



# The **Wildness** of Play

## Conference Report

September 2009

A conference with a difference; two days of playful discussion about play and playwork in the open air

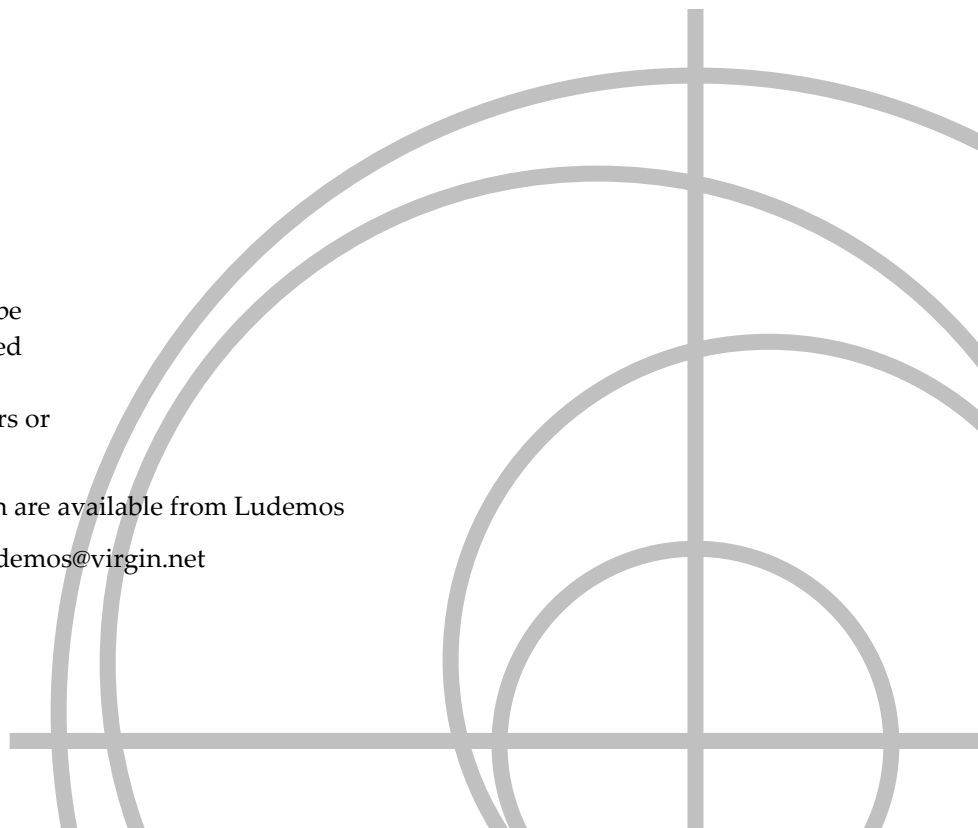
The Hayes, Staffordshire

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## 'Wild things...you make my heart sing...'

**There are two sides: the agents of waste and the lovers of the wild. Either for life or against it. And each of us has to choose. Jay Griffiths**

To see a World in a Grain of Sand, And a Heaven in a Wild Flower, Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand, And Eternity in an hour. **William Blake**

You are not dead yet, it's not too late to open your depths by plunging into them and drink in the life that reveals itself quietly there. **Rainer Maria Rilke**

The healthy being craves an occasional wildness, a jolt from normality, a sharpening of the edge of appetite, their own little festival of Saturnalia, a brief excursion from their way of life. **Robert MacIver**

To be whole. To be complete. Wildness reminds us what it means to be human, what we are connected to rather than what we are separate from. **Terry Tempest Williams**

Live in the sunshine, swim the sea, drink the wild air. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? **Mary Oliver**

## The Wildness of Play Perry Else, June 2009

**Play is wild**; it has many forms, meets many different needs and remains difficult to define or label. Play may be quiet or loud, solitary or social, physically exhausting or mentally stimulating. Play can be seen in varied types of activity, emotion and intensity, that is different according to the players, the environment and the opportunities or affordances in that environment. Play themes can change in moments across these dimensions or can last for days. Play is unpredictable; as much as some adults may like to set curricula for play, the playful drive will reassert itself and fool around with the very forms of the boundaries that we may try to set around it; put playful children in a classroom and see what happens.

Play is the opposite of order and external control; in play we set the rules. Play is the true freedom of the self in that it allows us to go wherever we want. A playful spirit is what helps us find out what it is to be fully human, *homo ludens* as Huizinga called us. Brian Swimme said it this way: 'Play, fantasy, the imagination, and free exploration of possibilities: these are the central powers of the human person.'

