

Practice examples

Hackney Play Streets

- **Hackney Council-funded Play Streets project has involved 40 streets being closed for play since September 2012**
- **A £55,000 grant from Hackney Play Association has funded a Play Streets co-ordinator and support officer to help residents through the process of closing roads**
- **The street play movement, started by Bristol organisation Playing Out, has led to at least 475 streets being closed in 38 local authorities**



Street play sessions in Hackney typically last for two hours and involve free play

ACTION

In 2009, two Bristol mothers decided to apply for a road closure order to enable children to play freely in their street, then helped neighbouring streets do the same. They produced a film and website to inspire others, launching the organisation Playing Out in 2011.

Hackney Play Association (HPA) director Nicola Butler found herself “blown away” by the Playing Out film’s portrayal of the joy and simplicity of street play. So she invited the Bristol team to speak at the 2011 East London Play Conference. “I was very keen to support this in Hackney, but didn’t want to just parachute in as the play association and start imposing it,” she recalls. She didn’t have to. The film had also inspired Hackney mother-of-three Claudia Draper, who sought Butler’s help in getting her road closed regularly for play.

Butler says Hackney Council’s support for the play association across key departments including parks, transport and its youth service Young Hackney has helped maintain a culture of play in the borough, which has seven staffed adventure playgrounds. She remembers the authority getting on board with the street play idea “really quickly” and after a summer

of 2012 Olympics street parties, started a year-long play streets pilot, providing the paperwork enabling residents to close their roads regularly for play. The authority also funded HPA to employ Draper as Play Streets co-ordinator, supporting residents to get street play off the ground.

HPA’s annual £55,000 play streets grant from Hackney’s public health department also enabled the recruitment of support officer Allison Vitalis in June 2016. After being contacted by residents, Draper or Vitalis talk them through the process. They may also help with initial door knocking; residents need to show support through a petition form, ideally signed by the majority. “They’re trying to allay fears and objections, like reassuring neighbours they’ll still be able to drive in and out if needed, and reassuring older residents that they’re welcome to join in too; it’s not just for children,” explains Butler. “Hackney Council has been robust in taking the view that it is not going to let a small number of vocal objectors go against the majority’s wishes.”

Hackney Council runs a rolling programme for street play

applications, with four deadlines throughout the year. There is a lead-in time of around three months; traffic regulations require it to advertise road closures twice in a local paper, at least a month apart. Sessions are usually monthly, and last two hours. They tend to involve free play rather than structured activities; including bikes, scooters or simple play equipment such as skipping ropes, hoops or chalk.

There are now 40 Hackney play streets and 200 sessions took place last year, involving around 1,400 children. Seven Hackney schools also close the road outside for play at the end of each term and a children’s centre, homeless families centre and a church have also participated. HPA has also worked with six housing estates to introduce play sessions in the roads or communal space outside, generally facilitated by HPA playworkers, who provide play equipment.

Councillor Feryal Demirci, Hackney cabinet member for neighbourhoods, transport and parks, sees play streets as an important part of the council’s drive to make neighbourhoods safer, healthier and more

“liveable”, improve children’s health and create closer-knit communities. The Department of Health (DH) acknowledged street play’s health benefits in 2013 through a three-year grant of just over £1m, enabling a partnership of Play England, Playing Out and London Play to provide advice, support and resources, helping at least 475 streets close in 38 local authorities.

IMPACT

A 2012 University of Bristol study, which involved electronically monitoring the activity levels of 66 children during after-school street play on two Bristol streets, showed them to be outside for 70 per cent of the road closure, compared with 20 per cent outdoors during an average school day. They spent 30 per cent of this period in “moderate to vigorous physical activity”, compared with an estimated five per cent when indoors. The university’s evaluation of the 2013-16 DH-funded street play project, expected later this year, will show similar findings, as well as an increase in community cohesion.

A February 2015 evaluation of Hackney Play Streets by play expert Tim Gill, commissioned by the council’s Get Hackney Healthy board, shows strong consensus among participants about street play’s benefits, particularly in increasing children’s play freedom and increasing social interaction.

Vitalis says initiating street play in her road in 2013 built a sense of belonging and security for her and her two children, after her move from a social housing estate left her feeling isolated. “It was a really good way for my children to be included in the neighbourhood,” she recalls. “Now I have many friends on this street and we all look out for each other. It’s made a big impact on my daughter, because she knows everybody.”

