

# Playing It Up



With Loose Parts, Playpods,  
and Adventure Playgrounds

Joan Almon, Editor







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**Playing It Up—With Loose Parts, Playpods, and Adventure Playgrounds**

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# Preface



o become fully human, children need intrinsically driven engagement in play, alone and in groups. As Joan Almon and the Alliance for Childhood have fostered, and this book extends, the realization of this need has been credibly established. Now it needs to be broadly enacted.

For children, play allows the inner world—as it biologically races toward maturity—to integrate with the outer world. When allowed to flourish, play provides motivation, resiliency, purpose, and meaning. But today this fact of nature is being disregarded by mainstream culture, and the consequences require remedial collective action and committed leadership.

Yet such action requires a commonly held belief in the value of play. As historian William McNeil wisely penned in his “The Care and Repair of Public Myth,” (Foreign Affairs, Fall 1982 issue) despite the fall of the French, the British in WWII collectively believed they could defeat the Nazis, and with the Grand Alliance, they did. Public belief becomes a mythic truth that is both felt and cognitively understood. When a public myth takes hold, then collective action follows.

We are desperately in need of a new consciousness or mythology about the true nature and importance of play. When this credible, scientifically backed truth becomes a collective belief, the disastrous consequences of contemporary play deprivation will be ameliorated.

This book offers beacons that, when enacted, illuminate paths that bring the magic of play into parks and parishes, schools and neighborhoods with the joyous sparkle that play gives to our life force.

## Author

Trained in general and internal medicine, psychiatry and clinical research, **Dr. Stuart**



**Brown** first recognized the importance of play by discovering its absence in the life stories of murderers and felony drunken drivers. His years of clinical practice and review of over 6000 personal play histories affirmed the need for healthy play throughout the human life cycle. His exploration of human and animal play led to the establishment of the National Institute for Play. Stuart Brown was executive producer of the three-part PBS series, “The Promise of Play.” His book, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* has been translated into eight languages. Dr. Brown co-teaches “From Play to Innovation” at the School of Design at Stanford University, and enjoys

international corporate and academic consulting on play and its many contributions to overall human well-being.







# Chapter One

# The Back Story

*In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior. In play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.*

—Lev Vygotsky

## Joan Almon

**E**very book has a back story, and this one stretches back to the Alliance for Childhood's founding in 1999 and its commitment to play as a healthy essential of childhood. The Alliance began out of a deep concern for the decline in children's health and well-being. Medical professionals and educators banded together, hoping that their combined knowledge of children and their commitment to healthy child development, would stem the increase they were witnessing in children's physical and mental illnesses.

Part of the problem was that many children were under mounting pressure to perform to adult standards—often developmentally unrealistic ones—all day long. After school, many children were over-scheduled with adult-led activities and were also immersed in screen time. Between ages 8 and 18, surveys by the Kaiser Family Fund found that children spent over seven hours per day outside school in front of screens. What did children use to do instead of attaching themselves to screens? Initiate play alone or with friends. And a survey of children recently showed that when asked what they'd like to do if they could plan a day of play, most answered that they'd like to go outside and play with friends. Time with screens was rarely mentioned.

Play is more than an entertaining activity for children. They have always used play to deal with stress and strain. It is not surprising, although deeply disturbing, that at the same time that play has disappeared, illnesses in children,





such as obesity, anxiety, depression, hyperactive disorders, and autism, have grown at alarming rates.

Why is play so important to children's development? Play supports children's healthy physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. Without it, serious gaps in development can occur. An extreme outcome was identified by Stuart Brown, a retired psychiatrist and founder of the National Institute for Play, who studied the lives of hundreds of Texas prisoners incarcerated for murder. He found that one of the common elements in their childhood was a lack of play.

Since its beginning, the Alliance has been committed to doing everything it can to strengthen children's health and well-being. This includes restoring play to children's lives. We are especially interested in play that is initiated and led by children and that expresses their own concerns and interests. Such play is full of the stories children create to understand themselves and the world around them. It often begins with the magical words, "Let's pretend."

Yet increasingly people have told us that children no longer know how to play. Experienced kindergarten teachers have said that if they give their children time to play, they do not know what to do. "They have no ideas of their own." This troubled us deeply, for it is a huge loss to the children themselves but also to the nation. How can a democracy survive, let alone thrive, if its citizens have no ideas of their own and are beset by stress and strain?

At the same time, many play advocates have told us that it does not take children long to recover their ability to play if they are given a supply of open-ended play materials,



often called loose parts, and permission to play with them freely. The play urge in us never actually dies, although it can become blocked up. Loose parts and permission to play seem to free up the urge, and the wellspring of play begins to flow again.

One example came from a mother who had heard a talk about play and loose parts. Shortly after, her five-year-old son was having a play date at his house. He had a history of difficulty playing with others and this day was no different. In desperation his mother gathered a collection of loose parts and put them in a room, took the two boys in there and told them they could play with all of it as they'd like. They stayed and played intensely for the next three hours.

From the beginning of our campaign to restore play we knew there were ways to succeed, but we were not sure how to begin. We spoke to leading play advocates here and abroad. They were in agreement on the main reasons play had disappeared—too much screen time, too much time spent in adult-organized activities, and too much testing and homework, combined with a narrow school curriculum that tended to stifle curiosity and creativity. Most disturbing to us was the degree of fear that we encountered in parents regarding play. They did not want their children to be out of sight for fear of strangers abducting them, despite the fact that the likelihood of this happening was very slim.

Fear of play was so rampant that many of the play advocates in this country warned us against using the word play. “It’s become a four letter word. Don’t use it,” they frequently said. We searched for an alternative, but we could find no better word to describe this age-old activity that children engaged in all over the world. We stayed with play but spoke of creative play, imaginative play, and child-initiated play. These added words seemed to calm people, while free play and unstructured play made them nervous. After all, who knows what will happen when children play freely! They may end up on Mars or deep in the ocean. They may create splendid worlds or dysfunctional ones. Or, as one play advocate in the Netherlands said of children playing in a wild, nature-filled space he helped develop, let the children loose and they become wild. “They touch their inner Neanderthal.” Yet, he added, their injury rates were extremely low. There was no need to be fearful of that

For adults, play can seem frightening until they recall their own playful adventures. Then they become more sympathetic to children’s play. Also, when they observe children at play without interfering, they come away deeply impressed by how capable children are in managing their own play and assessing risks.

Yet society’s fear of play, with its various physical and psychological risks, remains a major obstacle that needs to be overcome, or at least minimized, if children are to play freely again. A strategy for addressing such fears stumped us at first. It was at this point that we met Penny Wilson at a play conference in Baltimore. Penny is a long-time playworker in London’s adventure playgrounds. Her specialty is inclusive play, making sure that children with complex needs have a chance to initiate and direct their own play. We hosted Penny





in the U.S. a number of times where she spoke with hundreds of people about play and playwork, loose parts, and adventure playgrounds. At the same time, many of us visited Penny in London where she showed us her favorite adventure playgrounds, and introduced us to playworkers and leading play advocates from whom we learned a great deal.

Playworkers saved us from the trap of having to define play. They said it was simply not possible to define play, which was a huge relief for we'd seen many play meetings bog down over how to define it. "It's just too big to define," the playworkers said. "It's like trying to define love." But it can be described, and in the playwork principles written by the playworkers in the U.K., they described play in this way:

"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."

Of course children have their own way of understanding play, and in one training session, a park's department coach who seemed a bit skeptical of play at first, said he had asked his eight-year-old daughter what she thought play was. She answered immediately. "It's what we do when the adults are not watching." It reminded him of his great play adventures as a child, often out of sight of adults, and his attitude toward play changed. Even his work as a coach changed, and he let the children and teens in his ice hockey program organize their own games after each coaching session—after he took the coaches off the ice.

Again and again we faced the same dilemma: Parents would not let their children out to play unsupervised, but children could not freely play if adults hovered over them. The profession of playwork offered solutions. The playworkers we met in the UK were very knowledgeable about play and deeply committed to it. They were present in adventure playgrounds and many other locations, but they had the wisdom to put on their cloaks of invisibility. Their presence did not disturb the children's play, and they intervened only when they felt it was essential or were invited into play by the children. They assured the children's right to play and guided it with a flexible rule such as this one used by Penny: "Have as much fun as you can and try not to hurt yourself or anyone else."

On one of Penny Wilson's tours, I listened to her unique use of playwork language and delighted in its richness. Like every profession, playwork has its own terms and added to that is the quirkiness of playworkers' minds. Plus British English is often different than



American English. At the end of the session, we asked Penny if she would write a glossary of terms for playwork and the result became the popular booklet, *The Playwork Primer*, which is available on the Alliance's website.

The deeper we went as play advocates the more we encountered fears about risk and adventure play. Parks departments and others told us they couldn't possibly open adventure playgrounds because the insurance would be too costly, the accident rates would be too high, and there would be too many lawsuits. We came to think of these arguments as the three great myths about adventure play. But were they really myths or were they based on real experiences? There was only one way to find out and that was to commission a study of existing adventure playgrounds in the U.S. and to look at data from other countries. We asked Halcyon Reese-Learned, Ph.D., who had directed adventure playgrounds in Houston, to do a series of interviews for us. Her findings became the basis for our report, *Adventure: Why Children Need Risk in Play*, which is available on the Alliance's website and can be ordered through Amazon.

What we learned was eye-opening. The three U.S. adventure playgrounds in California reported relatively low accident rates, certainly no higher than on conventional playgrounds, and probably lower. This was supported by studies in England and in Canada as well. The California adventure playgrounds were each over 30 years old, yet two of them had had only one lawsuit each and one had had none. This was considered remarkably low. Finally, insurance companies seemed unconcerned about adventure playgrounds. As several directors told us, if you have insurance to cover swimming pools, which most parks







departments have, then you have enough insurance for an adventure playground. It turned out that the three big arguments against adventure playgrounds—too many accidents, too many lawsuits, and prohibitively high insurance rates—were indeed based on myths, and it was time to put the myths to rest.

Today the attitude toward play is quite different than it was a decade ago. Play is no longer considered a four-letter word; it's recognized as a vital part of childhood by many. Risk remains a frightening concept but with the help of Lenore Skenazy and the Free Range movement, and many others who advocate for age-appropriate risk, even that is slowly changing. Many parents now want their children to play freely but they are stumped as to how to enable that to happen. We are far removed from the days when parents simply said, "Just go out to play and don't come home 'til supper." If children do go out, they are often alone in their neighborhood without other playmates. And there are still many examples of well-meaning people calling the police when they see children out on their own, even though the children are in no visible danger and have their parents' full permission to be outdoors playing.

Playwork and its general approach to play are an obvious solution. Playworkers function like lifeguards at pools, but they work in parks and playgrounds, housing developments, homeless shelters, schools, and early childhood settings. They safeguard children's play without interfering needlessly with it. When the playwork approach is combined with the presence of loose parts and an appreciation for appropriate risk and adventure, play has a chance to thrive in children's lives again.

As the articles in this book show, this rich combination of playwork, loose parts, and adventure play is on the rise in small towns and large cities, in inner city neighborhoods and affluent suburbs, and in parks and nature preserves. Generally, play activists begin

with pop-up play days—individual play days with loose parts. Then scheduled activities, such as after school programs and adventure camps, are often started, but the eventual goal is often to open an adventure playground with trained playworkers and loose parts. The newest such playground opened in May, 2016 in New York City on Governors Island.

This book, and the movement it portrays, has not only a back story but also a future story. It is being written each day as new grassroots initiatives form and as large environmental and health organizations begin to support free play as one of their priorities. It will grow more rapidly when foundations and philanthropists recognize the urgent need for creative, imaginative, adventurous play for children’s health and development. And it will become much more sustainable when local and national agencies embrace play as a fundamental right of children and make sure they have ample time and space for it.

The past decade has seen many positive changes in the public attitude about play and the growth of the play movement. With the continued work of play advocates, the next decade can see similar changes in the understanding of the value of risk and play. It’s possible to imagine playworkers, loose parts, and adventure playgrounds in numerous cities, towns, and rural areas across the country. What was once a far-off dream is coming closer to being a working reality. \*

## Photo Credits

Joan Almon, Rusty Keeler, Jill Wood, and play:groundNYC staff

## Author




Joan Almon has spent decades advocating for children’s need to play, first as a Waldorf early childhood educator and then as co-founder of the Alliance for Childhood. She is passionate about restoring play-based experiential learning in kindergartens and preschools, and providing play opportunities for children of all ages and abilities at home and in schools, neighborhoods and parks. The new wave of play opportunities reflected in this book gives her great hope for the future. She lives in Maryland but enjoys vacations in a log cabin in Tennessee where she and her husband spend time with their extended family. She also loves storytelling and puppetry, cooking, and reading.









# Chapter Two

# Play: Rising Up!

*It is a happy talent to know how to play.*

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

## Rusty Keeler

**W**hat an exciting time for the world of children's play. Kids are outside again doing adventurous things: running, jumping, playing with friends, riding bikes, digging in the dirt, taking risks, having freedom, pushing limits, having fun. One of the big factors in this “play renaissance” is the dedication of adults working to improve the lives of children by providing time, space, and materials with which children can explore, roam, run free, and be. The book you are holding is full of their stories—their dreams, drives, challenges and successes. It is indeed a new era in the world of adventure play. So many good things are happening I can hardly contain myself! But this didn't happen overnight. Things used to be good. Then things got bad. And now good things are rising up again.

Growing up in the 1970s, I felt like I had it all—friends, fields, freedom, fun. Like many adults nostalgically remembering their childhoods, I fondly recall playing outside all day, everyday, until it got dark or you knew you were almost late for dinner, or your mom called you, or a dinner bell rang. There were things to do and people to do them with. We built stuff. We burned stuff. We swam, sledged, invented our own games, rode bikes, had conflicts, solved problems. Once we reached bicycling age we had the run of our small town. It was ours—downtown streets, back alleys, woods, creeks, the lake. All ours. Kids were always outside messing around. It felt normal. You even had enough time on your hands to be bored.



In my travels now, working with communities to create interesting play environments, I hear all kinds of amazing stories of similar “free-range” childhoods. Kids climbing trees, playing by the railroad tracks, eating mud, catching fish, exploring the ocean, braving freezing winters, playing in haylofts and vacant lots, building forts, finding worms, the list goes on and on. People are giddy when they share these stories with me. I love hearing them. But then what so often follows the fun memories is the idea that “Oh no, I wouldn’t let my children do those things now. The world is a different place now than when I was a kid.” My heart always sinks a little when I hear this. Then my mind kicks in and questions it. What’s really so different? We know that crime statistics show that it is actually as safe now as it was then, if

not safer. Could it be that these people are somehow just more frightened than other generations? Is it outside forces that keep children from playing? Or is it people’s inner feelings and fears?

Back in those glory days of play-freedom, it was also a time of adventurous playground design. Architects, artists, and designers all got into the act and created some pretty exciting and outlandish play environments and equipment. Over the years much of it has disappeared, but some have stood the test of time and when you see them—things like the brick play mountains of NYC’s Central Park—you say, “Whoa!” They’re exciting, dangerous, risky, adventurous. The wow factor is there because it’s almost hard to believe nervous adults have let them continue to exist. But the beloved few have continued to attract and entertain children, regardless of playground safety worries.

The same is true of the wonderful and wild world of adventure playgrounds—those messy, kid-built-looking environments full of scrap lumber, cooking fires, water, sand, dirt, and sometimes even farm animals. With a rich history dating back to the end of WWII, these adventure playgrounds—originally called “junk playgrounds”—could be found all over Europe and dotted throughout North America as well. These playgrounds were stocked with materials to build with, had generous opening hours, and were staffed with professionally trained playworkers. Ah, playworkers. Those hearty souls dedicate their time and energy to creating an atmosphere of freedom for children. They make it seem



almost as if there are no adults present at all. Playworkers do not tell the children what to do, or teach them, or structure their time. Their support allows children to do what you and I may remember from our own childhoods: to simply be, to follow their own ideas and instincts, to build their own inventions and use their time as they see fit. Fantastic.

Yet, while adventure playgrounds in Europe continued to grow and flourish over the years, they floundered in the Americas and, by the end of the 1980s, nearly all had fizzled out. Why? Was this also because the world was becoming that different place people talk about? What caused this unfortunate change? Why were adults retreating from adventurous play?

There is much discussion about why it happened with lots of ideas and reasons. But it wasn't any evil master plan. I don't believe it happened on purpose. It seems that many individual things happened. Facts show that for a generation or two, children stopped having the freedom to play the way they used to. But to me this was an unconscious, incremental shift. Little by little, bit by bit, things happened until we suddenly found ourselves in this weird and sad state. You know the list of reasons.

Schools, feeling academic pressures and fear of injuries, began cutting recess. More studies, less playtime. Working parents scheduled their children with more structured care and activities so that children were spending more time in cars shuttling to and from activities. People bombarded by constant news cycles and violent television dramas, became more nervous and confused about the world they were living in. They were programmed for fear over friendliness. Stranger danger. Fear factor. Better keep your children inside!

Fast track housing and town development proceeded with little consideration for the needs of children, bikes, and families. A lack of sidewalks and other amenities made



neighborhoods less safe and fun. Parks and public institutions developed a growing fear of lawsuits and removed interesting play equipment. They began saying “no” to playing in many natural areas. Lawyers, insurance companies, and risk managers started having more decision-making power in schools, parks, cities, and towns. Then add to the “less-interesting-ization” of our communities, an over-abundance of child-targeted consumer products and more interesting technology. Children cautioned to stay indoors become entranced with screen magic and were agreeable with staying indoors. Oy! Fear. Nervousness. Busy-ness. Bottom lines. All while birds chirp, flowers grow, and the sun shines in the blue sky. The world is still out there, but where did we go?

This unconscious shift began reinforcing itself over and over. The public mindset took fears and made them into realities. People began agreeing that the world was unsafe and children needed to be super-protected. The reinforcing choices adults began making added up, limitation after limitation, restriction after restriction, so that saying “no” became the societal knee-jerk response. No to children’s freedoms, no to adventurous risky play, no to the things that were highlights of childhoods from our yesteryears. Many people accepted this sorry state as reality. Through the lens of the overworked parent, teacher, or parks administrator this was the way the world was, and there was nothing we could do about it. And yet, I say, and yet...there were many, many people for whom this did not sit well at all.

This book is not about the problems facing our children. There has been plenty already written about those sorry states. This book shares the success stories of the dedicated adults and the brilliant solutions they are coming up with to consciously reverse those downward trends of play in children’s lives. This book is about the conscious evolution to a world of child-directed





adventure play in this day and age. It is about adults who have said “enough!”—enough of limited or stale school recess, enough of fear dictating the lives of our children, enough of saying no to play. It is now a time of saying “yes.” Yes!

During that dry spell, whenever there was talk about those glorious and gutsy adventure playgrounds of Europe, people’s automatic reaction was as expected for the time: “Looks like fun but you could never do that here in our country.” You’ve heard it all: litigious society, risky play is bad, people don’t want their kids around that kind of mess and disorder. That was the story. That was the narrative. Yet, personally, every time I visited an adventure playground in Berlin or London or Copenhagen it felt to me exactly like the kind of place that children in the States needed. These were places of freedom, joy, tension, fun, struggle, creation, independence. These were places where children were free to be themselves. Places that gave parents the comfortable perception of safety thanks to the trained playworkers on site, yet gave the children the perception of freedom and risky adventure because that was the oath and dedicated work of the playworkers. The things happening on adventure playgrounds seemed perfectly natural, perfectly normal, a perfect reflection of childhood, even in its imperfections. The play was real. The places



were good. Children were trusted to make wise decisions, and to learn from mistakes when they weren't so wise. In short, the philosophy of adventure playgrounds showed a respect for children and their play. Our children clearly needed this too—more than ever.

I knew what I believed. I knew the kind of children's spaces that I liked—and that children seemed to like too. I knew I wasn't alone in wanting more adventure, dirt, and risk. I knew I wasn't alone in wanting to see the return of adventure playgrounds. Turns out that this was a subject that was bubbling under the surface for lots of other people too. They suffered from a new fear of stifled childhoods with the want of something better, wilder, riskier, a little bit crazier, and a little bit more like the childhood play we remember.

When Hanna Rosin's article, "The Overprotected Kid," came out in *The Atlantic* in April 2014, it created an uproar of support for more adventurous play. Overnight it felt like a movement was happening. People were calling for change. And then more articles, films, and books came out on the need for this change. UK playworkers were touring the world to spread the good news about adventure play and playwork. It seemed that what the movement needed next were some brave souls willing to break out of that perceived fear bubble and give it a go—show the world this could be done and rewrite the narrative. People were starting to do it and I wanted to help too!

While plotting and planning with those UK playworkers, and dreaming of risky adventure play, I had the great fortune to have the opportunity to help create one of the first of the new wave of US adventure playgrounds, the Hands-on-Nature "Anarchy Zone" at Ithaca Children's Garden in Ithaca, NY. As you'll read later in this book, the Anarchy Zone has become a much-loved space for the children of Ithaca and the surrounding region, as well as an inspiration for others starting their own adventure playground projects. We knew kids would love it. We believed parents would love it too. Now in its fifth year, the Anarchy Zone has been fun, challenging, surprising, and always interesting. It's true that before we opened, we sweated bullets meeting with city lawyers, boards of directors, and insurance agents. But lo and behold, we jumped through each hoop and we were on our adventurous way. We adults did what we had to do—the boring stuff, the tedious stuff, the behind the scenes stuff—so that children could have a space to do exactly what they wanted, naturally and freely. It is always fun to see what happens on site. It is always interesting to see what kids do when adults say "yes." Tree climbing, mud wars, fort building, swing making, potion-concocting, flower picking, zombie apocalypse theater. The infinite list goes on and on.

It's tough sometimes when you think you are all alone working for something you believe in, but as you will see in this book, and as we Anarchy Zone folks soon found out, we're not alone in this at all. There are people all over this country and abroad working to support children's free play, their access to loose parts, connections to nature, and the creation of real playworker-staffed adventure playgrounds. We were all in this together so it made perfect sense to join forces and support each other to reach our goals. What better way to propel the movement than to work together. Thus the North American Adventure Play Association was (re)born to share stories and resources, ask questions, and work as a team for change. (I say reborn because there was a similar national adventure playground group in the 1980s. It's back!) No longer isolated in our own projects, we now work side by side to support the realization of our dreams. This is a collective shift. There's no turning back. We're in this together. You too!



This book is filled with the stories, passions, and successes of change-makers in the adventure play movement. These rebels are the people that stood up and said “enough” and put their energies to reshaping the landscape of children’s play. Rather than letting fear freeze beautiful possibilities, these energized play-activists created new ways of doing things. There are so many success stories. Schools bringing back recess. Schools adding loose parts and play pods to recess. Parks creating natural playgrounds with loose materials. Communities working to create true adventure playgrounds. Schools creating adventure playgrounds. Adventure play conferences springing up to propel the movement. Foundations and governmental agencies supporting adventure play initiatives with grant funding and in-kind donations. You can see it everywhere: adventure play is returning to rural areas, suburban areas, and urban areas. Let the fun begin again!

And it’s still just the beginning. The world is indeed a different place. But not because we’ve been told it is, or seen it on television. The world is changing because we are consciously evolving it. We are consciously choosing to say “yes” to the play opportunities we believe children need. We are consciously working to create the world we want our children to grow up in. You are a part of this too. Change can happen in so many ways—in backyards, living rooms, neighborhoods, local schools, parks, and playgrounds. And it is happening. We’re changing it. The pendulum is swinging back. When this new generation of free-play children grows up, their memories will be filled with freedom, fun, and adventure, which is just as it should be. ✨

## Website

[earthplay.net](http://earthplay.net)

## Photo Credits

Rusty Keeler

## Author



Over the past 20 years, **Rusty Keeler** has worked with hundreds of leaders of communities, parks, schools, universities, and child care centers to dream, design, and construct beautiful outdoor environments in more than 30 states and throughout Canada, Europe, China, Australia, and New Zealand. He is one of the pioneers in the movement to reconnect children to nature, and his designs reflect his sincere desire to create a more beautiful world in which to grow and explore. He is the author of the books, *Natural Playscapes: Creating Outdoor Play Environments for the Soul* and *Seasons of Play: Outdoor Environments of Wonder*. He is a frequent keynote speaker and presenter at conferences, colleges, and community events worldwide.





.....  
*Children concentrate  
deeply when handling  
risky tools.*

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# Chapter 3

# Getting Started

*When children pretend, they're using their imaginations to move beyond the bounds of reality.*

*A stick can be a magic wand. A sock can be a puppet. A small child can be a superhero.*

—Fred Rogers

## Introduction

**Getting play started in a community** requires a pioneering spirit. Play activists break ground that may seem dry and barren, but which is very fertile down below. They find allies who are sometimes hidden in unlikely places—not only in parks and schools, but also in Chambers of Commerce, health and nature organizations, and more. They reach out to the media, to PTAs, and to many other groups to inform them about play and help them overcome fear of risk. There is no map or preset agenda for this work. Play pioneers find their way as they go, and each community is unique.

The articles in this chapter describe different ways play has started. In Ohio and Washington State, Tricia O'Connell and Kevin Mills were brand new to their communities and started from scratch. In the suburbs of Chicago, an established early childhood organization under the leadership of Blakely Bundy and Liza Sullivan expanded to include a very active project on play. In California, the Dockrays bought land in their own community to establish an adventure playground but also reach out to do pop-up play days in a host of communities in the greater Los Angeles area.

Again and again activists mentioned one organization in particular that was of great help to them,







especially in their start-up phase, and that was Pop-Up Adventure Play, whose article opens this chapter. Morgan Leichter-Saxby and her British colleague, Suzanna Law, have been tireless in supporting play across the US and in many other countries, as well. Most communities now begin their play adventures with pop-up play days.

What all the projects have in common is a focus on loose parts, those wonderful open-ended materials that children play with in a multitude of ways. Most are cast-offs by manufacturers, businesses, and homes. Adults no longer need them and children delight in them. One finds them in dumpsters and recycle bins, or nicely organized in scrap stores, as the British call these establishments. For a good list of scrap stores in the U.S. go to the website of the Art of Recycle. Thrift stores and Habitat for Humanity resale stores are also good sources for loose parts.

A frequently asked question is: What loose parts should one have on hand for a successful play day? There are many possibilities that range from plastic boxes or buckets full of sand or earth, to large mud puddles, from cardboard boxes to PVC pipes, and from old sheets to stretch fabric for hammocks. The most basic approach is usually cardboard boxes, magic markers, and tape. But some play days feature only natural materials—sticks, stones, earth, water, tree slices, and branches, palm fronds, or bamboo poles for building structures. Others include lumber, hammers, and nails for fort building. There is no end to the variety of loose parts that exist or to what the children will do with them. Pop-Up Adventure Play has its own list of suggested loose parts.

One of the first play days I attended was the Ultimate Block Party in Central Park in New York. The children played with boxes, tape, sheets, and ropes, but one of my favorite items was a Venetian blind that was bent and no longer usable—or at least not by adults. All day children used it in the houses they built. But one imaginative boy put his head



through the slats and used it as armor. I can still picture that proud knight.

It is surprising what large impacts even small amounts of loose parts can have. The Alliance took part in a project to bring natural play materials to a large child care center in San Jose, California. The intention was to create an interesting, natural playscape, but the center learned it would move the following year, so a small intervention was done instead. Of the six carts that

held outdoor play materials, two were newly supplied with natural materials—baskets of acorns, stones, wood pieces, and similar materials. The reviews by the playground staff at the end of the year were very moving. They found that the children were drawn to the natural materials and played very harmoniously with them. They also commented that children with disabilities found it easy to integrate into this play with small loose parts.

Surprising elements in this chapter are the articles by Kevin Mills and Tricia O'Connor who speak of tinkering schools and the makers movement. Why surprising? Generally, these approaches are much more structured and adult-run than the free play with loose parts that is a central focus in this book. Yet both of these strong play advocates see ways to integrate tinkering with open-ended play by showing the children some basic techniques with tools while giving them freedom to explore and build with a variety of materials. There seems to be a fine line between such approaches and the use of tools and the building of structures at adventure playgrounds. What is important is that adults remain clear on their intentions and not let their own inclination to teach and to organize activities dominate or displace the children's own self-directed play.



In this book we follow-up on “getting started” with chapters on permanent play sites. But at a recent play conference, Morgan Leichter-Saxby described “play ranging” as an intermediate approach or as an alternative or complementary approach to developing a permanent site. When a group has done a few pop-ups and begins to do them on a regular basis, this is considered play ranging. In the UK play rangers are playworkers on the move. Rather than being assigned to one adventure playground or hospital, they take their loose parts—sometimes as small as a pocketful or as large as a van—and go to a wide range of sites to promote play. Some advocates in the US do this temporarily while trying to establish adventure



playgrounds, while others, such as Kristin Shepherd in chapter five, have decided to stick with play ranging with a van rather than being tied to one spot. Another example is play:ground in New York City, described in chapter four, which ran an adventure playground and camp in the summer but hopes to play range in parks and schools during the other seasons when Governors Island, the location of their playground, is closed. ✨

## Websites

For a list of scrap stores in the US and other countries, see:  
[artofrecycle.org/our\\_neighbors](http://artofrecycle.org/our_neighbors)

## Photo Credits

Jeremiah Dockray, Teal Gardner, Philipp Klaus, Erica Larsen-Dockray, Suzanna Law, and Tricia O'Connor



## A Non-Shopping List

Here is a list of the kinds of things that are great for play, but anything that's clean (and not sharp!) can work. Just remember that children should be able to cut, color, tear, glue, or otherwise change the materials. So, not your favorite blanket or storage box!

