

Making Playtime a Key Part of the School Day!



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INTRODUCTION



For the past fifteen years I have specialised in working with schools to improve the quality of play for every child at every playtime. I have drawn on my experiences as a playworker, a teacher, and a local government school improvement adviser to develop the OPAL Outdoor Play and Learning Primary Programme in over 200 schools, and build the OPAL team to support better playtimes in all schools.

My work has taken me all over the UK, to Scandinavia, USA, Canada, New Zealand and Australia. While school systems may differ, all children have the same universal need to play for their well-being and happiness.

I am currently working on a book for JKP publishing called ‘Creating Excellence in Primary School Playtimes’, which will be published in 2017 and will look at the areas covered here in much greater depth. In this booklet I have tried to summarise the ten most valuable lessons, based on my experience, to help you begin improving play. There is no happier place to be than a school playground where everyone is having an amazing playtime - so start now!

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1. CHANGE YOUR CULTURE FIRST

OPAL mentors have worked with hundreds of primary schools across the UK and the world. There is one common prerequisite to sustainable quality in every school, and unless it is understood then attempts to improve play will only ever amount to cosmetic tinkering around how play looks, not what play is. Any school that is serious about improving play must address the cultural conditions of play summarised by OPAL's PARK principles.



P is for policy - What values and principles are you working to? If you don't understand what play is how are you going to improve it?

A is for access - What have you put in place to make sure all children can access all resources all of the year?

R is for risk - One important benefit of challenge is, 'to move beyond what is already known and is already easily accomplished'. There is no challenge without risk. How do you balance risks and benefits?

K is for knowledge - Playwork is a skilled profession. Because the role of the adult in play is highly complex, play workers require training and reflective practice. Schools will make little lasting progress if they concentrate solely on the role of the environment and not the adults.

2. USE WHAT YOU HAVE

Many schools have lots of space they do not use, and do not use whatever space they have for much of the year. This is a huge waste of valuable resources and causes unnecessary problems - over-crowding causes higher levels of collision, stress, noise and aggression.



Often outdoor space use in schools has evolved over time in an unplanned and haphazard way, and many schools do not plan for how to cope with the predictable climate of the country they live in. The average UK primary school only uses their field for 13 per cent of the school year for play typically because it is considered too slippery, wet or muddy.

Look around your school and question everything about the way that the space is used. Here are some questions you might ask:

- Why is that fence there?
- What would need to change so that we could use our space more effectively?
- Does a once-a-year event dictate how our space is used for the 179 other days of the school year?
- Do the needs of children come first in our use of space?
- What percentage of the year do we really use our field for play?
- Why do we do that?
- What would need to happen so children could play there more?

Remember that clothing should meet the needs of childhood and not childhood meet the needs of clothing - so do whatever is necessary to provide the clothing and footwear children need to be able to play outside all year round.

3. PUT SOMEONE IN CHARGE

If 'Nobody' was a person they would be very busy, because if you put nobody in charge, you can guarantee 'nobody' will get the job done.

Better play in schools does not happen by magic. It takes thought, planning and persistence. Change requires energy, both to begin, and to sustain. If improvements are to last longer than the few weeks of excitement caused by a new project then someone with power in the school must be in charge of play.

Play is one of the most important aspects of childhood, it is a human right and vital for children's physical, mental and social well-being. If schools, which should be centres of child development and where around one fifth of the day is called playtime, don't take play seriously, who will? Nobody.



4. BE GENEROUS

Scarce resources can be a source of conflict. If something is causing trouble in the playground, a more positive and happy solution for all might be providing more, not taking the play opportunity away.

A lot of children require a lot of resources and a lot of storage! Are you going to provide a play house for 40 children - maybe you need five? Are you going to buy a bag of sand for the sand tray - how about a 20 or 40 ton sandpit instead? Maybe you are going to put some tyres out for play, will you provide 25 for 250 children or two each?

Children are naturally creative, but they need lots of basic resources for their creativity to flourish, and they will be happier if they are not having to compete for use of a very limited amount. So whatever you are providing in a school, go for big, go for multiples and always be generous.



5. MAKE USE OF FREE STUFF

There is a theory (Nicholson 1972) well known by play workers that says ‘for every moveable thing you give children to play with, there is an exponential increase in the amount of play possibilities a child will invent’. So two things equals ‘play-squared’, three things ‘play-cubed’, four things ‘play to the power of four’ etc.

It is much more important for children to have items to play with than structures to play on, because the potential for change, control, manipulation and combination is much greater.

What is wonderful is that it really doesn’t matter what the things are. As long as they can be moved by children and are without obvious hazard, then they have play value. Adults often think that children need things called toys in order to play, but children are playful by nature and if a toy is something a child plays with, many random objects can be toys.

Boxes, tubes, old clothes, computer keyboards, pipes, crates, pallets, cloths, handbags, hats, planks, tyres, steering wheels, suitcases; the list of what can be played with is almost as endless as the ways children use them in their play. Don’t get stuck thinking about what you can’t afford - what can you get for free?

