

Play Strategy Delivery Project

Evaluation Report Update 2008-2009

Introduction

This report provides an update on progress of the Play Strategy Delivery Project implemented by the Early Years, Childcare and Play Services - Play Team and builds upon information submitted as part of the initial Play Strategy Evaluation report in 2007 (available to download from www.bradford.gov.uk/alltoplayfor)

1. How well is our project managed?

The Play Team has experienced significant growth since the submission of the initial Evaluation Report. This is a result of the attraction of additional funding to deliver a project which aims to increase disabled children's access to high quality, inclusive childcare. The additional funding has resulted in the team increasing from 10 members of staff in 2006, to 17 in 2008, with an aim of having 21 members of staff by late spring 2009. This work builds on the successful delivery of other inclusive play projects.

The play team is currently undergoing a restructure to bring the services of the team in line with the proposed Localities Structures. Evaluation findings from the original report still stand and the high quality work of the team continues to be acknowledged by our partners.

".... Your safety standards were of an excellent standard and the children want to know when they can do [fire play] again! As usual, a very positive session, enjoyed by the children and greatly valued by all staff."

Play is increasingly recognised as a fundamental part of the delivery of children's services locally. This is reflected in the recent name change of the 'service' from Early Years and Childcare, to Early Years, Childcare and *Play* (EYCP).

During 2008-2009 the Play Strategy Delivery Project formed approximately 20% of the overall EYCP Play Team budget.

2. Why did we set up our project and how have we developed our approach to service delivery?

The Play Strategy Delivery Project has in-effect, progressed through three stages since its inception in 2002. The first phase being the consultation for

and production of the Strategy, the second was aimed at supporting the development of an infrastructure to underpin the work of the strategy and the current phase, which is focused on providing services, to meet the needs of children and families, as identified in All to Play For – A Strategy for Play in Bradford District 2008- 2011.

A great deal of progress has been witnessed by The Play Team since the submission of the last Evaluation Report. Originally focused on the three strands of;

- face to face open access play delivery with children and young people,
- work with play settings and playwork professionals to raise quality,
- strategic work to ensure the effective implementation of the play strategy in other services and in the voluntary sector,

the Play Strategy Delivery Project was reviewed during 2008 – 2009 following feedback from the Children’s Fund Executive and from Quarter 3 of 2008 – 2009, is now focused on three new outcomes;

1. Children have a maximised range of play opportunities.
2. The project can demonstrate the impact of its work within communities.
3. The project can demonstrate the impact of its work for vulnerable groups.

At the beginning of 2008, the Play Team overarching Aim was also reviewed to reflect the team priorities and new developments. As such, this is now;

To create, improve and develop children and young people’s access to high quality, inclusive play provision according to need

The Play Team outputs relevant to the Children’s Fund include;

- Operational Play Service Delivery – this includes the delivery of 200 Play Pod sessions to a minimum of 400 children per year, 5 Play Day Celebration events and 15 ‘one off events’ which promote play in and to local communities.
- Targeted work with Vulnerable groups – including work with children of traveller and gypsy families, play provision for looked after children within a community home and playwork training for newly qualified social workers and foster carers.

Identified need:

Service delivery has been shaped and developed over the last four years, underpinned by the recommendations of ‘All to Play For’ which was reviewed and re-launched in Summer 2008 following a refresh of consultation findings. The Messages from Bradford children, young people, parents and carers remain consistent. Through consultation, children and young people identify public outdoor spaces, both official and unofficial as their first choice of places to play and they want more, better, socially safer, exciting places to play. Parents unanimously identified a lack of supervision in open play spaces, as a primary barrier to allowing their children to play outside. (All to Play for – A

Strategy for Children's Play in Bradford District 2008-2011)¹. The Play Strategy Delivery project aims to address these findings.