By Emily Rogers



The Land

- **Wasteland-based “junk playground” on Wrexham’s Plas Madoc estate has made headlines for the freedom it gives children to engage in challenging play**
- **Playworkers empower children to create an ever-changing space, building their confidence to manage risk for themselves**
- **Analysis estimates The Land and Wrexham’s two other adventure playgrounds generate a social return of £4.60 for every £1 spent**

ACTION

The Land is part of a portfolio of play opportunities on Wrexham’s Plas Madoc estate, run by the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham (AVOW). Playworkers started visiting the estate during school holidays 13 years ago with a trailer of loose parts for creative play, then introduced street play. AVOW play department manager Claire Griffiths says this helped create “a playful culture” on the

estate, making people “more open and accepting of the idea of a junk playground”.

The Land was a piece of wasteland by the estate where Griffiths says children had already explored and played, building “attachment and feelings of ownership to the environment”. Realising children needed their own space, playworkers applied for support from environmental funding body WREN. The only alteration needed was a fence, recalls Griffiths, “to protect children’s creations, dens, temporary homes and secret spaces”. AVOW leased the land from Wrexham Council, opening it as a staffed playground in February 2012 with donated materials, including pieces of wood and plastic tunnels. None of the play materials have monetary value, except the crash mats. “Children want to change and adapt the environment; they can’t do this if something has to be protected, due to cost,” explains Griffiths. “They never asked for fixed structures or expensive

equipment; they wanted fires, to paddle in the water, dig, create and destroy.”

Mike Barclay, Wrexham Council’s play development co-ordinator, says The Land remains true to adventure playgrounds’ origins to enable children “to build, destroy and reconstruct”.

“I personally think ‘junk playgrounds’ is a better name; the term ‘adventure playgrounds’ has become so commercialised. Left to their own devices, most children don’t end up creating a neat and tidy space.”

At least three playworkers from AVOW’s six-strong team attend The Land’s two-hour weekday sessions, attracting around 60 children with an average age of nine. They build relationships with the children, intervening where needed, to encourage and extend play. Much of the media coverage of The Land has focussed on children’s use of potentially dangerous tools such as saws and hammers, and on their playful contact with the fire usually burning there. Griffiths says

playworkers’ understanding of the children is “so important” in deciding how much access they have to tools and fire; newcomers’ safety is ensured through “graduated access” to them.

The Land’s playworkers are supported to use “dynamic risk assessments”, which Barclay says means assessing risks as they encounter them “on a moment-by-moment basis” as “children will do things you can’t predict”. Key to this is ensuring children recognise risks and are able to manage them. A 2015 film about The Land by US filmmaker Erin Davis shows a boy climbing high in a tree. The playworker doesn’t instruct him to climb down, but instead remarks that a branch thicker than the one the boy is standing on broke underneath him recently; guiding him towards assessing the risk for himself. “The alternative is that you ban tree climbing,” says Barclay. “All that does is focus on what was going wrong, failing to recognise the things that were going right. We’ve got to go: yes, that kid has gone further than

Theraplay

- **Theraplay involves therapists guiding the parent and child through playful, fun games and developmentally challenging activities**
- **A 2011 study evaluating its effectiveness in treating shy, socially withdrawn children found that children improved significantly on assertiveness, self-confidence, and trust**
- **Tact’s “in-house” therapy service means adopters do not have to go to the local authority for assessment and referral**

ACTION

Four years ago The Adolescent and Children’s Trust (Tact) established a play-based therapy

service called Power of Play. The “in-house” therapy service means adopters do not have to go to the local authority for assessment and referral to limited resource, nor wait for child and adolescent mental health services.

Julie McCann, who runs the service, says a relationship is established with all Tact adopters from the beginning of their preparation course and following them through approval, matching and early placement.

“In this way, I normalise therapeutic support and encourage our adopters to use therapeutic play skills from the beginning, hopefully avoiding too many crisis moments,” she says.

Play is used as a means of observing the dynamic between adopters and their children with

initial support tailing off in the first six months of placement. Where issues are identified, McCann embarks on a series of sessions, using play to analyse and address issues.

“What we try to do with therapy is enhance attachment between the parent and child,” she says. “I will do an assessment of what is already happening to get a sense of where the strengths and challenges are in the relationship. In that sense it is relationship therapy.”

Theraplay is based on four different determinations of the relationship:

- **Structure** – how they structure their time together
- **Engagement** – what the quality of the engagement is
- **Nurture** – who is nurturing who in the relationship. Is the child

able to receive nurture? Can they be soothed and looked after?

- **Challenge** – some families set the bar really high, and the child is always way behind and trying to catch up. Some are over-challenged and don’t let other people help them with lowering that bar sometimes. Some children don’t give themselves any challenge and are hesitant and shy to try anything new.

