

Play stories

Thanks to Bridie, Charlie and all the other children over the decades who gave me the enormous privilege of being a small part of these stories. And behind many of them is my wife Sue Coates who co-created with children the wonderful spaces in which the stories could be seen.

Cardboard City

I was about to put the large cardboard Pampers nappy box out with the rubbish when I found my one-year-old daughter Bridie inside it. We played peek-a-boo for a bit and then out of nowhere I had a light-bulb moment. I cut little window shutters and flaps in the box to make peek-a-boo a bit more unpredictable and hilarious - for both of us. The next day Bridie and most of her soft toys moved into what became their main residence for months.

I'd forgotten about this until years later I walked into a Shoreditch railway arch where a furniture import/export firm had thousands of large flatpacked cardboard boxes and Cardboard City was born. We called it that as a small political provocation – this was the late eighties in Hackney after all.

Cardboard City became massively popular because most children instantly got the concept that you could make anything in a city out of cardboard. Carton-sealing tape machines made it easy for even little children to tape large boxes up. Giant markers encouraged them to draw the shapes of doors and windows at the right scale before cutting them – with smaller pens they tended to draw tiny doors the size of a cat flap (though many of the cardboard house doors featured a cat flap and indeed cardboard cats). We discovered that blunt-edged serrated letter openers were cheap and brilliant cutting tools that children could easily and safely use – grapefruit knives were an early mistake and Stanley knives were a no-no from the start.

We learned not to chuck out hundreds of boxes in one go at play sessions - a more controlled supply created an interesting dynamic that swayed between competition and cooperation, between negotiation and fights over resources, between helping to make and deliberately wrecking other children's makings. It also meant that left-over bits were used in much more interesting and creative ways, like making the cats for the cat flaps.

Over the years Cardboard City became a sort of culture with old hands making a beeline for the boxes and tools, with new children circling round the edge and gradually being drawn in. Most constructions only lasted a day, but others on adventure playgrounds lasted weeks or more and children often carried their creations home. I was told by parents that a boy had set his cardboard house up in the front room by the telly and refused to sleep anywhere else for weeks - I could relate to that! A girl had set hers up at the top of her bed, put her pillow in it and carefully positioned her bedside light on the windowsill to shine through her cardboard cut-out window so she could read her books. Another boy put his cardboard tepee out on the balcony of his block of flats and insisted on eating and sleeping in it all summer.

What the children made was precious to them at the time of making and for some of them over much longer times, for reasons we can never really know. But the children who insisted on keeping and bringing their constructions home were telling us something about what was important to them. The playworkers in playgrounds that left their constructions in place and respected them by doing so gave the children the message that anything was possible and that their play was important.

Here Fred, have some cornflakes

A boy aged about five was playing with a knobbly piece of wood and pieces of the adventure playground crushed bark safety surface, chattering away to himself and his play objects. A playworker came by and asked: "What are you doing?" "Nothing" he said, shrugging his shoulders - end of conversation. She shrugged in reply and went about her business of putting up the swings. About five minutes later, another playworker asked him: "Who's that?" This time he said: "This is my dog. She's called Fred! And she's very, very naughty. But she's hungry too. Here Fred, have some

cornflakes” as he fed bits of bark to Fred. The conversation continued for several minutes, curling and spiralling fantastically around animals and favourite food and all sorts of stuff I can’t now remember.

Both playworkers had asked open rather than closed questions, but his responses were very different. He was an exceptionally bright and playful child, but his mum and dad were having serious relationship problems at the time and he could often be solitary and quiet in his play. Both playworkers knew what was going on in his life, but it was the empathy and understanding of the second playworker that I think encouraged him to extend his play. He was happy to let her into what we now understand to be his play frame - her more playful approach encouraged him to respond with verbal play cues in a way he didn’t to the first playworker.

Beans

The playworkers heard hysterical laughter and came out of the building to find about ten children, mostly girls, facing a girl sitting on the playground ‘throne’ - a brightly painted massively oversized chair built out of poles and planks. The girl on the throne called out “Mexican!” The children jumped up and down. “Baked!” The children pretended to fart, holding their noses. “Black-eyed!” They pretended to punch themselves in the eye. “Runner! They ran madly on the spot. “French!” They shook hands and bowed politely saying “Bonjour” to each other. “Has!” They mimed limping with walking sticks or shuffling along with Zimmer frames.

Just think about the imagination and wit (has-beans!) involved in this one-off wonder that had absolutely no playworker or other adult intervention apart from creating a space on and around which it could possibly happen. This for me is an example of the essence of play and playwork, and evidence, if any were needed, that children are the experts in their play.

Throughout they were watching and outdoing each other in ever more ridiculous acting out and movement. The game had never been seen on the playground before, lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes and has never been repeated as far as we know. When asked how it had come about, the children said they’d made it up.

In fact there are lots of beans games and suggestions or even instructions about how to play them all over the internet. But none have the playful subversion of this version.

Archaeology

The children had been enjoying digging and mixing clay to make a wood-fired mud oven based on a traditional Turkish type, but with added play features like having real grass growing on the outside, populated with plastic toy animals. Another story in itself was the look on the Ofsted inspector’s face when told it was actually used. By children! To cook pizzas! Which they made themselves! And actually ate! And nobody died!