### Check your recycling box for:

- Cardboard boxes and tubes
- Paper bags
- Plastic bottles and other containers
- Magazines and newspapers

### Look in your cupboards and kitchen drawers for:

- Cotton balls
- String and yarn
- Old keys
- Mixing bowls
- Wooden spoons
- Old bedsheets and towels

### Check out the park or your yard. You might find:

- Acorns
- Twigs
- Leaves
- Wood chips

### And treasure the weird and wonderful:

- Bright fabric
- Old tires
- Old hats or socks
- Giant bottle caps
- Old computer keyboards or phones

From "The Mini Pop-Up Kit" by Anna Housley Jester for Pop-Up Adventure Play found at [popupadventureplay.com](http://popupadventureplay.com)





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*Play varies from  
quiet rests to risky  
adventures.*  
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# Pop-up Adventure Play



## Morgan Leichter-Saxby with Suzanna Law

**Our first pop-up adventure playground** was held in a giddy spirit of experimentation in New York City’s Central Park. Sharon Unis and I had met and started talking after a meeting of the New York Coalition for Play, proceeded to a coffee shop, and chatted for hours. She was fascinated by the many different versions of playwork seen in the UK—in adventure playgrounds, in playranger projects, in schools and shelters. We speculated what an “American” version might look like and how its development might be nudged along. We wanted to bring as many of the classic adventure playground experiences as possible to communities where they didn’t yet exist.

We decided that the UK practice of play ranging—where playworkers travel to the open spaces of housing projects with small kits of loose parts—could be scaled up for a US audience. In a country where playwork is largely unknown, we wanted to create a model that was not dependent upon us to train community members. It would be grounded in playwork practice, but at the most introductory stage, and it would be a method of building community around play at the grassroots level. The Ultimate Block Party, planned for Central Park in October 2010, seemed an ideal way to reach large numbers of children and their families.

The organizers had placed our pop-up play space next to the stage where television performers led the crowd in a high volume sing-along. We’d been supplied with volunteers, and to begin with we all sat in a circle talking about the importance of having a light touch with visitors, of maintaining the environment, and of embodying permission to play in our facial expressions, physical gestures, and words. It was a bright cold day, and photos show volunteers layered up with scarves and cardigans. One of those volunteers was Erin Davis,



conducting research for the film that would go on to become *The Land*. The Alliance for Childhood provided their play suitcase full of sheets, clothesline, clothes pins, and masking tape. The music began and so many people came, packing themselves into our long, thin alleyway between the trees. They built houses and shops from cardboard boxes. Older children constructed an elaborate maze, with three of them circulating to hand out paper tickets while an older brother was stationed at the entrance, tearing the tickets in half.

Feedback from visitors was very positive, and from that event we got contacts and encouragement to move forward. Suzanna Law, a playworker in the UK, came on board very soon after as part of our summer-long residency on Governor's Island in New York City and has been a central member of Pop-Up Adventure Play ever since.

In 2011 in the UK, where Suzanna Law and I were working, we filed papers for Pop-Up Adventure Play to become a recognized charity. We formed a board of colleagues and friends who exploded with ideas for new projects. With the support of a local scrap store and the town council, we opened a Pop-Up Play Shop in Cardiff, Wales and brought loose parts play to a struggling town center. Funded for five months, this provided a place where anyone could come and play, free of cost, supported by playwork staff. So many

groups that are considered “hard to reach” walked right in—recently arrived refugees, single fathers, mothers so young that we were funded to work with them as children. When we left, a shop that had been empty for five years was rented within two months. You can read more about this project in our online toolkit.

We continue to provide free support and information to those who want to host pop-up play events. Everyone is welcome to register on our website and receive a printable resource pack of information and tips, as well as support by email or Skype. Many then share stories about their experiences on our blog. One of the surprises for us has been how widespread the resonance is, with people contacting us from all around the world. There are independent organizers in 17 countries, representing places as diverse as Kuala Lumpur and Cairo, Brooklyn and Bogota. We had 87 new registrations of pop-up organizers in 2015.

We also started our online Playworker Development Course (PDC) in November 2012, providing a foundation in playwork theory and practice for students around the world. Suzanna coordinates over







150 students in 21 US states and 15 countries, and moderates our online discussion group. We've attracted very well-qualified tutors, lecturers, theorists, and practitioners of playwork, so that each student has a mentor he or she can trust. Our priority is to give access to basic playwork tools to people around the world, regardless of their circumstances. With a sliding scale to address those needs, the project has been able to fund itself from the start.

Some who started with pop-ups or as course students are now working towards having permanent play sites, or are ranging across their whole cities, or working in local hospitals. It's been an honor to be part of this growing movement, and to keep our emphasis on quality playwork training and practice. Contacts have become friends, students have become colleagues. Thanks to our three tours—around the





US, Australia, and then the world—we've had the chance to meet many of them in person and to share their stories in our book, *The New Adventure Playground Movement*. On a couple of lovely occasions, we've been able to recommend PDC students for playwork positions in the US.

We never expected to become the world's online adventure play association, but this seems to be our niche! On Facebook, we have 6000 likes with a much wider outreach. The power of that was brought home to us on our recent world tour when we met many people who had followed us online for years. They were astonished to learn that our social media was managed by Suzanna alone, and many shared stories with us of what the pop-up community has meant to them. One teacher, who works in a heavily rule-bound and risk-averse setting, said that when she was having a bad day she would "hide in a cupboard and scroll through the website's feed, just not to feel so alone."

Suzanna and I run the organization together in spite of living in different countries. Calling each other "work wife," we feel grateful for the support of our board and colleagues, and for feedback from students and independent organizers who feel motivated to keep going and keep growing. Suzanna is extraordinarily gifted with the quiet, polite, and uncertain children who terrify me, while I am more practiced with the short, rock-throwing, young hooligans. We have learned from each other and become better, stronger playworkers than we were as individuals. That strength has allowed us to build relationships with the diverse independent organizers who come to us with all sorts of questions.

Whatever the specific project, our work focuses on building relationships and connection. One of playwork's tenets of practice in the UK is that no playworker should work alone. Every day people reach out to tell us that they've felt alone in this work for





a very long time. On tour, we stay in people's houses and eat at their kitchen tables, and they tell us stories of meetings where they were "the only one who thought that more rules might not be the answer." Some have cried as they hugged us at the door. Whether they're teachers who suspected that recess needn't be so terrible, or parents regretting the limitations on their children's lives, or adventure playground enthusiasts with a dream of opening their own site, people tell us that they need that online community if they're going to stay motivated to build one locally.

Everywhere we go, we're telling stories, showing Suzanna's beautiful images of play, and sharing anecdotes about what children actually do with these opportunities—the houses and games they construct, the tires they roll, the ropes they pull, how they dress-up and tear down. One of our greatest compliments was on Governor's Island, where a mother said that she had been to the Ultimate Block Party with her son who built a robot. "He's been talking about that robot ever since," she said. "And a year is a long time when you aren't even six yet."

Heading into our sixth year, we've found that the ideas we generated at the beginning have held true. The concept of a pop-up adventure playground has resonated powerfully with people across the US and the world. We've seen articles in *The Atlantic* and been mentioned in Amy Fusselman's book, *Savage Park: A Meditation on Play, Space, and Risk for Americans Who Are Nervous, Distracted, and Afraid to Die*, and felt the audience for these ideas broaden. When we do public lectures now, more people than ever have already heard of adventure playgrounds (and sometimes even playwork!). Each pop-up grows the community a little bit more, so that even if people do not learn that this idea has its roots in the adventure playground movement or playwork practice, they still feel connected to their local landscape, neighbors, and their own instinct for play in a powerful way. Although nothing is as powerful as observing and participating in play directly, good stories and images carry the idea a little bit further—like sparks from a fire.

Nearly all new, independent organizers find us online. They include Costa Rican teachers, Ugandan community workers, Canadian nannies, parents in Pennsylvania, and many others. Some want desperately to open their own adventure playgrounds. Others are focused on improving recess opportunities, or pushing back against formal education's emphasis on standardized testing. Still more are seeking to "take back" public spaces for local residents or are encouraging fellow adults to "remember how to





play.” There are different barriers to play, but also familiar issues, and the same methods have proven to help people solve a variety of problems. We hear recurring stories, too, of the personal realizations of individuals. One mother at a pop-up spoke with me openly about the frustrations of her son’s severe ADHD symptoms, her experiences with doctors and diagnoses, and how he “can’t stick with anything for more than a few minutes.” When she’d finished she breathed, and noticed suddenly that he’d been happily occupied playing in a box for the last half hour. Again and again we hear, directly and through local organizers, that parents who are able to observe their children climbing trees and building forts say, “I had no idea my child could do that.”

This process has been an education for us, too, with lessons in international legal structures and the complex dynamics of fundraising, as well as the practicalities

of working together but apart. We’ve made mistakes and course-corrected, learning as we go. Our online reach has grown every year, but our focus on supporting projects at a low-income, grassroots level means that crowdsourcing doesn’t work for us. Successful fundraising requires skills and contacts that we’ve never developed so we’ve found ways to make do without, both as an organization and as individuals. Pop-Up Adventure Play has not yet paid us a living wage. There’s privilege in being able to choose to persevere regardless, but considerable sacrifice as well—and we don’t have trust funds or wealthy partners to rely upon. There have been times when we would have loved the encouragement of a more established organization to support us, just as we were trying to offer to others.

At the same time, there is considerable freedom in remaining independent. In the UK we’ve seen adventure playgrounds and playwork projects tailor their work to match whatever current priorities exist among funders. Pop-Up Adventure Play has been able to do things in the opposite direction, listening to the people we work with and responding to their needs directly, without waiting for the agreement or permission of those far removed from the field. There were forms of support we would have loved to provide for others (starter funding, for example), but we have been very free to work as we please, going where invited and tailoring our approach to individual situations. This has allowed us to focus on the skills and resources we do have, offering training, support, and encouragement to anyone who asks. In this way, we’ve attempted to playwork the world.



Good playworkers respond to immediate needs, but they always keep an eye on the future, and we have some goals outlined for our next five years. These aren't goals for playwork in the US as a whole but for our role in that movement.

1. Students or pop-up organizers in every US state. We're nearly halfway there already, and momentum is growing!
2. Three top-quality adventure playground sites, evenly spaced across the US, where PDC students can go for in-person fieldwork experience.
3. More students on the PDC and more courses on offer, including the one we're currently developing on risk.
4. An international playworker exchange program, bringing experienced playwork staff to visit great sites, and share ideas in a community of best practice.

When it comes to play, one never knows what a loose part may become over time. Something similar is true for playwork projects. So much of this process has been a surprise

to us, and reflecting on the journey so far leaves us proud but not complacent. Running Pop-Up Adventure Play as an organization has been yet another application of the 2005 Playwork Principles (see page 161). We've always tried to respond to need, go where invited, begin again every day, reflect together, and keep play as our top priority. It's also been a lesson in building trust and community. We've never wanted to nudge people, only to be there when needed. Sometimes relationships or connections don't develop in the ways we'd hoped, so we reflect, learn, and move on. We're still here, working carefully and remaining committed to this work, this movement. Our commitment has been continually reinforced by our friends in the field, and by our shared belief in the importance and processes of play.

If there's any advice we would share, it's this. If you believe in play, and know that you can be a part of supporting it, then don't wait for the perfect time, because the perfect time will never come. Make friends, learn more, reflect, and get in touch to let us know how you're doing. Start now, start small, keep going. \*



## Website

[popupadventureplay.com](http://popupadventureplay.com)

## Photo Credits

Suzanna Law

## Authors

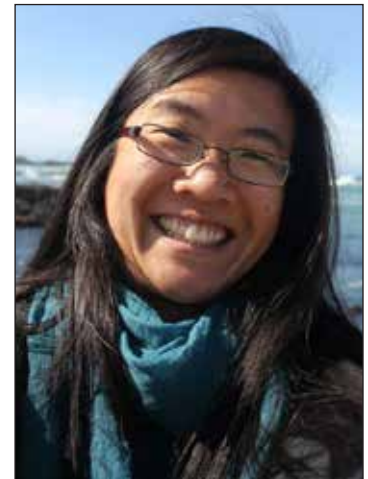
### **Morgan Leichter-Saxby**

While at University College London, Morgan began conducting ethnographic research at an adventure playground but quickly shifted to frontline practice. She has since worked at fixed sites and in play ranging projects in neighborhoods of both great socio-economic deprivation and affluence. She is a frequent presenter at conferences, and she leads Pop-Up Adventure Play's training and resources. Morgan blogs at [playeverything.wordpress.com](http://playeverything.wordpress.com), and she is currently working towards her Ph.D. in Playwork with Professor Fraser Brown.



### **Suzanna Law**

Bridging the academic and practitioner worlds, Suzanna Law has had a busy eight years in playwork. From play ranging projects that serve low-income neighborhoods, to online courses with students in more than a dozen countries worldwide, Suzanna applies playwork principles to communities, however that word is defined. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in Playwork with Professor Fraser Brown, and she leads Pop-Up Adventure Play's communications and social media.



Together, Suzanna and Morgan have written *The New Adventure Playground Movement: How Communities Across the USA are Returning Risk and Freedom to Childhood* (2015) and *The Loose Parts Manual: The DIY Guide to Creating a Playground in a Box* (2016).



# Let's Play Initiative

## The Alliance for Early Childhood

**Liza Sullivan and Blakely Bundy**

**W**hen it comes to children's play, the suburbs on the North Shore of Chicago are probably no different than other affluent, overscheduled communities across the country. Child-directed free play has been squeezed out of many children's lives by a number of factors. Children are heavily scheduled and enrolled in a myriad of adult-led "enrichment opportunities" from team sports to karate lessons to language schools and everything in between. Children are bombarded by screen-based technology and, since almost every family can afford the latest electronic gadgets, their houses are temptingly full of them. Also, successful parents are afraid that their children will not be as well-off as they are and, in hopes of getting a head start in admission to an Ivy League college, they demand "push-down academics" in schools, with much more paper and pencil work and far less play. Finally, parents' fears about real and imagined risks, even in these very safe communities, often result in children being closely supervised by adults at all times, with little free time to create their own play, especially in the beautiful natural spaces, including beaches, woods, meadows, and parks, located throughout these communities.

This was the situation in Winnetka, Kenilworth, Northfield and other affluent towns on Chicago's North Shore in 2009 when The Alliance for Early Childhood wondered if we could do something about it. The Alliance (not



to be confused with the national group, Alliance for Childhood) is a local community collaboration organization whose mission is to promote the healthy growth and development of children from birth to age eight. How could we bring back child-directed free play in our communities? What was the best way to inform adults about the benefits of child-initiated play? How could we provide opportunities throughout the community that allowed children to play, especially outdoors? Would it even be possible to restore play as a central activity of childhood?

The Alliance's first step was to create its Let's Play Committee and invite a guest speaker to address parents on the "The Secret to Your Child's Academic Success: The Irreplaceable Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Benefits of Play and How to Provide Them for Your Children." At our Annual Networking Dinner, a gathering of almost 200 early childhood teachers and administrators, the speaker addressed why children need to play in school. Both events were well attended and we were on our way.

## The Park-a-Day Challenge

In 2010, Liza Sullivan, chair of the Let's Play Committee, was one of six families across the country to participate in the first-ever Park-a-Day KaBOOM! Summer Challenge. In 50 days, Liza and her 3 ½-year-old twins visited over 50 different parks, playgrounds, and public play spaces throughout the Chicagoland area. This national initiative was intended to raise awareness of outdoor play spaces and inspire other parents to play outside with their children, as well as understand how regular outdoor play can positively impact children's development.

The Alliance decided that we could adapt that concept to introduce children in our communities to our wonderful—but often empty—parks. We brainstormed with local park districts about the value of child-directed free play and decided that the purpose of the Park-a-Day Challenges would be to feature this. It was not to be an adult-directed event.







We provided appropriate “loose parts” each day. We filled several plastic clothes baskets with such items as: rope, string, bungee cords, clothes pins, sheets, tarps, plastic cones, balls, sidewalk chalk, wicker baskets, magnifying glasses, and even a roll of tickets. It was decided that the Park-a-Day Challenge would be held at a different park in a different town each day from 9 am to 12 noon and again from 3 to 5 pm. Alliance staff and board members would arrange the loose parts on a park bench or other space so children could see and access them easily. They would occasionally “tidy up” the loose parts, but basically would stand back and let the children’s imaginations take over.

The Alliance publicized the event through social media, fliers, and, most importantly, asked board members to email their friends and neighbors and encourage them to come. We made it clear that this was not a “drop off” program, but one that was to be enjoyed by children and adults alike. Many families came and were pleasantly surprised to see their children explore the loose parts materials and come up with creative play ideas.

One mother remarked, “Seeing the kids build those forts with the sheets and tarps reminds me of what we used to do as kids.” Another mother watched her daughters create

a pulley system on a tall climbing structure, using some pieces of rope and a basket and observed, “Who would have thought they could have so much fun with a rope and a basket?”

Parents enjoyed time to socialize in the parks while their children were engaged. Younger children observed older children as they played. The local press covered the event, including discussion of the Alliance’s rationale for holding it. The first Park-a-Day Challenge had been a resounding success!

Since then The Alliance has continued to refine the Park-a-Day Challenges. One year nearby Kohl Children’s Museum loaned us their Imagination Playground blocks—large blue, lightweight blocks that children can use to build any structure, from buildings to ball ramps. These proved to be a huge hit with participants of all ages. Families driving by the park couldn’t help but see the dozens of children engaged in play with the blue pieces and would stop and join in the fun. The Alliance provided magnifying glasses, binoculars, viewers, and drawing paper on clipboards for children to document their observations, if they chose to do so.

We asked our local libraries to hold story hours during the Park-a-Day Challenges. Families would spread blankets under a shady tree and listen to stories if they wanted, while other children continued to play. Over the years we added more loose parts including long bolts of lightweight cloth that children used to make everything from costumes to tents. To encourage children to create their own games, we added whistles, bells, timers, and measuring tape.





In 2015, we invited several organizations from around the Chicago area to sponsor activities during the Park-a-Day Challenge. For example, Monday's theme was "Let's Move" and Lincoln Park Zoo led an Animal Yoga Adventure; the Chicago Botanic Garden hosted Critter Olympics; Hi-Five Sports Camp provided games like Freeze Tag, and Capture the Flag; and Winnetka Covenant Preschool did a Hula Hoop Dance Jam. The themes of the other days were: Nature, Balls, Art, and Imagination. Libraries continued to hold story hours each day, following the themes of the day in the books chosen. And hundreds of children and their parents or caregivers turned out. Although it has evolved from its first very simple Park-a-Day Challenge five years ago, these special play days have become a community tradition, drawing over 200 children and families per day. They introduce families to neighborhood parks, help them discover ideas for loose parts to spark their children's play, and show them the value of child-directed free play.

As we worked on the Park-a-Day Challenge with our local park districts, The Alliance formed a special relationship with the Winnetka Park District staff who truly understood the value of child-directed play. They were eager to explore other ways that we could collaborate.

## After-School Recess

One way to collaborate was to work with the Winnetka Park District to set up an after-school program with the express purpose of allowing children more time for play. It also helped parents to schedule a time for their child's free play. It was held at a school and the teachers' aides staffed it. Children were invited to stay after school to play on the playground and The Alliance provided loose parts to enhance the play.

## Family Camping

The next joint venture with the Winnetka Park District and an organization called BackYard Nature Center, was the Family Camping program, held in 2013. Winnetka is blessed with an 18-acre parcel of land called Crow Island Woods, which includes meadows, woods with hiking trails, a small shelter with picnic tables, and rest rooms. It is a wonderful place to introduce families to a camping experience in a nearby park. The event included instruction in camping activities, such as pitching tents and outdoor cooking, nature-based play including a scavenger hunt and a hike, and an evening sing-along around the campfire, complete with s'mores. The Alliance's contribution to this event, beyond publicizing it, was to provide loose parts for young children to enjoy while older children and parents learned camping skills. About 15 families attended, the weather held, and the Family Camping program was declared a successful event.

## Pop-Up Adventure Play

In early 2014, Liza Sullivan learned that two playworkers from England would be traveling around the United States, introducing the work of Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds. The only problem was that they would be arriving in our area over our spring vacation. Was it worth arranging an event at that time? We decided to go ahead with it, and The Alliance became one of their national partners. Together we hosted a four hour, free pop-up event. and at the request of the playworkers, we gathered hundreds of cardboard boxes of all sizes for the event, donated by a local appliance store. Despite

freezing March temperatures, over 150 children and 50 adults attended the event held in a meadow at Crow Island Woods. Parents remarked that they had forgotten how intriguing cardboard boxes are for children. Children were allowed to take a box home after the event and we heard from several parents that their children were still playing with those boxes days later!

## Inspiring Nature Play in Spaces Large and Small

The Alliance's success in inspiring play led to other organizations and schools asking for help, advice, and inspiration. How could we share what we had learned while continuing to learn from others? In May, 2014, a day-long symposium, entitled "Inspiring Nature Play in Spaces Large and Small" was held at the Chicago Botanic Garden. It was organized by The Alliance, Chicago Wilderness, and Chicago Botanic Garden. There were two major sponsors, so the event made a profit, and the funds allowed this successful symposium to be repeated in 2015 and again in 2016. At the first event 17 different schools and organizations presented hands-on ideas for nature play. There were 190 teachers, administrators, librarians, park district personnel, and many others in attendance, representing over 100 different schools and agencies from all over the Chicago area and as far away as Wisconsin and Indiana.



## Tuesdays in the Woods

In May 2014, we launched a program entitled Tuesdays in the Woods, once again co-sponsored with the Winnetka Park District and held in Crow Island Woods. For four Tuesday mornings, families with preschoolers were invited to come play, hike, and, if they chose, stay for a picnic that they provided for themselves, and to enjoy these spring days outdoors. The Alliance provided magnifying glasses, binoculars, viewers, and drawing paper on clipboards for children to document their observations if they chose to do so. Ten families attended the first session and one little girl reported that she was especially excited to have a picnic, because she'd never been on one before! A mother





of a preschooler and an infant, who had recently moved to the North Shore, had never been to Crow Island Woods before and was thrilled to be introduced to it.

## Fort Building

Over the Columbus Day weekend in 2014, and again in the fall of 2015, The Alliance partnered with the Tinkering School of Chicago and the Winnetka Park District, to provide two days of fort building. The Alliance provided logs and boards, tools such as saws and hammers, nails, ropes, ladders, and other materials that could be used to construct forts. Participating children adored this opportunity and constructed amazing edifices, some high off the ground and accessible only by ladders they'd built. If participants needed an additional piece for their building, they could go off into the woods and forage for it.

It was interesting, however, to note the comments of parents standing by and watching their busy children. Were their attitudes encouraging or inhibiting their children's play? For example, we heard:

"That's high enough."

"I don't want you climbing that."

"Don't go inside that fort. It's not safe."

"I'm sorry. Was there something icky on the piece of wood?"

"Do you want a snack? Do you need a snack? Should we have a water break?"

(interrupting play)

"We have to go to x" (another activity) when the children clearly wanted to stay and play.

Dozens and dozens of children came to participate in the fort building activity, including 13 second graders from a Cub Scout Den. One Cub Scout loved the fort building activity so much that he begged his mother to bring him and his sisters back the next day, which she did.

## Winter Play Day

While The Alliance has offered many opportunities for nature play over the past five years most have been held in milder weather during the spring, summer, and fall months. However, the Chicago area has long winters and it was decided that we try a Winter Play Day in January of 2016. To be held rain, snow, or shine, the play day included fort building, ice painting, a scavenger hunt, walks through the woods, tree



swings, building with logs, and the opportunity to roast marshmallows on the fire. These activities were facilitated by three partners: BackYard Nature Center, Chicago Botanic Garden, and Emily Oaks Nature Center. On this mild January day, there was a steady flow of families over the two hours, totaling approximately 100 children and their caregivers, at this inaugural event.

## What's Ahead?

The Alliance for Early Childhood's Let's Play Initiative has had many successes during the five years of its existence, but there is still much to do to promote and encourage child-directed free play in the communities it serves. As we look to the future, some long-term ideas our organization has considered are developing an indoor community playspace, an outdoor nature or adventure playground, playpods in schools and/or local parks, a "Play Summit" for parents, educators, and community leaders, and lastly a summer-long play initiative with trained playworkers staffing local parks. ✨

## Website

[TheAllianceForEC.org](http://TheAllianceForEC.org)

## Photo Credits

Liza Sullivan

## Authors

**Liza Sullivan, M.A.** is currently the Executive Director of The Alliance for Early Childhood. She began her professional career in northern California as an elementary school teacher. She returned to her native Chicago and joined the Chicago Children's Museum where, for five years, she developed on-site and off-site programs for both students and area elementary teachers. For three years, Liza served as the museum's Assistant Vice President of Education, overseeing the museum's daily operations, as well as internal and community-based programs that reached over a quarter of a million children and educators per year. As part of her advocacy of free play and nature play, Liza authored several articles and blogs, and she presented at local and national conferences. She co-founded ThroughPlay, an early childhood educational resource, which supports innovative play experiences and the utilization of Chicago's natural environment to educate young children. She was also the Assistant Director of Continuing Education at Erikson Institute, designing in-person and online programs for adult learners.

**Blakely Bundy, M.Ed.** served as the Executive Director of The Alliance for Early Childhood for 25 years. She currently is the Co-Director of Defending the Early Years. [deyproject.org](http://deyproject.org)







# Santa Clarita Valley (SCV) Adventure Play

Jeremiah Dockray and Erica Larsen-Dockray

**T**his article was written by Jeremiah (J) and Erica (E) who kept their voices separate although their vision and work is beautifully combined.

**J:** SCV Adventure Play started with a car accident. It wasn't some sort of life-changing epiphany, but merely reading on public transit (while my car was in the shop) that introduced me to the concept of an adventure playground. On a bus ride, I came across an article titled "Adventure Playground: A Parable of Anarchy," a history of the movement. It startled and inspired me. It articulated something I always knew but had never been able to say; everyone (not just children) needs the physical and mental space to play as they want. Working with children is something I have always done, even when I'm not trying to, but this resonated with me on a level that demanded a lot of reevaluation and soul searching. The little I knew at that point was breathlessly described to my wife Erica, who was similarly struck.

**E:** When Jeremiah began describing adventure play to me I was instantly thrust back

to my childhood on the farm in Nebraska playing in the scrap and muck. The more he shared, the more I connected those activities to my development as an artist. I also began to rethink how I was creating art as well as teaching animation, media arts, and visual arts to children and adults. My association with teaching and making art were at once altered.

**J:** A new dream emerged—to create or promote an adventure playground. All we had to do was bring this hidden history back into the world. No small task! Fortunately for everyone, the movement was still alive, and not relying solely on our small exposure to it. I discovered people who not only knew this history, but had studied it deeply, and were shaping a new movement. I quietly started following Pop-Up Adventure Play, which continues to do a lot of hard work and is really gaining traction in the United States and abroad.

Hoping to learn more about playwork, I enrolled in their Playworker Development Course, and in a serendipitous action, they were looking for locations and partners for their upcoming U.S. tour. That was it. We had to reach out to them and offer to help host an event. I emailed them, we chatted, we planned, and they put us on the tour!

However, it was Erica, who asked a question that I hadn't considered. "What are we going to do once the workshops and play days are done?" That was when SCV Adventure Play was born, and ultimately led to the discovery and purchase of an abandoned two-acre park for a permanent Adventure Playground space we are calling Eureka Villa.

**E:** For the tour we ended up hosting two days of workshops and pop-ups in our area, gave them a grand tour of our future site and became indebted for life! Here were people helping to advocate for a lovely and important part of children's lives and we were a part of it. SCV Adventure Play provides pop-up adventure playgrounds for various local groups, such as the City of Santa Clarita, Los Angeles County Parks and Recreation, local schools, the Women's Center for Creative Work, OHM Mamas Mother's Group, Earth Day Festivals, College of the Canyons, and more.

**J:** Within the last couple of years, I have taken less work as a TV editor, devoting more effort toward making SCV Adventure Play and Eureka Villa my full time job. We have been looking around for more pop-up opportunities, and preparing Eureka Villa for more events and its transformation into a full time Adventure Playground! In 2013, we moved to Val Verde, a small California community made up mostly of working class Latino and CalArts students. Around this time, the Playworker Development Course tasked me to evaluate a space for play. Driving around town, we spied a vacant lot for sale, overgrown and fenced off, with giant trees and elderberry bushes. I decided to check it out and just by stepping into it I immediately saw its potential for play. It was a perfect space for children to connect with their ideas, nature, and each other.

