

Fair Play



for Children



ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS



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A BRIEF HISTORY

Introduction

I was prompted to write about the early developments of Adventure Playgrounds by a range of factors, particularly those referred to in the latter parts of this paper. Further to this however, I, along with many others connected to this area of work, became increasingly concerned that the fundamental philosophy underpinning the operational practices initiated by the pioneers of Adventure Playgrounds, was being somewhat misunderstood, forgotten and even disregarded. In addition, I am aware that many Playwork training programmes do not appear to emphasise the importance of the original concept. In determining this, I rely on my direct experience of being an Adventure Playground Worker over a long



period of time and a trainer involved in writing and delivering basic introductory courses through to degree and post-graduate levels of training.

When I expressed my intention, to a number of respected and appropriate people, to write about the history of Adventure Playgrounds, I was particularly encouraged by the support of my very dear friend and past work colleague, Professor Fraser Brown. Fraser was himself a lone Adventure Playground Worker operating on an isolated site on a large social housing estate in the north west of England when I first met him many years ago. In preparing and writing this paper he has been tremendously helpful

in offering his professional assistance in providing constructive assessment and human support for which I thank him unreservedly.

1) The Beginning

The concept of what we now refer to as Adventure Playgrounds had its beginnings in the early 1940's and perhaps even before. As early as 1939 there were clear examples of a more enlightened approach to the provision of play areas, as indicated by a playground in Bolton, Lancashire. Here, instead of the traditional metal swings, slides and roundabouts, there was an abundance of unconventional wooden structures of a wide and stimulating variety. Elsewhere, a number of play sites throughout the UK witnessed the introduction of "unusual" play items such as old train engines, disused lifeboats, old buses and unwanted railway carriages. The latter two items were later often adapted to accommodate equipment storage and indoor play on emerging Adventure Playgrounds.

The prospect for a more imaginative and exciting approach to play opportunities was being explored by a wide range of organisations including some forward thinking local authorities. This was as a consequence of and a realisation that there was a need for more child oriented, clearly defined and dedicated spaces for children's play – places where children could express themselves in a free and unrestricted manner in response to their instinctive urge to explore, experiment, invent and extend their various and multi-faceted patterns of play behaviour.

This was demonstrated by children (and I was one of

such!) who during and after World War II were often to be seen playing on bomb sites, lighting fires, building a variety of structures, mainly dens and the like, using the materials readily available there. If and where trees were to be found, children invariably made swings, tree houses and such. In place trees, the cast iron arms of the street lamp posts would be used for swings! Such improvisation of course, reflected the imagination and play instincts of children since time immemorial.

There was a gallant effort to accommodate such play behaviour as highlighted by a project in Morden, Surrey and reported in the Evening News, November, 1947 when a “Junk Playground” was created on waste ground with *“a grown-up who can help, but won’t boss – and the rest is up to children”*. The newspaper went on to refer to similar developments elsewhere, for instance an *“Under-Fourteens Council suggested the scheme for our big cities.”* They stated that, *“Stepney and Shoreditch Councils have already reserved pieces of land for the scheme. Westminster has just bought two sites intending to use them as ordinary playgrounds. This seems to be a chance to try out the idea in another area where it is badly needed.”*

Coincidentally (and perhaps ironically), Morden was not only the possible birth place of the Adventure Playground concept in the UK, but also the birth place of Fraser Brown, an Adventure Playground Worker in the mid 1970s and the first Professor in Playwork in the U.K.! How curious is that!

When the “junk playground” concept began to gather momentum, it was clearly recognised by the early pioneers that provision needed to be a totally child centred environment where supervision was not so strictly applied. This was so that children and young people could be free of unnecessary constraints and simply be themselves. They needed to be places

which would be without adult imposed controls and intervention, as profoundly stated in the newspaper article referred to above; places where *“a grown up ... won’t boss – and the rest is up to children”*. A clear enough statement of intent; it was to be an environment where there were no meaningless rules, regulations and play-restrictive controls.

Development of such a concept was originally determined by Professor Carl Sorenson (1931), a landscape architect by profession. He arrived at a considered view of children’s play needs as a consequence of witnessing children persistently accessing construction sites, bomb sites and landscape development areas in order to use loose materials for play experiences within such locations. Sorenson recognised the need for a place where children could express their individual and collective imagination and creativity; a specific space available to children when they most needed it – when not in school i.e. *evenings, weekends and all school holidays*.

Sorenson’s “Junk Playground” as it was referred to, was established in 1943 in a small urban area, Emdrup just outside Copenhagen. It was provision which reflected Sorenson’s idea that *“children could create and shape, dream and imagine”*; an understanding long since recognised as essential elements of primary play behaviour. The latter two are very often overlooked aspects of play, yet so much of this takes place in the child’s mind. Children are frequently imagining, fantasising, creating, exploring and determining their play in their minds, much of which absorbs them for long periods of time. Of his concept, Sorenson (1951:314) stated “...

of all the things I have helped to realise, the Junk Playground is the ugliest; yet for me it is the best and most beautiful of my works”.





