

**Play.Philly**  
Dedicated to Increasing Play  
Opportunities for Children in Philadelphia

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## **Introduction**

It is absolutely crucial that children living in poverty receive frequent access to high quality free play. Free play impacts every element of a child's development, from social to physical (Milteer & Ginsburg 2012). Adventure play, a category of play rooted in a child's freedom and participation, helps strengthen a child's resilience and helps them learn to manage their risk. Unfortunately, children living in poverty experience disproportionate play deprivation. This deprivation means that children who are at a disadvantage already from any number of poverty's pathways are now at an even more significant disadvantage as they do not have access to the developmental benefits of free play. This paper describes Play.Philly's understanding and dedication to increasing access to free play in support of the holistic development of children living in poverty in Philadelphia. Play.Philly believes that a holistic and interdisciplinary play-based approach is one that will help children achieve their developmental potential.

## **Background**

### **Role of play in development**

It is not a coincidence that the youngest of almost every species on the planet plays (Goldstein 2012). Play works to support every realm of development of a child. The most direct and obvious correlation between play and development is play's support of physical development. In its truest form, play works to support the development of cognitive processes as it exposes children to a series of new stimuli which leads to a Piagetian adaption of the knowledge framework of the child's brain (Milteer & Ginsburg 2012).

When children engage in authentic play, it is the only time in their lives that they are interacting with the world in a way that is free of the influence of adult agendas. In play, children learn to resolve conflict, explore risk and work with peers from different backgrounds. Further,

play in the earliest stages of development is the most prevalent strategy used by children to develop attachment with the supportive adults in their lives.

At its core, play supports the opportunity to explore, manipulate, and overcome obstacles and challenges. It is this process that begins the development of resilience in young children. (Miltner & Ginsburg 2012). Lester and Russel (2008) describe resilience as the “ability to withstand or recover from environmental challenges and stress, to spring back and successfully adapt to adversity” (p.20).

When the UNCRC was ratified, the world (now with only one exception – The United States) made its commitment to the notion that play is a human right that supports the physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of children. Play positively influences each of the adaptive systems responsible for building resilience. First, the nature of play allows children the opportunity to regulate their emotions in a variety of environments. This diverse exposure helps children learn to regulate their emotions so that they are capable to respond to uninvited stimuli outside of play. Authentic and free play is an enjoyable for children to develop. The enjoyability of play supports interest in development and cultivates a high level of developmental efficacy. Because children have control over their play processes, they are able to self-scale their capacity to respond to play stimuli. In doing so, they are learning appropriately respond to uncontrolled environmental stimuli. Further in support of resilience, the dance of the play process provides opportunities for children to explore their personal motivation, emotion, and reward systems. The cultivation of these systems better allows children to construct their actions outside of play (Lester & Russell 2008). Finally, children as young as two or three have been described as using play to build community (Goldstein 2012). For resilience, children often require an attachment to a place and a community. This personally created safety net allows children to take risks that

they wouldn't normally explore as they feel comforted and connected to a place (Lester & Russell 2008). For a child to truly reap all of the benefits of play, they must do so in an environment constructed by them for the sole purposes that they deem to be important in their lives. This type of truly authentic play is called adventure play and children in the poorest communities in the United States have very limited opportunities to participate in this developmental support.

### **Adventure Play**

“An adventure playground is a very special place – it is an outdoor space staffed by trained playworkers and volunteers, where children have the opportunity to play; to manipulate, create, and recreate their own environment” (Brown 2007, p. 2)

Adventure playgrounds were born out of the observational and self-reported understanding that children prefer to play everywhere in a city except for the designated and adult constructed play spaces. The freedom afforded to children by an adventure playground creates an environment in which children are much more likely to be social. Even more, children in an adventure playground are much more likely to create novel interactions with unknown peers. This means that children are more likely to be deeply exposed to children that are from different backgrounds than their own and that they are more likely to develop an understanding of these differences. Children continually report and demonstrate a significantly higher number of affordances in an Adventure Playground than those present in a contemporary and fixed playground. These affordances are the mechanisms through which children develop from interactions with their environment (Staempfli 2009).

Adventure Playgrounds, often created in empty lots in urban areas, provide children with unstructured opportunities to engage with each of the four elements: fire, water, earth and air. With this exposure to the elements comes a plethora of opportunities for children to explore and strategize ways to manage risk.