**E:** Our pop-up adventure playgrounds materialize in many different areas and forms. We





have held pop-ups in grade schools, college green spaces, parks, festivals, private homes, community centers, on blocked-off streets, and beyond. We have held a few pop-ups in Burbank and Los Angeles proper as private events at community centers. In Santa Clarita, we get a far-reaching range



of children from two to fourteen years of age and from varying backgrounds and cultures. Because most of our pop-ups take place at annual events, there is a lack of continuity of participants. One exception is the monthly pop-ups we have been holding since 2014 with the City of Santa Clarita's "Thursdays on Main" in Newhall. These pop-ups have some returning children, but usually we get a new bunch each month. The Newhall players range in age from diapers to middle school and are commonly either Caucasian or Hispanic.

I think the most common benefit children experience is a primal explosion of excitement once they realize they have the freedom to manipulate their space and explore to their hearts content! At our pop-ups, it happens once they see the loose parts or hear our voiced permission to "do whatever they want." At Eureka Villa it is merely stepping into the park which ignites that same "spark," and then they are off, swinging on the tire swings, exploring the hiding spots, or climbing trees. It is truly amazing to witness this sort of spiritual "unshackling"—as if we told prisoners they are free to go.

We often witness incredible moments of invention and collaboration. We have seen castles with working drawbridges, detailed doll houses with many moments of problem solving, weight bearing stick chairs, double hammocks, and more. If the players have an extended amount of time to play, it is common to see the development of a communal space. Often the children will begin to connect certain boxes to establish a "hang out" with their friends and invite new kids into the spaces to share. There are strangers who work together to create spaces or fulfill ideas as though they were long-time friends. Even with disagreements, allowing the children to work out social problems within an adventure playground environment lends itself to a "we're in this together" effort. Because play is so free, I believe the children just want to figure out a way to solve the issues so they can get back to the play.

Many times we encounter children who have never climbed a tree or received permission to take risks, get dirty, dig in a pile of palm fronds, or engage in other fine practices of childhood. It is a profound moment to witness a tween-aged player climbing or swinging on their first tree.

**J:** During a pop-up at a Burbank elementary school, I had some reservations about whether we could handle such a large group (between 100-150 children). When the children were released into the yard and the pop-up area, the other volunteers and I stared down a massive wall of screaming, running, excited children. Once they engaged, however, they were all deeply playing—a group building here, a solitary explorer there, very peaceful. I busied myself with helping cut boxes and locating materials until I happened upon a girl (probably 10 or 11) stomping her feet, fists clenched, and emitting a high pitched squeal. “It has finally happened,” I thought. “Someone is upset or hurt and I might need to step in.” As I approached, what she was screaming started to become clear. “This is. SO. MUCH. FUNNNNN!!!” I turned on my heels, remembering the similar instances I’ve seen the last couple of years. The children need this. It almost seems like a release, or a reunion with a part of themselves that has been forgotten or neglected.

**E:** One of my favorite memories was during a pop-up where a small family of cousins and siblings decided to recreate their grandmother’s house. An older girl, around 13 or 14, was at the helm directing her relatives down to the details. They meticulously cut fabric for curtains, a doormat, created window flower boxes, and re-created the “welcome” sign on her door. Using tape, they defined the house’s exterior. Unfortunately, their grandmother was not present, but it was most definitely an incredible feat to see first-hand. The children created a symbol of a shared love that tapped into their lives as family. Whenever a child taps into that connection, with any creation, there is a creative shift and purpose that you just don’t see on a regular playground.

Throughout this journey we’ve had many an obstacle, expected or not. The first on the list would be time. From our first conversation about adventure play, Jeremiah and I both said, “What an honorable venture we could take on—in two or three years!” Before we knew it though, we were closing escrow papers on Eureka Villa and planning a pop-up for 200 children within the same week. With such a push start, we’ve since experimented with the balance between time devoted to income and that of developing this dream. We admit our problems are good ones to have, but we are still learning as we go.

**J:** Slowly we’re shifting our “normal” careers to devote a minimum of 20 hours a week to this project. Learning how to structure the business by drawing on the local Small Business Development Center, parks and recreation, and community art organizations, and pursuing grass roots funding sources, as well as garnering help locally and internationally for the questions which arise, has been pivotal.

**E:** Since Jeremiah left the Hollywood machine our income has dramatically shifted, and I find myself teaching more and leaving the project reins to him much more often. I can confidently say we’ve both gone through many reflections on self, purpose, and priority, much like we did after the birth of our son, Dallas. We are finding our future selves in this process.

Aside from these deep reforms, we have unexpectedly been called to action within our community as it struggles with a nearby landfill. A contract was made to close it in 2019, but now a looming expansion is proposed instead. Much to our dismay, our future adventure playground site is at ground zero. As life plays out, though, we have connected to more neighbors as we organize against the expansion and have learned much about the community. As of Winter 2016, we await an environmental impact report to determine if we are tasked with defending ourselves or if the County of Los



Angeles will stand up for us instead. We hope for the latter.

**J:** As for the impact of our efforts, one focus has been raising the awareness of parents in the community about the range of play opportunities. With the children themselves, the opening of public spaces that are child-led has been eye-opening for some of them. In the future, the opening of the permanent adventure play space, Eureka Villa, will expand the opportunity and consistency of child-directed play in the community.



**E:** Within five years, we hope Eureka Villa will be a funded and staffed permanent adventure playground, in addition to having pop-ups throughout Los Angeles and nearby Ventura Counties. We also hope to have a loose parts play initiative with local schools, including a playwork educational program via regular workshops and classes. We plan to build partnerships with area businesses and organizations to keep our base strong and hopefully continually inspire new playworkers to grow with us. We would love to be a part of a nationwide advocacy effort for playwork, loose parts play, and play in education. ✨

## Website

[scvadventureplay.com](http://scvadventureplay.com)







## Photo Credits

Jeremiah Dockray and Erica Larsen-Dockray

## Authors



**Jeremiah Dockray** is a preschool teacher and playworker, TV and film editor, and a co-founder of SCV Adventure Play and Eureka Villa. After studying film at the College of Santa Fe in his home state of New Mexico, he moved to California and worked in the TV industry for over a decade. In 2012, he discovered the concept of adventure playgrounds and was happy to join a thriving movement. Along with his wife, Erica, he is in the process of forming Santa Clarita Valley Adventure Play that play ranges throughout the greater L.A. area and Eureka Villa, a permanent space in Val Verde. Together they advocate for free play for all.

**Erica Larsen-Dockray** is a native of Scottsbluff, Nebraska. She is currently an adjunct faculty member at her alma mater, the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). She teaches in the Film/Video school's experimental animation program under camera animation techniques and critical studies of female representation in animation. She is also a teaching artist at Inner-City Arts in downtown Los Angeles, teaching Media Arts to elementary school students and Animation to seventh to twelfth graders. Erica also co-founded Calibraska Arts Initiative, which is a summer program that brings artists from California to small town Western Nebraska where they teach multi-generational workshops in their métier, while enveloped in the Nebraska landscape.







# Rebuilding the American Dream Through Play

Tricia O'Connor

**A** little blond-haired girl approached her preschool's tiny yet transformed playground. In addition to the little plastic playhouse and the concrete tricycle path, her playground today was filled with cardboard boxes big enough to stand up in and dotted with bins of chalk, markers and string. Bits of colored fabric and costumes hung from the fence and fluttered in the brisk October air.

It was our first pop-up playground at her Headstart preschool center, one of many such centers our program, Lake Erie Adventure Play (LEAP), was contracted to serve. But she and several of her classmates stayed back, unsure, even though we had done a brief introduction to our program as we entered the playground, showing them the bins and giving them permission to play.

At most of our events, children dive right in, but I could see these children needed a little extra permission to play. I picked up some chalk, squatted down near a long cardboard tunnel and drew on the cardboard; the little girl edged closer. I held the chalk out in the palm of my hand; she picked it up and tried it out herself. A few classmates picked up some chalk from the bins and started decorating the box.

With another group, I picked up some tape and a popsicle stick from one of the bins and taped it to the side of a small box, again just modeling some things and giving permission without telling them what to do.

Soon they were all busy constructing, building dollhouses, running and screaming through the fabric draped around the tricycle path, and piling together inside the cardboard boxes and giggling.



## Getting Started

Lake Erie Adventure Play (LEAP) came about after our tiny town along the shores of Lake

Erie in northern Ohio was featured in *The New York Times* in August 2013 as the poster child of the “Crumbling American Dream.” The author, Harvard social scientist and Port Clinton native, Dr. Robert Putnam, was citing a national trend—loss of manufacturing jobs, a growing inequality gap, large numbers of children living in poverty, young adults not going on to live better lives than their parents, and a shriveled sense of community.

As a newcomer, I’d seen crumbling houses and poor families, but I had no idea until I read the article that 50 percent of the children in our town were living in poverty. After a town hall meeting that included Dr. Putnam, our local United Way director Chris Galvin put out a call: “Is there anyone who can help our kids?” I answered. Throughout my museum career in a children’s museum, I’d been following adventure playgrounds and I knew that this type of open-ended play could help our children. It can build community. It can build life skills. Most important, it can build confidence and important brain connections needed for closing the achievement gap.

Chris Galvin connected me with another woman who had suggested something similar, and gave us a date two weeks later for our first pop-up playground, which we modeled after the work of Pop-up Adventure Play.

We developed a build-our-wings-as-we-fly method. With the support of United Way, we reached out to churches, social service organizations, and interested community members to gather our loose parts (boxes, fabric, string, tape, markers, chalk, and odds



and ends of recyclable containers). In September 2013, we set up in a park along a main thoroughfare, our brightly colored fabrics fluttering in the wind, as part of our community's Art Walk. Because it was a school night, we weren't sure we would get much of a turnout, especially since it turned dark by 6:30. But soon we were packed! Parents and children stayed after dark and transformed our materials into something magical.

United Way remains a great ally for us. From the start, Galvin saw the value in what we had to offer our children, and how our mission ties nicely with United Way's goals of health and education for kids.

At first, everything we did was on a volunteer basis. My colleague and I signed up for the Playworker Development Course with Pop-up Adventure Play and talked with US leaders in child-directed play. I developed a presentation about free play, and Galvin carved a path for me to talk to many community leaders, including our county's Headstart director, the library director, the mayor and city council, directors of social service agencies, our arts council, community service organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, etc.) and others.

Concurrently, we offered more pop-up playgrounds through the winter at a local church's parish hall. We promoted our newly formed and growing Facebook group through press releases, and sent fliers home through the preschools and elementary schools. We grew.

We were accepted as the lead project by our county's leadership program, which held a fundraiser to provide us with some seed money for startup costs. We put together a simple strategic plan and applied to our local United Way for funding to operate as a program within United Way. By June, we were finally getting paid to do this work and we had wheels (a local pediatrician donated his SUV to United Way for our program).

## Finding Allies

Like the Art Walks we participated in, we found initial success by aligning our pop-up playgrounds with existing programs for youth. We partnered with our United Way's summer lunch program and offered pop-up play events at their sites in low-income apartment complexes. We also coordinated pop-up play events at our elementary school's afterschool program, which continued in the summer, and then contracted with Headstart to visit all of their preschool centers within a three-county area.

Partnering with other organizations who offer activities for children and families gives all of us more energy and camaraderie. This past year we've held joint events with our local Arts Council. Kids run back and forth between their planned activity tables and our free play area. We've also set up at our elementary school's family fun fair, and worked with social service agencies that offer programs for children.

While most of our events target children 12 and under, we've also had success reaching out to



ninth graders at an annual career fair, a business school solution to *The New York Times* article. While our area features loose parts play, we also talk about many careers that use inexpensive materials like these to build models before producing final products.

We've also held events at town festivals that weren't as successful for us. We've found it hard to compete with carnival rides and cotton candy. This was not a good use of our time.

## Gathering and Organizing Materials

So where do we get our materials? The only things we've purchased are markers, tape, chalk, and sometimes bright and shiny fabric. We get boxes through appliance stores, an annual donation by a local company that manufactures appliance boxes, and donations from community members. Our dance studio donates costumes and fabric. We go through lots of tape, especially duct tape, which is difficult for kids to tear. While we do still have some duct tape on hand, we've found that brightly colored masking tape is a bit easier on all of us. We've had success getting donations of tape from service organizations and tape manufacturers.

Since we are a mobile program, having an easy way to store, unload, and pack our materials is essential for taking care of our staff. A museum colleague figured out a simple modification for our van that allows us to store our flattened cardboard boxes underneath and our clear bins of materials on top. Being able to get to the cardboard without removing all the bins helps our staff tremendously.

We use several plastic carrying totes to distribute limited amounts of markers, chalk, tape, bits of string and ribbon, and a few small odds and ends. Each of these items has a home in between events in a large clear plastic bin. We quickly found that setting out all of our chalk or markers led to a big mess for us to clean up.

We have other clear bins marked for costumes, smaller pieces of cardboard, recyclable containers, and plastic flowers. These are set out at events for children to rifle through. It doesn't all end up back in the bin it started in, but there is a reasonable semblance of organization so that the next event we hold is easy to set up.

## Play ... It Is Rocket Science!

How do you develop a community's interest in play? We usually start a conversation by asking adults to reach back to their own play memories. Heads nod as we discuss how children today just don't have access to these types of play experiences. Then we emphasize how play builds important skills needed for later success in





life and business. Usually I share the story from Stuart Brown's book, *Play*, about how NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory asks job candidates about their play and tinkering experiences as children. They know that someone who messed around with loose parts and traversed uneven terrain has what it takes when "Houston, we have a problem" happens.

Play events can be a little uncomfortable for adults, especially at the beginning when it can feel like things may spiral out of control. There's a kind of frenzy when children first experience the freedom to just play with materials that they can transform any way they choose. We've learned to just take a deep breath. The play eventually finds its rhythm. But parents can be anxious and controlling—especially if they feel like their child is acting too "wild." School professionals, too, are sometimes uncomfortable with the lack of rules and especially with sword-play. Sometimes we engage the adults in discussion, letting them know gently that messy play is okay here. And sometimes we lead by example, perhaps engaging with the children to let parents know all is okay.

We did things a little differently at a couple of pop-up playgrounds that we organized for another organization's summer activity program. First, we sat all the children down at the beginning of the two-hour play program and led a brief discussion about how to initiate play and also how to share the loose parts. The children came up with the parameters: if you see something on the ground near someone, just ask if they are using it. When initiating sword play, my colleague came from behind and hit me on the head with the pool noodle. She asked, "Is this how to initiate play?" Several aides who had been frazzled by the lack of rules at a previous play event were much calmer at this one and better able to support the children's play.

## Tinkering in a Playful Way

One of the national leaders we reached out to was Gever Tulley, founder of the Tinkering School, a hands-on learning experience where children use real tools and materials to tackle big problems and create amazing things.

After Tulley offered to train us in the immersive process used at their San Francisco-based site, I volunteered at one of their week-long overnight camps. It was amazing to watch the children work in small teams to build that week's mystery project, an off-road go-cart. The best part was seeing the youngsters grow in confidence—not just in how to use tools, but in how to figure things out and solve problems.



We piloted the first two weeks of our version of Tinkering School in Summer, 2015. Each week of the daycamp we gave children an overall theme, but then it was up to them to imagine what they would build and what it would look like. For example, one week our theme was an adventure obstacle course, by land, by sea, and by air. Our tinkerers, ages 10-13, brainstormed in small groups, exploring the land and water options to imagine what was possible. Then they worked in small groups alongside an adult collaborator to build their creations, which included a zipline, a go-cart, a climbing wall, a swinging tire obstacle course, a water slide, and several rafts, some more float-worthy than others.

In addition to working on their projects, children could decide on their own to take a break, work on a side project, head out to feed the pigs, or skip rocks in the pond. I watched one 10-year-old boy experiment with the drill on a piece of plywood. It was riddled with holes by the end of the week. Our tinkerers also played with art, decorating not only their creations, but using spray paint and nuts and bolts to create their own t-shirt designs.

One 10-year-old girl said, “I thought we’d be building birdhouses. I never imagined we’d be using power tools and building all of this!” Months after camp, her mother reported how our Tinkering School experience had changed her daughter: “My daughter ... has become more confident this year in voicing her ideas to her peers since camp.” Other parents have reported this, too.





And she, like others who attended, are tinkering at home, too. “There always seems to be ongoing tinkering in the house now,” a mom said. “If [my girls] hear anything is broken, they immediately want to know if they can take it apart.” Another camper and his friend went home and took apart his Nerf guns because “he wanted them to work differently.” Another boy who had never been around farm animals made arrangements with the camp owner for his mom to ride her first horse. Another parent just posted on Facebook about her amazement when her 11-year-old son not only wanted to fix the knob on their back door but “grabbed the right bit” for the job.

While Tinkering School is more directed than loose parts play, we learned that it can be structured in a way that allows children the freedom to create and play, and also to learn alongside and with adults.

## Taking Care of Ourselves

We’ve learned to take care of ourselves. While the play events themselves are exhilarating, they also require lots of energy and it’s easy to become exhausted. We have fluctuated between two and three staff and about three to four volunteers we can call on for various events. That’s not enough. The first year we sometimes had four events a week in the summer, each in a different location, requiring us to unload, set up, run the event, tear down, reload the van and drive to another location. Sometimes in the rush, we schedule events without thinking through the need for extra volunteers.

Because of all of that, we’ve learned to take care of ourselves. If we are tired, we get out fewer materials. We only get out paint when we have enough help to clean up the wet, messy boxes and materials. We’ve found that some materials are better for inside use, like the bright plastic buttons children love. Cleaning those up outside is a pain, but inside, with a big broom, it’s easy.

## Sustainability and Challenges

Funding and sustainability are probably our biggest challenges. With an annual budget of around \$19,000, we don’t have enough to fund even one part-time position with regular hours. Our staff of two to three people are contracted hourly to do behind-the-scenes administration and run our events. Some occur at set times, like the summer lunch program and the Arts Walk, but others are dependent on the needs of the agencies contracting us.

Because of our United Way affiliation, we can’t apply for some grants because of competition, and many local businesses and foundations who already give to United Way won’t consider our funding requests. We have toyed with becoming our own nonprofit to increase grant eligibility, but it also would increase staff responsibility for taxes and documentation. For that reason, we’ve been trying to find a home for our program under the umbrella of a larger organization.

Hiring staff and finding volunteers is difficult with our current structure. We have to find kid-friendly people with a flexible schedule who don’t mind the haphazard nature of our scheduling. While we have a rich retiree base in our area, finding adults who can go with the flow of play and have the energy for constant setup and tear down hasn’t been easy. We have considered hiring high school or college students, but again we would need to offer set hours and we just haven’t had the funding or internal structure to do this.



At the moment, I would say we are limping along financially. We've reached out to many organizations, attended business startup seminars, investigated grants and funding sources. And at the same time, we've gone from three contract staff down to one. We know the importance of what we do, but finding a path through funding and sustainability hasn't been easy.

## Why We Do It

Given all the challenges, why do we keep going? Simply put, because of the children. At a winter play event a mom reported that her son said, "Mom they're doing that box thing today. Can we go? Please?" The Arts Council's theme for this January event was "Frozen," based on the popular children's movie. Families poured into the hall. Youngsters ran back and forth between structured art activity tables and our free play area. Girls and boys, a few in blue princess costumes or Olaf and troll outfits, transformed our materials, working together in groups on bigger forts, or in pairs creating things out of smaller boxes and loose parts.

At another event for an entire elementary school of 500+ children, teachers reported that they saw children playing together who never associate with each other. And during their regular recess time, they didn't have any of the tattling or conflicts they experience on a daily basis. All of that was with one day of free play! Imagine what a regular experience of child-directed play with loose parts could do.

We are constantly amazed at the ways children use materials—coming up with creative solutions to support their play that we would never imagine. They build big things, small things, and create games out of all sorts of materials. To me, this is the crux of why child-directed play is so important. The children of today will run the world of tomorrow, and it will be a different world with different challenges that we can't yet imagine. Building



children’s repertoire of creative solutions and healthy risk-assessment through open-ended play will prepare them for whatever the future brings.

Are we making a dent? This past fall I heard kids playing outside after dark, and it struck me how unusual this was. I hadn’t heard it for years, but I didn’t know it was missing until I heard it again. In the parking lot near our house, which is in the middle of our small town, I now see multi-aged groups of children playing games together, riding their bikes, climbing stone walls, and chattering. Our Arts Council and some local craft stores now hold free monthly programs for kids. A family whose children have been to our events posts images of their playtime and the antics they get up to. A mom I know in Indiana follows our page and chose her daughter’s preschool based on the articles and images we posted about free play. I can’t say for sure that all of these are a result of our efforts, but I think there’s a connection. \*

## Website

[facebook.com/lakeerieadventureplay](https://facebook.com/lakeerieadventureplay)

## Photo Credits

Tricia O’Connor and Melissa Bayer

## Author

**Tricia O’Connor**



“Only girl I know who could climb trees barefoot like a monkey.”

—*My childhood friend, Joe*

I hold the vision and develop and implement operations of LEAP, based in Port Clinton, Ohio. I grew up playing outdoors for hours on end, every day after school, winter and summer, snow and rain. We played mostly outside the eyes of adults, doing all kinds of things our parents would have told us not to do, and learning a ton in the process. I’ve wanted my whole life to offer that back to kids. Since I never had the opportunity to raise children of my own, providing free play opportunities with loose parts gives me the chance to pass that love of play along to today’s kids. As a museum consultant with over 18 years experience developing award-winning exhibits

for children, families and life-long learners, I’d been following adventure playgrounds in Europe for several years, hoping that some day I’d have the chance to develop one here in the United States. Now seems to be the time for that.

# Adventure Playgrounds and the Maker Movement

Kevin Mills

**F**or six years I designed and built hands-on exhibits for the Children's Museum of Tucson. I needed to make the exhibits safe and durable, but beyond that I engaged in a process that was open-ended. If you can dream it up, a steam punk airship for example, and figure out how to make it, then knock yourself out. And there-in lies my epiphany.

"Open-ended." It's the same term we use to describe the type of play that we in the adventure play movement are seeking to restore. And in the waning days of my six years at the museum I came to discover that I might be denying children the very thing I thought I was providing—the ability to construct and play with diverse materials in open-ended ways.

Children love to build with all kinds of loose parts, and while I was constructing exhibits at the museum, I too became a passionate fan of using unlikely materials in





unusual ways. I started seeing the world in a whole new way and began to see potential materials in the most surprising places. I began rigorously collecting and bold-faced soliciting of fringe vendors who thought me quite mad. “Can I have that huge scrap of vibration dampening material, Mr. construction worker?” Field trips to specialty stores became my happy obsession. I’d purchase things for which I had no idea how they might be used. A fishing reel became a “respirator” on a planetarium. A docking wedge used in boating became the bumper on the giant walk-through choo choo train. And the dampening material became the engineer’s brake mount. Items that hadn’t yet found their home I’d hang on the shop walls with others of their ilk. Every nook and cranny behind the scenes of the museum was utilized. One wall was “hoop dreams” for all things spooled or coiled. Another was the “thin stick rack.” Cataloging became an art in itself.

In time I amassed a collection of carefully chosen materials and, through thoughtful selection and implementation, I was beginning to win the war of attrition. I used elastomerics (industrial rubber) where softwoods were once devoured and I used polyethylene (cutting board material) where hardwoods once splintered. These modern materials are more versatile, more durable and more hygienic.

My passion for this approach and the work it yielded led me to speak at the annual convention of children’s museums. The talk was entitled “Improbable Uses for Unlikely Materials.” And, in time, something wonderful began to happen. I had created a critical mass of loose parts and my collections were brimming with promise and potential. So, whenever confronted with the need to enhance or strengthen a failing exhibit I’d simply turn to my collections for inspiration. Inevitably some improbable hose or fixture would present itself. Not only as the perfect solution, but uncannily so. My assistant and I came to almost *expect* this spooky behavior. Again, this was due largely to the fact that there are no design rules and almost anything goes. A toilet plunger, new and unused, became the perfect air driver for a train whistle. I couldn’t help noticing that the notion of “no rules” perfectly mirrors what we hope to restore for our children—unstructured, no rules play.

An intimate understanding of materials and their properties is at the core of any well-considered construction endeavor. It turns out it’s also at the heart of a child’s determination to *deconstruct*, if not outright destroy. When one finds oneself in an arms race with children, one had better champion the smart use of innovative materials as fast as humanly possible. By day, they’d destroy and by night I’d remedy. When the 12” long, 5 lb. uvula was torn from the back of the giant mouth for the third time, I had to be resourceful. With vinyl tube shims and a modified pipe clamp we were back in business... if only for a time. I spent the better part of my first two years at the children’s museum doing only repair and upgrades. Eager to design and build *new* features, I was determined not to succumb to the fate of my predecessors: perpetual maintenance.

If I was going to avoid having to spend late nights repairing what the kids had mangled during the day, I was going to have to develop an entirely new framework for



design/build. And I came to find that it was the materials themselves that would drive that process. There is a time-honored adage among craftsman. “Let the materials tell you what they want.”

Often, in the intervals between designing new exhibits and upgrading existing ones, I would search the web for inspiration and to see what others were building for play-based learning. It was during the summer of 2011 that I discovered the existence of adventure playgrounds. I can still recall feeling a shift take place in me. The dream job, the one I’d heard myself tell people, “I may never leave,” was suddenly in question. In adventure playgrounds I recognized the wisdom in allowing children to choose and hold the materials. Memories of fort building flooded back to me. And along with it the pride that came from finding rocks heavy enough to hold the blanket tight over the fort. Suddenly I wanted to give children what they needed—a chance to hold things in their hands and make it work, to design for themselves.



I was still relying on loose parts that I had collected in the service of designing for play, but I was beginning to waiver in my dedication. I developed a crisis of conscience by creating devices for keeping children indoors and pushing buttons. I had enjoyed great success designing for this indoor realm, but I could no longer do so knowing what we now know about the importance of unstructured outdoor play. While I was thriving in my work and enjoying problem solving and creativity, I was doing so almost at the *expense* of the children. I was using loose parts to build interactive features with *closed narratives* and leaving little room for their imagination. I realized that my job mimicked perfectly what children need to do in their job—to learn through play. I was effectively *denying* the children the very process I was employing to make the exhibits—inspiration and critical thinking to problem solve. *They* should be holding items in their hands in order to figure out which one will be just the thing. *They* need to be the makers.

In 2012, when the other directors and I concluded that it was high time that the loose parts movement came to the Children’s Museum of Tucson, we invested in a large set of blue Imagination Playground blocks. When the blocks arrived the effect on the kids was profound—and it affected me profoundly as well. I became clear that the best use of my talents might no longer lie in making completed interactive features so much as designing systems for enabling and empowering children to do their own making.





While vacationing near Seattle on Bainbridge Island during the summer of 2014, I was absolutely struck by the number of free range kids I witnessed playing in the fields and in the forests. One forgets what seeing children playing in their neighborhood looks like. I felt I had traveled back in time. When I learned that neighboring Mercer Island had one of the few adventure playgrounds in the United States, it became clear to me that this was a region where I belonged, one where the opportunities for advancing playwork are abundant. So, on a wing and a prayer, I moved to Bainbridge Island in August of 2015 with a determination to apply my talents and insights to the adventure play movement.

In working to advance the cause of adventure play on Bainbridge Island, I put together a presentation entitled “Adventure Playgrounds and the Maker Movement.” The maker movement promises to change society as profoundly as the digital age, and to foster tinkering and do-it-yourself ingenuity on an unprecedented scale.

After giving my first power point presentation I was inundated with invitations to give the presentation to other groups and advise on how to advance the cause. In fact, I’ve consistently met with genuine enthusiasm and assistance for promoting these ideas further. The president of the local Chamber of Commerce saw my first presentation and met with me later to suggest ways to find funding to further educate the community. He said he was moved by the play memory exercise and felt strongly that the community needs to know more about the potential of an adventure playground to restore the best parts of childhood.

My approach leverages the burgeoning maker movement and the growing desire to foster innovation and creativity in children. By describing adventure playgrounds as incubators for future innovators, I seem to be getting more traction with audiences. I'm finding it's also a better way to ease achievement-oriented parents into a conversation about unstructured play.

In reaching out to the children's museum here on the island, I learned that they are considering adding outdoor components to their offerings. They're very receptive to the idea of collaborating on some pop-up adventure play dates. Some of the private schools I've spoken with have also expressed an interest in holding pop-up dates.

When I attended the 2nd annual Play Symposium in Ithaca, New York in October of 2015, my sense of how important this work is was greatly reinforced. It's truly an exciting time. The people I met there are deeply dedicated to doing right by kids by restoring for them the kind of play that was the standard for thousands of years. I'm happy to be a strong voice for this cause and I enjoy cultivating conversations around how to advance it. As a designer and builder I'm also taking great pleasure in being on the lookout for opportunities where the new materials of play can be harvested for greater benefit. Like many others, I'm convinced that we're on the cusp of a profound cultural shift, one that is being brought on by the advent of desktop manufacturing (aka the maker movement).

