

Advocating the Child's Right to Play – The Hong Kong Experience

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PLAYRIGHT CHILDREN'S PLAY ASSOCIATION (Playright) is a charity in Hong Kong advocating for the "Child's Right to Play." Twenty-seven years ago, play was very low on most people's agenda. Since 1987, Playright has been working hard to help people in all sectors appreciate the value of play. With the desire to reshape and improve play resources, opportunities and environments for children, Playright developed various play projects and service programs to raise community awareness. We are glad to see a growing recognition of the value of play, but are also aware of the challenges that we still have to meet in the years to come.

In this article, I discuss the play conditions of children, including their play time, playmates, play resources, and play space in Hong Kong. I also discuss the challenges and efforts to make changes for children. I hope that sharing our experiences would help draw further thinking and efforts into supporting children's play.

It is Playright's vision to build a society that respects, protects and fulfills the Child's Right to Play, and where children can enjoy their childhood.



Understanding Children's Play

Play for play's sake

What is play? Play is one of the ways we define childhood, and the natural way to grow. It is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated (Play Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005). All children are born players. They have a natural inclination to play. They play all the time and anywhere. They play for play's sake, not for any other purpose or agenda. Play is essentially for and by children. It can be irrational and purposeless in the eyes of adults (Newstead, 2011).

Play with values

To make sense about children's play, the nature and values of play have been widely studied and promoted. Play benefits children's social, physical, intellectual, creative and emotional development. Play can enhance adaptive capabilities and resilience (Russell & Lester, 2009). Play is an essential component of children's development. It is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood. It has been raised that the persistent absence of play will have harmful effects on children.

Play as a child's right

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has recognized play as a discrete element in Article 31, requiring concerted efforts to support children's play (Committee on the Right of the Child, 1989). Play is affected by the socio-economic environment, cultural practices and societal values. Policies and practices in health care, education, welfare, leisure and even town planning also affect play opportunities and environments for children (Wong, 2007).

Children's Play Time

More structured learning activities and less free time to play

There has been a growing group of well-intended parents making a group of over-scheduled children. Other than normal schooling, it is not uncommon to find children heavily engaged with extra-curricular activities (ECA) or interest classes. The Chinese Manufacturers' Association of Hong Kong reported that over 45 percent of Primary 4 to 6 children join four to six

sessions of ECA per week. Over 22 percent of the children attend seven sessions a week (*The Hong Kong Economic Times*, 2011). A study conducted by the University of Hong Kong found that many children's only free time given by parents was on Sunday morning (*Ming Pao Daily*, 2009, September 26).

Even pre-school children's free time is already strained by attending interest classes and playgroups. The playgroup and learning center business has been gradually flourishing in the past two decades. Parents happily engage their children in these activities hoping that their children will have a head start over others. The introduction of the Pre-School Education Voucher Scheme has unexpectedly provided support to push this trend further. Some parents have started to enroll their children in two kindergartens, giving children less free time to play.

Children's Playmates

More solitary activity and less social play

How much time do our children play with others? Playright's study in 2008 found that children do not play with their neighboring peers. Of those who play with neighboring children, 14.2 percent spent less than two hours a week on this. What is more, the time children spent on TV and computer games is 11.6 hours a week (Tang, 2008a). Playmates in one's living environment are crucial for children's holistic development. Play can be an important medium for establishing peer friendships, which is important for mental health (Russell & Lester, 2009). Is our community planning supportive enough for children playing together?

Work and study patterns affecting family play

What about children and their parents? Play is an important medium for establishing attachments to adults, and for emotional regulation. The relatively safe context within family play is essential for building positive family relationships and emotional states. It was found that half of Hong Kong's families, however, spent less than six hours a week to play with children, and over 17 percent of parents did not have any time to play with their children. Over 60 percent of parents found this inadequate (Tang, 2008b). More than 60 percent of the parents stated that long working hours are the primary reason that keeps them from playing with their children and long study time is the second important reason.

Children's Play Resources

More toys but less play

Children play with whatever they can find - often with nothing. Any play tools, may it be toys or common household materials such as cardboard boxes or toilet rolls, may enrich the possibilities in the play process if children find it worth playing with. However, the play ability of children has been gradually weakened in an affluent society, like Hong Kong. Some children have "learned" to use play tools in the "right" way, can only use them when given instructions, or have even lost all interest to "play". They are playing less, not because of lack of resources, but because their play ideas are belittled.