The results from consultation in Bradford are not unique and are reflected at a National level through The Children's Plan (DCSF 2007)² which identified a lack of 'safe, stimulating and challenging places for children and young people to go'. Following on from the Children's Plan, the Government responded to these findings by publishing the National Play Strategy (DCSF, 2008³) which sets out the Government's commitment to children's play. This strategy was matched by capital investment through the Play Builders program in early 2009. Bradford has been awarded approximately £1 million for the implementation of this project – funding which has been allocated to Bradford's Children's Services Department and is being project managed by a task group of the Bradford Play Partnership Executive.

The play team continue to undertake annual Ward Play audits, one each area per year. These audits include consulting with local children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners regarding local play opportunities and ensure that the views of children and young people feed into planning as much as possible and on an ongoing basis.

Identified need – Current Research:

In recent years there has been a renewed interest in the nature and purpose of play and an increasing body of evidence to suggest that children's access to free play opportunities is both essential for children and beneficial to the wider community.

The role of free play in reducing health inequalities is a growing concern, especially regarding children's emotional and mental wellbeing and as a way of addressing increasing health inequalities. A recent review of Play, Policy and Practice undertaken by Russell and Lester (2008⁴) identify that much of the evidence from neuroscience suggests that playing is a way of building and shaping the emotion, motivation and reward regions of the brain. The British Medical Association (2006⁵) report highlights that good physical health is dependent on emotional well-being. Research by Pretty and others (2007⁶), indicate that both access to nature and physical activity improve mental health and psychological well-being over a short period. The authors also suggest that if the activity in green space is valued and enjoyable, it is likely to lead to further exposure to such experiences and continued health benefits. Mackett

¹ Bradford Metropolitan District Council (2008) All to Play For – A strategy for children's play in Bradford District 2008-2011 Bradford.

² Department for Children Schools and Families (2007) The children's plan – building brighter futures. London. DCSF

³ Department for Children Schools and Families (2008) The Play Strategy London. DCSF

⁴ Russel, W & Lester, S (2008) Play for a Change – Play Policy and Practice, A review of contemporary perspectives. London. National Children's Bureau.

⁵ British Medical Association (2006) Child and adolescent mental health: A guide for healthcare professionals. London. BMA

⁶ Pretty, J, Peacock, J, Hein, R, Sellens, M, and Griffin, M (2007) Green exercise in the UK countryside: Effects on health and psychological well-being, and implications for policy and planning in Journal of Environmental Planning and management. 50 (2) 211-231.

and Paskins' (2004⁷) research emphasises that walking and playing away from the home can contribute significantly to children's health through physical activity. Through their research Mackett and Paskins identified that the place where children tend to be least active is in their own home. When they do go out, unstructured events (playing) tend to be more active than structured ones. Their research concludes that aiming to provide safer local environments in which children can actively travel and play with their friends may be an effective approach to supporting children's physical activity.

The 2007⁸ Unicef report on the well being of children, identified the UK as ranking bottom of the 21 richest countries in the world. One of the factors identified was the difficulties children faced when trying to make friends. Research shows that play can help build resilience as a result of the key role emotions have in play and playing. Play can help emotional regulation which can lead to building strong attachments and peer friendships. Play can provide vulnerable children opportunities to build resilience.

The importance of playful communities is also identified by Russell and Lester (2008), who identify that children's ability to engage playfully with their local environments depends on their ability to move independently within and across spaces. Restrictions to mobility, a heavy promotion of adult agendas and the determination of outcomes from play, prohibitions and constraints about the use of space and/or dull and featureless environments will narrow the potential of local environments to support children's play and as such, reduce opportunities for community cohesion. Ross' detailed study of children's play, (2004) quoted in Russell and Lester (p. 147) identifies that children's use of community space is important;

"...not only for children's play experiences, but also for their social relationships. In their use of the local area children encounter and built ties with each other and with adults living and working in the area. These informal contacts are important in crating a sense of security and allowing children to feel part of a place..... Most children conveyed a strong attachment to their local area, relating a definite sense of belonging"

Evidence based practice

The work of the Play Team is underpinned by current best practice within the playwork sector. This is influenced by a number of sector specific tools and documents such as 'The first Claim – A Framework for playwork quality assessment'⁹ and 'Best Play – What play provision should do for children'¹⁰ which support the delivery of quality play services.

