Engaging Play

Edited by
Liz Brooker and Susan Edwards

Open University Press
12 Using power on the playground

Brian Edmiston and Tim Taylor

Children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account.  
(United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1959)

Introduction

Advocates for children’s right to play can be encouraged by a new policy in the United Kingdom: the British government’s national Play Strategy for England now formally recognizes that play is essential to children’s learning and development (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008a). As education policy-makers champion play in public environments, including active adventure-seeking play, adults can anticipate how children’s lives are likely to improve through changing the quality of play provision.

We argue that if children are to have play woven into their school lives, then teachers, parents and administrators must pay attention as much to how adults use power in response to children’s behaviours, as to children’s actual play. Children’s playtime is always enmeshed with adult attitudes, assumptions, interpretations and actions towards children’s energies and playful desires. Using Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of dialogic interactions, we advocate that adults can use power with children to negotiate playground activities and expectations that aim to accommodate to the needs of everyone in a school. In this chapter we explore some of the complexities associated with this perspective in practice.

The following account by Tim Taylor could be read as an exemplar of the play strategy’s implementation. A primary teacher for 15 years, Tim currently is assistant headteacher at Surlingham Community Primary School in England, which serves predominantly rural and suburban families with low to middle incomes. He shares teaching year 3–4 (children aged 7 to 9 years) with the headteacher, Catrin Parry-Jones.

At break-time, Reception children [aged 4–5] trundle around on scooters and tricycles, weaving in-and-out of older children kicking
footballs, hitting balls against the wall, or playing games like Hide-and-Seek on the field. Others walk or sit in the garden talking.

(Tim, interview, 25 June 2008)

Promoting children’s play is more complex than this description or the national strategy might suggest. Adults can easily romanticize happy, smiling, engaged children. But what if children’s play seems to take a turn towards the dangerous or violent?

In one corner of the field children run in and out of a den constructed, in the bushes and against the fence, out of eight-foot willow staves, rope, and camouflage netting. Older boys, with younger children in tow, are shouting orders. Some boys, and a few girls, carry pretend guns, made from blue plastic construction equipment, as they crouch, dash around the trees, or guard the entrances.

(Tim, interview, 25 June 2008)

What are some of the challenges for adults’ use of power in situations like this? Power is not simply the exercise of force. Foucault’s theoretical framework (1984; cited in MacNaughton 2005) conceptualizes power as always relational, circulating among people in every discursive and physical interaction, and accumulating with those who use power both to control people’s actions and the meaning of their activities. Adults have more power than children do in respect to how their play is interpreted and represented to others, and thus over what, and how, children are able to play. Adults can use power with, for and over others: how adults use power to support, undermine or engage with children’s activities affects both the content, and the social interactions of, their play (Edmiston 2008).

I (Brian) was interested in learning more about how power circulates in schools, among children and adults, and in doing so, affects any moves to make schools more playful and interactions more dialogic. I wanted to gather examples of these dynamics in action, and so between June 2008 and March 2009 I interviewed Tim by email, phone and in person, about his experiences in relation to significant changes during playtime that occurred over the 18 months since he had first arrived at Surlingham Primary in September 2007. I did not have an opportunity to observe or interview at the school, though Tim and Catrin have both read and approved this manuscript.

Adults using power over children

Julia Smith,1 the mother of a seven-year-old boy, Adam, came in unannounced one day [in October 2008] to watch her son at
playtime. She was scared by what she saw. While some children, mostly girls, walked or sat and talked, over half of the children in the school were engaged in active play. Many were running, laughing and shouting in and around their dens. Some made loud shooting noises in noisy and boisterous attack-and-defending behaviour. Mrs Smith’s initial response was to get angry and accusatory. She said to one of the adults on duty that the play was ‘vicious and out of control’ referring to one of the older boys as a ‘little shit’. We [Catrin and Tim] invited her inside to discuss what she had seen: uncontrolled, dangerous behaviour with no rules. She was worried that a small group of ‘vicious’ boys were acting as role models for the younger children. She did not want to ban play but felt the adults should be more controlling. We stressed that she had not had the benefit of a member of staff to provide an alternative interpretation. We assured her that we took her reactions seriously, though as a staff we were committed to ensuring, as much as possible, every child’s emotional and physical safety.