Limited access

For some children in extreme situations, such as illness, disability and poverty, lack of access to play resources, facilities, and opportunities can be an issue. The Forthright Caucus studied the summer program enrollment of children from low income families. About 95 percent of the interviewed parents find that summer programs are the basic needs of children, but 53 percent cannot arrange it for their children because of financial difficulties (Cheung, 2011). Besides, children suffering from illness or disability also need to play, but their play resources are often limited by the facilities available and attitude of adults around them. For instance, there are still very few public hospitals in Hong Kong that have a Hospital Play Program despite more than twenty years of Playright's advocacy and support.

Children's Play Space

Less outdoor and environmental play

Children play wherever they find themselves. However, many only play at home when actually preferring playgrounds (Yip, 1999). Parents were not aware of children's need to play outdoors. They also under-estimated the value of outdoor play in preventing obesity and promoting physical health, and thus made little or no effort to meet this need.

Calling for inclusive playgrounds development

Playright's earliest activities in 1989 focused very practically on Hong Kong's lack of inclusive playgrounds (Playright, 2008). Two decades later, we have to ask again, do ALL children enjoy quality play opportunities? The study of Wan (2009) found that 95 percent of parents of children with special needs think that their children need or very much need to play. Over 90 percent think that play is important or very important to their children's development. However, close to 80 percent think that the public playgrounds are inadequate or very inadequate, while close to 50 percent expressed difficulties in using public playgrounds (Wan, 2009).

To further understand the views of playground stakeholders towards the development of public playgrounds, Playright carried out a study in 2010. It was found that the most urgent agendas for playground improvement are about design and types of play facilities. About 98 percent of the respondents agreed or totally agreed that Hong Kong community's attention and awareness of the value of playground on children's development needed to be raised. The respondents considered that the most important ways to promote inclusive playgrounds were by developing guidelines for design, research work, and information access (Yuen, 2010).

Playright's Strategies to Make Change on Children's Play

To make Hong Kong a place where children can benefit from playing as part of their everyday lives, we need a wider perspective. Our mission is to advocate play and seek societal commitment to meet the play needs of every child at policy, planning and provision level. How?

1. by creating play opportunities at different settings to demonstrate the value of play;
2. by promoting good practice and empowering adults to develop appropriate play provisions as well as play-friendly environment for children;
3. by inspiring a play-accepting culture in community.

Creating play opportunities

For children in families, the HSBC Playright PlayScope (PlayScope) is a deliberate effort by Playright to strengthen the creative use of play resources and inspire play ideas for parents. PlayScope is also our first social enter-

prise to support family play. Through our versatile play space, play series and toy library service, families with young children can experience the many possibilities of playing. Furthermore, we have lately developed the Playful Parents Academy to empower the parents to play with their children.

For children in the community, Playright has been running the Play Mobile Project since 2005. We penetrate every community, turning vacant spaces into playgrounds that offer children new outdoor play experiences. The Play Mobile is also invited to kindergartens and special schools. It is encouraging to see the increased understanding on the problem of excessive sedentary and indoor activity, and that outdoor physical activities for children are becoming more popular. Recently, we further develop the Playborhood project that provides regular play opportunities at selected residential open spaces. We hope to actively engage local residents and partners, as well as to develop a sustainable service model.

For children in the city, Playright has launched environmental play since 2009. It focuses on opportunities for children to play freely with natural elements, in and around natural spaces. The start of environmental play is not without difficulties, as children resist getting dirty, have fear of wildlife, and parents worry about risk-taking. However, these difficulties are soon resolved once everyone becomes more experienced. Our family day outings to the countryside, community play days at public parks, and Forest School for kindergartens are very well received.

For children in hospital, we have the Hospital Play Services since 1994, helping children to reduce anxiety due to their illnesses and treatments at hospital. Through the play service, provided by trained Hospital Play Specialists, the children cope better with medical procedures and develop more positive feelings towards sickness and hospitalization. We are now providing the services in three public hospitals and plan to extend our reach to serve more children in need.

