PLAYWORKING THE CHILDREN’S MUSEUM

A NOT-QUIET-HOW-TO GUIDE

Volume 1, May 2017
THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN THIS BOOK...

emerged from experiments with playwork practice at The New Children's Museum over the past three years. Our intention in putting this "zine" into the world is out of a strong curiosity. There are hundreds of children’s museums in the United States and internationally. Could a playwork approach take hold in children's museums?

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Before we talk for even a second about children’s play, let’s first talk about you.
THINK ABOUT A SPACE WHERE YOU ENJOYED SPENDING TIME AS A CHILD.

Where was this space?
What objects were in that space?
Who, if anyone, was in that space with you?
How often would you spend time in this space?
MAP OUT THAT SPACE HERE.

Don’t worry about drawing a perfect map. Just focus on your memory of that space. If you get stuck, go deeper into a specific nook or cranny.

Go Ahead-- start your time traveling. we'll wait.
Some things you might have remembered:

You were so into what you were doing that you lost track of time.

Using stuff in ways that stuff might not have been intended to be used.

Adults who were there, but not there.
From our experience, adults rarely recall a space that was designed for children, such as a playground. Many of us remember spaces such as alleys, our bedrooms, under the kitchen table, a patch of dirt outside our house, or the outskirts of a playing field. In those in-between spaces, the set of behaviors we enjoyed was:

- Intrinsically motivated
- Personally directed
- Freely chosen

This is how the Playwork Principles, the professional and ethical framework for playwork, define "play." Another way of putting it is this...
“PLAY WHEN"
IS WHAT I DO EVERYBODY ELSE STOPS TELLING ME WHAT TO DO.”
All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological, and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.

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.

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.

The Playwork Principles* were developed to give playworkers a way of talking about what they do in supporting children’s play. They are:

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

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

3. The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training, and education.
4. For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult-led agendas.

5. The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.

6. The playworker’s response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up-to-date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.

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

8. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.

*Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005*
Playwork originated on “adventure playgrounds” in Europe after World War II.

Carl Theodor Sørensen, in Denmark, and Lady Allen of Hurtwood, in England, observed that kids preferred playing in bombed-out lots to playing on adult-built play equipment. This observation lead to the creation of new type of playground: one where kids could take risks and play with the lumber, nails and cast-off toys of broken buildings, but with the support of adults who could keenly spot and clear hazards. Lady Allen of Hurtwood first called these people “Play-leaders.”

“It is evident that the help children get from the play-leader is useful to them emotionally as well as practically. In a child’s world, a friendly adult who exerts a minimum of authority and is generous with his time and attention is maybe something of a rarity; and the children respond as if they have been waiting for just this sort of friendship.”

- Lady Allen of Hurtwood, 1963
Today, adventure playgrounds and “Playworkers”-- as they are now called-- can be found in the UK, Scandinavia and Japan. In the United States, there are far fewer, but some-- such as the Berkeley Adventure Playground-- have been in operation since 1979. Since 2005, there has been a growing movement toward creating more of these types of playgrounds in American cities.

However, playwork is not dependent on an adventure playground to exist. Playworkers work wherever there are children, such as:

- **Hospitals**
- **Schools**
- **Traditionally built playgrounds**
- **After-schools**
- **...even the visitation areas of prisons**
The playworker’s role is to be the child’s advocate in a built world that is often designed to inhibit children’s play and playfulness. This is particularly true when Playworkers practice in contexts that do not provide the child a high level of control.

To do this, the Playworker observes the play environment and thoughtfully considers what modifications, if any, are necessary to allow the child to play. In a hospital, for instance, that might mean working within existing rules in order to bring in appropriate “loose parts”: stuff that can be combined and recombined in infinite ways.

If you have ever been in a waiting area with a small child, you may have done some of the things a Playworker might do in that context: root through your bag to find something the child can play with, or give the child a pen and an old receipt with which to draw. Playworkers do this type of “compensatory work” on a large scale, in a world built by adults for adults.

On the next page, veteran playworker and researcher Stuart Lester describes a possible mission for an adventure playground. To our minds, it could describe the future of children’s museums: that is, if we make some shifts...
We aim to provide a play environment in which children will laugh and cry; where they can explore and experiment; where they can create and destroy; where they can achieve; where they can feel excited and elated; where they may sometimes be bored and frustrated, and may sometimes hurt themselves; where they can get help, support, and encouragement from others when they require it; where they can grow to be independent and self-reliant; where they can learn—in the widest possible sense—about themselves, about others, and about the world.

