Social play*—playing with rules and societal structures

*Creative play*—construction and creation

*Communications play*—e.g., words, jokes, acting, body and sign languages, facial expressions

*Dramatic play*—performing or playing with situations that are not personal or domestic, e.g., playing “Harry Potter” or doing a “Harry Potter play”

*Deep play*—risky experiences that confront fear

*Exploratory play*—manipulating, experimenting

*Fantasy play*—rearranges the world in the child's fantastical way

*Imaginative play*—pretending

*Locomotor play*—chase, swinging, climbing, playing with the movements of your body

*Mastery play*—lighting fires, digging holes, games of elemental control

*Object play*—playing with objects and exploring their uses and potential

*Recapitulative play*—carrying forward the evolutionary deeds of becoming a human being, e.g., dressing up with paints and masks, damming streams, growing food

*Role play*—exploring other ways of being, pretending to drive a bus or be a policeman or use a telephone.<sup>24</sup>



## Playable spaces

This phrase was used by Tim Gill<sup>25</sup> in the Mayoral Planning Guidance for London and Bernard Spiegel of Playlink.<sup>26</sup> It was picked up almost instantly by playworkers because of the context in which it was used. It sums up quite delightfully the need for architects, parks managers and staff, developers, and town planners to look at the places where children play and ask, “Why there?” in much the same way that Sorenson did when he first realized that children preferred to play on bomb sites rather than in the fixed play equipment areas that had been created for them. It demands that we think about what is needed in a playspace and do an audit of the successful component parts there. It also implies that communities should consider children in the overall design of the fabric of environments and, by extension, think about human beings rather than just traffic and other economic factors. A playable space is pleasant for every bit of a community to be in. Quite a concept.

## Playwork Principles

This is a curiously vital and useful piece of work. The history of the Playwork Principles is available through Play Wales (see [www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk)).

The playwork sector was invited to respond to a document produced by Bob Hughes, Gordon Sturrock and Mick Conway.<sup>27</sup> The responses were collated and condensed by a scrutiny group that amalgamated them into the Playwork Principles. The process was honest and scrupulous. I know; I was a member of that group. Although the process was coordinated by Play Wales, the principles are embraced by the playwork profession throughout the four nations of the U.K. They describe, clearly and succinctly, the ethos of our craft. They are a delight to work with and will probably be very useful for some time.

Here they are:

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological, and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.

2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play by following their own instincts, ideas, and interests, in their own way, for their own reasons.

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.

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

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.

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.

7. Playworkers recognize their own impact on the playspace and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.



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 well being of children.<sup>28</sup>

## Quirkiness

A good play space will always have some element of quirkiness—something that shows that this is a space where anything is possible and where the world has a strange slant. Quirky is the opposite of cool. Coolness is a play stiffer! People who are focused on being cool find it very difficult to let go and make themselves silly and playful. When playworkers can be quirky and show their playful take on the world, they liberate the quirky playfulness within the children. But we also have to be careful not to be too weird; that's just scary for children.

## Recalcitrance

Arthur Battram and Wendy Russell<sup>29</sup> have a jolly, playful, and illuminating collective noun that describes playworkers: Recalcitrance. It encapsulates the general attitude of the archetypal playworker. They are frequently nonconformist, seeing the world outside the box, being offbeat and unconstrained in their creativity, lateral thinkers, able to tolerate with joy the benign wildness of creativity that they observe in the playing child. They are able to support the play process with wisdom and insight, using imaginative modes of intervention to move play

forward. Of course, playworkers delighted in this term from the first coining because, as Groucho Marx said, “I wouldn’t want to belong to any club that would have me as a member.”

## Reflective practice

Reflective Analytic Practice (RAP) is an essential part of the toolkit of the playworker. RAP refers to a working style. Playworkers are constantly observing the children at play. They look at the ways in which the site is used, looking for deficits of certain types of playing. They consider and reflect on what they are seeing and share their thoughts in a daily reflective practice session with their colleagues. These observations should be analyzed and acted upon. A diary of reflective practice sessions must be kept to show the seasonal ebb and flow of playing.