6. USE NATURE

Natural materials are relatively cheap, they can be left outside ready to be picked up and used at any time in play, and they can be provided by the ton. A good variety of different surfacing materials adds hugely to the play value of an environment because the ground becomes a play resource too.

Cheap bulk resources include sand, stones, earth, pebbles, mud, wood chip, bark and firewood. Other resources may be generated on-site and played with before they are taken away such as grass clippings, logs and branches.

Many schools over-manage their grounds as if the whole site were one big football pitch. Think about the benefits of re-wilding some of the grounds. This will increase biodiversity, learning opportunities and play value.



7. PROVIDE CHOICES

Ask any group of adults to try and define “what makes play, play?” and they will always talk about freedom and choice. Yet look around most school playgrounds and they are often dominated by rules, rotas and restrictions.

If you have play equipment that you can only go on for one afternoon a week, when it is your class’ turn, and you must go clockwise, and only when an adult is standing watching; this is not freedom, there is no choice, or imagination, this activity is not play. Rotas may be needed in the six week introductory period of a change, to manage the excitement of the new, but should be phased out as soon as possible. In play, whenever possible and as much as possible, freedom of choice should be returned to the child.

The same should apply to mixed age and gender play. Children learn about other people through play. It should be up to children who they want to mix with and in almost all cases the benefits of mixed age and gender play far outweigh any disadvantages.



8. ALLOW TIME

Play, like wildlife, requires the right habitat. The habitat of play is time, space and permission and this is rapidly disappearing from the lives of 21st century children, because of traffic, property value, ambition and fear. There is a common myth that ‘children don’t know how to play anymore’, but the truth is that adults don’t know how to let children play anymore.

Letting children have enough time to play is a moral obligation for anyone who cares about the wellbeing and happiness of children and a legal obligation for countries which have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

When schools fail to provide engaging play environments and appropriately trained staff, playtimes become problematic, as children become frustrated that their basic childhood needs are not being met. If playtimes are cut, then all of the well documented developmental, emotional and social benefits are cut too. If we really care about the needs of children, the answer is *better playtimes not less playtimes*.

9. DON'T WASTE YOUR MONEY

Investing in play in schools is money well spent because everyone wins; children are happier, supervisors' jobs are better, teachers' jobs easier and senior managers have less problem behaviour to deal with!

However, there is a type of play equipment, popular in schools in the UK, which can only be classed as 'unchallenging' challenging play equipment. The only purpose of this kind of equipment is to provide physical challenge, but because schools are risk averse and like challenge without risk, the play industry provides equipment that the adults are most comfortable with. The result is dull equipment which it takes a five year old a few minutes, or at most a few days to master, because both risk and challenge have been designed out.

Children will always be attracted by newness, so any play equipment, however poor its play value, will be investigated by children for the first six weeks of its presence. But children are around school play equipment for approximately 1800 hours a year, for several years! So it makes sense to invest in capital equipment that will continue to present interest and challenge, building strength, fitness and coordination over a number of years, otherwise you are just buying very expensive benches to hang-out on.



10. KEEP IT UP!

Reading and maths are not areas that schools do for a short time and then give up on because they are hard to teach, but are valued as essential to the purpose of the school. Continual access to quality play should be the concern of every school too, because adults control all aspects of the lives of children, and children do not have the power or ability to access outdoor social play in other areas of their lives.

Improving schools' play requires understanding, commitment and persistence from leadership, staff and parents. Play should be important to everyone because it enables children to learn 'the un-teachable curriculum' - in other words to learn all the really important things that cannot be taught. So make sure that providing better play for every child is not just a short term project, but is on staff job descriptions and the school's improvement plan every year.



Play is a right and not a privilege, and yet outdoor social play is rapidly disappearing from the lives of children around the world.

Schools are in a unique position to be able to make a difference to the quality of childhood for many children by improving the quality of the play they provide.

This booklet is based on the 15 years of action research behind the UK's OPAL Outdoor Play and Learning Primary Programme, which supports schools to adopt a strategic and planned approach to improving the quality of the play they provide for every child.



EMPTY CLASSROOM DAY



Empty Classroom Day is a UK campaign to celebrate and inspire learning and play outside the classroom. The campaign is backed by Persil, led by Eco-Schools England and supported by Project Dirt.

On the day schools across the world will be taking at least one class outdoors, teaching essential skills and raising awareness of the importance of play. We hope this will inspire schools everywhere to make outdoor learning and play a part of their school every day! With everyone's support, we can make sure children everywhere enjoy their childhood and have the foundations they need for the life they want to live.

Play for today, prepared for tomorrow!

Find out how you can get involved and access all the resources at: www.emptyclassroomday.org.uk



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@emptyclassroom

Do be aware you get involved at your own risk! Be prepared to be amazed...



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