Playwork: what’s so special?
Playwork is unique. It is the role of facilitating children’s play. In 2005 the Playwork Principles were developed to help share an understanding of what playworkers do.

The Playwork Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people’s capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

There are eight Playwork Principles; the first two describe the process and importance of play, Principles 3 to 6 describe how playworkers facilitate children’s play, and Principles 7 and 8 describe the impact of playworkers and their intervention on children’s play and the play space.

Children who lack opportunities for play do not develop to their full potential. Translating this thinking into planning, policy, strategy, education and training is the best way to ensure the quality of playwork as a profession, the quality of delivery of play opportunities, and to secure quality play provision for all children.

Playwork Principle 3

The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.

The role of the playworker is unique because its reason for being is primarily to facilitate children’s play. Typically, most professional people deal with outcome orientated aspects of the child’s life, for instance education or health, the outcomes of which are usually part of a wider adult agenda.

Playwork, however, has the child’s agenda as its starting point – playing. Playing is a process; it is driven by the child for the child. If facilitating children’s play is the prime focus of someone’s work, then they are working as a playworker; if not, they are doing something else. Playworkers ensure that the process of play and how it is facilitated informs involvement in play policy, strategy, training and education.

Playwork Principle 4

For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.

Playing brings many benefits; aspects of the play process, as well as children’s innate drive to play, can be manipulated and used to achieve outcomes determined by adults (examples include sport and education).

Playworkers endeavour not to be distracted from their primary role as playworkers. Fitness, crime reduction and education are important adult agendas but are not immediately important to children and their play. When playworkers interact with others on any adult agenda, it is their role to ensure that they keep the child’s agenda, the play agenda, in the forefront of thinking.
If playworkers are to advocate for children’s play it is essential that they understand and can explain what children do when they are playing and how playworkers can support that process.

This is vital because if we allow adult agendas to dominate the work playworkers do with children, they adulterate the play process. As adults in children’s play space, we already affect that play space; children will not play exactly as they would if we were not there. It is the playworker’s job to try and ensure that children have the best chance of playing as naturally as they would if adults were not present, and to intervene as little as possible.

Playwork Principle 5

*The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.*

The space that is created for children to play is extremely important. One of the keys to a successful play space is the sense that it, and all that happens within it, is owned by the children. Children must feel empowered to change and alter the space, choose what happens in it, and to have as much control over the space as possible:

- They can choose resources, from paints to bikes, to skate ramps or new members of staff.
- They can choose whether to play by themselves or with others and who they play with.
- They can build things themselves, from cardboard box creations to dens and adventure playground structures.
- They can have responsibility for decoration – putting up pictures or painting murals.
- They can decide what to plant and grow it themselves.
- They can dig out fire pits or holes – they can change the environment to suit their own needs.
• They can freely manipulate loose parts.
• They can choose what to cook.
• They can build their own dens.

The possibilities of what children can do differ from setting to setting. If provision is operating in space shared with others, this can restrict opportunities to give children choice and control, particularly if those who are sharing the setting are not sympathetic to children using the space.

Playworkers see this as a challenge rather than a restriction. They can be inventive: choosing resources carefully can overcome many situations, as can serious negotiating, goodwill and politeness.

Compensatory space

A play space is a compensatory space and it is important. It is a space that makes up for children's loss of a natural play environment due to factors such as parental fears arising from living in a highly populated area, high levels of traffic, anxieties of stranger danger and a perception that allowing children out unsupervised is disapproved of.

In a natural environment, the only permission children need to play is simply being allowed out to get on with it. For a compensatory play space to feel as natural as possible and for children to have the freedom they need to play, they need to feel permission from the adults within that space.

Playworkers create an environment where children have that control over the space and what happens in it. The more control children have, the greater the level of permission they feel.

Playwork Principle 7

Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people’s play on the playworker.

Playworkers are constantly aware of who they are within a children’s play space and how they interact with both the children and the space. Children tend to see adults as authority figures rather than as part of their play. This is the way most adults establish their relationship with children, whether intentionally or not. Not so playworkers, in this respect playworkers are in a privileged position.

It is vital that playworkers understand what they do and how that alters both the play space and the play itself, either positively or negatively. There are several key aspects to adults’ relationships with children that allow all of us to minimise our impact on the play space. This knowledge and understanding informs all playworkers’ practice.

Being respectful – Children choose to be with people who respect them. In staffed open access play provision the children attend if the playworkers respect them, and although they may not be able to leave of their own accord in a care setting, the children are much easier to work with if they are shown that they are respected. Respect is a two-way street; if playworkers want respect from children they must give it back.

Not judging – Playworkers are not employed to form moral judgements on children, or teach them how to live their lives. Their role is to create an environment where children feel emotionally and physically safe. To be effective, a playworker needs children’s trust, to feel they can share their problems or sorrows, or just ask advice; children will be reluctant to do this if they think they are going to be told off or that they might be thought of as a bad person.

A respectful and non-judgemental approach is important because it supports the principle that children are able to play in a space that is as close as possible to a natural play environment, with adults having as little impact as possible. Most children, given free choice, will play away from adults, and will generally only go to them for food
or if a serious problem occurs such as an injury or bullying. To keep a play space as authentic as possible we need to consider how children would play freely in an adult free environment.

**Checklist for facilitating a compensatory space**

- There is no formula; to offer effective compensatory play, playworkers must be sensitive and thoughtful and have clear aims.

- The way a compensatory play space is set up needs to be based on research and analysis into the play opportunities available in the local area with the participation of the children and young people.

- The space must not be adulterated by adult agendas. Playworkers can set themselves up to fail if they have a idealised vision of what a play space can be. They must be wary of simply fulfilling parents’ and school bodies’ needs, or those of politicians to the detriment of children’s play needs.

- While the children have control over decisions and choices regarding their play within the space, they do not run it or staff it.

- The space needs to be secure enough for children to feel that their space is protected, without the overall effect of a prison or zoo.

- An affective compensatory play space may not conform to a narrow, stereotypical view of a play space: it will look like it looks.

- It may be a wholly outdoor space or may have covered provision – this is immaterial as long as it provides compensatory play.

- An exciting, challenging space with committed and well-supported staff who work to their full potential will attract more children and be more successful.

Above all a compensatory space will be a place where both clear and hidden permission is given to play.

For more information about the Playwork Principles visit:  
[www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playworkprinciples)

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[www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playwork](http://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/playwork)
Play Wales is the national organisation for children’s play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children’s right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.