Hughes in *Evolutionary Play and Reflective Analytic Practice* describes a process that involved playworkers reflectively immersing themselves in playwork at such depth that the new and important insights regarding the mechanisms and motivations behind it could begin to emerge. He writes:

The power of RAP seems to rest on a combination of three things:

- (1) The ability of the playworker to bring contemplative and regressive skills to bear upon “what if this was happening/ had happened to me?” kind of problem.
- (2) The ability of the playworkers to locate, digest, and study material relevant to this problem from literature.
- (3) The ability of the playworker to craft an analysis of the two, producing either a practical playwork solution or greater clarity to a difficult theoretical area.

Hughes notes that this has “the effect of opening up long-forgotten sensory and affective play memories” that allows the playworker “not to be in the cockpit with the child, but certainly flying in parallel.”<sup>30</sup>

## Secret spaces

This is a phrase used by Elizabeth Goodenough<sup>31</sup> to describe the hideaways that children need to create or discover and to have safely within their control. Without these private places where their inner

playful lives can be exercised, children have little opportunity for many different types of play.

Morgan Leichter-Saxby<sup>32</sup> asks, in her work on forts and dens, without the opportunity to experience privacy how on earth can children discover a sense of their private selves and personal worlds? She writes:

To be by oneself, in a place that feels safe and unadulterated, to have time and space to dive into the depths of the playing that is an intrinsic drive within you, to step at once aside from and yet deeper into the world as you experience it, that is when and where the richness of the play that is possible ripens to fruition.<sup>33</sup>

## Spaces of exclusion

Researching for this primer, I went to Niall Martin, the friend and psychogeographer who had introduced the concept of *spaces of exclusion* to me.<sup>34</sup>



It turns out that the phrase has been quoted wrongly, by me, all over the U.S. and the U.K. Niall tells me it should be “spaces of exception.” This just proves once again that there are distinct advantages to being on the DCD spectrum.<sup>35</sup> I can get stuff wrong in useful ways. I like to think of it as lateral thinking.

“Spaces of exclusion” sums up for me the hostility of the urban countryside towards children. There are places designed to be child-unfriendly, places that by design do not even demonstrate an awareness of the existence of children. There is a prevailing atmosphere of children being unwelcome because of their unpredictability, noisiness, and general non-adult nature.

Look at the design for urban living that we have developed in a corruption of the work of Le Corbusier.<sup>36</sup> Tower blocks without street life. Corridors that are purely functional. “The neighbors complain when my children play in the corridor,” says one mother. “I am on the eleventh floor, my son is on the autistic spectrum. What am I supposed to do, keep him locked up in the flat on his own, or send him off to the ground floor to play?”

We live within walls, in Malvina Reynolds’s “little boxes made of ticky-tacky,”<sup>37</sup> in living pods.

These tower blocks are surrounded by communal land, but this

is often a hostile space for children because of the ways adults use it, or because of the blasts of wind that bounce around the wind mazes created by the blocks, or because of the powerful message carried by the “no ballgames” signs on every wall. These notices carry no legal weight. But just as surely as advertising takes for granted the “advertiser’s right to intrude” (Winnicott, 1954), a right delightfully subverted by the graffiti artist Banksy<sup>38</sup> and many others, they carry a message that gets through. They create a sense in the community and in children, especially, that playing is wrong. This whole attitude is antisocial. It builds die Mauer im Kopf, “the wall in the head,” as Lynsey Hanley points out, the internalized control system that limits what we believe is possible of and for ourselves.<sup>39</sup>

In London’s Tower Hamlets, where I live and work, thousands upon thousands of dwellings shrink into the spaces left for them by the “lines of severance,”<sup>40</sup> the roads that butt their way rudely through the borough with their unreasonably fast and heavy traffic, and the smaller streets that emulate them like a child emulates a dysfunctional sibling. There are railway and tube tracks and canals. Sometimes the whole place feels like a complex laser burglar alarm system that we need to flick flack and dodge our way through. How do children negotiate this by themselves? The places where we can walk our desire lines—the paths we would naturally carve out and that should be pathways created by bare feet crushing long wildflower-filled grass meadows—are preordained for us and set in tarmac. Municipally designated desire.

