

The Big Deal



# Play Quest

an independent evaluation  
October 2008



## **Introduction**

PlayBoard, on behalf of The Big Deal Programme, following a select list tendering process selected Marc Armitage, an independent children's play consultant, to carry out an independent evaluation of the Play Quest programme. The brief asked the evaluation to consider the project in terms of both measured outcomes and working practice to determine its value as a model of effective participatory practice in the children's sector in Northern Ireland and to make recommendations for short and longer term development.

The report is structured in two parts: Part 1 gives a general background to the project and the model of working. It also discusses the possibilities inherent in developing greater participation and involvement using a playwork approach; Part 2 gives results of the independent evaluation of the project, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations.

## **PART 1**

### **Background and Origins of Project**

The Big Deal is a Big Lottery funded initiative to help to extend effective practice in how children and young people are involved in decision-making about the things that matter to them. The Big Deal involves different agencies working with children and young people:

- Youthnet (lead partner & responsible for small grants programme)
- PlayBoard (delivery partner Play Quest programme)
- Northern Ireland Youth Forum (delivery partner Programmes for Young People) supported by the Education & Library Boards
- Youth Council for Northern Ireland (strategy and co-ordination partner)

The Play Quest programme is the 0-10 strategy of The Big Deal and aims to increase children's involvement in decision making through play.

Play Quest is delivered by PlayBoard's team of Play Rangers across a wide range of settings who cater for children aged 0 – 10 years. The programme supports children, parents and staff to achieve effective participation through play. Play Quest is a programme tailored to settings needs and typically it involves an initial visit, observation of the play environment, delivery of the programme and a follow-up visit.

Play Quest is an inclusive programme based on the needs of groups or organisations and the children. Community, voluntary and statutory organisations working with children aged 0–10 can be part of the Play Quest programme, including schools, preschools, parent and toddler groups, school aged childcare providers, youth clubs, uniformed and church groups or projects with a specific focus e.g. looked after children, children with a disability, from minority ethnic or rural communities. The programme has a particular interest in working with organisations in clusters within communities to help develop and sustain partnerships. The programmes specific objectives are:<sup>1</sup>

- To extend children’s play opportunities
- To explore opportunities for children to make decisions
- To support children to tell others what their play need are so they become advocates for their own play needs, and
- To support adults to recognise and meet children’s play needs through observation and reflection

The project team comprises a Programme Manager and four Play Rangers. It is a three year funded programme which is due to end in July 2009.

### **Play and Playwork Context**

All children are entitled to play and this entitlement is enshrined in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Play is intrinsic to children’s quality of life: it is an important part of how they learn and enjoy themselves. It is also a key component of a healthy lifestyle, enabling good physical, emotional, mental and social development.

‘Play’ and ‘playing’ are often seen by wider society as trivial and not very important in life. However, play is a complex process that holds great importance in the lives of children and young people and is a highly significant element in the process that each of us goes through in order to develop into the kind of adults we become. For children and young people themselves it is the thing they choose to spend more waking time on than any other form of activity. As Colin Ward put it, “Play is the thing that children do, all the time and everywhere.” (Ward 1979).

Children and young people report that for them play is simply the most important aspect of their lives. This is as true for older children as for younger children, even though teenagers may not acknowledge that what they do is ‘play’. The UK wide

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<sup>1</sup> Play Quest project Information Pack.

National Review of Children's Play (more commonly known as the Dobson Report) carried out in 2004 defined play as 'What children do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons'. As such the report concludes that play should be seen as behaviour not just of young children but of 0 to 18 year olds.

A sense of freedom, curiosity, experimentation and pushing the boundaries both physically and socially are key elements of how children and young people play spontaneously in their own time and in the company of their friends. However, this sometimes brings them into conflict with adults who can see such behaviour as disruptive and anti-social. It does not always fit well with the agenda of some of the organised settings in which children spend their day. As such the play that takes place in these settings is often adult initiated, activity-led and is thus very different to that which takes place naturally.

Playwork is a highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances children's play. Playworkers' help create secure atmospheres that welcome and encourage all children to play in different ways according to their age, ability, culture and circumstances. (NI Implementation plan for Playwork Education and Training 2006 - 2011).

