

People Make Play: The Impact of Staffed Play Provision on Children, Families and Communities

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This well-written and beautifully produced research report presents six, staffed open-access play services in England. "Open access," as it is generally used in the United Kingdom, refers to staffed play provision where children come and go as they please. While not uncommon, it has become more difficult to offer this service to children in recent years due to changes in legislation. *People Make Play* records the views and experiences of the children, parents, and staff involved, and it details how open-access provision operates from these different perspectives. Those of us in playwork so frequently assume such details are self-evident that we do not record them. Yet, these details often distinguish the unique nature of playwork. The strength of this report, therefore, lies in its optimistic reporting of an endangered form of play provision, and it will be of particular interest to those outside the playwork field for whom open access can still be something of a curiosity.

Reading *People Make Play* as research, however, proves less straightforward. The report presents a number of contradictions in its aim, methodology, and findings. Part of its original aim was to produce a "quantitative outcome evaluation of play provision" (p. 81), but it details a number of reasons why this goal seems

unachievable. Its qualitative methodology gathers the views and experiences from the six settings, but—as useful as this might be for other purposes—it does not provide an adequate basis for claims about the impact of staffed play, especially when the author collected no data for comparative purposes. It is unclear what the author is measuring in order to assess impact. Unsurprisingly the users of the staffed-play provision speak positively about it, but the limited literature review focuses on the benefits of play in general. And the report makes overall recommendations based specifically on the benefits of staffed play. The report frequently makes reference to the importance of children being able to access "free play" as a result of attending supervised settings and yet offers no clarification about what this means or how—or even if—free play happens despite the presence of adults. Instead, we get equivocal statements such as "The staff see their role as striking a balance between allowing full expression through play and cultivating an atmosphere of safety, tolerance and mutual respect, intervening carefully only where necessary to ensure that the sites are inclusive to all" (p. xv).

Perhaps a lack of clarity about the field itself, as illustrated by the title, underlies the lack of clarity in the methodology. The notion that adults are crucial for play seems deeply problematical for a field that sees play as innate—or as something that should always be under the control of children. Although the historical playwork literature consistently documents the belief that the way adults behave can "make or break" supervised play space, it would surely be more accurate to say "people

make playwork.” That adults using playwork skills—as opposed to using other methods of supervision—better encourage children to play freely is an untested (but widely held) belief in the playwork field. *People Make Play* disregards the complexities involved in the provision of supervised play—complexities recognized and debated within the playwork field and generally referred to as “the playwork paradox.” This lack of grounding in the playwork literature results in the potential for misrepresenting the nature and purpose of playwork, despite the author’s best intentions. For example, although the author alludes to the need for enabling children to access space for play, although he mentions the need for adults to avoid taking over children’s play space, and although he reproduces the Playwork Principles in full, he obscures and contradicts the well-documented rationale of playwork practice with statements such as “The best opportunities to play are shaped by people—the ‘software of play’” (p. xix). This rationale can be summarily described as employing a compensatory methodology that seeks to facilitate play in time and space only if children are unable to play unsupervised.

Jack Lambert in his *Adventure Playgrounds: A Personal Account of a Play-leader’s Work* (1974) wrote that “Play, like everything else, is political.” In my view, *People Make Play* demonstrates the difficulty that organizations waging a campaign have in designing and commissioning research. Commissioned by Play England at a time of dwindling funding for the national play strategy, *People Make Play* perhaps unsurprisingly calls for further funding for staffed provision. Of course, there is nothing essentially

wrong with gathering “evidence” to argue causes, but there is a marked difference between lobbying and research. Confusing these two makes *People Make Play*, a bit of a curate’s egg, one that gathers valuable source material but fails to meet its objectives or to produce meaningful findings. Unfortunately for those of us in the playwork field, the publication also runs the risk of disseminating inaccurate and unhelpful information about the overall purpose of playwork provision. As this report correctly states, there is much work to be done in terms of playwork research, and it is a great shame that this report itself missed an opportunity to be a better contribution.

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Babysitter: An American History

Miriam Forman-Brunell

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Baby-sitters performed the crucial function of enabling ordinary, middle-class parents to participate in the emerging leisure economy of the mid-twentieth century. With a baby-sitter at home, adults were free to play. Yet, as the cover of *Baby-sitter: An American History* suggests by reproducing Norman Rockwell’s famous 1947 illustration for the *Saturday Evening Post* (called *Babysitter with Screaming Infant*), the baby-sitter had many disputed meanings—some factual, some fictional, and some mythical.