

# Editorial

BY ROBYN MONRO MILLER

# REFLECTIONS ON THE ADULT'S ROLE IN CHILDREN'S PLAY

*With the passage of time comes the appreciation that what made my childhood so special was time. Time to explore. Time to discover. The time to start play experiences and then spend days playing out each individual story with the changing characters, costumes and environments. These play stories often resulted in the play spaces used being uninhabitable by adults for days and sometimes weeks.*

*It was these same adults that chided me for not going outside and "having a play", who packed up their picnic baskets and collected the children and then headed out for time in a new space where adult conversations mingled with the sounds of children's play.*

If I were to reflect on the role of adults in play it could be many things- facilitators, - catalysts, defenders, and champions. But all these things I surmise come down to one singular concept, the most fundamental role of each adult is the provision of time. Perhaps that is why we call it Playtime?

## **ADULTS CAN CREATE TIME WHERE NO TIME EXISTS**

Adults must be proactive in ensuring that children have time to play. It is the human right of every child. However, it is not always adults in today's world that restrain the opportunities for play. On that day it was my own child that broke the silence of that moment with her sighed lament b "I wish I could play tennis."

The range and availability of adult led, organised activities in our modern communities is immense. Couple that with a child's natural curiosity, energy and quest for new and interesting experiences and you have a combination that is potentially a more destructive child led force against free play than any adult can provide. We as adults need to ensure that we quarantine time for children to engage in free play, even when they themselves are too consumed in seeking out the best and latest in classes and clubs, I did not enrol my 10 year old child for the range of activities she has signed herself up for. In fact, of the 6 organised activities she does each week. I have still not satisfied her desire to be enrolled in Hip Hop, Soccer and an obscure activity called "Star time"... for which I am regularly reprimanded in any pre-pubescent argument. But I believe that if I were to indulge her natural desire for structure and adult focused activity I would be doing a more fundamental disservice to her life - denying her the opportunity to develop the self awareness and creativity that play will provide for her.

## **GIVE TIME FOR THE PLAY PROCESS TO HAVE A BEGINNING A MIDDLE AND AN END**

Like a good story the process of play can take days to enact and just like a good story it can enrich us and leave us with new perspective. The importance of children having the ability to extend their games across the course of days and weeks is rarely acknowledged in a world that is frighteningly negative about disarray. The adult directions to pack up play spaces each day destroys the natural pattern if children's play. Play is not always a short

process finished in an afternoon and yet the need to confine play to such strict parameters restricts and inhibits children's development. Adults should ensure children have regular spaces that do not need to be interrupted and fulfil their function as a play story. The cubbies, the dens and the props that children use to create their play spaces allow for the story to develop and in doing so children have the opportunity to create their own world through their play space.

## **COMMIT TIME TO FINDING PLACES FOR PLAY TO OCCUR**

Adults can be wonderful resources to enrich and expand on children's play. A child focussed adult continually sees play opportunities in a myriad of places and spaces offering them up to children as gifts. Adults can share their own childhood play spaces with children and work with children to find and develop new ones.

The reality of children playing "unhindered by adults" roaming the streets and parks from early morning till late and not returning till dinner time is a historical oddity for many communities. This myth has been perpetuated regarding children in days gone by having an amazing level of freedom enjoyed by all children. Yet in speaking with different generations their experiences of play vary and in most cases were not this model of playful freedom.

If we are to truly encourage a worldwide movement that supports play for children we need to create a more realistic view of where play can occur and how adults can facilitate that play. The fear of risk is real to many families. Play purists may condemn me, but as a parent in a community full of parents and children, this is our reality. By creating guilt that our children can only benefit from such examples of free play and the illusion that play only occurs in such instances, advocates are hindering the development of play rather than facilitating it. Play is flexible, spontaneous and evolves - so why can't our ideas on play evolve? An appreciation that play can and does occur anywhere children are found needs to be supported and promoted. Whether these play spaces are institutions or the natural environments, an appreciation of what happens in these spaces must outweigh the location.

As bystanders to children's play in the community we can use our influence as constituents by challenging our community leaders to have play on their own political agenda and in their vision for their communities.



Places that will provide for children play opportunities within their own community should be viewed as fundamental to society. We should never take for granted that play will be considered by our leaders without the constant presence of a vigilant community.

## **GIVE TIME TO CHALLENGING COMMUNITY PRACTICES THAT ROB CHILDREN OF PLAYTIME.**

Being a champion for children's play is an adult's way of repaying the debt of their own childhood play experiences.

Like environmental campaigners of the 1970's we need to engage not just hearts through emotive, reminiscing but also minds, and move play out the field of adult memories into an economic and global imperative. Adults hearts are already engaged in play, we now need to engage their heads. As champions of play we need to take the time to measure the impact on the economy, the impact on the environment and the consequences for society when children are not given opportunities to play. It is these arguments that will build a case for play provision more strongly than that based on the reminisces from a mythological utopia.

The role of adults in children's play cannot be relegated to that filled by the traditional play worker, all adults must be responsible for facilitating play.

As is the natural order of life in the western world, the children in my neighbourhood have now grown up and left home. My childhood play space has become a stylish garden, the pride and joy of my retiree parents. The adults that shooed us out to play are silver haired. However, as I watch my mother hanging the washing on the line while her grandchildren commence building cubby houses around her garden, I appreciate that she, like the rest of the grandparents in the street are still champions for children's play, facilitating play time in the most unlikely places, and she, like the rest of the community just does not know it.

*Extract from International Play Association Journal September 2010.*