—Stuart Lester
NOTES ON A PLAYWORK

EXPERIMENT
The New Children’s Museum is an arts-based children’s museum in which each “exhibit” is a one-of-a-kind installation artwork commissioned from a contemporary artist.
As an arts-based museum full of artists on staff, The New Children's Museum is a fertile place to try new things. In 2014, we started introducing playwork to our practice.
WE STARTED WITH TWO CHANGES:

1. We moved away from “resetting.”

In children’s museums, “resetting” exhibit spaces is a typical duty of the people who staff exhibits and programs. To start, we instructed floor staff-- then called “Museum Guides”-- to not immediately reset an installation after visitors used it.

We also instructed them to allow loose parts-- such as wooden cars -- to move where the child wishes to move them, even if that means the child takes them to another installation.

Desert Derby, Roman De Salvo, 2015
2. **WE STOPPED MONITORING LINES.**

In 2013, Museum Guides would stand by an inflatable sculpture (a “jumpy”) and count in how many kids could play in that space at a time. We stopped doing that, cold turkey, and instead allowed kids to negotiate their own turns and when it felt appropriate for them to enter the space.
Suddenly, without the work of resetting installations and monitoring lines, Museum Guides had more time on their hands. It was hard for Museum Guides to know what to do without a specific, “teacherly” role! To encourage reflection and to cultivate a “beginner's mind,” we introduced a daily observation practice based in part on playwork practice and in part on design thinking.

Our observation sheets looked (and still look like) this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>HOW</th>
<th>WHY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start with concrete observations.</td>
<td>Move to understanding: How is the person you're observing doing what they are doing? Does it require effort? Do they appear to be enjoying what they are doing? Use descriptive phrases packed with adjectives.</td>
<td>Step out on a limb of interpretation. Why is the person doing what they are doing, and the particular way they are doing it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 4-year-old boys are stacking picture books in the library area.</td>
<td>One boy gestures excitedly to the other boy to get more “little” books. The other boy flaps his arms and makes a buzzy noise when he goes to find other books.</td>
<td>It looks like they are pretending to be birds, or maybe rockets— I thought they were building a tower, but it seems to play into some other narrative. Let’s put more loose parts out in the library and see what happens tomorrow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4. **We began daily and weekly reflective practice.**

We began meeting for a half-hour after every Museum day to record observations and share practice. We also committed to a two-hour group meeting each week in which the entire team came together for trainings. In those meetings, we would share:

- **Reflection in Action**
  - Stopping and thinking while in process (intuition)

- **Reflection on Action**
  - Thinking after the event

- **Reflection on Inaction**
  - Thinking about what I (or others) didn’t do and why

- **Reflection Before Action**
  - Thinking in advance, visualizing how it might be, etc
5. We Introduced Risk-Benefit Assessment.

Though it may seem simple, stopping monitoring lines and de-emphasizing resetting can feel risky. What if parents get upset that things look messy? What if someone gets hurt in the jumpy if too many kids crowd in there at once? WHAT IF I GET IN TROUBLE?

Jackie Kilvington and Ali Wood, in their indispensable book Reflective Playwork: For all who work with children, call playwork a significant “shift in emphasis.” Playworkers, they write, do not:

1. correct or control children’s behavior;
2. Ensure children never come to harm;
3. Entertain children;
4. Lead or direct children’s play;
5. Plan activities for children;
6. Teach children what they need to learn;
7. Socialize children into being good citizens;
8. Look after and protect children.

That list can feel a little scary. Isn’t it an adult’s job to protect the child? Well... maybe. Sometimes protecting the child is allowing the child to take measured risks— to sit with our discomfort for a moment before immediately acting.

To practice doing this, we introduced Risk Benefit Assessment (RBA). We start by thinking of the benefits, and then move to risk.
What do we mean by risk in terms of play provision?

We mean providing opportunities for all children to encounter or create uncertainty, unpredictability, and potential hazards as part of their play.

We do not mean putting children in danger of serious harm.

Every child is different; one child’s idea of a risky situation might be another’s idea of something ‘easy-peasy’. We do not force children to do anything that they feel is beyond them, or encourage them to go any further than they feel safe. Neither do we simply leave children to fend for themselves.

If in doubt, or if we are unfamiliar with the child, we err on the side of caution; we have a duty of care towards the children in our setting.
In 2016, after two years of experimentation, we changed the Museum Guide name to “Museum Playworker.”

