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[Home](#) > Playworking communities to communities which play

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## Playworking communities to communities which play

[Morgan Leichter-Saxby](#) [1]

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As play workers interested in community-based work might argue that if play is “what children do” (Ward, 1978) then children’s local opportunities for play might be understood as a measure of how “child-friendly” their community is.

Frequently understood as an instinct and need, the expressions of the play drive (story-telling, den-building, ludic movement, etc) can also be seen as creating, sharing and adapting culture. This point of view positions children as community agents, and as the creators of social capital.

However, in many communities children's play behaviors are ghettoized, corralled into fixed equipment playgrounds, school break times, and the private home. As children's play is marginalized physically and temporally, so are children's first means of engagement with the world.

Play is also marginalized conceptually. The above quote may be reframed as “play is what children do” (emphasis mine), as playful approaches to the world are often seen as “impractical” frivolous”, and so “pointless”. This is admittedly an improvement from communities which regard it as satanic – but the strict adult regulation of the spaces and times allotted to children's play demonstrate the profound anxiety associated with it (Chudacoff 2007).

The freedoms and subversions, the anarchistic tendencies of children at play are viewed as potentially dangerous or wasteful. The instinct to play, which continues throughout the human life span, is then appropriated by corporations seeking to satisfy those needs for us through a consumer relationship – providing a “safe” and “valuable” outlet for these impulses, for a fee.

Children's responses and resistances to this systemic oppression are customarily misunderstood, by adults who were raised under a similar system which they are now in a position to benefit from, suffer from, and perpetuate. The behaviors of children deprived of play are often distinguished by withdrawal and aggression, by the “rapid firing of play cues” (Sturrock & Else 1998) and by poor skills at social negotiation. Pank-sepp (2007) noted that there are many cases where great play urges of children are unfulfilled and often diagnosed as ADHD or ODD, or simply “acting out”. This is not to say that the underlying cognitive or social circumstances given these terms do not exist - but that they are exacerbated by a stringent adult definition of “appropriate behavior”, and by few opportunities to for the release and self-regulation experienced during free play. Once medicalized or pathologized, children displaying these behaviors are often seen as proving the systems “right” - demonstrating that children are inherently unruly and unreliable, ignoring suggestions that they are made this way by adults.

Inclusive play provision which supports children’s self-directed processes of spatial, social and conceptual exploration have demonstrated the remarkable and immediate benefits of play in children’s lives. Playworkers believe that, outside the most extreme of cases, children know how to play instinctively and are experts in their own play. This faith in children to teach themselves ways to negotiate boundaries, assess and take risks, and to recognize and meet their individual needs given the chance is in direct contrast to the suspicion adults frequently expressed towards them. All children have needs with are “special”, and all benefit from environments rich in multi-sensory potential, staffed with trained empathetic professionals and populated by a group of children diverse in age, background and ability. By helping to remove the physical, social and internalized barriers that stand between children and free expression of their drive to play, playworkers open the possibilities for children’s engagement with and co-creation of social capital, culture and community.

Organizations such as Pop-Up Adventure Play (PUAP 2012) offer programming designed to open public spaces such as parks, libraries and gardens to these playful expressions. Events such as Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds and Pop- Up Play Shops (PUPS 2012) create celebrations of play which are enormously persuasive to a range of community members internationally. Local organizers of these events cite such secondary ambitions as the rebuilding of social networks broken by war (Colombia), the reclaiming of streets for children’s play (USA), and the rejuvenation of ailing city centres (UK). Opening playwork provision to the observation and participation of all ages begins to heal generations of social rupture and repression of the play drive through shared humor, novelty and joy. They provide an alternative framework for understanding challenging behavior (Russell 2006) and encourage visitors to create memories, build friendships, and become involved in a global movement for play.

These events and programs also create opportunities to playwork whole communities by engaging local residents in conversation and in play. Playwork's emphasis on loose parts (Taylor 2008) demonstrates ways in which scrap can be reused and recycled as low- and no- cost opportunities for play. Issues such as obesity and ADHD are reframed by positive messaging, through the sharing of joy, appreciation of risk and bravery, practice of non-judgmental support, and a fundamental trust in children. By valuing play, we recognize children as experts in their own play and creators of social capital – and in so doing, move them and their play from the periphery to the centre of community life.

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### Tags:

[Play working](#) [4]

[Communities](#) [5]

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### Links

[1] <http://educationaltoolsportal.eu/en/tools-for-learning/morgan-leichter-saxby>

[2] <http://www.popupadventureplay.org>

[3] <http://www.popupplayshop.org>

[4] <http://educationaltoolsportal.eu/en/tools-for-learning/tags/play-working>

[5] <http://educationaltoolsportal.eu/en/tools-for-learning/tags/communities>