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INSPIRATIONALLY PLAYFUL

PEOPLE, PAPERS AND PRACTICES THAT HAVE INSPIRED PLAY PRACTITIONERS AND RESEARCHERS

ipa
GLASGOW 2023
PLAY: RIGHTS & POSSIBILITIES

EDITED BY JOHN H. MCKENDRICK JUNE 2023

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The wonder of play and how it inspires

John H McKendrick

All too often, we take for granted the incidental and everyday fabric that enriches our lives. Birdsong, random acts of kindness, a change in the weather and the like, are every bit as important to our wellbeing as annual cultural celebrations, sporting competitions, wage packets, and seismic events in world history.

Children's play is one incidental and everyday occurrence that readers of this volume will never fail to appreciate. But what we sometimes take for granted, or fail to celebrate, are the sparks that initiated this interest in play. We have gathered over fifty reflections on what has inspired, and continues to inspire, those with a professional interest in play. It is a global collection, comprising thoughts from each of the six main populated continents, with contributions from nineteen different nations. As with its companion collection, *Priorities for Play*, there are reflections from parents, playworkers, play advocates, early years practitioners, academics, and professionals from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds.

Perhaps fitting for a collection that was prepared in advance of the 22nd International Play Association Triennial World conference, the collection opens with two reflections of how participation at the IPA Conference in Calgary in 2017 laid the foundations for what developed into IPA Glasgow 2023.

We celebrate inspiring people. Some are playworkers, some are advocates for play, some research play, some use play to educate, and some educate others about the practice of play. This diverse collective of enthusiastic proponents of play has, in their own special way, inspired their own and the next generation of play leaders, doers, and thinkers. We celebrate play writing. Once more, reflecting the broad canvas that is play, this inspirational writing is drawn from a range of traditions, including abstract theoreticians, creative professionals, health and wellbeing specialists, popular entertainers, environmentalists, anarchist planners, and educationalists. We draw inspiration from our own personal biographies, reflecting on our own childhood experiences, and our contemporary role as parents. We acknowledge that children at play are inspirational, and that their play enriches the lives of those around them. We draw inspiration from our playwork practice, whether it be in amidst unfamiliar cultural environments, in contexts of crisis, or as part of our regular professional work in familiar and homely settings. We reflect on play environments, showing how places and their people have demonstrated the value of play in neighbourhood open space, clinical settings, hospitals, schools, early years settings, and adventure playgrounds. We acknowledge how books, film, dance, theatre, and Improv(isation) have created opportunities for playful behaviour, celebrating play in and of itself, for the joy it brings to those who play and those around them.

Our inspirations for play come in many forms: we hope you enjoy our celebration of the people, places and practices that shape our world of play.

Inspired at IPA Calgary

Tam Baillie

Tam has been involved with children and young people throughout his career, with his last full-time position as Scotland Commissioner for Children and Young People (2009-2017). He is a Trustee of Upstart, a Board member of IPA World and IPA Scotland, and Chair of the Steering Group for the IPA Glasgow 2023 conference

I have had a long and varied career working with the most vulnerable children and young people in our communities – some of whom didn't make it into adulthood.

At the time of the Calgary IPA conference, I had just stepped down as Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People and was looking forward to a quieter life. Little did I realise that at this late stage in my career I was going to have a 'light bulb' moment. This came during a plenary session delivered by Peter Gray.

As the Commissioner I was frequently asked about the mental health and well-being of adolescents in Scotland as we have well-documented ongoing concerns about young people's mental health and well-being. When asked to comment on this issue, I usually acknowledged disrupted early attachment; the rise of social media, increased pressure from examinations; and a lack of mental health support services. However, I was not entirely satisfied with these explanations, and it felt like something was missing.

It was only when Peter began to identify the factors that were impacting on ability to exercise their right to play that I realised the link between play and mental health. Children were suffering from the contraction of roaming space in communities; the sanitising of risky elements of play; and the inability to fully access enough play to support their development. It is this combination of play deficits leads to a lack of inner resilience which otherwise would enable young people to cope with the stresses and strains of adolescence and which instead results in poor mental health for many of them.

I had previously expressed lots of concern about the lack of play opportunities for children, but I had not made the connection to mental health problems in adolescence. This realisation prompted in me a resolve that, whatever I did with my future, I would dedicate time to the promotion of play and the link with adolescent mental health – making up for the missed opportunities in my previous positions of influence. Peter Gray's speech and the Calgary conference inspired me. I now have the privilege of working with IPA and other play. pressure groups. It is never too late to start to make a difference.

Play: rights and possibilities

IPA Scotland, Play Scotland, Early Years Scotland and Inspiring Scotland

Representations from each of these organisations formed the core of the Steering Group for the IPA Glasgow 2023 conference.

Inspired by the 21st IPA World Triennial Conference hosted by Calgary Council and IPA Canada in 2017, planning began for the Scotland bid to host IPA 2023 almost immediately on the Scottish delegates' return from Canada. A meeting of Scotland's Play Council confirmed support for the bid, leading to the formation of a partnership between IPA Scotland, Play Scotland, Early Years Scotland, and Inspiring Scotland. The group were further supported by the Glasgow Convention Bureau, Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Caledonian University, and so the IPA Glasgow 2023 Steering Group was born in 2018.

After two years of research, work and aspiration, our final bid document was submitted to the IPA World Board in January 2020 in the lead up to the Jaipur conference. When our bid was accepted in May 2020, against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Steering Group moved into planning mode.

The title of the conference, Play: Rights & Possibilities reflected our ambitions and aspirations. Our five conference themes - play in children's rights, the quality of childhood, resilience, optimum development, and the creation of environments – outlined what we hoped the conference would achieve.

Organising the conference has been both a challenge and a privilege. We hope that delegates take away with them nuggets of personal inspiration for play and its infinite possibilities, and that the hosts of the 23rd IPA Triennial World Conference, wherever that might be, are inspired to follow in our footsteps!

A playful journey with inspirational women

Margaret Westwood

Margaret is Chair of IPA Scotland and Scotland's Play Council. She served on the IPA World Board as Secretary from 2005-2017 and worked in local authority play development and strategy for over 25 years.

My 30-year journey of advocating for children's play has been illuminated by four inspirational women.

Sue Gutteridge was Scotland's first Play Development Manager, whom I met when I joined Stirling Council's Play Services in 1991. Sue was a champion of observing children's choices, and she imparted the meaning of free play, the difference between accessible and inclusive play, and the importance of self-determination in children's play choices. Stirling took a 'play landscape' approach to public play areas which encouraged children and young people to experience risk, adventure, and mystery. Play in the Park projects provided staffed outdoor play which scaffolded children's play and informed the development of public play spaces. This approach, described by Sue in *A Shoal of Red Herrings I* & *II*, was ground-breaking for local government, and Stirling play areas were held up as the epitome of good practice in publications such as *Design for Play.*

Moving to the City of Edinburgh Council in 2000, my next inspiration came from Nancy Ovens, founder member of both the IPA Scotland branch and Play Scotland, the national organisation for play. Nancy firmly believed in the importance of articulating play strategy at a national level, to support work at the grassroots and local level. Nancy encouraged me to become an active advocate for play through Play Scotland and IPA Scotland.

At the 2002 IPA World Conference in São Paulo, I was inspired further by Valerie Fronczek, who had a passion to promote children's universal right to play. Her contribution and unwavering commitment to international policy on children's right to play cannot be understated. Val's writing of *Article 31: A Forgotten Article of the UNCRC* led to the funding which enabled IPA to research with partners in ten countries and produce *IPA Global Consultations on Children's Right to Play*. This resulted in IPA's appointment as the competent body to organise the *UN General Comment #17* on article 31.

Last, but by no means least, my final inspirational woman is, and continues to be, the remarkable Theresa Casey, playworker and President of IPA from 2008-2017. As President she guided IPA through the process of developing and producing GC#17, and her writing on play supports children, carers, and practitioners in Scotland and across the world. Theresa's work remains an inspiration for all who play and work to promote whether at grassroots, national or international levels.

Juliet Robertson

Deborah Meechan and Martin Winters

Deborah and **Martin** are both Early Years Lecturers at Glasgow Clyde College. They future early years practitioners in Forest Kindergarten and deliver Forest School sessions.

As one of Scotland's leading educational consultants, Juliet has inspired many practitioners to take play and learning outdoors to harness the play potential and provocations that exist in nature, green spaces, and places without walls.

Juliet established Creative STAR Learning in 2007, which has since inspired practitioners nationally and internationally through training and the provision of resources and guidance for outdoor provision. Following Forest Kindergarten (FK) training provided by Juliet in 2017, Deborah introduced FK to students on the HNC Childhood Practice course at Glasgow Clyde College, delivering an FK unit developed by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA). Deborah soon extended this offering to students across each of the College's three campuses.

The FK unit equips prospective early years practitioners and teachers with an understanding of outdoor learning within the Scottish policy and practice context. It also provides valuable opportunities for students to experience the benefits of being outdoors and connected to nature at woodland sites close to each college campus. Many of the activities and ideas shared with students during FK delivery have been inspired by Juliet's work, helping to inform and shape the practice of future educators by sparking their interest in outdoor play and learning.

Juliet's inspirational training was the first step taken in an ongoing journey of developing outdoor learning provision at the College. Since 2017 staff have undertaken more outdoor training, such as the Level 3 Forest School Leadership qualification, and increased outdoor learning input across all levels of Childhood Practice qualifications. Colleagues from a range of faculty departments have also been inspired to undertake FK training and recently we have established a designated outdoor class space at our Langside campus with a view to building more.

Further motivation has come from Juliet's books (such as *Dirty Teaching* and *Messy Maths*), blog (*'I'm a teacher, get me outside here!'*), and contribution to other publications. We know many - children, our students, and staff colleagues – who have benefitted from the wealth of ideas, resources, and provocations to support play outdoors provided by Juliet.

Juliet's body of work is invaluable, accessible, and a vital resource in supporting practitioners to develop their outdoor practice.

Inspirationally playful equals Juliet Robertson.

Alan Rees MBE
Theresa Casey

Theresa served as President of IPA from 2008-2017, when she worked on *General Comment no.17, Access to Play in Crisis,* and Children's Rights and the Environment. Theresa chaired the International Advisory Group for IPA Glasgow 2023.

When I arrived, startled, into the world of adventure playgrounds, I could hardly believe where I had found myself. It was the last year of my degree at Edinburgh College of Art, and I was immersed in a world of paint, ego, and what meant to be an artist. Around 1989, I answered an advert for a summer job at the strangely titled Scotland Yard Adventure Centre. There, it was process not product; intrinsic not instrumental; and fun not work!

The Yard, as it became known for short, was a new adventure playground, planned for disabled children to help to meet play needs that were often overlooked. It was a bare site at the time, with little equipment and immature planting. For quite a long time, I was one of two part-time playworkers, trying to figure out how to animate the space and make it work for children. We visited established adventure playgrounds in London and enjoyed the anarchic energy. We learned from HAPA (Handicapped Adventure Playground Association) (which later merged with KIDS) and Chelsea, the first adventure playground for disabled children, finding passionate advocates for children there.

We were lucky the management committee was chaired by the twinkly-eyed Alan Rees. He was that wonderful kind of employer who trusted staff, allowing us to try out sometimes ropey ideas, and follow twisty paths. We also, as playworkers, learned to step back and allow play to flourish naturally, as it will when children have space and time. I learned many lessons about inclusion, exclusion, and diversity in that space. I think Alan enjoyed coming down to the Yard to see what creative mess of joyous playfulness was emerging each time.

I admire Alan, and people like him, who don't seek the limelight but quietly build the stage and make really good things happen. Alan was an IPA member and he encouraged us to join the fledging Scottish Branch, connecting with play people from around the world – another eye-opener - there was an international play community? I remember Robin Moore, IPA President, visiting from North Carolina and us all being a little over-awed. I remember meeting Roger Hart at an IPA conference and realising I was talking to the writer of the Innocenti Essay *From Tokenism to Citizenship,* that we had all been discussing, with its beautiful vignettes of children's lives. This play world of IPA seemed non-hierarchical and accessible in a way that I took to.

Remembering Alan Rees MBE, 1931-2019.

Emily Coutts - battling for the Children's Wood

Marguerite Hunter Blair

Marguerite is Chief Executive of Play Scotland, previously CEO of Playboard NI and former Community Services Manager for Belfast City Council.

