

Alliance for Childhood

Building a Movement for Play

A growing number of children suffer from play deprivation, which affects their mental and physical health and their cognitive and social capacities. To address this crisis and find solutions the Alliance for Childhood held a meeting of professionals from diverse fields in May 2006 in New York City. (See list of participants below.)

One focus of the session was “playwork,” a profession well known in the United Kingdom, where playworkers help create safe environments for children’s creative, open-ended play. Could a similar profession be developed in the U.S. with professionals trained to work in parks, children’s museums, after-school programs, and other venues?

By the end of the day it was clear that playwork was needed, but so were a number of other interventions that, combined, could help restore play to childhood.

Dr. Roger Hart of the Children’s Environments Research Group at the City University of New York, who helped host the meeting, spoke of the need for play advocates and of a movement for play. Penny Wilson, a veteran playworker from London, gave vivid descriptions of how playworkers support children in their own creative play. She also introduced the group to a definition of play used in the U.K.: “Play is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated.”

There is at present no single organization or group spearheading a coalition for the restoration of play or providing a clearinghouse for information on play, yet it is clear that all those attending the meeting—as well as many others who were not present—are working hard to preserve and restore play. In this sense a movement of individuals and organizations already exists, but its members need to be more aware of one another and give mutual encouragement and support for others’ endeavors.

Each person at the table spoke of what he or she could do individually or through his or her organization to help restore play in the U.S. Here is a brief overview:

The Alliance for Childhood (www.allianceforchildhood.org), represented at the meeting by Joan Almon and Ed Miller, will continue to promote playwork in a host of settings, commission needed research on play and formal instruction in early childhood education, and work with others to develop a national campaign to restore play to early education. The Alliance is sponsoring Penny Wilson’s work in New York, Chicago, and, next year, California. It will also publicize its play campaign at the annual conferences of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

The American Association for the Child’s Right to Play (www.ipausa.org), represented by Sharon Schneider of Hofstra University, will continue its focus on the need for play in general and specifically its campaign for school recess, which includes online training. They also focus on play days across the country and work with

International Play Association chapters in other countries, including Canada. They also work closely with TASP, the Association for the Study of Play. IPA-USA's next conference will be at the Strong Museum, the national museum of play, in Rochester, New York, in April 2007.

The Strong Museum in Rochester (www.strongmuseum.org), represented by Joan Hoffman, redefined its mission three years ago from being a toy museum to being a play museum. It now has a director of play. The museum is undergoing major renovations and doubling its size, including outdoor space for the first time. They can help educate visitors about play. Next year they expect 700,000 will visit as families and 60,000 to 70,000 schoolchildren will visit. They are exploring how to bring playwork into the museum via their "gallery hosts" who can help fuel play. A suggested motto for adults supporting children in play: "Feed It, Don't Lead It."

The Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College (www.slc.edu/childdevelopmentinstitute.php), represented by Margery Franklin, Jan Drucker, Barbara Schecter, and Lauren Franco, has been aware of playwork for some years and the need for training of professional playworkers. At the meeting they expressed their interest in hosting conferences and workshops on play and playwork and perhaps eventually offering some kind of program—leading to a certificate or master's degree—in playwork at Sarah Lawrence. CDI has also produced a series of short films on early childhood, one of which, titled "When a Child Pretends," is specifically about play.

Roger Hart of the City University of New York's Children's Environments Research Group (web.gc.cuny.edu/che/ceerg/about_ceerg/index.htm) spoke of his work with UNICEF and others about play in this country and abroad. He recommended every effort be made to bring in the recreation movement. He will continue his work in New York and elsewhere, and will devote the coming year to writing a book that looks at his hometown in Vermont 30 years after doing interviews with children about their play habits. Now he will interview the same 86 individuals about the differences in their children's play experiences.

Jane Andrias, former principal of Central Park East I Elementary School in East Harlem and now a New York City-based education consultant, is working with Deborah Meier and other activists on a campaign to address the crisis in early childhood education. Their group, based at New York University, is called New York Voices of Childhood. Jane also spoke of the need to start talking about play within families.

Elizabeth Goodenough of the University of Michigan has raised funds for the production of a PBS documentary and accompanying book titled "Where Do the Children Play?" She has also secured funding for an outreach project that will promote the film via roundtable conversations in 100 targeted cities, with intensive activities in ten of them. The film and book are scheduled for release in spring 2007.

Bill Crain, professor of psychology at CUNY, will continue his battle with the New York City Parks Department to keep real grass in the parks and playgrounds, and will

also resume his work with them to have their employees support play as the old “parkies” did. He has tried to place student volunteers in the parks to help with play and will resume that effort. He strongly advocated a national campaign or conference on play and its relation to mental health. He also pointed out that the natural playworker is the grandparent.

Jennifer Astuto, assistant professor of education at Long Island University, will be teaching a summer course in 2007 with a focus on play. She will also do a literature review on the cultural and social aspects of play and how to assess them, and has written an editorial for the Play Policy and Practice Forum of NAEYC. She is also doing research on the status of play and formal instruction in New York’s public kindergartens.

Willie Weisz and Fred Druck, who work on playground design, said they would be meeting with a major playground equipment manufacturer. They hope to help them design better playgrounds, including finding ways to design equipment appropriate for different sites, taking into account existing trees, shade, sunlight, etc.

Penny Wilson, professional playworker from London, said that if she lived in the U.S. she would focus on grassroots activities in neighborhoods to strengthen play in local parks.

Louise deForest of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association will continue her lecturing on childhood and in particular her work on media and play. She reported a strong interest in this theme: 1,000 people came to hear her speak on the topic recently in Mexico.

Lia Sutton (<http://adventureplaygrounds.hampshire.edu>), a recent graduate of Hampshire College, spoke of her commitment to adventure playgrounds. As part of her senior project she visited adventure playgrounds in Europe and worked in the Berkeley, California adventure playground. She has published a booklet and established a web site, and intends to establish adventure playgrounds across the country.