Tinkering and unstructured play are two sides of the same coin and these two modalities want to supplement each other. Einstein said, "Play is the highest form of research." Perhaps what is needed is an adventure playground that is strategically situated next to a "maker space." Maybe these "Maker Playgrounds" might then also rely on steady streams of selectively harvested remnants from regional manufacturers. This





might then serve to fuel even greater creativity and exploration with greater potential for intergenerational collaboration. Perhaps the generation that follows the “Millennials” will be branded “The Makers.”

I envision a Maker Playground as the mother of all adventure playgrounds. At its core is a tinker factory where artists and makers use state-of-the-art tools and materials to explore and invent. These factory playworkers have a shared goal of producing only incomplete and partial works—components and pieces manipulated only enough to serve as fuel for creative play in children. These are the raw materials for childhood discovery and exploration. Workers procure, sort, and modify donated industrial remnants and the fruits of their process are dispensed onto the loose parts playground that surrounds the factory. The children are free to manipulate and create with these play components as they see fit and according only to their imaginations. Children may enlist the support of playworkers in the construction of their creations. It’s all designed to fuel the creative fires and foster the problem solving skills that are so innate and essential in child-directed play.

There is no telling what hybrid of play and tinkering we will see in the coming years, but the opportunity to reunite children with unencumbered play will surely reside somewhere in the mix. Tinkering and unstructured play are going to be the best of friends—they just don’t know it yet. \*

## Website

[Facebook.com/playczar](https://www.facebook.com/playczar)

## Photo Credits

Kevin Mills

## Author



**Kevin Mills** For an industrial designer such as myself, landing a role designing hands-on exhibits for a children’s museum was akin to being asked to design furnishings for Alice’s Wonderland. Only these furnishings needed to be much, much more durable. So down the rabbit hole I went. An accomplished furniture designer, I went from a world of art galleries and signs imploring “please don’t touch” to one where signs implored guests to “turn the crank as hard as you can!” Suddenly man-handling was the order of the day. The learning curves were so very steep. In fact, the whole of my six years there was a non-stop learning curve; an unending crash course in contending with the special blend of slobber and

brutality that only children in their namesake museum can deliver. What’s more, most of the materials I’d come to know and love, hardwoods, glass, steel, aluminum, had to be mothballed in favor of a whole new palette. A palette yet to be determined.

# Additional Play Projects

**W**e recently learned of additional play projects and include brief descriptions here. We would love to hear of others.





## The CAPE Project

The CAPE Project at the Child Development Institute of Sarah Lawrence College in West Chester County, NY, creates Community Adventure Play Experiences (CAPE) with partners on campus and in the surrounding NYC metropolitan area. Our emphasis is on play research, training, collaboration, and community outreach. In the past six months we have done 35 CAPE play events and a number of trainings, including one for 80 staff members of New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation. CAPE relies on volunteers and provides important fieldwork for students and researchers in psychology, child development, the art of teaching, and theater. It has become a model for engaging a college environment in service-learning.

CDI provides opportunities for adults who work with children in a wide range of settings to be trained in supporting play with Play's the Thing, a five-day program taking place each April. Established in 2008, the program explores uses of play in learning, therapeutic, and recreational contexts. It includes CAPE training and offers 35 contact/in-service hours. It can also be taken for graduate credit. Through its CAPE and professional development programming, the Child Development Institute hopes to change the culture of play, making it available, accessible, and sustainable for all. As with most things, sustained relationships seem to be the answer.

—Saundra Norton

### Website

[sarahlawrence.edu/cdi/outreach](http://sarahlawrence.edu/cdi/outreach)

## KOOP

KOOP—Kid Owned & Operated Play is based in Champaign-Urbana, IL. It believes that children need a space and time to call their own. With so much of their day structured for them, children need opportunities to play freely, to explore, to test, to create, and to build and rebuild their world—with the freedom to do this in their own way using loose parts. In order to accomplish this, KOOP offers pop-up play events in collaboration with local park districts, camps during school breaks, independent events, and an Adventure Play Afterschool Program at a University-supported primary school. In the future, we look to expand our efforts to further communicate the adventure play philosophy by offering workshops to local political officials, park and school professionals, parents, and graduate students. We pledge to continue to advocate about the importance of a child's self-directed, free play with loose parts, and the unique developmental opportunities it can provide. In addition, we would love to open a permanent adventure playground within the community and to broaden our energies to other cities and rural communities.

—Naomi Sukenik and Kelsey Langley

### Website

[KoopAdventurePlayground.com](http://KoopAdventurePlayground.com)

## The Lion and the Mouse

The Lion and the Mouse (Le lion et la souris) is a community organization serving families in Montreal. We provide opportunities for child-led, nature-based play, particularly



in dense urban environments. Inspired by playwork and forest school principles, we offer a diverse array of programs for children, in all seasons, in areas of great biodiversity and little biodiversity, in playgrounds and public parks, and in our own studio space. We love reclaiming neglected areas for play and child-led exploration. We also seek to encourage play in the broader community through Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds and other events.

Since we began in 2013, we have offered trainings about play for parents, educators, and care providers, and we have seen our mission develop as one of play advocacy. We are educators and activists who fight to reclaim urban space for play. We are tree-climbers, loose-parts collectors, artists, social entrepreneurs, multi-lingual, and anti-oppressive. With many helpers, we are creating a thriving community where children

are listened to, respected, and given opportunities to play and simply be children.

—Megan Cohoe-Kenney and Cameron MacLean

### **Website**

[lelionetlasouris.com](http://lelionetlasouris.com)

## **Twin Cities Adventure Play**

Twin Cities Adventure Play is based in Minneapolis, MN. We are in our third year of community partnerships in which we help create kid-driven “community backyards” with pop-up play days, community training, after school programs, and camps. We also provide



Playful Perspectives workshops for parents and youth educators throughout the Twin Cities. We recently created a semi-permanent nature play space in partnership with the Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board as a legacy project for the Children and Nature Network Conference last spring. Our goal within the next few years is to establish a few permanent spaces and ongoing adventure play-based programs for children, as well as education programs for parents and community members throughout Minnesota. We are proud to be founding members of the North American Adventure Play Association.

—*Seniz Yargici Lennes*

### **Websites**

[tcadventureplay.com](http://tcadventureplay.com)

## **North American Adventure Play Association**

The North American Adventure Play Association (NAAPA) advocates for the rights of children and youth through the development and promotion of self-directed play. It supports organizations and individuals involved in adventure playgrounds and free-play opportunities in North America, provides resources, and maintains a framework for communication for this network. The association meets regularly through remote meetings and an annual in-person event.

### **Websites**

[adventureplayground.org](http://adventureplayground.org)

[facebook.com/groups/americanadventureplaygrounds](https://facebook.com/groups/americanadventureplaygrounds)

## **Photo Credits**

Joan Almon and Jill Wood









# Chapter Four

# Adventure Playgrounds

*A child loves his play, not because it's easy,  
but because it's hard.*

—Benjamin Spock, MD

## Introduction

**W**hat differentiates an adventure playground from other play spaces? One distinction is that an adventure playground has loose parts, and it changes daily according to the needs of the children who play there. But loose parts alone are not enough. An empty lot or a forested space often provide abundant loose

parts, and many of us played in such spaces when we were young—and wish that today's children could as well. But most children are not given the freedom to play in such an unsupervised way today. As a result, a compensatory approach is needed and adventure playgrounds fill this need. They are staffed by playworkers whose support of the children's play enables child-initiated play to flourish in a time when most adults do not feel free to allow it.

Under the watchful eyes of playworkers, children are again free to play. Their creativity blossoms, as do their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical capacities. In general, today's children are play-deprived, and adventure playgrounds are one way to support their need to play.

Are adventure playgrounds the only solution for allowing children to play freely? Not at all. Lenore Skenazy, with her movement for free range kids, actively encourages adults to let children go out and play on their own, and her message is timely and important. But as the readers of her blog write, the obstacles are many, including parents being reported to the police or social services for neglect of their children. What

.....  
*Adventure playgrounds  
feature child-initiated  
play with support from  
playworkers.*

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parents said a generation ago—just go out and play and don't come home until supper—is often viewed as an illegal action today!

If the children do go out to play, they often find themselves alone, for the other neighborhood children are apt to be indoors on screens or off at organized activities. Mike Lanza in California has addressed this issue by helping his children grow up in a





“playborhood” where parents know and trust each other and allow their children to go out and play together.

Other alternatives include street closings, called “play streets,” where a neighborhood receives a permit to close a street for play. But these are usually one day events, valuable but limited unless they lead to further neighborhood play.

Until all children are free range kids and all neighborhoods are playborhoods, compensatory approaches are needed so that children can be assured of the right to play. Adventure playgrounds with trained playworkers are an excellent way to address this need. The numbers are still small, but they are growing. It’s a movement that shows huge promise.

This is not the first decade that has seen a rise in adventure playgrounds. The 1970s and 80s also witnessed a spurt of growth and 16 or more adventure playgrounds existed then. Slowly they closed or were made less adventuresome. Huntington Beach, near Los Angeles, remains from that time and is actively used every summer. Mark Hoxie, lead playworker, describes it in this chapter. The Berkeley Adventure Playground is another that is over 30 years old. It is open year-round although not every day. Both of these are “hammer and nail” playgrounds where children build their own one- and two-story play structures, careen on zip lines, and do many other adventuresome things. But as Fraser Brown, a professor of play and playwork in England, points out, the real “adventure” in play is what takes place inside the child’s mind. That may not require zip lines or hammers and nails, but permission to play freely and the availability of loose parts. Both are found in adventure playgrounds and make it much more likely that children will engage in deeply satisfying, inwardly-adventuresome play.

The beauty of an adventure playground is that it is full of risks that are immediately visible to children. This engages their inner capacity for risk-assessment and most navigate the risks very well. This does not mean there are no scrapes or bumps, but they are considered a normal part of childhood. There may also





be an occasional broken bone. No one would wish such an injury on a child, but when it happens, children generally heal well and learn from the experience. Compared with the alternative of depriving children of adventuresome play and all its benefits, many would agree with Lady Allen of Hurtwood, the founder of adventure playgrounds in the UK, who said, “Better a broken bone than a broken spirit.”

While a first glance at an adventure playground may awaken fear in the hearts of some adults, observation of children playing there often results in comments about how capable the children are. When using tools, they are surprisingly focused for long periods of time. When engaged in building together or developing imaginative play scenarios, they show a great capacity for social negotiation and problem solving. And they are constantly challenging themselves physically as they improve their balance and coordination. The play that takes place on adventure playgrounds, with the support of playworkers and the use of loose parts, stimulates children’s creativity and imagination, their social and physical capacities, and so much more. The gains are enormous compared to the costs. \*

## Photo Credits

Teal Gardner, Ithaca Children’s Garden Staff, Philipp Klaus, Abby Oulton, and play:groundNYC staff





# Huntington Beach Adventure Playground

Mark Hoxie

**I** have a memory deep in my brain from when I was young. Somebody showed me an article in the local newspaper about a playground here in Huntington Beach. It was very different from any playground I had ever seen. The pictures were amazing to me. There were no swing-sets or metal slides as found at all the other playgrounds, and the kids were a mess—covered in mud and having a great time. Though I was never able to make it there to play, this was my first encounter with an adventure playground.

Years later, I was a volunteer for the Orange County Braille Institute working in the youth department with children who were visually impaired or blind. The summer program was full of activities that allowed the children to do things that they might not be able to do on their own or with their families, such as arts and crafts, roller skating, swimming days, and weekly special events days. Special events usually included going to amusement parks, the county fair, museums, etc. One week the event was a visit to that playground I could just slightly remember. My second encounter with an adventure playground was spent helping one of the kids out to a raft in a pond, climbing a hill to go down the slide into muddy water, and building in a tree house.

My third encounter came a few years later when I was looking for a summer job. I wanted to get more experience working with children, as I had decided I was interested in becoming a school teacher. I went to City Hall to look for job opportunities in the Community Services Department. I found a few that interested me, including at the Huntington Beach Adventure Playground, so I filled out an application and was soon lucky enough to be hired as a recreation assistant. I've worked there every summer since then.

Since 1983, the Adventure Playground has been open each summer inside Huntington Central Park, just east of the Huntington Central Library. The setting is very natural, having large pine and pepper trees. There is a cement lined pond where children play on small rafts using push poles to move. A thick center rope and four hand ropes function as a bridge, allowing the children to balance and cross the bridge over the pond. The building area consists of four tree houses, which children add onto using the provided wood, hammers, and saws. A 20 foot tall hill is the scene of the mudslide. The children are sprayed with water as they slide down a rubber mat and land in a hole filled with muddy water.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Huntington Beach had grown from a small oil and surf town into a larger suburban city. Local leaders found the opportunity to expand and develop parks and community centers. The Adventure Playground in Huntington Beach was created in the early 1970s after staff members from the city attended a conference on park development, in which a lecturer spoke about adventure playgrounds found throughout Europe.

The idea of an adventure playground originally came during World War II when a Danish landscape and playground designer, C. Th. Sorensen, noted that children often preferred playing in the war's wreckage rather than using equipment that was actually designed for play. The children liked to build and work together as a team to create something new out of the bits and pieces of old wrecked buildings or cars or whatever they could find lying about. Sorensen decided it would be a good idea to designate parcels of land where children could decide how they wanted to play instead of having adults decide.

In the early 1970s near the corner of Gothard and Talbert streets, the original incarnation of Adventure Playground in Huntington Beach was developed at the bottom of a quarry pit. The location was chosen because it was across the street from the new Huntington Central Park, yet out-of-the-way enough that the noise coming from hammers and yelling would not bother park and library goers. Here the children could slide down the sides of the hills into a natural pond, they could build with the tools they would check out, or huddle around the bonfire that was always burning while the playground was open.

After about four or five years at the original location, the quarry pit had filled with water due to torrential rain storms, raising the water table in the area. Adventure Playground was temporarily relocated for a few years until it found its permanent location inside Huntington Central Park. The quarry pit was later filled with dirt and is now part of the Central Park Sports Complex, and the bonfire is no longer part of the experience.

Huntington Central Park is located near the center of Huntington Beach in Southern California. The park is surrounded by residential neighborhoods on three sides and commercial and manufacturing buildings on the fourth side. The park is a destination location for many purposes, including the wonderful Huntington Beach Central Library,



the Sports Complex, and the Equestrian Center. The park is also well known as a location for birdwatching, Shipley's Nature Center, and an expansive dog park.

Adventure Playground encompasses a few acres of a hidden corner in the park. The main goal of the playground is for children to have fun doing activities they are not able (or allowed) to do in other places. While there are rules, they exist to maintain safety and ensure that everybody has a good time. With the exception of plant growth, the playground looks virtually the same as it did in 1983. Modern is not a word that describes this playground. There is no electricity, very few structures, and plumbing is left to outhouses and outside showers.

Traditionally, Adventure Playground opens in June (the day after Father's Day), as the local children get out of school for summer. Over most of the past 25 years the playground has served 7,000 to 10,000 children during its eight to ten week open season each summer. The largest percentage of those children typically came with day camps and summer programs, which are required to make reservations. In 2014 and 2015 the total has risen greatly, to approximately 13,000 attendees for each of those summers. Since the 2008 recession, the number of children coming with day camps and other groups has fallen, while the number of children coming with families and on play dates has risen to replace the large groups.

We appreciate becoming more well-known, but popularity can cause some "problems." We have a certain number of tools that we hand out based on the size of





the building area, so when we are busy, there can often be a wait to borrow a tool. Also, lines to use the rafts or go down the mudslide may take 5 to 15 minutes. The children are usually understanding, but sometimes the parents get impatient when their children have to wait.

Although many of our visitors come from greater Orange County, others come from all over Southern California. Last summer I even spoke to a family that comes to Adventure Playground every year during their vacation from Arizona.

Some of the great pleasures I have working at Adventure Playground are my interactions with both children and adults. It's fun to sprinkle a crowd of kids as they wait to go down the mudslide, or tell them a silly joke and watch as smiles grow on their faces, or get a shy kid to give a high five or fist bump. Many parents like to tell stories of how they played in a similar manner when they were young, or that they remember coming to Adventure Playground, and they usually ask if it used to be bigger, and I usually reply that they were just smaller.

In Adventure Playground, the City of Huntington Beach is providing a unique play experience for children at a low cost of \$3 per child in 2015 and free for adults. Parents can work alongside the children showing them proper tool techniques and then allow the children to build something on their own. When the children check out a hammer, they are given three nails to use, but after that they must earn more nails by turning in bent nails or bits of trash, so they find they must conserve the nails. The tree houses are open to anybody to use, so the children must learn to work together and agree on what they want to do with the treehouse. If they get tired of building, the children may turn in their tools and head to the mudslide or the pond.



Most children love Adventure Playground, and girls love it just as much as boys do. I recall asking a young girl what she thought of the playground as she was leaving, and she said it was better than Disneyland. I would say that is a bit of hyperbole, but most people leave with a very good feeling about the time they've spent at the playground. Occasionally, we will have a visitor who doesn't care for the experience. Maybe that's a child who doesn't like getting dirty, or a parent who came with a different expectation of what the playground is about. We don't take it personally.

It should also be said that the playground owes a debt of gratitude to the volunteers who help keep the playground maintained. Since Adventure Playground first opened, many scouts have completed Eagle Scout projects at the playground, including the construction of changing rooms, the pagoda over the sandbox, a staircase up to the mudslide, and many other projects. Over the last several years, local congregations of the LDS Church have had a day of service each April in which volunteers fix broken parts of the tree houses, paint benches and other structures, and do a lot of general cleanup of the playground. And many people have donated wood for the children to build with, including a huge donation from a local sign company. The time and effort given by all of these people has helped maintain a very nice playground and keeps our admission price low.

Ultimately, Adventure Playground remains what it always has been—a place for children to play in a way few have a chance to play anymore. It's a little bit of Tom Sawyer. It's a bit of the Little Rascals and of the Sandlot. It's a memory you'll find somewhere deep in your brain. \*

## Website

Go to [huntingtonbeachca.gov](http://huntingtonbeachca.gov) and do a search for “adventure playground”

## Photo Credits

Mark Hoxie

## Author

**Mark Hoxie** has lived most of his life in Huntington Beach, California. He has volunteered for many youth organizations, but primarily with the Orange County Braille Institute, as he also has a visual impairment. His major at Cal State Fullerton was Liberal Studies, which gave him a well-rounded understanding of the physical sciences, social sciences, and humanities. He planned on using these in a career as a teacher. Mark has worked for the City of Huntington Beach since 1992, and he has been in charge of Adventure Playground since 1996. In his free time he enjoys reading, skiing, and many other sports, watching classic movies, and spending time with his family.

# The Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone

## Ithaca Children's Garden

Erin Martea

**I**thaca Children's Garden (ICG), home to the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone (HONAZ), is unlike any other children's garden. Designed by and for the community, ICG is within Ithaca city limits, walkable to the downtown center, and easily accessed by bike and car. The three-acre garden is nestled along the Cayuga Waterfront Trail on the Cayuga Inlet, at the edge of a residential neighborhood. Hikers, dog-walkers, and others use the trails that pass by the garden, while most families who utilize the space make a special trip of it. It is more of a destination than a neighborhood hang-out, and once families visit, they frequently come back again and again. ICG is open to the public 365 days a year, dawn to dusk.

The Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone has become a main attraction at ICG. Nearly all who visit ICG make a special stop there and usually spend as much time as their adult





companions will allow. However, the playable opportunities are not limited to HONAZ. Visitors and guests of all ages are invited to have playful experiences throughout the entire garden, replete with special invitations to explore and discover off the trail, using all their senses. Special places like the Wetlands Habitat, Bird Garden, Strawbale Troll House, Wildflower Meadow, Bulb Labyrinth, Kitchen Garden, and the larger-than-life 60-inch turtle sculpture, built for climbing and playing, are some of the offerings to discover at ICG. And while hands-on exploration is encouraged in each of these areas, HONAZ is a habitat designed exclusively for children and their own self-directed play experiences.

The Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone is approximately a third of an acre, punctuated by two magnanimous London Plane Trees, a climbing structure of large irregular logs, an extensive mud pit, boulders, sticks, and tires. There is also a humble but beautifully muraled shed that houses additional tools like rakes and hoes, and loose parts like pool noodles, wooden blocks, fabric scraps, and rope.

HONAZ is less about the stuff, and more about the freedom that players find there to create, practice, build, destroy, manipulate, hypothesize, test, and most importantly, work right up to the edge of their imagination and beyond.

The quality and character of engagement with the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone exceeds what we had initially envisioned, and it changes every day, depending on who is playing there. The magic of this space is that there is something for everyone, offering a universal invitation to play, understood by every child who encounters it, regardless of age, experience, or background. This is a place that on any given day allows practice with elaborate den-building, cantilever and pulley design, bridge construction, hammock fabrication, and mud mixing. Children have equal opportunity here for staging elaborate weddings of Greek and Roman gods as they do readying their stores for the Zombie Apocalypse.

As educators, parents, and administrators, we often subscribe to a common refrain about what children need in order to succeed as adults. We say that children will be better prepared if they have more of the experiences they will have later as adults, but ever earlier in childhood. For example, we say that young children will be better trained for school if they learn how to read, write, and sit still in pre-k and even earlier, and rather than wasting time with play and recess, they ought to begin spending their time in applied academics as early as ages two and three. This refrain makes good logical sense, yet it completely discounts what we know about how children learn and what experiences best support child growth and development.

Rarely does a day go by without our playworking staff experiencing profound growth in the children. Playworkers are trained to support, protect, and extend child-directed free play, and are instrumental in the success of adventure play. The benefits children





experience here can be categorized as developing skills, self-confidence, and identities as 1) Problem solvers, 2) Innovators, and 3) Collaborators.

We see pieces of this big picture snapping together every single day as children speculate, test, fail, and try again. This can take the form of a physical challenge overcome by single-minded, solitary, intense focus such as constructing a bridge with tires and planks to cross a mud pit without falling in. It can just as easily be a child developing flexibility, tenacity, and even a sense of humor as she practices observation skills that make her a more effective communicator with fellow players. We see children make friends, overcome personal limits, and develop confidence in what they can do here, and by extension, what they can do in the world. We witness children celebrating personal triumphs, whether it is excavating a particularly deep trench or winning a playmate for a new game. In witnessing these achievements, there is no doubt that child-directed play is critical for positive child development, learning, and connection to the natural world.

I first encountered the “Anarchy Zone” concept in 2007, while serving on ICG’s Education Committee. The original idea was that we would design a space within our 3 acre children’s garden where adults couldn’t go. It would be a place where children could do their own thing, free from adult direction and interference. Our vision was of a space overflowing with sticks, boulders, mud, water, trees, dens, and rumples children: basically a big, wild mess.

We all knew at the time the idea was solid gold. However, for a number of years, the idea remained just an idea—until 2011. The turning point was when we were introduced to key partners who helped us bring the concept to life, making the dream a vibrant, full-color reality.



These key partners were David Stilwell with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Rusty Keeler of Earthplay, and Elizabeth Stilwell, a Cornell faculty member in early childhood education. They had been developing a similar concept and were looking for a place to grow the idea.

We put our heads and resources together and were off and running. With four partners and four unique perspectives, the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone represented the intersection of our collective inspiration and best thinking. Each partner brought a unique perspective to the group, and we all learned from each other every time we came to the table. Working with these collaborators affirmed what ICG had experienced over the years—the strength of partnerships formed through any given project has a direct and significant bearing on the outcome and success of that project. And while partnerships are often strong during the development of a new project, sustained commitment over time is less common. The Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone is exceptional in that it has retained the continued support of all its original partners, as well as attracting additional support and involvement, and combined with community input and need, the project has taken on a life of its own.

The site chosen at the Garden was slated to become a site for an education building according to the Garden's original master plan. We planned to pilot the HONAZ concept there and then move it to adjacent land and reclaim the footprint for our education building. However, the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone met with such universal affection, and the irreplaceable London Plane Trees were such defining characters of the space, that relocating it became an unacceptable option. We have instead continued development in



this space and are now exploring other sites for our future education center. This major adjustment represents the approach we have taken while designing the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone, as well as the larger ICG—design in response to the opportunities of the site and the needs of the community.

One of the best strategic decisions we made was to start small. Enormous vision was tempered by a purposeful intention to start exactly where we were at the time. We chose to add site elements that were easily available, free or inexpensive, and were universally safe and easy to manage. We made a decision to steer clear of carpentry tools and materials in our early days while we learned who the audience would be, what the staffing structure would look like, and how the operation would flow. That meant we had piles of woodchips and soil, straw bales, small boulders, logs for climbing, sticks, tires, and rope. Barrels for rain catchment, child-sized spades, and wheelbarrows were added, and when we saw how much our existing trees were loved, we planted additional trees for shade, climbing, and loose parts.

We knew from the outset that we could not afford daily staffing for the Anarchy Zone. The Children’s Garden is staffed only on weekends and during school vacations, yet it is open every day. We wanted a similar arrangement for the Anarchy Zone. Most adventure playgrounds are only open when playworkers are present, but because ours is a destination play space where children are generally brought by adults, we knew there would be some level of oversight even though staff would not be present. This has worked well for us and has helped dictate what materials are left out and what opportunities for adventuresome play exist. Mostly we have loose parts on land that dips and rises. Children roll down slight hills in barrels, build their own seesaws with planks, drop from tree limbs into hammocks, and do much more. Tools for building are only available when staff is present.

While the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone is magical in so many ways, the real beauty of the place comes not from the shape or size or what loose parts can be found here, but from whom children become here. By providing a habitat where children can co-create through imagination, manipulation, and creativity, the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone provides a critical antidote to children’s vanishing opportunities for play and connection to the natural world.

Since starting our project in 2011, the mission and vision of the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone has grown. Not only do we aspire to create a habitat for children’s free play and through it, authentic connection to the environment, we find ourselves coaching local educators and school teachers and facilitating play-ranging beyond our own site. We have expanded our vision to provide mentorship to other people and projects just getting started. Through ICG’s annual Play Symposium and its new Playwork Immersion Course, HONAZ serves as a training hub and resource center for projects in North America that are just getting started, and for those looking for practical experience to advance their project to the next level. We have learned so much in the launch and management of the Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone and we hope others can benefit from our experience. \*

## Website

[ithacachildrengarden.org/play](http://ithacachildrengarden.org/play)





## Photo Credits

Ithaca Children's Garden staff

## Author

### Erin Martea

From the tops of the twin oaks to the murky waters of frog creek, edges of poison ivy bank, and the extensive sewer system paradise, there was no corner of Erin's northern Virginia neighborhood that she did not explore as a child with the gaggle of other unsupervised youth. She has always been passionate about the environment and people's health and well-being, and serving Ithaca Children's Garden (ICG) as its executive director since 2011 has been her privilege and bliss.



Following her graduate studies, and as recipient of the Cornell University Dreer Award, Erin spent six months traveling to Australia, New Zealand, and Trinidad researching permaculture in public garden education. Erin is deeply inspired by permaculture ethics and principles and is always looking for ways to integrate permaculture philosophy into all aspects of Ithaca Children's Garden. She

is an advocate for playwork and the importance of real play in children's lives. Erin lives in Ithaca with her family and loves to garden, hike, bike, sail, camp, dance, travel, and thrift-store shop. Her favorite place on the planet is Glacier National Park, Montana.





# Play:ground

## An Adventure Playground in New York

Reilly Wilson

**T**here is a largely forgotten history of waste-material adventure playgrounds in New York City. In the early 1970s, several playgrounds of this type—with playworkers, tools, construction materials, fire pits, and even animals—were opened under the auspices of The Parks Council and the Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association, with support from the Lindsay administration and the Parks Department. These playgrounds, while heralded by users and newspapers alike, fell victim to the implosion of municipal finances in the mid-1970s. Yet their initial rise was aided by a glut of “abandoned” lots and the decentralization of public space funding.

Today, efforts to develop an adventure playground in New York City face a drastically different property landscape and a Parks Department that appears unmotivated to consider funding adventure playgrounds or playworkers. However, young people growing up in the densely built environment of much of New York City are no less in need of places for risky play in spaces that they can creatively make and unmake themselves. Even apart from overblown fears of “stranger danger,” children living in New York City are constrained by automotive traffic and built permanence, by residence in small apartments in high-rise buildings, and often, depending on the color of their skin, by over-policing.





Play:ground was conceived in a conversation between Alex Khost and Eve Mosher at a birthday party. Alex and Eve, both artists who are educating their own children in free school/unschooling environments, had been drawn to the concept of adventure play and playwork. Following this fortuitous meeting over cake, Eve and Alex both enrolled in Pop-up Adventure Play’s Playworker Development Course and began hosting pop-ups in parks around Brooklyn. The reaction to the pop-ups was so enthusiastic that they began seeking others who might take part in their efforts to open an adventure playground with its own site.

I was put in touch with Alex and Eve by my academic advisor, Dr. Roger Hart, whom Alex had contacted for advice. I had recently returned from the United Kingdom where I had completed a Masters by Research in Geography at the University of Leeds—“Who Owns the Playground? Space and Power at Lollard Adventure Playground, 1954-1961”—and was beginning research on a critical history of adventure playgrounds in the United States. Roger, the head of the Children’s Environments Research Group (CERG) at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, has been researching play environments since the 1970s and is a long-time supporter of adventure playgrounds and playwork as a profession. Through CERG, I organized a panel on adventure playgrounds, moderated by Roger Hart, and invited Alex and Eve to speak about play:ground. When others heard about play:ground they expressed interest and the planning group grew to six members. We began to meet regularly as a group—both in person and through video-conferencing—and drafted by-laws and a set of principles for membership and for making group decisions through consensus.