Order is about compartmentalising things and measuring them. It's dispassionate and objective, aiming to put things in labelled boxes. It's about the taming and suppression of natural drives; in the end, it's oppressive.

Play is holistic, involving and satisfying; the player chooses when to start and stop and what to play with and for how long. Play is often passionate, creative and stimulating – when the rules are flexible so is the 'outcome'. It's unpredictable, difficult to label and is often 'out of the box'. Ultimately, it's chaotic, challenging and wild.

Order has resulted in many things to which the western world attaches value; structures, systems, rules, roles, boundaries, money. Order has cured diseases, extended life, built cathedrals and empires, conquered nations and put men on the moon. It's also resulted in slavery, mass murder, genocide, and – in the west – needs another six Earths to sustain the current energy and material consumption.

Play does not worry about these things – we can play with rules and roles and restrictions; in play we can make money out of acorns or shells – it's the game that matters. If play is what we do when we are not working at other things, then maybe bringing a little wildness into order and playing a little more is what is needed.

We can see this desire to take things further in small children who want one more push on the swings, or for it to go 'higher, higher'. Or in children who want to stay up 'just another five minutes', or in the classroom joker who knows that the teacher is 'in charge' but can't resist one more lark. Play is life at the edge, exploring the boundaries both real and imaginal, whether they are physical, fantastic, social or artistic. This can be messy and wild, it is unpredictable and anarchic, but it's life and we are most truly alive when we are playing. If you are looking for evidence of this playful life, look at the play opportunities provided by the 'traditional' playground and those provided by 'slack space', the space in cities between other things, the wild spaces where trees, bushes and life have crept back in. Look at woods, and streams and beaches; look at forests and jungles.

In play, we explore the boundaries between ourselves and others, between what is real and unreal, between order and disorder. To do that we need to be inquisitive, enquiring, take risks and be a little wild. And finally, perhaps we also need some of those traits if we are to work with children in their play, helping them create spaces in which they can play.

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**This year at BoP**, many people were willing to push at the boundaries, playing with reality and fantasy and getting lost somewhere in between.

It was our sixth visit to the Hayes, and the changes on site helped make our return a special one: 'sunshine, abundant nature - bird, beast and berry and the benevolent spirits of the land seemed particularly present' – the weather was kind and enhanced the magical elements provided by many people on site.

The theme was Wildness – inspired by the lovely book 'Wild' by Jay Griffiths – and was embraced whole heartedly by the wild play people who gathered at The Hayes, Staffordshire.

The event got going Friday afternoon as people began to arrive, pitch tents and plan which workshops to attend. The site had been tidied up for us by the owners and tenants, and many people enjoyed having access to the lower field, the waterfall and the dome in the woods.

The beauty of the house and site were enhanced by Susie and Hilary, adding flowers, lights, greenery, sculpture and fabric so that we were ready to begin by early evening. First we had to eat, and this year we were looked after by Millie

and Jane who did wonderful things in the kitchen, helped as always by the kind spirits who wander the Hayes, 'even one cup made a difference'.

By eight o'clock, we were ready for the playful introduction to the weekend. Wildness was brought in through the use of cards randomly distributed around the audience, with people commenting and adding personal stories as thoughts occurred to them. Groups formed and people began to personify wildness in a broad 'continuum of wildness', supported by the costumes and materials supplied by Annie and Julia. The feedback was wild, chaotic and wonderful – it really was one of those times you had to be there. Boundaries were pushed physically, emotionally, culturally, psychically and spiritually.

Saturday morning, there was a wild walk led by Hilary Kneale then the workshops began.

Pete King was 'Wandering in the Wildness of the Mind'. He looked at Play and Cognitive Script Development, in a session that extended his work on the six factors of free play.

Bridget Christy first attended BoP as a 'wild child' and returned to work with Alyson Christy in a session that looked at children's relationships with natural spaces. This was a practical and thoughtful session, asking delegates to consider how play development might tackle adult and child fears of wildness. For more, see below ['Do not fear the wild, child' – some wild thoughts from a young playworker's perspective Bridget Christy and Alyson Christy, 2009](#)

BoP 'old-timers' Stuart Lester, John Fitzpatrick and Bridget Handscomb gave us 'Nursery Crimes and Scary Tales' – Barbie in the woods at the Hayes; who'd have thought? They promised distress, disaster, discordance, drama, dissensus and daring-do, but also delivered frights, frivolity, fantasy and fun.