All such re-usable materials added to and helped develop their play experiences through imaginative and creative uses. Bertelson emphasised that: ”

The purpose of the leader was not to govern children from outside and direct their building activity to a useful goal, but rather to act from within, by allowing them to pursue their own projects”

(Kozlovsky 2007: 8). He also strongly advocated that initiative must come from children themselves and went on to say; *“I cannot and indeed will not, teach the children anything”* (Bertelsen 1972: 20)

Carl Sorenson also stressed that children ought to be free of external controls in their play by determining for themselves how, when and where they played, thereby maximising the opportunities to establish their own play parameters to the greatest possible extent. With regard to this, it was suggested that adults ought to be exceedingly careful when seeking to intervene in the play lives, events and behaviour of children. Such an approach was later reinforced by visionaries such as Drummond Abernethy and Lady Marjorie Allen. (Refer to sections 2 and 6)

The appointment of a “supervisor” in the Emdrup situation, as was also the case in Morden, later to be referred to as a *Play Leader*, was considered to be required to ensure that “dangerous” and potentially harmful activities on the site were noted and children offered assistance when asked for or needed. It was generally agreed however, that children had to consider their own capacity for confronting and dealing with risks.

John Bertelson, the first *Play Leader in Emdrup*, also had responsibility for identifying potential sources for the regular supply of tools and materials. These were items such as timber, old tyres, ropes, nets and other resources provided so as to enable children to have constant access to creative play opportunities.

The *Play Leader* was seen, by the children as someone who, among other things, was able to “protect” their play environment and prevent outside intrusion and interference, perhaps through the introduction of various control mechanisms such as fences and gates. (See Taylor 2008)

2) *Early Developments in the UK*

As a direct result of a visit to Emdrup in the mid 1940s, Lady Allen of Hurtwood reinforced the concept of “Junk Playgrounds” in Britain. Marjorie Allen as she preferred to be known was herself a landscape architect and no great lover of bureaucracy or stringent planning control mechanisms. She stressed the need to keep such provision “out of the hands of officials and professionals”. (This was emphatically expressed to me during a conversation I had with her prior to the extension of Blacon Adventure Playground undertaken in 1969/70 to accommodate more disabled children)



It was in late 1948 and clearly after the Morden project and other similar initiatives, that a more defined approach to “Junk Playgrounds” was established and the first Adventure Playgrounds, as they became known in Britain, opened; Lollard Street and Clydesdale Road, both in London and another in Rathbone Street, China Town, Liverpool. These Adventure Playgrounds were at the forefront of a more substantial movement, and further organised voluntary provision followed in urban areas such as Grimsby, London, Liverpool, Bristol, Manchester, Birmingham and other areas in the Midlands, Sheffield, Newcastle, Cardiff and Edinburgh. The early new towns emerging in post-war Britain also provided Adventure Playgrounds; Crawley and Stevenage for example integrated Adventure Playground provision into their high density housing developments. Such an initiative was later incorporated into additional new town areas which were created in the 1960s/70s, e.g. Telford, Runcorn and Peterborough.

3) Management Structures and Operational Practices

Historically, most Adventure Playgrounds were established in urban areas in response to decreasing space for children to play imaginatively and creatively. Large, densely built and heavily populated residential areas were springing up all over post-war Britain.

In the early days of their development, Adventure Playgrounds were often initiated and managed by local groups and subsequently seen as an essential, lively and vibrant component of the communities in which they were located. Most were established on land that was economically of little value, or indeed, in the case of some of the larger towns and cities, on bomb sites. Large numbers of children throughout the U.K. at this time played on derelict sites (as indicated earlier), using debris to be found there and supplemented by unwanted/discarded household material. Imaginative constructive &/or deconstructive play such as den-building with regular re-building, or making camp-fires, was a frequently witnessed event. Marjorie Allen, writing for the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education described Adventure Playgrounds as follows:

“They are decidedly messy occupations and they make the planners who are mainly tidy minded, unhappy. Nevertheless they must never forget children enjoy dirty and untidy, adults abhor it and we have to decide whether we are to make playgrounds for children or playgrounds that please the planners”

The physical content, shape and layout of Adventure Playgrounds was determined by the availability of material resources, the imagination and inventiveness of the children and staff and seasonal factors. Initially very few had purpose-built indoor play accommodation, often relying simply on self-built “play hut” type constructions in order to store tools and equipment and to house a phone perhaps. Further to this, one of the first structures to be built on the playground was quite often a shelter where Playworkers and kids could sit around a fire chatting, singing or baking potatoes and other such delicacies! This informal gathering place helped to establish mutual trust, often resulting in children revealing considerable information about their fears, expectations and so on. It was frequently the starting



point for the unique relationships that developed between the Playworker and children.

With regard to the absence of other indoor provision, Playworkers often relied on local residents when wishing to access facilities for their ‘personal needs’, there being no utilities linked to the sites! Obviously this reinforced the fact that the Play Worker was indeed accepted as part of the community.

In spite of having little by way indoor facilities, quite a number of Adventure Playgrounds kept animals on their sites. Rabbits, goats, donkeys, gerbils and chickens (many mysteriously disappearing at Christmas times!) and even sheep, were often looked after by the children and staff. Many animals arrived due to their owners not being able to give sufficient time to their care. The Blacon Adventure Playground in Chester, one of the longest established in the UK, (and still attracting overwhelming numbers of children) to this day has quite a large variety of animals as part of its urban farm, which is an integral feature of the site. The animals require considerable husbandry which is undertaken by kids and staff. The introduction of animals is a valuable asset to an Adventure Playground as it is another element of play education that too few children experience in their lives.