(Tim, email, 7 December 2008)

Though her response was understandable, Mrs Smith had largely missed the situation. Like many adults, she had difficulty distinguishing between actual and pretend violence (Paley 1984; Schaefer and Sm 1996; Katch 2001; Jones 2002). The children she had observed were playing. What Adam’s mother feared was about to become physical violence was in reality pretend aggression that was part of the children’s very and often rough-and-tumble play (Pelligrini 1988). Activities that had previously demanded adult intervention had been broadly agreed upon earlier adult–child discussions; children would require supervision and intervention only when necessary, to ensure physical safety or to help resolve difficulties.

Nor did Mrs Smith realize that the children’s play, which had seen no need adult control, was actually highly self-monitored and socially controlled by the children:

Their play is highly choreographed and predictable. Younger children mostly focus on chase whereas older children’s play often centres on complex narratives. Boys of all ages join in, from aged four to eleven, along with one fully participating older girl and other girls who occasionally participate. Although children may describe the theme as ‘war’, there is no sign of real violence. There are sometimes disagreements about resources, which occasionally cause arguments, but what is remarkable
is the level of spirited collaboration and wide-spread obvious enjoyment.

(Tim, email, 14 December 2008)

Tim and Catrin were concerned about any actual aggression and asked Mrs Smith to reflect more deeply about what was actually happening. Had any of the children been crying or been hurt? Had she noticed anyone being excluded? They explained how over the previous year the whole school, adults and children, had been involved in collaborative discussions that had established guidelines and rules for playtime with the aim that every child would have choices about which activities they would want to participate in, yet feel safe in the knowledge that caring adults were nearby. On reflection, she accepted that many of the children were joyful, that they were collaborating, and that apparently no one was being left out. But she still had serious reservations and advocated for a break-time organization like that in previous years.

**Adults using power to control behaviour**

In contrast with Mrs Smith's memory of playground order, Tim had had serious concerns about how previously adults had restricted the children's choices and behaviour.

When I arrived [in September 2007], the children had a huge play area but few resources that engaged them. The infants [aged 4–7] had tricycles and a low-level climbing structure. The juniors [aged 8–11] had limited access to Physical Education equipment restricted to a daily option, for example, football on Thursdays. Decisions had been made with little reference to the children's desires and opinions. Knowing that children need firm and well-understood boundaries the previous head-teacher had made those boundaries clear but unequivocal, dealing fairly, and reasonably with those who exceeded them.

(Tim, phone interview, 15 December 2008)

The Mid-day Supervisory Assistants (MSAs) whose job is to supervise the playground had been participating in a long-established rule-based power structure that preceded Catrin's appointment four years previously (Tim, email, 10 March 2009). For example, access to play materials could be restricted by an adult decision that was assumed would not be questioned by children. Catrin arrived intending to distribute power and change the school culture by sharing more authority for decision-making with staff and children (Catrin, email, 4 May 2009). However, she initially
focused on changes in classrooms leaving the playground set-up lar;
unaltered. In the public space of the playground, the children were
ther expected nor encouraged to take responsibility for their own act;
except in retrospect when judged to have transgressed rules impo
monitored and enforced by watchful adults. From a Foucauldian v
point, adult surveillance was used to control behaviour, especially in
utating children’s bodies. Play with violent themes and pretend guns
not allowed; physical contact games were disapproved. Rather t
encouraging children’s self-discipline, adults disciplined children by
tralling their behaviour according to adult assumptions and decid
about appropriateness (Kohn 1996).

**Adults using power for and with children**

Tim proposed changes at playtime in response to the mood of the
children, especially a group of older boys:

> I originally introduced [in November 2007] the staves, netting
> and rope for den-making to engage a group of about a dozer
> older disaffected boys whom I felt were distrustful of me and
> who wandered around at playtime getting bored. Those boy
> instantly gravitated to the equipment and readily accepted the
> restriction that they not throw anything. Within days, over
> half of the children were building dens. The boys had been
> mostly invisible to the adults who paid attention to them only
> when causing problems; school seemed mostly a boring chore
> mitigated by playground opportunities to spend time with
> friends.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

In contrast to the previous head-teacher, who it seemed had most
in relation to the playground used power over others by restri
options and deciding on rules with little meaningful discussion, Tim
Catin wanted adults to use power as much as possible for all of the
den by caring about their needs. Rather than impose specific
prohibiting certain behaviours, or regard problems as residing in
gressive individuals, their intention was to shift more power to the
den. They hoped to promote the sort of reciprocal, caring comm
that teachers ideally wanted for the school (Noddings 1992; Kohn 1

Tim and Catin wanted to negotiate new arrangements that
acceptable to children as well as adults. Their intention was to have
dialogic interactions in which children’s voices and views were hea
adults and vice versa (Bakhtin 1981). In other words, they wanted i
power with children and adults. They proposed that adults extend play options by introducing new materials. Tim led discussions with teacher colleagues, with the MSAs, and informally with the children, aimed at implementing changes to build a more inclusive school community.