Known locally in Glasgow as the Children's Wood, this is an urban oasis comprising nearly four acres of open, green/wild space in the middle of an urban environment. To the soundtrack of birdsong, rustling birch trees and bees humming, locals tend to raised beds and an orchard; children play and hang out of trees, build dens, cycle, and walk their dogs; and the community organise jam making and home baking, storytelling, bonfires, forest schools, teacher training, school visits and youth activities.

It is in an area where the life expectancy for a man stubbornly remains twenty years below the national average It is a hub of outdoor community activity whose very existence was taken for granted. That is, until the day a proposal for an expensive housing development was submitted, which stood to generate ten million pounds for Glasgow City Council! In a city of complex needs and increasing poverty, amid challenging financial times, the Council found the proposal hard to resist.

Emily Coutts tells the tale of a David and Goliath battle in her book, *The Dear Wild Place*. She explains that from the outset she was "convinced that only an empowered community, in love with the land, could have a real effect… care and connection have been at the heart of our grassroots community project … I always knew that this wild place was different and much more valuable to the community".

The newly passed *Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015*, which aimed to help communities do more for themselves and have more say in decisions that affect them, was largely untested but was a potential ally. However, Emily realised this battle was going to need a lot more than "an academic argument based on planning policies".

Award-winning campaigning, a range of expert opinion, and support from high-profile figures such as Alasdair Gray and Liz Lochead, were used to gather support for the case to save the Wood for children's play, families, and the local community. Events, vigils in George Square, media engagement and a petition to the Scottish Government eventually resulted in a Public Hearing. It lasted two days. On the second day the Reporter requested a site visit and was clearly moved by all he saw and those with whom he spontaneously interacted. The decision came in December that the land would remain undeveloped. "The best Christmas present ever" according to the Game of Thrones actress, Kate Dickie. This was an enormous victory, a battle won by people-power, led by the redoubtable Emily Coutts.

Three inspirational playworkers

Hitoshi Shimamura

Hitoshi is Director of Tokyo Play and the Japan Playwork Association. He started his career as an adventure playground playworker in Tokyo, before becoming a playwork trainer.

Jimmy Jolly was a travelling playworker from the USA, who worked all over the world (regrettably passing away in 2004). His approach was to stay in one country for a while to contribute to the development of playgrounds and playwork training. I met him for the first time at the IPA World Conference in Tokyo in 1990 when I was a student. We meet at subsequent IPA conferences in Hong Kong and in Lisbon, and I was privileged to work with him in Hong Kong in 2000. As a young playworker, I had been impressed with his working style, skills, warm disposition, and his quiet but strong passion for playwork. I loved to learn from his practice and playwork philosophy. I know that many other playworkers and play people feel the same. We were also excited about Jimmy's plan after his retirement to build a house in Hawaii where playworkers could gather from all over the world. In 2004, we received the sad news that he had passed away suddenly in Thailand on his way to Japan to deliver a keynote speech at our 3rd National Adventure Playground Conference. Jimmy was a big loss but remains an inspiration.

Joe Benjamin was a playleader in 1950s, working in the early era of adventure playgrounds, and author of the seminal Grounds for Play (1974). Joe's book was insightful and inspirational, with its collection of detailed descriptions in his daily logs which brought to life his adventure playground experiences in the 1950s. This taught me the importance of recording my own daily practice. The work is still a useful resource to learn about children, play, adventure playgrounds, and playwork. It has been a cornerstone of my work and was a staple in my studies when reading Playwork at Leeds Metropolitan University.

Hideaki Amano was the first professional playworker in Japan, who worked at the first permanent adventure playground in Japan, which opened in 1979. He is not recognised internationally, but he has been a playwork pioneer in Japan. When I started my playwork career in 1996 at the adventure playground, he was a senior officer and playwork trainer, and he taught me about the foundations, practicalities, and philosophy of playwork. Hideaki is the reason I am still practising playwork.

Zoe (Ya-Mei) Lin – A mother can motivate a thousand more

Christine (Yuihwa) Lee

Christine (Yuihwa)) is an advocate for children's right to play and to participation. She and her cohorts started Taiwan Parks & Playgrounds for Children by Children.

Prior to becoming a mother, I never regarded myself a playful or child-loving person even though playfulness and child-friendliness could describe elements of how I worked as a language teacher. Then I became a mother and love for children became a theme of my life. Zoe (Ya-Mei) Lin a fellow mother in our playgroup appeared in my life, when she sent a mind-wrenching message in 2015 advising that the Taipei City Government was dismantling playground slides:

"Government was not being righteous to our children demolishing their playgrounds. Today, they take away the playground from afar. Tomorrow, they'll take away the playground next to your place. Childhood memories of your children and you playing in the playground will be ended if you don't act. You can do much more, not merely for your own children, but for all children in Taiwan. Step out and voice out for all children or their favourite playgrounds would be dumbed down to canned-food (cookie-cutter) playsets or torn down to empty rubber mats."

In the playgroup, Zoe had always been the play leader (playworker) introducing a wide range of play to our preschool-age kids. When mothers did not know how to nurture and parent, she was the one who enabled them to infuse their parenting with play. Zoe was a pioneer, who was preaching the gospel of play to a new generation of parents in Taiwan.

Taiwan had long been a traditional and conservative society, where education was rigid rather than playful, and everyone regarded studying to be the top priority. There were few child play practitioners, at least not in the sense of those who promoted 'free play'. The *UNCRC* concepts of children's right to play, children's right to freedom of expression, and to participation in the society were not widely known or shared, back then. Much has changed in Taiwan in the last decade. But there is much more still to do. Obstacles still exist in our traditional and conservative society.

A mother can motivate a thousand more to start a play(space) movement for their children and others'. We are blessed to have had a founder and spiritual leader who, together with her fellow advocates, has promoted mother-ness, child-loving-ness, playfulness, and citizenship to advance the case of play for our generation, and many more generations to come, in Taiwan.

Lady Allen of Hurtwood

Shelly Newstead

Shelly has worked in the international playwork field for over thirty years. She is the Managing Editor of International Journal of Playwork Practice and Editor of the Advances in Playwork Research series (Routledge).

Lady Allen of Hurtwood (born Marjory Gill) is widely recognised as the inspiration behind the development of adventure playgrounds across the UK in the 1950s and 1960s. She was also one of the original founders of the International Adventure Playground Association (now International Play Association), which means that many of the delegates at the IPA Glasgow 2023 World Conference will also have been inspired by her (whether they know it or not!). However, she has inspired me for quite a different reason: her passion for justice for children. It may surprise many to read that she was quoted in an interview for the Liverpool Daily Post (June 30th, 1973) as explaining, "I don't particularly care for children, as a matter of fact, but I hate injustice, always have."

Although frequently associated with children's play, Lady Allen was not in fact a play advocate. Her interest in children came from a much broader concern about the nature of childhood. She believed that childhood should be a time of "continuous celebration, free from the pressures which can do irreparable damage to their self-esteem" (Allen and Nicholson, 1975). As a pupil at Bedales (a progressive school), Marjory Gill had experienced a carefree childhood and she grew up believing in the importance of happy childhoods for all children. She was concerned that the adult world imposed too many rules and pressures on children and passionately believed that it was only fair that children should be able to enjoy their childhoods before having to face the rigours of adulthood.

During the Second World War, as a pacifist, Lady Allen was unable to do any work which contributed to the war effort. Instead, she applied her passion for justice to seek fair treatment for children to children's homes, which led to the *Children Act 1948* (an important piece of legislation which still underpins much of the current regulation of UK children's services). It was also around this time that Lady Allen visited (almost by accident) the first adventure playground at Emdrup in Copenhagen. Sørensen's unorthodox concept appealed to her because it provided a practical solution to providing for children's needs within an often-hostile adult world. The first adventure playgrounds were conceived not as play spaces, but as a children's community in adult society, in which children could enjoy their childhoods on their own terms: a temporary respite from the conventions and strictures of the adult world.

Lady Allen's powerful and practical vision to "restore to these children some part of their lost childhood" (Allen and Nicholson, 1975) inspired others to create adventure playgrounds across the UK, which in turn led to the invention of the practice of playwork. … but that, of course, is another inspirational story!

Dr. Stuart Brown – conference inspirations

Lynn Campanella

Lynn is a play and recess practitioner who has worked with school boards/districts across Canada and the United States since 2010. She is the Chief Play Officer for Playocracy.

Many of the people I have met in my professional life did not initially plan to work in play; they just fell into it – some with grace and others as messy as an outdoor mud kitchen. When I first met Dr. Stuart Brown at a US Play Coalition conference, I was immediately drawn to him through his genuine and gleeful stories of play and how it shapes our brains, opens our imagination, and invigorates the soul. This also happens to be the title of my favourite dog-eared, note-laden book, which acts as my play bible. And, of course, it is written by Dr. Brown.

Back in 1966, Stuart Brown entered the world of play, albeit from an unusual place. He was part of an international team that studied Charles Wittman, one of America's first mass shooters. From there, he went on to study the play personalities of thousands of dangerous offenders. These men who committed murder or were felony drunk drivers all had one thing in common – they did not play as children.

This concept not only terrifies me but has been my motivation and driving force for years! We know that we are a play-deprived society. We know that play is not valued or viewed with educational reverence. But the question I ask myself on a regular basis is, are we raising a society of dangerous offenders?

Dr. Brown has devoted his life to raising awareness of the importance and value of play. With the support of the National Geographic Society and Jane Goodall, he was able to observe and research animal play. That, combined with his research into the latest advances in neuroscience, biology, social science, and psychology, enabled him to better understand impact of play on our brains and bodies.

As the founder of the National Institute for Play, Dr. Brown has also influenced many by raising awareness of the power of play among the wider public.

What did your dive into the world of play look like? Mines was akin to a clumsy swoop down a slippery, twisting slide. I am exceedingly grateful for the day I was introduced to Dr. Stuart Brown. His research and knowledge have supported my endless fascination with play, and his friendship provides the inner glow that keeps me playing!

Dr. Stuart Brown – the language of play

Anu Paul

Anu is a designer at Anthill Creations (India). She aims to make play accessible to all through sustainable practices.

"Jake blasts into the maze of animals without hesitation. I worry about how the horses will react, but they don't shy. In a flicker, horses are jumping and gambolling. It seems that we all adults, kids, dogs, horses recognize that Jake is consumed with the joy of play. All of us are caught up in the moment."

This is an excerpt from the book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul* by Stuart Brown. It left me with wonder about the language of play that is being communicated among all the four characters mentioned (Jake the dog, the horse, kids, and adults) despite their differences.

When I started to observe my surroundings, I saw these characteristics everywhere; in the fall of the leaves while parting from the tree; in the eyes of the new-born when hearing the rattling sound from its toy repeatedly; in the muted fight between mommy cat and its kitten. The more I observed, the more I was able to understand all these characteristics, which made me realise that there must be a common language of play.

I was someone who saw play as either physical activity such as running and jumping, or cognitive activity pursued through board games and puzzles. I learned that play was apparently purposeless, voluntary, not time-bound, involved a diminished consciousness of self, and has the potential for improvisation.

I came to embrace the innate language that I share with all the creations. Without this, there was something that I missed deeply about life and with it I realised the pure bliss that only play can offer. It is this language that brings strangers together, that helps me to share smiles with my peers, that tightens bonds, that helps me to practice failure, gives me a sense of freedom, and brings me to the present. The one thing that makes the language of play differ from other languages is that we do not have to learn it to know it.

Dr. Joyce Hemphill – my origin story

Heather Von Bank

Heather is a Professor in the Department of Family Consumer Science at Minnesota State University-Mankato. She teaches Child Development and Family Studies and co-authored, *The Power of Playful Learning: The Green Edition.*

Why are origin stories so pervasive? Whether the origin story belongs to Spiderman or Captain Marvel, they originate from Greek mythology. We need to know how Hercules got his strength or where Athena got her wisdom. Perhaps, knowing the hero's struggles and the choices they made, helps us to understand their powers. My origin story, or how I came to know about the power of play, is personal but most likely not unique. A teacher introduced me to play.

I was a teaching assistant in graduate school and worked with a professor who taught a class about the benefits of play. I initially was skeptical about how play could benefit children's development, but Dr. Joyce Hemphill worked her magic on me. I learned about the play-based work of Piaget and why Vygotsky's types of self-talk are foremost to children's language development. During the playday Dr. Hemphill organized, I was amazed at her passion as she had supported her students to apply theories of child development as they created playful and interactive activities.