A child entering an adventure playground for the first time can expect to see an unexpected and often unprecedented place. The pillar upon which adventure playgrounds are built is loose parts play. On an adventure playground, there is an abundance of various loose parts. A child can expect to find everything from broken mannequins to ropes and lumber. In addition, they will have access to the tools (such as hammers, saws, and fire) used to manipulate the loose parts to create their environment. One of the most crucial components of an adventure playground is the minimal intervention of adults in the play of children. The only adults allowed within an adventure playground are called playworkers. Playworkers are always trained (often with the same rigor of a bachelor's degree) to employ the four tenants of adventure play. First, it is the role of the playworker to work to the child's agenda (Brown 2017). This means that adventure playgrounds are operating at Hart's (1992) highest level of participation: child-initiated, shared decisions with adults. Second, it is the role of the playworker to be non-directing. The adult determined "success" of an activity is not more important than the child's control of that activity. Third, it is the role of the playworker to suspend gender, social, and class based prejudices in play. Finally, in a related manner, it is the role of the playworker to meet the child where they are. This process is referred to as "joining" and is crucial for working with children from all levels of experience. The limited number of adventure playgrounds in the United States means that all children are coming to the playground with a different level of exposure to adventure play and therefore a different level of comfort (Brown 2017). In addition to creating the emotional

environment in which children have freedom, the playworker is “able to address and remove barriers of physical and/or emotional nature that prevent play from happening.” (Staempfli 2009, p.271). The physical space provided by an adventure playground and the atmosphere cultivated by specially trained playworkers creates the perfect environment for play in support of the development of children of all ages.

### **Barriers to Play**

For children in poverty, there is an abundance of factors working against their development. One of the factors working in opposition to child development is a lack of access to free play. Milteer and Ginsberg (2012) explain the series of influences in the reduction of play opportunities for children living in poverty. First, the focus on reducing the educational achievement gap has sped up the process of removing play from school in favor of rigorous academic curriculum. Children in poor/minority communities had less access to recess than their peers in homogenous and affluent neighborhoods. In 28% of the schools in high-poverty communities, primary-age children had no access to recess during the school day (Milteer and Ginsberg 2012). Second, parents and adults overwhelmingly believe that free and unstructured play is dangerous for children in their neighborhoods. The isolation of people within neighborhoods has led to a less communal raising of children. In response, parents felt less safe with fewer eyes watching out for dangers their children may experience (Milteer & Ginsburg 2012). Further, twice as many mothers in poor neighborhoods reported being fearful of their child playing outside. In their study, Kimbro and Schachter (2011) reported parents having a unique vulnerability response and altruistic fear which translates to a fear for the child’s well-being. The third reason play is less present in minority/poor neighborhoods is, the commercial

nature of play and toys in the United States. Because play is commercially driven, parents living in poverty believe that play in support of development must come from the toys marketed to them. A lack of resources for these parents drastically reduces their belief in their ability to use play in support of their children's development. Finally, there is a significant deficit of dedicated play spaces in poor neighborhoods in the United States. For children living in poverty in The United States, the opportunities for play are reduced both in school and out of school and this magnitude of play deprivation increases the likelihood of abnormal cognitive, emotional, social and physical development. In addition, when children are not engaged in free play, they are filling their time with activities traditionally completed in isolation such as excessive television viewing and video game playing (Milter & Ginsburg 2012). Not only are children in poverty operating at a play deficit, but they are also occupying their time with isolating activities which further reduce their opportunities to reach their maximum developmental potential.

In addition to a general fear of children being outside in poor neighborhoods, the environments of children in these neighborhoods are not conducive of healthy development. Children in poverty experience increased exposure to lead, heightened exposure to pollution sources, increased prevalence of street traffic hazards, an increased rates of crime (Evans 2004). The increased prevalence of environmental hazards reduces the likelihood that parents will feel comfortable promoted adventure based play in their neighborhoods.

Even though parents in neighborhoods with high levels of poverty are afraid to let their children engage in free outdoor play, Smith (2015) reports with a qualitative study that these parents value play. However, these parents explain that they value play because it makes children happy. They did not report an appreciation for play as a developmental support. Further, this

study outlines the parents' beliefs that it is not their role to facilitate or play with children. Instead, that is the role of peers and siblings.