Adventure Playgrounds as indicated earlier, were invariably fully supported by children and the communities in which they were located and most were subsequently managed by neighbourhood groups. In many instances officers and elected members of the local authority also became actively involved and supportive. Other voluntary organisations, the local church and sometimes even local businesses took an active interest and joined management bodies. With regard to the cost of establishing and maintaining Adventure Playgrounds in the early days of their existence, most were funded by temporary government funding initiatives such as the Urban-Aid Programme and/or directly through

finance from local authorities. Such funding systems were frequently supported by the use of other government initiatives of the day such as the Job Creation Programme (JCP) and the Special Temporary Employment Project (STEP). However most, if not all Adventure Playgrounds, had to organise creative fund raising activities for additional running costs or for new and further development of



the site.

Few Adventure Playgrounds were established in rural areas because of the general misconception that children living in such areas had free and easy access to more adventurous play opportunities. This is a fallacy that persists even today. It has to be stressed that *all* children have a human drive to play whatever their culture, age or social and economic circumstances, and regardless of their physical, emotional and intellectual capacities. (Chilton. "Where Can Children Play" 1989) All children are special and so are their needs, which are varied and diverse, therefore, provision surely must reflect this. Children need to have access to free, unadulterated, creative, stimulating and developmental play experiences on a regular basis no matter where they live and irrespective of their individual or collective status.

4)

Indoor Facilities and Social Provision

Although most Adventure Playgrounds focussed on outdoor play in the early part of their history (indeed in most instances there was no other option!), with the introduction of additional grant-aid from various sources and the need to extend the activities throughout the whole year and in all weathers, indoor play provision was given a greater focus. Many sites established such provision in a comprehensive manner. Toilets for all abilities, offices, first-aid facilities, kitchens, arts and craft rooms, storage, quiet rooms, etc. were provided in many instances. There were still many sites however where steel containers, old railway carriages and double/single deck buses were used as the only indoor "facility"

The introduction of purpose-built indoor provision created opportunities for extending the range of play activity in addition to promoting and reinforcing the obvious, which is that children do play all-year round. Indoor space was also used for a variety of other social needs, such as parent and toddler groups, community meetings, probation services, the accommodating of long-term truants and children with school phobias. There were cases where the facilities were used for "home tuition" where a child had been excluded from all schools and where the child's own home environment was not conducive to such a process.

These "extra- curricular activities" had to be fully understood and agreed by the children in the first instance. All such developments enabled the Playworkers to become associated with a wide variety of services for children with particular requirements. The Playworker was seen by other professions as someone with a wide and sympathetic knowledge of

local children and their families and was therefore regularly involved in case discussions.

Of considerable importance in all these developments, was that at the very centre, there existed a strong, unique, trusting and binding relationship between the Playworker and the child. The Playworker ensured that the child's needs were paramount.

5) Staffing Matters

Wherever they were located, most Adventure Playgrounds opened at times when children and young people of all ages (i.e. 3/4 years upward), needed them most - for example, after school, generally until late in the evening (often until 10 pm in summer months for older children), at weekends and during school holidays, 7 days a week - thus demonstrating that the prime concern was for the needs of children, rather than the image or requirements of the organisation providing the facility. However, staffing issues were particularly problematic because of the absence of job security such as employment contracts, adequate policies on pay and conditions and future career prospects and structure, all of which, including poor funding mechanisms, contrived to create very low, staffing levels, in terms of numbers,.

Many sites were staffed by one full-time Playworker, a good number of who were sometimes unsure of receiving their salaries because of the uncertainty and frailty of the grant-aid system which was often the manner in which provision was funded. Due to the exacting and demanding workloads, physically, emotionally and socially, there was a relatively high turnover of staff. It was not until much later that staffing levels and pay and conditions were

recognised as being in need of serious consideration. The recommendation that there be at least two full time members on site with additional support during peak school holiday periods was eventually accepted after many years of discussion. It has since been established through many discussions and debates organised by Playwork organisations and other bodies, over recent years, that in order to be able to respond to the out-of-school play needs of children (and also the out-of-work needs of young people aged from 15 years upward using the facilities), the employment of three full-time Playworkers be the accepted basic staffing level, supplemented by additional sessional workers during busy holiday



periods.

It is worth recording that the term *Play Leader* was changed in the 1970s to Playworker by the APWA (see Section 6) because of the need to emphasise that the *leaders in play were indeed the children*; the Playworker being seen as the facilitator or enabler rather than someone who initiated play behaviour. Playworkers undertook to operate *alongside children, working with them, for them and on their behalf* but rarely if ever taking the lead, even though on certain occasions they would initiate or generate interest in a particular "event". Knowing when to "intervene" and when to "withdraw" was critical in the unique relationship between the child and the Playworker.

Volunteers from the local community were heavily

and frequently relied upon to give support to the paid Playworker. Further to this, some Adventure Playground projects also used volunteers from abroad organised through the International Voluntary Service Council (IVS). During the long school holiday periods some projects even used local police cadets as volunteers as well as college and university students. It is worth emphasising that voluntary support, included young people who had used the sites for many years, and in number of situations later became paid Playworkers themselves or went into other related fields of work as a result of their experiences of working on Adventure Playgrounds.

