

Neighbourhood play and community action

The Neighbourhood Play Toolkit was conceived to develop and pilot a practical, comprehensive set of resources for improving public neighbourhood play spaces and services for children and young people. Five local community groups took part in developing and piloting the resources, which sought to bring together 'play development' and 'community development'. This summary, by Haki Kapasi and based on the project's self-evaluation and the reflections of those taking part, draws together lessons learnt from the pilots:

- Taking part in developing the toolkit was a valuable, enriching experience for most of those involved. Many gained confidence, increased their skills and knowledge, and were proud to be part of something that made a difference in their community.
- The tangible, achievable vision – to develop safe places for their children to play – was important in galvanising those involved. Having a vision for their children, and therefore the future, gave those who took part energy, enthusiasm, a problem-solving attitude and determination. The clarity of this vision enabled them to negotiate with partners more effectively.
- Participating in a play development project built networks within the community, increased opportunities for children and adults to come together, expanded partnerships and thus increased social capital.
- The pilot projects attracted additional financial resources to achieve their objectives. They also attracted in-kind support such as volunteers, access to community buildings, expert advice and information.
- Participation in developing the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit led to opportunities for personal development. Individuals carried out new tasks, undertook responsible positions, and some progressed to qualification courses and higher education.
- An important thread running throughout the pilots was the need for opportunities for affirmation. Celebrations, press coverage, achieving training qualifications, and prizes for children helped to maintain momentum and increase confidence.
- Development of the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit offered a practical framework for realising a vision. A flexible, responsive approach to developing play opportunities was important, especially because of the varying levels of knowledge and confidence in the groups. Group members also felt it was important to set clear objectives and targets, to help them map progress against milestones and encourage them to continue.



Background

The importance of play in children's development is well understood by child development theorists, early years practitioners and those offering play provision for older children. Children's opportunities to play outside safely and freely are increasingly restricted because of adults' fears for children's safety. The two main concerns stopping children from playing out are traffic and harm by strangers. To respond to these decreasing opportunities for playing out, the Children's Play Council, supported by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Housing Corporation, carried out a three-year action research project to develop and pilot, in a small number of areas, a practical and comprehensive set of resources for improving public neighbourhood play spaces and services for children and young people.

The project's unique feature was the synthesis of play development and community development. For the purposes of this summary, play is defined as:

“What children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons.” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2004) *Getting serious about play, a review of children's play*)

Five pilot projects were chosen:

- Boston Mayflower Housing Association, Lincolnshire;
- Fazakerley Youth Action Group, in the Adlam Estate, Liverpool;
- Kingcraig Estate, Blackpool;
- New Earswick, York;
- Victoria Geldof, York.

Three of the pilots were in areas of low income, with some having very poor neighbourhood facilities. The estates in York were in mixed-tenure neighbourhoods containing both social and private-sector housing. While the final outcome was the creation of more play spaces and services for children and young people, inherent to the project was the development of communities. The Children's Play Council appointed a development worker to support the groups during the pilot phase.

Play generated vision

The most successful pilots were those where participants had clarity of vision, which gave them energy, stamina and enthusiasm. Play offered an ideal vehicle for vision-building for community members. Creating safe, accessible play spaces where their children could burn off energy, make friends and experience a sense of

freedom seemed tangible and achievable. Furthermore, a vision for play enabled community members to focus on the future – represented in the children – and on a vulnerable group in their communities. Children were perceived as innocent victims of social and economic deprivation, and it was the job of adults, irrespective of their own circumstances, to create something better for their children. Play, and the toolkit project, helped to galvanise this belief into a concrete reality, so that community members could become co-creators of their children's futures. They worked on the basis of generosity and openness, learning as they went along, about more effective strategic interventions. And of course, everyone had played when they were young, so it was easy to identify with this essential need.

When the groups became enthused with their vision, they found ways to overcome barriers to their progress. They were less problem focused and more solution focused. Their vision enabled them to identify opportunities, resources, strategies and people who could help them to achieve their goals. It imbued them with a determination to reach their goals, overcoming hurdles and seizing opportunities along the way.

Clarity of vision was also fundamental when negotiating with a range of partners. It helped to identify what was realistic and achievable, and encouraged accountability. Community groups were able to express their needs and listen to what their partners were able to offer in helping to meet those needs. As one community member said:

“There may not be a shared common vision between agencies and the local community. The agency needs to put their cards on the table and everyone must be realistic about what can be achieved and don't raise false hopes.”

Play built social capital

In developing play opportunities for children and young people, community members met on a regular basis to discuss their progress, make further plans and develop their ideas. This generated opportunities to develop relationships, build networks, increase trust and share visions and aspirations as well as personal problems. Successes were celebrated along the way, and intergenerational conflicts addressed.

As a naturally social and cooperative activity, play itself was able to build social capital. Children usually like to play with other children, and play not only brought children together, but also provided a non-threatening environment for adults to build relationships. By helping parents and carers to get to know each other through their children, play encouraged a sense of community. Thus play could act as the glue bringing communities together, thereby increasing social capital. One

participant also described play as the glue that brought different initiatives together.

Built into the draft toolkit were consultations with adults, children and young people. Consultations offered everyone in the local community a chance to express their opinions, listen to other views, and develop play opportunities to meet the local community's needs. Above all, consultations created consensus in the community where conflict prevailed. They helped to bridge differences and create dialogue, particularly when dealing with intergenerational conflict. Consultations showed that everyone in the local area, young and old, mostly wanted similar things – harmony, sense of safety and sense of belonging.