Although the oven was finished, the children kept on digging in a corner of the playground, because making mud was good fun, and they were increasingly intrigued by the broken crockery, rusty nails, bones and the other bits and pieces they found. This developed into a full-blown archaeological dig complete with careful excavation in an area they roped off with all sorts of dire warning signs: “Keep Out! Danger! Deep Excavation!” Items were carefully uncovered and brought to finds tables where they were painstakingly washed in a series of old margarine and ice cream tubs with old suede brushes, toothbrushes and paintbrushes, most of which were smuggled from their homes.

The finds were then carefully labelled in plastic bank cash bags: broken crockery = Ming dynasty; rusty nails = Iron Age; the bones of buried playground pets and pigeons = Roman or Viking or dinosaur remains; pre-decimal coins = pirate treasure etc and carefully placed in a multi-drawer cupboard they ‘borrowed’ from the playground office. Children aged from about six up to about thirteen changed roles over the days, dropped in and out of different elements, and eventually abandoned the whole thing when interest waned after a couple of weeks.

And there's a postscript. A flyer from the Museum of London arrived offering free hands-on archaeology sessions. Everybody got quite excited, the playworkers arranged to take a group of children to the museum, and I tagged along to help out. We were given a very boring and patronising lecture about how to behave in the museum and use our worksheets. Worksheets? "This is even worse than school" one child muttered. After what felt like an age, we were led into a room containing boxes of sand in which real ox bones, bits of genuine Samian pottery and (very obviously) fake fibreglass representations of Roman and Saxon foundations were buried. It was nothing like the playground dig. The verdict of one older child, shared by all of us was: "That was the most boring trip out ever!"

I like several things about this story. The children spontaneously developed the mainly playworker-led mud oven project into something else entirely, and the playworkers had no involvement apart from simply enabling the children to use the space, tools and materials to extend their play. Well, up to a point - one of the playworkers couldn't resist burying interesting things like foreign or pre-decimal coins in the excavation after closing time, to be discovered with great excitement when the archaeologists returned the next day.

Many of the children had been watching and enjoying the Time Team TV series and had picked up a lot of knowledge of archaeological dig techniques: the concepts of layers with older stuff lower down; systematically brushing, sifting, cleaning and labelling finds and so on, but they used this knowledge in a purely playful way. I don't think any of them, even the youngest, saw it as a real archaeological dig, though they were genuinely fascinated by the stuff they found. The Time Team programme gave them a conceptual frame that enabled them to play around with a rich repertoire of rules and ideas. What Sandra Melville has described as "the implicit permission" given by the playground environment, both the physical space and the playworkers, was what made the whole thing possible. In comparison, the Museum of London was an inauthentic play experience because of the much narrower range of permissions and possibilities. In fairness to the museum, they were doing their best, but were coming from an educational or instructional rather than a playful mode.

What does this story illustrate about some of the play concepts and theories? The children were engaging in lots of play types to a greater or lesser extent, singly or in combination. I would include symbolic, social, creative, exploratory, mastery, object and role play. A fairly complex play frame (various children over several days digging clay and mixing it into mud for the oven, plastering it onto the chicken wire frame, sowing the grass seed and arranging the toy animals) expanded and changed into a much more complex and longer-lasting series of play frames. These were instigated, maintained, developed and changed by hundreds of play cues and returns over the following two weeks, all within an overall archaeology or Time Team play frame. However, not all the children all the time would have been in the archaeology or Time Team play frames – most dipped in and out, or went off to do other things on or off the playground. All this happened within a series of full play cycles that were destroyed or abandoned as individual children from time to time, and then eventually all of them, lost interest and moved on to other things.

And I'll leave it to the reader to think about how many of the criteria for an enriched play environment were afforded to the children by the playground.

Granddad's job description

My partner Sue and her grandson Charlie, who was then about six, were driving back to London from a weekend away when I was somewhere else. "Sue, can Mick be my granddad?" he asked out of the blue. "I'm sure he'd love to be your granddad." Charlie was quiet for a minute or two. "But if he's my granddad can he still be my best friend?" As you can imagine, my heart just melted when Sue told me about what he'd said – the best job-share offer ever!

But what's it got to do with play? Over the years Charlie and I had all sorts of adventures together – exploring Highgate woods looking for imaginary tigers, climbing hills and trees, burying 20p pieces or

hiding them in a hole in a fallen tree (mysteriously, we never found any of them again), learning to ride his bike and investigating every (and I mean every!) nook and cranny of the neighbourhood, having complicated conversations about why the moon was sometimes big and orange but mostly small and white 'with a dirty face', whether the London moon was the same as the one in Devon, how rainbows and what he used to call "thumberstorms" were made.

He'd had minimal contact with his biological granddad, and wanted to be able to say to the other primary school kids "that's my granddad" when we turned up to collect him for a weekend away with his extended family. He was working out his social relationships, and needed to know that he'd got them right. This was sophisticated questioning at all sorts of levels: if Mick becomes this can he still be that; would his real granddad still be his granddad; where exactly do he and his mum and dad fit into the extended family; would my Irish nieces and nephews he'd not yet met really be his cousins? Our next big adventure was Charlie's first ever plane flight to Ireland to meet them, and they got on like a house on fire. In a delicate resolution of the thorny problem of my being divorced, their Catholicism and Charlie's relationship to us all, the Irish children and Charlie decided to their mutual satisfaction that they were 'kind of step-cousins' in a diplomatic peace deal as subtle as any negotiated in Northern Ireland.