Newcomer Morgan Leichter-Saxby wanted to get messy and inventive by looking at ways to communicate to express ourselves in play, but the freely chosen nature of the workshops meant that delegates were busy talking elsewhere – next time Morgan?

'Wild Play in the Woods' was offered by Maggie Fearn and Sian Cornelius, who wandered through the woodland environment helping all to play within their own comfort zones in the natural environment.

A reflective session was offered indoors by Ali Wood and Jacky Kilvington. Titled 'Wild Women Playing', the workshop delved into the wild side of female playing from female and male perspectives, and the similarities and differences between female and male play in childhood and adulthood – who's wild, who's tame.

It was supposed to be War in the Woods, but apparently the players knew no bounds as mud, tomato ketchup and tea bags were put to deadly effect all over the site. The aim was make sense of war play and learn how to deal with conflict in a positive way, but it looked like too much fun for that to have been achieved; well done, Tricia Dennemont and Beverley Ellis!

Flying in from Sweden (on magic wings?), Eva Kane came to help delegates save Flora from the Stoke goblins, the elves of darkness. As well as protecting the fairy playground and making new homes for the goblins, Eva looked at adventure pedagogy, blending wild playing with experiential learning. For more, see below [Mission: Rescue Flora Eva Kane, 2009](#)

Early evening on Saturday was the now obligatory curry and poppadums supplied by Millie Else and Jane Kearley, then singing and storytelling, with a bit of didge and fire juggling down by the stream – thanks Steve and well done Liam and Freyja! And thank you to John for sharing his poem about childhood [Unchained daisies John Crosbie, 2009](#)

The new fire area worked extremely well, with fire amongst the trees and with the waterfall in the background. The whole space was made possible by the Meynell Games team setting up a wonderful fire pit and tarp to help us feel the warmth and keep off the rain. Susie added some magic with oversized mushrooms. In the event, it was a glorious evening with (almost) a full moon illuminating proceedings and tempting the wilder hearts to stay up till the early hours, playing with the fire and drinking chai.

10.30 Sunday morning we were back in the workshops with Eddie Nuttall talking about his journey around the UK for 'Possible Summers'. Eddie has been collecting stories for the last two years, putting his playwork practice into the public domain, along with his theoretical reflections on what he experienced.

‘And when he came to the place **where the wild things are**, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws...’ [*Sounds fun: Ed*]

Julia Sexton was organising a wild rumpus in the woods, exploring the feelings, images and emotional qualities of childhood, and why playworkers need to be aware of their own wild things in relation to children’s play. [Where the Wild Things are Julia Sexton, 2009](#)

Tony Delahoy with colleague Louise Kennedy to offer a spiritual journey through Biophilia [=“love of life or living systems” *EO Wilson: Ed*]. The workshop was an exploration into possible links between biophilic play and a child’s emerging spirituality, adding to the session Tony had done at the last BoP.

With thoughts, songs, stories and arrows flying around our heads, by Sunday lunchtime it was time to think about packing up and saying 'bye till next time. After another marvellous meal, the delegates and workshop leaders gathered on the terrace at the Hayes. The sun was still shining as we formed a circle to share our thoughts and thanks for the events of the last two days. After a song of farewell from Jane Kearley, the ending was led by Annie Davy, who reminding us of the 'hummers' of Friday evening, took us through an Aboriginal bee summoning song. As we wound together in a huge spiral, we became bound by song, story and significance, as the polyphonic notes reverberated around and through us all – a special time for everyone there.

It was meant to be a wild exploration of play, and while there were certainly moments of madness and danger, overall the weather was kind, the site welcoming and with a warmth ran through all the activities that made them particularly rewarding and rejuvenating.

We plan for The Beauty of Play to be 10-12 September 2010; see you there!

Perry Else: Ludemos – *'we play'*

***Special thanks to:***

- Rosie and the community for sharing the Hayes with us
- Susie for making it all look so beautiful
- Millie and Jane for the lovely food
- John for sharing his poetry
- Meynell and Midah, Sarah, Lynne, Joel, Pete, Tony (Liam and Polly), Louise for the site preparation and safekeeping
- All the delegates for sharing and contributing to the spirit of the Hayes
- All the children for letting us play – and joining in occasionally
- All the presenters for their wild wanderings
- Everyone for making it such an inspiring, enjoyable and playful event

## Feedback

And thank you for all the comments; here are just a few:

Congratulations! It was an extraordinarily lovely event.