Dr. Hemphill 's passion for all things play inspired me to develop my own course on the benefits of play. My students and I explore the benefits that risky, parallel, and whole-body play provides for children's development. I turned my classroom into a loose-parts play lab and had conversations with students about what adults could do facilitate children's play in schools, at recess and beyond.

Origin stories are never fully complete until you witness the impact their power has on others. Dr. Hemphill is my hero. She shared the power of play with me. I have shared the power of play with my students, and now my students are becoming heroes, brightening the world, and sharing their experiences about play with others. My students' practise play in their careers as specialists working with children in hospitals, preschool teachers implementing play-based programs, parent educators seeking to empower parents in play with their children, and as citizens to advocate for play in society.

I have taken part in conferences that focus on the power of play. I have met people from across the world who are like-minded. But to truly change and improve lives, we need to share the power of play with individuals outside of our immediate community of play. We can do this by telling our origin stories; how we came to understand the ways that play benefits the lives of children, families, and adults. Only when we tell our origin story do we truly appreciate why we need to share the power of play.

Dr. Patrick Lewis - a champion of play

Whitney Blaisdell

Whitney is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. She is a former public-school teacher and the Executive Director of Project Play YQR, a non-profit organization.

I met Dr. Patrick Lewis as a graduate student when attending a summer intensive course that he and Karen Wallace co-imagined and created that centred on play, art, and narrative. I was a public-school teacher at the time, and it helped me to reshape my teaching practice to embrace play, and to critically examine the role K-12 schools have in affecting play in the lives of children and youth.

Lewis's book *How we Think, but not in School: A Storied Approach to Teaching* helped me challenge the often taken-for-granted notions of standards, outcomes, and text-based learning for children, and made education that embraces play and storytelling seem not only alluring, but possible. I have heard Karen and Patrick, together, discuss how an education system that practiced care for children would be filled with play, art, and stories. This is how I started to teach.

Despite embracing play in my teaching practice, I spoke to Patrick when I began contemplating leaving my beloved teaching position and starting a non-profit organization. He was one of few who took my dissatisfaction with teaching seriously. When I tentatively shared my interest in starting a non-profit organization based on play, he encouraged me.

I am reminded of the desires and agency of children and that adults are not savours of children's play in Lewis' words in his article *The Erosion of Play:*

> … even though the erosion of play seems to inexorably roll on, I think there is hope, a resistance movement, if you wish. It is not early childhood educators or parents or an international body such as the UN or UNESCO with the Convention on the Rights of the Child—it is children themselves. Children have an inherent compulsion to play, humans both young and old are possessed with a play impulse or drive; it would seem that it is a necessary part of being human (p. 20)

His support was unwavering. He once offered some unexpected advice: that as a parent to two young children, I take time to play and spend with my family while my children are still interested in playing and spending time with me.

Dr. Patrick Lewis' teaching, writing, and influence have and will always guide me on my own journey through play scholarship and activism. The opportunity to reflect on my gratitude has solidified, for me, the importance of those who believe in things like play, joy, and happiness, both in schools and the academy, but also in the human life.

Colleen Friendship – helping me find play

Christel Hennig

Christel is currently a kindergarten teacher with Edmonton Public Schools (Alberta, Canada). She has been teaching for twenty-three years and has worked with students from pre-school to grade 5.

When I graduated with my B.Ed. degree, I was confident that my career goal was to teach sixth grade. At first, I taught upper elementary. Then, in pursuit of a permanent contract, I had to grasp an unexpected opportunity. I found myself drawn into a world of Early Education programming that provided multi-disciplinary learning experiences for two- to six-year-olds with Special Needs. It turned out that my Elementary Generalist degree had not prepared me for this new teaching assignment, and I found myself desperately needing more training. Throughout my years coordinating a classroom in this early education environment I collaborated with many knowledgeable specialists, but it was when I was partnered with Colleen Friendship as my in-home consultant that my career path and my understanding of teaching and learning shifted completely.

Through play, Colleen masterfully engaged our students and families in quality learning experiences, both in their own homes and within our classroom. I was, and continue to be, inspired to emulate her respect for children as autonomous beings, her empathy for the cultural experiences of diverse families, and her unrelenting advocacy for the right of the child to play. She played a pivotal role in shaping the bespoke programmes that we provided for each uniquely individual student. I credit Colleen with introducing me to the amazing, robust, and enticing world of play.

As a child I was not interested in all forms of play. While I organized my toys and designed play areas, for the most part, I did not enjoy readily engaging in active play. Ironically, now as an adult, I find myself responsible for recognizing student interests, developing play environments, and engaging children in a wide variety of play activities while extending and strengthening their skills across learning domains. I have come to appreciate and enjoy environments through the eyes of a child, and I now seek out learning through play opportunities with my students. It is this child-like wonder and a love of finding new and engaging ways to relate to my students and their learning that sparks enthusiasm in me as an educator.

Colleen and I attended the IPA World Conference Berlin in 2005, presenting together and learning from others around the world. At the time, I found myself motivated by the entire experience and those memories still guide my work today. Now, almost 20 years later, I returned to IPA, this time to attend the conference in Scotland, to continue my learning journey … ready, set, PLAY!!

Dr. Angela Hanscom - inspirational advocate

Fiona Armstrong

Fiona is a paediatric occupational therapist with a special interest in risky play. Her doctoral research is the PARK project (Play and Risk in Kids).

Angela Hanscom is a paediatric occupational therapist who recognised that movement through active free outdoor play is a means of ensuring healthy bodies, creative minds, academic success, emotional stability, and strong social skills in children. These are the same skills needed to cope, participate, and thrive in everyday life.

In *Balanced and Barefoot*, she describes how active free play outdoors facilitates the development of sensory and motor skills required for physical and psycho-social development. She argues that it should be recognised as essential to childhood.

Modern day living has restricted children's opportunities for play with reduced free play time, reduced time outdoors, reduced space to play, fear of danger, economic demands on parents, and the perceived need for constant supervision. An over-reliance on parental supervision is understood to foster an excessive fear of danger.

She observes that children's play time is being eroded by increased time in the classroom, and that an over-focus on academic performance in school. This is restricting movement opportunities, which impacts negatively on stamina, strength, and dexterity, resulting in poor confidence in their own abilities and an inability to self-assess risk.

In her book, Hanscom challenges these behaviours and trends, showing how they impair development and education. She highlights what can be achieved through an outdoor play that promotes independence and creativity among children. Like many playworkers, she advocates that children need free time to play outdoors without adult intervention to develop creativity, independent thinking skills, confidence, emotional regulation skills, and healthy sensory and immune systems.

Inspirational words and ideas from Angela Hanscom!

The Neo-Reichian therapists

Brasilda Rocha

Brasilda is dedicated to clinical practice and systematic research in the field of corporal psychotherapy. She concentrates on children and adolescents, teaching and preparing new psychotherapists.

In my work, I consider the theoretical and practical concepts of body psychotherapy with children and adolescents, aiming to improve postures and behaviours through therapeutic procedures. I have drawn extensively from the theoretical underpinnings and experiences of the neo-Reichian therapists (Gerda Boyesen, David Boadella, Alexander Lowen and Stanley Keleman), who work with toys in their psychoanalytic and psychodramatic reading. Neo-Reichians use the concept of transitional object (after Winnicott) and the active therapist technique, in search of an energetic flow, following the work of Reich.

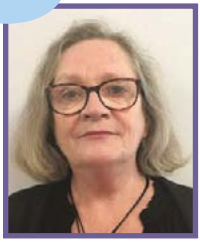
Neo-Reichians work with the notion that there is an active aspect to toys and that these objects correspond to the needs of the child when they use them. I work with Reichian and neo-Reichian assumptions, based on the concept of the formula of life, associated with symbolic concepts and meanings of toys.

Through my academic career and clinical psychology, I have worked to understand the types of toys that correspond to the energy flow of the child's psychic development, so that we can expand this internal space and avoid emotional tension. I have been inspired and driven to support the child through toy play to assist that child to repair traumatic situations of emotional experiences of the first moments of life.

Our scientific objective is to compare work with the toy to determine the child's phase of psychic evolution. With these data we can make a therapeutic formulation (faster and more precise) that leads to the therapeutic process and, in preventative terms, to assist the development of the child's personality more effectively.

Neo-Reichian thinking has and continues to underpin my practice and understanding.

Donald Winnicott
Anne McFadyen



Anne is a child and adolescent psychiatrist and Adviser to the Scottish Government on Infant Mental Health. Before returning to Scotland, she worked at the Tavistock Clinic and Royal Free Hospital, where she was involved in clinical services and research involving infants, including those admitted to neonatal units.

"Come at the world creatively, create the world; it is only what you create that has meaning for you." (Winnicott: 1968, p.23).

Donald Winnicott was an inspirational paediatrician and psychoanalyst who made an outstanding contribution to our understanding of early relationships between babies and their mothers. He had a very special talent for communicating his ideas about what was happening for and between children and their carers in very straightforward language to both professionals and the public. Many of his insights are familiar and provide a solid foundation for how we think today about emotional development. His ideas complemented and fitted well with those proposed by scholars from other theoretical schools, for example Piaget and Erikson, and built on the key concepts described by psychoanalysts such as Freud and Klein.

The importance of play was central to his theories and practice.

We imagine a baby playing peek-a-boo with their parent or older sibling; the wonder and joy they experience as they discover that the other is still there. They exist even when the baby cannot see them - and they are recognised as separate people. The baby begins to work out what is ME and what is not-ME. Later they are sitting in their highchair giggling as they repeatedly drop their favourite toy to the floor and demand imperiously that it is returned; only to drop it again and again and again.

Play is seen as work and as children get older these early games with one other develop into something more: building, creating, exploring, and making believe. Wee ones start to move away from their carer, developing the capacity to be alone or with peers or with objects which represent their mum or dad.

This to-ing and fro-ing, the exploration through play, the repeated creation and destruction (for example of a tower of bricks), are all in the service of 'working things out'. Play is at the heart of development.

This is summed up in words Winnicott (1968, p.24) composed to represent the baby's communication with the mother:

"I find you; You survive what I do to you as I come to recognise you as not-me;
I use you; But you remember me;
I keep forgetting you;
I lose you;
I am sad."

Rachel Carson - searching for wonder

Rosamund Portus

Rosamund is a lecturer at UWE Bristol in the School of Architecture and Environment. Her research focuses on young people's experiences of climate emergency, climate literature, and children's nature connections.

Rachel Carson is one of the most famed environmentalists of the twentieth century who, in 1962, published her seminal book *Silent Spring.* Exposing the damaging effects of insecticides, Carson's writing sparked an environmental movement which continues to this day (Murphy, 2005; Griswold, 2012). Yet, Carson's interests were not confined to exposing environmental harm. Some years prior to the publication of Silent Spring, in 1956, Carson penned an article exploring how children relate to the natural world, later published as the book *The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children.* This work considered the need for children to connect with the natural world through fun and adventure. In Carson's world of play and imagination lichens become fairylands, rocks become diamonds, and the wind becomes a 'many-chorused voice'.

Carson's work was inspired by a visit from her grandnephew, Roger. One summer, Carson and Roger roamed the woods and beaches which surrounded her house, discovering the magic and excitement of the natural world. Her book details these adventures, describing, for example, a game they played upon encountering a crop of young spruces: Carson and Roger imagined which creatures might use the different sizes of spruce for their Christmas trees, from squirrels, to woodchucks, to tiny bugs.

The experiences shared by Carson have remained with me and, as a researcher of child-nature connections, influenced my work. Through her writing, she is a powerful advocate for the role of play in developing children's connection to the natural world: she calls for a world in which children exercise their imagination and cultivate their sense of wonder. This value of nature-based play as a conduit for children connecting with the natural world has since been championed by other writers (White, 2004; Candiracci et al., 2022). Indeed, my own work to co-develop a nature toolkit for children is rooted in play and wonder, with a focus on imaginative discovery (Portus, Barnes, and Williams, 2023).

In this time of environmental crisis, the legacy of Carson is as important as ever. Children discovering the natural world through play and imagination will give them the tools and experiences to care for it as they grow older. As Carson wrote back in 1956, "if facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow" (p.49).

Professor Johanna Smith - a very inspirational puppeteer

Tania Czajka

A French native based in Scotland since 1991, **Tania** has been exploring language learning through play and creativity for many years. She specialises in creative puppetry and is the founder of Le Petit Monde Stories.