Occasionally we find a playground. We know that it has been created because of some legislative demand placed upon designers and town planners. You can feel that it is as unwelcome as children themselves. It is in the way; it takes up space. It has not been created by a person who knows about play or children. It is there purely as a signifier to other adults. It carries the message “See? We have done it. We have put your stupid playground into the design. Now can we get on with the important stuff please?” Neither architects nor landscape designers nor even parks managers know much about play from their training, though some splendid exceptions exist—people who have taken the trouble to inform themselves and translate their knowledge into playscapes for children.

For the most part we see garish blots of metal enclosed inside metal fences like *über*-playpens. In one section there will be a slide and swing,

a bouncy chicken, and maybe a climbing frame. Next door to this will be a slightly larger version of the same thing, fenced in and separated from the first. The marginally older children are assigned one playspace, the little ones another. The danger of the two mixing is considered to be so great that a double layer of fencing must be built between them. And heaven forbid that teen-agers try to access either of these spaces. They are demonized and pilloried and labelled “hoodies” and delinquents and vandals. (Where are they supposed to play?)

These token play places are clearly spaces of exclusion for teens in much the same way as up-to-the-minute educational toys require the child only to press a button to send the toys into an orgiastic flurry of playfulness, while the child is required to step back and watch, to become a passive observer. That’s how these “playgrounds” operate. They do not provide a range of experiences but focus on gross motor play alone. No evidence here of the variety of the 16 play types identified by Hughes and used by playworkers to understand the business of the playing of children. It is mostly metal or plastic, and even the flooring obliterates the experience of falling and grazing your knee. It is rubberized. Sanitized. Child-proofed. Play possibilities are tightly controlled. No sand and water here. No digging in the mud. No loose parts. No visual stimulation or sense of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in the screamingly primary-colored metal and rubber playzone.

Imaginative and dramatic play types are curbed by the ugly shaping of bits of equipment into chicken or rocket ship forms. Have a look at the Free Play Network<sup>41</sup> photo gallery of places of play. Go to the section about places of woe and you will see graphic illustrations of such horrors. Play is adulterated here. Spaces of exclusion are disguised as places of inclusion.

Even in schools, where many children experience their only outdoor unstructured playtime, the agenda is adulterated. The threat of a withheld playtime if the individual child or the class does not tow the line is ever-present. I witnessed this once in a class that was looking at the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the lesson subject. They were talking about the child’s right to play and one child started to mess about. He was told that because of his behavior he had forfeited his playtime! Play as a system of rewards and punishments.

Another story comes from a playworker in a school lunch playtime. She saw a group of children playing at having babies. They had stuffed

jumpers up their T-shirts and were pretending to be pregnant like their teacher and one of their mums. The playworker sensitively supported the game and was later hauled over the coals by the head teacher who said that this must never be allowed again and that in 25 years of teaching she had never seen anything like it. (In 25 years of playwork, I have seldom seen a day go by that something like this does not happen. It is a healthy use of play.)

## Stories

Many years ago I became frustrated with playworkers who did not hone their reflective practice to the extent that allowed them to recall the playing of the children that they had seen that day. I started to organize our team meetings in a slightly different way and we began to tell each other the play stories of the day. This required us to watch, remember, and think about the telling. We had to be faithful to the material that we had seen in the play.

Somehow the storytelling process let us get closer to the playing than we could when we used adult representation of the material. Our team became very good at this and it became lodged in our shared practice. But we were only one team. I knew that the stories of these children's play needed to be heard widely.