While consensus-building can be a frustrating process at times, we have found that it ensures that we are constantly evaluating decisions from multiple angles, rather than

simply making expedient decisions that neglect our long-term goals. This is a decision we made early on as a group to ensure that no one's perspective was ignored and that no one was made to do anything that they felt was deeply objectionable. By creating by-laws early on, we have been able to add members and expand the scope of our activities without much friction. While our consensus framework is complex, it is necessary in a place like New York City, where play advocacy brings together highly diverse points of view. I will provide a brief outline of the process here:

All major decisions are concluded by consensus rather than majority. An initial vote is held to see if everyone is in agreement about how to proceed on any aspect of our work. If there is disagreement over a decision, conversation on the topic continues until consensus is reached.

Prospective members undergo a three-month probationary period during which they are expected to fully participate in the work of play:ground. After three months, the full members hold a vote on whether to accept the prospective member as a full member. If a unanimous vote for acceptance is reached, then the new member gains full voting rights. This probationary period ensures that all members of the organization value the opinions and contributions of the others, which is essential for consensus to work.

Members who become inactive in the work of the organization for an extended period of time have their voting rights suspended until they have successfully undergone an active probationary period.

Consensus decision-making involves commitment to constant dialogue, underpinned by respect for those you are working with. While we do not always agree on everything, it is clear to every member of play:ground that no one of us could accomplish our goal of opening an adventure playground in New York City alone. The contributions and unique insights of every single member are indispensable.



Around the time that the six of us began working together more regularly, a prospective space was presented to us. One member's partner was in the process of relocating her acrobatic circus to Bushwick, Brooklyn, and suggested the new location's yard as a possible sight for play:ground. For several months we pursued that option, recognizing that the circus—similarly focused on risk-taking, creativity, and community-building—could prove to be a valuable partner to us. However, several obstacles specific to the urban environment emerged.



We would have subleased the land, which presented problems regarding liability and the stability of land tenure. More crucially, we had serious concerns about how the presence of play:ground would impact the surrounding neighborhood, which was experiencing the initial stages of gentrification. Some of us had reservations about opening a junk playground in a neighborhood where none of us lived and where we did not have existing strong relationships with resident community members.



Having recently completed a year-long research study on the placement of an adventure playground by affluent “outsiders” in a working-class neighborhood in London, the problems inherent in such endeavors were ever present in my own mind. A major issue is that junk play activists often feel that their project is misunderstood, that free play in general is popularly devalued. This defensive stance can lead activists like us to undervalue the very real concerns of adults living in the immediate vicinity of junk playgrounds. Play:ground was established to provide young people with space and materials for self-directed play and productive risk-taking, but not at the expense of adults. In Bushwick, play:ground had the potential to diminish the control of its neighbors over their own surroundings. This was a situation potentially affected by class and race, divisions that might cause friction, especially if community members were not included in decision-making from the outset.

As we were debating these issues internally, play:ground was approached by the Trust for Governors Island (TGI) about producing an adventure play event there. Governors Island encompasses 172 acres and is linked to Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn by a short ferry ride. A former military base, the island has been administered jointly by TGI and the National Park Service as a public park since 2003. We produced an initial two-day event on the island in September 2015. The response was joyous, with hundreds of young people playing together in a menagerie of duct tape, paint, cardboard, and zip ties. Almost immediately, TGI committed to providing us with a full-time space. While we were aware that this location presented limitations, ultimately, the positives were evident.

An adventure playground on Governors Island is by definition a destination playground, since no one lives on the island. As such, we are unlikely to have a group of daily users consistent enough for individual young people to use it as a neighborhood playground and collectively “take ownership” of the space. That is a disadvantage, however, siting play:ground on the island relieves us of the perils of disrupting an existing

community unprepared to host a playground that looks like a junkyard. TGI has assured us that in the midst of the island's beautiful art installations and manicured plantings, we should feel secure pushing the envelope, and that within our space, imaginative play values should trump aesthetic value in every decision. Furthermore, by situating ourselves within a very visible landscape which receives a diverse array of visitors, we hope to be able to raise awareness of the value of adventure playgrounds and playwork for New Yorkers without burdening any one neighborhood with an inpouring of tourists. Ideally, the breadth of exposure that Governors Island affords will not only inspire other groups to work towards adventure playgrounds in their own neighborhoods, but will also make it easier for them to make the case for the public resources necessary to make community adventure playgrounds a sustainable reality on a larger scale.

It is extremely important to all of us at play:ground that any young person should be able to play at the site. Our main goal is to make the site freely available as much as possible. In order to cover the infrastructural and labor costs of free access time in the afternoons and on weekends during Governors Island's open season, we are running a summer camp during weekdays, and have launched a crowd-funding campaign. We structured our summer camp tuition to allow us to offer half of the spots at a sliding scale, down to zero, based on financial need. During six weeklong sessions, our camp will host twenty young people aged seven to thirteen who will be able to build, augment, and destroy their environment however they choose.

In order to place playwork practice at the center of our approach, we knew that the most important thing would be to make sure that our staff was properly trained and continuously supported. We have struggled with how to do this, both logistically and financially, not least because trained playworkers are few and far between in the United States. While our members are volunteers and regularly commit ten to twenty hours a week to the play:ground project, we decided that it would be socially irresponsible to use our status as a start-up organization as an excuse for asking others to self-exploit in pursuit of our goal. As such, we have chosen to commit our organization to paying a fair wage. Furthermore, we are delighted to have hired Morgan Leichter-Saxby of Pop-Up Adventure Play as our head playworker this summer. As a group, we feel that the expense of paying Morgan the full and fair wage that she deserves as an experienced playworker and playwork trainer is more than worth it.

Play:ground opened in May, 2016. In the year leading up to the opening we ran pop-ups in parks around Brooklyn, undertook a month-long residency at the Brooklyn Children's Museum, and worked with pro-bono lawyers to become a registered non-profit entity. Luckily we gained two new members to help with this work. We also ran our Kickstarter funding campaign and undertook the necessary site-work, installing fencing, a rain-water capture system, and a wet-weather shelter. While the whole process seemed overwhelming at times, the size of our group and the strength of our collective enthusiasm have helped us to weather even the busiest of schedules.

We are also actively planning for the future of play:ground beyond our first summer. Although Governors Island is currently only open to the public from May through September, we are hoping, through fundraising and grants, to be able to bring school groups to the adventure playground during the school year. We are exploring partnerships with other groups based on the island that already do this. We also plan to conduct





outreach visits to schools throughout New York City to encourage loose-parts play as a valuable learning activity that can be incorporated into the school day.

One of the most energizing forces has been the amazing response that we have received from young people and parents. Hardly a day goes by without someone new contacting us to tell us that this is what they have been waiting for! Even Roger Hart, recounting his trip to our Governors Island event with his two children, was unprepared for the joy that they would find:

*I knew it would be fun, and I like Governors Island. But I wasn't ready for the enthusiasm that my kids had for it. I somehow thought that since they have a dad who has let them build all the time inside the house... but it was a profound experience for them and they are still talking about it. ... [W]hat they haven't had is all of those opportunities with other children. And so here was a place where for the first time ever they were able to invent building material in space, real space, with others, some of whom they knew and some they didn't know. And it was exciting, it was an adventure. I got excited, too. ... My son still talks about what he was able to build that day and when are we going back.*

Our installation at the Brooklyn Children's Museum had averaged over five hundred visitors per day, with many visitors returning for multiple visits. With the opening of our space on Governors Island we hope to engender a broader conversation in New York City about the need for access to adventure play by young people living in a highly-structured environment, and the positive role that playworkers can have in supporting such opportunities in public park spaces and in school environments. We'd love to work with the Parks Department, schools, and others to make similar opportunities available for all children. ✨

**Facebook**

[facebook.com/playground.bk](https://facebook.com/playground.bk)

## Photo Credits

Philipp Klaus, Abby Oulton, and play:groundNYC staff

## Author

**Reilly Bergin Wilson** is a National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellow in the Environmental Psychology doctoral program at The Graduate Center of the City University of New York and a research associate at the Children's Environments Research Group. She was awarded a Masters by Research with Distinction in Geography from the



University of Leeds for her thesis, "Who Owns the Playground: Space and Power at Lollard Adventure Playground (1954-1961)," funded through a US-UK Fulbright Commission University of Leeds Partnership Award. She also holds an Honors B.A. in Geography and Urban Studies from Temple University, for which she conducted funded research in Bosnia-Herzegovina on playground privatization. Currently, Reilly's research is focused

on constructing a critical history of adventure playgrounds in the United States. Reilly's interest in playgrounds stems from her work as a caregiver for very young people, as she witnessed their constant efforts to find patches of loose materiality in mostly static playscapes.





# The Sallie Foster Adventure Playground

Teal Gardner

**The Sallie Foster Adventure Playground** at the Gifford Park Community Garden in Omaha, Nebraska has existed since May of 2015. The playground is named for the late Sallie Foster, who, along with her husband, Chris, and some other dedicated neighborhood folks, started the Community Garden in 2001. Acting as an extension of the west side of the Community Garden, and operating as a part of the garden's youth program, the playground is framed on three sides by fencing, with an open side connected to the garden. From its southern edge, the playground quickly becomes a steep, grassy hill, at the top of which are two big old Catalpa trees. Around the trees stands a large treehouse. The entrance to the playground is announced by a free-standing door frame. By passing through this "portal" (as it is lovingly referred to), visitors may participate in the culture and activities of the playground. The values upheld by volunteers and participants have been agreed upon through group discussions: that







the playground be a free and open space dedicated to providing opportunities for youth to decide on their own modes for play, and that adult volunteer playworkers support that chosen play.

Our path toward opening the playground began about two years before we had a space. The first year (2013) involved much research along with hosting several pop-ups at an art center, a street festival, and community center. The next summer, a weekly series of pop-ups, called Play Lab at the Gifford Park neighborhood market introduced the idea of adventure play to the neighborhood. Play Lab had been hosted more widely throughout Omaha prior to the relative stability of the neighborhood market, which assured that each Friday evening Play Lab could exist in the greenspace behind the market stands. This sustained presence helped to prompt the conversation about starting a neighborhood adventure playground with a core group of active community members from the neighborhood association board.

An essential element to the success and identity of the playground is the close relationship that it has to the neighborhood around it. In early spring of 2015, the founder of the Community Garden, a longtime resident of Gifford Park, donated a piece of his land to the project. The Community Garden, operational for over ten years, is a well-known and used amenity in Gifford Park. For the playground to be situated within this already vibrant space in the neighborhood is ideal. Families attend garden programming and were quick to embrace the new playground, to learn about it, and to trust it, which provided a built-in population of users and volunteers from day one. The support of the neighborhood is a key piece to the successful initiation and long-term viability of the playground.

The Gifford Park neighborhood has a diverse population of residents, ranging from college students, to refugee families, young professionals, and older folks. The neighborhood has been populated by low to moderate income people for a long time. Only recently have several more expensive apartment buildings begun to dot the area. The playground was visited by at least 130 children over the course of its first season, and repeat visitors were overwhelmingly living in or near the neighborhood. During the hottest August days,



a stalwart contingent of eight youngsters—mostly neighborhood youth—made up the attendees. This core of young people who visit the playground most frequently do not come from privileged economic backgrounds. They usually ride their bikes or walk to the playground, unaccompanied by adults. Their ages range from six to fourteen.

The playground is open one day per week, and is staffed exclusively by volunteers who have been through a playworker training day and playground orientation, which is available before the season begins, and whenever new volunteers wish to start throughout the season. This year, we are augmenting our volunteer strategy to include clearer roles for volunteers on site, including managing check-in, signing waivers, and staffing the tool shed. We require that there always be two adult volunteers on site for the playground to be open. Waivers are administered to all visitors prior to entry. The playground is not fully closed, as it is only fenced on three sides. We have a sign that indicates open hours and contact information for people who wish to know more about our open policy. Because we are only able to be open once per week, we have a “members” policy, which allows neighborhood parents—who have been through an orientation or are volunteers—to bring their children to the playground whenever they wish.

Many connections take place at the playground. Among the youth, friendships have been forged, enlarging the network of youth-active spaces in the neighborhood. Youth have had the opportunity to connect with adults who are not their parents or teachers in a meaningful way, thus expanding their personal networks of support. The playground has also offered the youth an opportunity to coexist in a space where each of them feels ownership. This creates a sense of mutuality among them, and it also provides them with a space that it is loved and cared for through visible decorations and improvements made by the youth.

Adults who have made their way into the fold of the playground find camaraderie among other volunteers, who share similar interest in providing for children’s play, along with an ethos that supports active involvement in community building through youth work. Adult volunteers have been key in bringing resources to the playground, beyond the precious gift of their involvement. They bring an attitude that guides the playground in its hands-on approach, making the playground work for any child who enters it. They have also donated valuable materials, skills, and time to make the playground what it is.

Piles of wood and sticks, pallets and boards line the western edge of the playground, while materials that are sensitive to the elements (string, tape, tools, fabric, cardboard, and any other odds and ends) are stored inside the tool shed when not in use. The back of the shed is painted with many overlapping pictures done by the children. There are cats and mermaids and most notably a large dragon which has come to be the mascot of the playground. Structures rise and fall over time, with the occasional fort growing week-in and week-out until it is fortress-like. Temporary structures and spaces, like fabric tents, are usually dismantled and put away at the end of the day.

There is one large permanent structure on the playground, the treehouse. As a collective project, this is definitely one that stands out as having been funded and executed by a team of adults and the playground youth. Our site, as mentioned above, sits mostly on a steep hill. The largest flat space available for our play can often get crowded, so we thought that creating a treehouse would be a good way to increase playable space. The treehouse was funded through an anonymous donation and many hours of donated work



by a contracting company, neighbors, and, of course, the youth. Building the treehouse was a great experience which brought many new skills to the playground. Youth were pouring concrete, digging post holes, measuring and hauling wood, and using electric drills for screws. The process rendered a massive result. The treehouse spans the space between two trees and has two levels. But it is far from done! This summer the treehouse will grow and change, as youth add walls and partitions on their own. We will add a rope ladder in addition to our wooden ladder, and possibly other forms of access will be invented!

Our first summer on the playground was a whirlwind of new experiences. From the earliest structures of the summer, through months of play, sunshine, paint, hillside romps, and chicken dances, we found ourselves working hard on the treehouse as summer turned to fall. This coming summer, we plan to expand the materials available, to organize and systematize the storage shed, to increase our number of playworkers, and connect to more neighborhood youth. We will also try to build

into the playground more ways for older neighborhood youth to feel welcomed, with the hopes that they will connect to the playground in their own way.

We've learned much from the playground, but try to hold one thought at the forefront of our minds: Youth create the playground. This statement is a complex one which the adults of the playground strive to uphold. We try to be playful without dominating play, to concoct ideas alongside the youth, to enrich the space without owning it. We work with them to help them create their own worlds which manifest as shanties built from pallets that transform from "pet store" to "bike shop" to "Anna's place" and other, less structurally-bound permutations of human imagination. We have seen obstacle courses develop, and archeological digs take place, where items of interest became part of a collection at one boy's house, his "Playground Museum."

We have consistently found that the youth—given time, space and materials—fill their hours to brimming with active, creative, and imaginative play. They are the heartbeat of the playground. It is theirs. \*

## Facebook

[facebook.com/Salliefosteradventureplayground](https://facebook.com/Salliefosteradventureplayground)

## Photo Credits

Teal Gardner



## Author



### Teal Gardner

I originate from New Mexico but basically grew up in Nebraska with lots of traveling thrown in. My family are avid hikers, so I got to know the way of the land early on, though I have always lived in cities. After college (BA Anthropology, English, and Art, all at the University of Nebraska) I found myself getting very interested in all types of play, especially the adventuresome sort that I had read lots about but never seen in person. Having worked as an assistant at a nature-based Montessori school throughout college, I saw a lot of parallels between the way a Montessori classroom is prepared for students and the way an adventure playground is prepared with ample loose-parts by playworkers. I was intrigued, and fell deeply in love with the concept of “free and open play” as soon as I started hosting pop-up play opportunities around town. After a year or so of jamming loads of loose parts into my car every weekend, I decided to aim for a stable location—and the rest is in the paint-splattered history of the Sallie Foster Adventure Playground.









# Chapter Five

# Playpods in Parks and Schools

*Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.*

—Fred Rogers

## Introduction

**I** first heard of playpods with loose parts in schools via videos from England. I wanted to see a playpod in use and asked playworker Penny Wilson to arrange it for my next visit to London. It was an amazing site. About 150 to 200 children, ages six to fourteen, were outdoors playing on the asphalt that surrounds the school on three sides. The regular playground equipment was off limits that day as a new and interesting piece was being built. However, its absence did not seem to limit the children who had the playpod with lots of loose parts, climbers attached to the brick walls around the school, and an abundance of imagination.

Nearly every child was deeply engaged in play. Some strung netting on the wall climbers and made chairs and hammocks for themselves. Others dressed up in animal costumes, while others built and played with a wide variety of recycled materials. At the end of recess, older students who were





playground helpers walked around, first with signs alerting players that clean-up would start in a few minutes, and then serving like sheep dogs that worked inwards from the far edges and got students to bring things back to the pod.

I stayed in the pod during clean-up and watched the children stowing the materials on the shelves and in the bins. One of the recess aides oversaw the process, and I asked her how she and her colleagues felt about the playpod. She smiled broadly and said they loved it. They had only had the pod for a month, but recess was so much easier to monitor than it had been before. They used to have to intervene all the time, sorting out fights, stopping bullying, etc., but now the children played well and rarely needed adult help.

After that visit, I began showing the playpod video

at conferences and was delighted to hear from a parent in California who wanted a pod at her children's school. It's now installed at a school in San Carlos and an article about it is included in this chapter, along with a description of a playpod at a school in Durham, North Carolina. Both schools find that children need little help when given a chance to play freely with loose parts.

One concern about playpods at schools is that recess times tend to be much shorter in the U.S. than in the U.K. It's ideal for children to have 30 to 60 minutes for recess, but the schools with playpods are finding that even with their 20 minute recesses, valuable play takes place. Even though we'd love to see longer recesses for children—and think there are many cognitive, physical, and social benefits from more time to play—we are also happy to note that even with 20 minutes of recess it's well worth having playpods, probably because the children can play together every day and build on earlier play experiences. The costs for the pod and loose parts are not great, and recess staff is already on hand. They just need some training in how to appreciate and support child-initiated play.





Schools are not the only sites that benefit from playpods. They can be placed at any playground and opened by staff or volunteers after school, and on weekends and holidays. The combination of loose parts and playwork staff serves as a magnet and draws children to the site, as the article by Janice O'Donnell about her PlayCorps project in Providence, Rhode Island shows. We also include in this chapter a description of Kristin Shepherd's project which uses a van as a mobile playpod, well stocked with loose parts and capable of serving many schools. \*

### Website

For a playpod video, see:  
[youtube.com/watch?v=nqi1KyJJeKg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqi1KyJJeKg)

### Photo Credits

Teal Gardner, play:groundNYC, and Jill Wood



# PlayCorps in the Parks, Providence

Janice O'Donnell



**he children at the playground have formed a sort of bucket brigade**, filling old pots, pans, and pails with water from the community garden hose and passing them up the slope to a makeshift waterslide.

They've figured out that adding the soapy bubble solution in a nearby plastic wading pool makes the slide (a couple of tarps held down with tent pegs) really fast. One of the PlayCorps team members stands near the top of the slide, another at the bottom, watching carefully in case someone needs a hand up or it looks as if too many kids might crash into each other. But the children are pretty aware of the risks in the raucous game they've created and give the littlest ones the time they need to navigate their slide. Everyone's yelling and laughing. Everyone's wet and muddy. It's the perfect way to spend a broiling-hot summer afternoon at this inner city park. And similar child-directed free play is happening at six other parks in Providence's impoverished neighborhoods.





Providence PlayCorps is a joint effort of the city's Parks & Recreation Department, the Healthy Communities Office, Providence Children's Museum, and the Partnership for Providence Parks (a non-profit organization created to enliven the city's 100-plus parks). All of these are working together with the federal free meals program offered throughout the summer to children in low-income communities. Piloted in the summer of 2014, the PlayCorps program is now in seven neighborhood parks five days a week during July and August.

Each park has a team of three, a Play Leader and two interns, who are trained and coached in playwork as practiced in many of the UK's neighborhood adventure playgrounds. They provide an ever-changing variety of "loose parts" (cardboard, chalk, balls, water, fabric, paint, buckets, rope, etc.) for the children to use in any way they please. Because the activities take place in public parks, materials must be cleaned up and stored at the end of each day in a storage container, or pod, rented for the summer at each park. PlayCorps substitutes







big cardboard boxes and miles of colored duct tape for the boards and nails children use in traditional adventure playgrounds to create and recreate their play space. Nonetheless, risk-taking is encouraged.

With the PlayCorps team, children fashion tree swings and hammocks out of old sheets and rope; attach fabric, cardboard and whatever else comes to hand to the fixed playground equipment; and scale the chain link fences, as well as creating water slides and mud holes. The PlayCorps team clears the park of hazards, such as broken glass and trash every day, and carefully observes—but does not direct—the children in order to provide materials and ideas that extend their play and ensure they are not in real danger.

The Play Leaders are graduate students or recent college graduates; the interns are mostly college students. All have experience working with/caring for children and all are passionate about the value of free play. Because Providence is a majority-minority city and most PlayCorps participants are children of color, care is taken to ensure a racially diverse team. At least one fluent Spanish speaker is assigned to each park. About half of the team members have roots in the neighborhoods served.

As PlayCorps Director, I run the program with my colleague Jillian Finkle, PlayCorps Manager. Jillian manages much of the day-to-day work—reassigning staff to cover an absence; collecting timesheets; dealing with problems such as overflowing trashcans or a dead squirrel in the park; ensuring every site has enough tape or paint or chalk or cardboard, etc. I take care of the infrastructure—arranging for the pods; connecting with other community resources; smoothing lines of communication with various city departments; developing budgets and seeking funds. Together we screen, hire, train, and mentor the 21 PlayCorps workers.

Prior to offering PlayCorps daily at the seven locations, the PlayCorps team spends a week in training. We present sessions on playwork principles, reflection, restorative practice, community demographics, and asset mapping, as well as hands-on materials exploration, and nitty-gritty how-to. The season begins with a pop-up play day where the whole PlayCorps team has the opportunity to interact with children and loose parts.

On-going mentoring is certainly as important as advance training. Each week of the program there is an hour-long Play Leaders meeting and an hour-long whole team meeting. These meetings combine the very practical (paycheck distribution, time sheet collection, supply distribution) with the reinforcing of playwork principles and practices, as well as trouble shooting and sharing of great ideas. Each meeting starts with a circle (as does every day among each three-member park team) in which we share “highs and lows.”

*“My high for this week,” a team member might say, “is that we brought chalk to the water park, and the kids were super creative using the wet chalk to trace each other*



and make these amazing drawings. My low is that, on Monday—again—there was so much trash and broken glass in the park.” Or, “My high is that the daycare group that’s been so reluctant to let their kids play with us, joined us and the kids had such a great time building with the boxes. My low is that there’s this one kid who obviously has issues and wrecks everyone else’s constructions.”

PlayCorps staff readily acknowledge that the program is a major learning experience for them. Janette, a 2015 Play Leader, is a MSW candidate and mother of four-year-old Jaz. She contributed this to Providence PlayCorps’s blog:

*“...me complaining about every little thing she would do, especially when it came to her playing outside . . . or being a kid! I was just so anxious about her getting dirty because I cared about how people viewed me as a mother. I assumed people would think I didn’t take care of my daughter if she got dirty at the park. I was also strict with Jaz’s play because I didn’t want her to catch germs from other kids or the ground. I was afraid it would affect her asthma. I thought I was taking good care of Jaz by being strict and restricting her play. But instead, I was hindering her creativity and stopping her from playing naturally and enjoying her childhood. I had this realization during training to be a Play Leader with Providence PlayCorps...*

*Thanks to PlayCorps, I have realized how to loosen up my restrictions and to let Jaz play freely. Independence in a child’s play is key to their development. I now know I need to let Jaz assess her own risks. I need to trust her—to know that she knows best how to play. Even if that means getting a little dirty.”*

Each park sees 40 to 90 children a day. Many children visit their park regularly, so the program serves about 3,500 individuals in total throughout the summer. The children

may be as young as three or as old as fourteen, but most are between the ages of six and eleven. They live in the public housing units and tenement houses that surround the parks and usually come on their own. They’re free to leave on their own as well. Some daycare providers bring their charges for an hour or so to play and eat the free lunch, and some parks also host recreation department, library, or church groups that become integrated into the PlayCorps activities.

Working in partnership with city departments and private nonprofits, PlayCorps



further the goals of the collaborating organizations in ways that are innovative and effective:

**Increases use of city's public parks**, a goal of Providence Department of Parks and Recreation;

**Increases participation in federal summer meals program** in low-income neighborhoods and encourages children to be physically active, goals of the city's Healthy Communities Office;

**Provides inspiration and opportunities for imaginative self-directed play** to children most in need of them, a goal of Providence Children's Museum;

**Serves the mission of the Partnership for Providence Parks** to make the parks vibrant, healthy, and playful neighborhood hubs.

Collaboration is PlayCorps' great strength and also its biggest challenge. The program shares public space. PlayCorps staff work alongside Providence Parks and Recreation Department employees who staff the water parks. These are mostly teenagers with very little training who, at best, do not interfere with PlayCorps activities. Some are fine with PlayCorps staff encouraging children to bring foam noodles, balls, buckets, etc. into the water park; others are not—an area of negotiation.

Library programs, daycare groups, community gardeners, sports teams, and various other groups also share the space. For some, PlayCorps looks like chaos. The PlayCorps team is fine with kids climbing the chain link fence or whacking each other with foam noodles. Care providers often find these activities totally unacceptable. Playwork—supporting children's free play without directing it—is not generally understood in this country.

We also share space with the federal meals staff who provide summer lunches. In most of our parks, this is a collaborative and friendly relationship. But that takes work at the administrative level and in the field. For example, meals staff is responsible for collecting and disposing of lunch trash. To keep that manageable, some insist that children eat their lunch in a confined area, away from PlayCorps materials. However, the best case is when the children are allowed to combine their meals with their play, pretending restaurant or banquet, for example. PlayCorps teams reached a compromise with meals staff by offering to clean up the lunch trash themselves if the children take their meals to where they play. One of the measurable goals of PlayCorps is the increase in summer meals participation at its sites.

Providence PlayCorps is regarded as an important city program by the Mayor and his administration, as well as by the Parks and Recreation Department, thus raising officialdom's awareness of the importance of child-directed play. City funding for summer employment provides the interns' pay, a \$30,000 investment. PlayCorps has the support of city services (such as office space and payroll management). Sharing public space means PlayCorps staff must connect with neighborhood families and institutions and thereby gives us the opportunity to share the benefits of children's free play.

The cost of a season of PlayCorps is \$100,000. In addition to city support, funding comes from private grants and federal Health Equity Zone (HEZ) funds through the city. With such a short season, administrative costs are high. For example, it takes as much



time to hire 21 people for an eight-week period as it does to hire staff for an entire year. Ideally, PlayCorps would be a year-round program with a presence in one or two parks on weekends throughout the school year, expanding to multiple locations in the summer. This would not only lower the per person cost of the program, but also keep parks lively throughout the year. It would provide children with much needed safe opportunities for active outdoor play. We are seeking funding to make this expanded schedule a reality by 2018.



PlayCorps' success, and indeed existence, is largely due to the willingness of city departments, private nonprofits, and individuals to work together and to try something new. It's not always easy. Priorities often conflict; some ideas and practices are entrenched; and money is always tight. However, Providence is a small, high-needs city. We know each other and have learned we need to pool resources, compromise, and cooperate to meet those needs and provide for our children. In PlayCorps we've found common (play)ground. \*

## Website

[playcorps.org](http://playcorps.org)

## Photo Credits

Janice O'Donnell

## Author

**Janice O'Donnell**, whose career began as an alternative (free) school teacher, was Executive Director at Providence Children's Museum from 1985 through 2014. She joined the Museum staff in 1979 to manage special projects and communications. She now directs Providence PlayCorps for the City of Providence Parks and Recreation Department, is a founding member and spokesperson for Recess for Rhode Island, and consults for several child-centered organizations.



A graduate of the University of Rhode Island, she was recognized with the URI Alumni Association's Achievement Award in Education. She has presented on PlayCorps and adventure play for the Association for the Study of Play, Association of Children's Museums, American Adventure Play Association, TEDX Providence ([ted.com/tedx/events/18620](http://ted.com/tedx/events/18620)), and other venues. As a Rhode Island Foundation Leadership Fellow,

Janice studied playwork in the UK and applies playwork practices in her work in inner-city parks.

Playfully known as "The Priestess of Play," Janice's driving passion is awe of children's creativity, resourcefulness and curiosity.



