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**B5. Playwork Partnerships:  
Wild and Away - the National  
Environmental Playwork Conference**  
**Hilary Smith**

Environmental playwork is concerned with supporting children's access to free play in and around natural outdoor environments. The biennial Wild and Away conference brings together playworkers, early years workers, park rangers, environmental organisations and community projects to network, share experiences, pick up skills and debate issues at a unique low impact outdoor conference centre – Green and Away.

**Aims**

The aim of the Wild and Away conference is:

- To enable practitioners concerned about children's access to outdoor play to network, share experiences, pick up skills and debate issues
- For practitioners to experience low impact technologies and sustainable living over a weekend conference to inform future practice.

Playwork Partnerships is a department delivering knowledge transfer activities within the Faculty of Sport, Health and Social Care at the University of Gloucestershire. Playwork Partnerships is independently funded from a range of sources including a Government grant *via* SkillsActive (the Sector Skills Council for Active Learning and Leisure – including playwork), European Social Fund grants for projects and self-generated income from the sale of goods and services.

The aim of Playwork Partnerships is to promote the importance of play and playwork and to increase the learning opportunities for playworkers (people who work with school-aged children in the child's leisure time).

The work of Playwork Partnerships is steered by a consortium of stakeholders from across the southwest region including local authorities,

voluntary sector play associations, Learning and Skills Councils, play providers, playwork trainers and the University of Gloucestershire.

### **Playwork Partnerships and the Wild About Play Project**

The Wild About Play project was initially a two-year project run by Playwork Partnerships and funded by the New Opportunities Lottery Fund (now the Big Lottery). Wild About Play was set up to investigate examples of good practice in outdoor and environmental playwork with children in the southwest region. Through research, the project aimed to develop a network of interested agencies, and share project findings to enable practitioners to review and improve their work with children in the outdoors. The aim was to disseminate best practice and research findings through the Wild About Play website, publications and conferences.

### **Wild and Away: National Environmental Playwork Conference**

The first Wild and Away conference was held in July 2004 to fulfil the dissemination role of the Wild About Play project. Subsequently the conference was run for a second time in 2006 and plans are underway for a third conference in the summer of 2008. The conference is co-ordinated by a small development group from Playwork Partnerships and local partners (previously Herefordshire Nature Trust and SkillsActive).

As the Wild About Play project had developed an ethos of environmental sensitivity through the sourcing of recycled materials and certified paper for printed materials, it was a natural progression to identify ways of delivering a national conference with minimal environmental impact.

#### **The conference venue**

The conference venue, Green and Away (2007), was chosen specifically for its innovative use of low impact technologies and environmental sustainability. It is run as a charity and education organisation and is based on a small organic farm in Gloucestershire. Electricity for the venue is generated by the sun and wind; water for outdoor showers is heated by a wood fire; meeting spaces are made by coppiced hazel and recycled canvas and the whole conference centre is serviced by composting toilets.

The venue requires delegates to bring their own bedding, tents, torch, rainwear, environmentally friendly soaps, shampoos and toothpastes.

Delegates are encouraged to travel to the conference *via* public transport or by car sharing. A surcharge is made to those who take a car. Delegates are also required to participate in the running of the centre by collecting or chopping firewood, cooking and washing up.

The venue is only available for hire over the six weekends of the school summer holidays.

### **Conference Programme**

The initial programme for the first Wild and Away conference was put together in response to the research that had been undertaken as part of the Wild About Play project. Questionnaires had been circulated to playworkers and environmental workers within the Southwest region to identify their current levels of work with school aged children, their understanding of play in the outdoors and their future training needs.

In 2004 the conference programme had an international flavour with keynote addresses from Robin Moore from the Natural Learning Institute and professor of Landscape Architecture, College of Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, USA and Julian Richter from Richter Spielgeräte Playground Manufacturers in Germany.

Key messages from Robin Moore's address concerned the value of environmental play for children and society. He suggested that access to environmental play is essential if children are to gain an understanding of the natural world and to become experts in sustainable development. This message is echoed in his thoughts about reconnecting children with nature in the publication *Natural Learning* (Moore and Wong 1997).

Julian Richter emphasised the need for sustainable practices in the overall design and manufacture of fixed permanent play equipment and associated safety surfacing. He highlighted to delegates the huge environmental impact of producing rubber safety surfacing, installing it with solvents and the issues concerned with the removal and disposal of the surfacing at the end of its life. The use of natural materials, such as sand, bark and grass, were explored as sustainable alternatives that are equally efficient.

The conference programme included both practical workshops and more theoretical talk shops where delegates were offered a breadth of opportunity to explore and debate issues. Workshops topics were focused

around the four elements of fire, earth, air and water and included *Earth Magic, Boats and Bubbles, A Walk on the Wildside, The Great Artdoors* and *Wild About Woodland*.

Talk shops included:

*Playing round the houses* – an exploration of the challenges of organising and facilitating wild play in limited outdoor spaces. This talk shop posed questions about the environmental, social and psychological issues of providing outdoor play on housing estates and similar spaces.

