ISSUE 3, Volume 1, December 2025

play magazine

RIGHTS

international play association
promoting the child's right to play



The Palestine Play Projects: A field report

Inclusive play through forest school pedagogy: Research from Portugal

Play & Humour: A field report on cultural collaboration from the Philippines

Building Inclusive Play Environments: A position paper from UK

Decolonial interrogation of play space design: An African perspective

Play and inclusion

Focus on Conflict, Pedagogy, Poverty, Disability and Decolonization

ABOUT IPA AND HOW YOU CAN JOIN

The International Play Association (IPA) is a dynamic, cross-sectoral, membership-based international non-governmental organization founded in 1961. It has members in almost 50 countries and branches in 20 countries. It has active groups throughout the world and enthusiastically welcomes new members and new energy!

IPA is at the forefront of developing a global understanding and increased visibility of the child's right to play (article 31, UNCRC) as a fundamental human right. In 2013, IPA reached a significant milestone with its leading role in crafting the General Comment (GC) on article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). GC #17 deepens our understanding of article 31 as a whole, and especially of play as a child right.

IPA recognises that the well-being of children is a global issue, and that opportunity for play is an important element of well-being. Play is children's natural behaviour and their healthy development is dependent upon sufficient time and opportunity to play.

IPA is an interdisciplinary organisation that brings together people from all professions who work for and with children. For over fifty years, national groups have initiated various projects promoting the child's right to play.

IPA's worldwide network promotes the importance of play in child development, provides a vehicle for interdisciplinary exchange and action, and brings a child's perspective to policy development throughout the world.

IPA welcomes you, or your organisation, to join its international network and participate in its campaign to promote the value of play around the world. You can contact IPA through your national representative listed on our website.

Visit ipaworld.org, or email the IPA Membership Officer at membership@ipaworld.org.





Nature-based play



Construction play



Fantasy play



Socio-dramatic Play



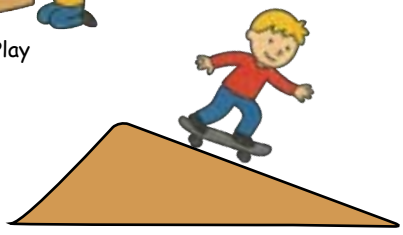
Locomotor Play



Imaginative Play



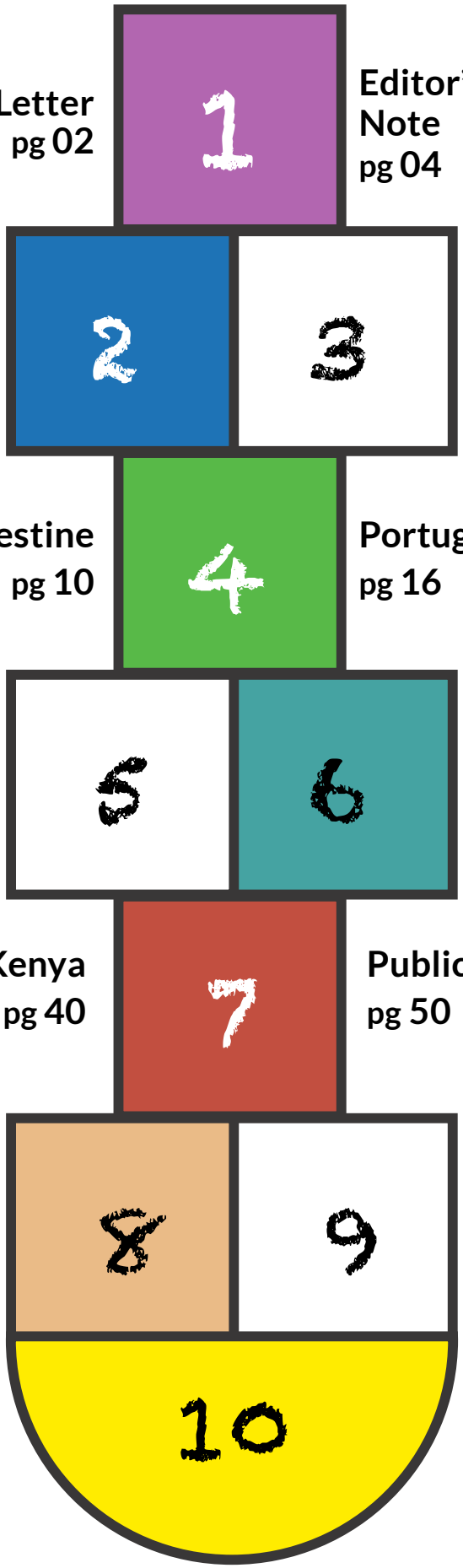
Symbolic Play



Deep Play

Magazine design by Safia Zahid
Play Types illustrations by Safia Zahid
Cover photo: Freepik

Contents



President's Letter pg 02

Editor's Note pg 04

Editorial Board pg 06

Contributing Authors pg 08

Palestine pg 10

Portugal pg 16

Philippines pg 24

United Kingdom pg 32

Kenya pg 40

Publication Spotlight pg 50

News From Our Branches pg 52

Membership Benefits pg 56

Obituary pg 58

Call for Papers pg 60

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was written for all children, not some children. Every child must have these rights respected and upheld. In considering this, IPA World, through our advocacy for Article 31, acknowledges that all rights are indivisible. When we impact one right, we impact them all.



Robyn with Brian in Sweden, 2025

In this edition of Play Rights magazine, I must start by acknowledging events happening across the globe. The world is in terrible pain, full of division, exclusion and brutality. Now more than ever, our children need our advocacy – not just our voices, but our action. As I sit down to write to you, I was reminded of a quote attributed to James Baldwin, "The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognising this may be incapable of morality".

This edition focuses on inclusion because the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) was written for all children, not some children. Every child must have these rights respected and upheld. In considering this, IPA World, through our advocacy for Article 31, acknowledges that all rights are indivisible. When we impact one right, we impact them all.

This edition showcases some outstanding advocacy work being undertaken across the globe to address these human rights through the power of play. The General Comment (no 17) on the Right to Play reiterates that all children, regardless of their abilities, geography or the conditions they were born into, must have their right to play respected and upheld. The reports are uplifting and inspiring, and we hope they will inspire you to find ways you can be of practical assistance and support in addressing the current challenges we face in our world.

I have been travelling over the past two months on a fellowship looking at policies for play, and last month I had the pleasure of visiting Sweden and meeting with a founding member of IPA World and Life Member, Brian Ashley. Brian is soon to turn 100, and we think he holds the title of the oldest IPA Member!! Brian sends his regards to all members and reminded me that the power of our collective means we can spread the message of children's rights to play and have a real, long-lasting influence on Government policy. Our branch updates in this edition offer some great examples of how our work of members at a country level is impacting policy and knowledge transfer across the globe. In this edition, we also remember two members of IPA World who served on our IPA Council, Maggie and Ute. Both were remarkable women and will be remembered and celebrated for their fierce commitment to children's rights. The dedication and passion they had is something I believe we all share as members of IPA World.

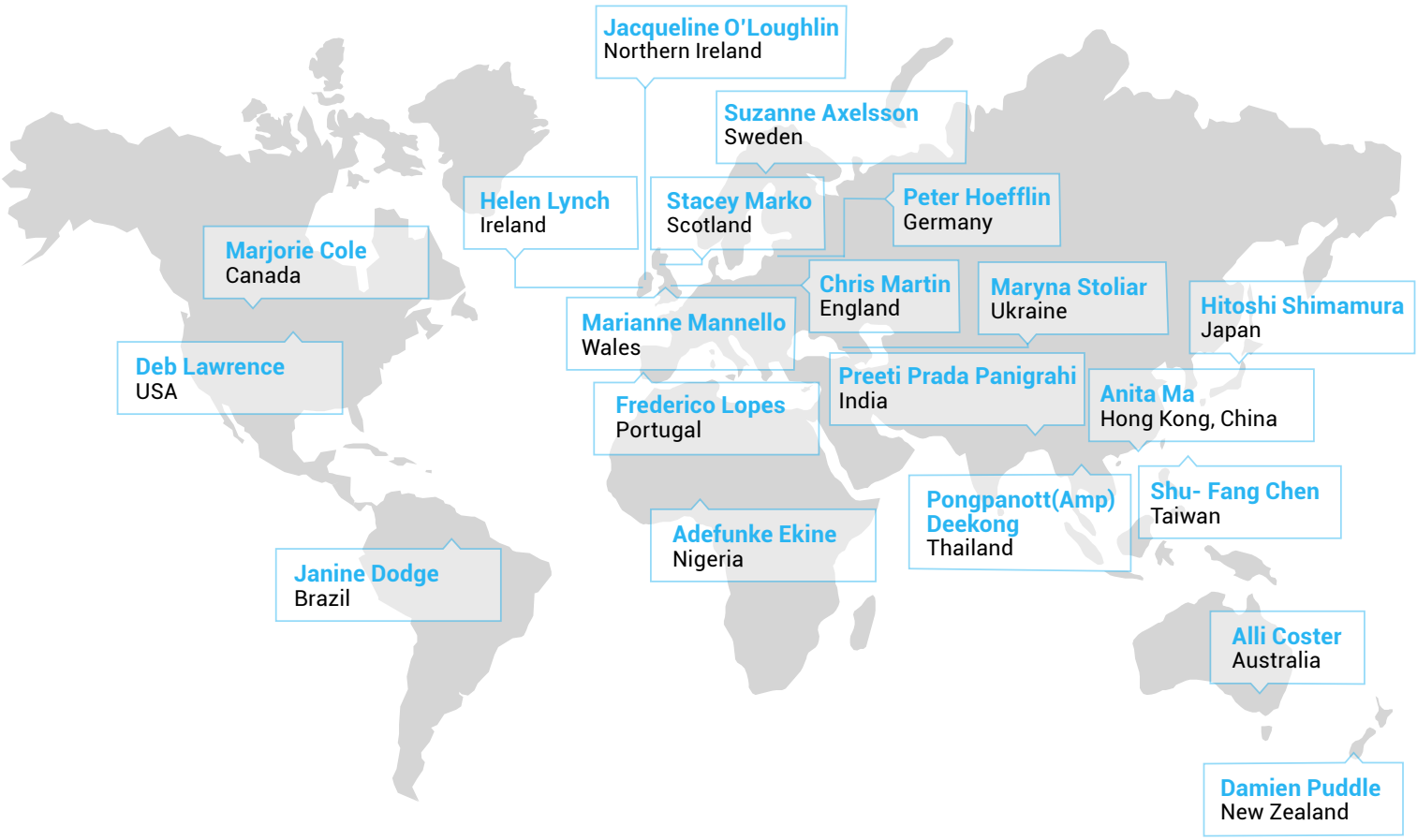


I hope you find this edition of Playrights informative, but more importantly, that it reignites your belief in the power of people to create and shape a better future for our children through play. My sincere hope is that it becomes a catalyst for your own action to protect, provide and promote play for all children.

Yours Playfully

Robyn Monro Miller AM
President, Play Rights, IPA World

BRANCHES & COUNCIL MEMBERS



IPA-WORLD TRUSTEES



Robyn Monro Miller
Australia



Victor Koong
Hong Kong



Sudeshna Chatterjee
India



Tam Baillie
Scotland



Krister Svensson
Sweden



Mike Greenway
Wales

EDITOR'S NOTE

Play, Inclusion, and the Reimagining of Childhood Spaces

Living and working in the vibrant yet challenging urban context of the Global South, I have witnessed firsthand how diverse childhoods unfold in spaces often created without consideration for children, where resourcefulness and resilience are the critical tools far too many children must possess to survive and thrive. Children transform crowded lanes, shared courtyards, and even construction sites into their playgrounds, crafting joy and meaning out of complexity—sometimes wrestling with conflict and at other times discovering unexpected friendships.

Yet, these scenes also remind me that barriers to play are real and stubborn. Across communities, even the most creative play is threatened by the relentless struggles with poverty, domestic responsibilities, disability, gendered norms and dangers lurking in neglected environments. Whether working with neighbourhood groups, listening to parents, or observing children at play in everyday spaces, I have learned that the right to play as enshrined in Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is far from universally realised. Over two decades of working with children, I strongly believe it is absolutely critical to embed equity and intersectionality in play. Every child—regardless of their diverse identities and backgrounds—deserves meaningful and fair opportunities to participate in their homes, schools, and communities through play.

This themed issue on Play and Inclusion brings together voices from diverse geographies and disciplines, united by a desire to reimagine how inclusive play can transform childhood experiences.

In recent years, there has been a hopeful shift: more city planners, educators, and practitioners now ask how planning and policy can reflect children's actual lived experiences, rather than ideals drawn from elsewhere. Participatory planning and design mark a crucial step forward. When children and their caregivers are invited to help shape the environments in which they play, the results are not only more inclusive but also richer, more imaginative, and deeply rooted in lived realities. In a world where exclusion can feel inevitable, genuine participation offers a spark of possibility.

We received an overwhelming response to our call for papers for Play Rights' themed issue on Play and Inclusion. As a result, we will be publishing two volumes on this theme. We draw on General Comment 31 to highlight the importance of special attention for particular children within the discourse of inclusive play.

This issue brings together voices from diverse geographies and disciplines, united by a desire to reimagine how inclusive play can transform childhood experiences. Each article reminds us that play is not simply a matter of leisure—it is a site of transformation, resilience, and hope.



The **"Palestine Play Projects"** field report foregrounds play as a mode of psychosocial resilience and collective agency in contexts of extreme precarity such as in the rapidly changing crisis in Gaza. In the aftermath of recurrent destruction, when fixed playgrounds become impossible to maintain, communities reimagine play through mobile and locally improvised initiatives—storytelling, drama, and creative workshops. The article highlights the politics of adaptability, solidarity, and local leadership, inquiring into how inclusion can be sustained when material infrastructures of play are constantly eroded.

The research paper, **"The Forest That Never Stops"**, from Portugal presents a compelling case for integrating outdoor pedagogy and Forest School approaches into mainstream education systems. Moving beyond the romanticised notion of nature play, it presents robust empirical evidence of how child-led, nature-based learning environments advance the right to play and deepen inclusion within culturally and socioeconomically diverse school communities.

CHILDREN NEEDING SPECIAL ATTENTION TO REALIZE THEIR RIGHT TO PLAY



Girls often have less time and freedom than boys to enjoy play and leisure, especially during adolescence, due to domestic responsibilities, family care, parental concerns, lack of facilities, and cultural assumptions about their behaviour.

Children living in poverty often have little scope for play and recreation and are typically excluded from opportunities that are readily available to children from less disadvantaged backgrounds.



Children with disabilities face multiple barriers, including exclusion from school, informal and social arenas; isolation at home; cultural attitudes and negative stereotypes that are hostile to and rejecting of them.



Children in institutions such as residential homes and schools, hospitals, detention centres, remand homes and refugee centres may have limited or no opportunities for play, recreation and participation in cultural and artistic life.



Children from indigenous and minority communities due to hostility, assimilation policies, rejection, violence and discrimination may face barriers to participating in own cultural practices, and celebrations as well as opportunities to participate in sports, games, cultural activities, and play and recreation alongside other children.



Children in situations of conflict, humanitarian and natural disasters find that play, recreation and cultural activities are often given a lower priority than provision of food, shelter and medicines even though play can help children recover a sense of normality and joy after experiencing loss, dislocation and trauma.

"Play and Humour: Transforming Children's lives through cultural education" is a field report on the ongoing international collaboration between "Clowns Without Borders Germany" and "maninoy Patenschaft Philippinen e.V". It examines how creative and participatory cultural programmes foster inclusion in under-resourced communities by engaging children facing poverty, gender and ethnic exclusion, or disability through humour and performance. These initiatives reposition play as a culturally embedded, inclusive, and rights-based practice.

In the position paper, **"Learning from Lived Experience: Building Inclusive Play Environments for Every Child,"** the argument for inclusion moves towards co-production and reflexivity. Through case studies in Scotland and Northern Ireland, the authors trace how disabled children and their families have become co-designers of play environments, producing new models of accessibility and belonging that transcend policy compliance. This participatory approach reflects a broader epistemic shift—from designing for to designing with—suggesting that authentic inclusion emerges when lived experience becomes the foundation of design thinking and policy formation.

Finally, the reflexive practice note, **"Designing for Inclusive and Plural Worlds of Play"**, advances a critical, decolonial interrogation of play space design. The article challenges the global export of a standardised playground typology. Centring local knowledge, improvisation, and sensory engagement, it argues that meaningful inclusion requires relinquishing control to the very publics design seeks to serve, particularly in African and low-income urban contexts.