⁷ Mackett, R and Paskins, J (2004) Increasing children's volume of physical activity through walk and play. Contribution to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport and Department of Health Consultation on choosing health, choosing activity.

⁸ Available from http://www.unicef.org.uk/press/news_detail_full_story.asp?news_id=890

⁹ Play Wales (2002) The first claim – A framework for playwork quality assessment Wales. Play Wales.

¹⁰ National Playing Fields Association (2000) Best Play – What play provision should do for children. London. NPFA

Practice is also informed by a program of continual professional development of the Play Team. This includes formal training and qualifications. During financial year 2008 -2009, members of the Play Support Team have been supported to access a range of courses and conferences including:

- CACHE Level 2 Certificate in Playwork
- CACHE Level 3 Award in Playwork for Early Years and Childcare workers
- Level 1 or 3 Forest Schools training
- Disability equality training
- Safeguarding deaf children conference.

Evaluation of the project

Evaluation of a play project remains problematic. There is a dilemma facing playworkers in that the playwork principles – which establish the sector’s professional and ethical framework, identifies that;

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

And

“the prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process”¹¹

This causes a conflict between the need to gather evaluation evidence from children and young people accessing the provision, and the need to maintain a quality play service.

The majority of the Play services delivered to children by the Play Team are Open Access, in that children are free to come and go as they please. It is a conscious decision of the team to make the engagement in evaluation an option for all children who attend the sessions, so as to avoid ‘adulteration’¹² of the play experiences of the children. As a result not all children choose to engage in evaluation of their play experiences.

Over the last 3 years, the play team have focused heavily on staff observations and reflections of the play sessions provided, in order to capture evidence to evaluate the sessions. This can range from noting down children’s comments, to reflecting on how children play and with whom. It also includes anecdotes from children, parents and community members.

Evaluation responses are also gathered through ‘Question of the Week’ which invites children to share their views and opinions regarding certain elements

¹¹ Available from <http://www.playwales.org.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=48&page=50&skin=0>

¹² Adulteration is a term used within the playwork field to describe an adult controlled or adult dominated play experience – one that is not child centred.

of the services provided by the Play Team as well as community events where local communities are invited to share their views and opinions about play services and provision in their area.

Evaluation of the work of the team is also encouraged from partners either on a formal basis or more generally in the form of feedback through either email or through direct discussion.

Achievements

During financial year 2008- 2009, the Play Team has delivered the following:

Play Pods:

- 233 sessions to which there have been 691 children in attendance.

One off Events

- 29 events have been delivered to 2071 children and 1555 adults.

Support to vulnerable groups

- 42 sessions have been delivered to 'vulnerable' groups.

Evaluation Findings

Outcome 1: Children have a maximised range of play opportunities.

The Play Team session observation forms recorded that during quarters 3 and 4, 86% of play sessions offered children and young people a 'maximised range of play opportunities'. Those observations which did not reflect this were often as a result of no children attending the session, or the session being dominated by an adult agenda;

"children did not want to play as there was a police presence but the good thing that came out of this was that the police played football with the boys and were chatting with them whilst playing" Staff reflection – October 2008

"[play opportunities were] not as maximised as normal due to the sign for the pod launch needing to be done today in order for it to be finished" Staff reflection – March 09.

There is a wide variety of play opportunities afforded to the children while accessing play sessions. Staff reflections describe play which is totally child lead and controlled, but also details the diverse range of play opportunities and experiences offered to the children. The list is too long to quote in this document; however the provision is reflective of both the Playwork Curriculum¹³ and of the Play Types¹⁴. The Playwork Curriculum suggests that the essential experiences playworkers make available to children fall into the categories of –The elements, Identity, Concepts and the Senses. The Play types identify 16 different play types experienced by children during their play.