# Playing in the After School Program

## The Parish School, Houston, TX

Jill Wood

**I**n 2008, the Head of The Parish School, Margaret Noecker, established an adventure playground-based after school program on three acres of marshy grass behind the school. She asked me to get it up and running with Kelly, a former Air Force Readiness Specialist, and handed me a notebook from the Houston Adventure Playground Association. It basically said: find a bunch of junk, put it out, and let the children take the lead, which is still a pretty solid description of our adventure playground (AP). We started with five adventurers, two adults, a giant pile of sand, two cement culverts, and a basketball court.



The play was complex and inspiring from the start with costumes made from grass, sand volcanoes, freestyle jumping contests from the culverts, and a bucket band called Techno and the Rock Stars. Kids carved out space for quiet tinker-y play and built structures for climbing, dancing, and chatting. Play schemes could last a few minutes or a semester.



The children spent about four months in battle with The Gorgs, an enemy who hid in the unmowed part of the site, stealing tools and sucking brains. To kill a Gorg, you had to lure them out by making them think you were surrendering, then surprise-spear them with bamboo. At some point the children drew Gorgs on scrap wood with sharpies and hid them throughout the grass, making the spearing part a little more focused. Toward the end of the fourth month, a child asked, “Why aren’t we sad when we kill Gorgs? We’re sad when other things die.” So the children dug a deep hole in the sand, buried a drawing on wood, looked up, and collectively howled.

Kelly and I looked at one another with wide eyes, because the howl was really serious. Not like the howl you might make when playing chase—the one that is supposed to sound fierce, but still signifies it’s a game. It was angry and collective. All seven children participated in the funeral and seemed to be feeling a similar thing all at once. Since they all came from the same school, we had to ask, was today a particularly rough day?

Our after school program is located at The Parish School, a school for children who have communication disorders and learning differences. This means that the children at our school might have one or several neurological profiles that make learning in a typical public school classroom even more difficult than it already is. Diagnosticians might call the differences Auditory Processing, Sensory Processing, or Autism Spectrum Disorders, ADHD, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, or Apraxia of Speech. And while we don’t dwell on diagnoses on our playground, there’s no denying that many of the children who attend AP have tough days at school. A child we see on our playground might have missed a step of instructions from





his teacher because he's still trying to process what she said five seconds earlier. The instructions just keep getting layered on top of the sentence before, creating noise instead of a map. There's a good chance a child on our adventure playground may have had the better part of her school day derailed when a new activity was added to the daily schedule without warning.

I thought this funeral might be a collective frustration about the pace and design of the world. But eight years later, I know that play has its own momentum. Four months of Gorg Wars culminated in a serious funeral because that's where it landed. Really, with a few alternate twists and turns, it could just as easily have been a dance party.

Today, our adventure playground has 32 children enrolled, which is 30% of the age-eligible population (ages 6-12) at The Parish School, plus 4 children from nearby schools. We have a stockpile of hammers and nails, hand drills and saws, shovels and post-hole diggers, extra clothes, a zipline, a sink, changing rooms, some shade structures, and three adults to support the play. We've learned about playwork, a professional framework for supporting free play developed on adventure playgrounds in the UK. We know about risk benefit analyses, Bob Hughes' play types, play frames, and reflective practice, but the play itself is pretty similar to 2008. Not to say that all of the playwork resources haven't been incredibly useful, it's just that children don't need much beyond space, time, and some scrap material to make play. The above resources are to keep us adults in check—to keep us from making the play about our needs instead of the children's.

Not only is our adventure playground on the grounds of a school, all of the AP staff have had some experience working in The Parish School classrooms. So this business of allowing the children's play to belong to them is harder than you might think. When adults step back, play gets messy, loud, and projects don't get finished. Children sometimes leave





other children out, or say the same joke 50 times. The garden might not get watered, knees get scratched, and tears sometimes flow. A lizard might get left in a bucket overnight, in which case we might tell the kids that lizards like freedom better than plastic containers.

Between 8:00 a.m. and 3:00 pm we play a different role. It is our job as educators to contextualize children's choices within the adult framework they will be asked to work within for the rest of their lives. During the school day, we teach children not to scream too loudly because a classroom is shared space and it hurts other people's ears. We teach them to put away supplies so others can find materials when they need them, and to complete things they start, so there is a finished product to prove to others that they were listening and following directions.

But from 3:00-5:30 pm on AP, we classroom-trained adults exercise the discipline of not making

children's play into lessons we want them to learn. Playwork training helps us maintain that discipline, but so does the experience of stepping back and seeing incredible results.

We plant a vegetable garden every fall and spring. Harris County's master gardener program provides free buckets with the bottoms cut off, fertilizer, and hearty seeds to encourage container gardening in schools. The first year, we planted the heck out of those seeds -- partially because it was novel, but also because there was a boy who loved to nurture. He meticulously planted and watered all 14 containers. His enthusiasm filtered through the AP community, and we ended up with a bumper crop of lettuce, peas, carrots, turnips, kale, and radishes, which led to a restaurant, complete with a cash register, handmade money, child-built benches, and several community feasts. Our teacher hearts soared! This was child-led experiential learning at its best. We could not have written a better lesson plan if we'd tried, so we built raised beds to make the garden an official part of our playground.

Did you know that radishes grow under any circumstance in Houston? You could accidentally drop a seed in the crack of a parking lot, where a stray weed peeks through, and a month and a half later you'd have a radish. I know this because the master gardening program sent us seeds the next year, a few kids planted them, watered them

twice, then forgot the garden altogether. We tried to rekindle gardening enthusiasm: “Remember how we worked together to make a beautiful garden last year? Wasn’t that fun? Remember the restaurant?” But our pushing made it seem less like play and more like work. In spite of total neglect, though, we had four radishes that year and we’ve had both radishes and neglect ever since.

That same year there was a girl who loved to tow heavy things. Walking around the playground, you could find human-scale harnesses everywhere—contraptions made from bicycle inner tubes, velcro, pieces of fabric tied to bungee cords, and duct tape wrapped around rope. As the wagons started to break down from the force and impact of experiments, the children used knowledge gained from harness building to make franken wagons, like sturdy go-karts. They took the sturdiest remnants of each wagon and connected them to one another with the strongest material possible (turns out to be three layers of wood connected with screws), creating a nearly indestructible, but very heavy rolling tank. Four years later, under the weight of all of the wood, the wheels are splayed, but we still use it. Last week, a group of kids attached a doorknob to the side of the wagon, just because.

The time saved by letting plants die, not finishing a fort, or leaving tools out gets funneled into projects our adult minds could never dream up. If it isn’t a franken wagon, it might be time spent digging a hole deep and wide enough for 3 children, inventing rules for shopping cart races, singing a sock baby to sleep, or pulverizing bricks with a hammer. All of these things teach aspects of resilience, community, negotiation, and cooperation





just as well as a garden. Also, the next summer, a wild fire burned several acres of grass surrounding the playground, and our AP became home to frogs, crawfish, cattails, and two opossums that couldn't outrun the fire. The destruction of our tall grass Gorg Territory created fertile soil and about an acre's worth of blackberries. After the fire, we also found patches of mimosa pudica, a leafy herb that closes in on itself when you touch it. Blackberries, shy plants, and opossum skulls have brought countless hours of joy and wonder to replace the garden.

There are so many of these stories—narratives that start in a familiar place and land somewhere completely unexpected and lovely.

Our after school program is an adventure playground, making it part of a tradition of spaces established to compensate for the freedom and independence children have lost. These stories are numerous because we've provided time, space, and permission to play.

Children who struggle in the classroom during the school day can come out to AP and discover they are good at running fast, inventing silly voices, or making peace. A child might intuitively understand how water runs through pipes, or how to pile the right objects for a soft landing from a rope swing. Another child might have an excellent memory and remember where the sharpies are stashed. These things are clearly of value to their peers and helpful to others, so they become foundations of self-worth. They are not skills we adults know to look for and prop up, but they are at the center of confidence and individuality, so we step back and wait for them to emerge.

There are other benefits that happen along the way. Since these are the same children I see during the school day (in the second half of my job as school librarian), I know that they can be more organized, regulated, creative, brave, and flexible when the play belongs to them, simply because it is more motivating. Whether or not this is generalized to other environments, doesn't take away from the fact that between 3:00 and 5:30 pm they experience it.

We want every child at our school, even those who aren't enrolled in AP, to experience his or her own domain, so we've started a loose parts recess program at The Parish school. AP brings simple materials out to recess (boxes, fabric, spoons, rope, buckets, and wagons) sets them out, provides a playwork-trained adult to support the children's ideas, and waits for the play to happen. Before we brought loose parts out to recess we saw a lot of locomotor play, particularly chase, and quite a bit of conflict. But now the children spend their time creating more dynamic play schemes.



While most schools do not have three acres to give to an adventure playground (if you do, give me a call. I can help!), loose parts recess is simple and will broaden play options. When there are more choices, children can find people with like interests and strengths, and there will be less conflict due to boredom and incompatibility. So find a bunch of junk, set it out, and let children take the lead. You will be amazed at where the narrative lands. \*

## Website

[parishschool.org/campus-life/adventure-play](http://parishschool.org/campus-life/adventure-play)

## Photo Credits

Jill Wood

## Author



**Jill Wood** holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Studio Art and a Masters of Library and Information Science from the University of Texas at Austin. As a child growing up in a suburb of Los Angeles, her favorite subject in school was recess and some of her most memorable hours were spent riding bikes, exploring tide pools, and carefully labeling her rock collection.

Since 2008, she has directed Adventure Play, an after school program at The Parish School, a specialized school for children with communication delays and learning differences in Houston, where she is also school librarian. She is co-founder of Bayou City Play, an organization that sets up weekly, inclusive loose parts playgrounds at Shriner's Hospital for Children, and pop-up playgrounds throughout the city.

Being part of adventurous play for eight years has taught her that play, like exploring library shelves, is much better when there are a lot of choices and no one is telling you exactly what to choose.





# The Recess Playpod

## White Oaks Elementary School: San Carlos, CA

Allison Liner and Kerry Folan

**W**hite Oaks Elementary School is about ten miles north of Palo Alto. We have 350 to 400 students, ranging from transitional kindergarten through grade four, although in the 2016-17 school year we will serve children from preK through grade three. This transition gives us a wonderful opportunity to anchor our practices in what we know young learners need in order to thrive. As we prepared to install our playpod, we had discussions that led to play-based themes for parent education and ideas for redesigning our whole playground space, as well as additional opportunities for playful learning during the school day. We also plan to open a Makerspace on campus to include a sandbox, tinkering and making supplies, and open-ended design challenges to enhance the natural zest for learning that young children bring to school.

White Oaks is located in the heart of a neighborhood. Ours is the smallest campus of our district schools, with one playground shared by all students. In order to ensure children have adequate space to play, we run three lunch and recess sessions. Children in the



Transitional Kindergarten, Kindergarten, and first grade classes eat and play first, followed by our second graders and finally our third and fourth graders. We use cones to designate our playpod area and keep supplies nearby.

Our play space includes a large blacktop area and a small grassy area. There are two play structures, a ball wall, and two basketball courts. While many children play sports or use the play structures, some children look for another option during recess. At a Stanford University play advocacy conference, one of our parents saw a video about playpods in the UK and presented the video and playpod concept to our principal and district superintendent. Both were enthusiastic about a playpod at White Oaks. The playpod concept fits well within our school district strategy which focuses on the skills and conceptual tools that are critical for 21st Century learners. We see it as an important vehicle for providing children opportunities to enhance the 5Cs: Critical Thinking, Communication, Collaboration, Citizenship, and Creativity.

Our school set aside funds for playground improvements. We also approached the PTA which agreed to allot an additional \$1500 towards the playpod. We identified a location for the playpod in the back corner of our playground in a somewhat underused area. The area has a small hill, two trees, and a small wall for sitting, which we felt would give some dimension to the play area (for ramps, etc). We researched online, communicated with play advocates in the UK, and spoke to two other schools that had implemented a playpod, gathering advice on the types of materials used and the “what works and what doesn’t” of a playpod. We then put together a list of materials we would need for storage and play. After initial research it seemed that a walk-in metal storage



container was going to be too expensive. We thought that to pilot the playpod we could instead use four to five large but low plastic storage bins that would be opened from the top and the children could easily pull out materials.

A local home improvement store offered a 30% discount but once they were delivered we found that they were extremely complicated to put together and that they would not last long being outside all year in the elements. We then reverted back to the metal storage container idea. At the same time, we drew up a letter that we could present to local businesses for donations. It explained the purpose of the playpod and included a list of the types of donations we were looking for such as PVC pipes, tires, plastic rain gutters, tarps, large pieces of cloth, etc. We sent the letter out to our school community via our weekly online newsletter. Parent volunteers also approached many local electric, plumbing, and other companies. A local “Restore: Habitat for Humanity” store was generous in giving us some materials that had been donated to them but that they could not resell.



In the end, our start-up cost was approximately \$3500: \$2679 for a 10 foot container with a roll up door from Aztec Container, and \$800 for shelves, trash cans on wheels, a ramp, and loose parts. Our expected annual cost is approximately \$300 for restocking. We secured many items through donations and received school funds, as well, to cover the costs..

After the container arrived, a parent volunteer installed shelves in the back of the container and a wooden ramp so that materials could be rolled in and out of the container. On the shelves, we placed bins that hold our smaller materials such as small balls, household items, and pieces of cloth. We purchased eight large rolling garbage bins to hold the larger materials such as pipes and tubes. Larger, odd-sized materials such as tires, large wooden spools, and cardboard boxes were stored on the floor.

Prior to opening, we asked a few classes to “test” our design and provide feedback before our grand opening at lunch recess. Kindergarteners and fourth graders served as our test group. They provided important feedback that we incorporated into our final design. For example, one class suggested that we use a hand bell to signal clean up so that items could be put away before the line up bell. Another class recommended that we add a “suggestion box” and a “lost parts” box in the office so that children could make requests for new materials, and also return smaller items that were found after the playpod closed.

## **The children's response to the playpod**

The children love the playpod! Just as we hoped, children needed very little direction about how to engage with the materials. They jumped right in, pulling items from bins, constructing, imagining, and building with a joyful, collaborative spirit. Just as our research indicated, playground conflicts are significantly reduced when the playpod is open. Children are happily engaged and very busy. Every day we see new creations and inventions. On any given day there may be a car made out of a box and wooden spools

covered with cloth, an obstacle course with ramps and balls, a miniature golf course, a fairyland with gems and gauzy sheets, and many other constructions. There is something beautiful in the idea that the materials do not dictate the way they should be played with and the children can create freely.

## Some comments from the children

*“I like the playpod because it sparks kids’ creativity. I especially like using the giant toilet paper rolls to make tunnels for ping pong balls. All-in-all, the playpod is cool.”*

—Ethan, 4th grade

*“I like building things with my friends and making new creations. We made marble tracks out of gutters, cardboard tubes, styrofoam, and tires and kept trying to build the track higher and higher. It was so much fun! We also made mini soccer fields out of turf and ping pong balls, and used computer keyboards as the scoreboard.... the big marbles were our players. The play pod is better than recess!”*

—Sam, 2nd grade

*“I like how you can create whatever you want. And you don’t have to copy anybody. And you can use your imagination. And it’s really fun that you don’t have to work by yourself. You can work together, like teamwork.”*

—Sophie, 1st grade

## Overcoming Obstacles

**Storage:** We’ve found that a combination of rolling garbage cans and small-medium bins works best. Initially, we thought we needed to label each bin and separate items during clean up. Once we saw the children in action, we decided to maximize play time





by encouraging students to put away items in any bin. The labeling was not important to children, and our new system seems to be working well.

**Rules:** Some basic guidelines are necessary, so we post a reminder at the playpod.

*Have Fun:* Play, imagine, create, build

*Be Safe:* No weapons, hitting, hurting

*Share:* Items are for everyone

*Playpod Zone:* Play within orange cones

*Clean Up:* Put away before you walk away

**Time:** Having sufficient time to build, create and play is challenging with a short recess. We have three separate recess periods for different grades. Each lunch recess allows 20 minutes for lunch and 20 minutes for play. The playpod materials are left out between recesses but the last group is responsible for the clean up. The children felt it was unfair that they only had ten minutes to play and 10 minutes to clean up. Eliminating the label system helped decrease clean up time. We also allow classes to use the playpod during the day. Often teachers use this as a reward, for example if the class finishes a project on time, they may have 30 minutes of playpod time on the following day.

**Play staff:** Generally, one yard supervisor assigned to this area. Sometimes this person is our school counselor.

## Resources to Introduce the Playpod

We provided a list of read aloud books for teachers to read in their classrooms and we also made a one minute intro video for the children so they would know what to expect. Initially, we made a schedule for classes during recess so that the playpod wouldn't be too crowded. After about two weeks, we opened it to anyone who wanted to join. ✨

## Website

[whiteoaksschool.com](http://whiteoaksschool.com)

## Photo Credits

Kerry Folan

## Authors



**Allison Liner** is the principal at White Oaks Elementary School in San Carlos, California. She has been a teacher and administrator for 24 years in California and on the east coast. She is a mom to two “tinkering” boys, Jack and Luke, who remind her each day that play is learning!

**Kerry Folan** is a preschool teacher at Trinity Presbyterian Preschool, a co-operative play based preschool in San Carlos. She has two children who both attended White Oaks Elementary. Her daughter Tessa just completed 4th grade so was an initial playpod “tester.”





# A PlayPod in Our Schoolyard

## Forest View Elementary School, Durham, NC

### MaryLu Flowers-Schoen and Kimbie Sprague

**Kimbie Sprague, Parent:** A few years ago I was asked to contribute a parent's perspective for Forest View's application to be the first school in the United States to pilot the PlayPod. At the time I had two children in the school, in second and third grades, with one more coming up the ranks. I was particularly proud that the Scrap Exchange was a partner in this effort as we are longtime supporters of the Scrap Exchange's mission and frequent visitors to the store. The Scrap Exchange is a highly recognized and respected advocate for recycling in the Durham community. What is second nature to me—and what I place a high value on—is the responsibility to reduce my family's carbon footprint and to be good stewards of the earth in all aspects of life. This goal is still not embraced or understood by all. The PlayPod emphasizes the importance of recycling, and in some instances, opens people's eyes to it.

The symbiotic relationship between recycling and creative play is deeply rooted in my life, and I am proud to say it has passed down to my own children. I have vivid memories as a child of watching a program on "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" about the Boston Children's Museum scrap center with vibrant blue barrels of odds and ends waiting to be given a second life. It prompted my mother to put aside a box just for that purpose. After seeing Star Wars for the first time, my brother and I dove into that box to create our own wrapping paper tube lightsabers! In my house we have numerous boxes of cool tidbits that are awaiting the spark of inspiration. I have a son whose active motto is, "One man's trash is another man's treasure." He loves scavenging, especially on recycling day. This hunting for treasure started when he was three and has only amped up eleven years later.



Having a PlayPod embodies part of Forest View's mission to provide opportunities for learning that emphasize creativity and problem solving. It also helps build bridges in our diverse school community. With more than 25 countries represented, our school is a mini U.N. with several languages spoken by students. Free time on the playground can be especially intimidating to children who are not fluent in a common language. Creative play prompted by the PlayPod aids in fostering unification where communication barriers exist. This simple resource has brought great comfort to those who might otherwise feel excluded.

The PlayPod has been an uplifting option for children who are not fans of traditional recess. Some kids revel in the opportunity to physically release energy and enjoy the competitiveness that spawns playground games. Other kids dread this. I have a child who will always prefer creative outlets to competitive ones. He derives pleasure from what he creates, not so much from physical feats. His recess time was often spent in small groups making up adventures, going on treasure hunts, and picking up trash before the PlayPod came to fruition.

Creative play is dying in this generation of children who are technologically over-exposed. The PlayPod allows opportunities for open-ended, unbridled play that doesn't require directions, batteries, or an internet connection. Today's children need as many opportunities for deconstructed and simplistic play as they can get!

My big children, now in middle school, mourn the loss of recess and the PlayPod, the giant recycling shed which will always be cooler, no matter what they independently collect. When we go to the Scrap Exchange or see an old rotary phone, adding machine, or other piece of "ancient" technology they say, "Mom this would have been really cool to have in the PlayPod to use as a..." We only have one opportunity to be children and to focus on the "work" of play and learning through discovery.

**MaryLu Flowers-Schoen, Art Teacher:** Linda Tugurian, then our Science Teacher, applied for a PlayPod grant in 2012 after consulting with some of our teachers for input. (Note: PlayPod is the spelling used by BeActive NC and the Forest View Elementary School.) The grant came through BeActive North Carolina, a program of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation, in conjunction with the NC Zoo Education Division, which had staff who went to England and Wales to learn about playwork and the playpod approach there. As an art teacher who works a great deal with all kinds of materials, I was very interested in the idea of creative play with loose parts. When we heard that our grant was approved, we also learned that we were the only one to receive a grant for a PlayPod in North Carolina that year. Since then another school in our district has also received a grant for a PlayPod.

BeActive worked with the NC Zoo Education Division to create a training for our staff that included one representative from each grade level, plus me, the art teacher, since I was interested in this project from the first. The training was titled the "Playful Pedagogy...inspire play, everyday."

We began our training near the end of September, 2012. It consisted of articles to read and discuss, team play using recyclables, sometimes with space conversions or task-oriented goals, and creation of the school policies we wanted to use with our PlayPod. Teachers could earn Professional Development CEU credits for re-licensing by attending the training, field testing activities, and journaling results and observations. Further group



discussions resulted from these. In addition, BeActive NC created a video for the children explaining the use of the PlayPod and the importance of putting things away at the end of the play time.

We teachers met once or twice a month for five months and also worked to get the “shed” installed to be ready for the early spring. The Scrap Exchange, located here in Durham, created our sign, and provided a hefty gift certificate for initially supplying our PlayPod. I also put a request in our school newsletter for donations of recyclables, such as kitchen utensils, electronics, fabric, old toys, and lots and lots of plastic containers.

Our recess is just 20 minutes long, and some grades wanted to use the PlayPod only once or twice a week. Second and third graders seem to use the PlayPod most often, but sometimes the fourth and fifth graders ask that it be opened to them. Some teachers open it only on pretty weather days. This has cut down on the mud that can collect on the items and also is tracked into the shed from shoes. I donated two brooms for students or teachers to sweep the floor occasionally.

First graders tend to use it less often than others, in part because they have a hard time cleaning up the loose parts at the end of play time. Here is a statement from our first grade teacher representative on the PlayPod committee, Susan Heath. “The PlayPod is a creative and innovative idea for children that are not interested in regular playground play. Children are able to express themselves in a different way and still exercise mind and body. The problem at my grade level has been that it really has not been put to use this year. I would like once more to try and get first graders on board for opening and putting it to use!”

Unfortunately, the kindergarten children don’t have a chance to use the PlayPod because they play on a playground adjacent to their kindergarten rooms and not on the playground where the PlayPod is located. We’re lucky to have three playgrounds at our school.

The key to the PlayPod is wired to the walkie talkie which teachers (or assistants) always collect from the office to carry to the playground. So access is available whenever desired. The office, the principal, and I have keys, as well as a teacher who helped us by



labeling shelving and attaching photos onto shelves so students know where items go. I probably have a key because I helped coordinate the rebuilding of the shed when the playground tree was struck by lightning three summers ago and damaged our PlayPod. I was the staff liaison who provided building access for the construction crew that helped rebuild it that winter. I also go to the Scrap Exchange for art supply supplements and pick up cool things for the PlayPod whenever I see them.

BeActive was great in coordinating a construction crew to help us rebuild the PlayPod. This amounted to another grant. Our PTA donated \$900, the Scrap Exchange donated more “goodies,” and I coordinated parent volunteers. A local construction company provided the expertise and tools, made the purchases, and delivered the materials. Our new and improved PlayPod went from a 10'x12' metal shed purchased from Home Depot to a much taller, wooden version built on the same plywood floor foundation.

It goes without saying that I believe playing with familiar and unfamiliar objects in new ways is what some students need for a more thoughtful, imaginative, and creative respite from academics. Not all children are into athletic games, nor do all use our playground structures. The PlayPod meets a need for a number of children. We also have an observation platform next to a bog/rain garden that allows quiet contemplation and observation of nature, and this meets other students' needs.

Is recess long enough? No! I wish we had an hour long recess time each day—even if it's broken into shorter chunks of time—so that our students can clear their minds, learn in different ways, and then refocus on their classroom assignments.

What are children supposed to do with this rotating collection of stuff? Anything they like. “At first, they used the items very literally,” says Lora DeWalt, a Forest View fifth-grade teacher. “A broken calculator was just a pretend calculator. Now they're using it as a code device to get through a secret door. Their creativity is expanding.” The kids are also learning that ingenuity takes persistence. They may be disappointed when their grand architectural plans can't be accomplished in a single 30-minute period. “But then there's the excitement of thinking, ‘Tomorrow we're going to try it a different way, and we're going to make it work,’” says DeWalt. \*

## Websites

[forestview.dpsnc.net](http://forestview.dpsnc.net)

[beactivekids.org/beactive-in-community/play-intitatives](http://beactivekids.org/beactive-in-community/play-intitatives)

## Photo Credits

MaryLu Flowers-Schoen

## Authors

**MaryLu Flowers-Schoen** Just like the inspirational words of Maya Angelou (also a long-time resident of North Carolina), “You can’t use up creativity, the more you use, the more you have.” I truly want students to explore the most, be the best, and have a fun, well-rounded education.

This will be my 30th year in North Carolina visual arts education, which builds on my overseas career since 1974. I was awarded the 1996 North Carolina Art Education Association Visual Arts Educator of the Year, but I include cooking, gardening, nature walks, and aesthetics in my curriculum. It is important to me to focus on the whole child with mental as well as physical health. A PlayPod concept was a no brainer to me—creative play during a day of academic study. While I do not personally take students to daily recess, I have been a part of writing grants for playground equipment, improving our campus facilities with an amphitheater, soccer field, nature trail, and rain garden, and actively helping to maintain the various gardens, vegetable and perennial. Yes, this overlaps with Healthful Living and Science curricula, but I look at it as the basic art of living. With these experiences, students will be life-long learners.



**Kimbie Sprague** I am in my ninth year as a Forest View parent and second year as an employee working in the media center. My background is in casework and issues of affordable housing. The heart of all social service is advocacy and that has always transferred to issues that I feel passionate about, like being a good steward of the earth. I strive to impress upon all the kids that I work with that they have the power to control their carbon footprint (and influence others) by the choices they make.





# Recess Revolution

## Rethinking the Way We Play

*Every journey begins with a single step.*

—Lao Tzu

**Kristin Shepherd**

**R**ecess Revolution was designed as a way to introduce the idea of free play with loose parts to teachers, parents, and caregivers without their having to commit to a complete philosophical change in the way that their homes, schools, or after school programs are run.

When I started Recess Revolution, I had wild dreams of convincing schools that they should create a play environment that included an unmanicured natural setting and lots of loose parts, much like the Welsh adventure playground, the Land. It has been featured in an article in *The Atlantic* and a documentary by Erin Davis. I thought there should be mud and fire pits, lots of loose parts and tools, and children should go out to play no matter what the weather. Needless to say, this idea was a bit radical. I needed to tone it down if I was going to be able to make any change at all.

This is how it all started...

Believe it or not I was a classroom teacher. For 15 years, I taught mostly fifth and sixth graders. I did my best to make my lessons fun and memorable. I encouraged my students to be expressive and creative in their assignments. I wanted them to be problem solvers who could think outside the box. I tried to teach them about integrity and perseverance through literature. I created silly memory devices and songs. I prided myself on being the type of teacher who tailored assignments for each student. I loved being a teacher. I loved the children, the parents and the subjects I taught. But as testing slowly began to be the primary focus of school administration, and as music and arts programs lost funding, and as test data began to rule every aspect of what happened in my



class, my students got better and better at taking tests, but struggled more with thinking for themselves.

I began to feel disenchanting with my career.

One subject I had always struggled with as a teacher was Physical Education. I could get the children to do calisthenics, but when it came to playing games, only some of them were motivated. I understood. I never liked PE as a student either. I just wasn't competitive that way. I wanted to use my energy to be creative. I would take my students out to play soccer, and inevitably, five of the thirty would run around like crazy playing soccer, but the rest of the class would stand around talking to their friends. It was frustrating. The children who needed the most exercise were those least interested in PE.

One day, as my students were out "playing soccer," I saw that across campus, volunteers were taking used cardboard voting booths out of the cafeteria and carrying them to the recycling bin. I asked eight of my less motivated soccer players to get the large cardboard booths. I figured we could use them for a science display. As they labored to carry the unruly, large panels across a breezy campus, I saw that they were having fun. They were physically working hard, communicating, and being creative about solving the problem—and they were smiling the whole time. This was a shared learning experience that they would not soon forget. This was my introduction to the magic of loose parts.

I began to search myself for what I enjoyed and remembered from my own childhood and education. Well-planned paper and pencil tasks did not top my list, but I could remember in detail projects I had made, performances I was in, adventures I had gone on, and times when I had overcome a fear. And I had many memories of playing with my friends.