This issue is an invitation: to join in deepening our understanding, learning from both successes and setbacks, and listening closely to those whose voices have too often been unheard. Taken together, these stories remind us that to include through play is to honour the politics of recognition and participation. To further anchor this conversation, we are spotlighting two publications that showcase the depth and urgency of current research and offer fresh resources for practitioners and policymakers. By sharing these resources alongside the themed issue's articles, Play Rights aims to support ongoing reflection, scholarship, and actionable guidance for nurturing the rights, agency, and joy of all children, wherever they live and play.

Sudeshna Chatterjee
Editor-in-Chief, Play Rights, IPA World

EDITORIAL BOARD



Dr. Sudeshna Chatterjee (Editor-in-Chief)

Sudeshna has extensive experience as a globally recognised urban practitioner, researcher, and published author. She focuses on enabling inclusive, resilient and child-friendly cities and communities and advocating for including child and youth perspectives in urban policies, planning and urbanisation processes. Sudeshna has led IPA's Access to Play in Crisis research in six countries and was elected to the IPA World Board in 2017. She is the Programme Director (research) for Sustainable Cities and Transport at the World Resources Institute (WRI) India Ross Centre for Cities. She led the research and framing of the UN system-wide "Global Principles and Guidance of Public Spaces for Children" and an associated compendium of 50 case studies acting on behalf of UNICEF, WHO, and UN-Habitat.



Dr. Matluba Khan
Bangladesh

Matluba is a senior lecturer in urban design at the School of Geography and Planning at Cardiff University. Her research explores the connection between the natural and built environments and human behaviour, focusing on the impact of school ground design on pedagogy and play.
She has studied the outdoor learning environment of children at primary schools and urban residential areas in Bangladesh and Scotland.



Dr. Chris Martin
England

Chris is a playworker, writer/researcher, and playwork activist. He is the chair of IPA England and Tiverton Adventure Playground. He wrote the UK Play and Playwork Education and Skills Strategy 2011-2016; facilitated the All Party Parliamentary Group on Play, and was National Playwork Convenor for Unite the Union.





Marjorie Cole
Canada

Marjorie is President of IPA Canada and focuses on the importance of play in education as an Education Coordinator for a non-profit dedicated to early intervention.
She advocates for the transformative power of play and educates post-secondary early childhood educators about play. She also pursues graduate studies in counselling and psychology.

Dr. Helen Little
Australia

Helen is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood Education. Before entering academia, she was an early childhood teacher. Her main area of teaching is outdoor play, which, for her is a key context for advocating for children's right to play. She aims to support her students in becoming advocates for play.



Dr. Tolu Okoruwa
Nigeria

Tolu is a Chief Lecturer and researcher at the Federal College of Education, Abeokuta, Nigeria, where she has taught teacher trainees to adopt various play-based strategies for teaching children. She has also published articles stressing the importance of play in children's all-round development.



Dr. Maria Nordström
Sweden

Maria is an associate professor in the Department of People and Society at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences. With a background in developmental psychology, she has collaborated with many urban planners on outdoor spaces for children over many years to promote children's right to play.





Dr. Anupama Nallari
India

Anupama is a member of the urban team at Save the Children where she supports knowledge and content development for the Global Alliance – Cities4Children. She received her doctorate in Environmental Psychology from the City University of New York. Her past work includes research on common space in informal settlements in India, facilitating child-focused participatory planning and design, and supporting the development of global guidance and principles for public spaces for children in both formal and informal contexts.



Tassy Ellen Thompson
Norway

Tassy currently practices as an artist-researcher and is a doctoral fellow and university lecturer at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of South East Norway. Her work explores landscape and sustainability in relation to play, performance, and education.



Michael Dietrich
Germany

Michael is the artistic director of the improvisational theatre "Mixxit Theater" and the spinning theatre for children "Mit Zick & Zack auf Geschichtenreise". For 20 years he has initiated and organized media and theatre projects in the cultural education of children and young people, currently as managing director and board member of PA/SPIELkultur eV in Munich and for maninoy eV in the Philippines.





CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS



Alix Crawford

Alix is the Founder and Chairperson of the Mae Murray Foundation, a charity established in 2015 in response to her family's experience of social exclusion while raising her daughter, Talia, who has Cerebral Palsy. The foundation creates inclusive spaces for individuals of all ages and abilities and promotes community inclusion through shared learning.



Ana Luísa Sousa Gil

Ana holds a PhD in Educational Administration and School Management Policies from ISCTE. Her research explores the relationships between leadership, pedagogical practices, and academic outcomes in Portuguese schools. She focuses on educational effectiveness, school policy, and the role of pedagogical leadership in student performance and well-being.



Julian Lewis

Julian is a journalist and social entrepreneur who has served as a trustee of Palestine Play Projects since 2020 and previously raised funds for a related US charity. He is inspired by the charity's commitment to helping uphold Palestinian children's right to play as part of a safe, happy, and healthy childhood.



Lesley Ravenscroft

Lesley helped to found the Palestine Play Projects charity 10 years ago and continues to contribute to its work with care and commitment. She works in education, supporting children in understanding and enjoying maths. She brings the same warmth and belief in children's wellbeing to our work in Palestine.



Luís Miguel da Silva Inês Soares

Luís is the principal of the Alvide School Group in Cascais, officially appointed in 2025. With a background in education, he stands out for his organisational leadership and commitment to pedagogical innovation, fostering a collaborative school culture focused on quality teaching and student achievement.



Marguerite Hunter Blair

Marguerite Hunter Blair is the former Chief Executive of Play Scotland; she is secretary of IPA Scotland and chairs the Carrick Centre, Maybole, and G20 Youth Project, Glasgow. Previously, she was CEO of Playboard Northern Ireland. Marguerite was awarded an OBE for services to Play, Learning and Health in 2025.



Marie Williams

Marie is a chartered engineer, researcher, lecturer, UK Design Council expert, and founder of Dream Networks CIC, specialising in regenerative and inclusive play-space design. She collaborates with children and communities across the UK and East Africa to create diverse, culturally rooted, and climate-resilient play environments. She advocates for decolonial design approaches and champions every child's right to experience joy through play.



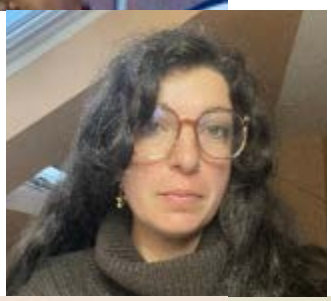
Michael Dietrich

Michael is a cultural educator and actor from Germany. As managing director of PA/SPIELkultur e.V. he creates diverse play spaces for children in Munich. He improvises interactive plays for viewers of all ages with mixxit theatre and as a Clown Without Borders he brings play and humour to young people in crisis situations worldwide.



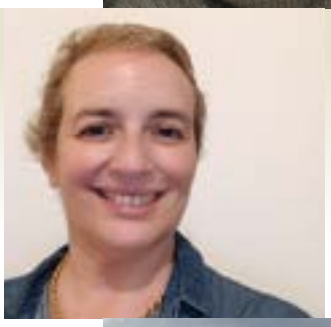
Mia Rohrbach

Mia is a special education teacher, social worker, circus pedagogue and clown. She works as a consultant for inclusion processes and organises inclusive circus projects. As a hospital clown, she visits retirement homes and hospitals. She carries joy in her suitcase theatre and, as a clown without Borders, delivers it to projects all over the world.



Shireen Tawil

Shireen joined the Palestine Play Projects in 2024, driven by her belief in the importance of play and her commitment to Palestinian rights. Her work has orbited around mental health, forced migration, climate, education, and advocacy. She is interested in the intersections between rights, play, nature, and designed spaces.



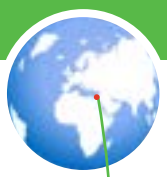
Sónia da Conceição Afonso dos Reis

Sónia has served as deputy principal of the Alvide School Group since 2024. With extensive experience in pedagogical coordination, she supports strategic management and curriculum development, ensuring alignment across educational cycles and promoting projects that emphasise equity, inclusion, and academic success.



Theresa Casey

Theresa is a past-President of IPA (2008-17) and a trustee of Palestine Play Projects (PPP). As a former playworker, she feels solidarity with the PPP partners who have sustained their essential creative engagement with children despite the immense challenges. She brings insight from IPA's thematic work on Play in Crisis.



Palestine Play Projects: A Field Report on Palestinian Children's Right to Play

Theresa Casey, Shireen Tawil, Julian Lewis, Lesley Ravenscroft

This field report documents the work done by Palestine Play Projects with the grassroots initiative Child Smile and reflects on how work with children on the ground is evolving in response to the rapidly changing crisis in Gaza.

From playgrounds to play rights

Until 2023, Palestine Play Projects operated under the name UK Playgrounds for Palestine. They focused on building safe physical play spaces in response to the longstanding occupation denying Palestinian children their fundamental human rights. But the destruction caused by war, especially in Gaza, changed everything. In our annual report for 2023, we noted:

"We have not yet heard about the status of playgrounds built within Palestine but anticipate all playgrounds in Gaza have been destroyed."

Play can be dangerous in an occupation. Play at schools is interrupted by settler attacks, and we hear from partners that in recent months, many people have stayed away from playgrounds due to fear of attack. The children in Gaza face forced displacement, homelessness and loss. Hunger compounds trauma, and over 95% of school buildings have sustained damage.

The scale of loss is staggering. As of 30th July, UNICEF reports at least 18,430 children killed in Gaza, and more than 45,000 injured, many of whom have life-changing injuries. One in four residents of Gaza is facing famine. All 320,000 children under five are at risk of acute malnutrition, increasing their vulnerability to childhood illnesses and potential long-term physical and mental health (UNICEF in the State of Palestine Escalation Humanitarian Situation Report No.41, 2025). Gaza has the highest number of child amputees per capita in the world (Lazzarini, 2024).

Yet we continue to believe, more than ever, in the transformative power of play.

A new approach

Under such extreme conditions, our approach has evolved, always in dialogue with local partners. In 2024, we shifted our focus from solely building playgrounds to collaborating with local groups in Palestine to support creative and flexible play programmes. In Gaza, where construction is no longer possible, we are now supporting mobile and pop-up workshops that nurture creativity, emotional expression and heal-



Operating in Khan Younis, and now in areas nearby, wherever is safe. Child Smile was set up to support children through drama therapy.

Photo credit: Child Smile



CFTA, Khan Younis, Gaza, Words on the banner read "from the sea of Gaza and the children of Gaza we want peace."

Photo credit: The Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA)



Photo credit: NAWA Kindergarten

NAWA Kindergarten, Deir El-Balah, Gaza. A joint project with, Playgrounds for Palestine, USA, providing play facilities for children in what was then the smallest refugee camp in the Gaza Strip.

ing. In this way, we support the rights of play, participation, recreation and culture encompassed by article 31, as we illustrate below.

CASE STUDY:

Child Smile – Drama, Healing and Hope in Crisis

"We work amidst the rubble—not just the physical, but the emotional wreckage as well. And despite everything, we continue searching for what is beautiful..." (Child Smile team)

Child Smile is a Gaza-based grassroots initiative that uses drama, theatre and storytelling to support children's wellbeing. Led by local professionals and volunteers, their work is rooted in Palestinian culture and responsive to the lived realities of war.

In 2024, Palestine Play Projects funded tents, wages, props and refreshments so that Child Smile could deliver drama workshops designed to build confidence, spark imagination and nurture healing. Over three weeks, 120 children took part in 72 sessions, culminating in a joyful two-day festival, celebrating with their friends and families.

In May 2025, with the original space and tents abandoned after forced displacement, Child Smile sent us a video of their 'new place' in Khan Younis, a camp-style area with murals, posters and sandy floor – a welcoming place to deliver workshops and activities. On June 6, 2025, Child Smile founder Hassan Akhras shared that they had once again been forced to flee due to mass displacement, resulting in the loss of their tents and resources yet again. Hassan keeps us informed by email and WhatsApp of how the programmes are implemented under changing conditions.

7/6/25: *"I live difficult days while I sleep with my children on the street. This life is the most difficult in history."*
(Hassan Akhras, personal communication, June 7, 2025).

9/6/25: *"I really live the worst days of my life with my family, and I lack any of the elements of life. (…) I try to be strong in front of my children, but inside I'm very tired, my friend. Damn this bad world, we deserve to live a better life."*
(H. Akhras, personal communication, June 9, 2025).

14/6/25: *"The situation is disastrous; there is no elements of good life. My children are suffering from malnutrition, as well as a lack of drinking water, which causes them diseases. Summer in tents is so hard; the temperature is so high. It's so tough to live under these conditions… I found a number of displaced children and women in this place. They are so needy for psychological support sessions through drama. If I didn't achieve that, I would be in a bad condition."*
(H. Akhras, personal communication, June 14, 2025).

Despite overwhelming adversity, Child Smile refuses to give up. They have relocated and rebuilt from scratch, this time as a mobile outreach unit, able to reach shelters and informal camps to serve displaced children with dignity, care and joy. *'We turn grief into resilience and isolation into community – reminding every child: "You are not forgotten. Together, we begin again."'* (Hassan Akhras)

In partnership with Palestine Play Projects, Child Smile's new programme, Mobile Drama for Displaced Children, will bring vital moments of healing and creativity to hundreds of children in Gaza, using a specially adapted version of the Magic Mitten methods. Magic Mitten is based on storytelling with interactive exercises to help children cope with fear, loss, and painful memories, supporting social and emotional learning. The "backpack theatre" approach, in which the team creates a minimal kit of essential resources that can be carried on their back to run workshops where children are, not only helps children survive emotionally, but as Child Smile describes it, "it helps them begin again." (Child Smile, n.d.)

A report from the first month of this new approach (received on 12 September 2025) highlights the key emotions staff observed among the children. They describe fear from aeroplanes, bombing sounds, occupation; the sadness for the loss of relatives or friends; anger towards the harsh realities and destruction of home; insecurity due to displacement, relocations and conflicting news; and a longing for school, home, and play as it was before the war.

According to Lester and Russell (2010), children's dynamic engagement with each other and their environment contributes to the creation of play spaces, with play simultaneously shaping and occupying these spaces. We have seen this dynamic play out through the workshops, in which trusted relationships with Child Smile staff and the claiming of physical space create temporal spaces where children feel "like children again." As previous IPA work has shown (Gentry, 2023), we must go where the children are, supporting children "in the creation of a space in which they can play." This playwork principle (Play Wales, 2022) echoes a human rights approach that builds children's agency and capacity to claim their rights.

We are working with Child Smile to extend the reach of the project, building in support for further rounds of drama workshops, enabling the reuse of resources and kits and empowering Palestinians on the ground, especially women, to continue the psychosocial caring for children whose needs are so great.

"I loved the workshop. I wish to join again because I enjoyed it and loved the girls and the leaders. I learned not to hide my feelings or cry silently but to write them in my notebook."
(Child participant, 13 years old)


Photo credit: The Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA)


Photo credit: The Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA)

The Culture and Free Thought Association (CFTA, Khan Younis) provides educational, cultural, and humanitarian support to the community, especially children and women.

Learning from other places in Palestine

Providing play opportunities for Palestinian children has always been complex and challenging. Even before October 2023, occupation and restrictions limited access to building materials in Gaza and the West Bank. The war has made those limits extreme.

While construction in Gaza is currently not possible, we have started exploring the safe reuse of materials found amid the rubble—an approach reminiscent of the early adventure playground movement's "bombsite" or "junk" playgrounds, familiar to many play colleagues. Meanwhile, in the West Bank, we are investigating ways to share equipment designs that can be built locally, including adaptations for children and youth with life-altering injuries.

Safety from settler and military violence in the West Bank has always been a concern. Still, with heightened attacks in recent months, we hear from partners that many parents are keeping their children at home and not allowing them to go out to play. The ubiquitous presence of check-points across the West Bank also hampers access to play spaces and opportunities for Palestinian children.

We are currently also working with other trusted partners. At the Maada Creative Centre in Jerusalem's Silwan neighbourhood, a vibrant community hub, we are restoring a playground and partnering with an Italian organisation to restore the surrounding 'garden'. In Khan Younis, Gaza, we are partnering with the Culture for Free Thought Association (CFTA) to deliver creative workshops in art, music, drama, and dance.

"I am so happy with activities, mostly to see kids laughing and forgetting the war even for moments … This project is so colourful – I wish you could come and see." (CFTA)

Ethics, rights and solidarity

As we began re-imagining our approach and as the toll of the war in Gaza became clearer, our new name - Palestine Play Projects - was a necessary change in response to our shift from focusing on physical playgrounds to broadening the ways we support play as a right of Palestinian children.

