

Alliance for Childhood

Playwork in Chicago

The Alliance for Childhood has been working with the Park District of Franklin Park, Illinois, just outside Chicago, and playworker Penny Wilson from London to infuse a new spirit of play in Franklin Park's recreation programs for children. The seeds sown in the first year of the project have flourished in unexpected and gratifying ways. Activities in 2006 had three components:

1. Continuation of last year's training of staff from the Park District of Franklin Park. This year the staff was joined by two "play partners" from the Hamill Family Play Zoo, a beautifully designed center for play at Chicago's Brookfield Zoo.
2. A conference on play and playwork attended by about 50 staff members from the parks departments of Franklin Park and Oak Park, the Hamill Family Play Zoo, the Lincoln Park Zoo, and several children's museums in the Chicago area and in Michigan.
3. An intensive review and planning session with Joe Modrich, director of the Parks Department of Franklin Park, and a meeting with Franklin Park staff working on the early childhood program.

I. Training Session, May 10, 2006

Playworker Penny Wilson began by asking the staff to report on their efforts to incorporate more play in their programs since last year. In each area of the park and recreation program, they reported, play has increased noticeably, and staff, parents, and children are happy with the results. Enrollments for the various programs have increased since play has become a strong component in them. Staff members mentioned that the children were clearly enthusiastic and the parents delighted in seeing their children so happy.

The staff told of changes they had seen: The after-school program leader described how parents often came from work to pick up their children looking tired and stressed. As they stood at the large window and watched their children play, they visibly relaxed, and then entered the room in a much calmer mood. At the ice arena, children were encouraged to choreograph their own pieces for the figure skating program, and staff found them capable and very creative. The preschool teachers were enthusiastic about the changes in their program and how much more engaged the children were in play and exploratory learning.

The summer camp staff initially had some difficulties integrating play into the program, in part because of the special needs of some campers. But once play was established the children did better than they would have in a "rules-based program," according to the parks director. The camp director also spoke of the new direction with enthusiasm. This year for the first time they had enough participants to run winter and spring day camps during school vacations. These camps were strongly play-based. All of these staff members indicated that they wanted to continue integrating play into their programs and build on what they had accomplished.

Penny introduced a definition of play used in the U.K.: “Play is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.” She described different types of play, such as rough and tumble, locomotor (running, jumping, etc.), imaginative, and social. In the afternoon 15 four-year-olds came to play outdoors in a specially prepared enriched environment so that staff could observe them, take notes, and then discuss the types of play they had seen. The children were completely engrossed in play for about 90 minutes. What especially impressed the staff was how engaged the children were, with no fussing or fighting, and how capable they were in using work tools and props.

The children played dress-up, dug in the sand, and experienced the sensation of mud and water. Penny had asked that small hammers, nails, and balsa wood be provided for the children. Instead, there was a large thick board with heavy adult hammers and large nails. At first it seemed the children would not be able to manage these materials, but a number of them chose to work at it and became quite accomplished in hammering in the nails and also in using their full body strength to take the nails out. The staff were astonished at how competent the children became in a short time and that they did not hurt themselves.

II. Play conference, May 11, 2006

Gillian D. McNamee, director of teacher education at the Erikson Institute, gave a talk titled “The Dramatic Life of Young Children in Play,” illustrating the importance of socio-dramatic play in children’s development. She argued that there are four vital signs of health in children: eating, sleeping, toileting, and playing.

London playworker Penny Wilson presented vivid pictures of play and playwork through a series of stories about children at play, particularly children with serious disabilities.

Dave Becker, director of the Hamill Family Play Zoo, described how the zoo fosters play indoors and out through arts, dress-up and make-believe play, play in beautiful natural settings, gardening, and more. He illustrated his talk with photos of the play zoo, which is designed primarily for children but also provides opportunities for adult playfulness.

In the concluding session, Franklin Park staff conducted a rich conversation about their experiences in bringing play into their programs.

III. Planning for the Future

On the closing day, Penny Wilson and Joan Almon met with Joe Modrich to review his extensive action list for integrating play in his program and for spreading the word about play and playwork. This included presentations at the annual conference of parks departments in Illinois and nationally, and building on relationships with local parks departments, children’s museums, zoos, and other venues that support play. We plan to bring Penny to Chicago twice in 2007.