While researching for my studies, I discovered the work of Professor of Theatre Education Johanna Smith, teacher, lecturer, hands-on artist, and puppeteer. Her enthusiasm and passion for teaching through play and creativity was contagious. I was hooked from the first pages of her book *Puppetry in Theatre and Arts Education: Head, Hands and Heart* (2018). Her practice is all about creative puppetry, which she describes as, "one of the easiest ways to use puppets, … to activate any material and engage all learning styles, ages and abilities".

She views creative puppetry as an accessible and inclusive method of teaching. She was influenced by the work of nursery practitioners Hunt and Renfro, who were also puppeteers, and wrote *Puppetry in Early Childhood and Education* (1982). In their book, they describe the various forms Creative Puppetry can take, one of which they name, Puppetizing in which, "Teachers guide children in using puppets for acting out stories, poems or songs and where performing is for one another, without an audience or a stage".

Although creative play and puppetry have been part of my early years practice for many years, I was always telling children stories through my own puppet characters. Reading about the work of Johanna Smith has helped me understand how much of a positive impact creative puppetry can have on children's learning. Through making their puppets to re-enact stories, they acquire ownership of their learning and can take their play further.

Johanna's book gave me the confidence to explore creative puppetry as an early years' practitioner. As a teaching artist, it enabled me to define what I wanted to provide to the early years' community and to develop my own approach to teaching languages. *Puppetry in Theatre and Arts Education: Head, Hands and Heart* by Johanna Smith is an easy and practical read for any teacher or educator who is considering developing a creative practice.

The Colorado Paper by Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else

Pete King

Pete has a PhD in Childhood Studies from Swansea University and is the programme manager for the MA Developmental and Therapeutic Play Programme.

I 'fell' into the world of play in 1996 when I was employed in an after-school club in Oxford. This was the beginning of an 'obsession' with play that has evolved for over 25 years. Whilst working, I was always observing and reflecting on how children played. My progress into the 'profession' of playwork in 1988 coincided with the publication of an International Play Association (IPA) conference paper *The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing* or what has become more commonly known as 'The Colorado Paper' by the late Gordon Sturrock and the late Professor Perry Else (Sturrock & Else, 1998). The process of play is one key aspect of 'The Colorado Paper' in respect of the Play Cycle (King & Sturrock, 2019). Along with my colleague Dr Shelly Newstead, the understanding and application of the Play Cycle has been one focus of my play research (King & Newstead 2019; 2020; 2021).

To focus on the process provides a more unified approach to play rather than trying to define play or using it to meet a specific outcome, often adult-initiated. This approach always reflected my professional practice, and as I have subsequently found out has always been the philosophical approach underpinning adventure playgrounds (one of the pre-cursers to playwork) where the adult is there to support, not direct the play. Ward's (1961) publication *Adventure Playground: A Parable of Anarchy* was an important find particularly when I was undertaking my master's in research at what is now Leeds Beckett University where I examined the relation of play and anarchism. This then developed into my PhD study on children's perception of choice when playing at home, in the school playground and the after-school club (King, 2013). Reflecting over the last 25 years, the thread has been on the process of play, inspired still by 'The Colorado Paper' (Sturrock & Else, 1998).

Child in the City by Colin Ward

Darijana Hahn

Darijana is a researcher of social space and lecturer in Hamburg (Germany); she completed her PhD in 2011, focusing on the *Children's Playground as a Mirror of Society* involving infants, including those admitted to neonatal units.

After my interview in the Spring of 2004 with the German author and artist Inge Thomas, who wrote the Plea for abolishing the Children's Playground (Plädoyer für die Abschaffung des Kinderspielplatzes) in 1980, she handed me a book, which felt like a treasure's box. That book was Colin Ward's Child in the City, published in 1978.

Being a child of the seventies myself I immediately fell in love with the book – not alone because of the intriguing photo on the title with three boys playing with the soap box, the "prince of pavement toys" (p.115), in the middle of a busy pavement. While Ward was sure, that the numerous photographs of children playing in the book "would be more effective than the text in conveying the intensity, variety and ingenuity of the experience of urban childhood" (vi), he was staggered that they could also be perceived in the contrary way, that is "one more catalogue of deprivations" (vi). This was one of the reasons why in the new edition from 1990 the photographs were left out – "with a pang" (vi). However, the loss of the photographs does not change the message of the book: to achieve child-friendly cities, we do not need a special "childhood city" (p.179): rather, we need a "shared city" (p.180), in which people of all ages and categories feel welcomed, tolerating and communicating with each other. It is no surprise that Ward ends his astute and delightful collage of observations, quotations, and research findings with a question:

"Rather than throw in a few playthings, shouldn't we help them climb out of the sandbox and into the city?" (p.183)

We have been seeking answers to this question ever since.

Summerhill by A.S. Neill

Eleni Daskalaki-Denman

Play has been **Eleni**'s work since 2005. She has played in early education, playwork, and play therapy.

A school where classes are optional?

Where children make the rules?

A small democracy, where each child and adult has one equal vote?

I encountered Summerhill as a teenager growing up in Athens in the 1980s. I was fascinated and incredulous. The book that introduced me to it, *Theory and practice of anti-authoritarian education,* a Greek translation of the original, had caught the eye of the rebellious teen that I was. That title, I now realise, had been used with some creative license by the Greek editors. Their subtitle Summerhill: the revolutionary example of a free school is closer to the title of the original book, *Summerhill: A radical approach to child rearing,* though in those days that did not register, or matter to me.

What mattered then – and now – is that this was not just a theory: the school really existed, even if in a galaxy far, far away. It was a world apart from the disciplinarian tradition I knew. My school and upbringing may have been an enlightened authority in some ways, but it was still a life decidedly ruled of adults. The book is still in my library today, one of the essentials that came with me when I moved to Scotland. I was surprised to learn that Alexander Sutherland Neill was Scottish born and bred, and indeed grew up not far from where I now lived. I also discovered, in this new era of online possibilities, that Summerhill School is still alive and kicking.

Neill believed that happy children would grow into happy adults. He created a self-governed community, which recognised children's individuality, their right to make their own decisions, and their right to play. At Summerhill, play takes priority over classes. As one former pupil puts it, this is "a place where children can be children".

The longevity of Summerhill, now over a century old, is proof, in my mind, that its principles are sound. Proof that free play can co-exist with academic learning, that children can self-govern, and that they can use freedom with responsibility.

Today, it strikes me that we would still be considered rebels if we root for Summerhill and Neill's philosophy. Considering our conventional schooling in the Western world – in, ironically, what we call the 'free' world – Summerhill and its freedom must still seem to most children a galaxy far far away.

Putting the Joy Back into Egypt: An Experiment in Education by Jean Hendy-Harris

Sarah Aiono

Sarah is a researcher, educator and play advocate in Aotearoa New Zealand. As CEO of Longworth Education, she provides professional development for teachers of children aged 5 – 15 years of age to ensure play continues throughout their educational experience.

Putting the Joy Back into Egypt: An Experiment in Education by Jean Hendy-Harris is an autobiography of an experiment undertaken by a family that recognised the traditional school system did not cater for their children's needs. It describes through personal anecdote how assessing children's learning needs do not go far enough in identifying those children who are the outliers – the unusual thinkers, the quirky problem solvers, and divergent creatives. Furthermore, it challenges the reader to consider a different model of learning that is rooted in experience, play and joy.

Initially, the author addresses the tension the family have in managing a deeply unhappy child transitioning to school as a 5-year-old, and the expectation that school is the answer to addressing his many noted deficits. It describes how they arrive at the difficult decision to home school, after being advised of the special needs their first-born child has. It shares the realisation many families of children with exceptional abilities have in their early school experience – that school systems ask many square-peg children to fit into the round hole of school.

As the chapters progress, the writer shares their experience of recognising that the deficits the school identify, are in fact unique strengths of their children. This leads to the creation of a playful, experiential desire to learn and the broad and varied subject areas they cover as a result. Chapter titles include "War Poets, a Rabbit and a Goat; Mathematical Mice and Music; and Journey into Russia" – all detailing how the family respond to their children's self-initiated inquiries about topics of interest, and how play forms the basis for the learning that occurs in their home curriculum.

At the heart of this book is a call for those in and out of the school system to recognise the diverse learning needs of all students, and that learning occurs, first and foremost, when joy is prioritised as an outcome. That learning should not be a laborious chore, and one that causes deep unhappiness and resentment. It is not always joyous in the moment (think conflict and challenge), as the subcurrent that ensures persistence, resilience and risk-taking occur pushes the learner far beyond what they can achieve in a traditional classroom setting.

Although published forty years ago, the text remains highly relevant and inspiring to those championing the need for change in our education system, and the presence of play in all aspects of our children's learning.

Stig of the Dump by Clive King

Barbara Middleton

Barbara is an award-winning environmental artist, illustrator and outdoor learning and play specialist who works with cultural, environmental and heritage organisations and communities throughout Scotland and beyond.

Stig of the Dump, written by Clive King and Illustrated by Edward Ardizzone, inspired my childhood play.

I loved the stories that Clive created but I also was drawn to Edward's evocative illustrations. They are wonderfully vivid and characterful. The characters transfixed me – a young boy called Barney and his unusual friend, Stig. Stig was from another time and place, a caveman with scruffy, black hair and bright, black eyes. The two become friends, share adventures, and communicate without language, as Stig speaks no English.

The stories made me wonder about folks who lived other lives, in other times and in places of their own making - anywhere. The 'anywhere' for me, was the nearby, overgrown woodlands. I spent many happy days there with my older brothers and our gang of friends. This spark also ignited a love of drawing which has shaped my dual career as an outdoor educator and illustrator.

As long as we remembered to play sensibly and be home before supper time, our parents were happy in the knowledge that we would be safe. Our 'gang' included children of all ages - from 8 years old, my age, to 15. There was no pecking order. However, we admired those friends who shared new ways of doing things: making a 'Tarzan' rope, constructing a den from natural materials, threading daisy chains for crowns; and building a fire to bake (and usually burn) our potatoes! I can almost taste them now - raw and starchy on one side, charcoaled and overcooked on the other. We happily devoured them. We would later learn how to make them more edible. Trial and error by experiential learning.

The sense of freedom and joy was immense. We wove narratives. The play was risky. We took chances. I remember the huge sense of braveness and excitement when it was my turn to hold onto the rope and swing out over the steep, railway embankment. My hands were too small to get a good grip and I slipped off from safety. I thought that I had died. I had landed on my back in a slurry of mud, winding myself. My brothers looked down at me whilst I looked up at them and for a moment I could not breathe. I was covered in dirty sludge. Initially, I had two worries: my mum would be angry because I was dead, and my Mum would be so angry because I was wearing my good cardigan. Of course, all was well. I was fine. Something more than fine. I was filled up with a new feeling - an incredible sense of being alive. I had taken a risk and survived. Anything was possible now.

Spontaneity by Keith Johnstone

Karen Benjamin

Karen is a Senior Lecturer in Drama & Performing Arts. She has a background in professional theatre and is a Comedy Improviser with Box of Frogs.

To be spontaneous is the essence of being human. It is an important part of creativity in its truest form. For example, spontaneous painting is painting intuitively without having an image or model to paint from, where the result comes from a spontaneous play with the paint, the colours, and texture. Children in their play are spontaneous in their responses to objects, situations, and environments. Hughes (1996) presented his *Taxonomy of Play Types* to explore the range of emotional responses and experiences children have when playing.

Stimulus can come from anything, and so it is for the Improviser. In fact, many play types have links with drama & theatre, for storytelling, communication and role playing are normal parts of everyday life. Every day we improvise. We wake knowing little of what the day presents, but we improvise our way through it with language, and emotional responses, reactions, and interactions with those we encounter.

The playfulness needed by the improviser is akin to the playfulness of the child in their natural responses to the world around them. For example, 'In creativity tests you may be asked to suggest different ways of using a brick' (Johnstone, 1981 p.75). How similar is this to Object Play (Hughes, 1996). Our responses to this task, like that of a child, can be as creative and as far removed from the obvious as possible. Bricks are not just for building walls!

Johnstone recognises, as did Sir Ken Robinson in his TED Talk, that creativity can be squashed within an education system, and that results in the common statement, "I can't draw!" What we need as humans is the natural ability to play and be creative. It is on this basis that he developed his approach to improvisation.