I began to search the internet for ways that people actually learn. I had lots of questions: "We want these children to remember things, but what forms a memory?" "Why is it that teachers are not taught how the brain actually learns?" "What gets students to put in more than a minimal effort?" "How do we teach kids to tackle problems that are different from what they have practiced?" I considered going back to school to study neurology, but couldn't find a program that seemed to cover what I was interested in. I kept coming back to the idea of fun.

That is when I stumbled across play. First, it was a group of people doing pop-up play days. Then I discovered the adventure playgrounds across Europe. After that, I discovered forest schools. Finally, I found that I could study play as an academic subject through universities in the UK.

I took a two-year sabbatical from teaching and started a Master's program in Play and Playwork from the University of Gloucestershire. Because I needed to observe students at play, I began to visit playgrounds at several different schools in my area. One school in particular was very kind to allow me to bring some loose parts into the kindergarten







playground so that I could see how they changed the dynamic of the space.

The results were dramatic. Children were communicating,

problem solving, and challenging themselves in ways that had not been previously observed. They spent much less time complaining to staff and more time engaged in playful behaviors.

I knew this was something I had to share with teachers, parents, and youth care workers everywhere. It became absolutely

clear that children need time and space to play in an environment with many possibilities for child-initiated play, and they just weren't getting that.

So, I bought a trailer, filled it full of loose parts (cardboard boxes, barrels, tires, tubes, tarps, clips, fabric, crates, buckets, old keyboards and remotes, gloves, boots, goggles, headphones, safety cones, etc.) and began hosting pop-up play opportunities in my community. When teachers and PTA parents from my community saw how their children engaged in my free play events, they knew it would be something to bring to their schools.

It didn't take long before I was visiting schools, after school programs, summer camps, and community events on a weekly basis with my trailer. My little business continues to grow by word of mouth.

The program practically runs itself. Children just love to play. When I go to schools, I give a short speech about how play is good for the brain and that it helps us develop creativity, communication, collaboration, and critical thinking skills. These 4Cs are a part of the Common Core Standards so school administrators eat it up. They feel like they need to justify using the time to play, so I help them.

I also have the children and adults take an oath.

### **Kid's Oath**

*I promise:*

*to take care of this place*

*take care of this stuff*

*take care of each other*

*(that means stuff on stuff, not stuff on people)*

When we say "stuff on stuff," I hit two cardboard tubes together, smile and nod, showing that banging things is OK. Then I pretend to hit their teacher on the head with a tube when we say "not stuff on people" and shake my head "NO." They get a good laugh out of it and the point gets made that we don't hit each other.

This oath was borrowed from one of my module tutors through the University of Gloucestershire, Stuart Lester. He has been an inspiration. Seriously, look him up.

### **Adult's Oath**

*I promise:*

*to let the kids lead the play*

*and to encourage the 4Cs;*

*Creativity*

*Communication*

*Collaboration*

*and Critical Thinking*

I know that giving the adults a task of encouraging the 4Cs seems to be counterproductive as far as letting the children simply play for play's sake without any agenda, but I have found that if the adults have the assignment of looking for something, they are less likely to get in the way of the children's thought processes.

After having participants take a quick oath, they are off to play as they please. I have seen everything from toddlers looking through tubes and banging on boxes, to engineers having catapult contests. Some players are solitary, some are in groups. Some make obstacle courses. Some build structures. Some create costumes and play a dramatic role. I have had drum circles, slides, mazes, space ships, break dancing competitions, windy day structural integrity competitions, chill out time in cozy huts, beds, and bathrooms, balls traveling through tubes, mini golf set ups, experiments with sound, crashing into walls, wars, dances, very organized offices and homes, very chaotic piles to jump and roll around in, rides in barrels, and so much more. There is so much fun being had, it is hard to keep track of it all.

Now, I don't want to give you the impression that I have not come across obstacles in this adventure. For anyone interested in bringing free play with loose parts into your area, there will be many challenges. Interestingly, none of these challenges have come from the children. I have worked with thousands of children now, and there has been nothing more than a few scrapes and bruises.

The biggest challenges come from adults. First of all, teachers and parents are guilty of hovering. They just won't leave the children alone. They want the play experience to be a lesson or a competition for some reason. They tell the kids what to do, why to do it, how to do it, when to do it, and who to do it with. The poor kids rarely get a chance to use their own brains.

When I see adults starting to take over the children's play, I try to distract them with conversation about the 4Cs, so that their children can feel free to play as they wish. After a few minutes, when the adults look back at their children, they find that they are having a great time without adult direction. When they start to observe rather than direct, they see children who seldom talk begin to express themselves. They see planning and perseverance. They see scientific method in action. They hear children justifying their decisions. They see creativity and problem solving. They often comment, "This is the way we used to play when we were kids."

There are also the worriers. They seem to sell their fears to the children. They worry about germs, warn about falls, fuss about dirt, stress over conflict. The list goes on and on.



It almost seems like they don't know what else to do with themselves besides worry about the children. Again, I steer the conversation toward the benefits of play. Once they have something else to talk about, the children are free to play.

Recess Revolution is not a final solution for changing the way America plays, but it does provide a sample, something tangible. Adults need to see free play in action before they can decide to make a change in what they allow children to do or what types of environments to provide. \*

## Website

[recessrevolution.org](http://recessrevolution.org)

## Photo Credits

Kristin Shepherd

## Author

**Kristin Shepherd** is director of Recess Revolution. She wants to live in a world where all children have the space and time to engage in creative free play on a daily basis. As an educator with more than 20 years of experience with children, she's worked for the Discovery Science Center, Boy's Town, and as a teacher in Anaheim, CA. While teaching, she earned her MA Ed. in Reading and Literacy, as well as a Certificate in Gifted Education. She has written several "standards based" musicals as an attempt to get music back in schools, hosted numerous science fairs, and is the progenitor of the cardboard box-based physical education program. She was a teacher of the Year Nominee for the Magnolia School District in 2013. Currently, Kristin is finishing her MA focused on Play and Playwork through the University of Gloucestershire. When she's not hosting on-campus field trips and community events with her trailer full of loose parts, you can find her tinkering with her homeschooler, experimenting with food, and exploring the outdoors.











# Chapter Six

# Playing in Nature

*Babies and toddlers often aren't allowed to play in the dirt or sand... By preventing babies and children from following their innate impulse to get dirty, we shield them from the microbial exposure that is essential for the development of a healthy immune system.*

—Dr. B. Brett Finlay and Dr. Marie-Claire Arrieta

## Introduction

**A**fter years of children being separated from nature, the tide is finally turning. Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*, has played a large part in this vital change. He was not the first to say that today's children are cut off from the outdoors in ways that are physically and mentally harmful. Many had already made that point and were working to correct the imbalance, though generally they worked in isolation from

one another. But their efforts counted, and it seemed they laid the tinder and Louv's book lit the spark. The resulting flames illuminated the problem of nature deprivation for a broad audience. It also fired up the will of activists and brought them together in coalitions like the Children and Nature Network and OAK, the Outdoors Alliance for Kids. Louv's book had an effect similar to the publishing of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, which also marked a turning point after which many individual efforts coalesced into an environmental movement.

Within a few years of Louv's publication, it became widely accepted that time in nature was essential for children's well-being during childhood and for their lifelong love of nature. At first this new awareness resulted in an increased focus on environmental education, green schoolyards, and an emphasis on gardening, hiking, fishing, boating, and similar activities. These are important for the growing child, but there is another activity that was largely overlooked at first—the child's need to play in nature.

Throughout human history children have played outdoors in both urban and rural



areas. They climbed trees and dug tunnels, built forts and treehouses, or found secret spaces for play. As Elizabeth Goodenough of the University of Michigan points out in her book, *Secret Spaces of Childhood*, children not only play actively in nature, they also use it as a retreat.

Today there is a growing focus on nature play. In schools there is a movement to turn asphalt playgrounds into natural play spaces as described by Sharon Gamson Danks in her book, *Asphalt to Ecosystems*. In early childhood settings, natural play spaces are becoming more common, actively encouraged by Nature Explore, a joint project of the Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation. The newest development is the growing interest in forest kindergartens where young children spend their whole day in the woods, well dressed for the weather. Good descriptions of these approaches can be found in books by Rusty Keeler, Mary Rivkin, and David Sobel, which are listed in the appendix.

In this chapter, we focus on an adventure playground in the woods, a play initiative in an arboretum, and a natural play area in a national park. This is just a sample of the many nature play initiatives taking place, including those in the Brookfield Zoo near Chicago, and the zoos in San Antonio, Providence, and Asheboro, NC.

There are thousands of parks, zoos, and nature centers across the country that are already active in bringing children and youth into nature for exploration and education.



It often takes very little to include play in their programs. Yet there are obstacles, and one is the concern that letting children off the paths to play means they will harm nature. Certainly, one does not want children endangering delicate environments, but overall children's footprints are quite small compared to the many ways we adults impact nature.

As the following articles from Mercer Island and the Indiana dunes show, natural play areas can be set aside within a park so that the impact of children's play is contained. This approach can work well in parks that have a "leave no trace" approach. Meanwhile, most urban parks allow children to leave the path and play freely in nature.

Such play can be encouraged through pop-up play days with a focus on nature play including fort and den building, rock climbing, wading, and dam building. Whatever the arrangement, children respond deeply to nature when they are allowed to play in it, and ultimately, that is what counts. \*

## Photo Credits

Nancy Garvey, Danielle Marshall, and Jill Wood





# An Adventure in the Forest

## Mercer Island, WA

Diane Mortenson and Paul West

**A**s a child did you play in the woods, building forts, exploring and imagining, until the last ray of the sun was gone? Those of us who are older often recollect the freedom we enjoyed. Today, children are not as likely to have this same experience. Busy schedules, fear of crime, and electronic media all play a part in the loss of outdoor play in a child's life. Mercer Island Parks & Recreation recognized a need for change in our children's experience, and since 2010 we have the only adventure playground in Washington State.

At the 2008 National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Environmental Summit in Portland, Oregon, Richard Louv and his colleagues laid out what they saw as the shortcomings in the recreational choices children and parents make. Leaving the Environmental Summit, our staff was newly motivated to do something to "restore the natural environment," but this time as a place for children to play. The City of





Mercer Island Parks and Recreation Department already had a successful environmental stewardship program in place, but it was also at this Summit that a NRPA colleague happened to mention adventure playgrounds to one of our staff. Our own research suggested that adventure playgrounds were just what we were looking for—a creative avenue for self-directed play in the outdoors.

We found that adventure playgrounds are commonly situated in urban settings. However, given a park, beach, or forest to call their own, children will form emotional attachments to places just as they form emotional bonds to family and friends. On Mercer Island, we wanted to marry this attachment to place that an adventure playground provides with a forested setting. In our experience, if you are a parks and recreation professional, chances are that you had such a special place when you were young, and positive attachment to a particular place or places in childhood can grow into a larger world connection to nature in adolescence and adulthood. In turn, that attachment may become the foundation for environmental ethics and environmental leadership. We therefore set the goal for our adventure playground as enabling participants to become comfortable in—and bonded to—the forest environment.

We were fortunate to have a playground already suited to such a project. Deane's Children's Park is a wooded two-acre site with several play structures on the south end. The north end of this park is forested and was originally intended for free play. However, dense, non-native vegetation had made that part of the park less attractive over the





years. With a grant from the Mercer Island Preschool Association, we thinned vegetation, removed tree hazards and fixed breaks in the existing fence. We also erected a temporary fence to secure the playground between opening hours. A decommissioned restroom became the playground headquarters. Enthusiastic staff assembled equipment, materials, tool boxes, policies and procedures. Tool boxes included nails, saw, hammer, safety goggles and gloves. The Adventure Playground opened in 2010, with almost a thousand children attending the first summer.

Our Adventure Playground is really focused on the building of structures such as forts, houses, swings, and anything else the participants can think of. Children can also use shovels to dig and are required to wear a safety construction helmet. Once the eager builders arrive, they check in, sign a waiver and get a tool box to share with other children. Some children have not had the opportunity to use tools or build a tree fort. Often they will come back and add onto a structure they didn't work on the time before. It is amazing to see what has been created from the start of the summer to the end.

There is a myriad of health benefits for children who spend time playing outdoors, and the adventure playground in the woods provides many advantages, including an



increased intake of Vitamin D and decreased hyperactivity and depression. Children also tend to be more active outdoors which can reduce the risk of childhood obesity. The fresh air cleans their lungs, ridding them of impurities such as car fumes and dust. It is also a benefit for them to be playing in a forested natural setting, teaching them environmental awareness & stewardship.

We think the benefit of children building, imagining, and using tools for the first time—or multiple times—is one of the best benefits to them. It is unstructured play of sorts and frequently becomes very creative and interactive. Children come to the playground to build something new, add on to other buildings, and share with one another. It is a great activity for them to do with their parents, too. We see kids that don't know one another engage and enjoy each other's company in an enriching environment.

## The impact on our community

For the first few years our maintenance staff was responsible for taking the structures down at the end of the summer so that the children could build new ones the next summer. It took five to seven staff members over two or three days to complete the task. Not only was it a time-consuming and costly project for them, it took resources away from other important park projects. We have since hired an organization to come in and dismantle the playground for less time and money than using our own staff.

Our summer camp counselors (two or three) staff the playground, and they are trained by our Recreation Coordinators on how to operate the playground at the start of the summer. The staff's role is to guide the children when needed, rather than do the work for them. The adults are there to help the children get started, but it is important to the integrity of the program that the children be able to create and manage on their own with minimal assistance. There are a few important safety rules on the playground which the staff enforce.

One safety rule that has proved a challenge for participants to follow at times is the wearing of closed-toe shoes while in the adventure playground. Turning children away who don't have proper footwear is not easy, so we have extra shoes on the site which we bought at a thrift store. It has become clear that hard rubber soled shoes are the best bet to avoid a nail through the shoe.

Another safety rule is that children under the age of 12 must have an adult with them. Actually, the parents have a great time with their children, teaching them new skills and showing them what they used to do when they were young. Another challenge in developing the playground is keeping enough wood on the site to build with. Fortunately, we have had a builder as a sponsor, and he delivers new wood weekly. The community also pitches in with wood donations.

The Adventure Playground only operates in the summer months on Sundays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays from 1:00 pm to 4:00 pm. We have a vision of staying open year-round, but Washington weather in the winter might not allow for as good an experience as the summer. We also have a friendly agreement with the neighborhood that the wooded park—where the playground sits—will be restored to its original state for most of the year so that its trails and open space can be enjoyed by all. The Adventure Playground is a highlight on Mercer Island serving hundreds of children from Mercer Island itself and its surrounding communities. Our vision of children playing in the woods and

enjoying nature, while getting dirty and building forts like we used to do, has become a reality that has reached other communities who may take to the “adventure” too. ✨

## Website

[mercergov.org](http://mercergov.org)

## Photo Credits

Joan Almon and Mercer Island Parks and Recreation Staff

## Authors



**Diane Mortenson**, Recreation Superintendent, City of Mercer Island, WA Parks and Recreation Department. Diane has served the community for 20 years in a variety of positions with the Parks and Recreation Department. Providing a wide variety of recreation, social, and health services that directly benefit the well-being of individuals and their communities is a gratifying career, one which is hard to call a job. Giving youth the opportunity to unplug and experience outdoor play and nature is a priority in our field. Being outdoors makes her the happiest, and living in the Pacific NW offers plenty of outdoor fun. She enjoys parks, hiking, biking, boating, fitness classes, friends and family, and traveling with her husband of 15 years.



**Paul West**, Parks Operations Superintendent, City of Mercer Island, WA Parks and Recreation Department. As a boy, Paul played in the wild spaces within biking distance of his suburban New Jersey home. It was his great fortune to vacation next to Nature Conservancy coastline for several years as a teen. For the last 25 years, he has worked to manage and restore natural areas in the Seattle area. At the National Recreation and Parks Association Environmental Summit in 2008, a speaker introduced him to the concept of adventure playgrounds and that sparked an idea. With a supportive director and colleagues, that idea became a program.



# Children at Play Initiative



## Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest

Claude Stephens

**B**ernheim Arboretum and Research Forest is a nearly 15,000 acre privately owned park and natural area located a short distance south of Louisville, Kentucky. With a mission of “connecting people to nature,” Bernheim’s focus is on identifying and addressing root strategies across a broad spectrum of activities that ultimately lead to the protection of the natural world shared by all. Many school-aged children visit Bernheim with their families and school groups.





Like most organizations that provide educational programming for children, there is a great demand for Bernheim to approach education through the lens of teachers, school administrators, and the adults that arrange for visits to our forests, streams, grasslands, and native landscapes. From that adult perspective, the highest service that Bernheim provides is content-based knowledge about the workings of the natural world. After all, this is where children might best connect to water cycles, native ecosystems, ecology, predator-prey relationships, gardening, and all the “ologies” that lead to an understanding of how the world works. Right? Well, maybe not.



Through the prism of the child’s mind, the highest service Bernheim might provide has little to do with knowing how to draw the water cycle and much more to do with playing in the rocky stream that, by coincidence, is a part of that cycle. No child wants to disembark from a bumpy bus ride only to be quickly gathered into a learning circle. Not even if that learning circle is a bunch of stumps in a forest clearing. That’s a great deal like sitting down at the dinner table to a plate full of delicious smelling food and being told, “Don’t eat yet. We are first going to have a twenty minute lesson on the food pyramid.” The child’s mind isn’t organized that way. Nor should it be. Children are hard wired

for exploration, play, adventure, discovery, and the kinesthetic work of tinkering about with things—real things.

In 2012, Bernheim began the ongoing process of rethinking the assumptions of informal learning. In the process, we challenged ourselves to identify specific ideas that would best support a life-long love of nature for our visitors. In essence we asked ourselves these questions: “What can we do today that will build a future generation of people with a passion for protecting the natural world? How do we insure that we will have future members, supporters, informed citizens and workers?” It was a coin with two sides—service to our visitors on one side, and the sustainability of our mission on the other.

Out of those reflections, the Bernheim Children at Play Initiative was born, thanks in large part to generous support from PNC Bank, and this vision statement was drafted: The Children at Play Initiative explores the value of free play in nature in order to increase our collective capacity to understand, promote, design and champion best practices in outdoor play environments that connect children directly with nature for life.

In the three years since launching the initiative, Bernheim has explored the science-based research behind the value of play, hosted play conferences, instituted regular free play days at Bernheim and around the region, assisted schools and childcare centers in redesigning play environments, provided small start-up grants for play-based projects,



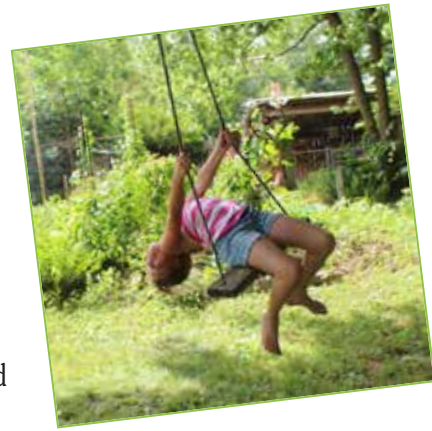
and hosted a series of workshops for parents and educators about nature-based play. We are more interested in how our efforts address a regional need than how play-based learning might work only at Bernheim. We make no claim to be experts, but we do claim a leadership role in opening a larger conversation about play in our extended community.

Importantly, our understanding of the role Bernheim plays in the region, and even nationally, has shifted. We now regularly receive letters of inquiry about our play initiative from outside of our region. We are frequently asked to provide guidance to organizations that were initially a bit distant. In a relatively short time, we have observed a shift in the public perception of the value of nature-based play. That includes some of the nuances of outdoor play such as the acknowledgement that an appropriate level of risk is actually a desirable element in healthy childhood development. We have explored loose parts, natural materials, how to communicate with educators and parents, and probably most important of all—how to become better at play ourselves. We have found that children are not the only ones that benefit from a good box fort building session or a rolling tumble down a hill. We adults do too.

The Bernheim Children at Play Initiative has focused on the social processes that gradually led to shifts in children's play experiences:

- ◆ from outdoor to indoor play
- ◆ from nature-based to technology-based play
- ◆ from loose parts to fixed equipment
- ◆ from natural to engineered environments
- ◆ from unsupervised to supervised play
- ◆ from rule-free play to rule-based play
- ◆ from non-prescriptive to prescriptive play objects
- ◆ from relatively large to relatively small home ranges for children
- ◆ from individual and small group play to large team play
- ◆ from risk accepting to risk averse play

It's important to note that we are not taking a position on the relative merit of these shifts as good or bad. Rather we should critically examine each of them and then make informed decisions about where and how we apply our resources in order to craft the very best play environments for our children. The final answer will always be colored by the outcomes we hope to achieve and the perspectives that we bring to the decision making process. Bernheim's bias is toward building play environments that support children through the process of becoming comfortable explorers of nature in a safe and healthy way. We hope to build passion that lasts a lifetime.



One of the most important outcomes of our efforts to date has come about simply by creating an open conversation about play. Play is a broad topic. Until a community has a robust facility for the language of play, it's difficult to address the issues of risk, loose parts, free-play, adventure play, play space design, play research, and all the other pieces of the rich play puzzle.

Here's a short story from one of Bernheim's monthly free-play days arranged at a local school. Our staff arrived early on a Saturday morning to set out a mixture of loose parts that included boxes, tarps, ropes, tape, dozens of toilet plungers, boards, sticks, poles, clips, chalk, hundreds of gloves, milk cartons, cardboard tubes, a parachute, rolling dollies—and a great deal more. We keep this supply of loose parts in a shipping container installed in the Children's Play Garden at Bernheim. They are used often on-site or sometimes toted around the region for days such as this one. We set things up in an outdoor area among a few mature trees across a sports field from the fixed equipment playground commonly used by the children. You know the kind of playground I'm talking about. Their red, green, blue, and yellow parts are ubiquitous. The teachers at the school were excited to see how their children might react to all the new loose parts.

At the appointed time, the first families showed up with maybe eleven children. I knew what was going to happen next, but the teachers didn't. I quickly identified the lead children in the pack because I know what to look for. Children with a facility for play have a way they move and a look in their eye that is a cross between mischievousness and skepticism. They eyed all the loose parts strewn about, looked over at their regular playground, did a couple of quick back and forth glances between their two options, and as soon as the leader of the pack bolted for their familiar playground all the rest followed.

The teachers called out "No. No. We're here to do something different today." I calmed the teachers down and told them not to worry and that I expected that to happen. I told them to watch for the children to come running back in eight minutes and set the timer on my phone to check myself. In seven and a half minutes, all the children came bounding back across the field toward the jumble of loose parts. In front was the same young boy that had led them to their familiar playground in the first place. For the next four hours the children made cardboard forts, invented games, created art, tied ropes into indecipherable scrambles, slid down hills, taped things to other things, constructed rocket ships, and engineered pirate ships. That's a partial list. I was in constant motion responding to requests to cut openings in boxes with the utility knife tied to my belt loop with a four-foot tether, lest I leave it unattended.

One of the teachers asked how I knew that the kids would lose interest in the fixed equipment playground after eight minutes. First I reminded her that it was actually only seven and a half minutes. I had over-valued their normal play area by 30 seconds and made a mental note to adjust my estimates for the next time. Then I told her that, having done enough free play days, I was pretty good at judging the play value of fixed equipment play structures. The children had first bolted for what was familiar to them. They had to get that out of the way before they were ready to explore the unfamiliar. One of the main reasons for including loose parts is to encourage exploration of the unfamiliar. Loose parts have loose rules for how to use them. Children play *on* fixed equipment but they play *with* loose parts, and that is a world of difference.





As a society our understanding of play, and the value of play, is evolving. We are beginning to challenge some of the assumptions that have led to playgrounds that all look the same. We are beginning to see that we have been good at engineering fixed equipment that may be safe in the moment but that does little to prepare children for how to identify, and then navigate or avoid, risk across the longer arc of their lives. Science is helping us to see that children need play as a foundation for learning.

At Bernheim we remain committed to involving children in learning about water cycles, forest ecology, gardening, and introducing them to the “ologies.” But the water cycle means very little to a child that hasn’t first stomped in a mud puddle, tried to dam up a trickle in a creek, or played through a downpour. The hard work is providing those experiences for children. Once you’ve done that, the water cycle stuff is easy.

As Bernheim’s Children at Play Initiative moves forward, we are excited about what might come next. There’s still a great deal of work to do around building a common language for play, but there are also systemic challenges at the state and national level that deal with everything from permitting to planning. The good news is that other countries have started that effort, and more and more research supports asking new questions or reframing old ones. Regardless of the lens we each use to consider the value of play, we all have one thing in common. We all want our children to have the best experiences they can possibly have to grow up as healthy, productive people ready to take on the next generation of challenges that are certain to be ahead of us. It’s a good bet our playgrounds will somehow be intrinsically linked to making that all go well.

So are you ready to save the world? Good. First let’s play. Tag...you’re it! ✨

## Website

[bernheim.org](http://bernheim.org)

## Photo Credits

Claude Stephens

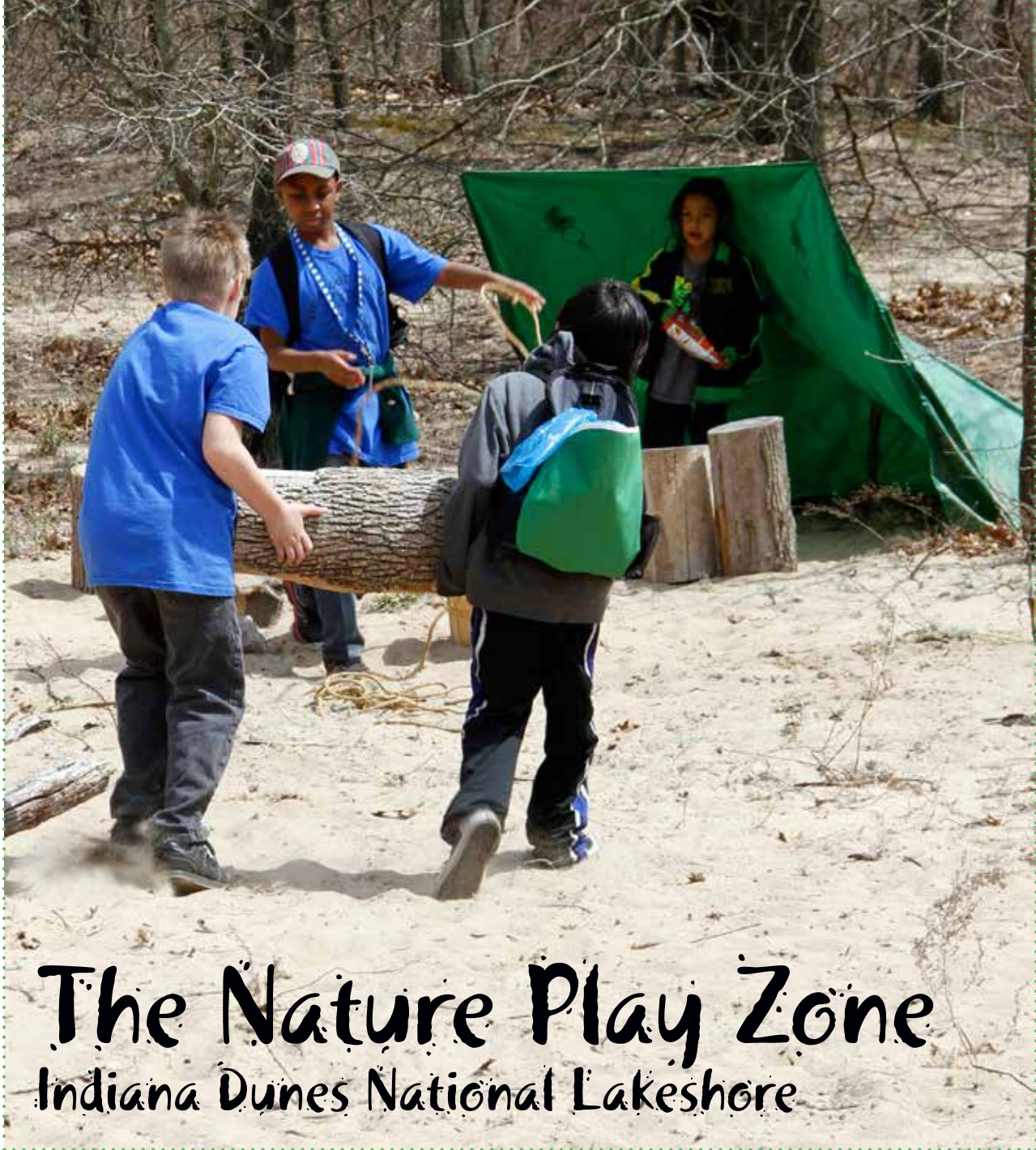
### Author

**Claude Stephens** is the Facilitator of Outreach and Regenerative Design at Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest in Kentucky. He has more than 30 years of experience in informal education and an academic background in biology and evolutionary ecology. Claude takes a natural systems approach to projects with restorative aspirations. He has served on numerous non-profit boards and community efforts focused on creating livable communities.

