

What is a Playworker?

Playworkers lay the groundwork for kids to figure it out on their own

How is a Playworker different from a Teacher or Coach?

A playworker recognizes that play is not all sunshine and Hula Hoops. It is deep. It requires time, concentration, thinking—and sometimes arguing, testing, and risking. When children are playing in a supervised setting, rather than, say, the woods, it also requires that the adults on hand understand and support the “work of play” going on.

“We aim to provide a play environment in which children will laugh and cry; where they can explore and experiment, create and destroy... feel excited and elated... bored and frustrated, and may sometimes hurt themselves; where they can get help, support, and encouragement from others when they require it; where they can grow to be independent and self-reliant; where they can learn—in the widest possible sense—about themselves, about others, and about the world.”
-- Stuart Lester, author of “Play for a Change.”

The playworker’s job involves ALMOST “disappearing” so children get the most out of play. This is not being lazy. This is recognizing that play is quite different from “being entertained.” It is how children experience and make sense of the world. Without it, children are crippled socially and emotionally.

The playworker plays an important, intentional role in preparing, guiding and documenting the open-ended learning experience.

“What a playworker does not do is say, ‘This afternoon we will be face painting and playing canasta. Then you will do 30 minutes of ‘keep-fit’ and then have a health snack,’” writes playworker Penny Wilson. “Play is the children’s business.”

That doesn’t mean playworkers are completely hands-off. Rather, they must strive to nearly re-create the unsupervised play of yesteryear, while subtly providing tools and intervention when absolutely necessary. Some examples:

- Two boys are shoving each other because both want to be “King.” A playworker walks by, seemingly oblivious to them but quietly muttering to herself, “A country can have two kings.”
- A child sits alone, unable to come up with anything to do. A playworker walks by with a toy he acts interested in, and leaves it near enough for the child to discover it herself.
- A playworker brings out cardboard boxes and nonchalantly sets out tape, magic markers and the like, then walks away to “do something else.”

In all these cases, the playworkers wear the “Cloak of Invisibility.” Rather than directing, teaching or scolding, they lay the groundwork for kids to figure out the situation on their own.

At the end of each day, playworkers share with their colleagues the stories of the play they’ve seen, and discuss what might enrich it even more. This reflection gets them closer to the playing, and even more committed to ensuring their children get the deepest, most educational play experience.