As improvisers play in performance they draw upon their responses to the obvious, to the minutia around them, to accepting 'offers' from audience and their fellow players, a play cue in some sense, and then going with the 'flow' to perform. Are they therefore capturing the essence of what play is for children, drawing on their own playfulness and how much of this is the essence of being human?

Impro for Storytellers by Keith Johnstone

Michael Dietrich

Michael studied education, psychology, and sociology. He is managing director of PA/SPIELkultur e.V. in Munich (Germany), and artistic director of mixxit Theatre.

Fascinated by acting without learning lines, telling stories without knowing their endings, and standing on a stage without having rehearsed a role, I encountered Keith Johnstone, a British dramaturg, acting teacher, and founder of modern improvisational theatre. I read *Impro for Storytellers: Theatresports and the Art of Making Things Happen* and met him in person at a training course. He taught acting by PLAYING theatre. With the motto, "you can't learn anything without failing!", he encouraged students to make mistakes and learn joyfully through entertaining scenic games with practically unsolvable tasks.

The tasks involved concentrating on the moment, on the partners on stage, and on accepting playing offers - always to the point of absurdity. Players imagined themselves away from reality in a play world, which was a safe environment. Risks could be taken, and solutions tried out without thinking about possible consequences. The playful approach to roles, situations and stories offers a kind of safety training for life. I have argued that "under framework conditions in which the physical well-being is not endangered, previous experiences, structures, and values can be thrown into a tailspin and new skills, structures of thinking, or expectations can be formed in repetitive trying out" (p.93). A playful attitude encourages us to be curious and creative - and to leave our comfort zone.

Keith Johnstone said, "many teachers think of children as immature adults. It might lead to better and more 'respectful' teaching if we thought of adults as atrophied children". And he began to reawaken, not only in me, but in people all over the world, an infectious joy of play that had been deeply dormant. He regularly interrupted me and my classmates as soon as he perceived a hint of perfection, planning, or self-expression, i.e., 'adult' behaviour, and replaced this with a playful task. I can recall improvised scenes with a stuffed pig that always looked at me the same way and jumping around the room grinning broadly while inventing a word-by-word story with a play partner.

Play accompanies me as a basic attitude in everyday life, in my encounters with young and old alike, privately, and professionally. I try to be happy about mistakes, to perceive and inspire my fellow human beings, and to leave my comfort zone again and again.

Children's Game #19: Haram Football by Francis Alÿs

Eva Maréchal

Eva is a Belgian anthropologist and play-practitioner who researches the environment children need to facilitate free play. She is the driving force behind Hop Up, a dynamic pop-up playground.

Children run into the street and greet one another warmly. They stack stones on top of each other that mark out the goal. Their feet scrape the street free of pebbles. They tie their shoes, and the match is ready to take off. It seems like the start of a normal game of street soccer. But it isn't. Children follow the ball flying back and forth across the playing field, only, there is no ball. It's a soccer game played without a ball. That doesn't bother the children. With passion and expression, they kick, dribble, tackle, pass and … score! What follows is applause and euphoria.

Francis Alÿs' *Haram Football* films a football (soccer) match of children in a neighborhood of Mosul, Iraq. It highlights the redemptive power of play and the strength and resilience of children. The children manage to create a shared, imaginary world, transcending conventions, and everyday rules.

The street game occurred when the neighborhood was under ISIS control. It declared many things to be haram (forbidden), like football. To circumvent that rule, children invented a new kind of football, one without a ball. The ball is imaginary created by the children, invisible to those watching, but vividly present to those in the game. This is not without danger. In 2015 a group of 13 children were executed by for allegedly having been caught watching a football game on television.

In his research on children's play in war zones, David Feldman describes how children find ways to play, no matter how bad the situation is. He argues that this, reflects the significance of play as a means for children to cope with conditions of war. Play enables children to transform reality into another, imaginary world where they find freedom and agency over their lives. That is what happens in Haram football. It shows the struggle and ingenuity of children to create a sacred space for themselves in a world that is cruel and denies them much. Their playing field is surrounded by bomb craters, collapsed buildings, and tanks. However, in their game they find each other and the power to transform this battleground into a playground.

It reminds me of how the first adventure playgrounds emerged in the bomb craters of post-war Europe. And of Childhood Land, an underground playground in Damascus built by residents as a safe haven for children to play. The film shows play as an expression of passion, ingenuity, and resilience. It presents play as a natural way for silent resistance to war and suppression.

Memories of play

Debra Lawrence

Debra has over 40 years of experience in early care and education. She is currently the President of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, the International Play Association, USA affiliate.

As a child, adolescent, and adult, I am an example of how play contributed to my development and has guided my professional life choices. Play is the foundation for all learning. It is fundamental to healthy development, and as a child, I played freely from sunup to sundown. These rich, engaging, and active experiences provided the landscape needed for future success.

As a child of five years old, I suffered a life-threatening accident requiring me to learn to walk again: eleven years of surgeries followed. This prevented me from attending kindergarten, so my first formal school experience was in the first grade. In the days before first grade, my time during the day was filled with active, risky play that included climbing trees, investigating, and discovering, following my interests, pretending, all mostly outside. My parents, who were loving and nurturing, never read a book to me. I never went to preschool, and my daily experiences did not include anything that could be described as academic.

Nevertheless, when I entered first grade at six years and six months old, having never written my name or known what a letter was, I read fluently within three months. I am not a child prodigy. This is just evidence of how play lays the foundation for all future learning, and if we want children to be 'ready to learn', then play is how to make this happen.

Why are the fields empty?

Arindam Roy

Arindam is a Ph.D. candidate in Regional Development Planning in the University of Cincinnati. His primary research interests are children's play in urban settings.

My journey began as a child from a small town of India. We played in the fields around home, our small garden, school playgrounds, streets or in any piece of open land we could find. After high school, I studied architecture and worked as an architect for two years in India before moving to the United States to pursue a career in planning. While working within the parks system in Cincinnati during my doctoral degree, I realized a stark contrast between park culture in the United States and the play fields I grew up with in India.

I grew up playing in open green fields. Those fields were little maintained, had all kinds of shrubs, bushes, rocks, pits, puddles, sand piles, broken bricks, iron rods left out from construction, snakes, lizards, bugs, tree clusters, and what not. It was not a park; it was just a planned patch of greenery in the community. Nothing more was done to it, and we as children made the most out of it. I still remember a palm tree that stood at the centre of it, whose shadow formed our field boundary during hot tropical summer mornings. As the shadow shifted so would our cricket's small five-side field.

Browsing through the parks in Cincinnati and studying access, equipment, and safety features, I became overwhelmed at their complexity and all that was required to create a safe, risk-free, and monotonous play area. When I next returned to India, I made an intentional tour of all the old places and fields in which I used to play. I was stunned and saddened. The fields were either overgrown with bushes or were fenced-off, and there were no children playing outdoors in the evening. Only on the odd occasion, did I observe some little kids playing in green patches.

I recalled that in my own childhood it was hard to find a field, as they were in high demand, and would be occupied on a first come, first served basis. On many occasions, we had to settle for rocky fields or ones with thorny bushes. All of that seems to have changed. This inspired me to study the opportunities for outdoor play for children in India, the reasons behind the trends, and to explore if anything can be done to recover the worlds of lost play for future generations.

My daughter and me

Gerben Helleman

Gerben is an urban geographer, based at The Hague University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands). On his blog *Urban Springtime* he writes about his specialist interests on the use of public space and child-friendly cities.

When my daughter was born eleven years ago, many new worlds opened for me. In addition to the world of diapers and sleepless nights, my use and perception of public space changed. The width of the sidewalk and loose paving stones suddenly became important. First through my walks with the pram and a few years later when my daughter stumbled down the street. In her early years the walk to the local supermarket was a great adventure, because everything was interesting to her: the flowers from the front gardens, the leaves, the twigs of the trees lying in the street, the chains on the yellow fire hydrants, the baker's shop window, etc. All things that stood out much more at her eye level and stimulated her senses.

Yet, when we talk about outdoor play in our professional world we often talk about playgrounds with fixed and manufactured play equipment. My daughter taught me that we should look at the bigger picture. We need to be concerned with well-connected walking and cycling routes, clear crossings, landscaping, and clear sightlines. We need to get away from the focus on formal play areas (playgrounds, public sports field, skatepark). Those who want to encourage outdoor play also need to look how children use informal spaces (bushes, streets, lawns, squares).

Take the sidewalk again. At the age of four my daughter ran and jumped from one manhole cover to the other with her friend when we walked home from school. The small ones were ten points and the large ones fifty. From about six years old, my daughter meets her friends on the nearby public sports field to play soccer. After a while, however, the children want to do something else. Then they go to the surrounding bushes to build huts, look for insects or play hide and seek in the area. The mix of informal and formal play offerings matter much.

Outdoor play for children is about much more than the small, predefined target areas that we build for them. As Colin Ward (1978, p.73) explained in *The Child in the City*, "a city that is really concerned with the needs of its young will make the whole environment accessible to them, because, whether invited to or not, they are going to use the whole environment". We can facilitate that in simple ways. By placing letters, numbers or colours on the sidewalk. By hanging a chalkboard on a blank wall where children can draw and write. By planting different flowers. By leaving the fallen trees in parks so that you can climb over them. It is the little things in life that matter. Literally and figuratively.

Playful recovery after the fire

Kiana Krueger

Kiana is a passionate early childhood educator, an undergraduate student, and Research Assistant at MacEwan University. She is part of the CanPlay Lab team.

Play is a crucial component of childhood development, which has inspired many practitioners and researchers. Two distinct experiences ignited my passion for exploring play and its role in different cultures.

I visited Medellin in Colombia, aiming to support local communities after the Moravia Barrio fire. As I walked through the area, I was greeted by a group of children playing with simple materials like bottle cans, wood, and old tyres. Despite the absence of fancy toys or electronic gadgets, the children were fully engaged in their play and having a great time. I observed how the children used their creativity and imagination to transform these everyday items to utilise them in rich and engaging games. They used the cans as goalposts, the wood as ramps, and the tyres as obstacles and vehicles. I noted how the children collaborated to generate new ideas and rules for their game, developing their social skills and teamwork in the process. This highlighted the value of play and that it does not require expensive toys to be enjoyable and meaningful. It demonstrated that children find joy and creativity in simple objects, and that play is a universal experience that transcends cultural and economic boundaries.

One of my tasks in my voluntary work was to assist in the construction of a local elementary school. Next to the construction site was a roadside shop where a young child called Bali would often come and play with us. It was inspiring to see his joy every time we came to the site, as he ran around and helped us mix concrete and use the tools. Bali highlighted the universal nature of play and its essential role in the lives of children. It was a powerful reminder that even with limited resources, children can still find ways to create and engage in play, demonstrating their resilience and creativity.

These experiences reinforced my belief in the importance of promoting play as a fundamental part of children's lives, no matter where they live or what resources they have. It inspired me to explore the importance of play in different cultures and the creative ways in which children use everyday objects to create valuable and rich play experiences.

Different ways of playing

Caroline Essame

Caroline is the CEO and founder of the social enterprise CreateCATT. She is an associate lecturer in Singapore and an art therapist, occupational therapist and play specialist in England.

Just over 12 years ago, I was invited to train in creativity and play in a special needs school in rural India. So off I set on a trip to Kerala. That visit was the first of many, and it changed how I worked, and the way I understood the language of play.

Language was the first challenge. I did not speak Malayalam. Most of these children had complex needs and many were non-verbal communicators. Loris Malaguzzi talks about the 100 languages of play. I had to learn to listen in different ways and across cultures. These families and children needed support and expertise. However, they were also educators. They demonstrated the importance of play. They showcased its incredible diversity. As an educator, I had to be creative in my approach.

In my training I had prepared soundbites that could be easily translated. I needed to communicate simply, while conveying the essence of what I offered. In the field, I learnt to show not just tell, and to really trust the process of play to share profound and important messages. I learnt to listen to the language of differently abled children and to trust that play mattered to them, even if I could not always understand exactly what they were doing and why. If they loved to rock, I would sit and rock with them, validating what had meaning to them.

If I tuned into their language of play, they would be more likely to look at me and smile, making a beautiful connection. I discovered the language of pre-verbal play and from this early work in India my developmental play model was born. Inspired by the family of Deepti Special School, I returned every year until the pandemic hit. The visits inspired me to make Mothers of Light, a movie about the school and its work. I hope it inspires you too.