I would like to thank you for yet another fantastic, inspiring, informative, thought provoking and enjoyable weekend. The Beauty of Play is a wonderful opportunity for learning, discussion and reflection made possible by the people who attend and the amazing location. I have come away from Beauty with lots of answers (and even more questions!) and a renewed vigour for this work we call play!

Just wanted to say thank you again for last weekend! I was a bit unsure of what to expect but found the whole thing wonderful. I walked away feeling excellent and have thought about the Beauty of Play every day since.

The conference is a truly unique one and one that you can truly relax and gain so much from the conversations around the table and the relaxed atmosphere.

I would say that the Beauty of Play is an experience that most playworkers should try, it seems that the essence of play was touched more so than in any lectures, this may have been due to the space, but I found it magical. It really felt like coming home and it was so nice to have others that were on the same page.

Thank you so much for a lovely weekend, it was invaluable to reconnect to ideas and people.

Thanks for another excellent opportunity to revisit the child within, experience the magic of The Hayes, reflect on the thoughts of others, learn new things and generally have fun. Its aura does not seem to diminish.

We had an amazing weekend at Beauty of Play. This was our first experience and we have taken away with us a lot of excellent playful ideas. It was lovely to meet everyone and everyone welcomed us. We definitely would love to come next year, it's been a weekend we would recommend to colleagues and again thank you for a great weekend.

### *The Beauty of Play – Wildness of Play: a personal reflection*

With the return of the unique and innovative conference after a year's break what struck me over the weekend was the atmosphere of calmness between Friday night and Sunday afternoon. This calmness seems to be contradictory to the theme of Wildness of Play. Then again, maybe this reflects the contradictory nature of play.

The changes in place since the last conference two years ago may have also contributed to the calmness. The Saturday night camp fire being moved down the grassy slope and situated nearer the stream. This enabled everybody being able to sit around the fire. The weather behaved and was almost rain free and with the development of the Hayes as a mediation centre, perhaps these two factors also had an effect on the calmness.

As always there was a good mix of workshops with much opportunity for people to get wild in the woods. From the dressing up on Friday evening, free play exploration to Lord of the Rings type tribal battles and finding fairies to biophilia there was something for everybody. For me, the wildest thing I could muster on the Friday night was to eat an apple with a cup of tea – but that was the point, you could be as wild as you wanted – compared to my son who donned a cloak, a shield and his aim of finding the 'red haired comedian;' as somebody pointed out, there was a 'continuum of wildness'.

On a personal note, it was nice to see some old faces and meet new faces. I wish to thank those who gave their time and opinions in the workshop I presented. I wish to thank all those who took the time and trouble to engage with my two sprogs. Most of all, I wish to thank Perry, for as we know he is a busy egg, for the initial idea of the conference and its evolution to its present state, Millie and Jane for their culinary input and for all the people who attended and had a chin wag with me on the outside steps.

I finish with a note from the Troggs which possibly sums up this weekend:

Wild thing...you make my heart sing...  
You make everything  
Groovy  
I said wild thing...  
Wild thing, I think I love you  
But I wanna know for sure  
Come on, hold me tight  
I love you

Pete King; September 2009

*Some visual memories*

The following photos (some kindly shared by Lily Horseman - Kindling Play Training/KPT and Arthur Battram - Plexity) give a hint of what was covered in two special days of wild play.





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## Unchained daisies John Crosbie, 2009

Childhood days brighter longer,  
sunshine warmer, dreams stronger;  
you could wish on a falling star,  
how we wondered what you are.

You could hear the Angels sing,  
the gentle beat of Fairies' wing,  
ocean heartbeat in a shell,  
whispered tales the wind would tell.

Time was told by dandelion,  
trees were there for you to climb,  
puddles for your feet to splash,  
simple values without cash.

Buttercup, chin reflections;  
daisy chains, stone collections,  
love resolved on petalled flowers,  
rainbow gold on sunlit showers.

You had fun beneath the rain,  
saw Jack Frost, window pane;  
birthday cakes, wishes done,  
growing up so much fun.

Older now, your purpose changed,  
your life in order, rearranged,  
fact and fiction, segregated,  
simple things, complicated.

But still...  
the sun is warm and dreams are strong  
and Angels sing their precious song,  
ocean heartbeat, rising falling,  
still for you the wind keeps calling.

Still the trees hold open arms  
and buttercups await your charms,  
puddles wait, overflowing,  
unchained daisies keep on growing.

Stars keep falling for your wishes,  
flower petals for your kisses,  
nothing's changed, is it true?  
Nothing's changed...  
... not even you.