We took this decision very seriously. Were we really Playworkers? Our group of eight created a stream of consciousness list. This was our list, our Playworker Proclamation:

**WE ARE**

imaginative peeps
knowledgeable but not didactic
accepting
fabulous
anti-capitalist anarchists
allies to kids
unknown: we don’t know: they don’t know
invisible
slytherins
stoked
open jammin’
on the road to nowhere fast
hiders
seekers
a group of creative, playful, intelligent and thoughtful individuals
here
adaptable
wonder-ers
WE BELIEVE

In questioning and confronting our assumptions about ourselves, others, etc
In listening and responding to children’s interests and needs
In the unspoken
In trust
In giving kids space to feel what they want to feel In being sad when you want to be
In mystery
  nonsense
  secrets
  majick
  cosmic fate
  randomness
In just being, not always doing
In actions: physical, verbal and nonverbal
In the power of silliness
That play is very important.
That play is a fundamental right
That any space/environment is a playful one
That play can happen anywhere, not just here at the Museum
That what is playful is not always “nice”
That joy must be tied to sorrow
That raw/unpadded equipment is okay
That play is more than it appears to be
That we can fly
We condemn
The corruption of PLAY in the name of a TEACHABLE MOMENT
The naysayers
Activities.
Rulez, man.
Assumptions of correctness or appropriateness.
The idea that children must be directed/socialized in the “right” way
“Educational toys”
Authority
Ego
Hierarchy
Seriousness without silliness
Stifling
Control
The fascist cloud of supervision
Dogma
The patriarchy
The heteropatriarchy
The capitalist agenda
“One way”

We declare
All persons to be free of limitations
What is fun
That this is a place where adults do not hold all the power
Independence
Anarchy
ANARCHY!!!
Constant playfulness
There is no right way to play
Truth
Magic
Independence
That this place is special, though we can’t say why
The climate of the day
Freedom to be who you are
PLAYWORK IN CHILDREN’S MUSEUMS

NEXT STEPS
When it comes to whether playwork might work in children’s museums, our assumption about the value of “play” is the elephant in the room.
Yes-- children do learn through play! It’s just that, as we see it, there can be a difference between “play” and “playful learning.”

In playful learning, games and experiences are designed to meet certain learning objectives. So play in itself is not the goal: the learning objective is. Playful learning-- though fun and sometimes creating the conditions for play-- is still a means towards reaching a desired outcome.

Think about the map you made of a space from your childhood. You were probably learning quite a bit in whatever you were doing. But it was YOUR learning, at your pace. Most likely, nobody was telling you what to do, or looking for a “teachable moment” in your play. No one was “instrumentalizing” your play.

Perhaps it’s time for children’s museum professionals to ask themselves an important question: In children’s museums, are we offering opportunities for play, or are we offering opportunities for playful learning? Does how we talk about play impact how we design our exhibits and programs? In the paper-rock-scissors game of children’s museums, does “playful learning” kill “play?”
play AND playful learning can coexist (we think). But to examine that, the children’s museum field needs to take a closer look at our beliefs on play.

We hold an unchecked assumption that the value of play is that it is “practice” for adulthood. We look at children playing in a pretend grocery store, and imagine they are pretending to be adults. We see children building a fort, and imagine that they are building collaborative skills they will need in the business world. In seeing play as a means to an end, we see childhood as a whimsical but often troubling trial to get through in order to become adult: it is as if we think turning 18 is the “point.”

But the point is that play is pointless. If you start thinking of your morning jog as purely a means for weight loss, then the jog can no longer be play. Running becomes drudgery. Pointless play disrupts habitual modes of living and substitutes new behaviors. That’s a pretty precise way of describing “learning.” Play, Brian Sutton-Smith, “involves a willingness, even if a fantasy, to believe in the play venture itself.”

That is: if I can do this thing in this moment, then possibly I could do another thing in the next moment. Maybe the world isn’t that bad, after all. Maybe I can get out of bed another day.

This presents us with the sad irony of children’s museums: the minute we instrumentalize play is the minute we lose the ability to play: and, ironically, perhaps lose the ability to deeply learn. Paper-rock-scissors: playful learning just might kill play.
But to start, we need to stop thinking of children as just future-adults, and rather as...

**PEOPLE.**

In other words...

Play is not a means for a kid to become a better future adult.

Play is about us (kids and adults) being better US -- more alive in the world, more passionate and more willful.
We are still trying things out at our museum. We don’t have all the answers, but playwork—this “third path”—has called to us. Perhaps you, too, are a playworkers and didn’t know it. Try some stuff out. Let us know what you do. And stay in touch!

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RESOURCES

Pop-Up Adventure Play
www.popupadventureplay.com

The Playwork Primer
Penny Wilson

Play for a Change
Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell

Reflective playwork: for all who work with children
Jacky Kilvington, Ali Wood

Rules for a Playful museum
The Manchester Museum