Trust children and trust play

Kim Adams

Kim is a speaker, play advocate and content creator, with over 35 years' experience in preschools and child care canters. She is the owner of Barron Park Preschool in Palo Alto, CA.

I was 19 years old in 1988 when I landed my first job as a preschool teacher. The school was part of a large corporate chain of childcare centres in the United States. I had not encountered any coursework related to child development at college and I had no work experience with groups of children. I was hugely under qualified for this job. It did not matter; I was excited to be a preschool teacher. Quickly, I found that being a preschool teacher at this centre meant lots of moving from room to room, working with different groups of children. I was expected to keep the kids safe, entertained, and especially, under control. It was stressful, chaotic, and a bit confusing.

A few years later, I was fortunate to move to a totally different environment—a school which was more resourced, supportive, and messy in the right ways. Still, I had a misconception of my role as 'teacher'. My practice had improved, and my skillset was greater, but I misunderstood 'who' was in control of the learning. I thought I was the teacher so I must teach.

I changed my approach when I was introduced to the amazing work of Bev Bos, the early-childhood educator, author and play advocate. To say that my eyes were opened to a new approach is an understatement. Her work resonated deeply. I learned that children should lead and direct their own learning through play. This would be unpredictable, fun, often loud, joy-filled, and yes, messy. I did not need to control children, or even teach them. Rather, I needed to support their learning by offering an environment rich with open-ended materials, space to explore, and lots of time to play.

There is something about play being a universal human behaviour that inspires me to look for the ways it serves human development and wellbeing. I have long been fascinated with the connection between creativity and play. I deeply respect the way that play is the vehicle through which children's developmental needs are met. However, as I learn more about the benefits of play while simultaneously learning about Adlerian psychology, I have come to realize that play is a perfect vehicle for meeting the human need for connection and contribution.

Thirty-five years later, my experience and knowledge have shaped my understanding of the need to protect the one and only childhood that children have. Play has become the central focus of my work through which I help other parents and other educators to trust children and trust that their needs will be met through play.

My box is bigger on the inside

Suzanne Axelsson

Suzanne has worked over thirty years in early childhood education with a focus on children's autonomy, democratic approaches, and inclusion. Her books include *The Original Learning Approach* and *Risky Play and Teaching*.

My three children have inspired me the most about play. My relationship with them has enabled me to understand play on new levels. Play has always fascinated me and having open dialogues with my children throughout their lives has been second nature to us all.

The fact that all three of my children are autistic, like myself, has offered me the opportunity to consider non-normative play. This has driven me to become a play advocate not just for the sake of play but also for the sake of children who all too often get their play labelled as behaviour.

My son refused to wear dress up clothes as a pre-schooler, which could have been a problem for the for the Swedish tradition of Sankta Lucia where children dress up in white gowns. Creatively, I bought a gingerbread-man or tomte outfit that could be worn as pyjamas, so while everyone else got dressed up on December 13th my son had a non-stressful pyjama day.

It was not until he turned six that he asked me, as he nervously held a Peter Pan hat, "am I still me if I put it on?" The transformative power of play was so strong that he feared that he would no longer be himself. After our chat together about dressing-up, he realised that dressing-up clothes were not something to fear. It was a big lesson about just how powerful play can be, and how personal our relationship is with it.

On another occasion, one of my daughters was struggling with her homework, and I suggested she think outside the box, to which she replied, "but my box is bigger on the inside than the outside, and travels through space and time." Her Dr. Who fandom was shining through, but again it was a valuable lesson about children, autonomy, and play. Too often, we are shoving children into neat little identical boxes in an education system that asks them to think creatively. In contrast, through play the possibilities are endless, and there is a sense of safety because it is play and not real life. Play creates the perfect conditions for creativity and risk taking - where mistakes do not have serious consequences but are just a part of the process of getting to know the world.

Time and time again, my three children have fuelled my understanding of play and ignited a desire to find out more. Play should not be just tolerated: it needs to be accepted and understood as a way to understand the child.

The boy, the worm, and the leaf

Marion Burns

Marion is a co-author of *Realising the Ambition: Being me*, the national guidance for early years in Scotland. She is a member of the IJELT editorial board and is the non-executive chairperson of Early Years Scotland.

The school bell will ring soon. Children are hopping, skipping, and running through the school gates. Gates that will in a few minutes close, creating a barrier between waving adults and their children, who until moments ago were adjusting school bags and hair bobbles, straightening ties while hugging one another. All the while a small boy was playing, unseen, not heard; despite his voice rising above the clamour of others intent on getting to school before the bell. He has a worm and a single leaf blown down from nearby trees many months ago. The leaf was now a tool, a prop, a potential solution to picking up the worm, which until he stopped to look at it, was in grave danger of being trampled by busy footsteps making their way across the tarmacked playground. The boy deeply engrossed in his play tried different ways to use the leaf to pick up his worm. I am sure I heard him say, "can't you see me playing, you will if you use your eyes and your ears?"

I watched and listened to see if others had heard him playing, as my own charge waved, hugged me, and shot off to meet up with friends. Perhaps others observed the boy and his worm? Sadly no, children and adults alike stepped around him without so much as a pause or a backwards glance.

The national practice guidance for early years in Scotland, *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*, promotes play as the vehicle through which our children learn best. Play that is freely chosen and intrinsically motivated. Play that is initiated by a specific interest or simply curiosity, something that the child determines has value, is worthy of further exploration, or is a problem to solve.

The worm captured the boy's curiosity. It needed to be saved, taken to a place of safety, to continue its burrowing in the soil of the nearby flower bed. The leaf was wobbly, crunchy even, but it just would not do the job the boy had in mind. The bell was now ringing, the gates were locked shut and the adults were cheering along the late comers to hurry through the gates. The boy looked up to see if his 'deeply significant' endeavours had been noticed. Through the space between the bars in the now closed gates our eyes met. I could do no more than share that moment, yet his actions, emotions and words said it all.

He picked up the worm between his fingers and dropped it carefully in the soil beside a bush, then he too ran up the steps and into school. I walked away reflecting on the boy's playfulness, his creativity, and wondered what a skilled Other would have done next.

Children are inspirationally play-full!

Play in healing and hope

Jen DeMelo

Jen is the Vice President of Innovation and Strategic Partnerships at KABOOM!. Her role in providing oversight to strategic projects leads the organization to produce innovative outcomes connected to playspaces.

My story comes from the field and is one that inspires and provides hope. Following the mass shooting that occurred in Uvalde, TX on May 24, 2022, where nineteen innocent children and two educators were killed, I was tasked with determining if building playgrounds might be of benefit to the community.

One month after the tragedy, I made my way to Uvalde to listen, learn, observe behaviour, and audit infrastructure. I ended up making several trips to Uvalde to meet with community members, educators, parents, grandparents, mental health practitioners, City officials, City agency representatives and kids. My purpose was to determine if we should deploy staff and resources to support the efforts of the community in Uvalde to recover from the tragedy.

It was clear that there were simply not enough places for kids to play and that play was a high priority in the community.

We embarked on our first project and designed and completed our first playground in Uvalde with an overwhelming amount of support from the local community. The project became a beacon of hope, and the playground an oasis of joy, where kids and families had the ability to decompress and experience moments of laughter and play in a community gathering space that gave moments of normalcy at such a complex time.

The power of play had never been so clear to me, and we have since partnered with several local groups to follow-up on our commitment to end playspace inequity in Uvalde. We have now completed three projects and we plan to complete ten more.

It is rewarding to see that the physical play infrastructure is providing a place where kids can be kids and play. The process of engaging the community in designing and building the playspace has brought hope and has helped in the healing process. It has certainly had a profound impact and been an inspiration to me.

Creating community spaces for inclusive play

Leah Taylor

Leah is a PhD/ MScOT Candidate at Western University in Ontario, Canada. Her research focuses on inclusive active play, and applications of physical activity in occupational therapy when working with young children (age 0-5 years) with disabilities.

Let me set the scene: it was the last t-ball practice of the year. The athletes had all left and the coaches were tidying up. Jane (pseudonym) came over to the coaching staff and thanked us for giving her a chance to play on our team and for a fun season. Her mom, crying in the background, then approached the head coach and gave her a hug. Her seven-year-old daughter who has muscular dystrophy and who is confined to a power wheel chair, finally got to participate in a team sport.

I will never forget this moment which re-affirmed my desire to pursue a career in occupational therapy, with a research focus on inclusive active play.

I live in a rural community in Western Canada. Like most rural Canadian communities, kids take part in organized sports like hockey or soccer and have access to parks and playgrounds outside of school time. Although our community offers many recreational opportunities, these often do not engage children with disabilities as full and equal participants.

To counter this problem, in 2021 community members started a chapter of Challenger Baseball. This is an adaptive t-ball program for children with disabilities. The goal is to provide an inclusive space to enjoy the full benefits of playing an organized sport. Taking part as a coach over the last two years I have learned more from each of our athletes about the value, importance, and opportunities to support inclusive play than I could have ever learned in a classroom.

The inspiration for my research on evaluating inclusive playgrounds has emerged from this experience. In many Canadian communities, the local playground may be one of the only free, unstructured opportunities for kids to engage in active, and unstructured play. But how many of the athletes who participated in Challenger Baseball could use our local playgrounds? My research goal was to figure out a way to evaluate community playgrounds for inclusion. This would allow local disability champions to approach our town council with recommendations to adapt our playgrounds to better meet the needs of all children.

My hope is that our research is a useful place to start for others looking to advocate for the inclusion of all children on community playgrounds. These are important community spaces of childhood, and every Jane should be afforded the opportunity to engage in play.

From waste to safe play space

Adefunke Ekine

Adefunke is an Associate Professor of Childhood Education at Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun Nigeria.

Outdoor play is critical to children's holistic development. Play is the vehicle for developing imagination, intelligence, and language. COVID-19 deprived many children – in my community, across the nation, and globally - of the joy of experiencing fun and interactions with peers for many months. This is worrisome as with the advent on technology-based games, too many were already withdrawing from outdoor play.

In poorer and rural parts of Nigeria, children's play tends to be self-motivated and self-directed; children make use of available materials in the immediate environment such as sand, water, waste materials such as empty cartons, tins/can, ropes and used tyres. In contrast, children from the urban cities and high-income families play with technology.

After the schools re-opened in Nigeria, and having seen how play spaces were being created with local materials in some other countries, we started a project to use waste to create safe environments for play. I oversee two preschools back home in Nigeria, where income is low for many families, and where the pandemic took its toll on nearly everyone through social distancing and restrictions on play.

This project of waste to safe play spaces provides physical benefits as well as a stimulating environment for cognitive development. There is growing evidence that children's mental health and emotional wellbeing are enhanced by being outdoors and that the restorative effect is strongest in natural settings, which is what our project provides. Research has shown also that green outdoor spaces foster creative play, improve interactions with adults, and relieve symptoms of disorder especially in children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

Our space has become a place of exploration for children, providing opportunity for them to expand their horizons and build their confidence while learning about and managing risk for themselves.

Inspirational roots in Japan

Naoto Yamaguchi

Naoto is currently pursuing a Ph.D. He is a playworker in Kyoto city Kawaokahigashi Children's house (Jidou-can). In Nishijin and Uji, he organizes temporary adventure playground once a month, as a community activity.

Blue Beans Shore has been operating as a non-profit since 1986. They are based in Hyogo, Japan. They create a range of unique children's camps: bamboo shoot camp, summer sea camp, food education programme, Christmas camp, art workshop and so on. They educate university students as camp leaders, under the direction of Sajima Hirotoshi, who was previously a YMCA camp leader. During my time there, I learned the importance of making children equal friends. I also learned the importance of preparing for children's play: environment, equipment, tools, words, performance and so on. As camp leaders, we motivated and courage children. Finally, we rejoice in what they achieve and the process though which these results are gained. This, I think, is being aware of children's zone of proximal development.

Usagi-Harappa has been an adventure playground since 2009. It is based in Uji city, Kyoto, Japan. Most of its playworkers are mothers. We held Usagi-Harappa monthly. It is a temporary adventure playground, which is shaped by the seasons and what prevails in the wider park. The mothers' eldest sons and daughters are now university students. They grew up on Usagi-Harappa. The mothers warmly welcome families and children who come to play and sometimes provide counselling on child-rearing or child-development or daily worries. Usagi-Harappa makes connection among residents within the community, which is a characteristic of Japanese adventure playground.