¹³ Hughes, B (1996) *Play environments: a question of quality*. London. Playlink

¹⁴ Hughes, B (2002) *A Playworkers Taxonomy of Play Types*. London. Playlink. Available to download from <http://www.playassociationhf.org.uk/wesbitedocs/summary%20of%20play%20types.pdf>

One significant finding from reflections noted in the staff's observations is the freedom of choice and control that children have over their play at the various play pod sessions. 90% of staff observations described the children's choice and control over their play.

"the elemental play was totally self-controlled, and children were clearly feeling greatly empowered at being allowed this freedom rather than being reined in, told not to get dirty etc." Staff reflection Jan 09.

"The children decided to plan out the next few sessions and what activities they wanted to do for the next few weeks. There were lots of activities available during the session that the children had chosen to get out and they basically just got on with whatever they wanted." Staff reflection – Play Pod Feb 09.

Although it is clear from the staff observations, when asked about their play experiences at the pod sessions, children tend to respond about specific activities or play they have been engaged in, rather than specifically about the amount of control they have over their own play. This does provide evidence of the range of play opportunities experienced by the children, however it is only by putting together the observations from staff with the anecdotes from children, can we build a qualitative picture regarding the impact of the play sessions. The children's evaluation of the session detailed above from February 2009 includes the following description of their experiences:

Question of the week: What do you enjoy doing at [the play session]?

"Playing in football"

"Playing with Lewis and Ben"

"Colouring"

"Playing out"

"Making things out of wood"

"Caught 10"

"Playing with Clay"

"Playing with Lewis and Ben"

February 2009.

Staff and community partners also recognise the impact of the project in its role in maximising play opportunities.

"I feel the pod has a positive affect on the children.... They have the chance to be creative with junk items. Many thanks to all concerned... it not only helps the children but also gives the staff good ideas." March 2009.

An area which is identified as significant throughout the staff reflections is the place of risk and challenge in children's play. The staff offer a wide range of play opportunities which allow for risk and challenge, but given the significant choice and control children have over their play, this often results in children seeking out play which offers these experiences. At one play pod, the staff observe children's 'pod war' play continuous over the course of a number of weeks. It is noted that there are high levels of emotional and physical risk inherent in their play. Children felt so confident with this that they were able to articulate the nature of their play to staff:

“we take the things, that’s the game, we need to take it in turns and stop crying”
“The children built one of the dens on the generator. They found it hard to run in and out of the pod so they just passed things in and out of the pod window to one another. Mock fights were started whilst protecting their areas. “
“[staff members name], it’s only pretend if we do this, then we can sneak up behind the other team and get their stuff” Staff reflection October 2008.

Children’s own risk assessment skills are captured in their discussion about fire play. The members of the play team had asked the children what they wanted to do at the next session and children had asked for more fire play during the session, the following discussion was captured:

Child A: “I’ll help my brother and he can have a go at lighting a match. I’ll show ‘K’ too how to do it cause I watched you and I’ve done it before”

This was then followed by a conversation about fire and wax and stories of when people had been ‘silly’ with fire and how they had been burned. This showed how children had developed their understanding about the ‘proper’ way to handle fire and their increased confidence about avoiding getting hurt.

Key Findings

- Play services offered by the Play Team provide children a wide and varied menu of play opportunities
- Children’s choice and control over their play is of fundamental importance to the nature of the provision.
- The quality of the provision is high and reflective of current best practice.
- Play which offers opportunities for risk and challenge supports increased resilience through growth of self-esteem

Outcome 2: The Project can identify the impact of it’s work in communities.

Both national and international research, (Russell & Lester pp 130 – 147) as well as findings from local consultation identifies that children face a range of barriers when trying to play in their communities. Developed in response to the findings of consultation to inform ‘All to Play For’, the Play Pod project aims to address parental, child and community fears which present barriers for children playing out. Not only that, but the Play Team aim to promote the value of play to communities across the District, through the delivery of a range of ‘one off events’. These events tend to be either community fun days, launch events for projects or any other opportunity where the child’s right to play can be promoted.