6) Support Agencies

In the late '50s and early '60s a number of movements were established with the intention of developing underpinning values and operational principles, philosophical, political and practical foundations for creating and sustaining Adventure Playgrounds. Initial organisations for furthering the new concept of adventure play were:

The Adventure Playgrounds Workers' Association (APWA) among other activities aimed to create a more enlightened understanding of the role of Adventure Playground Workers and produced the first "Pay & Conditions for Playworkers Document" in addition to initiating discussion around the Politics and Philosophy of Play. The APWA was also instrumental in helping to establish the Joint National Committee for Training in Play Leadership, playing a very prominent role at the inaugural meeting held in a pub in Chester in 1973. It is worth noting that all the members of APWA attended meetings in various locations throughout the UK and did so without their

expenses being re-claimed. I stress this in a clumsy attempt to highlight the sheer commitment of those involved in Adventure Playgrounds at a time when they received little support other than from each other. Such collective support together with very determined and united operational aims and gallant attempts to improve working conditions, was in my view, as near to a union of Play Workers as we have ever achieved. I would strongly suggest that such a united approach is in considerable contrast to what is perhaps seen in today's disparate Play Work



movement.

The London Adventure Playground Association (LAPA) now named Playlink, as a major body in the Adventure Playground movement, was also an organisation which was responsible for overseeing a wide range of administrative matters including working conditions in liaison with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). In addition to other organisational responsibilities, it oversaw operational practices, training for management committees and staff. LAPA also determined terms of references for Adventure Playground workers in the London area.

The National Playing Fields Association (NPFSA) from its inception and early development campaigned vigorously for greater consideration to be given in protecting and developing spaces for recreation and childrens play. The NPFSA had considerable influence with regard to establishing the Adventure

Playground movement throughout the country. It provided starter grants to many, which were often supplemented by the County Playing Fields Associations operating in most areas of the UK. Such grants were used to promote/provoke financial support from local authorities.

Drummond Abernethy (1977) of the NPFA, along with Lady Marjorie Allen, was energetic, vocal and tireless in stressing the importance of free and developmental play as pursued by children using Adventure Playgrounds. Through its Regional Officer structure, the NPFA offered constant support to the creation and ongoing management mechanisms needed for the enhancement and protection of provision (many of the Regional Officer staff were

incident to the lack of appropriate recreational spaces and places where children could express their developing personalities through play. The Fair Play for Children Campaign, supported by the NPFA, through its Regional Officer structure, initiated the concept of regional play associations/play councils which were subsequently established throughout Britain. Most of them provided direct support and assistance to the Adventure Playground movement in their individual region.

7) *Adventure Playgrounds and Integrated Play Opportunities*

All those involved in Adventure Playground provision from the very beginning, supported the concept of play environments for *all* children as referred to in section 3 above. With limited resources, they endeavoured to accommodate the different levels of developmental needs of children of all abilities in



experienced Adventure Playground Workers). Further to this and in addition to the London APA, many local voluntary support structures emerged such as the Manchester Adventure Playgrounds Association (MAPA), Liverpool Adventure Playground Association in conjunction with and supported by Merseyside Play Action Council (MPAC), Bristol APA, and other such Associations throughout the country.

In 1973 the Fair Play for Children Campaign was launched as a direct result of the then Bishop of Stepney expressing deep concern in a letter to The Times about the deaths of two children who were playing in Regents Canal. He linked this tragic



their everyday work. However, such an approach required a much more determined focus if provision for disabled children was to be seen as relatively equal. The *Handicapped Adventure Playgrounds Association* (1970s terminology) (HAPA), fully supported by Lady Marjorie Allen, was created to promote and develop the work and this resulted in the creation of the first Adventure Playground for disabled children in Chelsea, London, followed by another four in other areas such as Wandsworth, Hackney, Islington and Stockwell. A little later Calder Kids Adventure Playground was established in Calderstones Park, Liverpool, managed by Gerry Kinsella and Jim Stanton respectively, also provided opportunities distinctly for children with disabilities.

I recall being involved in helping to make arrangements for a long-distance charity wheelchair



push undertaken by Gerry, himself a wheelchair user. The route of the “push” and it was a real physical push because the technology of wheelchairs in those days had not developed to the extent that they are today, was from Liverpool to Hamburg and back. Gerry and Jim raised a considerable amount of money for the Adventure Playground at Calderstones.

The first fully integrated Adventure Playground outside of London was created in Blacon, Chester in

the early 1970s when it extended its existing site, which involved staff and kids working alongside each other, in order to provide additional space for the introduction of extra activity areas.

Organisations such as Kids Active, now KIDS (as HAPA became) have been more than vociferous and energetic in their aim to establish the rights of *all children* to be able to access the joys and other benefits of adventure play. All Adventure Playgrounds now aim to pursue a *concept of play for all* and indeed all Playwork training programmes should, as many do, emphasise the same philosophy.

8) *Developments Elsewhere In Europe*

Elsewhere in continental Europe during the 1960s and early 1970s, the Adventure Playground movement gathered momentum with provision being reinforced and further established in Scandinavia, Germany, Holland and many other countries. With such interest there became a desire to create an exchange of information, views, philosophies, and skills. Subsequently a loose collection of interested Adventure Playground workers and supporters formed an informal European alliance. This resulted in a number of conferences and seminars in various locations in addition to an exchange system where children and Playworkers visited and stayed in other countries whilst experiencing respective play opportunities in the different Adventure Playgrounds.