## **Mission: Rescue Flora** Eva Kane, 2009

The fairy flora needs our help to pacify the goblins. To do this we need to:

- Make ourselves blend into nature
- Make dwellings for the goblins and tempt them to take possession
- Create a protection system for the fairies' playground

Resources Needed:

- A few blue/black berries, end of a candle and a piece of paper
- As many strips of card, long enough to go around your head, as participants,
- Double sided tape enough to put a long strip on each card,
- Stapler,
- Knives/scissors 1 per 3 participants,
- String and thread,
- Empty glass jar with lid, food colouring, sponge,
- One plastic cup/2 participants,
- 20 bottle tops/5 participants (preferably with holes in otherwise also hammer and thick nail needed),
- Ropes
- Little box full of treats

### **Story:**

When I was little, my granddad taught me a lot about the creatures in the forest. In Sweden, there are all kinds of trolls as well as the creatures you are used to from here.

In Northern Ireland I got to know a guy called Ian who introduced me to all kinds of beings in the forest as well as the bogs. There are leprechauns there as well as all the usual forest beings. When I moved back to Sweden I accidentally bumped in to a stranger in the street and to show him I had no ill intent I offered him a coffee and we got talking. It so happens that he is a world renowned elfologist. After a while I mentioned that I was coming here to Stoke and he laughed and said, 'Have you not heard about the goblins of Stoke?' Apparently the goblins here in Stoke are renowned for being extra irritating. Does anyone know anything about goblins? Well, the real ones aren't really like the ones in the pictures if you're thinking of Harry Potter or the Trilogy of the Ring.

Just in case you've never heard of goblins – they are of varying sizes but usually quite small. They don't have any homes since they wander but instead they

usually sleep in temporary dwellings such as mossy cracks in rocks and tree roots. All Goblins are up to tricks, teasing and annoying both creatures, humans and animals, but apparently the ones in Stoke are worse than most! The elfologist, who is called Östen, told me that the fairies of the area are starting to get fed up with their tricks since they can never play or work in peace. He also said he was going to send a message to his fairy contact here in Stoke, she is called Flora, to let her know that I was coming.

I never thought anymore about it until just a few days ago when all of a sudden an owl appeared at my house. That has only happened once before and that was the beginning of another adventure I can tell you about some other time.

Anyway, the owl delivered mail that I brought with me. You may not know this but owl mail is always written in special ink that only those can read who have passed the NVQ Level 1 in Elfology. There is a way to make it visible to you, though but it means that the ink will disintegrate within a couple of hours.

### **Read mail**

As you can see there is a request for help from Flora. When I got this I contacted my friend Östen, the elfologist, and he helped me read it and he explained it to me.

Usually Flora asks people she thinks she can trust to help with the increasing problem of the goblins and this is how I got the owl post! Now, I don't know about you but I can't resist a challenge so I said to my friend that I would ask your help in trying to make some sort of impact and he said that with so many people maybe being able to help it might actually make a difference! So what do you say? Do you want to have a go at trying to help Flora and her friends?

The idea is to make the forest safer and calmer for the fairies. Östen said that to avoid the fairies thinking that you are goblins you have to make yourself blend in to the forest a bit. He suggested we do this by making some sort of natural headgear.

### **Make headgear – strips of card, double sided tape, stapler**

Now the next problem is the goblins. They are all around us even if we can't see them yet. I don't really think we want to either! If they start to annoy us and play tricks with us we would never get this job done! Things would go missing and we might even lose these beautiful head dresses without even noticing! We'd trip over things and get wet and God knows what!

Östen told me that goblins would love to have more permanent dwellings really and if could come up with a way to make some attractive semi permanent dwellings in an area then the goblins may stay put for a while and give the fairies some peace. So I thought we could have a go at that I've found a place where that might be possible.

Goblins live in mossy cracks in trees and rocks and I was hoping that we could make them a bit more inviting and homely and maybe even make a nice bed or fireplace or something to suggest that they may settle for a while...

### **Goblin dwellings in groups of 3 – knives/scissors, string**

#### **Tour of Goblin homes**

We need to make sure that the goblins come and look at these dwellings too. Östen told me that goblins are really attracted by bad smell. That's why when you're out in the country your rubbish bags that are left out at night get torn and you find rubbish bins with their lids off. Now goblins have much better smell than us, more like dogs, so I brought some of my granddad's dog essence to make sure that we find good rotten smells to help us attract the goblins. It's made of ground down reindeer horns.