Comments from partners regarding the barriers of allowing children and young people to play in their communities include;

- *“Fear of public perceptions about ‘play’”*

- *“fears of how it will be perceived by other professionals e.g. in school grounds, not being in control”*
- *“Media Scaremongering”*

The Wycliffe Pod project has faced some difficulties during 2008-2009 regarding community acceptances of children’s Play Needs. Although this is not a unique response to this project, the Wycliffe Pod Project demonstrates a clear indication of the impact of the work of the Play Team within communities.

Following the identification of “a lack of safe places to play” in the Local Neighbourhood Action Plan, the Play Team commenced work with the area coordinators office, local school and community representatives regarding the establishment of the Play Pod. The children in the community face a range of difficult situations which restrict their play, including dangers from traffic, intergenerational conflict, parental and children’s fears of being victims of crime and the geography of the area – barriers which are not only faced by children in this community, but which provide a reflection of barriers that the majority of children across Bradford and beyond face. Following discussions with the local partners the Play Pod provided an ideal model to implement to overcome these barriers.

Although extensive community consultation had taken place where community support was strong, planning permission was rejected for the pod, which resulted in the Play Team delivering a kind of mobile provision using a few limited resources without a Play Pod. To address some of the community fears, a further a large scale consultation process was undertaken before inviting local residents to a ‘have your say’ meeting. This involved ‘door-knocking’ on all local residents doors to introduce the project and answer any questions.

Although there were a number of ‘worries’ raised by the residents, the majority of feedback was supportive of children’s right to play comments from residents included:

“I think this is a great idea for the kids – it’ll keep them out of bother”

“they don’t play out like we used to. Too many cars now-a-days. If this gets them out more, it’s a good thing”

“they [the children] tend to worry the older residents in the flats when they play near them with their balls and stuff – they’re always getting shouted at.. It’s a good idea for them to play up the field where the parent’s can see them”

“We’re supportive of the idea, but we’re just worried about the older young people hanging round and doing drugs”

Community consultation October 2008.

Successful partnership working has been a crucial factor in supporting this project.

“a quick note to thank you all for your input in last night's meeting, and to attach the notes. ‘L’ and I both felt this was successful in bringing the two groups together. Based on a review of the consultation, I would be confident that a majority of residents support the location [of the play pod]” email correspondence October 2008.

Parents of children who come to the ‘pod-less’ sessions were also very supportive

“one parent was really happy with the sessions and said she was glad that her husband has supported us at the forum meeting the week before as they felt they had spoken up for their child's right to play” Staff reflection October 2008.

Although a lengthy process, this project demonstrates some of the attitudinal barriers children face within their community, but also the support and recognition of the significance of children's play. The large scale community consultation has raised children's play needs as an important issue for all members of the community. Planning permission has been resubmitted and the outcome of which will enable us to demonstrate if community support for children at play has increased as a result of the project.

Beyond the Wycliffe project, the impact of the work of the Play Team in communities is identified by both children and partners.

In response to question of the week “what would you be doing if you weren't at the play pod?” 59% of children attending one Play Pod indicated that they would be engaged in ‘sedentary’ activities such as *“Playing on my xbox” “playing my DS” “watching TV”*. 33% of responses referred to friends that the children would otherwise be playing with and the final 8% discussed anti-social or nuisance behaviour. *“getting chased” “throwing stones”, “hanging out and getting chased”*

Staff reflections note similar responses from children:

“Talking to some of the boys during the session, asking them what they normally get up-to round [the community] and where they hang out. ‘B’ replied with ‘we go round trying to piss people off and then get them to chase us, or chase the girls” staff reflection January 2009.

Partners who support the project also reflect on the same issues raised by children and members of the Play Team:

“Before the pod they [the children] had nothing to do other than play in the streets where they were always being told to move away and go play elsewhere, or they stayed in and played on their games stations and computers or just sat and watched TV.” Email correspondence. March 09

Research discussed earlier identifies the impact of play in communities on children's sense of security and ownership feedback from a Partner of one of the projects recognises the impact of the work of the team which mirrors this research:

“Every Monday night the children are not hanging around with no where to go and becoming a nuisance as everyone saw them. The children respect the area more now than they ever have, they show the older children up by not causing trouble like they do. They have ownership on the area now and know it's for them....I think that the people on the estate have also noticed that the play pod is a worthwhile thing for the younger children of this estate and they are the ones that will make the difference in the area as to keeping it clean, graffiti free and the next new generation of young adults to care for their community” email correspondence March 2009.