We continue to reflect on our position. How do we truly support the right to play (UN, 1989, Article 31) without engaging with other rights under the Convention—like the right to life (UN, 1989, Article 6), protection from violence (UN, 1989, Article19), food and shelter (UN, 1989, Article 27) or education (UN, 1989, Article 28)? We recognise the concept of 'indivisibility' of all the articles in the Convention yet we are not a relief agency. Amid overwhelming humanitarian need, we carve out space to insist that play is not a luxury. It is an essential part of children's recovery, identity and agency.

We have often found ourselves reflecting on ideas of neutrality, solidarity and the politics of language. How can we best express solidarity with the children we support while remaining politically 'neutral' – is that even possible? What is reasonable to expect of our supporters, trustees and patrons appearing, speaking and protesting in the public domain? We worry about the safety of partner organisations on the ground in Palestine. We created a risk register for our organisation but find ourselves asking - how do we manage risks that cannot be truly mitigated such are the hazards faced on the ground? We tackle the difficulties of sending funds through international systems, while acknowledging that projects may be delayed or changed or abandoned - and ask ourselves how we share that message. These are questions with which we grapple as we navigate the uncertainty of working in Palestine.

Hope for the future

Life in the occupied territories and Palestinian refugee camps in neighbouring countries has always been profoundly challenging. With its challenges having only intensified since the war in Gaza began in 2023, a focus on play may seem irrelevant or misguided. We see it differently. Our charity continues to affirm the right of Palestinian children and young people to enjoy play as an essential part of their human development, as well as a vital counterweight to growing up



Photo credit: Aheba el Tefel Kindergarten

Aheba el Tefel Kindergarten in Gaza , providing pre-schopl play activities

in situations of conflict and trauma.

Local partners are central to our efforts. Their resourcefulness and ingenuity, long noted as key characteristics of Palestinians under occupation, keeps us hopeful of making a positive contribution to children's lives in Palestine. This also helps us find the confidence to embark on projects with new partners. After appropriate due diligence, we entrust funds we raise from concerned donors—mostly in the UK—to them in a spirit of cautious optimism.

We are not naive about the prospect of a resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. A situation that was intractable even before the Gaza war will not be resolved soon. The war's impact may well make solutions harder to reach.

Nonetheless, in Gaza's eventual reconstruction there is the potential to embed a children's human rights approach into practical programmes. The needs of the territory's children for play and creative activity have never been greater. This traumatised and now often disabled group will require specialised, accessible and inclusive play equipment and trauma-informed, therapeutic play spaces and programmes.

Despite uncertainty, we move forward in solidarity—trusting our local partners, and the power of play to offer small acts of healing. We believe Palestinian children deserve lives full of laughter, creativity and community—just like children growing up in peace and safety. We hold on to that vision, and with the help of many supporters, we continue building toward it.

On the UN International Day of Play, 11 June 2025, a workshop led by our partner CFTA saw children in Gaza send hand-drawn messages of hope to children in London.

"From the sea of Gaza and the children of Gaza, we want peace"
"It is our right to live in safety" (Workshop participant)

In London, one of our team members held a workshop for local school children who replied with their own messages, written in Arabic.

"From the children of London to the children of Gaza, it is your right to live in safety"
"We love you, Gaza" (workshop participant)

Across war zones and borders, the right to play creates connections and plants the seeds of peace.

Palestine Play Proje*cts is a UK registered charity that works to uphold Palestinian children's right to play (UNCRC article 31) through creative and community-based initiatives in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and neighbouring countries such as Lebanon. The charity, UK Playgrounds for Palestine first began in* association with, and inspired by, the American charity, Playgrounds for Palestine. Constituted as a UK charity in its own right, and since 2025 under its new name of Palestine Play Projects, it is registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, charity number 1164949

Follow & support us
Instagram: @palestineplayprojects
Facebook: @palestineplayprojects
Email: info@playgroundsforpalestineuk.org

References:

Child smile initiative – Gaza Hashem Charity Association. (2025). Gaza Hashem Charity Association. https://gazahashemsociety.com/en/projects-and-initiatives/initiatives/child-smile-initiative/

Gentry, C. (2023, June 14). *International Play Association (IPA World). Ip*aworld.org. https://ipaworld.org/uncategorized/access-to-play-in-crisis/

Lazzarini, Philippe., Head of UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) 3rd Dec 2024

Lester, S., & Russell, W. (2010). Children's right to play: *An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. Bernard van Leer Foundation. Retrieved: 9/7/2025 from International Play Association (IPA World)

Magic Mitten - Helping Children Cope with the Aftermath of War. (2023, May 12). Magic Mitten. https://magicmitten.org/

Palestine Play Projects. (n.d.). *Palestine Play Projects.* https://www.palestineplayprojects.org/

Play Wales. (2022). The Playwork Principles. Play Wales. Retrieved 9/7/2025 from https://play.wales/playwork/the-playwork-principles/

UNICEF. (2025). *Convention on the rights of the child*. UNICEF; UNICEF. https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention

UNICEF in the State of Palestine Escalation Humanitarian Situation Report No.41. (2025, August 10). Unicef.org. https://www.unicef.org/sop/reports/unicef-state-palestine-escalation-humanitarian-situation-report-no41



Photo credit: AE Alvide

THE FOREST THAT NEVER STOPS

Supporting Inclusive Play through Forest School Pedagogy in Portugal.

Ana Gil, Sónia Afonso, and Miguel Inez





This research article examines how Forest School practices in Portugal can support inclusive play and learning opportunities, and how valuing play as a right can promote a paradigm of genuine inclusion and a child-centred school culture.

This article explores how *Forest School* pedagogy can contribute to the right to play, particularly for children with special needs in Portugal. Building on international research, the article discusses the potential of outdoor learning to foster well-being, social-emotional development, and inclusion. While Louv (2005) raised public awareness of the 'nature deficit disorder', more recent primary research demonstrates that direct contact with nature can have measurable impacts on children's cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional outcomes (Gill, 2014; Mygind et al., 2019; Waite et al., 2016). In the Portuguese context, issues of equity and inclusion are particularly relevant, as schools increasingly welcome migrant children and those with special educational needs. This study, based on the analysis of the Educational Project (2022–2025), situates itself in that context, focusing on how a school cluster in Cascais, Portugal, promotes children's right to play and fosters inclusive participation through the pedagogical use of a 16,000 m^2 forest space, inspired by the Forest School model.





Photo credit: AE Alvide



Research Context

At an international level, the right to play is recognised as a fundamental right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which emphasises children's entitlement to rest, leisure, play, and participation in cultural and recreational activities (UN General Assembly, 1989). The Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) in its General Comment (GC) 17 explains that countries have a duty to ensure that all children have the time, space, and support to play, whether at home, in the community, or at school. GC-17 shows that play is essential for well-being, helps children become more resilient when coping with challenges, and promotes social inclusion, allowing all to participate fully.

At the European level, the Council Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems frames outdoor learning and child-centred pedagogy as levers for equity and inclusion (Council of the European Union, 2019).

At a country level, Portugal has consolidated an inclusive education agenda through legislative and curricular reforms. Decree Law No. 54/2018 established a universal, multi-tiered model of inclusive education, emphasising participation and access to learning for all students, including those with special educational needs (República Portuguesa, 2018a). Decree-Law No. 55/2018 outlined the national curriculum and emphasised active, experiential pedagogies (República Portuguesa, 2018b). These align with the general document, 'Profile of Students at the End of Compulsory Schooling,' which positions well-being, autonomy, creativity, and citizenship as core competences (Ministério da Educação, 2017). In preschool, the Curriculum Guidelines for Early Childhood Education emphasize environments that value exploration, movement and play (Direção Geral da Educação, 2016).

Forest School is a long-term, learner-centred process that supports holistic development through regular, supported engagement in natural settings. Evidence from the UK and Nordic contexts suggests gains in motivation, social relations, and self-regulation, with specific benefits for pupils who experience barriers to participation (O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Waite, Bølling, & Mygind, 2016; Knight, 2020). Systematic reviews on outdoor learning also indicate positive associations with well-being and socio-emotional outcomes (Becker et al., 2017; Mygind, Bølling, & Mygind, 2019).

For migrant children and those with special educational needs, inclusive play environments can reduce linguistic and social barriers by expanding the repertoire of communicative resources (such as gestures, shared actions, and materials) and by offering sensory-rich opportunities for regulation



For migrant children and those with special educational needs, inclusive play environments can reduce linguistic and social barriers by expanding the repertoire of communicative resources (such as gestures, shared actions, and materials) and by offering sensory-rich opportunities for regulation (Harwood & Collier, 2019; Nedovic & Morrissey, 2019). Forest School sessions, with their emphasis on child-led activities, risk-benefit assessments, and collaborative problem-solving, create affordances for participation and belonging that may be less accessible in conventional classroom routines (O'Brien & Murray, 2015; Knight, 2020).

The introduction of these practices typically follows a phased approach, allowing educators and children to adapt to new routines and expectations gradually. This progression is crucial when interpreting outcomes over time, as improvements in participation, well-being, and academic performance often emerge only after the new practices have become fully integrated into the school's culture.

The School Cluster serves increasingly diverse communities, including migrant families and pupils with identified special educational needs (SEN). In the 2024/25 school year, the School Cluster enrolled 1,156 students, including approximately 60 to 70 with special educational needs. In this context, the educational project's emphasis on the right to play and on outdoor learning is not only pedagogically aligned with national and international frameworks but also strategically targeted to address equity concerns. The research, therefore, explores how Forest School pedagogy functions as a mechanism for inclusion by expanding opportunities for engagement, collaboration, and success—dimensions that conventional metrics may not immediately capture. (Becker et al., 2017; Mygind, Bølling, & Mygind, 2019).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative case study design, following Stake's (1995) approach, which emphasises the in-depth understanding of a specific educational context and the dynamics within it. The central aim was to examine how the Forest School approach is implemented in a Portuguese educational setting and how it contributes to three key dimensions: children's right to play, children's well-being, and the inclusion of all pupils' rights to inclusion. To address these aims, a strategy of method-



Photo credit: AE Alvide

ological triangulation was employed (Denzin, 2012), combining three main techniques: participant observation in natural settings, semi-structured interviews with educational agents, and analysis of quantitative indicators from InfoEscolas, the Ministry of Education's portal.

Participant observations were conducted across three sessions, each lasting approximately two hours, involving preschool, first-cycle, and second-cycle groups (comprising 18–25 children per class, aged between 5 and 12 years old). A structured observation grid, based on principles of naturalistic observation (Angrosino, 2009), was used to record levels of engagement, peer interactions, indicators of socio-emotional development (initiative, self-regulation, empathy), and types of play and activity (symbolic, constructive, exploratory, cooperative). The use of this grid was directly linked to the research objective of understanding how play in natural settings fosters active involvement, emotional regulation, and collaborative learning. Field notes were enriched with narrative descriptions of significant episodes, such as conflict resolution, the participation of children with special educational needs (SEN), or spontaneous leadership among peers—providing concrete evidence of the inclusive potential of the outdoor environment.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with six professionals (three preschool educators, two 1st cycle teachers and one 2nd cycle teacher), each lasting between 20 and 30 minutes. The interview guide adhered to the principles of qualitative interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). It included open-ended questions on three key aspects aligned with the study's aims: (a) how children engage and stay motivated during outdoor sessions, (b) perceived changes in behaviour, well-being, and socialisation, and (c) the contribution of outdoor play to the inclusion of migrant pupils and those with SEN. This technique was essential to understand professional perspectives on the pedagogical and inclusive effectiveness of the Forest School model. All interviews were conducted in Portuguese, summarised in detailed field notes, and anonymised to ensure confidentiality.

The documentary analysis focused on the School Cluster's Educational Project (2022–2025), from which excerpts relating to play, inclusion, and sustainability were identified and coded. This step was crucial to link the institutional vision and strategy with the observed practices, addressing the research objective of assessing how the school's strategic orientation legitimises and supports the valuing of play as a child's right.

For the quantitative dimension, statistical indicators were collected from the Ministry of Education's Info Escolas portal for the years 2020 to 2023, covering school success rates, grade retention, attendance, and disciplinary measures. These data provided a complementary statistical perspective, allowing trends in academic performance and behaviour to be examined in relation to the progressive implementation of the Forest School model.

Data treatment and analysis followed an inductive logic. Qualitative data from observations and interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), generating codes such as "engagement," "resilience," "autonomy," and "inclusion," which were subsequently grouped into broader categories aligned with the research aims. Documentary data were analysed through categorical coding, highlighting convergences between strategic orientations and observed practices. Quantitative data from InfoEscolas were processed through descriptive statistics (percentages and year-on-year variation) and presented in tables and graphs to illustrate trends. A process of data triangulation (Denzin, 2012) was applied, allowing convergences to be identified—for example, the perception of greater well-being reported by teachers corresponded to a reduction in disciplinary incidents—as well as divergences, such as dimensions visible in daily practice that are not yet reflected in official indicators.

"The forest that never stops" serves as a portrait of a dynamic school community, where learning and growth emerge through play, supported by freedom, respect, and a sense of hope.

Finally, the study adhered to the ethical principles of research with children. Informed consent was obtained from staff and families, and participants' anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. Observations took place in natural settings, with non-intrusive procedures designed to safeguard children's privacy and well-being.

Results

The results highlight the role of Forest School pedagogy in fostering inclusive play, social interaction, and engagement for all children, with particular impact on migrant pupils and those with special educational needs.

Observational Findings: Across the three observed sessions, children demonstrated high levels of engagement, concentration, and joy. Outdoor play stimulated spontaneous peer collaboration, as older pupils frequently assisted younger ones, and mixed-age groups naturally formed around construction activities, such as building shelters or crafting objects from natural materials. The unstructured

Figure 1 | **Success rate in first cycle**

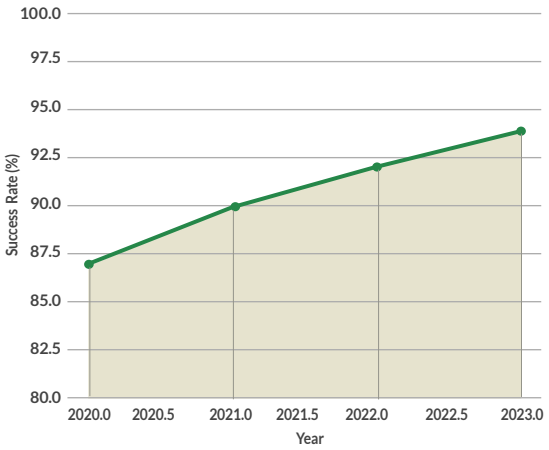
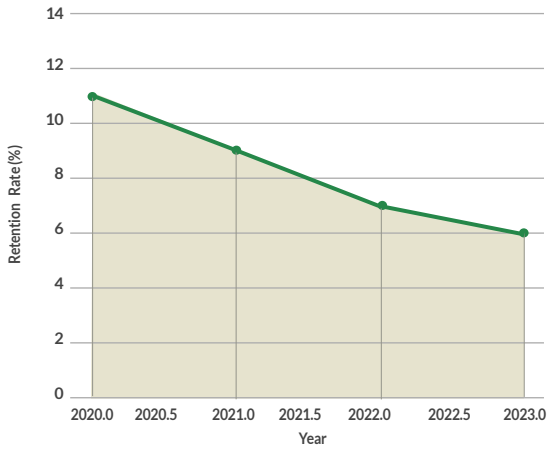


Figure 2 | **Retention rate in second cycle**



environment reduced performance pressure, enabling children with SEN or those with limited Portuguese proficiency to participate on equal terms. Episodes of conflict resolution were often managed independently by the children, illustrating gains in self-regulation and resilience. Creativity was a recurrent feature, with symbolic play, imaginative storytelling, and exploratory activities enriching the social and emotional climate.

Testimonies from Professionals: Teachers and educators consistently reported improvements in emotional well-being and behaviour. Children with histories of anxiety, trauma, or behavioural difficulties appeared calmer and more focused in the forest setting. One teacher noted: "Out here, even children who usually struggle indoors find something that captures their attention and holds it for a long time." Educators also emphasised that the outdoor space promoted a stronger sense of belonging, as the absence of rigid structures allowed every child to contribute in their own way. The inclusive dimension was particularly valued: nonverbal communication, symbolic play, and peer support facilitated the integration of migrant pupils and children with SEN, reducing the risk of isolation or stigmatisation.

Academic Indicators and Well-being: Data from the InfoEscolas portal, spanning 2020-2023, reveal a positive trend in school performance, coinciding with the progressive implementation of the Forest School approach. Success rates in the first cycle rose from 87% to 94%, while retention in the second cycle decreased from 11% to 6%. Attendance improved, with fewer unjustified absences, and disciplinary incidents were significantly reduced. Although causality cannot be established, the temporal overlap with the Forest School initiative is notable. Educators reinforced this perception, observing increased motivation, improved peer relationships, greater self-esteem, and stronger readiness to learn—factors widely recognised in the literature as predictors of educational success, particularly in contexts of social and cultural diversity (Figures 1 and 2).