Blown away when attending my first ever conference on play!

Debby Clarke

Debby is Play Development Officer for Dublin City Council. She is the author of *Everywhere, Any Day, You Can Play* – The Dublin City Play Strategy 2022 – 2027.

Becoming a 'playleader' was a dream come true for me. I never thought that my love for working with children at play would ever be considered a 'real job'. It was what I loved and was passionate about. No day was ever the same and it was easy to make friends (who became lifelong friends). Beforehand, we were covert playworkers as we could not quite articulate our work. We knew that it had value and substance, but it seemed intangible.

So onwards to eventually becoming a Play Officer for an area regeneration project in Dublin. With encouragement from Anne O'Brien, my city play officer counterpart, we set off for what was my first play conference hosted by Playboard NI. This opened a can of 'glow worms' for me! It was an Aha moment for all of us, as we realised that playwork was what we had been doing all along. First off, it was Bob Hughes, then Stuart Lester (Tell your mum I saved your life), Wendy Russell, Mark Armitage and finally Tim Gill (No Risk, No Fear). As the day progressed, everything began make so much more sense. Inspired would be an understatement! We met so many wonderful play people, heard so many great presentations, and learned from so much interesting work from Scotland, England, Wales, Northern Ireland beyond. The intangible became tangible, and a fire was lit that continues to burn.

This inspired me to register with the University of Gloucestershire University and I earned a BA Honours degree in Play and Playwork Practice, tutored by the Stuart Lester and Wendy Russel.

Together with other playwork colleagues, we succeeded in developing 'Playdays' within an Irish Context and eventually had it adopted as a National Event by our first Minister for Children. We are now in a much stronger position, and we have a five-year strategy and action plan in place that supports play in Dublin.

There is also a sad side to this story. Sadly, I lost my wonderful predecessor (Anne O'Brien) who was passionate, tenacious and had the foresight to see that policies and strategies for play were vital in supporting children's play as a right. I hope she's pleased with what she started!

From a play-friendly country

Siôn Edwards

Mae **Siôn** yn weithiwr chwarae niwroamrywiol yn Canolfan Phlant Integredig Y Fenter, Wrecsam (gogledd ddwyrain). Siôn is a neurodivergent playworker at The Venture Integrated Children's Centre, Wrexham (north east Wales). He is also the Chair of The Playwork Foundation, a UK-wide charity for play, playwork, and playworkers.

Like many others, I stumbled into playwork by chance. I was unemployed and ushered into a six-month 'back into work' placement at The Venture. I had never experienced an adventure playground beforehand. I saw parallels between the concept of freely-chosen play and improvisational theatre. These experiences prompted me to revaluate my childhood playing with friends in the street and, later, in the woods and rivers of Erddig parkland.

At the beginning of my placement, a nurturing playworker, Theresa Burling, said I could just do my hours and get through the placement or, if I wanted, she could share more about what it is to be a playworker. I was hoping for a job, so thought I had better say yes! She introduced me to *The Playwork Principles*, Bob Hughes' play types, the Play Cycle,, reflective practice, intervention styles, and iPD!p magazine. After six months, I was hooked on playwork and given a job.

I started Playwork: Principles into Practice (P3) training where Wrexham Council's Play Development Team further dismantled my assumptions about children's play and enriched my understanding of my role (in particular my impact upon children's play). Back at The Venture, our Chief Officer, Malcolm King OBE, supported me to conceptualise and budget for playwork provision and demonstrated how to interpret and complete funding applications, eventually entrusting me with my own projects.

Nationally, in 2002, the Welsh Government established a Play Policy and, at the turn of the decade, Wales became the first country to legislate for children's play through the *Children and Families Measure 2010*, which placed a duty on Local Authorities to secure sufficient play opportunities for children where they live.

Today, my playwork training continues at Belfast Met with Barbara McIlwrath; I help to run free weekly online reflective practice sessions with Penny Wilson from Assemble Play and also author The Playwork Primer. I am Chair of The Playwork Foundation with a talented and experienced board of trustees; and I have the joy of delivering playwork provision at The Venture for children and young people with neurodevelopmental conditions alongside my autistic partner.

Playwork colleagues (too many to name on a single page!), Play Wales, Wrexham Play Team, and Welsh Government continue to inspire me to improve my practice. I feel grateful to have been granted the privilege of being a playworker.

Inspired by photo-based stories

Amy Ross and Dagmar Kerr

Amy is a Children's Therapeutic Worker for The Cottage Family Centre in Kirkcaldy, and a Relax Kids Coach. **Dagmar** is a Project Officer with Children's Health Scotland (CHS) in the Health Rights Service.

While working with a special school to deliver the Special Smiles Dental Play Project™ to children and families, a teacher shared a young pupil's healthcare success story with the project officer. With support from his teacher, healthcare professionals, and parents, the pupil had created a photo-based story about going to the dentist to help prepare for the visit. We know that a change in daily activities or memories of a difficult previous experience can be stressful for children with additional support needs. Play preparation, such as reading storybooks, can help a child cope better when a new or potentially stressful appointment beckons. More generally, the importance of play is acknowledged in the health sector. The National Association of Health Play Specialists states that 'play is accepted as vital to healthy growth and development and a natural part of childhood which enables children to explore and make sense of the world they live in'.

This pupil had been empowered to share what mattered to him by taking photographs during his visit to the dentist to create a social story. His choice of photographs was unique to him. We were intrigued by the inclusion of a photograph of the intercom box located at the door to the dental service. To this little boy, the opportunity to press the buzzer and have the voice of the receptionist welcome him to the unit was important in enabling him to cope with the visit. We wondered how many of the adults involved would have chosen to take that photograph, and if they had previously been aware of how important this ritual was to the child? This mattered to him.

Healthcare professionals across the world regularly take part in an improvement exercise by asking patients 'what matters to you?' That simple question can improve healthcare relationships, engagement, and outcomes for a patient. Children and young people have the right to have their voice heard about all aspects of their life through Article 12 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC),* and through the EACH Charter, which promotes children's rights and welfare in healthcare.

An opportunity for play helped this young boy manage his healthcare appointment. We have co-created two storybooks with children to help them prepare for visits to the dentist and the doctor. We are grateful to others who listen to what matters, uphold the child's right to be heard, and share their stories.

Play: the child's superpower

Karen Minton

Karen Minton is a third year PhD student at the University of Wales, Swansea. Prior to commencing her research Karen was a social worker and service manager in the Third Sector.

One of my first roles in the Third Sector was to support children and young people who had to give evidence in court against their alleged abuser.

We prepared the young witness by visiting the court after it closed for the day. We would spin in the judges' chair and sit in the dock and the jury area. We would visit the video link room and chat with the usher in court. We also had sessions at their home and used knitted dolls and puppets to play out court scenarios. We played questioning games where we challenged truths on silly topics. We had quizzes, jigsaws and played a board game about going to court. We practiced relaxation and breathing exercises. We dressed up in wigs and gowns. We worked with young witnesses at a time they were at their most scared and most vulnerable.

But, through the power of play we were able to familiarise them with court and help them understand the different jobs therein. They learnt that the defence lawyers' job was to challenge their truth. They came to understand that we were the trusted, knowledgeable adults with a focus just on them and their individual needs.

Since commencing my research on play in a hospital setting, I have reflected on the similarities of young witness work and health play work. A child is in hospital because they need medical care and are very likely feeling scared, vulnerable and in pain. A health play worker provides activities and games to help them learn about hospital processes and prepare them for medical procedures. The health play worker will show the child coping strategies, provide distraction, be there to support, help them understand what is happening, and normalise their hospital experience. The health play worker is also the trusted, knowledgeable, adult with a focus just on the child and their individual needs.

Whether play is used to prepare a child to give evidence in court, or to support a child through a hospital procedure, it is delivered by the passionate, who are perceived with suspicion by some, misunderstood by others, appreciated by many, but whose only focus is the best possible experience for the child in difficult circumstances.

Play is their superpower.

Children's inner resources

Fiona Evans

Fiona is the Course Director for the MSc in Play Therapy a collaboration between Queen Margaret University and With Kids Charity. She has been a play therapist for 17 years.

"So today we are going on an adventure", Sam said with enthusiasm. Matching his affect, I responded with the same. "Oooh, an adventure". "Yes, we are going through this portal … look", he pointed to a round cushion, "Let's go, come on". We moved together towards the cushion, he led me to spin round and round until we arrived in another land. "Now the adventure begins!", he proclaimed. Anything could happen and most importantly, it would be of his choosing. Suddenly startled he yelled, "Quickly duck down. There's a monster coming for us!!" I whisper an aside, to be directed by him, "Are we frightened?" He exclaimed, "Yes, we are indeed. He is a big monster, and he breathes fire!" "Oh fire", I respond, continuing, "A scary monster who breathes fire." I say this calmly but with concern, staying as the role play companion but also the play therapist containing his fear. He looked at me. "Yes buuuuut … we will be able to hold him back and stop him getting us …" He looked like he had a plan. "Oh, we can do something together, a plan!", I replied with enthusiasm. "Yes, together we are strong, and we have powers. Special powers", he smiled. "You are pleased we have special powers together", I reflected. "Yup! … You can grow really tall and big, and I can freeze fire!' He was triumphant. Matching his affect, I joyously replied, 'Oh, we have had the powers needed to protect ourselves.' "Yeeeesssssss… we do… Let's do it!"

This is a typical example from the work of play therapy when we are asked to be part of the child's role play. It is crucial that the play therapist engages with the play, is playful, and takes the child's lead. If we were to direct this play then we would not allow the child the opportunity to work through difficulties, fears, previous traumas, and experiences that need to be processed.

The therapeutic relationship enables this process, alongside the child symbolically using the play for their own purposes. The therapist recognises the feelings and reveals inner complexities. I am continually inspired by the inner resources of the child to be able to work through what they need to do at their own pace and at the time of their choosing. It is how we accompany children in play therapy that matters. How we understand what is presented to us. How we are of use to them and how we can hold and contain painful experiences building the therapeutic relationship that makes the difference between being a play mate and a play therapist (Winnicott, 1971; and Bion, 2019).

'Together' we can help the child process their feelings and experiences, leading to new ways of being. The excerpt is not taken from a child's session but an example of a typical experience in the playroom.

Books to inspire children to play

Pat Rumbaugh

Pat, The Play Lady, inspires children and adults to play through her series of Let's Play books, work she co-creates with Daniel Nakamura, a talented photographer.

In 1991 I took my two children, Alex age five and Sarah age three, to story time at my local library. When we left the library Alex asked me why there were not books of real children playing. This made me think. I had been reading to my children since they were babies and could not recall a single book that had photographs of children playing. For years, I thought about this and wondered if there was anything that I could do.

In January 2006, I met Daniel Nakamura. He was a gifted photographer who loved snapping children in action photographs. Daniel and I embarked on this journey together. I was teaching at the Washington International School in Washington, DC. I got approval for Daniel and me to hold four photo shoots of three- to five-year-old children playing at the playground. We drafted a dummy book with text and full-page photographs of children playing. We focused on five actions: climbing, jumping, running, sliding, and swinging. We titled this book *Let's Play at the Playground.* It was published by Community Voice Media, LLC that has since closed. The remaining copies are in my possession (feel free to email me if you are interested in acquiring a copy).

In 2017, I was presenting in Atlanta, Georgia for the NAYCE Conference. I was exploring the Exhibition Hall when I came across a sign for publishers. I met Jiyoung Ahn and Deborah Shine, owner of the publishing company Star Bright Books. I showed them a copy of my first book and went on to explain that I had many more ideas for the Let's Play series. Deborah gave me her card and suggested I contact her to talk about my next book. Our second book, *Let's Play Outside* was published by Star Bright Books in 2021. At the end of the book, we list play tips for caregivers and parents.

Both books have received high praise from children and adults. Daniel and I have now begun working on our third book, *Let's Play with our Families*.

Creative professionals inspired by play

Sian Mitchell MacGregor

Siân is a doctoral researcher, working collaboratively on Valuing Young Audiences with the University of Aberdeen and Imaginate (Edinburgh International Children's Festival).

I have watched and worked in rehearsals for twenty years, and now I (formally) research them. Professional creators and performers were traditionally known as players, which immediately hints at a synergy with the world of play. Indeed, play is interwoven in all aspects of the theatre and dance works I witness and enjoy. In fact, when focusing on young audiences, play is prioritised and important, much more so than in work for adults.