Key Findings:

- That the work of the team positively impacts on children's ability to play in their local communities
- That the work of the team increases community tolerance of children at play
- That the play provision provides a diversion from more sedentary, anti-social or nuisance behaviour
- That play in communities can increase children's' ownership and sense of security in their area.
- That staffed play provision overcomes the majority of the barriers children face when trying to play outside.

Outcome 3: The project can demonstrate the impact of its work for vulnerable groups.

One of the key findings for this outcome is that disabled children need and want to access the same play provision as their non disabled peers and the Play Pods are increasingly popular as a provision that offers this. Children are often 'referred' to the Play Pods through another area of the Team's work – The Play Partners Project. This project seeks to enable disabled children to access play and leisure activities and offers a kind of bridging service between children, families and settings. Many staff, parent and partner comments and reflections identify that the pods offer a service which is inclusive;

“[a member of the play team] informed me that two former 'play partner' children would attend the pod. As I had never met them before I was unsure who they were throughout the session. This demonstrates that the pod has a valuable impact for disabled children as they access the facilities in the same way as non-disabled children and are not labelled as different” Staff reflection December 2008.

At another Play Pod, staff and parents have commented on how the children themselves work together to ensure the inclusion of other disabled children.

“The children helped the younger children to join in the game and were open to new ideas from one boy in particular who finds it hard to communicate or get his points across.” Staff reflection October 2008.

The Play Team’s work with looked after children has a wide ranging impact. The play sessions have benefit for both the children and for the staff who care for them. All play sessions are delivered by the play team, but there is an agreement that the staff at the setting support the sessions to enable them to develop new skills and ideas of how and what to play with the children.

Although playwork training for the workers at the setting is offered, none have accepted therefore their practice is only informed by observing practice of members of the Play Team. As part of the Social Services induction, the Play Team deliver a short session on Play to newly qualified social workers however it is unclear the extent to which this has an impact on the staff at the residential home. Play Team staff reflections often comment about the approach and intervention style of the residential staff which on occasions conflicts with a ‘playwork approach’ although where there is consistent involvement from staff practice does seem to improve.

“staff are keen to verbally interact between themselves and the children, but hesitant to involve themselves with their play. ‘X’ continues to make it clear when he wants no social interaction, which is rarely picked up by staff. Instead, staff are keen to pick up on ‘x’ poor behaviour and offer warnings of being removed back inside. I’m not entirely sure how effective this is in redirecting his behaviour when he is upset” Staff reflection November 2008.

“Due to the nature of the pod, play experiences can be limited there. On this particular evening, the children wanted to extend go-carting by taking the cart outside the grounds of the home. Whilst staff were concerned as to why the children wanted to leave the grounds, they were prepared to compromise with the children..... Staff seem to be more supportive of the children’s play needs than of late. Staff reflection November 2008.

“the pod is having a positive impact on the children – they look forward to the sessions every week and enjoy going in and choosing what they want to do. Its like a playroom and the children know that when that door opens they can go in and have fun! It’s exciting for them and it also gives them an opportunity to play with adults other than staff members” Email correspondence March 2009.

The children clearly value the play sessions offered and consistent with the rest of the play services provided, the sessions offer children access to a wide and varied menu of play opportunities:

“the pod offers children living in residential care home a chance to play and to take control over an aspect of their life if only for a few hours. The children cheered when we arrived and showed disappointment when the session finished.” Staff reflection February 2009.

“all four children wanted to make a go-cart this week. We had plenty of materials to use which was a great help so the children could chose what they wanted to use” Staff reflection October 2008.