9)

On the Decline?

Adventure Playgrounds, with 150 or more in London, began to flourish in the late 60's and early 70's. In the mid 70's, a survey I conducted accounted for over 500 Adventure Playgrounds throughout the UK. However the late eighties saw a decline in their numbers due to a wide variety of factors such as the changing social attitudes of post-war Britain. The country was becoming a society obsessed with consumerism, and social attitudes began to change, shifting gradually but perceptibly, from a nation where street and community life was based on cooperation, the sharing of resources and values and strong neighbourhood support mechanisms, perhaps to one of competition, individualism, prejudice, insularity, territorialism and social independence.



The physical profiles and operational practices of Adventure Playgrounds were being perceived as eyesores and a stark contradiction to the “sophisticated” designer play provisions now being marketed. They were seen by many to be ill-disciplined, messy and noisy ghettos. With their large, unorthodox often imposing and ramshackle timber structures built from reconstituted and recycled materials, they did not reflect the emerging and more sophisticated aspirations, attitudes and developing affluence of Britain. In addition, many

officers and indeed elected members of a number of Local Authorities, considered Playworkers to be anarchists, hippies and/or aggressive and combative and ill-disciplined individuals! In my opinion they had to be all of these and much more if they were to survive and make a difference to children's lives, which most of them did. (See Hughes 2012; Cranwell 2003; 2007; etc)

By far however, the greatest threat with regard to the future security of Adventure Playgrounds at this time was the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 which began to be universally applied across the country on all work based activities and more. It was not because of what the Act actually said but because of the way people sought to misapply or misinterpret it, indeed as many still do today. A number of local authorities used the Act as an excuse for withdrawing support for Adventure Playgrounds, because of so-called safety issues. This was particularly the case in Manchester in the late '70s when the local authority decided to close all the Adventure Playgrounds in the City because of its perception of safety factors relating to such provision.

The Officers and Councillors chose to close the sites the week before the long school summer holidays were due to begin, demonstrating how ill-considered their decision was. Fortunately at the last hour the Council was “persuaded” at a specially convened meeting, to reverse its decision through a sensible and obvious argument suggesting that children were more likely to come to harm if left to wander the streets in search of adventurous experiences, rather than by being on the staffed sites. It is a pity that they failed to take note of the fact that Adventure Playgrounds were places where children were given opportunity to encounter risks, confront them and develop techniques to manage them. As Marjorie Allen (1968) said,



"It is a rewarding experience for children to take and overcome risks, to learn to use tools with safety" She also stated later, "Better a broken bone than a broken spirit"

When considering "risk" in play, we need to be reminded and recognise that risk management for children, is not entirely about physical risks. Clearly many Playworkers have long understood that there is considerable social and emotional risk attached to play behaviour, but greater thought needs to be given to this aspect of play.

Further negative effects on the status of Adventure Playgrounds were, in my professional view, created by the introduction of the Children Act 1989. The misinterpretation of the Act in many cases again gave the opponents of free unadulterated play provision, ammunition to close them by cutting off funding – aided and abetted by the Government of the time. There was considerable confusion, misconception and a misapplication of the child registration process of the Act which many used to restrict and control the numbers using Adventure Playgrounds. Further to this, the operational requirements for "childcare" environments and child/staff ratios



required under the Act were wrongly applied to the informal settings of Adventure Playgrounds and other play provision that is of children's free choice.

Then along came the introduction of the Out of School Child Care Initiative which directed millions of pounds to after-school child-care provision but little if any specific funding for Adventure Playgrounds.

No-one in the Playwork profession demonstrated any hardened grievances with regard to the need for quality childcare provision at the time, quite the opposite. It was mainly supported and we all wished to see improved quality and increased provision for child care. Indeed, Play Wales for example in 1989, helped to campaign for greater child-care funding for Wales, because at that time, for every single child care place there were over 300 Welsh children in need of it. However what was of some concern was that out-of-school childcare was seen to be more weighted in favour of an economic agenda than children's play or care needs. In fact its primary stated objective was to create opportunities for young mothers to gain access to work opportunities.

Rather curiously, the creation of out-of-school child care provision was seen to be a major focus by central and local government and the only type of provision worthy of and in need of financial and political support. It was considered by many directly involved in Playwork, to be focussed on giving out-of-school child-care a high priority at the expense of all other out of school play facilities particularly Adventure Playgrounds. This it was felt, would mean children's access to comprehensive play opportunities would be considerably compromised.

10)

Manufactured Adventure Playgrounds

It is fairly widespread practice now and has been for some time, for play equipment manufacturing companies to promote the sale of “*adventure playgrounds*” as they perceive them. Such a description is applied to a variety of manufactured timber structures and other items, many of which are based on items originally designed and constructed by children using traditional Adventure Playgrounds over many years. Here are a few examples.