Synthesis of Findings: Taken together, the results suggest that the Forest School approach creates an inclusive and supportive learning environment that benefits children academically, socially, and emotionally. Observations document collaborative and creative engagement, professional testimonies highlight gains in well-being and belonging, and InfoEscolas data confirm gradual improvements in school performance and behaviour. The convergence of these findings illustrates the potential of outdoor pedagogy to align equity, inclusion, and educational success in a culturally and socioeconomically diverse School Cluster.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the importance of rethinking school spaces and schedules in response to children's genuine needs. The evidence suggests that Forest School pedagogy promotes inclusive play in natural settings, socio-emotional development, and overall well-being, with particular benefits for migrant children and those with special educational needs. Observations documented high levels of engagement and creativity, while teachers reported visible improvements in children's confidence, self-regulation, and sense of belonging. These qualitative findings converge with national school data, which revealed gradual improvements in academic

success, reductions in grade retention, and fewer disciplinary incidents.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that Forest School practice represents a form of pedagogical innovation that combines educational quality with equity. By recognising play as a right (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013) and nature as an ally of learning (Louv, 2005), outdoor pedagogy fosters a model of education that is more humane, open, and democratic. This approach reduces performance pressure, enables nonverbal and symbolic forms of communication, and creates opportunities for all children to engage, collaborate, and succeed (Knight, 2013; Piorski, 2016).

The experience also shows that it is possible to align curriculum, inclusion, and sustainability even in urban and socially complex settings. However, its success depends on several enabling conditions: committed leadership to sustain innovation, cohesive teams that share a child-centred vision, continuous professional development to equip teachers with skills for outdoor pedagogy, and the integration of such practices into institutional strategies (Becker et al., 2017; Mygind, Bølling, & Mygind, 2019).

Finally, this study contributes to the broader debate on the role of outdoor learning in promoting equity. While improvements in academic indicators are encouraging, it is equally important to value outcomes that are less easily captured by conventional metrics, such as resilience, social skills, and children's subjective well-being (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Amicone et al., 2018). Future research could further explore how these dimensions evolve across cohorts and how policy frameworks might better support schools in embedding play and nature at the heart of their mission.

"The forest that never stops" serves as a portrait of a dynamic school community, where learning and growth emerge through play, supported by freedom, respect, and a sense of hope.

References

Amicone, G., Lavinio, A., De Luca, R., Macaluso, E., & D'Angiulli, A. (2018). Green breaks: The restorative effect of the school environment's green areas on children's cognitive performance. *Frontiers in Psychology,* 9, 1579. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01579

Angrosino, M. (2009). *Doing ethnographic and observational research.* SAGE.

Becker, C., Lauterbach, G., Spengler, S., Dettweiler, U., & Mess, F. (2017). Effects of regular classes in outdoor education settings: A systematic review on students' learning, social and health dimensions.*International Journal of Environmental Research and P*ublic Health, 14(5), 485. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14050485

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2013). General comment No. 17 on Article 31:*The right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts.* United Nations.https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/780972

Council of the European Union. (2019). *Council Recommendation of 22 May 2019 on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems* (2019/C 189/02). Official Journal of the European Union.

Denzin, N. K. (2012). Triangulation 2.0. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research,* 6(2), 80–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/1558689812437186

Direção-Geral da Educação. (2016). *Orientações curriculares para a educação pré-escolar.* Ministério da Educação.

Gill, T. (2014). The benefits of children's engagement with nature: A systematic literature review. *Children, Youth and Environments,* 24(2), 10–34. https://doi.org/10.7721/chilyoutenvi.24.2.0010

Harwood, D., & Collier, D. R. (2019). Playful pedagogies, play narratives and play spaces. *Early Child Development and Care,* 189(7), 1137–1149. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2017.1372757

Knight, S. (2013). F*orest school and outdoor learning in the early years.* SAGE.

Knight, S. (2020). *Forest School in practice for all ages.* SAGE.

Kvale, S., & Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the craft of qualitative research interviewing* (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Louv, R. (2005). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder.* Algonquin Books.

Ministério da Educação (2017). *Perfil dos alunos à saída da escolaridade obrigatória.*Ministério da Educação.

Ministério da Educação (2024). *InfoEscolas – A. School Cluster.* https://infoescolas.mec.pt/

Mygind, L., Bølling, M., & Mygind, E. (2019). Bridging gaps between school and nature? A case study of outdoor education practices in Danish schools. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning,* 19(3), 227–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/14729679.2018.1508356

Nedovic, S., & Morrissey, A. (2019). Calm and active learning: Young children's play in outdoor learning environments. *Learning Environments Research,* 16(2), 281–295. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10984-013-9127-9

O'Brien, L., & Murray, R. (2015). Forest school: Evidence of impact on young children in England. *Forest School Association.*

Piorski, G. (2016). Brinquedos do chão: A natureza, o imaginário e o brincar. Peirópolis.

República Portuguesa. (2018a). *Decreto-Lei n.º 54/2018: Educação inclusiva. Diário da*

República, 1.ª série — N.º 129.

República Portuguesa. (2018b). *Decreto-Lei n.º 55/2018: Currículo dos ensinos básico e secundário.* Diário da República, 1.ª série — N.º 129.

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research.* SAGE.

UN General Assembly. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* United Nations. https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child

Waite, S., Bølling, M., & Mygind, E. (2016). Policy and practice in outdoor learning: International perspectives. *Education* 3-13, 44(5), 451–465. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2016.1169188

PLAY AND HUMOUR

Transforming Children's Lives Through Cultural Education in the Philippines.

Michael Dietrich, Mia Rohrbach

This field report explores how international cultural collaborations, utilising circus, creativity, and inclusion, can fulfil children's right to play and serve as a force for hope and resilience.



In a world continually fractured by inequality, poverty, and social division, the universal right of every child to rest, play, and participate in culture assumes an urgent new significance. Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child isn't just policy—it is a call to action. The right for all children to access leisure and creative expression must transcend tokenism, driving inclusive transformation where it is needed most. Today, participatory cultural projects that prioritise play not only dismantle barriers but cultivate spaces for healing, confidence, and connection.

The ongoing international collaboration between "Clowns Without Borders Germany" and "maninoy Patenschaft Philippinen e.V." has emerged as a beacon for what holistic, rights-based cultural education can achieve. Their project, 'Circus des Bais' (2025), in the Philippines, demonstrates how humour and play—universal languages—can foster resilience, igniting new hope for children living at society's margins. During a 10-day project trip in January 2025, which included 15 clown shows and 12 workshops held in schools, therapy centres, orphanages, and public places, the programme reached over 3,000 children and adults across three islands in the Philippines: Negros, Leyte, and Cebu. This field report shares valuable insights from that project trip.

Setting the Philippine Context: Challenges for Childhood and Play

Nearly one in four Filipinos lives below the poverty line. For millions, natural disasters like typhoons, floods, and earthquakes compound already dire circumstances, pushing families from rural communities into overcrowded urban slums. Despite periods of economic growth, the chasm between the rich and the poor continues to widen, and



Photo Credit: Clara Sachs



Photo Credit: Clara Sachs

children bear the brunt: deprived not only of adequate education but also of the vital cultural opportunities essential to nurturing creativity, self-expression, and emotional well-being.

Children from low-income families rarely have time or access to arts workshops, playgrounds, or the type of free-spirited play that sparks development and deepens social bonds. Often, their school experience is reduced to rote learning under strained institutions, with few chances for meaningful cultural engagement. In this landscape, "maninoy Patenschaft Philippinen e.V." stands as a tireless champion for marginalised groups: girls, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and children in remote or forgotten areas. Since its founding in 2008, maninoy has woven together educational sponsorships, school partnerships, and local self-help initiatives.

Circus de Bais: A Vision Beyond Entertainment

When Michael and Mario Dietrich, founders of maninoy, first planted the seeds of 'Circus de Bais' back in 2009, their ambition wasn't simply spectacle—it was transformation. In the garden of a social housing estate in Bais City, they brought together 25 sponsored children to craft a 15-minute performance with juggling, acrobatics, and magic. This small act—children aged five to sixteen captivating a local crowd—became the springboard for a project that would expand from the fringes of Negros Oriental province to schools and communities across the Philippines.

'Circus de Bais' soon drew the interest of "Clowns Without Borders Germany," renowned for sending clowns, musicians, and performers into crisis zones. Their mission is direct yet profound: using humour to build strength and courage in children, fortifying the spirit in places where trauma has silenced joy. By 2025, the collaborative project had blossomed into a multidisciplinary effort, blending performances and workshops for thousands of children and their caregivers. Crucially, it didn't just parachute in international experts—local professionals and sponsored children increasingly took leadership roles, ensuring that the impact of each workshop endured long after the clowns moved on.

Scaling Impact: 2025 Collaboration in Action

January 2025 marked a milestone for the project. Drawing from sixteen years of deep connections in the Philippines, maninoy and Clowns Without Borders orchestrated a



whirlwind ten days on three islands—Negros, Leyte, and Cebu. The numbers are remarkable: more than 3,000 children and adults reached, fifteen clown shows, and twelve immersive workshops held in schools, therapy centres, orphanages, and public venues.

What sets this initiative apart is its philosophy: every audience is unique, every child matters, and each place deserves individualised attention. Workshops and performances aren't merely entertainment; they are experiential journeys that invite children to co-create, experiment, and—most importantly—to laugh and play together. Such moments forge social bonds, ignite creativity, and awaken a sense of belonging in those who are often excluded.

Inclusion at the Heart: Reaching Every Child

True inclusion means meeting every child exactly where they are. A ground-breaking aspect of Circus de Bais was its concerted focus on children with disabilities. In partnership with J.E.S.U.S. Kids Therapy Centre in Ormoc and the SPED Integrated School, organisers built inclusive formats where children of all abilities shared the stage—clowning, playing, and inventing new routines together.

Physical barriers dissolved, most powerfully by the play tunnel: a symbolic passageway for everyone, a space designed for collective joy rather than separation. Whether through smooth silks, floating soap bubbles, or silent pantomime, fears of contact faded as children discovered their individuality and pride. The approach required educators to model sensitivity and trust. In one striking instance, a boy with autism, who initially stood shyly in a corner at the beginning of a performance, eventually joined in through the clowns' gentle and sensitive engagement, and began juggling with a clown in a circle alongside other children. This moment highlighted the transformative power of trust, gentle encouragement and inclusive play in encouraging participation and growth.

Community Networks: Creating Local Sustainability

Lasting change demands local roots. Many Philippine schools are crowded, underfunded, and not equipped to serve children with special needs. Often, children are compelled to drop out of school altogether to help support their families. In this context, play and cultural activities offer release from constant pressure—a refuge where expression is prized over performance, and language no longer limits participation.

Circus de Bais harnessed the power of local partner-



Photo Credit: Clara Sachs





ships. Over sixteen years, maninoy's network of dedicated board members, educators, and families has grown to encompass schools, therapy centres, social projects, and sponsor families on several islands. These relationships made it possible to select venues and methods thoughtfully, allowing for sensitive communication and the documentation of impact. Local project coordinators played pivotal roles in organising workshops, monitoring impact, and training other staff in circus and play education, sowing the seeds for replication and growth.

Humour: Bridging Divides

As the team journeyed across islands and communities, laughter became an ever-present companion. Whether under the shade of a school roof, out in bustling public squares, or within the confines of therapeutic centres, humour bridged divides. Through playful improvisation, expressive movement, and kind gestures, clowns encouraged children—and adults—to lower their guard and share in everyday enjoyment. These moments, sometimes sparked by mishaps (such as a girl tripping on soap bubbles and becoming the show's star) or spontaneous audience requests, exemplified the clown as a resilient role model. Stumbling and getting back up, embracing mistakes, and finding joy in imperfection sent a powerful message about courage, creativity, and dignity.

Multiplying Impact: Training and Professional Engagement

Expanding influence was always a goal. During Autism Awareness Month, four German staff members participated in a major conference in the Philippines, sharing insights and methods with educators, professionals, and parents. The response was overwhelming: educators questioned, learned, and recorded strategies for inclusive play, noting the power of flexible rules, sensory-rich activities, and role fluidity in breaking down entrenched gender or ability stereotypes.

Workshops emphasised the importance of letting children set the pace, recognising strengths over weaknesses, and scaffolding new opportunities for participation. For example, providing a variety of juggling materials, adapting games based on sensed energies, and ensuring all children had a turn at leading or shaping rules. Adults routinely joined workshops alongside children, rediscovering connections and





kinship through circus games. Several conference participants expressed keen interest in further training or replicating similar projects in new regions, evidence of the multiplying effect of experiential, creative education.

Transforming Practice: New Models in Social Work and Education

Circus de Bais isn't just an event, but a practice—a new paradigm for education, social work, and even international development. Observed effects were tangible: countless smiles, spontaneous re-enactments at school festivals, and an outpouring of requests for repeat visits and more workshops. For social workers and teachers alike, the model provided a new perspective on play-based education and its potential in social work and international cooperation. The project emphasised the importance of free play as a space where skills can develop without judgment, encouraging creativity, self-confidence, and social connection. It shifted attitudes, enabling professionals to rethink the role of play, improvisation, and humour—not only for children in precarious situations but as an essential component of progressive, rights-based development.

From a research perspective, this project embodies transformative education, with lessons for postcolonial development practice: direct participation, radical inclusion, and a recognition of laughter not as luxury, but as an elemental force of change.

Looking Forward: Continuing the Journey

Circus de Bais has left indelible marks. In remote mountain villages, children were brought by project coordinators to participate in workshops in Bais City, where they experienced public performances and group play for the first time. A coordinator observed marked changes: children who had participated in previous years became visibly more curious, bold, and self-confident—both as spectators and as active creators.

The famous red suitcase—loaded with props, games, and tools—will continue its journey. With deep need and untapped potential, both Clowns Without Borders and maninoy prepare for future missions and ongoing sponsorships. Their partnership shows that culture, play, and humour can restore dignity, foster joy, and open new prospects for children growing up amidst adversity. Above all, it affirms: cultural education is a human right, and laughter is the transformative force that can build bridges where words and resources fall short.



Photo credit: Mae Murray Foundation



LEARNING FROM LIVED EXPERIENCE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:

BUILDING INCLUSIVE PLAY ENVIRONMENTS FOR EVERY CHILD

Marguerite Hunter Blair OBE, and Alix Crawford

This position paper argues that to create play opportunities for every child, we need to learn from the experiences of those with different and complex needs. This way, all children can enjoy their right to play.

Playing is an innate way in which children reach out to be included. It allows for a range of interactions, including social and physical and fosters a sense of belonging. Creating conditions for children to be included is widely recognised as important for their health, well-being, and development. However, when we think about exclusion, and in particular the exclusion of disabled children from everyday activities in everyday environments that many of us take for granted, our own lived experience can become the biggest barrier. This article aims to demonstrate that the most effective way to move from a well-intentioned to a well-designed approach to creating play opportunities for every child is by learning from the lived experiences of those with varied and complex needs, so that every child can realise both their right and their need to play.

For many disabled children, feelings and experiences of exclusion can be reinforced by multiple barriers, impacting the formation of friendships and the quality of their play experiences. It is rare for their expertise and lived experience to be used in developing enabling and inclusive local environments. Research repeatedly shows that barriers to play, which all children can experience, are increased by the intersections between disability, poverty, disadvantage, and environment (Play Scotland, 2023)

Last year, Dr Jenny Wood, in her article 'Shaping a Scotland for Play', published in the December 2024 issue of The Play Rights magazine (Wood, 2024), highlighted the clear shift in Scotland from policy statements to meaningful action. Children are drawing on their lived experiences to participate in planning and shaping their local environments actively. As Scotland's legal and policy framework for play continues to evolve, it is essential that overcoming the exclusion of disabled children is at the heart of these actions. Incorporating the lived experiences of disabled children is key to their successful implementation and to establishing a culture of everyday accountability for children's rights.

The case for culture change

Since July 2024, all children in Scotland have a legal right to play. As the first country in the world to incorporate the UNCRC into domestic law, Scotland aims to use this law to change the culture surrounding children's rights (Scottish Government, 2024).



Playing with friends improves children's health and wellbeing.

This means moving from a system where rights of children are often overlooked to one where they are proactively protected and upheld.