Brazil v Brazil

In Ireland, the boys were playing computer football games, but the two older ones decided to go outside to play real football – mainly because Barney could not believe his luck when Charlie said he didn't mind being in goal most of the time. Pdraig, who was aged about seven, continued playing alone and after a while came running out in great excitement. 'It's Brazil v Brazil, and we're losing seven - four!' The boys (and the girls) raced in to see and play this new and bizarre game, and to Pdraig's immense pride told him that he was completely mad and a total genius.

Pdraig had manipulated a rule-based electronic environment to create new and quite paradoxical play frames, firstly with the machine, then with the children. It suddenly dawned on me that he had controlled the content and intent of his play to a large extent, both within and outside the given parameters of the game. He was engaging in at least some elements of creative, exploratory, fantasy, imaginative, social and mastery play.

For the first time I began to get interested in thinking about how children use and interact with computer games. I'd always been bored by them, because they didn't exist when I was a child and I'm useless at playing them. No doubt this is why I uncritically joined the consensus that they were probably bad for children through reducing active play outdoors and contributing to obesity or poor mental health. I suppose I'd forgotten about the endless hours that I and other children from my generation spent in equally sedentary play activities like reading comics and books, painting and drawing, watching TV, making models or playing with dolls.

Bob and others have posed the question of whether new play types could emerge from changes in the environment and particularly technological development. I've certainly seen how Charlie has used his mobile phone, MP3 player and computer to build social networks that include real cousins, friends and people he's actually met with more virtual people, including playing with his own identity in online social networks. I have no idea who he is in contact with or what he gets up to in his electronic world and I've had my worries and moral panics about this - until I remembered that my parents had no real idea what I was up to at his age when out playing or on the phone to friends.

It will be interesting to see how internet-based social networks change and develop, and whether more physically interactive Wii and dance mat type technology will spread into other areas. Or perhaps they will disappear like the Airfix models that took up so much of my childhood.

Some play equipment manufacturers have devised solar-powered outdoor interactive electronic games where the children have to hit buttons at different heights and locations around the equipment in various sequences to rack up scores, which are then uploaded to the internet. The idea

is that this encourages physical activity, but I was intrigued to hear that children in Holland have subverted the system. Instead of individual children running around frantically hitting the buttons in the correct sequences, they worked out that they could get massive scores by working as a team to hit the buttons while barely moving a muscle!

When a mobile phone is not a good idea.

We rang Charlie to see how he was enjoying his holiday in Devon. "I'm having a great time, thanks, but we're playing hide and seek, and you've just given me away!"

I need my bones!

Crumbles Castle is an adventure playground in Islington, so named by the children because the play building was constructed from recycled granite sets and cobbles and looks like...well, a crumbles castle. The roof with its battlements is a play area, and one wall has short sections of telegraph poles set into it horizontally as a climbing feature.

Charlie came up to the roof with me and we looked over the battlements at the poles and the potential drop below to some crash mats. "Fancy a go?" I said. "No way man am I gonna do that! Noooo waaaay - I need my bones!" So we had a look at it from the bottom of the wall, and Charlie decided he would have a go at the less scary-looking climb up – from down here the crash mats looked a lot bigger and much more bone-friendly.

Twenty minutes later he raced over to where I was taking photos: "Did you get a picture of me jumping from the very top one?" I certainly had got several, of his first tentative efforts and his increasing mastery play, climbing up, down, horizontally, diagonally, finding easier routes first and then working out the harder ones. Two old hands, also about eight, but playground regulars, gave him tips. Then they asked one of the playworkers if they could pile up the crash mats, plus a few more from the storeroom and jump from the top poles – a good four metres high.

This brilliant playworker didn't say no or yes straight away. She reminded the old hands about the rules they had previously agreed: that jumps must be strictly one by one, the mats had to be straightened up by the last jumper if they had moved, and no jumps if somebody was climbing up.

Finn McCool v the Giant Volcano

Charlie has always loved climbing and in loads of my photos of him he's high up in trees, rocks, cliffs and climbing walls. The Giant's Causeway in Ireland was a particular hit – he just couldn't believe his eyes when he saw it and was convinced that someone must have built such a perfect climbing and jumping adventure playground.

We were there with my sister, who is a teacher. She told me about taking her geography class to the causeway as part of the curriculum, but secretly also as a great day out. She'd taught them how a massive volcanic welling up of lava millions of years ago crystallised into the thousands of polygonal columns as it poured into the sea and was cooled.

She'd also told them the myth of the Irish giant Finn McCool who built the causeway to have a fight with his opposite number in Scotland's Staffa Island, which has the same geological forms and is the other end of Finn's causeway according to the legend. On the coach back to the school after the visit, one of the children said to her "Miss, you don't seriously expect us to believe that volcano lava story?"

Rhododendrons

I first got the point of rhododendrons in Tilgate Park in Crawley. Along one side of the lake they have been planted in a series of strips about 5 metres wide and up to 50 metres long which form natural three-dimensional climbing mazes. Charlie and his cousins loved climbing in them from a very young age, because they could often stay off the ground for dozens of metres at a time as there were

nearly always more branches within reach, just the right size to grasp or step on to get to the next bit.

The renowned Copenhagen play space designer Helle Nebelong believes that designing climbing structures where rungs and other elements are evenly spaced actually de-skills children. "How are they to cope with the knobbly and asymmetric forms they will encounter in the real world?" she asks.¹ And a girl she worked with summed it up perfectly: "The branches tell me where to put my hands and feet."