*I'm going to the garden to eat worms* - a debate questioning whether adults should restrain children's play that potentially harms or damages nature, how and when adults should intervene and how to encourage environmentally caring attitudes in children without imposing adult agendas on their play experiences.

*Risky business / playing with fire* – a discussion about how to support children to take risks appropriately during outdoor play, barriers to providing adventurous play activities outdoors and how to assure others that risk taking is a healthy part of children's play.

In addition, key elements of the Green and Away site offer delegates first hand experience of activities that they could use within their work with children and young people. Examples included cooking on a camp fire, building and using a clay oven, making shelters from coppiced hazel, making solar-powered lamps, growing and eating vegetables.

### **Sustainability focus**

The Wild and Away conference links to sustainability in a number of ways. In the first instance the conference itself offers delegates first-hand experience of low impact technologies and living. No direct correlation has been undertaken between delegates' behaviours prior, during and post conference to gauge impact but anecdotal evidence suggests that awareness of environmental sustainability is raised.

In addition, the subject of the conference, environmental playwork, offers a number of long-term links to sustainability.

There is a gathering body of evidence reporting on the benefits of outdoor play for children's overall development and its role in building social and

emotional life skills (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister 2003). In addition, research suggests that education about the environment needs to be embedded within a child's social context rather than as an explicit subject (Parry and Scott 1997).

Children's access to outdoor play over the years has been diminished. This has been due to a number of factors including parental fears, increased traffic and sensitivity to stranger danger (Children's Play Council *et al.* 2000). Green Alliance/Demos (2004: 21) note that the current generation of children are likely to 'face the toughest environmental challenges yet in terms of climate change and the ever increasing pressure on natural resources.' They go on to cite the importance of children's first hand exploration of the environment for future environmental awareness and citizenship. A natural way for children to engage with the environment is through play from an early age.

### **Active learning**

Most of the conference workshops involved active learning in one way or another. Some of the practical workshops focused on experiential learning (Kolb 1984) through the introduction of a skill or experience, for example, how to work with willow and wood to build dens and tepees, and then encouraging the reflection and theorising of the activity and exploring what meaning it had for the individual and how the activity would support work with children.

Other more theoretical workshops encouraged active learning through participation and engagement with the environment. For example, in the Playing Naturally workshop delegates were set a quest; they were charged with collecting artefacts from the environment and encouraged to create a world and mythology about the artefacts and their powers/importance. Delegates were then encouraged to reflect on this experience to gain an appreciation of the potential of the natural environment for children's play and children's natural sense of wonder and creativity. Active learning within this context strongly reflects Dewey's (1959) notions of child-centred pedagogy and the need for learning to be based upon interactions with the environment.

### **Feedback**

Feedback from delegates was largely positive, both about the conference venue and the conference subject. Delegates commented that they

appreciated the sustainable management of the site and that it was wonderful to have the opportunity to experience green living and sustainable practice.

Many delegates commented directly on the facilities with the composting toilets receiving both positive feedback, 'loved the compost loo – very excited to use it' and negative feedback, 'urinals disgusting', 'smell of toilet ☹'.

Generally delegates said they that they enjoyed the concepts of recycling, reusing, composting and using and living with nature that the conference promoted. However, one delegate did state, 'don't enforce sustainability, keep it civilised.'

With regard to the conference programme delegates fed back that conference speakers and workshop leaders were 'inspiring' and 'excellent' and that there was 'a good balance of practical and theory' within the workshops. Delegates were asked for ideas for inclusion in future conferences and along with the skills based workshop ideas (knife skills, bush craft, den building etc) were suggestions of education for sustainable development, qualifications and theology of play and learning.

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

Major strengths of the conference include the Green and Away conference site which offers inspiration and practical examples of sustainable and low impact living.

In addition, the diversity of backgrounds represented by those attending the conference is a major strength. Over the two conferences there have been 190 delegates comprising environmental workers from organisations such as Groundwork, Wildlife Trusts, Community Service Volunteers, Learning through Landscapes, Forest Schools and Country Parks; playworkers from adventure playgrounds, after school clubs and holiday Playschemes; early years workers from Sure Start projects and children's centres; plus a range of students and lecturers from both the University of Gloucestershire and other institutions offering playwork education.

Finally, the knowledge and experience of the workshop leaders and keynote speakers was a major strength. They generated inspiration and enthusiasm and provided a breadth of knowledge and experience that was

far beyond that which is held within Playwork Partnerships and the University.

Potential weaknesses of the activity revolve around the fact that the conference venue at Green and Away is only available for the six weeks of the school summer holidays. For the playwork sector this is a very busy time and this in turn will have an impact upon the accessibility of the conference to potential delegates.

In addition, raising the funds and associated costs of including international speakers on the programme is a challenge. In 2004, costs for speakers were partly covered by sponsorship from TimberPlay, the UK distributor of Richter Spielgeräte playground equipment. In 2006 an attempt was made to raise funds for an international speaker by contacting other institutions and conference organisers who might be interested in co-funding the travel costs of the speaker on the basis that the speaker would have a number of events to speak at. However, due to the timing of our conference this was not possible.

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**Key words:**

Children; environmental play; sustainable conference; professional development; active learning

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