- ***Cantilever swing***, initially constructed by kids using old telegraph poles a third of which was buried at an angle in the ground and with a knotted rope passed through a hole at the top of the pole or attached to a very large eye bolt – was usually referred to as the *single pole swing*.
- ***Aerial runway*** (or *Death Slide* as the kids called them!) was created by using telegraph poles to provide a launch platform and landing area. A “snatch pulley” that could be removed in the evening was the sliding mechanism from which hung a rope and/or tyre.
- ***Space nets***, on Adventure Playgrounds were originally made from a central pole and large cargo nets resourced from the dockland areas.
- ***Timber forts*** built on a progressive basis, added to throughout the year and every year then finally knocked down so kids could start again, all made from discarded timbers.
- Low-level ***Linked play systems*** that utilised old tyres, planks, logs and poles etc. to create opportunities for continuity in play, now called ***trim trails*** by the manufacturers.
- ***Timber play huts and dens*** now called play houses
- ***Clatter bridges*** now referred to as suspension bridges, and so it goes on.

There are so many examples of how the manufacturers have imitated the ideas which originally sprang from children’s initiatives, too many to list. One of the most vital aspects that they cannot copy however, with regard to physical structures, is the *process of play development*. This involves a whole range of intellectual, imaginative, creative, emotional and physical activity, most of which occurs in the child’s mind. There is a high level and direction of concentration and other thought processes that focus on the planning, consideration of the siting and actual construction of the structures, for instance. Then there is the use of tools and materials that means so much to children. In addition there is the sheer intensity of focus that binds and holds children together for such long periods, coupled with the realisation that they had the opportunity to determine what and how things were built and most importantly, how long they lasted! The intellectual, social and emotional process is so vitally important in play, much more so than the actual and resultant material product. This is particularly so when children engage themselves in other forms of play which are not essentially physical. (See Brown 2003)

The term “adventure playgrounds” is also used all too frequently to describe play settings in commercial provision such as theme parks, holiday centres etc. All such claims are erroneous to say the least in that they harm the original concept of Adventure Playgrounds as referred to in this paper and elsewhere.



Adventure Playgrounds are places for children to pursue a comprehensive range of play experiences determined by their individual and collective play behaviour and decision making processes. Essentially they are places in which children can determine and change the content as and when they themselves decide. Much of child's play behaviour is focussed on social, imaginative and creative play. In addition, children play *with* rather than simply *on* the equipment that they create. Further to this, there are many occasions when children simply determine to *do nothing*; times when they choose to reflect, or discuss things with each other and maybe with the Playworker, the latter being a key element in the Adventure Playground setting. Very often the Playworker will be seen by the children as someone they can trust and confide in about a wide range of issues they are concerned with and which are impacting on their lives at a given time, in addition of course to being of assistance with the supply of resources for on-going play.

Frequently children will indulge in play behaviour that provides them with an opportunity to express a variety of emotions prompted by events in their individual lives. This was particularly the emphasised when I assisted in creating a temporary Adventure Playground as a consequence of many people losing their homes through floods in North Wales some years back. A large number of families had to be

housed in temporary accommodation. Children using the play area close to where they were temporarily accommodated, were often to be found "re-living", through play, a variety of dramatic and traumatic events that impacted on their lives during the time of the floods. Freud (1974) calls this 'reconciliation' – a process that involves children using play to come to terms with traumatic events in their lives.

Manufactured adventure play areas clearly have some value and indeed are required as part of a comprehensive and wide approach to neighbourhood play provision in many localities (see "Where Can Children Play", Chilton 1989). However they represent a presumption that all play is based on physical activity when of course, as highlighted earlier, this is far from being the case. In over-emphasising the physical aspect of play, we are creating the same image in the eyes of the public and indeed in the perception of potential funding agencies including governments and other funding sources such as the National Lottery. It is not within the scope of this paper to describe the comprehensive differences between the original concept of Adventure Playgrounds and that of the manufacturers' catalogue (see NPFA n.d.; Chilton 1989; Chilton 2003; Brown & Taylor 2008), but I should hope that the readers of this paper will readily recognise the clear and obvious distinction. The *process* relating to the *creation* of a play environment and its content, is by far, more important than the finished product.

11)

Other So-Called Initiatives

There is an increasing awareness within the Playwork profession that finance from various sources of funding, including national governments and the National Lottery, is being directed to projects that purport to be Adventure Playgrounds when clearly they fall some way short of satisfying the traditional concept that has been referred to in this paper. It is of concern to learn that facilities consisting of minimal play opportunities are being claimed to be comprehensive Adventure Playground provision.

This is particularly worrying when it is described as such to local communities, including children, local authorities and funding agencies. The worry is that all these bodies might well believe that such provision is fulfilling the comprehensive play needs of children of all ages. This is a misrepresentation of the original and well-grounded philosophy and spirit of the hard-working pioneers of the movement who dedicated, in exceedingly demanding circumstances, so much time and emotional, intellectual and physical energy in order to provide and protect an essentially child centred environment such as that provided by the traditional Adventure Playground.