The staff, MSAs and young people, in early 2008, all agreed in separate meetings that children should be more responsible on the playground; they would take shared responsibility for following two interrelated rules: (1) to make sure that everyone is having a good time; and (2) to ensure that everyone is safe. At a whole-school assembly the children were unanimous about ensuring that new arrangements would create ‘win–win’ equitable spaces, for adults as well as all of the children.

Several months later towards the end of the school year, as social patterns had established around equipment use, some adults raised questions in informal meetings with older children about how some of the younger ones were feeling excluded from dens and how some, especially girls, didn’t want war play. The older boys negotiated and devised a solution that satisfied everyone when implemented. After that, nearly all younger children at times played in the dens both in parallel to, and with, older children. Tim discussed the plans outlined by the older boys:

> The boys proposed having three dens; one den would have nothing to do with war. Younger children [aged seven years or less] could go in any den they wanted, whenever they wanted. Each playtime older children [aged more than seven] had to choose one den and stay there.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

Additionally, some girls created a wish list for other adventure play activities, and using school funds, the School Council created a new garden with benches and an all-age shelter.

Since the initial decision to support more active play, Tim has seen significant cultural changes. Most adults recognized that boys were less bored and that those previously disaffected were highly motivated to use the equipment safely. Additionally, the relationship between adults and those boys improved:

> There is a much more cordial relationship and dialogue between all the children and adults. There is a consideration, on the adults’ side, for interests and concerns of boys and girls. And an understanding, on the boys’ side, that they are a contributory part of the school community, deserving of respect and beholden to respect the rights and interests of others.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)
As Tim and Catrin have drawn on all children's energies and ideas, their year 3–4 classroom, a playful overlap has developed between curriculum study, playground games and classroom activities:

A month or so after introducing the staves, rooting around in the sheds outside I found a box of blue plastic construction pieces from which children made vehicles they used inside and outside. When we studied medieval life some boys, with some help from me, created a functioning trebuchet with weights at one end and a swing used by all to throw rags and teddies. Increasingly elaborate machines created by children were incorporated in games about storming and defending castles. In the classroom, Catrin and I participated in dramatizations of some stories that continued at playtime, some of which were incorporated in an open house for parents and younger children.

(Tim, interview, 25 June 2008)

Challenges when shifting power

As changes were introduced at the school, Tim began to realize that was challenging a deeply seated status quo.

Adults' stance towards children's responsibilities

As well as agreeing to shift more responsibility to all of the children, the staff agreed that their stance should change from monitoring and intervening with an assumption that adults need to perceive problems to watching, supporting and assisting children who ask for, or clearly need, help in working through difficulties:

Children of any age are inevitably going to fall out from time to time and, if necessary, adults can help children talk with one another to clarify a resolution that meets everyone's needs. For example, teachers have agreed to start from the premise that everybody makes mistakes and that these are an opportunity to learn.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

Changing patterns of behaviour, along with their underlying assumptions, has not been simple for the adults who have continued to formally and informally talk about the new approach:
It is a challenge to all of us, as we have to shift our default position from 'putting things right' to supporting children in finding their own solutions.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

Moving from controlling options and implementing adult-created rules to negotiating with and supporting children in play that is safe has been much more challenging for adults than for children. All children, with adult support, have been prepared to address problems, change rules and alter playground space. As those most consistently and directly involved in implementing new approaches, it is MSAs who have faced most change. Though they have shared some of the concerns voiced by Adam’s mother, like all adults they are motivated by concerns over the children’s welfare:

Their great fear is that something awful will happen so they are reluctant to allow anything that they see as dangerous. Mostly they’ve maintained a watchful but distrustful distance, as have some of the boys.