This enables all articles, including those most relevant to play (such as articles 12, 15, 23 and 31), to be fully considered not just in play policy, but across all national and local policies. This cultural shift in how children are perceived and treated within public services and society should have a significant impact on the provision of participation opportunities, in an increasing range of environments for disabled children. It is incumbent on all involved to use their circle of influence to ensure that every child is included, particularly those with more complex needs. The broadest range of play opportunities must consider individual learning, physical or sensory requirements and demonstrate understanding of the variety of circumstances, cultures, or components thereof, such as deaf culture and neurodivergence, that children experience. This focus on culture shift is further supported by the legal right of children to participate in Play Sufficiency (Scottish Government, 2023) reports which assess the quality, quantity and accessibility of outdoor play opportunities. The process is well underway across Scotland as local authorities consult with children on their lived experiences, map and publish their Play Sufficiency findings, and update children and young people on how their evidence has influenced local development plans. It is supported by National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) (Scottish Government, 2023) which requires new, replacement or improved play provision to be inclusive and accessible for disabled children.

"An Inclusive Play Space provides a barrier-free environment, with supporting infrastructure, which meets the wide and varying play needs of every child. Disabled children and non-disabled children will enjoy high levels of participation opportunities, equally rich in play value."

(Children's Play Policy Forum & Play Safety Forum, 2022)

SCOTLAND'S PLAY VISION STATEMENT AND ACTION PLAN 2025-2030



Play Theory of Change

This accessible approach to play environments for every child is supported by the 'Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025-2030' (Scottish Government, 2025), which builds on the original 'Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision' (Scottish Government, 2013). The vision is for: "Every child to be able to play across all stages and aspects of their life to support their social development, resilience, language and communication development, health, physical and mental wellbeing." (Scottish Government, 2025). It includes a Play Theory of Change (Scottish Government, 2025), which identifies 'place' as one of three primary drivers that can create: "free, accessible, inclusive and safe public play spaces, developed in consultation with children and families' so that 'we live in places that offer safe, welcoming and inclusive play opportunities for all children." (Scottish Government, 2025)

The definition of play in the Action Plan is drawn from UNCRC General Comment 17, which describes play as an activity freely chosen and directed by the child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). The Action Plan also recognises that "barriers to play will be experienced by all children in different ways and at different times". It may not always be a lack of play opportunities alone, but could also be a lack of key infrastructure, such as accessible parking or toileting provision. The Action Plan supports the definitions of inclusive and accessible play in 'Including Disabled Children in Play Provision' (Children's Play Policy Forum & Play Safety Forum, 2022) and recognises the very real constraints experienced by children.

"An Accessible Play Space is a space which is barrier-free, allows users access to move around the space and offers participation opportunities for a range of differing abilities. Not every child of every ability will be able to actively use everything within an accessible play space."

(Children's Play Policy Forum & Play Safety Forum, 2022)



Challenging play is vital for children's development.

Including Disabled Children in Play Provision

The joint position statement of the UK Children's Play Policy Forum and UK Play Safety Forum was produced by a subgroup that included the invaluable contribution of the Mae Murray Foundation, a lived experience-led charity in Northern Ireland. The joint statement calls for high-value play opportunities for every child and sets the agreed definition of 'inclusive' and 'accessible' play spaces.

It is understood that while there will always be limited capital and revenue budgets for children's play facilities, there is no expectation that every play space can meet the inclusive definition. However, as the joint position statement suggests, the ambition to ensure the right of every child to high-value play opportunities means 'the strategic provision of truly inclusive play spaces, at well-chosen destination sites is likely to be a key feature of a reasonable response to legislation'. Conducting local assessments informs strategic decision-making and planning about where and how to target investments. In smaller play spaces, there should be a clear expectation that the designs meet the accessible definition as a minimum. Assessments should value lived experience, maximise coproduction, and involve local children and families directly in the design process.

The exemplar work carried out by the Mae Murray Foundation, is an illustration of such co-production and co-design. Their first-hand experience, combined with strong partnerships with play leaders and beach operators, has led to the creation of inclusive environment models, which are being copied around the world (Mae Murray Foundation, 2023), as the following section illustrates.



Accessible play opportunities where children can spend time with friends are essential.



The seaside is a high-quality outdoor play opportunity, that everyone should be able to experience.

Case Study: Inclusive Beach Environments

Most people can recount childhood memories of growing up playing or building sandcastles at the beach, yet not every child has this experience. A beach operator in Northern Ireland was delighted to have installed a wheelchair-accessible viewpoint, offering disabled children a superb view of beach activities that they could previously enjoy. This illustrates the Social Model of Disability, where it is the environment that disables the person. The Mae Murray Foundation contacted the beach operators, and they collaborated to create fully inclusive beach environments.

Two years on, Ben is laughing as he emerges from the waves on a sit-down surfboard. "I didn't know the sea was salty!" At sixteen, this is Ben's first time on a beach since he was two years old, when his mother was able to carry him. He had never been in the seawater. The beach behind him buzzes with life, with walkways to raised sand tables with sandcastle masterpieces underway, and people of all ages and abilities chatting and having fun together. A group of children are flying kites, some standing and some from their beach wheelchairs. Further along the beach, there is seated volleyball and offshore adaptive paddleboarding. Rather than a viewing point, this is what inclusion looks like in the beach environment.

Beach operators around the world are starting to replicate the Mae Murray Foundation inclusive beach model by accessing the free guide, 'ADAPT my Beach' (Mae Murray Foundation, 2023; O'Kane, et al., 2024). The publication has a clear framework, designed and co-produced by those with lived experience of exclusion. ADAPT my Beach is just one in a suite of publications based on the ADAPT Framework, with ADAPT my Play (Mae Murray Foundation & PlayBoard NI, 2024) co-produced by children themselves, adhering to the agreed definition of an inclusive play space.

ADAPT FRAMEWORK

ACCESS
Accessible design and development

DIGNITY
Facilities and amenities for all

ALL-ABILITY
Resources for all abilities

PARTICIPATION
Opportunities for everyone to take part

TRANSFORMATION
Bringing about long-term change



Getting it Right for Play

Local authorities play a key role in upholding the right to play by planning and providing quality play opportunities, as well as engaging with children in the development and delivery of play spaces. The revised 'Getting it Right for Play Toolkit (2025)' (Play Scotland, 2025) reflects Scotland's strengthened commitment to children's right to play and has been designed by Play Scotland to support local authorities in assessing the quantity, quality, accessibility, and inclusivity of outdoor play spaces.

The Toolkit has been shaped by extensive engagement with families, communities, and organisations, with a strong focus on the voices and lived experiences of children and young people with additional support needs. The guidance acknowledges the specific needs and barriers faced by specific groups of children and provides local authorities and community groups with practical assessment tools to help them evaluate and improve the design and provision of local play spaces. The result is that children of all ages, disabled and non-disabled, can feel safe and confident playing outside.

The definition of play in the Action Plan is drawn from UNCRC General Comment 17, which describes play as an activity freely chosen and directed by the child (UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). The Action Plan also recognises that "barriers to play will be experienced by all children in different ways and at different times". It may not always be a lack of play opportunities alone, but could also be a lack of key infrastructure, such as accessible parking or toileting provision. The Action Plan supports the definitions of inclusive and accessible play in 'Including Disabled Children in Play Provision' (Children's Play Policy Forum & Play Safety Forum, 2022) and recognises the very real constraints experienced by children.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE BEACH – A 10 STEP GUIDE
(MAE MURRAY FOUNDATION, 2023, MAY)

There are 10 key steps. The order of these steps may vary depending on the individual circumstances and some may run concurrently:

STEP1
Identify and evaluate beach site

STEP2
Draw up a realistic budget

STEP3
Create a formal collaboration or partnership

STEP4
Consider the staffing you need

STEP5
Develop and deliver Inclusive beach training

STEP6
Put in place an online pre-booking system

STEP7
Be fully aware of risk and how to mitigate

STEP8
Plan and implement ongoing maintenance and servicing

STEP9
Gather feedback and review need

STEP10
Deliver effective inclusive Beach management, season by season

"Designing for play means listening to those who live with its absence."

'Designing for play means listening to those who live with its absence.' (Professor Sukanya Krishnamurthy Trustee of Play Scotland (2019-2025) and Personal Chair in Geographies of Children and Young People at the School of GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh)

Conclusion

Both in Scotland and in Northern Ireland, we have developed a range of tools and frameworks for play to ensure that not just eighty per cent, not just ninety-six per cent, but one hundred per cent of our children and young people can experience everyday play opportunities. The answer to the question –'HOW can we include all children?' is simpler than our own lived experience permits us to realise. By listening to and learning from children with complex needs and their families, inclusive play spaces can be co-produced in even the most challenging environments, resulting in play experiences that benefit everyone.

References

Children's Play Policy Forum & Play Safety Forum. (2022). *Including disabled children in play provision. Children's Play Policy Forum.*

Mae Murray Foundation & PlayBoard NI. (2024). Adapt *My Play: Guide and Toolkit.* Belfast: Mae Murray Foundation & PlayBoard NI. Retrieved 2025, from https://www.maemurrayfoundation.org/adapt-my-play/

Mae Murray Foundation. (2023, May). *Adapt My Beach*. Retrieved from Mae Murray Foundation : https://www.maemurrayfoundation.org/adapt-my-beach/

O'Kane, N; Cleland, C L; Kerr, C; McConnell, K; Daly-Lynn, J; Hoeritzauer, F; Jones, S M; Tate, C; Glover, S; Corr, R; Hunter, R F (2024). *Mae Murray Foundation Inclusive Beach Programme: Impact Report.* Belfast: Mae Murray Foundation. Retrieved 2025, from https://www.groundswelluk.org/Filestore/Mae%20Murray%20Foundation%20Inclusive%20Beaches%20Impact%20Report_compressed.pdf

Play Scotland (2023). The State of Play in Scotland. Edinburgh: Play Scotland

Play Scotland. (2025, July). *Getting it right for play:* A Toolkit to Assess and Improve Play Opportunities (2025 Revised Version). Retrieved from Play Scotland: https://www.playscotland.org/resources/getting-it-right-for-play-2025-revised-version/

Scottish Government. (2013). *Play Strategy for Scotland: Our Vision.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. (2023). *National Planning Framework 4*. Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. (2023). *The Town and Country Planning (Play Sufficiency Assessment) (Scotland) Regulations 2023.* Retrieved from legislation.gov.uk: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2023/97/made

Scottish Government. (2024). UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024. Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Scottish Government. (2025). *Play Vision Statement and Action Plan 2025-2030.* Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. (2013). *General comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (Article 31).* United Nations. Retrieved from https://cypcs.org.uk/wpcypcs/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/General-Comment-17.pdf

Wood, J. (2024, December). Shaping a Scotland for Play. *Play Rights Magazine(1), pp. 10-17.* Retrieved from https://issuu.com/ipaworld/docs/play_rights_online-low_res-issuu





Play slide co-created with the community.
Photo credit: Dream Networks



DECOLONISING PLAY SPACES IN AFRICA:

Designing for Inclusive and Plural Worlds of Play

Marie Williams

Over the past 10 years, I have had the privilege of co-designing and building sustainable play spaces in underserved communities in the UK and East Africa. Dream Networks is a social enterprise that collaborates with businesses and communities to co-design culturally relevant and inclusive play spaces. My experience with children who have been marginalised based on their economic

background or abilities, and with communities ready to take collective action to provide children with the joy of play, has led me to a distinct realisation: to reimagine a more just and inclusive world of play, we must first dismantle the colonial legacies and systems of oppression that continue to shape who has access to outdoor play in urban environments.

One of the main reasons I chose to conduct my UCL doctoral research in Kenya was the realisation that knowledge about play—how children play, what they play with, and play practices—has been viewed through a limited lens. Literature on play is primarily based on Western notions of play, mainly derived from European cultures, which have shaped a homogeneous, standardised view of play centred on planned play provision, led by top-down, institutional plans that fail to include communities in decision-making. This Western lens is part of a broader Eurocentric worldview stimulated by colonialisation, one that universalises European epistemologies (ways of knowing), seeing and being in our world (Escobar, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Santos, 2016).

In the low-income, postcolonial community of Kitengela, children and their caregivers were excluded from shaping the plans and policies that shape their environment and govern who can access outdoor play spaces. These exclusions are rooted in the ethnic and class hierarchies introduced through colonisation (Derr et al., 2018; Escobar, 2018; Miraftab, 2009) and are reinforced by the legacies of modernity and capitalism (Mbembe, 2017; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013). However, such exclusions are not limited to post-colonised nations (Mignolo, 2011; Walsh, 2018). This is particularly urgent in formerly colonised countries such as Kenya, where colonial control systems have marginalised local and indigenous cultural practices (Escobar, 2018) and privatised public land in pursuit of economic growth (Manji, 2020). Decolonising play emphasises the re-centring of local knowledge and experiences in the design and provision of outdoor play spaces.

Decolonising Play is a verb

Decolonising play is a verb—an action we as play practitioners must consciously and actively take to produce a more inclusive future. Understanding how to decolonise play spaces is a "praxis of undoing and redoing" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 120), calling on us to recognise and delink from entrenched systems of oppression. This involves uncovering the local cultural practices that shape play and collaborating with communities to reclaim and reconstruct play based on local ways of knowing, seeing, and doing (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). In doing so, we can create multiple worlds of play that suggest ways to produce play without relying on exclusionary modes of production and provide



Photo Credit: Dream Networks

Children playing with sticks, the ground and a bottle in Kitengela town. Children rolling tyres and running in the background.



Five steps to decolonising play by Dream Networks

more diverse ways of encountering and cultivating play.

Below are ways to delink, uncover, reimagine and amplify plural worlds of play. Designing for plural worlds of play aligns with Escobar's call for producing a more equitable and just future through adopting pluriversal design practices that elevate the multiple ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing), and ways of seeing (Escobar, 2018) that inform play.

Moving towards Plural Worlds of Play

1. Stop assuming formal plans are needed to create change and connect with communities who are often marginalised in decision-making in our public realm.
2. Produce equitable access to play by taking small, bold steps to delink from systems of power that marginalise children based on their class, race, and ethnicity.
3. Be ready to protect play spaces produced based on children's lived experience. They may not always appear beautiful in adults' eyes, but they will be significant and playful in children's lives.
4. Amplify play cultures embedded in historical and evolving modern practices such as improvised, intergenerational, relational forms of play that already exist and flourish despite economic and political constraints.
5. Work with communities to deconstruct playground designs and reconstruct them with materials that enable more children to play.

Delink- How Colonial Legacies have Shaped Spatial Injustice

In 2020, during the first year of my doctoral research, I travelled to Kitengela town, Kenya, to learn how children and communities exercise their right to play and what prevents them from playing outside. Kitengela is a rapidly growing municipality where two worlds intertwine: children live in a world of informality, poverty, and precarity alongside one marked by trade and construction. In 2013, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) published General Comment No. 17, recognising that the right to play is affected by poverty. It explicitly states: "Children living in poor conditions frequently suffer multiple, cumulative violations of their rights, which inhibit their ability to enjoy article 31 rights and restrict their opportunities to benefit from their rights to rest, leisure and play" (UNCRC, 2013, para. 34). As of 2022, more than 20 million people in Kenya (40% of the population) lived below the national poverty line, and 37% of children in urban areas experienced poverty (UNICEF, 2023).

In cities worldwide, children from lower-income backgrounds are significantly less likely to have access to safe spaces to play with appropriate play materials (Adjei-Boadi et al., 2021; UNCRC, 2013; Ye & Yang, 2023). In Kitengela town, the lack of space for play was not solely caused by the government's inability to plan for play. Land dispossession during the colonial era meant that land became a commodity



Imagining a future where playful structures blend with everyday activities in urban spaces, for the Nairobi Design Week Exhibition- Past, Present and Future Play in Africa.

owned by the elite rather than shared (Okoth-Ogendo, n.d.; Thiong'o, 1986). Individual land ownership delegitimised relational and customary ways of owning common, public land, which are essential to African ways of co-existing (Okoth-Ogendo, n.d.). This is why we cannot address the inequities children face in accessing outdoor play without confronting the ongoing influence of colonisation—past, present, and future. Post-independence, neo-liberal regimes privatised land and excluded people based on income, ethnicity and political power (Boone, 2014; Manji, 2020). This shift facilitated the privatisation of land, reducing the availability of shared, public spaces for children to play. In Kenya, public play spaces are primarily addressed in master plans focused on developing sports stadiums and recreational centres to boost the economy (Kenya, 2007), further exacerbating spatial inequities that limit children's access to play by economic class.

Child-friendly planning and the concept of play sufficiency highlight how children's play opportunities can be enhanced and protected by integrating them into policies and plans across government departments (Lester & Russell, 2010; Riggio, 2002; UNICEF, 2018). Without mechanisms for communities to actively participate, they can unknowingly replicate systems that rely on experts and reproduce systems of oppression that suppress communities' voices (Miraftab, 2009; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013; Watson, 2014). Urban planners, development organisations and other institutes seeking to provide children with their right to play frequently fail to include the children in developing the design and deciding what their play provision constitutes (Bishop and Corkery, 2017; Hart, 1992).