Adventure play designer John O'Driscoll tries to eliminate uniformity apart from the elements that encourage running. Elsewhere, just one step, rung or other feature out of place in a regular sequence could be a hazard, but where all of them are irregular 'then from the very start children are watching where they're going.'²

Invisible

The playworker turned round in pretend surprise and asked "Who tapped me on the shoulder?" "Me." "But there's no-one there!" "I'm invisible." "Oh no! It's invisible Daniel again!"

Daniel loved being invisible on the playground, where most of the children and adults went along with his fantasy. He was academically gifted, had only recently arrived in the area, and his mother (a single parent) seemed to me to be very over-protective. She was particularly anxious about him playing with some of the children that she considered were bad influences and I used to see her quizzing him on their way home each day about who he'd been playing with and what he'd been doing. To me, his invisibility was his strategy to enable him to play with whoever he wanted to while telling his mum with a straight face that he hadn't been - if they couldn't see him, how could he have been playing with them?

That was my story and I was sticking to it - until I did a reality check with the playworker, who readjusted my rose-tinted spectacles. What had actually happened was that one day Daniel's mum had agreed that he could invite a couple of the playground children (who were also close neighbours) round to their flat, and they'd stolen a £20 note. She challenged their parents, who first of all completely denied that their kids had stolen the money, and then said that it shouldn't have been left out in plain view where it was a 'temptation' to them. Daniel completely stopped playing with the perpetrators, and when they came anywhere near him in the playground, he would get up and leave. Yes, he still loved being invisible in his fantasy world with the other children and playworkers, but what I thought was him dissembling to his mum was actually him reassuring her that he was genuinely staying away from the perpetrators.

Cursing and swearing

I was up a ladder at the top of the big tyre swing, checking and greasing the swivel and fixings, level with the children's camp in the adjacent tower. I suddenly realised that for the last few minutes I'd been overhearing every swear word imaginable being used by a number of different children, and immediately assumed they were being directed at one or more victims of bullying or were the prelude to a serious fight. I called out "Oi! What's going on in there you lot?" There was an instant silence, and as I started down the ladder to investigate, the next thing I heard was giggling and stifled screams of laughter. A grinning face with two hands joined in mock contrition popped out of a little window of the camp and said "Sorry Mick! We was just practising cussing. Don't tell the playworkers or our mums! Pleeeeeease?? Really, really, really pleeeeeease??"

From time to time around the estate where I live, two girls aged about 8 or 9 wheeled their dolls in toy buggies loaded with plastic supermarket bags hanging off the handles, stuffed with doll paraphernalia, drinks, sweets, and all sorts of bits and pieces. They constantly chattered to each

¹ See the 'Places of Woe, Places of Possibility' on-line exhibition at www.playlink.org.uk

² Interview in PlayToday (2007, Issue 60, Play England)

other: "I can't fucking get him to sleep, he's such a moany little thing." "Mine's just the same, she's cry, cry fucking cry." "The price of Pampers is bleedin' disgraceful." "That organic baby stuff's the same. Tell you what though, I got her onto them mashed bananas they throw away in Chapel Market."

Was this just sad copying of tough life on inner city estates? I'm not so sure. The children were utterly immersed in their play roles, effing and blinding away in perfect mimicry of their parents and neighbours. They had created their own secret subversive bubbles of playfulness in which they were acting out real life situations and experimenting with the language they heard every day at home and out in the world.

In the playground the children themselves had agreed a strict rule forbidding swearing, but the camp tower was a place where they could break their own rule playfully with little chance of being overheard and told off. The two girls were probably out and about on the estate and neighbourhood for the same reasons – I've often heard mums screaming at kids, "Fucking stop that fucking swearing!" And while the two girls mostly kept straight faces and acted out their parts, sometimes they couldn't help dissolving into helpless giggles as their subversion and mockery of adults overwhelmed them.

Mike Greenaway once asked a brilliant question at a Play Wales Spirit of Adventure Conference: "If a child on a playground tells you to fuck off, what should you do?" There was a lot of knowing laughter, but no one really came up with an answer. Mike's answer to his own question was that you should think hard about why they said it. In my experience children said it to me in all sorts of situations. Sometimes it was their blunt and disappointed answer to my explanation of why the playground had been shut, or opened late. Other times it was an expression of real hate because I'd done something like banning them or one of their mates. But mostly it was a self-deprecating and friendly verbal nudge when I told them how much I appreciated them for something they'd done (or more often, not done, come to think of it).

You won't let go?

The big day had arrived. Charlie had decided he was going to 'properly' ride his bike and we cycled off to the park. We unbolted the stabilisers and I held the back of the saddle as he got onto his suddenly very wobbly bike, his bottom lip characteristically jutting out in concentration, determination and quite a bit of uncertainty. "You won't let go until I stop wobbling?" he asked me. "Not until you're ready." Off we went, and within a few seconds I realised he'd got it, and let go. After about twenty metres he called out "Let go now!" Fifty metres further on he eventually looked round to check, and of course promptly fell off the bike. He lay there for a second or two (my heart was in my mouth) then he got up, turned around and a huge grin spread across his face when he realised that he'd ridden well over seventy metres on his own. "Yessssss! I did it! I did it! I can ride a bike!" he shouted.