The playing of children with disabilities and their peers is largely misunderstood or forgotten. When we tell the stories of their play we find that people understand with greater clarity what we are trying to say. The stories stretch like song lines through our shared experiences. They show the way that we need to travel and tell us about the places we have been. Working with a group of folks coming newly to the subject of play, I find that the sharing of our own play stories awakens the flavor of what is needed for the children around us today and starts to show us what we need to be doing for them. People understand how important their play was, what a small role adults played in it, how the experiences were so frequently with nature, and with mixed-age groups of children.

I have collected stories from people all over the world. Every group that I have worked with has come up with surprisingly similar ones. In Africa, Asia, Scandinavia, the Americas, Europe—all over the world children have done the same things. They have played chase, climbed, foraged for food, built dens, been daring, and played with fire and water, sand and mud. They have had seasonal variations to their playing, they

dressed up, pretended to be adults, made up rhymes, played at being in gangs or groups—all the activities that would need to be hard-wired into a developing species for its assured survival. Once adults see this, they frequently understand that play is more important than they had realized. It is an essential part of what we are.

In a presentation in Berkeley in 2008, Stuart Brown of the National Institute for Play<sup>42</sup> talked a little about his work of collecting stories of play from scores of folks, famous, infamous, and everyday. He said that play needs to establish a mythology so it can regain its identity in the United States. Several U.S. children's museums are considering gathering the play stories of the adults who bring their children to the site. We would like to see play-mindful communities watching out for the playing children, so that the prevailing culture will shift to one in which playing is the norm.

## Transference

This is a term that is borrowed from the psychotherapeutic world. It describes the process that occurs when the therapist and the analysand recognize shared experiences and start to identify with each other. In the therapy room it is the job of the analyst to recognize these exchanges and retain her personal detachment from them to allow the analysand to work through his own processes without being sullied by the personal input of the analyst. This enables the clients to continue with their own material without the adulteration of the emotional response of the analyst.

In a similar way all playworkers are required to examine the effect of the playing child upon their own psyches. They must realize that they are not there to impose their own emotional baggage on the children. Likewise, the children, who are at play, will have a personal impact upon them. It is the adults' role to manage and reflect upon the way the children affect them. The Playwork Principles touch on this process. Playwork is one of the few professions that acknowledges this phenomenon and its importance in the practice of its craft.

Consider an example: A playworker finds that she is surprised by an urge to hit a child when the child is cheeky to her. On reflection the playworker remembers that she was hit by an authority figure when she was cheeky. This situation causes resonance of her own trauma. Because she recognizes and understands it, she can be alert to it. She

discusses this realization with her line managers who support her working relationship with the child in question in the most appropriate ways. A poorly equipped and trained playworker will conceal her personal responses from the child or the playground as a whole and will re-enact her own traumas at the expense of the children. She will also conceal her personal response from her line manager, burying the problem deeper.

## Trivialization of play

This is a state of mind that perceives and positions play as trivial fripperies that are permissible for a few years in early childhood at a time when children (generally considered to be adults in training) can waste time with idle inane fun. It becomes infantilized. It is a brightly colored phenomenon, primary colors usually, though bubble gum pink is allowed. It is not thought to have any considerable substance and certainly does not fulfill any function—other than creating Kodak moments of fun. Balloons, bouncy castles, zoomorphic face painting, and jolly dungareed party entertainers are obligatory.

This perception of play has nothing to do with the processes of playing that allow the internal world of the child to come out and discover how to experience and assimilate the external world. It does not entertain the thought that the need for play stretches over many thousands of years and is in the business of giving voice to the richest emotional pallet. Instead, it is a world filled with the equivalent of the springy chickens one finds on playgrounds.

## D. W. Winnicott (DWW)<sup>43</sup>

The pregnant woman finds herself in a state DWW calls “primary maternal pre-occupation.” He says it is a sort of “healthy madness.” (He also says, “We are poor indeed if we are only sane.”) This state allows her to focus on the child and what it will need. How to provide the best life for her child? How to be a parent?