To delink is to disconnect from the power systems that suggest 'we know best' or depend on interventions led by the government or developmental institutions (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo, 2013), and to shift towards co-creating play spaces that reflect local knowledge systems, ways of playing and priorities. To explore play practices grounded in local communities' needs and knowledge systems, the research project adopted a co-design approach with children and caregivers in Kitengela, aiming to uncover their lived experiences of play and empower communities to shape their own play spaces.

Uncover - Children's access to play in African Cities

Over three years, in collaboration with peer researchers from the local community, we identified the factors that hindered and facilitated children's play through workshops, surveys, interviews, and direct observations. After observing over 200 children playing outdoors for 16 hours in Kitengela town, the main thing that struck me was the dichotomy in children's play experiences in public spaces, where freedom



Music and dance are essential in both past and present forms of play; for the Nairobi Design Week Exhibition- Past, Present and Future Play in Africa.

and restriction coexisted.

I saw a young girl pick up a long plastic strip and transform it into a kite that flew into the air, and then I saw the same material being playfully twisted and turned by a young boy. In the afternoon, we watched a boy roll a tyre, sit on it, and use a bottle to catch rainwater. As three other children walking past him stopped and joined his play, they were free to exercise their spatial agency and transformed a street corner into an unplanned play space. Children adapted, improvised and created play without standardised playgrounds or adult support. One mother even shared how children had further exercised their spatial agency and socially produced (Lefebvre, 1996) their own playground by occupying a large, undeveloped field. We continuously observed the diverse ways children led their play; partnering with grasshoppers and chairs to role-play, riding or chasing tyres, and dancing to music from a nearby stall. Significant research on play in urban spaces highlights the need for diversity, flexibility and agency with children's play in outdoor spaces (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Rosen, 2016; Ward, 1978; Wein, 2000).

While this experience is not unique, children from across the world share a common understanding of resourcefulness and improvisation in their play (Adjei-Boadi et al., 2021; Burke, 2005; Skelton, 2009; Tovey and Helen, 2007; Ward, 1978). A key difference is that in Kitengela's public spaces, children and their caregivers live within a post-colonial urban regime that prioritises development while failing to invest in essential services such as water and sanitation (Watson, 2009a). This lack of infrastructure creates environmental insecurities that place children at risk when playing outdoors and ultimately restrict their access to safe outdoor play (UNCRC, 2013). Consequently, children—particularly girls—faced intersecting barriers that limited their ability to play outside, shaped by socio-cultural norms (Charway & Strandbu, 2024) and by vulnerabilities in the urban environment.

Moreover, observations of children at play revealed that the joy and excitement they experienced during play were embodied and aesthetic experiences (Kwastek, 2013; Mignolo & Vazquez, 2023). Children created play through their body movements—running, jumping, and playing games like hide-and-seek. Through sensory play, they gathered gravel and mud to craft play objects and responded to singing and dancing by other children with play itself. Their play incorporated embodied, multi-sensory experiences and their collective imaginations to generate meaning and animate their play (Lester & Russell, 2010; Rasmussen, 2004; Vygotsky, 1978), rather than being directed by the provision of static play equipment (Tovey & Helen, 2007). When examining the majority of international development efforts aimed at improving children's access to play in African countries and more broadly in the Global South, a common pattern emerges. These interventions often showcase standardised playground equipment, such as slides and swings, which adhere to modernist aesthetics and prioritise risk aversion—traits that have characterised mainly European playgrounds since the 1960s (Bishop & Corkery, 2017; Frost, 2010). In doing so, these approaches frequently overlook and marginalise non-European cultures, their worldviews, histories, and the diverse ways in which play can be interpreted and experienced. During Nairobi Design Week 2025, Dream Networks showcased a collection of images that highlighted how Africa's diverse play culture can shape the future of play. Hundreds of visitors from around the world reflected on how the varied lived experiences and rich cultural heritages across Africa resonated with their own. This exhibition not only shifted their perspectives on play but also raised awareness of the inequalities faced by girls due to socio-cultural norms.

Research indicates that state parties and societies do not fully recognise the importance of play; consequently, investment in appropriate provisions and the protection of children's right to play is often minimal or absent (IPA, 2010; UNCRC, 2013). When 86 Kenyan and Congolese adults

were interviewed in focus groups about the significance of outdoor play in children's lives, all the parents and teachers agreed that play is essential for children's quality of life. They highlighted how outdoor play contributes to children's physical, mental, social, and cognitive development. They recognised the importance of play that transcends traditional Eurocentric value systems. Moreover, they emphasised the need for play environments that accommodate children from diverse cultural backgrounds, allowing them to learn, socialise, and share experiences as they play together, despite their differences. These perspectives reflected African epistemologies, or ways of knowing, rooted in relational and communal ontologies that view life as fundamentally interconnected, where people exist through and with others (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Owuor, 2008; Ramose, 1999). While communities may recognise the value of play, their voices are often suppressed, lacking mechanisms to govern the development of their surroundings.

Reimagine

To redo and reimagine more plural worlds of play, we need to centre the design of play spaces on children's lived experiences. Liberate local perspectives, situated knowledge systems, and everyday practices (Escobar, 2018; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015) to produce more equitable access to outdoor play. Co-designing with communities and ensuring children have design agency (Druin, 2002; Sanders and Stappers, 2008) is central to this liberation. Co-designing with community members enabled us to elevate their voices and children's play in the design of a community play space. Also, it cultivated the collective agency to take action to produce the play space they desired. Their community organising efforts convinced a private landowner to donate land to create a play space. An exclusionary and prohibited space became a play space where all children could play.

As we focus on communities and invest time in working alongside them, we can find opportunities to reimagine play based on lived experiences and on communities organising and sustaining the play spaces, rather than waiting for governments' plans that may not be realised. In many African cities, informal spatial practices, led by local voices and actions, play a crucial role in creating more equitable futures, as communities working together provide the infrastructure (Simone, 2010, 2004; Watson, 2009b), which governments fail to deliver. Furthermore, engaging children in the design of outdoor play spaces (Derr et al., 2018) and adopting embodied practices enabled children to design through play (Akama and Prendiville, 2013; Smit et al., 2022). Children perceived and proposed ways to play through touch, sight, hearing, and movement as they interacted and played in the open spaces (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Hodges, 2020; Smit et al., 2022). Developing situated understandings of the space and its materiality (Hodges, 2020) enabled them to create new meaning and reimagine how the space could be transformed for play.



Present-Girls with restricted access to play in the public realm. Image created for the Nairobi Design Week Exhibition-Past, Present and Future Play in Africa by Marie Williams

The community-created play space reimagines play by using the natural and synthetic materials that children were observed playing with during its development. These play spaces were designed with local improvisational culture in mind and utilised reusable, recyclable, or natural materials rather than imported items or standardised play equipment. Consequently, community members had more agency to produce and repair the play features, which reflected the resourcefulness and circularity consistent within indigenous African cultures (Nyamnjoh, 2017; Owuor, 2008). With community members and children's design ideas, we co-created a play space that reflected hybrid forms. Slides with gravel and earth hills enabled children to socialise, jump,



Collaborating with peer researchers from the community to design culturally relevant and accessible research and design methods.



Community members' exercising decision-making power during community consultation.



Children designing models for their reimagined play space.

and race as they approached the slide. Free open spaces provided opportunities for children to socialise and play traditional games like Kati. Swings and balancing structures were also available, creatively built using local and repurposed materials.

Decolonisation does not mean rejecting modernity and universalism; instead, it recentres on lived experiences and marginalised perspectives, while negotiating with global trends. Indigenous, non-Western play cultures can reflect their heritage and cultures while integrating contemporary materials and realities. Children still desired the swings and slides, alongside the improvisational, relational and physical games they enjoyed. Designing for the dance, physical games, storytelling and improvisations that were prevalent within the local play culture and are consistently found in children's play across African cultures (Chinyowa, 2021; Taiwo Ogunyemi and Henning, 2020), meant creating spaces for play not defined by objects but by movement, sound, and interaction. Spaces are adapted as children create objects of play and create meaning through their embodied and relational experiences. For example, among the Yoruba in Nigeria, dancing to the talking drum becomes a form of play as people share stories that span space and time. Dance, song, and storytelling should be cultivated in outdoor play spaces, not confined to performance stages. Across our multicultural world, plural play practices can be introduced through park events, school curricula, and diverse forms and materials to design play spaces.

At Dream Networks, we have adopted decolonial practices to create play spaces in the UK and East Africa that foreground equity, diversity, multi-sensorial experiences, and environmental stewardship in providing children with equitable access to play spaces. We recently partnered with Anzania, an organisation dedicated to restoring a post-colonial quarry in Kenya as a space for nature and play. Together, we are reimagining how land that was taken during colonisation and exploited in the post-colonial era can be reclaimed and regenerated through play. To reimagine a



Youth playing Kati (Mohamed Abdirahman Gure, CC BY-SA 4.0, & https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>, via Wikimedia Commons)

more equitable play world, we must challenge the economic powers that restrict children's access to play by demonstrating how play can restore nature, culture, and social relationships disrupted by colonisation (Escobar, 2018; Mbembe, 2021; Ramose, 1999). See Dream Networks Reimaging play publication for more ideas.

What can I do today? One place to begin is by unlearning and expanding beyond Eurocentric typologies of play, making space to recognise and value diverse play traditions from other cultural contexts. To help you start, check out the instructions in the box above on how to play Kati and give it a go.

Please feel free to contact me or our team at Dream Networks. We are always looking for organisations to collaborate with to liberate more plural play worlds.

References:

Adjei-Boadi, D., Agyei-Mensah, S., Adamkiewicz, G., Rodriguez, J.I., Gemmell, E., Ezzati, M., Baumgartner, J., et al. (2021). "Neighbourhood, Built Environment and Children's Outdoor Play Spaces in Urban Ghana: Review of Policies and Challenges", *Landscape and Urban Planning,* Elsevier B.V., Vol. 218, p. 104288, doi: 10.1016/J.LANDURBPLAN.2021.104288.

Akama, Y. & Prendiville, A. (2013). Embodying, *Enacting and Entangling Design: A Phenomenological View to Co-Designing Services, Swedish Design Research Journal.*

Bishop, K. & Corkery, L. (2017). *Designing Cities with Children and Young People: Beyond Playgrounds and Skate Parks,* Routledge.

Boone, C. (2014). *Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics, Property and Political Order in Africa: Land Rights and the Structure of Politics,* Cambridge University Press, doi: 10.1017/CBO9781139629256.

Burke, C. (2005). "Play in Focus': Children Researching Their Own Spaces and Places for Play", *Children,* Youth and Environments, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 27–53.

Chinyowa, K.C. (2021). "Exploring the Transformative Power of Play in African Children's Games", doi:10.7592/FEJF2021.84.chinyowa.

Christensen, P., & O'Brien, M. (Eds.). (2003). *Children in the city: Home, neighbourhood and community.* London: Routledge.

Derr, Victoria, Chawla, Louise, and Mintzer, Mara. (2018). *Placemaking with Children and Youth: Participatory Practices for Planning Sustainable Communities,* New Village Press.

Druin, A. (2002). "The role of children in the design of new technology", *Behaviour and Information Technology,* Vol. 21 No. 1, pp. 1–25, doi: 10.1080/01449290110108659.

Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse, Designs for the Pluriverse,* Duke University Press, doi: 10.1215/9780822371816.

Frost, J. (2010). *The evolution of the play and playground movement. In J. L. Frost, A history of children's play and play environments: Toward a contemporary child-saving movement.* London: Routledge.

Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. Innocenti Essays. 4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/24139916_Children's_Participation_From_Tokenism_To_Citizenship

Hodges, E. (2020). "Architecture and Embodied Free Play", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,* John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Vol. 78 No. 2, pp. 219–234, doi: 10.1111/JAAC.12718. IPA. (2010), *IPA Global Consultations on Children's Right to Play.*

Kenya, G. of the R. of. (2007), *Vision 2030.*

Kwastek, K. (2013). *Aesthetics of Interaction in Digital Art,* doi: 10.7551/mitpress/9592.001.0001. Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010). *Children's Right to Play: An Examination of the Importance of Play in the Lives of Children.*

Manji, A. (2020). "The Struggle for Land and Justice in Kenya", *The Struggle for Land and Justice in Kenya,* Boydell & Brewer, doi: 10.2307/J.CTV105BBM8.

Mbembe, A.J. (2021). *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonisation,* Columbia University Press.

Mbembe, A. (2017). *Critique of Black Reason, Critique of Black Reason,* Duke University Press, doi: 10.2307/J.CTV125JGV8.

Mignolo, W. & Vazquez, R. (2023). "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings ", *Social Text,* available at: https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/ (accessed 8 September 2025).

Mignolo, W.D. (2013). *The Darker Side of Western Modernity, The Dark*er S*ide of Western Modernity,* Duke University Press, doi: 10.1215/9780822394501.

Mignolo, W.D. & Walsh, C.E. (2018). *On Decoloniality, Duke University Press,* doi: 10.1215/9780822371779.

Miraftab, F. (2009). "Insurgent Planning: Situating Radical Planning in the Global South", *Planning Theory,* SAGE Publications, Sage UK: London, England, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 32–50, doi: 10.1177/1473095208099297.16

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2015). "Decoloniality as the Future of Africa", *History Compass,* Vol. 13 No. 10, pp. 485–496, doi: 10.1111/hic3.12264.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S.J. (2018). "Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization", *Epistemic Freedom in Africa: Deprovincialization and Decolonization,* Taylor and Francis, pp. 1–266, doi: 10.4324/9780429492204/EPISTEMIC-FREEDOM-AFRICA-SABELO-NDLOVU-GATSHENI/RIGHTS-AND-PERMISSIONS.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. (2013). *Coloniality of Power in Postcolonial Africa,* CODESRIA.

Nyamnjoh, F.B. (2017). "Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality", *Journal of Asian and African Studies,* SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 52 No. 3, pp. 253–270, doi: 10.1177/0021909615580867.

Okoth-Ogendo, H.W.O. (n.d.). "The perils of land tenure reform: the case of Kenya", available at: https://erepository.uonbi.ac.ke/bitstream/handle/11295/35689/059_The%20perils%20of%20land%20tenure %20reform-%20the%20case%20of%20Kenya.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com (accessed 10 February 2025).

Owuor, J. (2008). "Integrating African Indigenous Knowledge in Kenya's Formal Education System: The Potential for Sustainable Development", *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education,* University of Alberta, Vol. 2 No. 2, doi: 10.20355/C5Z594.

Ramose, M.B. (1999). *African Philosophy through Ubuntu,* Mond Books.

Rasmussen, K. (2004). "Places for Children – Children's Places", Childhood, SAGE Publications.London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi, Vol. 11 No. 2, pp. 155–173, doi: 10.1177/0907568204043053.

Riggio, E. (2002). "Child Friendly Cities: Good Governance in the Best Interests of the Child", Environment and Urbanization, doi: 10.1177/095624780201400204.

Rosen, R. (2016). "Early Childhood Subjectivities, Inequities, and Imaginative Play", Identities and Subjectivities, Springer Singapore, pp. 141–162, doi: 10.1007/978-981-287-023-0_23.

Sanders, E.B.-N. and Stappers, P.J. (2008). "Co-creation and the new landscapes of design", CoDesign, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 5–18, doi: 10.1080/15710880701875068.

Santos, B. de Sousa. (2016). Epistemologies of the South : Justice against Epistemicide, Routledge.

Simone, A. (2010). "The Social Infrastructures of City Life in Contemporary Africa", available at: (accessed 21 May 2025).

Simone, A.M. (2004). "People as infrastructure: Intersecting fragments in Johannesburg", Public Culture, Duke University Press, Vol. 16 No. 3, pp. 407–429, doi: 10.1215/08992363-16-3-407.

Skelton, T. (2009). "Children's Geographies/Geographies of Children: Play, Work, Mobilities and Migration", Geography Compass, John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, Vol. 3 No. 4, pp. 1430–1448, doi: 10.1111/J.1749- 8198.2009.00240.X.

Smit, D., Hengeveld, B., Murer, M. & Tscheligi, M. (2022). "Hybrid Design Tools for Participatory, Embodied

Sensemaking: An Applied Framework", ACM International Conference Proceeding Series, Association for Computing Machinery, doi: 10.1145/3490149.3501332.

Superti Pantoja, L., Diederich, K., Crawford, L., Corbett, M., Klemm, S., Peterman, K., Currin, F., et al. (2020). "Play-Based Design: Giving 3- to 4-Year-Old Children a Voice in the Design Process", Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - Proceedings, Association for Computing Machinery, doi: 10.1145/3313831.3376407/SUPPL_FILE/PAPER280AUX.PDF.ZIP.