Getting back on the bike, he wobbled a bit, then pedalled furiously straight towards me and fell off again just beside me – this time because both his hands were punching the air instead of holding onto the handlebars. A pensioner sitting on a nearby bench laughed and said "Well done mate. You got to fall off a couple of times and take the knocks before you get it. Go on my son, get up and have another go, we all had to do the same." Within weeks, Charlie and I were writing our names by skidding our back wheels in straight and curved lines in the loose surface of the nearby all-weather pitch, riding down flights of steps (scary at first for me, because this was something that I had never had the chance to do as a child) and generally mucking about on our bikes in the neighbourhood and beyond.

It was Charlie and the Hackney pensioner who gave me the idea of using learning to ride a bike as an example of getting the balance between risk, safety and benefit right in Quality in Play. It dawned on me that parents, neighbours, communities, institutions and the media accept that there is a positive

balance between the risk and benefit of learning to ride a bike, while in virtually every other aspect of children's play, there was a constant focus on the risk side of the equation.

Robin Sutcliffe told me an interesting story about this. When lecturing playwork degree students at Leeds Met he asked whether they thought that breaking a bone was an acceptable consequence of risky play. About half said yes, and half said absolutely not. His next question was who had broken a bone as a child, and it turned out that virtually all of those that thought it was ok had actually broken a bone playing, while those who thought it was unacceptable had never done so.

Imagination TV

Most days on the playground we lit a fire. Like millions of children today, a majority of the Bermondsey children lived in homes where they had no experience of a real fire. Before coming to the playground, most didn't know how to set up and light a controlled fire and were amazed and delighted to find out that you could slowly bake potatoes in the embers or quickly fry sausages or boil eggs or roast marshmallows over the flames.

They loved both the excitement of big bonfires showering sparks into the night sky and the quiet companionship of just sitting chatting around a small fire gazing into its ever-changing heart. One night a girl said "It's like imagination TV. You can see anything you like in it." This started off weeks of gentle musing about what they could see in the fire.

Frankie loved fires – of all sizes. His eyes blazed if a playworker lit up a cigarette (this was in 1979) and he was obsessive about helping with starting and tending the playground fire, but this wasn't enough for him. Other children told us that he was responsible for a series of arson attacks on parked cars, vans and lorries in the area and a major fire in a derelict factory. Then he nearly killed a family because he hadn't considered that someone might be living above an empty shop he torched. Oddly enough, the children were adamant that he'd had nothing to do with a fire on the playground that burnt out the building.

So what to do about Frankie? He was around ten years old. The police had no idea that he was the 'Bermondsey Arsonist Strikes Again' in the local headlines and his mum and dad were serious alcoholics who'd been rehoused in what was then called a sink estate for rent arrears – council housing policy at the time. Back then we playworkers saw the police and social services as at best remote and unfriendly, and at worst as the enemy. Also, the playground, or rather the playworkers relied on the support of the local community and 'grassing' was by far the worst thing you could do in Bermondsey in those days.

I talked to Frankie about the possible consequences of his fire obsession, but he just shrugged and said he didn't care what happened to him. I had a word with a brilliant local detached youth worker, who had a chat with Frankie and discovered that he had been setting fires not just because he loved them, but also because he hoped that if he was caught he would be taken away from his extremely neglectful and often physically abusive parents.

He persuaded Frankie to talk to the Educational Welfare Officer at the school he had rarely attended and he was eventually placed in foster care with a family in the Kent countryside. Frankie rang us at the playground a few months later to tell us "It's like heaven, only better, except there's no Addie round here." Everyone in the local community knew our adventure playground as 'The Addie.'

Petty officer

We were huddled around the playground fire for warmth on a freezing night in January 1980 because the play building was still burnt out, as the insurers hadn't yet paid up. We were talking about the armed forces, I think because recruitment officers had been around the local secondary school. Fourteen-year-old Dan pensively stirred the fire with a stick and said "My uncle was a Petty Officer in the Navy." He stirred the embers again and with a sly look, gave us the punchline "Now he's just a petty thief!"

Easter houses

An annual ritual in my rural Irish childhood, which now sadly seems to have died out, was building an Easter house. Basically it was a typical children's camp or den, but with some extras. It had to have a working fireplace and chimney, traditionally built with clay sods, though anything that came to hand would do. I remember the huge excitement when we found a milk churn with a base that had rusted away – the perfect chimney. Next we had to collect hen's eggs, light the fire and hard-boil them in an old saucepan with yellow whin (gorse) flowers – this was compulsory, though nobody knew why. Finally, we had to roll the eggs down a stony hill to crack the shells, and then eat them. They looked and tasted marvellous with the shells and the outer surface of the egg white stained yellow. And nobody died, as far as I know!

Many years later I mentioned the Easter houses to a Professor of Social Anthropology at Queens University in Belfast. She told me that the ritual of building a temporary shelter, and particularly cooking yellow-dyed eggs and rolling them down a hill had been a tradition for millennia across northern Europe. It was almost certainly the surviving remnant of a prehistoric fertility cult, connected to the Germanic dawn-goddess Oestre, from whom we get the word Easter.

Along with many other traditional children's cultural or seasonal celebrations, much of the creative content has now almost completely disappeared or been co-opted by consumerism as in chocolate Easter eggs. But egg rolling survives as an annual event in several English towns and villages, and also as a high profile event on the White House lawn ever since an 18th century American law banned it as a children's play activity on the terraces of Capitol Hill. If you Google Easter Houses or egg rolling you'll find fascinating memories and details of where the traditions survive.