This state morphs into what DWW calls “the Good Enough Mother” (GEM). This is not a put-down, rather a celebration of humanity. We are neither perfect nor failures. If we are good enough, that is the best we can possibly be. Perfection is for machines. DWW was writing at a time when mothers were the primary caregivers in almost all circumstances. We now extend this phrase to fathers as

well, and in playwork terms it has been applied as “the good enough playworker” (GEPW).

The GEM creates a “holding environment” for her child. DWW says that the mother literally protects her child from gravity in the early months, holding it to protect from falling. As the child becomes more able, more independent, the mother adapts the parameters of the holding environment to the changing needs of the child. This process continues through what DWW calls “absolute dependence,” through “relative dependence,” when a child can “play alone in the presence of the mother,” to independence. Of course we know that this is a drawn out process that is constantly in flux.

The holding environment is a useful concept for us. It incorporates all the needs of the child: food, air, cleanliness, warmth, rest, and comfort. It changes and develops as the needs of the child change. It is safe and allows for exploration. The GEM manages the holding environment for her child. At this stage physical care is psychological care.

The GEPW likens this holding environment to the playspace; it holds the children and changes to meet their needs, informed by the attentive and attuned reflective practice of the playworkers. As one of the very first ingredients of the holding environment, the GEM will stare into the face of her child and mirror what the child is doing and the sounds she is making. Typically the child will perceive herself being perceived by the GEM (“apperception”) and will respond by continuing the game.

The archetypal version of this mirroring game is the sticking-out tongues game that is played between parent and child in the very early hours of their relationship and which continues with infinite variations for years to come. In playwork terms, this informs our work with children on the autistic spectrum and therefore all the other children that we work with as well. If we want to work with a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), then we will mirror his playing so that we experience for ourselves, first hand, something of what he is experiencing. This allows us to use the play that we are sharing to form a triangulation with the child. We are communicating through his playing. He probably feels something like this: “People usually stop me from doing this thing. But here is someone else who does it, too. She seems to like the same things I do. Let’s compare notes.”

Infants, according to DWW, find in this mirroring game their first playful interaction. They realize that there are people outside of themselves. He terms the space between the GEM and the child, in which this playing occurs, the “transitional or potential space.” It is a space where things can happen that are “me” and “not me.” The internal world of the child comes out to play in the external world. This view of playing and the space in which it happens makes sense of play in the life of a child to a playworker. The slightly older child will be able to tolerate being away from the GEM by the use of the “transitional object.” This object could be a bear or a blanket (Christopher Robin and Linus, respectively.) It can be what the child needs it to be, which DWW understands as being the first “not me” object.

The transitional object roughly equates to a photo kept in a wallet. The photo is of the loved one, but it is not the loved one. It makes separation from the loved one bearable until you can be with her again. It is the transitional object that helps to make possible the move from absolute dependence on the GEM through relative dependence to independence. Playworkers and parents have to be aware of the need for the child to become separate from us and have independent actions and thoughts.

Children need to discover the world for themselves if their play drives are to allow them to come at the world creatively. They need to extend the holding environment from a place in which they are 100 percent in need of us to care for their every second (absolute dependence), to a place where children can use their transitional objects to help them play alone in the presence of the GEM (relative dependence), to a place where both mother and child can allow each other to be apart.

Winnicott believes that the best way to live is to live creatively. By this he means constantly seeing the world anew, experiencing and re-experiencing what is available to you. (See *Neophilia*.)

What a joyous way to see the world.

And how very playful!



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Lester is a senior lecturer in playwork at the University of Gloucestershire and an independent playwork trainer and advisor. He recently co-authored *Play for a change: Play, policy and practice: A review of contemporary perspectives*.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Battram is a management consultant and play theorist who has focused on the relationship between play and complexity theory. He is the author of *Navigating Complexity: The Essential Guide to Complexity Theory in Business and Management*, London: The Industrial Society (2000).

<sup>3</sup> For some of Gordon Sturrock's writings on play, see: "The Sacred and the Profane," <http://www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~estutz/profane.html>. For books by Sturrock and others see <http://www.commonthreads.org.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> See note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Lady Allen of Hurtwood had a liberal rural upbringing before the First World War in England. She studied to become a gardener and then a landscape architect. Her work led her to design outside environments, and this in turn led her to the issues of children's rights and children's need for play. She became a major player in UNICEF. To hear a radio interview from 2001, tune in to the BBC at [http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2001\\_51\\_mon\\_05.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/2001_51_mon_05.shtml).

<sup>6</sup> Lady Allen of Hurtwood, *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady*. Marjory Allen & Mary Nicholson. (Thames and Hudson, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Bob Hughes had a very playful childhood that stayed with him and informs his work to this day. He was a science graduate who fell into playwork. Fascinated by what he saw, he realized that the profession needed development. He has continued to write, research, and develop the craft ever since. His books include *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytic Practice* (Routledge, 2001), and *A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types (2nd Edition)*. For information on these and other works by Hughes see <http://www.playeducation.com/>. His article "Play Then and Play Now" can be found at <http://www.playengland.org.uk/westmidlands/play-then-and-play-now-bh.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> H. S. Turner, *Something Extraordinary*. (Michael Joseph, 1961).

<sup>9</sup> Richard Louv is a journalist and author of several books. His best known is *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-deficit Disorder* (Algonquin Books, 2005, 2008). He is chairman of the Children and Nature Network, which he helped found. It encourages community groups that focus on bringing children back into nature. See <http://www.childrenandnature.org/>. He has also helped develop the coalition of hundreds of organizations working to Leave No Child Inside.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.strongmuseum.org>.

<sup>11</sup> For information about the documentary film *Where Do the Children Play?* and accompanying books see <http://www.wfum.org/childrenplay/index.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Sturrock is described as being “more than middle aged and still enjoys playing. He believes there is no such thing as an adult, only children of different ages. He was brought up in India, which he feels gave him a unique perspective on play and playing. Most of his working life has been happily absorbed in the search for meaningful explanations for play, most particularly in therapy, where he saw play being used for curative outcome with too little acknowledgement.” From the website Ludemos: the home of therapeutic playwork, <http://www.ludemos.co.uk/members.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> In the U.S., the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood brings together over 25 organizations to fight the commodification of play and related problems. See <http://www.commercialexploitation.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Comments are distilled from Battram’s book (see note 2) and conference presentations since 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Simon Nicholson, “How Not to Cheat Children: The Theory of Loose Parts,” *Landscape Architecture*, vol. 62, pp. 30–35, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> Desmond Morris, in his classic study *Men and Apes*, observed, “There is a perpetual struggle going on inside the brain, between the fear of the new (neophobia) and the love of the new (neophilia). The neophobic urges keep the animal out of danger, while the neophilic urges prevent him from becoming too set in his ways.” Some research shows gains for those in whom neophilia is stronger: “In a study performed at the University of Chicago, researchers discovered that the average lifespan for neophobic rats was 599 days, compared with 701 days for neophilic rats.” Quotes taken from <http://gcm.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=18121>.

<sup>17</sup> Bob Hughes. See note 7.

<sup>18</sup> See section on D.W. Winnicott.

<sup>19</sup> From T.S. Eliot’s “The Four Quartets—East Coker,” Section V. See <http://www.ubriaco.com/fq.html>.

<sup>20</sup> For Romanian research see Sophie Webb and Fraser Brown, “Playwork in Adversity: working with abandoned children in Romania” in *Playwork: Theory and Practice*, Fraser Brown, editor, (Open University Press, 2003), pp 157–175. For research on play in Northern Ireland see Bob Hughes M.A. dissertation, “A Dark and Evil Cul-de-Sac (Has children’s play in Belfast been adulterated by the troubles?)” which can be ordered through [www.playeducation.com](http://www.playeducation.com). For research on play deprivation in murderers see Stuart Brown’s work at <http://nifplay.org/whitman.html> and in *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* by Stuart Brown, M.D. with Christopher Vaughan (Avery, 2009), pp. 26 and 89.

<sup>21</sup> Joan Almon is director of the U.S. Alliance for Childhood and was formerly a Waldorf early childhood educator.

<sup>22</sup> James P. Carse is a philosopher and religious scholar who taught history and literature of religion at New York University. His book, *Finite and Infinite Games* (Ballantine, 1987), contrasts finite games, the every-day games of life that are bounded by the rules of space and time, and infinite games, that are endless, unbounded creative expressions of human beings.

<sup>23</sup> William Heath Robinson (1872–1944) was an English cartoonist and illustrator, who is best known for drawings of eccentric machines. “Heath Robinson” has entered the language as a description of any unnecessarily complex and implausible contraption. (From Wikipedia).

<sup>24</sup> See [http://www.playireland.ie/about\\_play.asp](http://www.playireland.ie/about_play.asp).

<sup>25</sup> Tim Gill is a writer and children’s advocate. From 1997–2004 he was director of the Children’s Play Council, now called Play England.

<sup>26</sup> Bernard Spiegel is principal of both the not-for-profit PLAYLINK and the general consultancy Common Knowledge.

<sup>27</sup> Mick Conway was a playworker on an adventure playground for many years and then became head of Hackney Play Association. Currently he plays a managerial role at Play England where he is a national advisor on play. For information on Bob Hughes see note 7; for Gordon Sturrock, note 12.

<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.playwales.org.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=48&page=50&skin=0>.

<sup>29</sup> Wendy Russell teaches about playwork at University of Gloucestershire and is an independent playwork consultant.

<sup>30</sup> Modified from Bob Hughes, *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytic Practice*, pp 183–184. See note 7 for more details.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth N. Goodenough teaches at the Residential College at the University of Michigan. Her interest in children’s secret spaces of play resulted in an exhibit and book, *Secret Spaces of Childhood* (University of Michigan Press, 2003). Her work on play then led her to develop the award-winning PBS documentary, *Where Do the Children Play?* She has edited two volumes to accompany the film: *Where Do the Children Play*, a study guide and *A Place for Play*, a companion volume distributed by University of Michigan Press which also distributes the film.

<sup>32</sup> Morgan Leichter-Saxby is a playworker in London who has studied fort and den building as well as other play activities. Her blog is at <http://playeverything.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>33</sup> Quote was confirmed by email with Morgan Leichter-Saxby in April 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Psychogeography is a relatively new field of study, having begun in the 1950’s. It refers to the way a geographical environment, usually a city, works upon the feelings and emotions of an individual. It’s a type of mapping that takes into account more than the physical dimensions of an area.

<sup>35</sup> Developmental Coordination Disorder.

<sup>36</sup> Le Courbusier designed buildings but was also concerned with the social and physical integration of urban life. He spoke of communities where the daily activities at home, work and in the neighborhood could be integrated through rational design. He saw architecture as a tool for restructuring society, an alternative to revolution.

<sup>37</sup> Malvina Reynolds was a singer-songwriter and political activist. She is best known for her song, “Little Boxes,” sung by Pete Seeger and others. It was inspired by the rows of small identical houses in Daly City, California, south of San Francisco.

<sup>38</sup> Banksy is a graffiti artist based in England but known around the world for his art which often takes the form of political satire. He has managed to remain anonymous, although he complains that it is getting harder as he becomes more famous.

<sup>39</sup> Hanley, Lynsey. *Estates: An Intimate History*, (Granta, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Lines of severance are roads that are difficult to cross, railroad lines or other obstructions to pedestrian life or children’s play. Such roads divide neighborhoods into segments rather than integrating and uniting them.

<sup>41</sup> See <http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk>.

<sup>42</sup> Stuart Brown is a retired psychiatrist and founder-president of the National Institute of Play. See [www.nifplay.org](http://www.nifplay.org). See note 20 for information on Brown’s new book, *Play*.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott (1896–1971) was a British pediatrician who turned his attention to psychology and psychoanalysis. His ideas are receiving renewed attention, particularly from those who are play-minded. For a brief bio and quotes see <http://www.mythosandlogos.com/Winnicott.html>.

## Resources

The Alliance for Childhood ([www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org)) produces materials on play and playwork, including videos, policy briefs, fact sheets, reports, and resource lists.

### **Playwork**

Play stories by Penny Wilson: [www.flickr.com/photos/playtowerhamlets/4001537099](http://www.flickr.com/photos/playtowerhamlets/4001537099)

Free Play Network photo exhibit: [www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk)

Playwork partnerships: [www.playwork.co.uk](http://www.playwork.co.uk)

London playwork: [www.playworklondon.org.uk](http://www.playworklondon.org.uk)

## **Play**

American Association for the Child's Right to Play: [www.ipausa.org](http://www.ipausa.org)

Arbor Day Foundation, Nature Explore: [www.arborday.org/explore](http://www.arborday.org/explore)

Carol Torgan's 100+ Top Play Resources: [www.caroltorgan.com/100-top-play-resources](http://www.caroltorgan.com/100-top-play-resources)

Children's Environments Research Group: [web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/index.htm](http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/cerg/index.htm)

Children and Nature Network: [www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org)

KaBoom!, playgrounds and play: [www.kaboom.org](http://www.kaboom.org)

National Institute for Play: [www.nifplay.org](http://www.nifplay.org)

National Wildlife Federation, Green Hour: [www.greenhour.org](http://www.greenhour.org)

Natural Learning Initiative, playground design: [www.naturalearning.org](http://www.naturalearning.org)

New York Coalition for Play: [www.nycplay.org](http://www.nycplay.org)

No Child Left Inside: [www.ncicoalition.org](http://www.ncicoalition.org)

Play England: [www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)

Play Wales: [www.playwales.org.ukncicoalition.org](http://www.playwales.org.ukncicoalition.org)

Playborhood, advocating for neighborhood play: <http://playborhood.com>

U.S. Play Coalition: [www.usplaycoalition.org](http://www.usplaycoalition.org)

Wild Zones, natural play areas: [www.wild-zone.net](http://www.wild-zone.net)

## **Creating Playgrounds**

A web search on any of the following phrases will yield links:

Lia Sutton's adventure playgrounds

Early Futures Adventure Playgrounds

Weburbanist Adventure Playgrounds

Berkeley Adventure Playground NPR Interview

Huntington Beach Adventure Playground

Imagination Playground New York City

Shane's Inspiration Accessible Playgrounds

Boundless Playgrounds

# The Playwork Primer

Penny Wilson

PLAYWORK is the art of supporting children's play without directing or controlling it. Playworkers create play-rich environments in which their presence is nearly invisible. They assess risk, not to create risk-free play but to offer just as much risk as children can handle.



Photo courtesy of Play Association of Tower Hamlets

Playwork is a well established profession in the United Kingdom, where Penny Wilson has worked at adventure playgrounds for 25 years. *The Playwork Primer* is her introduction to playwork for those who want to restore free play to children's lives.

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"Wilson has produced an engaging guide for all those responsible for enhancing children's play. This book illustrates the universal powers of play and the role of playworkers in the development of competent, healthy human beings."

—Joe L. Frost, Parker Centennial Professor, University of Texas, Austin

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THE ALLIANCE FOR CHILDHOOD is a nonprofit partnership of educators, health professionals, and other advocates for children who are concerned about the decline in children's health and well-being.

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