Taiwo Ogunyemi, F. & Henning, E. (2020). "From traditional learning to modern education: Understanding the value of play in Africa's childhood development", *South African Journal of Education,* Educational Association of South Africa, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. s1–s11, doi: 10.15700/SAJE.V40NS2A1768.

Thiong`o, N. Wa. (1986), *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature,* James Currey.

Tovey & Helen. (2007). "Playing Outdoors: Spaces and Places, Risk and Challenge: Spaces and Places, Risks and Challenge", McGraw-Hill International, Vol. 1, p. 162.

UNCRC. (1990). *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.*17

UNCRC. (2013). "General comment No. 17 (2013)", available at: 1https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2013/en/96090 (accessed 3 April 2024).

UNICEF. (2018). *Shaping Urbanization for Children A Handbook on Child-Responsive Urban Planning.*

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes,* Harvard University Press.

Ward, C. (1978). *The Child in the City | The Anarchist Library,* Pantheon Books.

Watson, V. (2009a). "'The planned city sweeps the poor away…': Urban planning and 21st century urbanisation", *Progress in Planning, Pergamon,* Vol. 72 No. 3, pp. 151–193, doi: 10.1016/J.PROGRESS.2009.06.002.

Watson, V. (2009b). "Seeing from the South: Refocusing Urban Planning on the Globe's Central Urban Issues",*Urban Studies,* SAGE Publications, Sage UK: London, England, Vol. 46 No. 11, pp. 2259–2275, doi: 10.1177/0042098009342598.

Watson, V. (2014). "African urban fantasies: Dreams or nightmares?", *Environment and Urbanization,* SAGE Publications Ltd, Vol. 26 No. 1, pp. 215–231, doi: 10.1177/0956247813513705/ASSET/1A2672D4-1501-4CDC-BC5B-50B2610248A7/ASSETS/IMAGES/LARGE/10.1177_0956247813513705-FIG7.JPG.

Wein, E. (2000). "The Ambiguity of Play", *Journal of American Folklore,* American Folklore Society, Inc., Columbus, Vol. 113 No. 448, pp. 213–214.

Ye, Y. and Yang, Y. (2023). "A Review of Research on Urban Playability from a Social Justice Perspective", *Land 2023, Vol. 12, Page 1027,* Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute, Vol. 12 No. 5, p. 1027, doi:10.3390/LAND12051027.

Sudeshna Chatterjee reviews two recent publications that advocate for inclusion of children in their local spaces in two very different contexts.

POLICY BRIEF

Inclusive cities for children with disabilities: A focus on slums and informal settlements (2024)[1]

This policy brief makes a significant contribution to the global conversation on equitable urban development by drawing attention to one of the most neglected groups in city-making—children with disabilities living in slums and informal settlements. It bridges the gap between rights-based advocacy and practice-oriented policy guidance, offering concrete strategies to translate inclusion into everyday urban realities.

The authors underline that children with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged urban residents because exclusion is produced not only by impairment but also by the compounding effects of poverty, insecure tenure, and spatial neglect. In slums and informal settlements, environmental barriers such as unpaved pathways, inaccessible schools, and unsafe play areas combine with social stigma and institutional invisibility. These intersecting forms of deprivation restrict disabled children's mobility, learning, and access to play.

An intersectional perspective makes clear that exclusion is not uniform even among disabled children. Girls with disabilities, for instance, often experience greater confinement due to safety fears and gendered caregiving expectations. Children from marginalised ethnic or migrant backgrounds may face language barriers or lack documentation, which further limits access to public services and disability benefits. The brief's framework can be strengthened by explicitly acknowledging these layered vulnerabilities and promoting inclusion strategies sensitive to gender, class, and cultural differences.

Among the most practical contributions of the document are its recommendations on co-designing play spaces with children and their families; using participatory disability data tools; linking play infrastructure to slum upgrading; and driving narrative change through community advocacy. These strategies emphasise creativity, participation, and cross-sector coordination, supported by examples from Brazil, Lebanon, and Indonesia.



Photo credit: StockCake

However, critical gaps remain. The brief gives limited attention to long-term financing mechanisms, municipal accountability structures, or maintenance frameworks necessary to sustain inclusive play environments. It also underexplores intersections with climate risks—such as flooding or heat—that disproportionately affect disabled children in poorly serviced settlements.

Despite these gaps, Deluca and Nallari's work offers an essential operational lens for reimagining inclusion at the intersection of childhood, disability, and informality. It invites planners and policymakers to treat inclusive play not as an afterthought, but as a core indicator of equitable urban development.

1 *Deluca, M., & Nallari, A. (2024). Inclusive cities for children with disabilities: A focus on slums and informal settlements. In S. Sabry & A. Nallari (Eds.), Research Series: Cities for Children and Youth. Zurich: Global Alliance – Cities4Children. https://cities4children.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Cities-for-Children-with-Disabilities-a-focus-on-slums-and-informal-settlements.pdf*

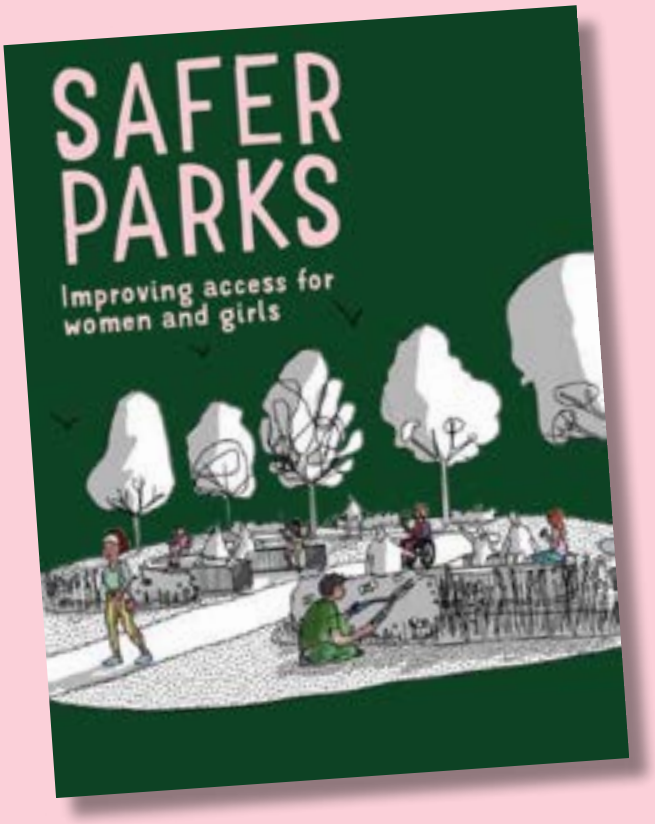
GUIDANCE

Safer Parks for Women and Girls Guidance

This guidance is a significant contribution to the discourse on gender equity in public spaces, foregrounding the under-addressed barriers faced by women and girls in parks—particularly in relation to play and social engagement. Developed through research led by UK institutions, the guidance effectively translates lived experiences of exclusion and unease into a clear, actionable framework for practitioners, policymakers, and community stakeholders.

A key strength is the document's focus on participatory processes, urging direct consultation with women and girls throughout park planning, design, and management. By providing case studies, practical tools, and quick wins—like improved lighting, clear wayfinding, comfortable seating, and diversified play opportunities—the guidance operationalises inclusion in tangible, replicable ways. The recommendations extend beyond standard safety measures, advocating for a broader, more creative understanding of play that challenges longstanding stereotypes and addresses social, as well as physical uses of park space.

Nevertheless, while the guidance draws on international examples and references global research, it remains largely UK-centric in its framing and case selection. A more explicit intersectional approach—disaggregating experiences by age, race, ability, and other social factors—would deepen its analytical rigour and ensure wider relevance. Equally, more concrete strategies for monitoring, evaluation, and partnership with grassroots organisations could strengthen their long-term impact by embedding continuous improvement in practice.



Overall, this guidance advances a rights-based, user-centred vision for urban parks, shifting the narrative from problem identification to practical change. For city leaders and planners aiming to create genuinely inclusive public spaces, it provides both inspiration and a valuable set of implementation tools.

Find Safer Parks for Women and Girls Guidance here: https://www.makespaceforgirls.co.uk/resources/safer-parks-for-women-and-girls-guidance

By providing case studies, practical tools, and quick wins—like improved lighting, clear wayfinding, comfortable seating, and diversified play opportunities—the guidance operationalises inclusion in tangible, replicable ways.

News From Our Branches

Our 20 IPA Branches worldwide are actively involved in local projects and initiatives that advance our mission to protect, promote, and provide play for children. Here are some highlights from the last six months from some of our branches and regions.

Asia Pacific Region

In June, Australia hosted the IPA Asia Pacific Conference, with 250 participants from seven countries: India, Taiwan,Hong Kong, China, Singapore, Japan, New Zealand, and Australia (plus one delegate from Scotland).



Australia

After representations and support from Play Australia (IPA Australia), the Australasian Society for Developmental Paediatrics (ASDP) has released its position statement on play. This statement provides the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand context for the ASDP endorsement of the Canadian Paediatric Society Position Statement on risky play.

Access the National Position Statement here:
https://asdp.au/files/1195/risky%20play%20position%20statement%20.pdf

Play Australia (IPA Australia) is excited to be part of Play 32, a Queensland-based coalition of leaders, organisations, practitioners, academics, and collaborators united with one shared purpose:

To ensure children's play and voice are a lasting, inclusive legacy of the Brisbane 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Through Play 32, we're working to ensure that every Australian child, from birth to 24 years old, benefits from a legacy that prioritises their right to play and be heard. Visit the website to learn more: https://play32.org.au/

Play Australia CEO, Robyn Monro Miller has completed a Churchill Fellowship. Robyn visited 14 cities across the world, exploring how play policy is applied. Robyn's report is due for release in February 2026. Robyn will be presenting her report across Australia as part of Play Australia's campaign to drive a national agenda for play.

Brazil

In 2025, IPA Brazil reaffirmed its commitment to promoting the right to play as a foundation for human development, mental health, and peaceful coexistence. This year was especially significant due to the consolidation of Brazilian Federal Law No. 14,826/2024, which officially recognises play as a child's right and establishes it as an intersectoral strategy for preventing violence. This landmark legislation is the result of decades of mobilisation by civil society organisations—including IPA Brazil—and has further strengthened initiatives to protect children and foster a culture of peace.

Throughout the year, IPA Brazil carried out actions across various regions of the country, partnering with public schools, universities, federal and state Prosecutor's Offices, and regional secretariats of Education, Social Assistance, Sports, Culture, and Health.

The travelling workshop **"A New Look at Play"** invited children and adults in multiple cities to rediscover play as a space for connection, care, science, and humanity. Certified courses, such as the Agentes do Brincar® (Agents of Play) program, continued to serve as national benchmarks. The Jovens Mediadores do Brincar® (Young Mediators of Play) and Guardiões do Brincar® (Guardians of Play) courses further strengthened our intergenerational approach, bringing generations together through play.



Hong Kong, China

Playright China is proud to have co-organised the "Building a Free-Play-Friendly City: An Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Place-Making international conference alongside Hong Kong Shue Yan University and SPEED of PolyU from 22–24 October 2025. With over 150 passionate participants joining both online and in-person, the event showcased how interdisciplinary collaboration can shape inclusive, sustainable, and free-play-friendly environments.

The launch of Hong Kong's first child-led adventure playground, Dream Together Playground, was held on 24 October 2025. This initiative marks a significant milestone for Playright, made possible through the dedication of our team, the vision of the Development Bureau and Harbourfront Commission, and the generosity of our main sponsors This successful project can demonstrate a new type of playground in Hong Kong, inspiring new creative and innovative play spaces.

Canada

IPA Canada was a proud partner at the Breath of Fresh Air Outdoor Play Summit in late September. Outdoor Play Canada ran the summit in partnership with a range of sponsors and partners. Over three days (September 25–27), thought leaders, educators, policymakers, and play advocates gathered under canvas tents, around campfires, and in nature to spark meaningful conversations about outdoor play, equity, and reconciliation. This fully outdoor summit balanced inspiring keynote talks (including the launch of a new Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play) with hands-on sessions, nature tours, and even speed-greeting in the outdoor exhibit area.

A major highlight of the Breath of Fresh Air Outdoor Play Summit was the impressive lineup of keynote speakers, each contributing a unique perspective and invigorating energy to the event. The summit was privileged to host Dr Stuart Brown, an internationally recognised expert renowned for his groundbreaking research on the science of play.

Amid all the playfulness, BoFA also created space for deeper reflection. Many attendees took the time to explore or discuss the Legacy of Hope Foundation's exhibitions, including Where Are the Children? which honours the stories and history of residential school survivors. This presence added emotional weight and a sense of responsibility to the summit, reminding everyone that outdoor play, community connection, and reconciliation are interconnected. Together, the speakers, sessions, and shared experiences made this year's Breath of Fresh Air conference both a celebration of play and a call to build a more compassionate, inclusive, and joyful future. You can Read Lyn's full report of the conference in the January edition of IPA's E-News "Play Notes".

News From Our Branches

Thailand

Let's Play Festival returned to Bangkok, Thailand, for its 3rd year—continuing our mission to champion free play for children and inspire parents to embrace its importance.

The festival is led by the Let's Play More Network, including IPA Thailand, and proudly supported by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation. This year, more than 30 organisations dedicated to promoting free play joined forces to create diverse play spaces and activity booths. Over 100 playworkers—both volunteers and staff—were on the ground to support children's play throughout the event. Over the three-day festival (21–23 November 2025), we welcomed approximately 12,000 registered participants, and the total number of visitors, including parents and children, likely exceeded 20,000. Yet beyond the numbers, what truly mattered were the countless moments of joy: the laughter, the smiles, and especially the meaningful connections we witnessed between parents and their children.

Our goal extends beyond hosting a joyful festival. We aim to spark hope—hope that more parents will integrate free play into their children's everyday lives and recognise it as an essential part of childhood development and learning. Looking ahead, we aim to bring play festivals to all 77 provinces across Thailand, ensuring every child has the right to and access to free play.





Taiwan

The International Play Association/Taiwan (IPAT) hosted the & Happy Ageing, Happy Living, Happy Learning" International Academic Conference, jointly organised by the Department of Early Childhood Education and the Department of Interior Design at the Nan- Ya Institute of Technology.

The conference focused on three topics: (I) Intergenerational, All-Age Happy Learning; (II) Cross-Cultural Children and Children's Games; and (III) The Inheritance and Innovation of Childhood Culture Between Old and New Generations. The conference invited international speakers from Taiwan, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong and other Asian countries.

The International Play Association/Taiwan (IPAT) also joined with the Taiwan External Trade Development Council (TAITRA) and the Little Tree Spreading Love Association, and guided by the Foreign Trade Administration of the Ministry of Economic Affairs, to host the & 2025 International Love & Sustainability Carnival, & aimed at inspiring diverse education and broadening the horizons of children in rural areas held from August 2nd to 3rd 2025 at the Nangang Exhibition Center in Taipei Taiwan.

Scotland

Following our Call to Action on International Day of Play (IDoP), IPA Scotland has been working tirelessly to translate the IPA World Play in Crisis Toolkit into Arabic. This vital resource will support aid workers and organisations advocating for children's right to play during times of war and conflict.

To make this possible, they launched a crowdfunding campaign on IDoP. Thanks to an initial £500 donation from IPA Scotland and a matching contribution from Play Scotland, we set the momentum. With incredible support from IPA members and branches worldwide, we quickly raised an additional £2,200 and met our target!

Special thanks to past IPA World President and long-standing IPA Scotland member Theresa Casey and to our partners at Palestine Play Projects, who have been instrumental in advancing this work. The translation is now with the graphic designer, and we anticipate the Arabic version of the toolkit will be ready to launch in the new year.

To celebrate this milestone, we will be organising an IPA webinar to share the toolkit and discuss its potential impact in 2026. Watch this space for details. approach, bringing generations together through play.

IPA Brazil's work gained national prominence through television and online interviews, as well as advocacy actions in Brasília, the federal capital. These initiatives reinforced the importance of play in public policies and demonstrated how this practice can transform schools, communities, and society.



USA

IPA USA's Porch Play Chats have reached a milestone with more than 267 free segments available on the IPA USA YouTube.
20-30-minute conversations with people passionate about the childs right to play.
See the Porch Play Chat offerings for each year, starting in 2020, at this link.

