



# Within the Wood Play Policy

## What is play?

**“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated ... the impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological and psychological necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities”**

Playwork Scrutiny Group, Cardiff 2005

- **Freely** chosen.
- **Personally** directed.
- **Intrinsically** motivated.

Children control the content and intent of their play. Any activity that fits these parameters is counted as play, even if it is not typically seen as ‘play’ e.g. crafting something or learning a new skill. All children and young people need to play, is it a necessity for a happy, healthy life.

## The importance of play.

- Develops physical skills.
- A tool to explore emotions and anxieties.
  - Dealing with trauma.
  - Expressing emotions e.g., anger, grief.
  - Act out conversations/arguments.
- Intellectual development, exploring theoretical ideas practically.
- Role or skills practice for the future  
e.g., playing with a mud kitchen to emulate cooking.

**The Four Perspectives on Play,** Else and Sturrock (2007)

The importance of play for children and young people is recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by the UK Government in December 1991.

## How we approach play.

- As Forest School leaders, we support and facilitate the play process.
- We ensure that we are trained in the play process, and this training is kept up to date. Our responses to play are based on this knowledge, and our own reflective practice.
- Play is observed and used it to understand if the children’s needs are being met.
- Using knowledge of their needs, we support **all** children and young people in creating a space that they can play in. To help meet those needs, we create an environment that contains opportunities for different types of play.
- It is important that we are advocates for play, telling others about the value of play, letting stakeholders know so they understand why it is central to what we do.
- In the play matrix (Fig. 1), we try to move more to the left as much as possible, giving the children choice, stepping back, giving guidance instead of orders and acting from the periphery until needed. The Coyote’s Guide to Connecting with Nature (Haas, McGown and Young, 2010) is a good book for information on this type of practice.

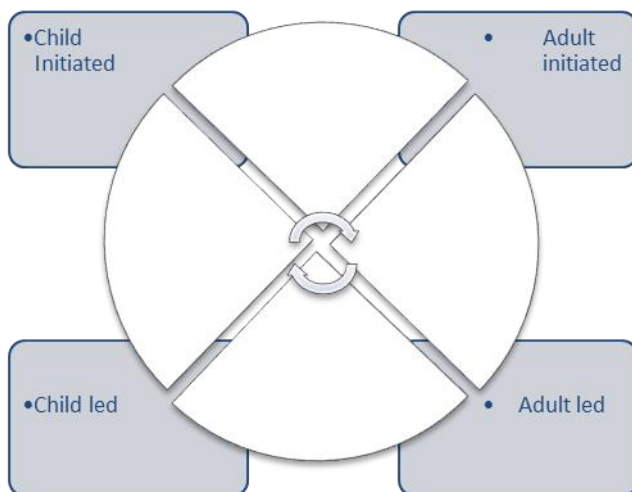


Figure 1. The Play Matrix, developed by Lily Horseman

- Some situations may require moving towards the right, for example fire lighting, and tool use. This is especially the case the first time we do a risky activity. The goal is to move to the left over time when the child or young person has more experience.
- Our intervention styles enable children and young people to extend their play. We think carefully about how, why, and when we will intervene in play. If we must stop play for whatever reason, we don’t just shout “Don’t do that!” and leave it at that. We explain our reasoning and give safer alternatives, using the needs of the child to inform which alternatives will work. For example, if a child wants to climb higher



than is appropriate up a tree, we can explain why (the branches get too thin there, it's windy, it's slippery etc.) and then suggest an alternative. If they need to climb and expend energy in that way, we could make a rope ladder or swing. The child could feel like they need to prove something (are they the youngest child? are they not getting enough attention from people that they respect?). In this situation they could be given a challenge, or an important job to do (cooking, making a shelter to protect equipment, lighting a fire). This is an example of how identifying children and young people's needs through their play can then inform how to best facilitate their play further.

- We are more constructive than just saying "No!" or "Be careful!". We discuss specifically why it may be a no (and give an alternative), and specifically how they can be more careful using our knowledge of techniques.
- The language that we use is clear and tone is non-confrontational.
- We examine our own responses to children's play. Are we wanting it to stop because it's making us feel nervous? Why? How do we respond? Do we respond emotionally because of this? Or on the flip side, is this play making us feel happy or calm? Why? What are the characteristics that are making us feel like it is going well? How do we take that and make it go well again in the future?
- We recognise our impact on the play space, and the impact of children and young people's play on us.
- Risk assessments are made advance for known activities, considering the risks and benefit of situations. Dynamic risk assessments are used for new situations that arise during sessions. Both safety and the need to facilitate play (and so potentially encounter risk) are central in these risk assessments.

Signed: 

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This policy will be reviewed in March 2025