Dancers, in particular, often use play as a starting point, a neutral and safe space to create and communicate. It is non-judgemental, throwaway, disposable. Eventually, however, these creative people are obliged to make performances, which seem beyond the reach of play. After all, performers and their support networks operate within specific, serious frameworks, involving schedules and finances: marginalising play. This is no surprise, as play is often disregarded or dismissed by the adult world – by comparison, it is no longer viewed as a legitimate or productive way of being.

So, how to retain and use play to inform and create in these circumstances? How can we bring together an artistic offering, whilst remaining significant to the youngsters who still converse fluently, often unabashed, and unapologetic, in play? To this complication can be added adult logistics, logic, technical requirements, and safety concerns. The notion of bringing play to a stage is more complicated than simply overcoming your adulthood or trying to peel back layers to your own childhood play experiences.

I work with professional adults who aim to play meaningfully for and with children, for those children's interest and joy. However, initially, these adults often find play more arduous than they had expected. Hence, these makers invite young experts in for advice and collaboration: asking for and incorporating children's ideas and influences. Concurrently, they gain confidence to let go of their own carefully constructed, somewhat serious world, and instead allow children's play to inspire them. And in turn, they all inspire me: second-hand play experiences – perhaps twice-removed, but never forgotten.

On belonging to an improv troupe

Charlotte Allan

Charlotte is a PhD candidate at the University of Strathclyde School of Education. She is a theatre maker specialising in work for under-fives and their accompanying adults.

Walking on stage in front of an audience with no script may be a nightmare scenario for many, yet my friends and I would do this willingly on a regular basis. We were an improv troupe, meeting weekly to practice our games and formulas that would then be played at public gigs, each one a one-off. Audience members would be asked to provide words, or themes, or settings, and we would create spontaneous scenes, poems, and plays from these suggestions. You can probably find this kind of performance near you, usually as a comedy act. When it is good it is extraordinary, the performers unbelievably witty and connected - to the audience as well as to each other. However, when it is bad, it is excruciating. If you seek it out I wish you luck!

What I continue to find so inspiring about this time, and these friends, was not the performances but the rehearsals. It was there we took the most risks and made the best work. The improvisation rule of 'yes and' invites a constant state of open readiness, an active willingness to listen and contribute. It is a state which never maintains a position of either receptivity or declaration: rather keeping the two in balance. Another rule is to 'always make the other person look good'. As well as keeping the quality of the work high this created a trusting, mutually supportive team.

Working in youth theatre I would often lead improvisation work with groups of children and adolescents. Here again the principles of accepting and advancing, 'yes and', as well as making each other look good, fostered positive communication. They are great examples of rules which lead to freedom: agentic action being supported in an environment of trust. Access to playful, non-judgmental spaces can become increasingly limited as children grow older. One sixteen-year-old (during exam season) told me that those two hours of youth theatre were the only ones in her entire week that she was free.

Our improv troupe disbanded as the births, deaths, and proper jobs of later adulthood took us in different directions. I have since used the skills and experiences from that time in all kinds of situations and they continue to inspire me, particularly when training or working with adults. Once you know that the transcendental, 'flow' state of wild imaginative play is not restricted to children, it is hard not to try and get everyone else around you to join in.

Play: Seeing and becoming different through the looking glass

Gregor Mews

Gregor is a curious scholar of the human and the urban condition in space & time. He is the author of the international multiple award-winning book *Transforming Public Space through Play* and co-leads the BASC Lab at the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia.

There is no linear or causal way to understanding the world around us, or what Whitehead referred to as 'feeling' and experiencing actualisation (Stenner, 2008). To me play is exactly that, a non-linear self-organising capacity pathway to navigate our becoming in an actualised world. In fact, attributes such as outside of the ordinary, intrinsically motivated, voluntary, positive, temporal, and transformational (Mews, 2022) are only one way of framing the looking glass.

I cannot help but wonder why western societies grant play in childhood, but call it everything but play in adulthood? Could the collective conditioning of entire societies project reductionist (limited) understandings of 'things' onto the actualised word around us that is entangled with everything else at the same time? This triggers in me a reflexive cognitive notion (Schön, 1982) when it comes to the articulation of my own entangled ontology of practice. It appears that 'context' in relation to 'subjectivity' has produced reductionist ideology that penetrates every aspect of our everyday life making it the widely accepted status-quo. This includes all cultural practices, and social as well as linguistical forces that construct our understanding of the world.

I seek to overcome the challenges associated to constructivism and relativism, that not just proclaim that 'all truths are relative to context' but also implies a fundamental dualistic contradiction which reinforces that context's freeness and absoluteness in its own right. To this end, I have been inspired by 'The Middle Way', or the principal approach of Zen. This approach has been gently introduced to Western societies by Watts (2011). It demonstrates that nothing can be claimed as absolute truth. In addition, the theory of eco-psychology (Fisher, 2022), offers a complementary access point to anyone who is interested in the education, design and play nexus as its discursive practice challenges the primacy of rhetoric and reductionism that supresses/distorts the notion of human experiences in the world. In this sense, Dewey's (1959) observation in relation to the ongoing nature of transformation of experience aligns with the middle way. Only by acknowledging the inherent incompleteness of the human experience does an opening emerge that invites one to wake up to a richer life that embraces complexity and embraces play.

Having realised that there is beauty in incompleteness has helped me to continue to celebrate play in research and practice. The sheer complexity of human life (with its dynamic forces and unpredictable patterns) is entangled with the pluralities of the world, allowing one to see, shape and therefore not just being but also becoming different.

Fond memories of what we have lost

Kirti Zala

Since 2011, **Kirti** has led aProCh (a Protagonist in every Child), which aims to make cities more child friendly. She holds an M.B.A. & MSc in Finance. She is passionate and strong advocate of building a better world for children.

Over the last five decades I have encountered Indian cities not as a bystander but as a child, a teenager and an adult who has walked many streets in many cities and interacted with some wonderful people across the generations. While I absolutely love my nation, what does not sit right with me are the many lifestyle changes that we have made over the years in the name of urbanization and development.

As a child, my fondest memories are of how every evening I played on the streets with my friends (games like gilli-danda, pithu and dabba eye-spice) and how we returned home with dirty hands and feet, sometimes bruised, but always with the happiest hearts. Over the years, the boundaries of our cities have expanded but freedom on our streets and community parks have shrunk. Our simple play times of yesteryear have been replaced with screen time, gadgets and esocialization.

The focus on indoor activities has diminished the opportunity for in-person human interaction, finding joy in nature, and free play. Parents are concerned with safety when they send their children to play outside home, as our cities have become less attuned to the children's needs. These days I often look at the maze our cities have become and wonder in the words of the Welsh poet, W.H. Davies, who cautioned, "What is this life if full of care, we have no time to stand and stare".

For the last decade or so I have chosen developed the aProCh (a Protagonist in every Child) initiative, taking a cue from the immense body of research that acknowledges the positive impact on children of unstructured activities and free play. This has been highlighted explicitly in Richard Louv's book *Last Child in the Wood* in which argues that we are facing 'Nature Deficit Disorder', which afflicts both our children and our society at large.

In *One False Move* (Hillman et al., 1990), found that the independent mobility of a child reduced tenfold (from 5km to 500 meters) in fifty years. Children have weaker connections to their surroundings. While it is true that children now have more access to information about distant places and the diversity of nature, they are less well versed in how it feels to be in nature. How it feels to immerse in nature, run around bare feet, feel the wind while cycling, or look at the fields from atop a tree.

Play IS the point!

Peter McCartney

Peter is a founder member of the Northern Ireland branch of the IPA. He has just retired from working as playwork trainer, playwork training co-ordinator, and manager, but not from being a playworker!!

There are loads of important theories, observations, and reflections on this thing we call playwork and I have been inspired by them and used them to inform my practice. Hopefully, also informing, and inspiring others along the way.

Playwork is an approach, but I do not see it as a category or a thing. I understand it as an aspiration; an aim; the end of a continuum where the child or young person has full agency over their play. Play happens across the whole continuum, but the 'play value' increases for the player as their play moves in the direction of person-directed play. That is the 'approach' that best supports the best play.

But what about play itself?

What is the point of play?

People think that play is what children and young people do when they have nothing better to do! We know that play IS the BETTER thing to do!!

It has always frustrated me that play is seen as trivial. Our experience of COVID-19 should have dismantled this misunderstanding. As well as those other important benefits or outcomes of play, surely more of us must now acknowledge the contribution of play to our mental health and wellbeing. However, although I acknowledge that this is an important argument for increasing the play offer in society, it still misses the point!

By focusing on the outcome for this funding application, or for that policy, we lose sight of the value of play for its own sake! So, it was really refreshing for me to come across the article *Play is the Point* by Avital Schreiber Levy. She hit the nail on the head. If you ask yourself, 'What is the point of play? You are also missing the point!! Play is not trivial. It is not a bonus or a treat or a reward for children.

Play itself IS the BETTER thing!

Play itself IS the POINT!

The power of the ordinary

Florence Burke and Melinda Connelly

Florence and **Mel** are part of the BBC Children in Need Impact team. Through grants to locally rooted projects, they aim to ensure that every child and young person in the UK can thrive and be the best they can be.

Playtime, playing, play pals, play piece (Scottish term for snacks to keep you going when you are playing!) are commonplace in childhood, and include a broad range of behaviours and take place in a wide range of settings. We instinctively know what the terms mean, but play is hard to define succinctly and without contradiction. However, we do share an understanding that it is important for children and young people's wellbeing and development.

Through our work and networks at BBC Children in Need it was apparent, even pre-pandemic, that children's emotional and mental wellbeing was becoming a problem. Good mental health allows children to thrive, think clearly, develop socially and emotionally and to learn. But right now, in Scotland and across the UK, many children and young people are struggling with their mental health (Whitebread, 2017).

In a recent BBC Children in Need survey, one in three children reported that they often feel anxious. The same proportion were worried about the future and one in five often felt sad. These are the early signs and indicators that help is needed. Early intervention could be the difference between improving levels of emotional wellbeing or succumbing to enduring mental health problems. Our evaluation also demonstrated that whilst clinical provision is required when mental health issues become complex, early intervention can address these issues. And that is where the power of play comes in.

As funders of projects and organisations working with children and young people, we are acutely aware of how privileged we are. In these times of increasing gloom, we know that there is much genuine concern and care available to support children's well-being. We appreciate, and are keen to support, work that uses the power of play to promote mental well-being among our children and young people.

The wonder of playfulness

Jeanne McLaughlin

Jeanne is a working play therapist at With Kids. She is currently researching and developing training programmes that help professionals and parents understand the playful nonverbal communication of infants and children.

Playfulness is an evolutionary strategy that allows human beings to attune to their internal state and engage others. It has no construct, no framework, and no purpose. It is spontaneously in the here and now. It is a way of being rather than doing and is a prerequisite for play. Children need a playful world to thrive and survive. Even in the most difficult environments, children will find a way to be playful as is highlighted in the photographs of Mark Neville's Child's Play exhibition in 2017.

Playfulness is distinct and separate from the process of play. As children, we were simply playful with our thoughts, our body, and the environment. Babies will notice their hands, move them, and suck them experiencing a sense of wonder at this strange and wonderful world. The psychotherapist, Daniel Stern, in his book the *Diary of a Baby* describes how a baby may experience the sensory world around them and how playful thought may develop.

As a nondirective child led play therapist, my job is to step into the playful world of the child and see things through their eyes. This does not mean that there is a need to make everything fun. We often equate playfulness with being joyful and, of course, it can be. However, being playful can also evoke a sense of fear or discomfort such as when a child may spin themselves around until they feel sick or put out all the lights to negotiate the darkness with the aid of a torch. Playfulness is the process that children instinctively understand helps relieve internal physical and emotional anxiety. When we think about why children may become playful together in the ruins of war bombing in the London blitz or in Syria (Feldman, 2019) we should perhaps wonder what as adults we have forgotten.

Children are unfettered by the layers of adult experience. Their thinking, in line with their brain development, can swing through the gamut of emotions from joy, fear, anger, confusion and back again. As adult, we know that to be spontaneously playful releases the feel-good chemicals into the body such as serotonin, dopamine and reduce the release of cortisol. Children simply know they feel good.

On reflection what inspires me to be and stay playful are all the children who have shared endless ways to be playful and those adults who still feel a child's sense of wonder at the world.