It is unacceptable practice in my view to be promoting, as an Adventure Playground, a facility that perhaps does offer outdoor play opportunities including such things as den building, fire lighting and the like, but only does so for four hours a week and limited periods of the year. I am aware that many of those involved in promoting and delivering such provision do so entirely with the needs of children in mind and perhaps in the hope that the scheme will develop into something more substantial

in the long term. Maybe it could also be the case that a little is better than none. However to insist on calling such provision a fully fledged Adventure Playground, is a compromise too far and is doing considerable harm to the concept. More importantly it is misleading and selling children short. Although such facilities are well-meaning and do indeed offer a valuable service to children even if only a limited basis, they should be used to emphasise the fact that children deserve decidedly much more than this. Although a full-time Adventure Playground is not cheap to operate, it is not expensive in the long term when it saves so much by way of children's lives and contributes so much to their all round growth and development. Furthermore there are so many real short and long term benefits to the local and wider community. We surely must campaign for and stress the fact children deserve and need comprehensive all-year round play opportunities which are staffed



by well-trained and properly resourced Playworkers and local management bodies.

12)

Does the Spirit of Adventure Playgrounds still Survive?

A few years ago, in response to the distinct absence of a comprehensive understanding of the real value of traditional Adventure Playgrounds in many areas of

the UK, Play Wales determined that there was a need to regenerate interest in sustaining and promoting the ethos underpinning a well established and proven concept. Play Wales subsequently organised a Seminar in North Wales with the title, "The Spirit of Adventure Playgrounds". The Seminar attracted considerable interest from across Britain and has proved to be a well supported, impressively attended annual event and has been held in Cardiff ever since. Sadly, in my personal view, Play Wales decided to remove Adventure Playgrounds from the title and so the Seminar is now called the *Spirit of Play* or simply *The Spirit*.

So, does the spirit of Adventure Playgrounds still persist? Do the original operational practices still exist, particularly with regard to the need for the sites and their content to be constantly changing so that children can develop new ideas and ways of approaching the use and development of various play features?

Is it still the case that Adventure Playgrounds are creating a feeling among children that there is always something new going on! Or is the physical content of Adventure Playgrounds left in a state of semi-permanency because the Playworkers have been too much involved in the building and "ownership" of the main structures? In this context I am mindful of the observation of Bernard McGovern in his book "Playleadership" (1973), he suggested that:

Many of these playgrounds now consist of mammoth man-made constructions such as forts, towers, giant slides, tunnels, and tree houses, buildings with all modern conveniences and in some cases as many as four or five play leaders now on the staff. ... We have now reached the stage where the Adventure Playground equipment

is being commercially manufactured with the accent on safety. Designs are changing and the Adventure Playground is in danger of becoming new look conventional playgrounds, with little to stimulate the imagination of children who frequent them.

I have to express some support for McGovern's concerns, having visited so many sites myself over the years. There appears to be little enthusiasm from some Playworkers to follow the traditional maxim that Adventure Playgrounds should be constantly changing by reflecting children's need to regularly try out new ideas and extend their creativity and their imaginations.

They are/were places where there was/is always something new and different happening. If Playworkers take too much control in developing the content of the play environment, then the rich



pattern of play behaviour changes and is replaced with repetitive, perhaps static play, through being focussed on the same permanent items. It is distinctly possible that if the Playworker becomes over-protective of existing features which he or she has had a prominent role in creating, regular change to layout and content of the site would not be encouraged. As a consequence there would be little scope for children to exercise their own initiatives. Spontaneity, a very vital part of play, continuity and creative play, together with collaborative behaviour would perhaps fail to emerge or be considerably

stunted. Further to this, the desire for learning and developing new skills would also be given little opportunity for expression.

13

Playwork Foundations

The Playwork profession has its roots undeniably embedded and firmly attached to the intrinsic nature of play and is unique in its approach to working with children in that it is decidedly focused on, among other principles, the following:

- Establishing a child centred focus on the creation of a free-play environment
- Developing a variety of outlets and opportunities for children to pursue their own play choices in their own time, in their own way and at their own pace.
- Enhancing and enriching the play environment by the creation, and through the promotion of opportunities for a wide and varied range of experiences relating to exploration, invention, creativity, experimentation, social interaction, improvisation, and a strong sense of self-realisation.
- Establishing appropriate practices for addressing the negative and destructive forces of play deprivation.
- Promoting a process of communication and other human response mechanisms which recognise the individuality and developing personalities of individual children.
- Providing and protecting a flexible, adaptable physical and social play environment able to accommodate a child's individual and changing needs.
- Adopting a style of intervention that is responsive rather than reactive, to the expressed needs of children.

When considering the understanding of the *spirit of adventure play* in the context of staffed provision, I am reminded of all those who were directly involved in the very early days of the creation of Adventure Playgrounds. Those who established and were wholly committed to the concept and who worked so hard to develop them by making them, in my considered view, one of the most comprehensive and successful means of providing for all types of play for all types, sizes, ages, abilities and backgrounds of children.



I take this opportunity not only to acknowledge the commitment and efforts of those I have had the distinct pleasure of working alongside and being in the company of in many years gone by, but to thank them unreservedly for highlighting the importance of children's play in human terms. These are people who worked without any sense of job security, outdoors in all weathers throughout the year (some even opened on Christmas Day because of the express needs of the kids!) And who worked with no indoor accommodation or welfare facilities for themselves and with little or no support and understanding of how valuable their work was and indeed is.

- Those who were faced with difficult operational conditions in some of the most socially neglected, hostile and challenging communities in the UK.
- Those who confronted the local authorities and indeed central government with arguments and

demands to improve the quality of play provision in local areas.