#### **Forest cocktail – Jar with lid, food colouring, sponge, plastic cups**

Smell everyone's cocktail. Now if we put these at the dwellings we hope that the goblins will come and enjoy their new houses.

The next bit I discussed with Östen was to make some sort of early warning system for the fairies so they hear if the goblins are coming. I think I have found the place in the forest where the fairies play and dance at dusk and my idea was to try and surround that place with wind chimes so that when the goblins get close the fairies would hear it.

#### **Wind chime – string, thread, scissors, bottle tops**

The fairies playground is away a bit and what they have done themselves, I found out yesterday, is that they have tried to protect the way there by putting up spider webs to make it more difficult for the goblins to get there. We have to get through it without destroying it. We also have to make sure that the wind chimes are quiet so that the goblins don't understand what we are up to. So each group has to get through the spider's webs without the wind chimes sounding. You know how easy it is to break spider's webs, it is destroyed if you just brush past it so be careful!

### **The journey – rope**

Finally here! Find a place to hang your chimes.

To let the fairies know that we are friendly visitors bringing gifts we have to do a little fairy dance. Twirl and imagine that you are a fairy!

Look what I found! Flora must have seen us earlier and realised what we were doing and this must be her way of thanking us!

## **Adventure Pedagogy**

A super short introduction by Eva Kane

Outward Bound – Kurt Hahn

Adventure Based Experiential Learning – Anthony Richards

Adventure Pedagogy – Sven-Gunnar Furmark

### **1. SEPARATION**

To leave the old and comfortable behind to meet and try the new

Prepare to move out of the comfort zone

Assess and choose the right environment

Motivation and preparation are important

### **2. EXPERIENCE**

Preparedness to meet the new – the unpredictable outcome

The four challenges

Physical

Social

Emotional

Intellectual

### **3. RETURN**

For participants to share their experiences are important, it allows it to become connected to everyday life.

### **4. INTEGRATION**

The adventure becomes integrated as part of all the participants' experiences and allows the participant to draw on it in new situations.

## **‘Do not fear the wild, child’ – some wild thoughts from a young playworker’s perspective** Bridget Christy and Alyson Christy, 2009

### **Introductions**

Two years ago, Bridget suggested that what was missing from Beauty of Play was a young person’s input. Wildness is just up her street! Alyson has recently finished an assignment on a similar theme (Christy, 2009). So, together in this workshop, Bridget and Alyson used some drama and reflective activities, interspersed with some play “theory” to share thoughts about children’s relationships with natural spaces in the great ‘wild’ outdoors.

### **What attracts children to outdoor spaces?**

The session started with a circle name game – ‘I sit in the grass’ – originally from Kenya so imagine children playing in the long grass of the savannah. Suddenly an adult shouts out, the game goes quiet – but it continues with signed actions.

Individuals reflected on their ‘special places’ and worked in small groups to create freeze frames to illustrate these and some of the key characteristics (treehouse, back gardens, willow den, swing under the oak tree, mini-house hidden under a bush, up trees, our space, our toys, no adults) – all very similar across the ages!



Bridget recounted other outdoor places she enjoyed alone or with her sister or friends: using quadro at the Saturday Club to make a toboggan and dragging each other around the churchyard; using bamboo canes to make tepees; playing hide and seek in the summer when the grass was long; ‘gorge’ walking on school trips; digging mud-holes in the garden and ‘doing voodoo’ on unwanted plastic dolls; wild camping in Papa’s woods (Alyson’s dad).

Have you ever come across eco-psychology? Fjørtoft’s (2004:17) work indicates natural landscapes influence children’s motor development. It also identified particular play behaviours in different ‘play habitats’ (ibid: 32) e.g. trees for climbing and look-out posts; shrubs for hiding, construction or zoned role-play; open fields for running/catching. Children appear to have an intuitive

perception of familiar landscapes. By continually interacting with their environments, children adjust behaviours in response to perceived play possibilities (affordances) (Gibson, 1979, cited by Fjørtoft, 2004:37). Several authors support the developmental and psychological importance of diverse landscapes as spaces for play (Bixler (2002, cited in Lester, 2008a:58; Kellert, 2002, *ibid*: 58; Noren-Bjorn 1982, *ibid*: 179). Kaplan and Kaplan (1989:55) researched 'sense-making through exploration' with a 'preference matrix' where 'coherence (*order*), complexity (*diversity*), legibility (*familiarity*) and mystery (*hidden uncertainty*)' generate 'preferred-places'.