Our 2025 Conference in Louisville, KY, was filled with laughter, joy, play, and many excellent sessions. Nearly 200 attendees spent 3 1/2 days celebrating, attending sessions, visiting local nature-based programs and playgrounds, the Frederick Olmstead Park Systems, and hearing two amazing Keynotes from David Reeks and Renata Merilles from Brazil, who discussed their work embedding it in the Amazon and other sites in Brazil and documenting children's play.
New this year: Play Fact Fridays.

IPA USA members elected a new Board in September 2025. The new board leadership begins on January 1, 2026.

Wales

Play Wales, a founding member of the Welsh branch of IPA, held its national conference in October 2025. IPA Cymru Wales hosted a brief reception after the conference to give delegates more information about the International Play Association. We were delighted to be joined by Robyn Monro Miller, President of IPA and Professor PhilipJaffé, Vice-chair of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Robyn discussed the recent activity of the International Play Association World and the importance of global advocacy for Play. Philip further underscored the need for global advocacy in his discussion of the UN's International Day of Play.

2025 is the Welsh Government's Year of Wales and Japan, so it seemed right for IPA Cymru Wales to collaborate with the Japanese branch for the International Day of Play.
We wanted our collaboration to be as child-centred as possible, so we were delighted when IPA Japan agreed to partner with us to produce a child-led film. The finished product, filmed by branch members across both countries, highlights the joy that playing brings to children. It gently reminds us that wherever children are, they value and need play every day.The film showcased children playing across Wales and Japan and features interviews with children of all ages – in English, Welsh and Japanese– sharing what they love about play.The short film is available at: https://play.wales/play/international-day-of-play/

IPA Membership Benefits

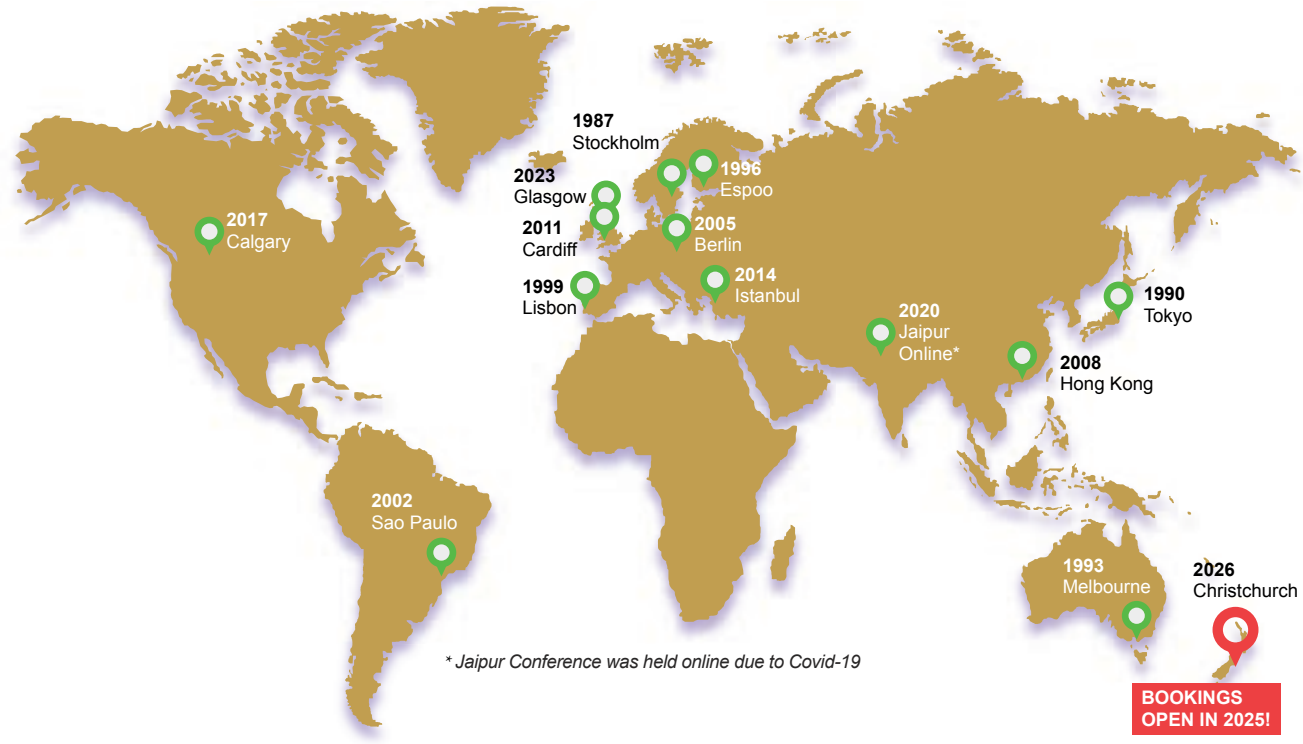
When you become a member of IPA, you will connect with a global network of passionate individuals advocating for the child's right to play. Additionally, you will have the opportunity to participate in global conferences and projects, and you can write for us and have your work featured in the IPA magazine.



IPA Triennial Conferences

Conferences are a primary means by which IPA seeks to fulfil its purpose of maintaining an international cross-sectoral forum to protect and promote a child's right to play, facilitate the exchange of experiences, disseminate information, and influence society. Every three years, the IPA holds a world conference. It is always a powerful and motivating experience with people engaged in creating a world where all children have the right to play and come together to learn from each other. **Members enjoy a discounted rate to participate.**

Previous IPA Triennial World Conferences have been held in the following countries.



** Jaipur Conference was held online due to Covid-19*



IPlay Rights Magazine

The Play Rights is a multi-disciplinary, online, print-on-demand magazine published by the International Play Association (IPA). It highlights the importance of play in child development and disseminates knowledge on the child's right to play by connecting the worlds of research, policy, and practice. The current board is committed to publishing two high-quality issues per year showcasing distinct viewpoints on children's right to play and varied approaches embedded in diverse cultures, disciplines, and regions worldwide. **The magazine is circulated for free among all financially viable members of IPA.**

Webinars

Did you know that IPA World has its own YouTube Channel? You can catch our latest recorded webinars at https://www.youtube.com/@internationalplayassociati5755

In 2025, starting February 12, we will host free member webinars on the second Wednesday of each month. These **"Webinar Wednesdays"** are wonderful opportunities for members to share their projects, research, and the latest initiatives.

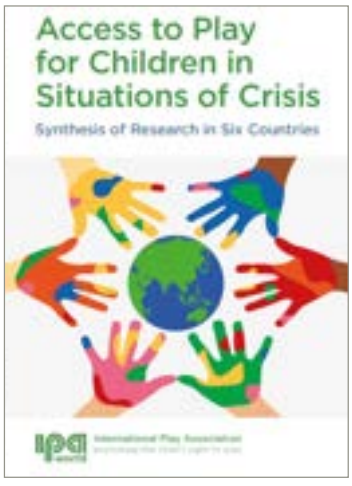
Sessions are one hour long and start at 12 p.m. London time.
Do you have a presentation or idea for a webinar? Email us your bio and a brief 200 summary of the topic you want to share secretary@ipaworld.global

Special Projects

IPA undertakes special projects to deepen our understanding of Article 31 and play as a child right. IPA branches, members, and trustees participated alongside invited experts in many significant projects.

• **General Comment No. 17 on Article 31 of the UNCRC:** In 2013, the IPA reached a significant milestone when the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child adopted the General Comment (GC) on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). **IPA spearheaded the GC-17 effort and positioned the forgotten right of children, the right to play, more centrally within the fuller context of the UNCRC for the benefit of States Parties worldwide and increased opportunities for its compliance.** IPA Executive and Council are currently reviewing how countries have used the document and preparing a report on recommendations for further action to support the use of the General Comment to inform and educate the community and policymakers on implementing Article 31. A formal report will be released in early 2025.

• **Access to Play in Crisis:** IPA shared the Committee on the Rights of the Child's concern that in situations of conflict or disaster, the child's right to play is often given lower priority than the provision of food, shelter, and medicines despite play being crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival. In 2016, the **IPA engaged in an international research project called Access to Play in Situations of Crisis in India, Japan, Lebanon, Nepal, Thailand, and Turkey** to address the gaps in knowledge and programming for promoting children's right to play in situations. **IPA also developed the Access to Play in Crisis (APC) tool kit to provide a practical document for those who work with children in challenging circumstances or situations of crisis** (humanitarian, natural, and man-made disasters) to support children's opportunities for play. Our national IPA branches and members participated in both APC projects.



Ute Navidi

Council Member & Regional Vice President (2005-2014)



Dr Ute Navidi served with IPA as a council member and regional vice president between 2005 and 2014. With her lively intellect and linguistic skills, she brought a keen sense of curiosity and eye for detail to all of her contributions to the IPA mission.

Having studied Sociology and Economics in the 1970s, Ute gained her PhD in Political Sociology at Birkbeck, University of London in 1996. Her ever-enquiring mind led her to further studies and qualifications, including her Professional Certificate (Management) from the Open University Business School in 2003.

Formerly head of policy at ChildLine, Ute's introduction to IPA came when she took up the role of Director of London Play in 2004. On joining London Play, she set out her priority to ensure all children had equal access to play spaces and facilities. Her commitment to equality and fairness was evident in her participation in IPA.

Ute worked as an independent children's rights researcher and campaigner from 2003 and enjoyed diverse engagements with the European Commission during that time.

Ute loved participating in the IPA Council meetings and World Conferences, where she supported the gathering and presentation of Conference Resolutions. Ute met IPA Japan's representative Hitoshi Shimamura in 2006, a meeting he credits with inspiring the founding of Tokyo Play. Ute went on to become an Honorary Advisor to Tokyo Play, and friendship and collaboration continued between the play organisations of the two great cities.

We extend our deepest condolences to Ute's husband, Daryoush, and to her family and friends.

Maggie Koong

Representative for the IPA
Hong Kong China branch (2013-2023)



It is with profound sorrow that we share the news of Dr. Maggie Koong's passing. She was a devoted champion for play and an inspiring educator for children. Dr. Koong was a former member of the IPA Council and served as the representative for the IPA Hong Kong China branch. She played a significant role in advocating for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child to issue General Comment No. 17 on Article 31, which greatly advanced the global right-to-play movement. Her compassion for children in need also motivated her to participate in the Access to Play in Crisis activities during the IPA Conference held in Istanbul in 2014.

Dr. Koong made significant contributions both locally and internationally. She served as the Honorary Advisor and was a former Board member of the Playright Children's Play Association. Additionally, she was actively involved with various local and global NGOs. Her commitment to enhancing the well-being of children has left a lasting impact.

Dr. Koong was highly respected for her extraordinary achievements. She was creative, intelligent, and strong in execution, yet always approachable with a warm and friendly smile. We will deeply miss her, and her legacy and spirit will always remain with us.

On behalf of the International Play Association, we extend our deepest condolences and support to all who knew and loved her.



CALL FOR PAPERS

Play Rights is inviting articles on the theme of "Play and Innovation" for its November 2026 issue to be released at the Triennial Conference in Christchurch.

Innovation in children's play encompasses both the qualities of environments and the creative practices of children themselves. It refers to environments that are inclusive, adaptable, rich in play affordances, context specific, and culturally relevant—deliberately shaped through policies, planning, and design. At the same time, innovation describes how children actively remake their everyday surroundings to create meaningful, self-directed play experiences by reconfiguring and imaginatively extending the material, social, and digital worlds around them, wherever opportunities arise.

In planning and design terms, innovative play opportunities include open-ended, multi-sensory, affordance-rich, flexible environments; loose parts; hybrid natural and built landscapes; and interfaces with media or technology that invite experimentation rather than prescribe singular uses. From the child's perspective, innovation appears in how children manipulate, hack and re-script spaces—using loose parts, marginal sites, interstitial and liminal spaces, and everyday infrastructures (steps, walls, drains, trees, vehicles, sidewalks) as platforms for play, negotiation, and identity-making.

The issue encourages authors to engage with these dual dimensions of innovation, drawing from environment-behaviour studies, urban studies, childhood studies, design research, education, anthropology, and human–technology interactions. Equally, we value action research and learning from practices that are creating innovative play spaces and experiences in formal and informal settings, as well as in situations of crisis.

Play Rights welcomes empirical, theoretical, and practice-based contributions that speak to diverse geographies and development contexts. Suggested (but not exhaustive) areas include:

- Planning and design of public spaces, streets, schools, and housing environments that intentionally scaffold innovative and inclusive play (including in informal settlements, peripheral urban areas, climate-stressed contexts and humanitarian contexts).
- Children's inventive appropriation of space and materials—object play, construction play, digital–physical hybridity, risky play, and rule-making—as forms of everyday play innovation.
- Policy, governance, and institutional arrangements that enable or constrain innovative play (e.g., standards, safety regulations, education reforms, urban renewal, regeneration, and housing policy).
- Methodological innovation in researching play, including participatory design with children, computational or digital approaches, ethnography, and design experiments.
- Play and innovation across differences, including gender, caste, class, disability, migration status, and intergenerational relations, and how children's own innovations contest or reproduce social inequalities.
- Strategies that prioritise children's agency, expand children's autonomy and inventiveness, such as loose-parts provisioning, designing for affordances and not play structures, promoting nature-based play, adventure playgrounds, adaptive reuse of residual spaces, and integration of digital media in play opportunities, especially for disabled children.
- Demonstration of how children negotiate, rework and maximise affordances in highly regulated adult worlds or resource-poor environments, using imaginative reinterpretation to carve out play opportunities despite constraint.

SUBMISSION AND REVIEW

Manuscripts should clearly articulate how authors conceptualise innovation, specify the nature of innovation that supports free play, and show how children's own actions transform environments, materials, and meanings. All submissions will undergo double non-blind peer review and should follow the journal's guidelines for types of submissions, formatting, and referencing. All submissions must adhere to ethical considerations in research with children and in the use of visual material.

All articles are due on March 15, 2026. Please send directly to the editor-in-chief of Play Rights, Dr. Sudeshna Chatterjee at sudeshna.apc@gmail.com

GUIDELINES FOR ARTICLES

Play Rights publishes papers from diverse viewpoints, approaches, and cultures, disciplines, and regions worldwide. The magazine publishes:

1. Short research articles: These articles should contain research, analysis, or thinking on critical questions related to the child's right to play (max 4000 words).

2. Reflexive practice notes: Engage critically with your own role in research or practice, whether as a playworker, environmental designer, or policy expert, exploring how your biases, perspectives, or social identity impact what you notice, how you interpret data, and how knowledge is produced (max 2500 words).

3. Field reports: Sharing experiences of activities conducted in particular contexts to address a child's right to play, describing what happened and reflecting on the observed phenomena, often integrating direct quotes, pictures, illustrations and methodological details (max 2000 words).

4. Position papers: These briefs draw out the implications of existing evidence for decision-makers (max 1500 words).

5. Opinion pieces: They should be written by an expert in a field, should have an excellent sense of story and purpose, and be able to hold an informed reader's attention (max 1000 words).

6. Book/media reviews: Reviews of books, films, documentaries, or other media that explore themes related to children's right to play, offering critical analysis and insights into their relevance and impact (max 1000 words).

For reference, please see the freely accessible December 2024 issue of Play Rights: https://issuu.com/ipaworld/docs/play_rights_online-low_res-issuu



Join us in Ōtautahi Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, for the IPA World Conference 2026, held at Te Pae Christchurch Convention Centre from 2–5 November 2026. We invite you to share your research, practice, stories, and ideas that celebrate innovation in play.

What is an abstract?

A summary of thoughts on a topic or experience, an area of study or an opinion. Basically, a high-level summary of what you would talk about if you were invited to present at IPA 2026. Presentations can take the form of an oral presentation, panel discussion, workshop, film, electronic poster, play break or a lightning talk.

THEMES

We invite abstracts across the following themes:

Kotahitanga Inclusion in Play	ākaro Māori Indigenous Play	Auahatia Innovating for Play	Ngā mōtika o te tamaiti/ngā tamariki The rights of the child/children

How to submit an abstract

The specifics of what is required and how to submit are provided on the conference website. After Tuesday, 17 February 2026, when submissions close, our Conference Programme Committee will review all abstracts and if your abstract is selected, all presentation authors will register for the conference as an attendee, covering their registration fees, as well as arranging and funding their own travel, accommodation and any other associated costs.

Submit your abstract now!

Abstract submissions close: **Tuesday 17 February 2026**
Registrations open: **Friday 30 January 2026**
Notification to authors: **Tuesday 31 March 2026**

CONTACT US

For any conference enquiries, please don't hesitate to reach out.
Project Manager: **Kate Clark** | T+64 3 974 1197 | E katec@conference.nz |
Project Coordinator: **Leanne Sherwood** | T +64 3 353 2821 | E leanne@conference.nz



international play association

promoting the child's right to play

ipaworld.org