



Adventure Playgrounds: the essential elements

Introduction

This updated briefing draws on the work of an expert group of play theorists and practising playworkers convened by Play England to identify the unique characteristics of the adventure playground model of play provision. It incorporates learning from adventure play support programmes delivered by Play England since 2006 and reflects thinking from an online debate initiated by London Play in 2012.

Adventure playgrounds are by their nature particular to their location because they are shaped by their users. They evolve with community and children's participation, as spaces that children 'own' and are empowered to shape and develop. Because each adventure playground is a unique place, this briefing does not attempt to prescribe what it should look like or what specific features it should offer. Nevertheless, there are important principles and essential elements that good adventure playgrounds have in common.

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 — physically, socially and culturally — by the children playing there.

It is enclosed by a boundary to signal that the space within is dedicated to children's play and to enable and encourage activities not usually condoned in other spaces where children play, such as digging, making fires or building and demolishing dens and other constructions.

It is a place where children can engage in a full range of play behaviours. The children and playworkers continually create and adapt challenging and exciting play structures and features to make a place that children feel belongs to them and where anything is possible.

The essential elements of an adventure playground

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

1. Staffed by skilled and appropriately qualified playworkers working to the Playwork Principles (see annexe A, page 11).
2. Allowing for spontaneous free expression of children's drive to play
3. Opportunities to engage in the full range of play types as chosen by children (see annexe B, page 12)
4. Exploration of physical, social, emotional, imaginary, symbolic and sensory spaces (see annexe C, page 15)
5. Free flow in giving and responding to "play cues" to ensure children can determine the content and intent of their play (see annexe D, page 17)



6. Creating a shared flexible space that children feel has a sense of 'magic'

7. A rich play environment that continually changes and evolves, where children can play all year round and in all weathers

8. The active involvement of children and young people in creating and modifying the play space, within a varied landscape

9. The playground is at the heart of the community

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

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 briefly 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.

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



1. Staff

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

Staff will 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.

2. Spontaneous free expression of the drive to play

The playground is a space in which children have the freedom to determine the nature of their play – where they can feel that anything is possible. The only constraint should be that they do not unduly harm themselves or others – see the risk and benefit section below. There is compelling research evidence that children greatly benefit from playing in and with the natural environment and this should be an integral part of what the playground offers.

3. Opportunities to engage in the full range of play types as chosen by children

The playground provides possibilities to engage in any and all play types because the children find the environment interesting, novel, challenging and exciting. It is the rich interplay between children and the physical and human play environment that is important, not whether children engage in particular play types or behaviours.

4. Exploration of physical, social, emotional, imaginary, symbolic 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 integral features of the physical and human play environment.



5. 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.

6. 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, dens and other self-made creations in place so that their play can be resumed from where it left off.

7. A rich play environment

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

The outdoor play area should offer a variety of playable spaces including: challenging play structures and features; quiet 'chill-out' areas; wild and cultivated natural 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 disabled children can enjoy the indoor area.

8. Actively involving children and young people

Children and young people are seen as 'co-creators' of the adventure playground and therefore it is important to avoid over-designing the outside area or installing fixed equipment that can't be easily modified or moved. The greatest possible proportion of the outdoor area should be available for children to freely use and modify as they wish. Playworkers should ensure that play structures and features change and evolve over time in response to their observations and reflection on how children use the space.



9. At the heart of the community

A fundamental principle of adventure playgrounds is that they are a neighbourhood drop-in provision for children in the local community. 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 — adventure playgrounds have been pioneers of social action for over 50 years.

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 should be fully engaged, consulted and informed throughout and supported to form voluntary management bodies, ‘friends of’ or other models of community partnership or ownership.

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

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.

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 residential. 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 any 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.

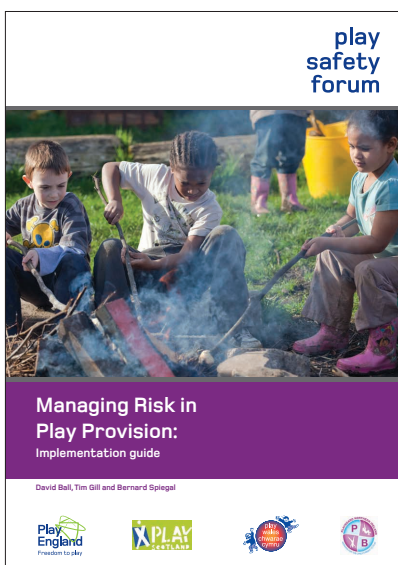
(With thanks to Perry Else)

12. Risk and benefit

Children need to encounter and manage risk in their play. 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.

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-benefit assessments. **Managing risk in play provision: Implementation guide** (Play England, 2013), which is endorsed by the Health and Safety Executive, provides useful advice.



Ensuring quality

Play England encourages adventure playgrounds to use **Quality in Play**, the leading play-specific quality assurance system, developed by play practitioners for play practitioners and tried and tested in practice over twenty years.

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

The manual is now free to download with further information and support.

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources-list/quality-in-play/>

Participation Works is a consortium of seven national children and young people's agencies that enables organisations to effectively involve children and young people in the development, delivery and evaluation of services that affect their lives.

<http://www.participationworks.org.uk/>

Resources

More information and **short films** about adventure playgrounds is available on Play England's website. Just visit:

<http://www.playengland.org.uk/resources-list/adventure-playgrounds/>

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Annexe A

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, Cardiff, 2005

Annexe B 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 Super Hero, 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: Rubic Cube, Game Boy, Mobile Phone, a ball, stone or piece of wood.

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 a doctor, teacher, shop assistant, lawyer.

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, i.e., 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

Annexe C

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, e.g. running, jumping, rolling, climbing, balancing

Examples: beams and ropes, soft mats, bike riding, 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.

Annexe D

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



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