Marble races

Our English cousins often came to stay on our farm in the summer holidays in the late fifties. To their astonishment, we rural Irish children had little or no tradition of playing marbles, didn't know the rules or even that there was a marble season starting around Easter. We were equally puzzled by their lack of an Easter house tradition and their fear of cattle, sheep and hens. We had a healthy respect for cattle, but sheep? Hens? They did love our game of jumping on the crusty tops of cowpats to splatter anyone nearby, and quickly became experts at it.

One rainy day we went into an outhouse that had timber off-cuts, lengths of copper piping and other bits and pieces of every size, shape and length along with tools and workbenches - and best of all, as it turned out, a pipe bender.

Over the next few days we built and endlessly remodelled ever more complex marble racecourses with chutes, jumps, slaloms, tunnels and "death drop" traps. Rules were invented, argued over, modified and frequently broken. What I most remember is the sheer fun of experimentation, trial and error, and our delight in someone's flash of genius in designing a new challenge for the marbles to negotiate. Which marble won what race was important up to a point, but most of the enjoyment was in building and remodelling the courses – that pipe bender meant that perfectly curved bits of copper pipe at all sorts of angles made for endless permutations.

The Addie Arms

Ten year old Laura had a condition where even the slightest bruise could be serious enough to mean extended stays in hospital, so she couldn't do many of the things that other children took for granted like 'boarder' swinging, rough and tumble play or camp and den building. In any case most of the dens and camps the children built became waterlogged swamps when it rained, or collapsed if someone 'borrowed' critical structural bits.

We decided to build a solid framework with a pitched watertight roof and a series of bays that formed a terraced street of camps within which everything except the basic frame and roof could be changed and modified. Laura bagged bay one and decided it would be a bar – her parents ran a pub

in the area. The playworkers and children helped her with the initial construction of the walls and the bar counter, scrounging old office chairs and various bits and pieces and then left her to it. Every day her mum or dad would drop her off with a supply of squashes, juices, sparkling water, plastic glasses, a cool box full of ice, her cashbox and everything else needed to run what she named the Addie Arms, complete with swinging pub sign. She worked out a pricing scheme based on wholesale cost plus 10%, far cheaper than the local sweetshops, while giving her some pocket money profit.

I passed it dozens of times a day, but never actually went in as I was 'too busy.' One hot August day she said to me "Mick, just put the hammer down for a minute and have a nice cool drink." From what was an amazing choice on the blackboard I settled for iced orange and passion fruit juice with sparkling water. I chose music from the offer of cricket, football, news or music on her transistor radio, sat back in the dimness in a salvaged leather office chair, and sipped my delicious drink while a cool breeze wafted through the net curtain, listening to the likes of Ghost Town and Stand Down Margaret.

Two of the dodgier older teenage lads came in and I tensed – we'd had problems with them for weeks, and I was pretty sure they had been responsible for recent playground break-ins, petty cash thefts and mugging children for their pocket money. Apparently completely oblivious to me, they ordered and paid for their drinks and stood at the counter quietly chatting to Laura in perfect mimicry of the chatter in the local pubs. After a few minutes, they drank up, turned round and with a grin and an "Awright, Mick?" went peaceably about their way.

A play light bulb went on in my head that day, which remains one of my most blissful memories of being a playworker. Up until then, I'd mostly seen adventure play from a very narrow (and male) perspective of more, higher, bigger, faster, exciting structures and boisterous physical activities. Laura's oasis of calm and peace that was equally enjoyed by the older lads was quite literally an eye-opener for me.

And how not to do it

Many years later I was asked to design and build a camp structure on another playground and got it dramatically wrong.

This time the idea was to have a 'street' with a row of camps on each side. As before, only the roof and main frame would be fixed, while walls and so on could be changed and manipulated by the children. The design was more sophisticated with boarded floors laid on railway sleepers, and the frame uprights were on a regular grid pattern so that a range of wall elements (with or without windows, shop counters, hole in the wall 'cash machines' etc) and hinged doors could be interchanged and moved around quickly by children. The idea was that they wouldn't need tools, nails or other fixings to build and take down their camp, though of course they could use tools and fixings to make creations in and around them. So what went wrong?

The scale was far too big. Though I'd used lightweight composite wooden boards for the walls and doors, the walls were too big and unwieldy for younger children to move around and the drop hinge tolerances were too fiddly for most of them to manage. The regular grid pattern meant that walls could only go here, and doors there. The wooden peg system that held the walls in place turned out to be a hopeless idea – most were lost within days. And last but not least, there was a huge amount of wasted roof space above the camps, which themselves were bigger than the children really wanted.

The camps were popular and well-used for the first few months, especially in wet weather and a magical touch was added when the playground rabbits colonised the spaces between the sleepers under the floor - you never knew when or where a twitching nose might pop out. But the children eventually got bored with them. The penny finally dropped for me when I saw two children aged about eight or nine carrying a table over to a corner of the playground and draping an old sheet over it to make the perfect camp which could be moved more or less anywhere in minutes.

However, the playworkers managed to transform this white elephant into a structure that was used in all sorts of other ways for over fifteen years. On one side of the street they added levels, small swings hanging from the roof trusses and a scramble net leading up to an opening into an adjacent tower to make a mini indoor adventure playground, still with smaller areas for making camps and dens. The other side became a workshop area where the children could use tools and workbenches to make all sorts of creations.

Eventually the pitched roofs were replaced with platforms connected by a bridge and festooned with flowers in hanging baskets and pots. A full-width staircase was added to one end by the tarmac area and the playground entrance. This became a play and meeting and viewing space in its own right, as it doubled as a tiered seating area overlooking where ball games, hopscotch, wheeled play and playground puddle play happened and children could also see who was coming and going.