### **Play, Playwork, Participation and Involvement**

Spontaneous play is naturally participative and cooperative: children who have not met each other before find it very easy to engage in play as part of the getting-to-know-you process; and children of all ages include negotiation, turn taking and team working as an unconscious, intrinsic element of their play (van Peer 1998). Much of this natural self-reliance can be lost, however, when adults become involved as even very young children will naturally stop what they are doing when an adult enters the frame and wait to be told what to do (Lillemyr 2003).

Combining the spontaneous aspects of playing and the intervention style of the playworker, provides children with an ideal opportunity to extend their natural desire for involvement when playing into broader involvement in other aspects of their lives. A project therefore that aims to promote further participation and involvement through play using a playwork approach has a great opportunity for success because in the context of 'playing' it is building upon something which is naturally already present. This approach rather than introducing a new, artificial concept supports a framework that recognises and is sympathetic to how children naturally participate.

## **Play Quest as a Model of Participatory Practice**

The Play Quest programme was devised and developed as a model of participatory practice and the project process is based on a playwork approach to working. It begins with potential settings completing an expression of interest form.

### Initial Approaches and Contact

Following receipt of an expression of interest the Play Quest team discuss the forms received and select those to take part. Each round of the selection process takes account of the size, remit and target groups of organisations previously involved in the programme. For example, by the end of the project the Play Quest team want to ensure a balance of organisations that:

- are local, sub-regional and regional
- are part-time and full-time
- work with different age ranges
- work with and within groups and areas of social need
- are from rural and urban settings from across Northern Ireland

Once a range of settings have been selected for involvement with the project two play rangers are appointed as co-workers to each setting, one of which is appointed as Key Worker. This person makes initial contact with the setting, discusses the programme, completes written agreements between Play Quest and the setting, organises necessary resources and equipment for the delivery of the project. The programme is then delivered in four stages:

### Stage 1: Observation/Baseline Assessment

In this stage, the project co-workers visit the setting and make a baseline assessment using a devised audit tool. This baseline assessment involves making observations of children at play; explores the settings indoor and outdoor environment; current activities, equipment and materials; the interactions between adults and children and between children and other children; and the skills, attitudes and play knowledge of staff, particularly in relation to understanding 'choice'.

### Stage 2: Design of Programme

The key worker now enters into negotiation to design a programme that meets the settings needs, based on the results of the baseline assessment and on the settings own appreciation of what it wants help and support with. This programme includes an action plan setting out what the Play Quest programme will provide and asks the

setting to enter into a written agreement which details expectations of both the user setting and Play Quest.

### Stage 3: Delivery of Programme

Engagement with the user setting then begins. Typically, when working with individual settings this engagement lasts for one week but when an opportunity arises to apply a cluster approach (as it did in North Belfast between September to December 2007) then a longer time frame can be given to each setting. In the north Belfast example, five settings in the cluster (two primary schools, a parent and toddler group, a playgroup, and an afterschool club) were engaged with over a twelve week period.

The programme varies from place to place but includes engagement children in the setting and with adults (including parents in some cases). It can be based on introducing new materials and equipment such as dressing up boxes, scrap and loose parts (see Part 2 for explanation), but also involves promoting the involvement of children in planning their playtimes and activity programmes, and establishing ways of children being able to represent their own ideas to user setting staff.

### Stage 4: Evaluation and Reflection

Each session in Stage 3 above is reflected and reported on by the Play Quest programme team but in this final stage the experiences of the whole programme are considered. A report is produced for the user setting which includes recommendations for continuing and expanding upon the work of the programme.

After a period of six – eight weeks, the setting is re-visited and an opportunity taken to speak to children and staff to assess the results of the programme, actions taken to address recommendations made, and to assess the need for any additional support the setting may need. A written report is then made for the benefit of the Play Quest programme and this serves as a tool for further reflection to assess the project's participatory practice and working model.

## **Project Outcomes and Achievements to Date**

The Play Quest programme is measured against a number of outcomes established by PlayBoard at the outset of the programme and agreed with the Big Lottery Fund. These outcomes are ongoing and include a target of engaging with a net total of 16,952 children and young people by the end of the programme (July 2009). Latest monitoring figures available at the time of the evaluation (March 2008) show that a total of 7,579 children and young people and 820 staff have had engagement with Play Quest. This figure is likely to increase dramatically from March 08 onwards.