Another significant finding from this area of work is the value of risk and challenge for vulnerable and disabled children. There are many reflections from staff which detail play experiences which offer a level of risk and challenge and the impact for certain children on their levels of self-esteem. A play session delivered for a group of deaf children offered the children a play experience that they had never had before. The feedback from the staff identified the impact of the fire play session:

“The children really enjoyed the session and were able to understand that fire has a purpose and when handled safely can be beneficial not just a danger. The children were able to learn this in a safe setting. The children were sensible at all times and were never at any risk. This was a concern when we first booked the session, knowing how it can be difficult to ensure that deaf children are made clear about dangers when not able to respond to voice. The children keep asking when they can do it again!. Email correspondence March 2009.

This too, has been identified as an outcome of the play sessions for looked after children. The anecdote captured below describes a young man who had been involved in a wood play activity:

“Informing the staff about how to use the wood play tools enhanced the level of individual risk the children were able to take for themselves. One child commented that he knew what things to do when he was hammering. In discussion he identified the following:

- *Look where you are hitting*
- *Make sure you head isn't over the hammer when you're hitting*
- *Wear goggles*
- *Think and use your brain and work out what you want to do and how to do it.*

He seemed proud that he knew how to keep himself safe when using the wood play tools and he told some of this to one of the staff members when she returned to the play after having been inside to prepare tea” Staff reflection January 2009.

The play team member then goes on to reflect on the impact of this experience and the levels of self-esteem felt by the boy during the session.

Key findings

- Disabled children and other children identified as being 'vulnerable' need and benefit from access to high quality play provision.
- Play offers children the chance to play together in a non-threatening environment supporting the development of new friendships and relationships between children.
- Children play an active role in the inclusion of disabled children or those with additional needs
- Play for looked after children can help redress the balance for choice and control in what is often a very adult led environment.
- All children need access to play which offers risk and challenge.
- Play which offers opportunities for risk and challenge supports increased resilience through growth of self-esteem
- Modelling quality playwork practice when working with children can support children's access to play in other sectors of the children's workforce.

Added value:

Staff reflections and observations frequently comment about the nature of the provision and it's impact on socialisation of the children and their ability to make friends. A significant theme raised is that the play provision allows the development of friendships beyond those that children would naturally establish. This includes children making friends with younger and older children, children from different schools, children within their local community.

"Children played with children of all ages. The children enjoyed playing in a team. They shouted encouragement to one another and helped each other to get back to their areas of war" Staff reflection October 2008.

"There were a number of new younger children today. I noticed that some of the older children really helped out and encouraged the new children to get involved without being asked. There seemed to be a sense of pride and were very pleased with themselves that they had helped the younger children" Staff reflection Feb 2009.

This is a significant finding in light of the performance of the UK against the UN Convention on the rights of the child which identified that the UK were performing bottom of the wealthiest counties. Children in the UK were deemed to be unhappy and a factor for this was the lack of friends that children have.

Another key finding is the impact that the provision has on supporting children's behaviour. A number of staff reflections discuss children's behaviour and the impact of a playwork approach. A number of different children accessing different play sessions are recorded as engaging in negative behaviour. Over time, this seems to reduce. Children are supported to deal with conflict themselves rather than adults intervening at the first sign of trouble. This has led to children becoming empowered and confident to overcome minor conflict themselves.

"Throughout the play witnessed today, the children were negotiating and resolving conflicting issues themselves" Staff observation November 2008.

"I think that developing the rules of the game provided some challenges for some of the children not used to in-putting or children used to taking charge. It was a real positive experience for them." Staff reflection September 2008.

Learning points:

The work of the play team continues to be delivered in a child centred manor, reflective of good playwork practice. Collection of evaluation data for the service has improved over the last few years which have enabled the team to collect a more accurate reflection of the impact of its work. The impact and outcomes of the work of the team are identified regularly which are reflected upon through team meetings and 'working groups' formed to develop new areas of work or to review existing ones. By embedding a reflective approach to the work of the team enables us to ensure that the services offered are reflective of the needs of the children, families and communities in which we work.

Alexandra Long
April 2009.