What attracted members of this workshop to the outdoors? Within our own shared play spaces, we were able to identify features of the 'preference matrix' and various 'play habitats'. Our 'sense of place', 'identity' and 'well-being' have acquired meaning by journeying through diverse geographical spaces, landscapes and social interactions.

But how far are children permitted to roam the outdoors? A quick 'bull's-eye' game was used to illustrate the distances participants had travelled to Beauty of Play; and then to share how far away from home we could play at different ages; and how far children we now play out.

### **What influences playing out?**

Another circle game – prisoners and guards – using touch and eye contact. This served as an introduction to a discussion of some of the barriers which kept us indoors – let alone getting to the 'wild places'. Key ones included:

#### **Recollected childhood fears**

- Getting lost                      \* other humans
- Kidnappers                        \* loosing track of time
- Bullying                            \* afraid of forgetting to go home on time
- Dogs                                 \* fear of consequences of parents' disapproval

#### **Real and perceived fears adult have for own (and other) children**

- Safety from other adults
  - Kidnapping, abduction, abuse
  - Criticisms of 'gangs of children hanging round'
  - Child being accused of crimes

Parents being perceived as lacking control of own children

- Bullying from other children
- Fear of being misled by others

- At risk as victims of crime / accidents / animals
- Loss of contact (solitary, distance)
- Being out in the dark
- Unsure of child's capabilities to cope in certain situations

The group briefly considered the thought that, without exposure to children in the community (since children are more likely to be in segregated places e.g. own room, childcare, school, leisure time clubs), it is possible adults are more fearful of the 'wild child'.

George (1998:33) warns:

What you do not know you will fear.

What one fears one destroys.

Fear changes attitudes and creates barriers for actualising affordances. Louv (2000) observes when humans lose connections with nature, they are both more protective and more fearful towards it. Adults and children do fear the outdoors, ('ecophobia', Sobel, 1999). Children see and learn fears from significant adults in their lives and stay indoors preferring indoor attractions (Maudsley, 2005:2.10-12) and 'agri-tainment' (White-Hutchinson, 2008).

Bridget described the 'agri-tainment' features of her own summer work and noted how fearful some children were of getting dirty or wet, let alone anywhere near the animals or be out in the rain. Bridget recalled being fearful when in Papa's woods when younger. Over the years the extended family have worked together to build bridges and dens, cleared rhododendrons and ivy, planted trees, found mini clay-pits, watched badgers and deer, set up orienteering trails and had many campfires with shooting stars. Bridget's friends were curious about the woods and she invited them to join the adventures. Bridget took the lead on crocodile hunts up the stream and in the ceremonial burning of lower school T-shirts. Now nearly 18, the woods are no longer the place to be when in Devon (paid work in agri-tainment has taken over along with surfing or sun-bathing on the beach – besides there are no hot water showers, electric and poor phone signal).

### **What do these wild thoughts imply for playwork professionals?**

One final game – Changing Chairs – a game of strategy and group working.

This was used to illustrate the point that when adults say 'don't play here' children will find a way around it! In finding ways around adult determined boundaries, 'lines of organisation', children create 'lines of immanence' (Prout,

2005, cited in Lester, 2008:158) and 'temporalised spaces' (Zeihner, 2003, *ibid*: 167) in which play-nature drives unfold despite mismatched understandings of behaviours by adults. Redressing lost opportunities for spontaneous, unpredictable play as part of community cohesion and being healthy (Play England, 2006:11), is a key purpose of the government's play strategy. Understanding influences on children's outdoor experiences, and their personal connectedness with nature, enables playworkers to respond appropriately.

Bridget suggested that play environments should have a mixed age range of playworkers: older ones should be examples of non-grumpy grown-ups; and younger playworkers may be better placed to understand the networks connecting children. Younger workers understand how to help children negotiate ways around (a) wild spaces – for example, Bridget is now reassuring much younger cousins (four under 5 years) that Papa's woods are not scary and shows them how to make dens; and (b) around the public adult community where some children do not know how to find their own ways around as they are always in cars between home or school or their sports or homework clubs... Grown-ups keep children out of sight as in olden times.

Unchs/Habitat (1997:28) declared children and adolescents have a right to protected environments within communities where play, participation, socialisation, learning about the natural world and autonomous experiences create a sense of belonging. The workshop looked quickly at Kyttä's (2003:64) 'affordance taxonomy' of children's environments. This includes hypothetical environments – 'rich' (Bullerby) or 'impoverished' (cell) – based on individual's relative freedom to explore and their perceptions of affordances in different environments. Simply allocating space for children's 'staged' physical fitness as perceived by Piagetian-based developmentalists (QCA, 2005:223; DCSF/DCMS, 2008:81) is insufficient.