Other outcomes include a target for strengthening existing participative structures and supporting new structures; developing and disseminating models of best practice; and contributing to increased health and well-being, achievement and learning, and wider family and community support for children and young people.

In meeting these outcomes Play Quest has, for example:

- engaged with the members' council of the Catholic Girl Guides. This involved working with children who wanted to become more involved in the organisation and the members council. It aimed to find out what the children like about the Catholic Girl Guides and what they would like to see changing. The Play Ranger modelled for the adults how to facilitate and support conversations and allow the children to take control and encourage discussion around the members council
- carried out a scoping and consultation exercise with children and young people aged 5-12 years as part of the development of the Equality Commission NI Draft Guidance for Public Authorities on Consulting with Children and Young People. This involved consulting with children using a range of techniques through play on how they would wish to be consulted, and how they would want information fed back to them. The report informed the development of the guidance.
- carried out consultations with children on Northern Ireland's first Play Policy and fed this into policy development
- Initiated the development of a Play Quest Information Pack for user settings that includes a project overview, policy statements, forms and further reading lists. Designed and developed an information leaflet to disseminate information and promote the programme.

Of most relevance to the results of the evaluation is an outcome requiring the project to engage with a net number of organisations and groups over the life of the project (see Part 2). These outcomes involve Play Quest engaging with 116 groups which includes 81 schools. At the time of the evaluation Play Quest had delivered: 46 programmes to settings, Play Days to 28 voluntary & community groups and worked with five participation structures<sup>2</sup> (7579 children and 820 staff). See following summary:

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<sup>2</sup> Big Deal Review Day Summary: 0-10 Strategic Programme; and Monitoring information September 06 – March 08.

Type of setting	Numbers	No. Chn	No. staff
Schools	21	4074	290
Voluntary/community	18	800	92
Non-formal	5	234	67
Mix/other	2	133	38
<b>Total</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>5241</b>	<b>487</b>

**Play Days – 1 day sessions, Summer days/visits**

28 voluntary & community groups – 2063 children, 278 staff

**Participation structures**

5 structures – 275 children, 55 staff

# PART 2

## **Introduction**

This part of the report lays out the methodology of the evaluation, gives the results, draws conclusions, and makes recommendations for development.

## **Methodology**

A range of methods have been used in the evaluation including a review of programme files and reports, outcome returns, and reflective material prepared by the Play Quest team. Interviews have also been held with a significant number of adult staff and children from past and current programmes and informal contact has also taken place with numerous children, parents and staff during visits to programmes.

People formally interviewed have been:

- Fifteen children
- Five members/parents of voluntary groups
- Three managers of voluntary projects
- Five school Midday Supervisors
- Three school class teachers
- Three school Principals
- All four Play Rangers
- Play Quest Programme Manager
- Chief Executive of PlayBoard

Various quotations from people interviewed have been recorded in this report but no names are included.

## Structure of the Report

This report contains the following:

1. Opening Remarks
2. The Purpose of the Programme
3. The Team
4. The Audits
5. Contact with other Staff
6. Additional impact of the Play Quest programme
7. Materials and Equipment
8. Time
9. Training
10. Conclusions
11. Recommendations

Bibliography

### **1. Opening Remarks**

- 1.1 Overall, the evaluation has concluded that the Play Quest programme is meeting its defined outcomes. The Programme is providing a model of effective participatory practice and is proving to be an effective, enjoyable and worthwhile programme. The staff team have developed a very reflective and cooperative way of working that is noticeable in their work practice. Their adoption of a co-worker role and their decision making in prioritising and selecting target settings to include in the programme is particularly effective.
- 1.2 The outcomes, targets and milestones agreed at the outset of the programme were supported by a robust rationale and formula. However, in practice in some instances longer participant engagement is required therefore targets could potentially restrain the organic development of the programme. To achieve the target of 116 organisations involved in the programme by July 2009, it will not be possible to introduce additional innovations, such as, where necessary extending the programme over a longer time frame to embed learning. Greater time for baseline auditing and engaging teaching staff in schools may be required to ensure understanding of the complementarity with curriculum outcomes.