(Tim, phone interview, 15 December 2008)

Adult fear, accompanied by a tendency to restrict rather than open up play options, can unintentionally undermine negotiations and the caring relationships that adults need to develop with children if school play is to become more responsive to all children’s energies and interests. Kindlon and Thompson (2000) argue that boys, as much as girls, need emotional relationships with adults. Further, they believe that adults, without realizing it, begin to undermine their relationships with children when they don’t trust them to follow their energies and desires but rather disallow, for example, boys’ hunt-and-chase play. As Thompson (2008) puts it, ‘If you start to fear boys’ play, and begin to fear them, then all they feel is that you dislike them. If boys feel that you dislike them they are going to write you off’ (n.p.). The ‘disaffected boys’ that Tim had observed on his arrival at the school tended towards writing off the adults who restricted their play. Such distrust is unlikely to begin to dissipate without the sort of genuine dialogue that became possible in the caring relationships developing at Surlingham.

Safety concerns within caring relationships

Providing more play opportunities for children means adults use power on behalf of, and with, children. But doing so may not be easy for adults previously assuming a controlling use of power over children. Learning to
manage fears of putting children at risk is likely to be easier in relationships grounded by an ethic of care and an assumption that children negotiate with adults about their actions.

Despite understandable adult reservations, risk-taking in play has recognized as an integral part of children’s adventure play that has element of danger. The British government’s consultative document Play (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2008b), both recognizes that safe play unavoidably often incorporates risk and that we have to recognize that they can be over-protective. Josie Gleave of the organization Play England which consults on the implementation of the Play Strategy, summarizes the research on risk and play:

Children often crave risk when playing; they want challenge excitement, and uncertainty in their play and they learn from. The research shows that children need to experience challenging play in order to develop important life skills and to better manage risk and challenge in their daily lives. However, opportunities for children to take such risks are limited. This is due to a risk-averse culture and an increase in health and safety constraints. It is clear that we need to address the current ‘cotton wool culture’ and provide children with more opportunities for adventurous play.

The fact that the recently published The Dangerous Book for Boys (Iggulden and Iggulden 2007) has been a best seller on both sides of the Atlantic suggests that, despite the academic critique of its gendered assumptions, many adults recognize how appealing self-chosen physical danger and accompanying feelings of exhilaration and fear can be to children. Drawing on two brothers’ memories of their own joyful adventurous childhood play, advocates active games, as well as possibly riskful activities, such as making a bow and arrow. The authors stress the need for supportive adults who make such play available to all children to help them challenge themselves in extending their feelings of self-confidence.

**Attitudes towards pretending to be aggressive**

Encouraging adventurous play is often most difficult for adults who involve pretend aggression. As Tim recounted:

Many parents have expressed, though in a less forthright way than Mrs Smith, their unhappiness with the boys ‘violent’ play in particular using the construction equipment to make guns. Some parents of younger children felt it was making boys m
aggressive. 'Well, he didn’t learn that at home’ was a frequent comment.

(Tim, email, 14 December 2008)

It is vital to recognize that pretending to be aggressive is an activity universally shared by humans and other mammals (Huizinga 1955). Many early childhood educators have realized (e.g. Paley 1984; Holland 2003) that pretending to be violent, including using a weapon, just cannot be suppressed. For example, they pretend to attack, defend and escape. Children will use fingers to invent guns just as they’ll cradle a blanket to imagine an infant. They may also use aggressive language with an intensity that would be quite inappropriate in a classroom. Human games of chase, hide-and-seek, chess and fantasy role-play, are all formalized versions of play aggression where children can shift how they use power from pretending to be oppressive to being chased, captured or imagining themselves as victims.

**Recognizing play**

One easy way to determine whether children are playing with aggressive behaviour, or actually being aggressive, is to observe non-judgementally and resist any desire to intervene. If, as Julia Smith noticed, all children are smiling and not crying, moving in-and-out of pretending, and not seeking adult help, they are likely to be enjoying pretend play rather than actually being aggressive. By looking more closely an observer can notice how players continually signal to each other that they are playing. As Bateson (1956) recognized, like the playful nips of wolf pups that signal to each other they could bite each other but are choosing not to, young children’s laughter, mock aggression and parodied actions, are examples of how they signal their intentions not to hurt one another, including when they chase each other or roll around.

Sometimes children overtly signal an intention to others to join a play space. For example, when a child holding a doll asks her mother to hold the baby. Similarly, when a boy points a finger saying ‘I’ve got you’ this can be interpreted as an invitation to enter an imagined space and initiate a playful exchange with a response such as, ‘You missed!’