“I look at those elements and structure sessions with those families to look at ways that might be strengthened,” McCann says. “The child has come from their birth family and they [and the adoptive parents] don’t know one another. The child brings with them previous templates of what a parent is, and, quite often, it is not a



Children are free to “build, destroy and reconstruct” while playing at The Land

we’re comfortable with, but we’ve got to allow them to benefit from all the things that happen when they go to the edge of their control.”

Griffiths says The Land enables children to “create their own narratives, their own worlds for their own reasons”. She adds: “It’s lovely to watch children overcome their fears, make new friends, and

grow in confidence and resilience. Play is a process of trial and error.”

AVOW’s playwork team received £165,000 last year from the Welsh Government’s Families First and Communities First programmes to fund The Land, plus outreach projects across eight communities. AVOW’s ability to secure the funding has been bolstered by Wales’s “play sufficiency duty”;

requiring councils to assess and secure sufficient play opportunities. This contrasts with England’s play policy vacuum since 2010, when the coalition government shredded Labour’s £235m Play Strategy.

“What we’ve seen across the UK is these playgrounds trying to survive without local authority support,” says Barclay. “If local authorities don’t have anybody with a playwork background employed to support children’s play, it inevitably drops off the list of priorities.”

While funding from government is reducing this year, The Land looks set to benefit from a “significant chunk” of £1m of Invest Local Big Lottery funding, says Barclay.

IMPACT

An analysis of the economic impact of playwork in Wrexham, a May 2016 report commissioned by Wales Council for Voluntary Action, on behalf of Communities First in Wrexham, estimates that for every £1 spent, The Land, The

Venture and Gwenfro Valley playgrounds generate a social return of £4.60.

Researchers calculated a monetary benefit from evidence gathered from more than 300 children and adults of these playgrounds increasing physical activity, improving educational attainment, reducing crime and benefits dependency and improving mental health. Parents observed children’s improved ability to make friends, calculate and take risks and know their limits. Former users said the playgrounds had helped them sustain relationships and improved their resilience, ability to work as a team, follow instructions and respond positively to change.

North Wales Police said the playgrounds contributed to reduced levels of criminal damage and antisocial behaviour. Schools reported improved attitudes in those referred there and related improvements in literacy, numeracy and language development.

By Emily Rogers

healthy template. Part of the work is to help them become a family by putting in a lot of early stuff.”

The sessions are entirely based on games and activities such as singing and dancing.

The Theraplay therapist guides the parent and child through playful, fun games, developmentally challenging activities, and tender, nurturing activities. The very act of engaging each other in this way helps the parent regulate the child’s behaviour and communicate love, joy, and safety to the child. It helps the child feel secure, cared for, connected and worthy.

McCann monitors the sessions and identifies behaviour and signals that can be acted on to improve the relationship.

“It can be the case that a child

doesn’t go to their parent to be soothed, they don’t expect to be picked up, they may be reliant on themselves, or it could be a child who can’t separate from parents – even to the extent of the parent walking into the kitchen,” McCann says.

“Some children seek out other adults – they are very indiscriminate with their attachments. Parents will sometimes say they don’t feel anything – they can look after the child but don’t feel any emotion underneath.”

Gradually, over the weeks the parents begin to take more of the lead themselves, McCann says.

“I video the sessions and look at them with the parents – reviewing them. We look at the cues that children are giving that they may

not recognise – children subtly looking away, for example.

“We often look at the video with the sound off to see what is happening in their bodies.”

The norm is for around 12 to 15 sessions with each family, which usually take place on a weekly or fortnightly basis.

IMPACT

As an intervention originally developed in the US, Theraplay comes with a degree of evidence behind it.

A 2011 study evaluating the effectiveness of Theraplay in treating shy, socially withdrawn children found that children improved significantly on assertiveness, self-confidence, and trust, while social withdrawal was also reduced and expressive and

receptive communication improved. Improvements were maintained over a two-year period with no cases of relapse.

Tact has done its own survey of adopters and social workers, but has not commissioned a formal evaluation.

“It is difficult to evidence, because we don’t have a control group, but families have said that if they hadn’t done therapy the family would not have stayed together,” McCann says.

“They had two children, and bonded with one, but didn’t with the other. I worked with them for a year – they have just had the adoption papers through. They said that if it hadn’t been for Theraplay, they wouldn’t be a family of four.”