Claude is an adventure play advocate, storyteller, urban homesteader, parent, and supporter of ideas and actions that make communities healthier, more creative places to dwell. His interest in play stems from a belief that it is through play that we begin to build the next generation of environmental stewards. Plus, it's fun.







# The Nature Play Zone

## Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore

Kim Swift

**I**t is a gorgeous June day at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, and I'm watching several families enjoying the park. One group is standing around a young oak tree looking up at two young girls scurrying up the branches like a couple of squirrels. The mom turns to me and says, "I didn't even know they knew how to climb a tree." Another group is playing in the sand, hiding rocks, digging up others, and exclaiming with joy like they just found gold. A third group is building a small fort, laying an intricate pattern of sticks and driftwood around a larger trunk they have inserted into the ground. The older child is helping the younger one in a rare display of sibling cooperation, according to their dad. In some parks, these would all be ticket-able offenses, and I would be going out to chide the parents and wrangle the kids back onto a trail or

picnic area. However, these are just the type of nature connections we are seeking at our new Nature Play Zone. So I just smile and watch.

We've been witnessing and facilitating this kind of behavior since we started testing the Nature Play Zone in April, 2012, and the response from visitors, schools, and youth groups has been overwhelmingly positive. To understand how this project grew and how we are able to allow some folks to get away with breaking park rules, you need to understand some of the history and geography of this national park site.

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore is one of 409 national parks in the system and includes a state park within its recognized boundary. Established in 1966, it represents one of the early urban/suburban parks under the auspices of bringing parks to people. The park encompasses 25 miles of southern Lake Michigan shoreline at the northwest corner of Indiana. It is a relatively small park, just 15,000 acres, stretched between the Indiana cities of Gary and Michigan City. Historically it was—and currently continues to be—a popular beach destination for Chicagoland residents with 1.5 - 2 million visitors exploring the park each year. The boundaries of the park look like a patchwork quilt as it weaves along three counties and around eight smaller municipalities. Of course, we can't forget that smack in the middle of the park lies one of the country's largest freshwater ports and a world-class steel making industrial site. All of this urban/industrial footprint sits amongst some of the best floral biodiversity in the country with numerous micro-habitats of dunes, wetlands, prairies, and woodlands. So Indiana Dunes has an atypical national park footprint, geographically speaking, but it also provides an opportunity for millions of people to have a national park experience within a 90 minute drive.

With that background, let's tackle the next question: how did we create the first and possibly only free play or nature play area in a national park site? It all started with Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods*. Several of us on staff read his book, including our park superintendent, who approached the education team and suggested we initiate an unstructured play area similar to what Louv describes in his book. So we took on the challenge by first visiting other nature centers in the region with these types of play areas. We found some excellent examples and were inspired by the range of options, from the highly developed Hamill Family Play Zoo at Brookfield Zoo in Chicago to the Wild Place at Lyman Woods on the west side of the city, which was just a roped-off section of meadow and woods behind the nature center.

Next, we started looking for a good spot at the national lakeshore. We wanted an area where staff or volunteers could interact with participants regularly, so it had to be near a staffed site with parking. We needed a place that was already developed or disturbed. We didn't want to open up a new area of the park, and it couldn't be in endangered species territory. We manage for both the federally protected Karner blue butterfly and the federally threatened wildflower called Pitcher's thistle. So we had to do some vegetation sampling at any potential site. Luckily, as we were doing a park clean up near the Paul H. Douglas Center for Environmental Education, the park's primary education facility, we stumbled upon a site that met all three criteria—near parking and a staffed site, no sensitive species, and previously disturbed as it was a railroad junction about 50 years ago.

It was really pretty easy after that. We worked with a high school class to conduct vegetation monitoring of the area to identify what was growing there. Since we did not





find any threatened or endangered species habitat, we were able to clean up the area, removing trash, glass, and debris. We did the necessary federally mandated compliance work and put the project into the National Park Service's project system for feedback. We removed invasive species such as oriental bittersweet, black locust, and tree of heaven, again with the help of volunteers and student groups. Once the approval process within the park service was complete and we received a green light, we set up a pilot program with actual children.

That first summer of testing provided excellent feedback for our team. We set up an unobtrusive observation form for staff to use when they brought families to the area. We learned which activities children preferred and which areas of the play zone were their favorites. We also watched the adults and how they interacted with the



children, and we quickly learned that the way the adults react directly correlates to how the children behave in the area. When the adults are relaxed and get involved, even in a small way, the children respond positively. If they sense the adults are not comfortable and are going to get upset if they get dirty, then the children react differently, quarreling with each other, resorting to traditional playground behavior, and being less willing to experiment.



Experimenting and exploring are the behaviors we want to see at this new space. When children are given that freedom, they seem to display an inherent talent to use their imaginations and let the magic of nature happen. Time seems to slow down here, and they forget about electronic devices and TV shows. They just play. Nature play has a different feel than traditional playground play. It is more inquiry-oriented, with children asking questions and finding answers on their own or with the help of adults or other kids. They build elaborate nests, forts, and designs. They cooperate with each other and try new things. They explore and search for the six-lined racerunner lizards that dart between the rocks. They dance with the wildflowers and just sit by themselves making castles with rocks. It feels so good to watch this kind of play, especially in our area, a middle class neighborhood of Gary, Indiana, where these types of play areas are non-existent and even built playgrounds are few and far between. It is accessible to thousands of local residents who can walk, ride bikes, drive, or take public buses to the play area and its nearby Douglas Center for Environmental Education which is open for indoor nature activities.

Several adults who brought children to the first pilot programs at the play area suggested that a shade structure be erected since the area is quite open to the sun and elements. Fortunately, the National Park Service provided the funding for that suggestion through its Healthy Parks, Healthy People initiative. We contracted for an innovative shade shelter and used green paving materials to make a pavilion and walkway that is accessible for strollers and wheelchairs.

In addition to the structure at the play area, the park initiated a Nature in My Neighborhood campaign to coincide with the opening of the Nature Play Zone. In the hopes of inspiring and cultivating nature play at home, we provided free nature backpack kits to the first 1,000 families who visited the Nature Play Zone the first spring and summer. The backpacks provided tools such as binoculars, journals, and a field guide for



children to continue nature exploration on their own. Additional funding for this program came from the park's partner, the Dunes National Park Association which helped us kick off the opening in April, 2013.

Since that grand opening, the play area has hosted over 3000 children, both in family groups and in organized school or youth organizations. The response has been incredible from both the public and the park staff who help facilitate play. Children appear to appreciate and respect the natural areas that they discover and explore, without need for adult intervention. Park staff and management were initially concerned that creating this kind of natural play area would conflict with the National Park Service resource management objectives and send mixed signals that these activities could happen anywhere in the park, not just at this special place. However, there does not appear to be an increase in destructive or consumptive behavior. The next phase of evaluation of this program will be to develop a way to measure changed perceptions and attitudes about the outdoors and even about conservation.

We are also hoping to plant this seed of nature play in other national parks as well as other state and local park sites. Recently, the city of Gary contacted us about creating a similar free play zone in one of the city's park sites that is being redeveloped. They wanted to know what lessons we had learned at the Nature Play Zone. It is exciting to see this idea spread within the region, the nation, and even the world. My advice for folks wanting to initiate this type of play area is simple—don't get too many adults involved. Let the kids lead the way. They are the experts in showing us how to play. \*

## Website

[nps.gov/indu/index](https://nps.gov/indu/index)

## Photo Credits

Dunes National Lakeshore Park Staff

## Author

**Kim Swift** has worked at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore as the supervisory education specialist and formerly as a field interpreter since 1992. Her role involves managing the education branch of the division of interpretation and education. She develops programs for students, professional development workshops for teachers, and larger curriculum materials for schools on an ongoing basis as new resource needs are identified.

Before coming to the NPS, Kim served as a Peace Corps volunteer for two years in Papua New Guinea focusing on community development in a very remote part of the country. She was later contracted by the Peace Corps to develop and conduct the environmental education pre-service training in both Kazakhstan and the Solomon Islands to prepare new volunteers for service.

Kim has a bachelor's degree in photojournalism from Western Kentucky University and has served as the park's photographer in the past. She later received a Master of Science in Parks and Recreation Administration with an Environmental Education emphasis at Indiana University.





# Chapter Seven

# Advocating for Play

## Passion, Values, Priorities and Partnerships

*Play is nature's way of teaching children how to solve their own problems, control their impulses, modulate their emotions, see from others' perspectives, negotiate differences, and get along with others as equals. There is no substitute for play as a means of learning these skills.*

—Dr. Peter Gray, *Free to Learn*

Linda Rhoads

### Passion



**If you are reading this, you are likely already** passionate about ensuring that children have opportunities for play. Maybe one or more of the models in this publication inspired you to strategize about how to create a new play space or program in your community. Or maybe you want to convert a temporary program into a lasting year-round one. You're confident you can develop the space and some innovative offerings, and that people will come. Planning and implementation may come easily, but advocating for systemic change may not come naturally.

As a passionate advocate for play, how will you drive cultural shifts and norms to integrate play into your neighborhood, park, school, or museum, so they become part of the fabric of childhood? Passion will serve you well to raise money, generate enthusiasm, spread your message, motivate volunteers and, metaphorically speaking, get the ball rolling. But how do you institutionalize something so wonderfully unconventional in a world full of familiar and predictable options? Soccer, hockey, gymnastics, dance, band, theatre, the list goes on.... How do you elevate free and unstructured play to the top of the list with so many competing alternatives?

As any advocacy 101 text will tell you, it's critical to utilize tactics that will ultimately influence key decision-makers. Tactics may include organic grassroots organizing; phone calling and letter writing; media blitzes including print, electronic, television, radio, and the gambit of social media platforms; lobbying of leaders and policy makers; events; and numerous variations on and combinations of these approaches.

But all too often, advocates for a cause become disillusioned when others don't share their passion. As a leader in advocating for play, it's important to recognize and honor the passions of those who can make or break the success of your initiative. Conversely, it's critical to recognize that a lack of shared passion isn't necessarily an indicator for lack of support. While play may not be the passion of a key decision-maker, there is still room for common ground. And that's where values come in.

## Values

Why differentiate between passion and values? Passion, derived from powerful feelings and emotions, is often closely tied to a position or a specific solution or course of action. Values are intrinsic and help define a person's ethics, their interests, and what is important to them—the proverbial moral compass, so-to-speak. So even if your passions are not aligned, there is usually room to explore shared values.

A key task then, is to determine the importance of play within the context of these shared values. Consider crafting the description of your play project, and its role in childhood, so that it resonates with decision-makers. Imagine the listeners hearing all of the reasons why they should support your efforts through the lens of their values. This reframing of your initiative will increase the likelihood that decision-makers will more quickly see how play is aligned with what is important to them.

The National League of Cities report, "State of the Cities 2016," includes a list of the top 10 issues for mayors. This top 10 list is a good starting place to deduce some inferred values. For example, the value associated with economic development could be, "Economic systems support sustainable financial health and growth." And for public safety, the value could be, "Residents have safe places to live, work, and play," and so on.





For each of the top 10 issues, spend some time writing about how your play initiative, program, or project is aligned with each issue or inferred value. Preparing your talking points using this framework, will help you articulate your plan from a values-based perspective and simultaneously address the top 10 concerns as reported by mayors.

## Top 10 Issues for Mayors

Issue	Inferred Values Statement	How Your Play Project Supports the Inferred Value
Economic development	Economic systems support sustainable financial health and growth.	?
Public safety	Residents have safe places to live, work, and play.	?
Budgets	Expenses will not exceed revenue; revenue streams will be identified for new programs.	?
Infrastructure	Residents will have services, facilities, and transportation that are reliable, utilize most current technology, and designed for future expansion.	?
Education	Public education will support the growth and development of all children (preK-higher education) to achieve their full potential.	?
Housing	Innovative strategies will ensure safe, affordable, comfortable living opportunities for all residents.	?
Environment/ Energy	A conservation ethic will drive natural resource use decisions.	?
Demographics	Community-based programs drive initiatives and decision-making to support community demographics.	?
Data/Technology	Use of most current technology supports work and leisure of all residents with an eye toward positioning for the future.	?
Health care	All residents, from the youngest to the oldest, have access to the best health and wellness services and treatments available.	?



## Priorities

Another challenge for advocacy work is identifying and overcoming competing priorities. In a complex world where there are multiple perspectives on issues and their corresponding solutions, we are usually given the impression that there are only two “sides” to everything and you must pick a side. Consequently, the process of navigating complex issues and competing priorities is an important skill for successful advocacy.

Again, in the National League of Cities report, “State of Cities 2016,” the following six trends are identified:

1. Mayors continue to be focused on improving their local economies and encouraging entrepreneurship.
2. Mayors are seeing improved revenue and are being judicious about how to spend it.
3. Mayors are cautiously optimistic about the future and are leading in the development of sustainable communities where people want to live.
4. Mayors are concerned about the uptick in the murder rate even though overall crime rates are historically low.
5. Mayors are concerned about the increasing opioid epidemic.
6. Mayors are helping their cities see the value of using technology and data to drive decisions and make their city governments more efficient and effective.

At first glance, it may seem like a challenge to articulate a rationale for play that is aligned with the priorities in your community, town, or city. In preparation for a conversation with a decision-maker, consider developing your key talking points about the value and benefits of play. In addition to The Seven Powers of Play described below, we’ve included quotes and other resources throughout the book that serve as excellent guides for crafting your message. How can play support the priorities in your community?



## The Seven Powers of Play

The Minnesota Children’s Museum has identified seven powers of play that help children interact positively with others, manage their emotions, and make sense of the world around them. These powers of play contribute to healthy minds and bodies.

**Creative Thinking**—To consider and experiment with alternatives freely and without fear in any situation.

**Critical Thinking**—To discern knowledge, information, and interests in order to solve a problem, prove a point, or decide what to believe.

**Self-Control**—To interface with and within a bustling society with the ability to manage one’s own attention, emotions, and behaviors.

**Confidence**—To genuinely believe in one’s own abilities to experience success and satisfaction in not only what one can do, but also what one is willing to try.

**Collaboration**—To engage with others positively and productively in pursuit of a common goal.

**Communication**—To take language and literacy (the tools of communication) and use them to exchange information with power and precision.

**Coordination**—To recognize, use, and appreciate the physical marvels of the human body.



## Partnerships and Problem Solving

In any endeavor, leveraging strategic partnerships can be one of the most effective ways to advance a new initiative, program, or policy change. Just as it is important to identify the values of decision-makers, understanding the values, priorities, objectives, and goals of prospective partners is also important.

To assess if an organization could be an optimal partner, it is advantageous to articulate your criteria for the ideal partner before approaching a new organization. In some cases, your initiative and message can be strengthened and amplified by larger, well-branded, and known organizations. In other cases, forming a collective of organizations with a variety of missions can bring multiple, important perspectives to your advocacy work.

In nurturing relationships with prospective partners, it is important to explore how a partnership can support the goals of each organization. A guiding question can be, “How can this partnership help address the challenges or interests of each partner organization?” Viewing your role in the partnership as a problem-solver can help you stay focused on working collaboratively on the issues and concerns of your partners, key decision-makers, and other stakeholders.

As an example of a creative partnership, the Alliance for Childhood is engaged in a strategic network of organizations focused on getting children of all ages outside. This unique coalition, the Outdoors Alliance for Kids (OAK) includes over 80 groups with a variety of missions. While their missions may seem disparate, underlying their organizational initiatives is the strong shared value of supporting a healthy childhood for all children. This value is the glue that keeps the network committed to a broad range of strategies designed to advance its vision.

The interests of the members of OAK include children’s healthy development; increasing children’s play in nature; children’s education; reducing childhood obesity; creating future stewards of our environment and natural resources; providing work for veterans and young people; sustainable transportation; preservation of wildlife and wild places; and providing outdoor experiences for at-risk, minority, and inner-city youth.







As a member of OAK, and by working together in this partnership, Alliance for Childhood's interests are amplified by other members just as we help broaden the reach of other OAK organizations. The partnership provides a framework for OAK members to speak as one powerful voice on behalf of our shared values.

In Wisconsin, another partnership (which, coincidentally, also uses the acronym "Oak") illustrates how working together can create significant results through collaborative problem solving. Scott Ashmann of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay described the project for us:

Four organizations came together with different needs and jointly developed a nature-based early childhood program. The four are the Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary and the City of Green Bay, of which it is a part, the local school district, and the University of Wisconsin in Green Bay.

The Oak Learning Center at the Wildlife Sanctuary admitted its first classes of students during the 2013-14 academic year. It was the first nature-based four-year-old kindergarten (4K) program in Wisconsin connected with a public school district. Oak's goal was to offer a tuition-free program.

As in many states, four-year-old kindergarten is not mandated, but many school districts have offered it, which has created a shortage of classroom space. A statewide model has been developed whereby a school district can partner with another organization, such as the non-profit Wildlife Sanctuary, which had classroom space. This allowed the district to offer 4K without having to construct additional classrooms. The Learning Center's teacher and naturalist are city employees, and the University provides expertise and experience with environmental education along with field placements for early childhood teachers and interns. The partnership has been a strength of this program, with each partner using the Oak Learning Center to fulfill both philosophical goals and pragmatic needs.

## What goal or need has the Oak Learning Center helped each partner meet?

Partner	Philosophical Goal	Pragmatic Need
Green Bay Area Public School District	A customized learning track for each student is offered. The Oak program is the beginning of an environmental education track.	More 4K sites were needed for an increasing enrollment.
Bay Beach Wildlife Sanctuary	Environmental education is part of its mission. This program provides an opportunity for young children to begin developing an appreciation for and understanding of nature.	One objective was to increase enrollment in the Sanctuary's programming.
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay	Establishing more collaborations with community organizations was a priority of the new administration of the campus	The Oak program provided a field placement for pre-service teachers and a site for research studies concerning early childhood development.
City of Green Bay	The Oak program adds one more reason (a strong education system) why a family might choose Green Bay as a place to live.	Provides an employment opportunity for a teacher and naturalist

### Closing Thoughts

It's easy to imagine that advocacy requires high-powered lobbyists from big law firms working full time on an issue. But by spending a little time up front preparing your talking points, you can have great success. Using values-based language, focusing on the priorities in your community, and developing strategic partnerships are all keys to gaining support for your initiative. But first and foremost, be yourself, channel your passion, and tell your story. Let your vision be your guide and stay focused on the long-term view. Building a movement for adventure playgrounds, loose parts, and playpods is an achievable cultural shift. By sharing your passion, your deep commitment to systemic change and a healthy childhood for all children will shine through. Be persistent and know that your role as change agent is making a difference. \*



## Tips

- ◆ Lead with your passion—be your truly authentic self.
- ◆ Seek out creative and strategic partnerships.
- ◆ Commit to nurturing long-term relationships and partnerships.
- ◆ Be genuinely curious to learn about the values of others. Ask:
  - “What is important to you?”
  - “What resonates with you?”
- ◆ Communicate with values-based language.
- ◆ Co-create practical, hands-on solutions that help others address their priorities.

## Websites

Bolder Advocacy, An initiative of Alliance for Justice: [bolderadvocacy.org](http://bolderadvocacy.org)

Minnesota Children’s Museum, Seven Powers of Play: [mcm.org/playmoremn/7cs](http://mcm.org/playmoremn/7cs)

National League of Cities, “State of the Cities 2016”: [nlc.org](http://nlc.org)

OAK Learning Center: [baybeachwildlife.com/kindergarten](http://baybeachwildlife.com/kindergarten)

Outdoors Alliance for Kids: [outdoorsallianceforkids.org](http://outdoorsallianceforkids.org)

## Photo Credits

Play:groundNYC and Jill Wood



### Author

#### Linda Rhoads

Linda spent ten years with a global 500 corporation, did public service within two natural resource agencies, and served as executive director of three nonprofit organizations. During these years, she honed her skills in professional and leadership development, advocacy and lobbying, grassroots organizing, constituent mobilization, strategic communications, partnership cultivation, and capacity building. She was honored to receive awards for her role in achieving policy solutions for better education, healthy kids, and a clean environment. Linda serves on the steering

committee of the Outdoors Alliance for Kids, an advocacy network focused on advancing local, state, and federal initiatives to get children outside. She earned her Master of Science degree in Adult and Community College Education with a minor in science education from North Carolina State University, and undergraduate degrees in geography and psychology from Stetson University. As an avid kayaker, Linda enjoys any kind of play in the outdoors—especially on the water—in any season or weather!





# Afterword

## Sustaining the Adventure Play Movement

*If children in play have been able to give up their whole being to the world around them, they will be able, in the serious tasks of later life, to devote themselves with confidence and power to the service of the world.*

—Rudolf Steiner

**N**ow that the movement for play is gaining ground, how can it grow and thrive? At present, a few parks departments, such as the one in Huntington Beach, support adventure playgrounds, and their support has enabled their programs to thrive for 30 years or longer. Berkeley's adventure playground is another example. Near Los Angeles, Yorba Linda's parks department has been running adventure day camp for decades. Its sessions are filled on the first day of registration, and it now serves a second generation whose parents attended as children. More recently, the Mercer Island Adventure Playground was started by its parks department.

However, most of the new play initiatives start as non-profits and must raise all the funds needed to run their programs. They do so by reaching out to government agencies, local businesses, foundations, and health insurance companies. They also bring in fees from summer camps, after school programs, and pop-up play projects.

In a recent panel discussion about the further development of adventure play, many ideas were explored. They included:

As the health benefits of adventure play become more evident, insurance companies and health-oriented foundations are showing interest in play initiatives, and have given grants to local play projects. National grants are a next step that would support widespread development of the adventure play movement.

Government agencies and others working to reduce childhood obesity can include free play with their current focus on exercise, sports, and diet. Children tend to remain



in active play for hours, taking small breaks as needed, and then returning to their play. They do not remain with exercise for such long periods, or even with organized sports.

The Department of Agriculture is active in supporting summer lunch programs, often in conjunction with parks departments. As the Providence PlayCorps project has shown, bringing playwork staff and loose parts into the parks for a few hours during lunchtime increases the number of children coming for lunch, and engages them in healthy, active play.

Installing playpods for recess and after school programs is a new concept and appeals to many parents and school leaders. There is already staff on hand, and they can receive training in how to support child-initiated play. The costs for the pod itself and its materials are not overwhelming. Also, while recess sometimes only lasts 20 minutes, it still allows children to enter into rich, creative play, in part because their invented games continue day after day. Even deeper play develops during the longer time periods in after school programs, as described by Jill Wood of The Parish School in Houston.

As the demand for playworkers grows, the need for trainings—especially ones that yield university certificates or degrees—is also growing.

Some US playworkers have studied in England and received degrees in playwork. Others are enrolled in programs here which hope to affiliate with a university. One is an extensive online training offered by Pop-Up Adventure Play. In the other, the North Carolina Zoo offers three weekend sessions on playwork.

In local communities, play activists have given talks on the value of adventure play to parks departments, civic organizations, schools, and other community groups. Our chapter on advocacy has tips on how to present the benefits of adventure play to decision makers.

As with any movement that is just gaining strength, these efforts to establish the right of children to free, creative play require dedication and sacrifice from all who wish to see it succeed. Fortunately, there are many who are deeply committed to child-initiated play. They find they are enlivened by the work, as are the children, their families, and their communities. \*

## Photo Credits

Play:groundNYC



# Resources

## Adventure Playgrounds in the US

Berkeley Adventure Playground:

[ci.berkeley.ca.us/adventureplayground](http://ci.berkeley.ca.us/adventureplayground)

Hands-on-Nature Anarchy Zone at Ithaca Children's Garden:

[ithacachildrengarden.org](http://ithacachildrengarden.org)

Huntington Beach Adventure Playground, near LA:

[surfcityusa.com/listing/adventure-playground/58](http://surfcityusa.com/listing/adventure-playground/58)

Mercer Island Adventure Playground, near Seattle:

[mercergov.org/Page.asp?NavID=2768](http://mercergov.org/Page.asp?NavID=2768)

play:groundNYC:

[play-ground.nyc](http://play-ground.nyc)

Sallie Foster Adventure Playground, Omaha:

[facebook.com/Salliefosteradventureplayground](https://facebook.com/Salliefosteradventureplayground)

Yorba Linda Adventure Playground Camp, near LA:

[facebook.com/pages/Adventure-Playground/182954011753043](https://facebook.com/pages/Adventure-Playground/182954011753043)

## Playwork courses in the US

North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro:

[nczoo.org](http://nczoo.org) Search: Playing Out Workshops

Pop-up Adventure Play online studies:

[popupadventureplaygrounds.wordpress.com/welcome/services](http://popupadventureplaygrounds.wordpress.com/welcome/services)



## Print Materials

“A Research-Based Case for Recess” by Olga S. Jarrett

*A History of Child’s Play and Play Environments: Towards a contemporary child saving movement* by Joe L. Frost

*Asphalt to Ecosystems: Design ideas for schoolyard transformation* by Sharon Gamson Danks

*Evolutionary Playwork* by Bob Hughes

*Free Range Kids: How to raise safe, self-reliant children (without going nuts with worry)* by Lenore Skenazy

*Let Them Play: An early learning (un)curriculum* by Jeff A. Johnson and Denita Dinger

*Loose Parts: Inspiring play in young children* by Lisa Daly and Miriam Beloglovsky

*Natural Playscapes: Creating outdoor play environments for the soul* by Rusty Keeler

*Nature Preschools and Forest Kindergartens: The Handbook for Outdoor Learning* by David Sobel

*No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society* by Tim Gill

*Play: How it shapes the brain, opens the imagination, and invigorates the soul* by Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan

*Play in American Life: Essays in honor of Joe L. Frost* by Mary Ruth Moore and Constance Sabo-Risley, editors

*Playborhood: Turn your neighborhood into a place for play* by Mike Lanza

*Playing by Heart: The vision and practice of belonging* by Fred O. Donaldson

*Playwork: Theory and practice* by Fraser Brown

*The Case for Make Believe: Saving play in a commercialized world* by Susan Linn

*The New Adventure Playground Movement: How communities across the US are returning risk and freedom to childhood* by Morgan Leichter-Saxby and Suzanna Law

*The Power of Play: Learning what comes naturally* by David Elkind

## Videos

“Nature Play: Take childhood back” by Daniel and Aimie Stilling

“The Land: An adventure play documentary” by Erin Davis

“Where Do the Children Play?” Michigan Public Television, U. of Michigan Press

Providence PlayCorps Project: [youtube.com/watch?v=a3gNhRHt16o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3gNhRHt16o)





## **Websites** *(Also see those at the end of each section of this book)*

Alliance for Childhood International:

[alliancechildhood.org](http://alliancechildhood.org)

Child in the City:

[childinthecity.eu](http://childinthecity.eu)

International Play Association:

[ipaworld.org](http://ipaworld.org)

International Play Association/USA:

[ipausa.org](http://ipausa.org)

Let's Play America

[letsplayamerica.org](http://letsplayamerica.org)

National Institute of Play:

[nifplay.org](http://nifplay.org)

Play England:

[playengland.org.uk](http://playengland.org.uk)

Play Wales:

[cwvys.org.uk/member/play-wales](http://cwvys.org.uk/member/play-wales)

Rethinking Childhood:

[rethinkingchildhood.com](http://rethinkingchildhood.com)

The Association for the Study of Play:

[tasplay.org](http://tasplay.org)

US Play Coalition:

[usplaycoalition.org](http://usplaycoalition.org)



## Resources from the Alliance for Childhood

The Alliance has written or collaborated on a number of articles, reports, and videos about the value of play. They can be found at [allianceforchildhood.org](http://allianceforchildhood.org) under publications or on the home page. They include:

### Print Materials

*Adventure: The value of risk in children's play* by Joan Almon

*The Playwork Primer* by Penny Wilson

*Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why children need to play in school*  
by Edward Miller and Joan Almon

"The Crisis in Early Education—A research-based case for more play and less pressure"  
by Joan Almon and Edward Miller

### Toolkit

Play Based Experiential Learning (PBEL): [playbasedlearning.org](http://playbasedlearning.org)

### Videos

Playwork: An Introduction

The Benefits of Risk in Children's Play

Prescription for Play

## Photo Credits

Play:groundNYC



# The Playwork Principles



These 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 wellbeing 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.

**Developed by the Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff, Wales, 2005**

Reprinted from: [playworkfoundation.org/the-playwork-principles](http://playworkfoundation.org/the-playwork-principles)

# Playing It Up—With Loose Parts, Playpods, and Adventure Playgrounds

Child-initiated, creative play is returning after decades of erosion. Through the hard work and creative efforts of play activists, new opportunities for play are arising across North America, including the use of open-ended play materials in schools, parks, nature centers, and adventure playgrounds. Over 20 play initiatives are described in *Playing It Up*, with dozens of photographs that illustrate the deep meaning and joyful experience of play.

## **Joan Almon, Editor**

As co-founder of the Alliance for Childhood, and as a former Waldorf early childhood educator, Joan is committed to restoring play to the lives of all children. She is deeply inspired by the innovative leaders who are creating play opportunities for children across North America and whose work is featured in this book.



## **Published by the Alliance for Childhood**

The Alliance for Childhood works to build, strengthen, and empower advocacy networks for play to improve the lives of children—for their healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living.