For children having special needs, such as physically or mentally disabling conditions or being at risk of or experiencing significant deprivation in other ways, we provide special help and resources. Often such children are denied their chance to truly play because play is merely regarded as a tool to achieve training needs, rather than an opportunity to enjoy real play. Playright thus collaborates with different special schools to develop the playful classroom project. We also develop a Pop Up Playground project

in deprived districts in Hong Kong, and play services in primary schools in Hefei, Anhui Province in Mainland China.

Promoting good practice for play

Creating play opportunities for children is important, but equally important is to support adults that have influence on children's play. It is about knowledge sharing and partnership. As a member of the International Play Association, Playright has gained access to international practices and standards. We are blessed to be able to act locally and think globally. At present, Playright has developed three professional hubs and offered workshops and training courses to support the development of children's play in Hong Kong.

On Play and Playwork , we have developed and offered the following courses:

- Playwork Induction Course;
- Foundation Certificate in Play and Playwork Course;
- Certificate in Playwork Course (partnered with Common Threads of UK); and
- Playwork Diploma Course (partnered with Common Threads of UK).



On Play Environments, we have organized the following courses:

- National Recreation and Park Association (NPRA) Certified Playground Safety Inspector Course & Exam (partnered with International Playground Safety Institute (IPSI) of USA);
- Playground Maintenance Course (partnered with IPSI of USA); and
- Playground Safety Induction Course.



On Hospital Play, we have collaborated with the University of Hong Kong - School of Professional and Continuing Education (HKU SPACE), to provide the Certificate in Theory and Practice of Hospital Play.

Of all the three professional hubs, we also offer tailor-made training or workshops for different professional groups. We organize conferences and symposiums to facilitate play knowledge sharing. The latest ones are the “PLAY FOR ALL” Symposium and “Designing play spaces for children of today”.

To empower adults to develop appropriate play provisions and play-friendly environments for children, our Play Environment Consultancy Services, Playground Safety Inspection Service, and many research projects, etc. have played an important role in promoting safe and inclusive play facilities to international standards. We hope that more and more Hong Kong

children, whatever their age, ability, background or ethnicity, can play freely and happily in an environment well suited to their needs.

Inspiring a play-accepting culture

Each child has the right to play, and we argue passionately for this fundamental entitlement to be supported and protected on all fronts. At the international level, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) adopted General Comment no.17, on Article 31 in February 2013. This provides us with a strong instrument to promote, protect and fulfill this essential right, which is often neglected. It is an opportune time for us to renew our efforts together for the promotion of play for all children at all times in all places using the General Comment no. 17 of UNCRC as the basis.

At the local level, our advocacy effort grows even stronger through advocacy campaign and partnership. On 17 November 2013, tens of thousands of children were accompanied by parents to join Playright's Cheer for Play event at Chater Road, Central of Hong Kong. This date was chosen to celebrate the Rights of Children in November 1989. The campaign also aims at inspiring mindset change and letting adults hear the voice of children. It has been Playright's annual flagship event to raise public awareness on the importance of play.



Building effective partnerships have maximized the impact of advocacy campaigns to lead changes to a wider community. For the past years, we have partnered with Disneyland Hong Kong to advocate for the Community Built Playground development. The impact has soon grown from a two-day play event to partnering with a government department in providing the same play experiences to a wider group of parents.

The partnership with UNICEF HK in advocating Inclusive Playground development in Hong Kong is also worth mentioning. The campaign has extended from a research project to the present education and design competition campaign that engaged major playground-related professional groups. We have yet to see the actual impact, but are glad to see a wider acceptance on children's play.

Conclusion

As a leading play advocate, Playright has continuously tried to change society's indifference to the importance of play and has genuinely placed the best interests of the child first. We are glad to see that play is a much more pervasive community issue now compared to the situation twenty-seven years ago. However, barriers to play still exist. Policies on planning, open space, housing and traffic, hospitals, schools and childcare have a direct effect on opportunities to play. We have to work hard collaboratively to foster environments and attitudes that support children's play.

When we value play, we value children. Let us put children's play on the agenda, and recognize that having time, resources and good places for play are of paramount importance to children, their families and our entire community.

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