By Neil Puffett



Scrapstore PlayPods

- **Charity Children's Scrapstore provides schools with safe waste materials as alternative play equipment**
- **The scheme has been shown to boost pupils' creativity, socialisation and physical activity**
- **Teachers also report improvements in children's readiness to learn, and skills development such as trial and error**

ACTION

When children returned to Greatfield Park Primary School in Cheltenham after this year's Easter holidays, they found a 15 square-metre, bright blue steel shed in their playground. The words "Scrapstore PlayPod" were painted on the front. "What's that?" they asked. Head teacher Nikki Hill said: "I don't know, what do you think?" Thus began the school's new creative style of play and learning.

Two weeks later, the PlayPod officially opened. Created by Bristol-based charity Children's Scrapstore, the shed contained clean, safe and non-hazardous business waste materials for pupils to play with, such as car tyres, crates, cardboard tubes, electronic equipment or wood cut-offs.

The scheme was developed in 2006 by Scrapstore with backing from Bath and North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, South Gloucestershire Council, and the Big Lottery Fund. Currently, 315 schools in England, Wales and Scotland have a PlayPod. They are based on a theory of loose parts in play – that children can use deconstructed materials in more creative and inventive ways to generate unlimited play outcomes. This is in contrast to traditional equipment with limited and specific uses, such as bats and balls.

Hill proposed the PlayPod to school governors in December 2016 to address three concerns. The school's 210-pupil population,



PlayPods' business waste materials challenge children's creative instincts in play

with a low percentage from disadvantaged backgrounds, was increasingly having minor accidents during lunch hours. Teachers suspected some children were deliberately avoiding the playground. "There's something quite nice about going to sit in the first aid area to break up your lunchtime," says Hill.

Teachers were also dealing with arguments and incidents after the break, which was negatively impacting on children's readiness to learn in the afternoon.

In addition, Hill says the school wanted to inject more creativity into its teaching. As a result of increased pressure on the national curriculum, from years 1 or 2 onwards, children stop asking "why?" and creativity is "weaned away", she explains. "Everyday should be a wow-day," adds Hill.

Before children played with the scrap, a PlayPod mentor delivered several training sessions. Nine dinner ladies, alongside the deputy head and a teaching assistant, completed 10 hours of Level 2 training in facilitating children's free play while maintaining safety. The mentor also introduced each of the school's seven classes to the

scrap and demonstrated certain precautions, such as not lifting heavy items higher than their heads, and how to tie knots when making hammocks out of cargo nets. The mentor delivered a risk-benefit analysis talk to all staff; for example, children who want to play fight must follow a "scrap-on-scrap" rule, and not hit each other with the materials. And the school also held a parents' stay-and-play session to demonstrate how children were using the new facility.

Since March, the school has used the PlayPod every lunch hour. Children leave written suggestions in a box provided by Scrapstore about what items they like and dislike. Every eight weeks the charity replenishes the shed with new stock and checks for unsafe or damaged items. Key Stage 2 classes have also used the scrap during lesson times to inspire writing projects.

The project cost Greatfield Park £14,000, which it self-funded without local authority involvement. It also pays an annual fee for continual ScrapStore support, which Hill describes as "minimal".

IMPACT

Hill says the PlayPod has achieved its objectives. Teachers have reported a "significant reduction" in negative incidents at lunchtime, fewer accidents, and increased creativity among children.

"Children are finding more and more creative ways to play," says Hill. "A lot of our older children are playing with younger children, and boys and girls together. It's a really lovely atmosphere out there."

Hill says children are more active at lunchtime, which energises them to learn in the afternoon. The scrap teaches them skills such as sharing and negotiating. She also believes the experimental ways children play is teaching trial and error, which could help with maths and science. "They have a bread crate they like to sit in and pull themselves around in," Hill describes. "They're experimenting and finding out the best method."

Hill says classes that use the scrap as a story-starter have seen boys become more engaged in writing. Parents have reacted positively, despite early anxieties about safety. And dinner ladies are more excited about their jobs.

In May, the school was externally assessed. When reviewers asked pupils what they valued most at the school, children said the PlayPod "helped them to make friends and be creative", according to Hill.

The experience at Greatfield Park is backed by PlayPod research from 2012. Based on interviews with 20 schools and three online questionnaires, it found all respondents agreed the PlayPod increased creative play, helped inclusion, improved self-confidence among staff and children, and helped children's risk management and problem solving. A total of 87 per cent said the scheme provided value for money.

When the whistle blows at lunchtime's end, all children pack away the scrap. Hill says tidying-up has helped teach responsibility. "If our reception children learn that in the playground, it might carry on up the school," she adds.

By Gabriella Józwiak