## **2. Purpose of the Programme**

- 2.1 The Play Quest programme is not the only scheme in Northern Ireland promoting the development of participation and involvement of children and young people; nor is it the only programme that aims to extend play opportunities in a variety of different settings. However, it is the only programme that combines these two elements together building participation through the medium of play. As such, the Play Quest programme is providing a very different yet complimentary service to other programmes such as those using a youth work approach to participation, for example.
- 2.2 Play is simply the most important part of children's day to day lives and is the thing they choose to spend the majority of their free time engaging in (see The Dobson Review 2004). Therefore using 'play' as the starting point to raise levels of children's involvement in settings they spend time in, such as school, daycare, after school clubs, youth clubs and holiday projects, is building on a natural and intrinsic behaviour.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.3 Playwork, as a professional approach to working with children, adopts a child centred 'hands off' methodology. Playwork, though professionally distinct, can be viewed as a complementary approach to any discipline that works with children and young people. This is currently evidenced in developments within the youth and childcare sectors.
- 2.4 The spontaneous nature of play and the variety of settings Play Quest has been working with requires a flexible approach to promoting participation and it is evident that the members of the Play Quest team know this, "The programme is about increasing participation by increasing opportunities but [how that is done] is different from place to place." (Playranger). This need for flexibility fits well within a playwork approach and reaction from past user settings (both children and staff) shows that this approach has been successful. One reported, for example "the children were *very* involved" (voluntary project manager).
- 2.5 The reaction from user settings during the evaluation has generally been that this level of involvement would not have been achieved without the involvement of the Play Quest programme. Despite possible early reservations with some, "I don't think [our teachers] at first thought it

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<sup>3</sup> In a playwork context, play is defined as behaviour which is spontaneous, personally directed, intrinsically motivated, and engaged in for no external goal.

would be as successful as it has been." (school Vice-Principal) these reservations have been quickly overcome,

*"It's given responsibility for play [time] over to the children. They decide what happens now. This would not have happened without the programme"*(class teacher).

- 2.6 User settings have found that this new way of working has been particularly useful. For example, other reactions included, "They [the playworkers] were able to predict some of the things children would do ..." (Manager, non-school programme) and, "I really enjoyed working with the Play Quest people ... it was different." (class teacher).
- 2.7 Participation in the Play Quest programme has raised the issue of play and involvement for many user settings where this had not been considered before. It has often acted as a catalyst promoting a majority of user settings to ask what they can do next. For example, "Children are involved in choosing of games/activities of their choice and when buying new equipment. I would like them to be more involved in the day to day organisation now." (voluntary project manager). This is demonstrating a useful level of added value to the involvement of Play Quest.
- 2.8 Occasional comments have been made such as, "I was very impressed with what they were doing in terms of play" which suggests that for some participants it is the 'play' element that has been strongest in their minds. Such comments have occasionally been made in non-school settings but are more common amongst school users of the programme. A reason for this may be that a playwork approach is a relatively new approach in schools. Promoting involvement and participation is something that schools are familiar with and it may be schools are simply finding a new way of looking at 'play' as a medium for informal learning.

### **3. The Team**

- 3.1 The Play Quest programme team show a high degree of organisation, evaluation and reflection in their working practice and how they are applying this to the process of the Play Quest programme. This is despite the fact that some of the present team members are relative new. However, it is clearly the systems and working approach that has been developed that have allowed new members of staff to be effectively inducted into the project team and the process of working. This point has been recognised by management at PlayBoard who have remarked that,

"The staff are [noticeably] a lot more confident and reflective in their co-worker role." (PlayBoard management).

- 3.2 The Play Quest programme team have developed a very effective series of procedures and shared practices for working including a form of recording involvement with each user programme from initial contact to post-involvement evaluation. The files of information for each user programme worked with have proved very useful for evaluating the programme as a whole and show a clear progression of ideas and understanding. For example, the project team began to adopt a written contract of involvement with user settings based on learning from early experiences. Discussion around this point is clearly demonstrated in these files.
- 3.3 The Play Quest programme team have been cooperatively prioritising and choosing programmes for involvement and have adopted a similarly cooperative approach to working directly with settings. Using a co-worker approach, in which the team operate in alternating pairs and with one in each pair adopting a key-worker role acting as first point of contact with a setting, has proved to be an effective working model.
- 3.4 Developing such a flexible and cooperative approach with a project team takes time and it is clear that the Play Quest programme team have reached a point of being able to provide an effective service for their users. It is also clear, however, that they have reached a point of unconscious competence with current service delivery. Project development and management structures will highlight areas for future professional and personal development.