In one pilot, hostility (based on fear) towards the children in the area by older members of the community was transformed into dialogue and understanding. One community member said that:

“The elders used to be cantankerous with the children, but now they talk to them.”

Play increased community resources

The pilot projects attracted sometimes considerable resources into their local communities as a result of taking part in developing the Neighbourhood Play Toolkit. Some raised substantial funds with support from development workers – one group raised £1.1 million and others in the region of £70,000. Play development projects could be attached to a multitude of initiatives, such as regeneration projects, environmental schemes, housing development, community development initiatives, arts projects and even heritage projects, each offering an opportunity to attract funding.

Many of the pilots attracted and used in-kind resources, such as expert advice, access to development workers, volunteers (for example through the Probation Services to redecorate a community centre), access to meeting rooms and refreshments.

The most successful pilots were those which established effective partnerships right at the beginning. Those whose partnerships were broad and had representation from local authorities, voluntary-sector organisations, local councillors and those working on other community initiatives were the most effective. Partnerships facilitated information sharing, identification of resources (both in kind and financial) and the bringing together of seemingly different schemes running in the area. The groups were able to use the different expertise of each partner to enhance their work. However, the pilots indicated that sometimes they lacked adequate expertise, and the availability of more expert advice would have been useful, particularly from local development workers.

Play development helped personal development

As individuals took part in the pilots, they identified more and more training and development needs. For example, participating in the steering group required knowledge of how to run meetings; for many, this was a new experience. They learnt how to set agendas, take minutes and negotiate with each other, and acquired basic skills such as not talking at the same time. As people organised activities and events, they identified further training needs, such as health and safety and first aid. It was important, therefore, to ensure that a range of training opportunities were available for them to meet their growing needs and awareness. A number of those taking part in the pilots studied further, gaining qualifications in working with children or working towards higher education.

Affirmation was important to everyone

Affirmation was important for children and adults alike. In communities experiencing persistent low levels of achievement and expectations, affirmation was even more important. Affirmation for the adults involved came in many different forms: seeing the children take part in creative activities, press coverage, winning awards, being invited to open a local park, the presence of councillors at meetings, achieving a vocational qualification or certificate, or successful fund raising. Being selected to take part in a national project was also an important affirmation.

Affirmations were encouraging, demonstrated progress and helped to pursue the vision, even during difficult periods. The most effective support workers *planned* affirmations into the projects, and developed mini projects within the wider pilot to ensure that the groups remained positive and optimistic. Planning for small, but quick successes and achievements demonstrated progress, which was important for the core group and the wider community.

Planning in play development

The draft Neighbourhood Play Toolkit, which included the support of the Children's Play Council development worker, provided an organised structure for realising a vision. Without this structure, it is questionable whether the groups would have achieved as much as they did. The groups needed a framework to help them to get started. Once started, they were able to progress better using the structure provided in the draft toolkit.

Working with children in play development and community development required flexibility and responsiveness. Group development in each of the pilots was varied, with some groups achieving good results in a short space of time and others taking much longer. The groups appreciated the development worker's responsive, flexible

approach. They themselves also had to respond quickly to unexpected opportunities during the pilots.

The groups also felt that it was important to set clear targets. Targets helped them to identify and monitor their achievements, and provided a structure and focus for reaching their ultimate goal. Targets helped to set boundaries for those groups that had a tendency to want to be part of every initiative or event in the area. Targets helped to celebrate important milestones and ensure accountability.

Reflection and evaluation occurred primarily through interviews with the external consultant writer. The groups found this a useful opportunity to review their progress and evaluate their learning, and recommended it as an intrinsic part of the process. Reflection and review were mostly affirming. The groups were able to assess their growing levels of confidence, increased learning and knowledge and, finally, the difference they had made for the whole community.

Conclusion

The Neighbourhood Play Toolkit development project began as a process aimed at developing and testing materials for use by local groups, supporting them in developing play spaces and play opportunities in local neighbourhoods. But in actuality it was more than that. It was a tool for building social capital and for enriching the lives of all those who took part and were impacted on by the project and its outcomes. Some of the pilot projects' steering group members lived in stressful situations, with poor-quality housing, low incomes and few neighbourhood facilities. Yet they were able to reach beyond themselves and look to the whole of their neighbourhood. They were driven by a vision for improving the lives of the children in their area. This vision led them to be positive, overcome setbacks, find

solutions and make a difference. Their own reflections on their learning showed deep levels of awareness, wisdom and generosity in sharing their learning with others.

The Neighbourhood Play Toolkit development project was a catalyst that ignited their enthusiasm and harnessed their potential and energy. They used all the opportunities, partnerships and resources available to them to achieve their vision. Their participation brought real and positive changes to the neighbourhoods in which they lived.

About the project

Over a two-year period, from September 2002, Children's Play Council worked with five community groups to pilot and test materials for a *Neighbourhood Play Toolkit*. The groups had responded to a 'call for partners' from CPC and were selected because they were established groups keen to develop local play provision. The CPC development worker supported the groups, working closely with local support workers where they existed, testing and developing tools to enable the process. After two years of intensive support the CPC development officer withdrew and the groups continued to develop their provision. The materials trialled by the pilots were published on a CD-ROM in January 2006 and are now being used by many local projects.

For further information

The full report, *Neighbourhood play and community action* by Haki Kapasi, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

The Neighbourhood Play Toolkit, *Organise, Create, Sustain* is available on CD-ROM, priced £25.00, from the National Children's Bureau's on-line bookshop (www.ncb-books.org.uk).

Published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, The Homestead, 40 Water End, York YO30 6WP. This project is part of the JRF's research and development programme. These findings, however, are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Foundation. ISSN 0958-3084

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