Apart from the obvious points that small is beautiful and less is more, on reflection this story tells me that I hadn't learned what I thought I'd learned from years of working on a playground. I certainly hadn't put it into practice, but skilled and experienced playworkers who observed what children actually did and then reflected on it made all the difference.

Costa Del Bermondsey

We playworkers were very proud of the sandpit with a small tower in the centre, complete with cranes, chutes and a rope-operated wooden JCB type digger that all actually worked. We were also very proud of the splash pool with its water slide that we built nearby just before the summer holiday. They both became very popular with the children in that long hot summer, but for a reason that we never anticipated.

We came to work one Monday to find a queue of children outside the playground gate - not unusual - but there was something odd going on with an extra air of suppressed excitement. One of the children in a doom-laden voice said, "You'll never believe what's happened over the weekend!" Our hearts sank – we'd had some quite serious damage to play structures recently. At first we couldn't see anything different, and then we saw the most amazing thing.

The heavy 12 by 12 timbers that surrounded the sandpit and supported the splash pool tarpaulin had been moved to join both structures. Around three tons of sand had been shifted and the tarpaulin carefully rearranged with a slope of sand on top of it to create a beach, complete with real seashells. The water slide had been carefully repositioned so that when the children came down it they would create smaller side waves rather than wash the beach away with big splashes.

We were gobsmacked and humbled because we so-called play workers had never thought of combining the sand and water features. We found out that about twenty children had done most of the work over the weekend, with a bit of help from parents and the connivance of the management committee chair who was a keyholder.

Every day that long hot summer the Bermondsey beach was crowded with children and parents. This was the first time that so many parents had spent much time on the playground - I'm convinced because they were re-inventing and playing out their beach experiences. Generations of Bermondsey families had worked in the local dock and print trades that had now disappeared and could no longer afford to keep up a long-standing history of holidaying in seaside chalets on the Kent coast. The Bermondsey beach was their way of hanging on to a bit of their culture in hard times.

No Logo

The Thatcherite market forces and Bermondsey duck-and-dive cultures memorably came together on the playground in the early eighties. Designer T-shirts with 'Bermondsey' printed diagonally across the back became must-have items for people of all ages across south London and beyond, but local children couldn't afford them - they were about £80 at present day prices. My friend Robert who worked at a local community print centre came to the rescue. He brought his screen-printing

equipment to the playground, the children brought their old T-shirts or dirt-cheap ones from the market and we printed dozens.

We soon had a visit from 'representatives' of the local company that had originated the craze, who told us in no uncertain terms that we were taking the piss and would have our legs broken if we continued printing them. They made the mistake of arriving when a dozen or so older children were on site. They were outraged and told our visitors they were taking liberties, that they knew exactly where their print works was, and that it might not be around much longer, lot of fires round here, know what I mean mate?

The owners turned up at the playground the next day, apologised profusely and it was agreed that we could continue to print one free T-shirt per child. About a year later, long after the craze died out, we were amazed to receive a cheque for £200 from the company as a donation to "the second-best printing outfit in Bermondsey."

The Thirty Years Tug'o'war...

The local pub that had hosted fundraising and celebration events for the playground (and the second leg of most management committee meetings) was facing closure as part of 'a rationalisation of the assets portfolio' according to the grey men in suits who visited one day. Together we organised a campaign to get as many signatures of support as possible, culminating in a 'Save the Rising Sun' play festival on the adjoining open space.

The final event was a tug'o'war between the playground children and the pub regulars. If the kids won, the adults had to donate £1 each to the playground. My co-worker Paul who knew a thing or three about friction and engineering concepts knew that if we had roughly the same total body weight on each side, the much larger number of children's feet would give them the extra traction that would ensure victory.

We ended up with about forty adults (most of them beefy builders and ex-dockers) agreeing to the deal and around a hundred mainly small children on the opposing team. Sure enough, the children inexorably hauled the adults towards the losing line. But suddenly the rope stopped moving in the children's favour, no matter how much they pulled. There was a loud crack as the fence rail to which the adults had tied their end of the rope disintegrated and everyone fell over.

I called foul, and we started again. Once again the children were winning and once again the rope stopped. "Heave, heave!" we shouted. There was a different sort of creaking and straining noise as the 20-foot tree behind the adult end started to tilt and come out of the ground.

Thirty-odd years on in my local pub in Islington, one of the regulars said to me "You don't remember me, but I know you. You ran that playground in Bermondsey." I didn't recognise him at first, but it was George, who had been in the print trade and had supplied us with vanloads of free paper – no adventure playground in Southwark had needed to buy any for years.

He eventually confessed it was him who had tied the tug'o'war rope to the fence and then the tree – George likes to keep his secrets to himself until the right time. He told me it was still the funniest thing he'd ever seen, and was delighted that I had thought Dennis the barman (and notorious bad loser) had been the culprit all along.

Ramps

George is a wheelchair user these days, and the pub has made a simple wooden ramp that can be moved as needed between the entrance step and an internal step to the beer garden so he can get in and out and around the pub. Carrying the ramp in one night I had another light bulb moment.

I suddenly remembered Charlie and his cousins in Devon spending days moving small ramps that had been made for other purposes around the back garden and the road in the neighbouring close to make bike and scooter jumps. Like the marble races of my childhood, most time and effort went into

trying out and negotiating different configurations, though the highest jumps were also important. It dawned on me that staffed play areas could easily and cheaply do the same and have a supply of ramps of various sizes that children could move around as needed. In some cases they could double as disabled access ramps as well as loose parts play items.