- Those who made the effort to knock on every door in the communities where they worked in order to generate involvement and create awareness of the importance of children's out of school play needs.
- Those who chose to live in the communities where they worked so they could develop a more enlightened view of local social problems and establish an empathy with the rest of those living there.
- Those who worked in very isolated districts and were very much unsupported but carried on because of their commitment to and belief in the play needs of local kids.
- Those who laid the foundations for so many successive developments in Playwork generally, for I believe the precursor to so much that has been established in the profession today in the UK, stems from the Adventure Playground movement of earlier times.
- Those who set the scene for adequate and appropriate working conditions, support mechanisms, training, and an understanding of the philosophical and psychological approach to play development.
- Those who chose to determine that Playwork was an independent profession in its own right and one not to be dovetailed into or attached to other areas of work and in doing so have its importance considerably undermined and diluted.

In highlighting the professional and unselfish commitment of those involved in the early development of Adventure Playgrounds, I hope I have raised an awareness of the importance of the need for our on-going support. If we are not only to protect *the child's right to play* but to also ensure that the concept is given due political support and

financial consideration, then we need to do so much more. Currently we appear to accept provision on the criteria of funding systems and politically determined requirements rather than on actual and real need.

If a minimum of staffed play provision is seen to be acceptable then we would be demonstrating a serious disservice to all those who dedicated so much of their working lives in the interest of children and young people and the undeniable importance of play in human development. I refer to those who have gone before us and those currently among us in this profession, who believed and still believe passionately in the value of play as an essential and integral part of a child's life. In particular the early pioneers contributed enormously to the creation of the concept of Adventure Playgrounds, rightly seeing them as a significant contribution to the human and developmental play needs of *all* children and young



people.

It is therefore vital that we all ensure that we do not compromise on the level of provision or undersell play by accepting unrelated, externally determined criteria and restrictive funding mechanisms that fall short of what is required. We have to stress that provision should not be seen as a cheap and undervalued means of simply "keeping kids off the street" or as an anti-crime device, it is so much more

essential and vital than this. Play has to be recognised as an integral and natural part of the child's right to healthy and total development. So above all else, we have a responsibility not to compromise to the child's detriment by accepting poor quality responses to what is needed. Should we not prioritise now in relation to the provision of quality play experiences for current and future requirements, or do we pay later with expensive intervention methods when all too frequently, it is far too late?

Finally, I am of the firm belief that if we intend to stand by a commitment to the promotion of the vital importance of play in the all-round human development of children, then we need to take more than a cursory glance back at the history of the Adventure Playground movement. We surely must give serious thought and undertake vigorous and determined action to sustain the unselfish commitment of those, who in the past gave so much for the future. In this regard I am reminded, of the words of Maya Angelou.

"No person can know where they are going unless they know exactly where they've been and exactly how they arrived at this place"

Tony Chilton 2013



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About the Author

Tony Chilton has been involved in Children's Play Development work since 1962/4 when he helped organise a Summer Playscheme/ Adventure Playground in Barking, London.

- As a pioneer Adventure Playground worker in the UK, he has been a full time Adventure Playground Manager in Telford, and Chester
- Founder Member of the Adventure Playground Workers Association
- Regional Play Development Officer for the National Playing Fields Association (North West England and North Wales)
- He was a founder member of the Fairplay for Children Campaign (1973)
- Founder member of West Midlands Playworkers Group
- Secretary and Founder of Blacon Adventure Playground, Chester
- Founder member and Chair of the North West Play Association
- Established and was first Chairman of Joint National Committee on Training for Playleadership
- Principle Play Development Officer City of Newcastle Upon Tyne
- Founder member of Northern Regional Play Forum; Tyne & Wear Playing Fields Association and Northumberland Playing Fields Association
- Founder member of Merseyside Playing Fields Association and Greater Manchester Playing Fields Association
- He was first Chairman of Safety in Children's Playgrounds Panel (National Association for Children's Play)
- A founder member and past Chair of Rhyl Adventure Playground Association, North Wales.
- Senior Development Officer: Play Wales
- A founder member of Clwyd Playing Fields Association (1971)
- Initiated the first professionally validated Playwork Training Courses in Northern England.
- Course Tutor in Playwork: City & Guilds, Stockport and Llandrillo Colleges
- Senior Internal and External Verifier Playwork NVQ's
- Wrote first Playwork Degree Course in Wales, University of Wales, Newport
- Designed and delivered the Professional Development (Post Graduate) Course in Play Provision Management, Llandrillo College.
- Lecturer on numerous Playwork Courses throughout the UK
- Conducted commissioned studies on Play Development: London Docklands Corp., Dacorum Borough Council, Newham Borough Council, Oswestry Borough Council, Nottinghamshire City Council, Basingstoke & Deane Borough Council, Redcar & Cleveland Council and etc.

Tony Chilton has written extensively on all matters relating to Children's Play including "What is an Adventure Playground" for the NPFA and contributed to several publications for Open University. He has presented papers throughout the U.K., Sweden, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong etc. He is currently Honorary Technical and Safety Advisor for the North Wales Play Association, a childrens charity. He manages Childrens Play Development Consultancy.





Fair Play for Children exists to campaign for the Child's Right to Play as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Its website at <http://www.fairplayforchildren.org> has extensive features – library, video clips, free publications, daily news service etc

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