Problems may arise when one person pretends to be elsewhere but another is not imagining the same fictional situation. However, when one person’s imagined space physically intrudes on others’ spaces, as Paley discovered, rather than censor activity rules can be renegotiated so that parallel play may continue (Paley 1984). Tim concurred:

I think it’s particularly important for adults to help younger children to realize that their actions can disrupt others and, like the
children in the dens, learn to share space. Occasionally, when things go wrong adults can assist the children in their negotiations. (Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

**Violence and pretending to be violent**

I (Brian) have described elsewhere occasions when my 5-year-old son imagined actions were uncomfortable for me (Edmiston 2008). It took me well over a year to be able to reinterpret my concerns that by pretending to be violent I might promote a love for actual violence. Initially I had worries like those of parents at Surlingham:

There was a problem when children who arrived early would ‘shoot’ at parents and children. Many parents felt that the school was encouraging (by not banning) a love of guns, violence, and death. (Tim, email, 7 December 2008)

Only after many months of playing in mythic worlds, like the landscape of *The Tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, did I come to understand that when my son, Michael, pretended to kick or shoot as Hyde he was exploring possibilities for acting in evil ways that complemented his imaginary goodness to patients as the altruistic Jekyll. Unlike when we pretended to be firefighters, this play was not a ‘rehearsal’ for a future social life (Erikson 1963) but was rather what I call a ‘workshop for life’ where highly antisocial, hateful possible ways of being could be explored alone or with kind. I came to realize that, ironically, through pretending to be violent Michael was becoming more, not less, committed to peaceful resolutions in everyday life.

Mrs Smith was worried that her son might become violent by pretending to be violent with older boys. But pretending to be violent does not create violent people, just as gorillas’ play fighting does not create violent gorillas. When children play together, whether or not they pretend to be aggressive, they collaboratively create an imagined world where their social relationships can be different. Between the ages of 5 and 8 my son pretended to attack or kill thousands of monsters as people, yet aged 13 he protested during the run-up to the Iraq War. In similar spirit, one of the 10-year-old den-making boys at Surlingham was adamant: ‘There’s actually no point to war. It’s the people who start who are on the wrong side. They may think they are on the right side but they’re on the wrong side.’

Adam’s mother was wise to be concerned about actual aggressive play but to realize that children stop pretending together and start arguing, then act
disagreements may erupt into real aggression that needs to be confronted
directly. Ironically, the teachers at Surlingham discovered, like Paley
(1984), that quiet girls may be more aggressive than boisterous boys:

There are few physical arguments among the girls. They tend to
use words as their weapons, for example, name-calling, put-
downs, social-exclusion, and refusing to play with one individual
or other. Last year there were a lot of arguments that caused
unhappiness. Parents were concerned about bullying.
(Tim, phone interview, 15 December 2008)

Just as they do when they are reading or watching movies, children know
that playing with how the world could be does not mean wanting to
become what they imagine. As Peter, another 10-year-old boy at the school
who enjoyed war play, put it, 'I want to be a dentist when I grow up, not a
mass murderer.' When Tim interviewed a group of his peers, including
some of those who were disaffected at times, the children were unanimous
that they were not actually being aggressive, unsafe or hurtful:

We might be playing it but it doesn’t mean we actually mean it ...
actually hurt people.

You may think it makes us violent, but it doesn’t because boys
usually like battering games ... since I was 5 I’ve been obsessed
with guns.

It’s just playing a game. We’re not going to effect real life. We’re
always playing against imaginary people ... us playing war is just
for excitement and fun.
(Tim, Quicktime movie attachment
to email, 14 December 2008)

**Powerful challenges**

Vygotsky (1967) stressed that children’s experiences of playing are likely
to be very different from the apparent meaning of their behaviours.
When children play, they imaginatively, and intentionally transform
objects, for example, waving sticks become parrying swords, or dolls rep-
resent crying babies. And, what may appear to a watching adult to be
dangerous behaviours, or uncontrolled energies, like running, yelling or
climbing, are much most likely to be self-chosen actions with enjoyable
risks that children take in challenging themselves. Children playing are
actually self-monitoring, developing the ability to choose appropriate
action and control behaviour within the rules of any imagined situation.
As Vygotsky stressed, when children pretend, activities are largely implicit cultural rules and social expectations; it is pleasant to accept and play within the constraints created by implicit rules. For example, boys chasing and pretending to be in an army may likely protect each other just as a cluster of girls pretending to be family would want to keep babies safe. Further, like the children in Surinam, children want to negotiate with one another, or with adults, to agree on overt rules to keep play safe and enjoyable for everyone.