The implication here is that playworkers need to use their knowledge and understanding of children's play worlds to challenge the designers a bit more. They all need to find ways of tackling both their own as well as children's fears of wildness, build mutual confidences in local communities, stir some emotional memories, review places of affinity and challenge organisational boundaries. Enjoy the wild and don't forget that our personal ideas of what is 'wild' and 'attractive' about the outdoors changes as we change over time!

PS – did anyone see the goblin-fairy house Bridget created in and around a tree stump in the woods? Beech husks for wine flasks, fern fronds for table mats and

stick-ladders to disguised bedrooms. There are still times and places for being wild in and for us all!!

### **Workshop Facilitators**

Bridget Christy

A Level student who loves Theatre Studies and English Language and Literature; a school peer mentor; worked last two summers in the 'Ewetopia' play area of The Big Sheep Farm Attraction, Abbotsham, North Devon; and occasional playworker with mum

Alyson Christy

Inclusive playworker running 'Somewhere Saturday Club; training and project development worker with various national children's charities; distance learning student on Gloucestershire University's Graduate Diploma in Playwork course.

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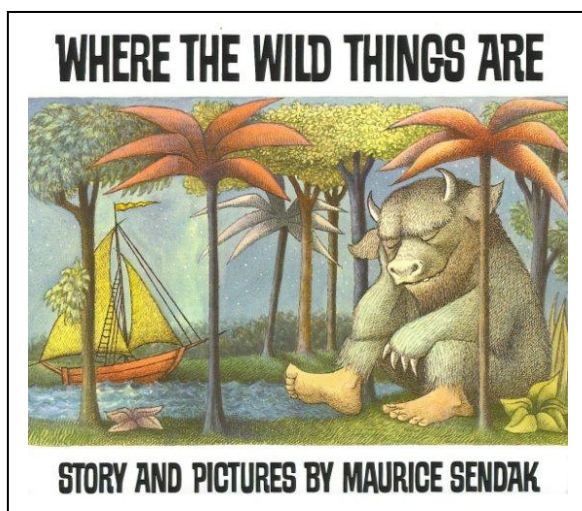
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## Where the Wild Things are Julia Sexton, 2009



This workshop joined Max on his journey to discover the Wild Things. It used Sendak's book as a springboard to explore feelings, images and the emotional qualities of childhood that it expresses.

Sendak's book has been viewed as controversial. Critics have claimed that the images are too scary for children and that the book deals with too dark emotions, namely Max's

rage and anger. It has been claimed to give children nightmares.

In response to criticism Sendak stated in his acceptance speech of the American Library Association Caldecott Medal in 1964 that "Max, the hero of my book, discharges his anger against his mother and returns to the real world sleepy, hungry and at peace with himself. Certainly we want to protect our children from new and painful experiences that are beyond their emotional comprehension and that intensify anxiety, and to a point we can prevent premature exposure to such experiences. That is obvious. But what is just as obvious – and what is too often overlooked – is the fact that from their earliest years children live on familiar terms with disrupting emotions, that fear and anxiety are an intrinsic part of their everyday lives, that they continually cope with frustrations as best they can. And it is through fantasy that children achieve catharsis. It is the best means they have for taming Wild Things."

"It is my involvement with this inescapable fact of childhood – the awful vulnerability of children and their struggle to make themselves King of all the Wild things – that gives my work whatever truth and passion it may have."

### **Why do playworkers need to be aware of Wild Things?**

Playworkers need to be aware that through play, especially through fantasy children can achieve catharsis. Play may be the best means that children have for taming their "Wild Things". In understanding this playworkers need to be aware of their role in advocating for children's right to play and protecting this method for achieving catharsis and not letting children's play be sanitised into "playing nicely". As a playworker, how do we respond to children's anger?

Many adults are afraid of the anger that some children are capable of and how to respond to it. How do playworkers respond to children's play that contains dark themes? What are our responses and what is the impact on children's play? If a play space is the children's space, is that a space where they can be wild?

Playworkers also need to be aware of their own "Wild Things", the complex range of emotions and conflicts that they encounter and the impact these can have on children's play. If playworkers want to encourage children to manage their emotions they need to consider how they manage their own. Playworkers need to reflect on the children they are involved with and their journeys to be "Kings of the Wild Things".

**For further reading**

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