South of the river

A few years after I left Bermondsey I called in when passing and got a couple of shocks. I recognised only a few of the children because they had grown up and changed much more than I imagined possible. What was even more thought-provoking was that the few of them who remembered me (only half-jokingly) said something along the lines of “Oi, what are you doing back here, traitor?”

Leaving the playground was bad enough, but they knew I was working in Hackney, and moving north of the river was a heinous crime in their eyes, nearly as bad as grassing. My friend Robert was moving to Turin around then and a local asked him “Where’s that then?” “North Italy.” Norf Italy? Norf Italy?! Could be worse I suppose, at least it’s south of the river.”

Tears

It was Sue’s last day at the playground after working there for nineteen years. I was waiting outside in the car to drive her and Charlie home. He came running out and said “Sue’s crying all her tears out!” Later she told me that one of the children had clung to her leg and begged her not to leave. But what had actually brought the tears was coming out of the toilet to find a crowd of children asking her to please stay, and suddenly realising how much she would miss them, and how much they would miss her.

The attachments that children might have to a playworker (and vice versa) are obviously different from the ones between children and their families and friends, but attachments nonetheless. Most playworkers I know share the experience of being told at some point or other “It was far better when so-and-so used to work here.” I hope it was mostly said in a spirit of friendly ribbing, but of course you never really know.

Attachment to place as well as people is very important to children’s well being. But there can be negative as well as positive aspects to these attachments, for example in the rise of the postcode gang culture. But could the dramatic reduction in younger children’s ranging behaviour – down by 89% from what it was only a generation ago - be a contributory factor?

When I was helping to develop a play policy for EC1 New Deal for Communities we held several consultation sessions with older children. Teenage boys consistently said that they moved around in gangs (their word) because that was the only way they felt safe outside their immediate home area. Girls said they moved around in a crowd (their word) for the same reason – and also because their parents would only let them out if they were with a group of mates.

The door

One of the most interesting play structures I’ve ever seen on an adventure playground is a door. That’s it – just a doorframe with a perfectly normal domestic door. But the children have invented dozens of games with and without rules about 'the door to nowhere' - who can use it when and in which direction in chasing games; fantasies about what might be on the other sides; elaborate rituals of politely visiting and receiving visitors or less polite games of “Police! Open up!” Knock Down Ginger made a reappearance on the playground after decades of absence in the surrounding area.

At the same playground the playworkers have thought carefully about the entrance to the playground. Some of the younger children in the neighbourhood were not using the playground, so they visited local primary schools, family and community centres to try to find out why. They discovered that it was because children and parents were unsure about their welcome – partly because they felt the entrance was intimidating and didn’t give sufficiently welcoming visual signals.

They spent several weeks experimenting with 'dressing' the entrance with art activities outside the gate. As well as ending up with an entrance that was more inviting in the child's eye view, the presence of a playworker doing interesting things at the gate created an inviting threshold.

I have come to believe that we should put at least as much thought into what messages playground thresholds and boundaries send to children as we do to the structures, features and 'implicit permissions' inside. Doors, gates and fences on adventure playgrounds have more subtle and complex roles and functions than in most other places – they are not just physical entrances and boundaries.

If they don't send clear signals that 'this is a place for children' and imply a welcome, then it is hardly surprising if some children are wary about coming in.

Puddles and rainbows

From when I was a small child to this day I have been fascinated by puddles. Back then I loved the upside-down world in their reflections, but became a little bit wary of them after a cousin told me that if you saw a rainbow in one you would fall into fairyland and never be able to get back. Fifty-odd years later a little niece warned me that something similar could happen: "You might fall upside down into the sky and never, ever fly back up."

It had been pouring rain during a morning finance meeting at the playground, and four year old Martin, the son of our committee chair, was bored with painting. The sun came out, and his mum said he could go out to play. Just as the meeting ended he came running in shouting "Rainbow! Rainbow!"

Out we went and looked up – no sign of a rainbow. With a grin Martin pointed to the puddle-strewn pathway to the playground structures - every puddle was a different colour of the rainbow, with around half a tin of our precious powder paints carefully stirred into each.

Astronomy

The playground was part of a consortium that had successfully fundraised to run camping holidays in the summer for many years. They bought a proper reflecting telescope to star-gaze on clear nights in the countryside. During a sleepover back in London they borrowed it as the forecast was a clear night with a full moon.

The playworkers suddenly noticed that all the boys had disappeared outside, but thought no more of it. When they were called back in for supper, they were in hysterics, and a playworker decided to go out and investigate why. The telescope was focussed, not on the skies, but on the window of an 11th floor flat in a tower block, where a young woman had no idea that anyone would be able to see her with no clothes on.

A partially blocked drain meant that on many days there was a large puddle that the playworkers left alone because children endlessly played with and in it - in all sorts of ways. They floated self-made paper or other boats on it; put bricks in as stepping stones for varieties of chase games; or just exuberantly jumped in it to splash other children.

A playworker had been thinking about how the children could observe the 1999 solar eclipse without the palaver of special glasses or indirect viewers to protect their eyes. She suddenly realised that the slightly muddy puddle would be the perfect viewer in which to safely see the sun disappear and reappear and would provide a grandstand view of the eclipse for everyone.