Rational discussions about why children need to engage in realistic play and why pretend violence is different from actual violence may be sufficient to resolve adults' instinctive feelings of antipathy to aggression as well as actual aggression (Freud 1933; Erikson, Reynolds, and Jones 1997). Tim acknowledged that despite the support children's choices, he shares with his colleagues a sense of worry about war play. A socio-cultural explanation for resistance to change the status quo is that adults are being asked to challenge views that are deeply rooted in less personal opinions than shared discursive frameworks, or discourse (Bakhtin 1981), that have acquired cultural meaning over time in social interactions.

Foucault's discursive theory of how power accumulates with discourse applied by, those in positions of authority helps illuminate how power will not be used equally, even in a school where children and staff work to create win-win situations. When discursive frameworks make us feel justified, adults may apply pressure to impose an outcome so they run the risk of ignoring, diminishing or silencing children's voices. Yet, teachers who desire to use power with children rather than oppress them, as much as possible can move to accommodate children's views and mitigate the effects of adults' actions as well as listen and negotiate. For example, as Tim described:

Matters reached a head in December 2008 when a 5-year-old child in Reception had been injured by another 5-year-old who was playing with the construction equipment. It was irrelevant that neither child was actually using the equipment as a weapon and that the incident was a complete accident. The parent was quick to remove her child from school for two days. There were rumour of a petition to have the construction equipment banned and concerns were voiced to school governor about a perception of permissiveness damaging the school's reputation. Under such pressure there was a genuine feeling of unrest among the staff. We decided that for the term it would be tactically astute to put the construction equipment away for several months. Not to ban it, but to give it
We discussed things with the boys and explained as best as we could the position. They were understanding, if disappointed. A set of new construction equipment was bought for each age group by the parent association and made available inside. At break-times in addition to the outside play areas all children now have staff-supervised free access to space inside the school.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009).

Conclusion

Examining assumptions about children’s play on one playground has revealed facets of how power can operate in schools. Adults may use power to assist children to negotiate, to create play spaces for all children, and to formulate policy. Power may also be used to shape constraints, to restrict and control children’s play. How adults balance such uses of power is an open question that has complex consequences for everyone in a school. Though changing playground practices at Surlingham proved to be challenging, the process has shown adults more of children’s desires and capabilities:

Those things that were covert and marginalised, such as the boys’ great interest in fantasy war play on the playground, are now out in the open with opportunities in classroom time for all children to explore their interests through writing, art, and ICT.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

At Surlingham Primary, recognizing that disagreements most often arose when resources were limited, over misunderstandings, or from feelings of unfairness, but not from play itself, the staff developed a conflict resolution policy that distinguishes between everyday disagreements and bullying. Adults used their power both to make institutional change and to create more dialogic spaces where all sides may be heard whether or not children are playing. Tim stressed the advantages:

We can interpret incidents more accurately with children, staff, and parents. Problems no longer escalate as they did.

(Tim, email, 10 March 2009)

The Surlingham teachers are now planning to write a formal statement about the school ethos. One idea is to make central the universal rights of children that include the right to play enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child. In parallel with a right to play is the right to be protected from physical and mental harm, that by implication
includes situations when other children play, or where adults organize playtimes. Implicitly rejecting a belief that unfettered power can be used over children to impose behaviour control, or that some children's play can dominate others, the UN Charter clearly regards children as people whose views about their lives should be included in any decision-making process.

Power can be used for children when adults give substance to the spirit of policy documents. Framing play both as a universal right and as sanctioned by the British government brings the authority of international law and national policy to considerations of the power relationships that shape discussions among staff, the governing body, parents and children, about who should decide what happens on the playground. The UN principles make the goal of discussions clear:

The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children.

(United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child 1959)

Adults can share power more equitably with young people when they talk and play with children. Adults who care for children at play can hear their voices, allow their views to shape adult assumptions and decisions and create respectful spaces where everyone's dignity is maintained in community of genuine dialogue.

Note

1. Names of parents and children are all pseudonyms.

References