#### **4 The Audits**

- 4.1 Carrying out an effective play audit of a setting prior to any playwork involvement is vital in making an assessment of what is happening, where it is happening, and what is not happening. This not only helps in planning what forms of play to develop and, in the specific case of Play Quest to help choose where to develop involvement and participation, but also serves to provide evidence that can effectively counter negative and false perceptions of play.
- 4.2 Play Quest realised early that a form of baseline assessment was essential and so has adopted a systemised way of doing this in each user setting prior to involvement in the form of a play audit. Adopting a systemised way of doing this has meant that like for like comparisons can be made in different settings over time and provides a useful learning tool for the Play

Quest programme. The team have observed patterns as a result of the audits and acted upon them. The classification system the Play Quest team have used is defensible as it is based on the sixteen Play Types<sup>4</sup>. This is a common playwork development tool. However, additional criteria could be added to enhance the tool in the context of specific information required for the objectives of the Play Quest programme.

- 4.3 More significantly, interviews with Play Quest team members show that occasionally, but not often the play audit aspect of the programme can be pressed for time. The pressure to meet outcomes can limit the amount of time the programme can spend with a user setting.

## **5 Contact with other staff**

- 5.1 There have been some issues relating to contact with staff in user settings. The cascading of information from senior staff to others can be problematic. Notably, this is more evident in larger settings.
- 5.2 The programme works particularly well when clear information and communication protocols have been established and the objectives and outcomes have been shared with staff at all levels.

## **6 Additional impact of the Play Quest programme**

- 6.1 Staff noted positive aspects of the programme. In schools post project, staff identified fewer 'problems' to deal with after the lunchtime session, and a greater sense of enjoyment. "The main thing was our children really enjoyed it." (class teacher). In non-school settings staff interviewed often felt that the enjoyment their children got from being involved was linked to the wider positive effects of participation on their setting as a whole. As with the school, they highlighted enjoyment as a key outcome. The connection between enjoyment and ability/willingness to learn is very real but is not viewed as an outcome of the programme.
- 6.2 As highlighted by evaluation participants, the consequence of promoting participation through a playwork approach has proved beneficial. The ability of the Play Quest programme to model methods of participation as helped to extend knowledge and capacity across a range of settings and disciplines. "It was very successful [but] we could not have provided the focus the Play Quest team did." (School Principal).

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<sup>4</sup> The Play Types are based on a Taxonomy of Play first developed by Bob Hughes (see Hughes 2001) that classifies forms of play based on the function of play.

## 7 Materials and Equipment

- 7.1 An important aspect of the programme has been the innovation and use of loose parts. Staff from settings have been surprised that participation through play can be achieved by using everyday low cost recyclable materials.
- 7.2 The point of using loose parts instead of manufactured materials has been greatly understood by almost all settings, "This has been about encouraging them to make the most of what they had." (School Principal). A significant number of settings have re-examined the materials and equipment they have been using and what affect it might have on play and on participation as a result. For example the same Principal went on to say, "We have tended to work by setting stuff out and not letting children's imagination loose." And another principal said, "It has encouraged us to unstructure the materials [our] children use so that they can use their imagination in broader ways" (School Principal).
- 7.3 Images of loose parts being utilised



1.



2.

**Photo 1.** Children working together begin by using materials in predictable ways based on their own previous experiences.

**Photo 2.** Children move on to experimenting with alternative use of materials, in this case tying rope to fencing and then other objects to the rope. Negotiation and cooperation beginning to increase

3.



4.



**Photo 3.** Experimentation becomes more specialised and adaptation of materials begins to have more focus, in this case material (a parachute) is added and tied to fence.

**Photo 4.** Play develops into den building with material, rope and other objects combined to act as props and a setting for role play within the den which has becoming a centre for pretend and imaginary play.

## 8 Time

- 8.1 Play Quest programme outcomes and targets require the project to work with a preset number of settings within the life of the project. This as resulted in a week of time allocated to each setting. Embedding the Play Quest programme within a user setting for a longer period of time may be more productive in terms of what the programme can achieve.
- 8.2 This view is echoed by PlayBoard management, "initial targets were based on what we envisioned the programme being able to achieve" "project potential has developed over time, therefore in some instances longer time may be required". