

## Developing an adventure playground: the essential elements

### Introduction

Adventure playgrounds are, by their nature, distinct and particular to their location and their users. This briefing paper aims to describe what is meant by adventure playgrounds funded through the government's play pathfinder and third sector adventure playground funding programmes. It sets out what is expected of play pathfinder local authorities in the design and development of new adventure playgrounds and expands on programme information for adventure playgrounds in the third sector funding programme.

### What is an adventure playground?

An adventure playground can be described as a space dedicated solely to children's play, where skilled playworkers enable and facilitate the ownership, development and design of that space – physically, socially and culturally – by the children playing there.

The indoor and outdoor area is enclosed by a boundary which signals that the space within is dedicated to children's play and that activities such as digging, making fires or building and demolishing dens – activities not normally condoned in other spaces where children play – are provided for and encouraged.

### The essential elements of an adventure playground

Play England and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) expect the approach taken by play pathfinder local authorities to be informed by some underpinning principles and for the plans to feature some essential elements. These were broadly set out in the *Play Pathfinder Bidder Pack* (DCSF, 2008) distributed to local authorities in February 2008. This briefing paper builds and expands on this earlier guidance.

Because each adventure playground should be a unique place, it is not possible to prescribe what it should look like or what specific features it should offer. Each should evolve with community and children's participation, as a space that children 'own' and are empowered to shape and develop. Nevertheless, there are some important principles and essential elements that good adventure playgrounds have in common.



## Widest possible range of opportunities

The adventure playground should aim to provide the widest possible range of opportunities for children's play, including:

- 1 Spontaneous free expression of children's drive to play.
- 2 Engagement in the full range of play types as chosen by children (see Page 6).
- 3 Exploration of physical, social, emotional, imaginary and sensory spaces.
- 4 Free flow in giving and responding to 'play cues' (see Page 7) to ensure children can determine the content and intent of their play.
5. Creating a shared flexible space that children feel has a sense of 'magic'.
- 6 A rich and evolving indoor and outdoor play environment, where children can play all year round and in all weathers.
- 7 The active involvement of children and young people in creating and modifying the play space, within a varied landscape.
- 8 The playground is at the heart of the community.

### Other essential elements, often shared with other forms of play provision are:

- 9 The playground is staffed by skilled and appropriately qualified playworkers working to the *Playwork Principles* (see Page 7).
- 10 It is designed to be accessible to all children, and is based on inclusive practice so that disabled, non-disabled children and children from minority communities are welcomed and enabled to play together.
- 11 Entry to the playground is free of charge, children are free to come and go and free to choose how they spend their time when there.
- 12 Risk management is based on the principle of risk-benefit assessment, balancing the potential for harm against the benefits children gain from challenging themselves in their play.

The remainder of this briefing explains and expands upon each of these elements and recommends an approach to quality assurance that will ensure the principles of good adventure playground management and operation are maintained. It also includes some underpinning principles of good practice in playwork and play provision, and provides suggestions for further reading and resources.

## The essential elements

### 1 Spontaneous free expression

Children's spontaneity and drive to play means that the playground is in essence a space in which children have the freedom to determine the nature of their play. The only constraint should be that they do not harm themselves or others (see the risk and challenge section below).

### 2 Engagement in the full range of play types as chosen by children

The playground provides possibilities to engage in any and all play types. It is the rich interplay between children and the play environment that is important, not whether children engage in this or that play type (a 'tick box' approach).

### 3 Exploration of physical, social, emotional, imaginary and sensory spaces

The adventure playground allows children access to physical and psychological experiences not readily available elsewhere. Opportunities for social interaction and developing children's innate capacity for their imagination to bloom should be designed in as integral features of the physical space.

### 4 Free flow in giving and responding to play cues

Play is seen as an outcome in itself and children can engage in the full play cycle on their own terms. Play cues are the signals that children give through a spoken, facial or other body signal or by the use of materials to indicate that they want to play. Engaging in the full play cycle means recognition that children's play may evolve and increase in complexity over time, and equally that play behaviours or props will be discarded when of no further use to their play. See Page 7 for more on play cues and the play cycle.

### 5 Creating a shared flexible space that children feel has a sense of magic

The child's-eye view of what is special has precedence and the playground is co-created with the children. It is a fundamental aspect of the adventure playground ethos that children's 'play in progress' is respected, for example by leaving camps and dens or other self-made creations in place so that their play can be resumed from where it left off.

## 6 A rich play environment

Adventure playgrounds should offer a range of play opportunities in line with the *Criteria for an Enriched Play Environment* (see Page 8).

The outdoor play area should offer, as far as possible, a variety of playable spaces including: challenging play structures and features; quiet 'chill-out' areas; wild nature and planted areas; water and sand play; informal sports areas; fully accessible play equipment. Where possible there should be changes of level in landscaped features as well as in built structures.

There should be regular access to fire and cooking outdoors, earth, water, sand, other loose materials and objects, nooks and crannies, natural features and forms. Children should be able to experience the elements as part of their play and use tools and materials to build and modify a flexible and evolving play space.

The indoor area should provide: fully accessible toilets, washing and cooking facilities; storage for tools, equipment and materials; and space for a range of play opportunities and relaxation. The offer should include: recycled and other materials for arts, crafts, dressing up and 'messy' play; opportunities for children to be involved in cooking, music and drama. There should be areas where children can 'chill out' with friends or be quiet, contemplative or read in peace. Inclusive sensory areas will help ensure that all children can enjoy the indoor area.

## 7 Actively involving children and young people

It is important to avoid 'over-designing' the outdoor area, as the greatest possible proportion should be available for children to freely use and modify as they wish. While it is recognised that outdoor play structures and other features will change and evolve over time to support children's play, play pathfinder playgrounds must be open and able to be used by children by the deadline (end March 2010 for Wave 1 and end March 2011 for Wave 2 play pathfinders).

However, this does not mean that every single element of the outdoor area needs to be fixed in place. Some of the capital can be used to provide equipment and materials for children, young people and the community to develop and modify the play space. DCSF will look at



proposals and Play England will advise on a case-by-case basis.

These issues need to be raised in early discussions with procurement and planning colleagues and should be made explicit in planning applications and final approvals as permitted development. Equally, there should be early discussions with commissioning and other budget holding colleagues on how this approach will be sustained after 2011.

## 8 At the heart of the community

The local community (including elected members) should be closely involved from the outset, in selecting the site, the initial development and on-going evolution of the playground. Successful adventure playgrounds are supported and championed by the local community, because generations of families have used them and are happy for their children to continue to do so.

The community should be fully engaged, consulted and informed throughout the process, including site selection, planning and development stages, and supported to form voluntary management bodies, 'friends of' or other models of community partnership or ownership as appropriate. The relationships that develop over time between playworkers, children, families and the wider community are key to long-term sustainability, which in turn helps to build community cohesion.

The community and local businesses can contribute by providing recycled and scrap materials, participating in fundraising, volunteering and helping out in a variety of other ways.

A fundamental principle of adventure playgrounds is that they are a 'neighbourhood drop-in' provision for children in the local community. The playground should aim to be a gateway to other children's and community services, so that children and families can find out what is available in the area.

## 9 Staff

Adventure playgrounds should be staffed by a team of trained and skilled playworkers, who facilitate and support children's play by working to the *Playwork Principles* (Page 7) that underpin the National Occupational Standards for playwork qualifications.

Staffing levels need to be sufficient to ensure that the playground is reliably and consistently open out of school hours, including weekends and school holidays.

Play England strongly encourages pathfinder playgrounds to recruit staff early in the process rather than wait until the playground is created. This will enable them to engage with and inform the community about what is happening, and ensure that they have had any training needed.

Staff will normally be expected to have, or be working towards, a playwork qualification. In addition, it is crucial that they understand and are committed to the adventure playground ethos of playworkers being a resource for children rather than leading or directing their play. The relationships between playworkers and children that develop over time are an aspect of playground life highly valued by children and families.

As well as core playwork skills, the staff team needs to have skills in the design, construction, modification and maintenance of adventure playground structures and features, to ensure that the playground can evolve and change in response to the children's wishes.

## 10 Access and inclusion

The playground should be fully accessible, inclusive and welcoming for all children, including disabled and non-disabled children, boys and girls, minority communities and other potentially marginalised children. Both outdoor and indoor areas should be

designed imaginatively to be used by disabled children with a wide range of specific requirements. The adventure playground should be accessible all year round, allowing children to play in all weathers.

Play England strongly encourages discussions with short breaks programme colleagues to ensure that the playground is fully accessible and that funding streams are used to best effect.

A number of tools showing how to ensure inclusion and participation have been developed by children's and young people's organisations. Contact details are at the end of this briefing. Local community groups and networks are also an invaluable source of information and support to ensure access and inclusion in its widest sense.

## 11 The 'three frees'

**Free of charge** means that there should be no charge for entry but does not exclude charging for special or additional activities such as trips out, camps and residentials, or small voluntary contributions towards running costs that may be levied. The playground should ensure that charging policies do not discriminate against children from disadvantaged families or minority communities.

Where an adventure playground provides a formal paid-for childcare service for some children, it should be made explicit that charges are for the childcare service and not for admission to or use of the adventure playground.

Open access means that, subject to registration requirements and taking account of any particular requirements, children are **free to come and go** as they please during opening hours. It is understood that for some disabled children there may need to be restrictions on full open access, and that children in the Early Years Foundation Stage may not leave unaccompanied.

**Free to choose** means play that is directed by children themselves, where they choose how, with what, with whom and for how long they play.

## 12 Risk and challenge

Research tells us that the uncertainty and challenge of much of children's play is a very large part of its appeal to them, but also that it enhances the development of their brains and bodies, making them more adaptable and resilient as they grow.

Risk and challenge is not limited to physical risk – it includes the uncertainties involved in making new friends, playing with children from different backgrounds and building emotional resilience through trying out new experiences with the possibility of failure.

Children should be encouraged and supported to encounter and manage risk for themselves in an environment that is as safe as it needs to be rather than completely devoid of risk. The benefit to children of challenging play opportunities should be balanced with any potential risk when carrying out risk assessments. The Play England and DCSF guide *Managing Risk in Play Provision: Implementation guide* (Ball D, Gill T and Spiegel B, 2008), which is endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive and RoSPA, provides useful advice.

### Ensuring quality

The Play Strategy signposts play providers to the Quality in Play system, being rolled out as a national programme by Play England. Quality in Play is the leading play-specific quality assurance system, developed by play practitioners for play practitioners and tried and tested in practice over 10 years.

Quality in Play has been fully updated to reflect developments in play policy and practice and is aligned with the aspirations of the Children's Plan and the Play Strategy.

### Further information

For further information and resources on adventure playgrounds, please contact Play England.

#### Play England

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Tel 07738 194839  
[www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)

#### Children's Play Information Service (CPIS)

The CPIS is a specialist information resource providing information on all aspects of children's play, focusing on school-age children.  
Tel 020 7843 6303/6026  
[www.ncb.org.uk/cpis](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpis)

#### Quality in Play

Email [qip@ncb.org.uk](mailto:qip@ncb.org.uk)  
Tel 020 7833 6838  
[www.playengland.org.uk/quality](http://www.playengland.org.uk/quality)

#### Department for Children, Schools and Families

The DCSF website provides useful information

### What is an adventure play park?

Adventure play parks share many characteristics with adventure playgrounds, but tend to be located in destination parks or large open spaces serving a wider population rather than a specific local community or neighbourhood. They have a wider family and intergenerational focus, for example by being linked to or running a café providing meals and snacks or co-located with extended school, children's centre, family support, youth provision and environmental or informal education services.

Therefore it is vital to think about and plan for how children and their families will be able to get to and from the play park. Particular thought needs to be given to how disadvantaged families and children and those living some distance away will have equal and easy access.

When considering development of a play park it is important to check whether there are any restrictions on enclosing or limiting access to all or part of the site, for example covenants, bye-laws or other public space designations.

Through a process of self-assessment leading to external assessment and a national accreditation award, adventure playgrounds can ensure they meet agreed standards and work towards excellence in supporting children's play.

on play policy and the play pathfinder and playbuilder programmes. [www.dcsf.gov.uk/play](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/play)

### KIDS

The national disabled children's charity KIDS has developed information on and tools for creating and maintaining an inclusive play environment for disabled children and their families.  
[www.kids.org.uk/publications](http://www.kids.org.uk/publications)

### Participation Works

Participation Works is a consortium of six national children and young people's agencies that enable organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives. [www.participationworks.org.uk](http://www.participationworks.org.uk)

### SkillsActive

SkillsActive works across the UK leading the development of playwork education and training for all those working with children and young people. [www.skillsactive.org.uk](http://www.skillsactive.org.uk)

## Different types of play

These 'play types' were developed by Bob Hughes drawing on a survey of the scientific literature on children's play.

### Communication play

Involves the playful articulation and expression of ideas and feelings. It is not just verbal but also includes facial expressions, touch and body stance.

Examples: name-calling, micky taking, jokes, imitation, gestures, singing and graffiti.

### Creative play

Involves playful interaction with materials, tools, colour, form and beauty.

Examples: Children self-expressing using paints, clay, fabrics, paper and wood.

### Deep play

Engaging in activities that are perceived as risky by the child.

Examples: swinging, balancing, climbing, moving at speed, arguing, being in the dark.

### Dramatic play

Playful dramatisation of events or experiences which have been observed but where the child is not personally involved.

Examples: imitating or improvising characters in a TV show, an overheard conversation, doing an observed dance routine.

### Exploratory play

Playfully moving through a space to assess its properties, possibilities and content.

Examples: looking into bushes, climbing trees, opening cupboards and climbing stairs.

### Fantasy play

Playful engagement in situations that are pure products of the child's imagination and unrelated to reality.

Examples: being a dragon, dressing up as a superhero, and casting spells and doing magic.

### Imaginative play

Playful engagement in situations that reflect reality 'but not in that way'.

Examples: being a ship, a tree or an airline pilot.

### Locomotor play

Playful three-dimensional movement through a space.

Examples: chase, tag, football, climbing structures.

### Mastery play

Playfully changing or controlling aspects of the play environment.

Examples: fires, building dens, digging holes, redirecting streams and water courses.

### Object play

Playful, focussed and repetitive, manipulative interaction with objects.

Examples: stones, puzzles, manipulative toys and kits, mobile phones and virtual games.

### Recapitulative play

Playfully representing the different stages of human evolution.

Examples: playing war and using ancient weapons, building caves and dens, engaging in rituals (burying pets), dressing-up, creating language and myths.

### Role play

Playfully exploring different personalities, identities and uniforms.

Examples: pretending to be mums and dads, doctors or nurses, traffic wardens, soldiers or mechanics.

### Rough and tumble play

Playfully engaging in close-encounter experiences that are less to do with fighting than with touching, tickling, gauging strength and physical flexibility.

Examples: Playful fighting, wrestling, chasing, using kung fu noises and pretend kicks.

### Social play

Playfully exploring and experimenting with social rules and protocols.

Examples: Board games, locomotor games, going out on trips, building or painting something together.

### Socio-dramatic play

Playfully acting out personal domestic or other experiences that carry direct implications for the child to better understand or experience control of the situation.

Examples: Children re-enacting social, often traumatic, experiences they have had, ie, parents arguing, a teacher shouting, being bullied.

### Symbolic play

Playfully using objects, shapes or props to stand for or represent other things.

Examples: stones for money, a crayon map for the play space, graffiti for hate or friendship, music or clothes that are 'cool'.

From Hughes, B. (2002) *A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types*. Ely: PlayEducation.

## Play cues and the play cycle

Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else developed the concept of the 'play cycle' containing 'play cues' and returns within a 'play frame', leading to 'play flow' after which the frame is discarded or destroyed when it is no longer of use.

A play cue is the signal the child gives that they want to play through a spoken, facial or other body signal or by the use of materials, inviting participation in play by other children, adults or the environment by communicating feelings or thoughts.

The play return is the response by another person or thing to the play cue, which is processed by the child issuing the cue who decides what to do about the return.

The play cycle takes place in a play frame that can best be described as a flexible boundary around the cue, response and what develops. A play frame could include anything from just one child engrossed in contemplation, a few children

playing together, a large group of children and adults playing, or any combination of these.

The play frame, which may be a theme like chasing or any play behaviour influenced by the physical indoor or outdoor environment, can last from a few seconds to hours or days or even weeks – the play flow. When the frame is no longer useful to the children's playing intent, it is discarded or destroyed.

Playworkers in adventure playgrounds need to recognise the various elements of play cycles if they are to support children in setting up, developing, maintaining and renewing play frames and moving on when they are of no further use to their play.

Adapted from Sturrock, G and Else, P (1998) 'The playground as therapeutic space: Playwork as healing' (known as 'The Colorado Paper'), available as part of the *Therapeutic Reader One* (2005). Southampton: Common Threads.

## Playwork Principles

These 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.

- 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 recognise their own impact on the play space 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.

Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (2005) *Playwork Principles*. Cardiff: Play Wales.

## Criteria for an enriched play environment

### A varied and interesting physical environment

Examples: Things at different levels, spaces of different sizes, places to hide, trees and bushes as well as things that have been made, places to inspire mystery and imagination.

### Challenge in relation to the physical environment

Examples: activities that test the limits of capabilities, rough and tumble, sports and games, chase.

### Access to the natural elements – earth, water, fire, air

Examples: campfires, digging, playing snowballs, flying kites.

### Opportunities for movement

Examples: running, jumping, rolling, climbing, and balancing; using beams, ropes, and soft mats; bike riding, using juggling equipment, ladders, space.

### Opportunities to manipulate natural and fabricated materials

Examples: materials for art, cooking, making and mending of all kinds; building dens; making concoctions; using tools; access to bits and pieces of all kinds.

### Stimulation of the five senses

Examples: music making, places where shouting is fine, quiet places, different colours and shapes, dark and bright spaces, cooking on a campfire, rotting leaves, a range of food and drink, objects that are soft, prickly, flexible, large and small.

### Experiencing change in the natural and built environment

Examples: experiencing the seasons through access to the outdoor environment; opportunities to take part in building, demolishing, or transforming the environment.

### Social interaction

Examples: being able to choose whether and when to play alone or with others, to negotiate, co-operate, compete and resolve conflicts. Being able to interact with individuals and groups of different ages, abilities, interests, gender, ethnicity and culture.

### Opportunities for playing with identity

Examples: dressing up, role-play, performing, taking on different kinds of responsibility.

### Experiencing a range of emotions

Examples: opportunities to be powerful/powerless, scared/confident, liked/disliked, in/out of control, brave/cowardly.

Adapted from Hughes, B. (1996) *Criteria for an Enriched Play Environment*, in *Play Environments: A Question of Quality*. London: PLAYLINK, as cited in NPFA, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council (2001) *Best Play: What play provision should do for children*. London: National Playing Fields Association.

The examples given are in no sense exhaustive, merely indicative.

## Acknowledgements

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