While the Adventure Play movement has gained traction in Europe, Canada, and Japan, The United States has yet to accept the research for one reason: fear. Spaces in The United States are much more regulated and legislated than those in The United Kingdom (Staempfli 2009). For example, the national government in Wales as deployed a nationwide strategy to bring play provisions to all children. These adventure play provisions target poor communities and families and engage the entire family. This approach is an attempt at shifting the countries perceptions of the role of play (Play Wales 2011). Similarly, The Venture, an adventure playground in England, has existed for more than 30 years and has 30 full time employees. It would be nearly impossible for an adventure playground to exist at this magnitude without the support of the local government and community members (Brown 2007). The acceptance of Adventure Play in Wales and England (and other regions around the world) can be attributed to the systemic interpretation and handling of perceived risk. While Staempfli (2009) explains that minor injuries and risks are the ways in which children learn about the consequences of their actions, there is a movement in The United States towards promoting seemingly less risky play opportunities. However, Adventure Playgrounds consistently demonstrate fewer injuries and fewer lawsuits. Contrary to popular belief, play spaces that are strategically constructed with loose parts and tools and supervised by playworkers are safer than the playgrounds intended to protect children from risk. Integral to the minimal risk present in Adventure Playgrounds is the overt presentation of risk which presents many opportunities for children to learn to manage risk. On an adventure playground, every component in the space has risks and children are aware of

this potential. This awareness causes children to use their newly fostered risk management skills to keep themselves safe as opposed to relying on the playground to ‘protect’ them.

### **Intervention**

With an understanding of the importance of free play in both child and civic development and an understanding of the influence of poverty on a child’s access to play, Play.Philly is dedicated to increasing access to free play in support of the holistic development of children living in poverty in Philadelphia.

At Play.Philly, we approach development from a lens reminiscent of that of Urie Bronfenbrenner (2005) who believes children development within their position in an environmental and temporal context. This approach is reflected directly in the structure of our organization which is equally divided among three programs: advocacy, childhood, and research. Across every level of the organization is an appreciation for child participation. Play.Philly is led by a governing board of directors composed of experts from a variety of backgrounds. The bylaws of the board dictate that a minimum of 51% of the seats must be occupied by members under the age of 18. These members serve as both a majority portion of the governing board and as an advisory committee. This ensures that every major decision in each of the three programs engages authentic child participation.

The role of Advocacy at Play.Philly is to work alongside the advisory committee to advocate for increasing the amount of resources dedicated to integrating free play into the multiple spheres of a child’s environment. Advocacy at Play.Philly focuses on growing the number of play opportunities in schools and neighborhoods while simultaneously increasing the amount of funding dedicated to training parents and youth workers about the role of play in development.

## PLAY.PHILLY

The end goal of our Advocacy work is to shift the perceptions of parents, educators, youth workers and policy makers towards accepting and supporting the crucial role of free play in facilitating child development.

The role of the Development program at Play.Philly is to engage the advisory committee and local stakeholders in the development of temporary and permanent play provisions in poor neighborhoods in the greater Philadelphia area. By working with city developers to strategically identify and purchase plots of land in low income neighborhoods and turning these lots into a space with all of the conditions to support the child-led development of an adventure playground. Second, this program is responsible for setting up pop-up style adventure playgrounds in central locations. These ‘pop-ups’ are temporary play provisions with a solid grounding in the pillars of adventure play. Further, this program is responsible for hiring and training playworkers to support play within the permanent and temporary adventure playgrounds. This program’s end goal is to ensure that all children have a play space to call their own within a reasonable walking distance of their home.

The role of the Research program at Play.Philly is to monitor and evaluate each of the interventions implemented by the Development program and use the findings to inform advocacy. The research team is responsible not only for measuring the impact of the intervention in terms of quantity of children reach and perceived quality of intervention, but they are also responsible for understanding the populations that are not utilizing the play provisions and understanding how better to serve these populations. Further, the Research program uses both cross-sectional and longitudinal research to demonstrate the impact of adventure play on the cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children.

Play.Philly's ability to successfully increase the access to and quality of free play opportunities for children depends on the interdependent nature of our programs. Weekly, members of each program participate in short term and long term planning sessions. Further, the missions of each program interacts with the missions of the other programs. Research measures Development and informs Advocacy. Development implements research and benefits from advocacy. Advocacy is rooted in research and leads to an increased Development capacity. With an interdisciplinary approach to child development that incorporates authentic child participation Play.Philly is able to successfully deploy play provisions that support the holistic development of children.

### **Conclusion**

Children in poverty are at a disadvantage. Their opportunities to explore risk and free play are restricted by fear and lack of access. In response, children are choosing insular activities that do not promote development in the same way that adventure play is designed to. When children experience adventure play, the frequency of their conversations increases, their cognitive ability to creatively recognize and utilize affordances of objects improves, and their connection to their community through space is strengthened. Play.Philly's advocacy, research, and development approach to supporting children living in poverty in Philadelphia is one that will work to holistically to strengthen children, communities, and families. Development, research, and advocacy each play a role in improving the lives of children in poverty in Philadelphia.

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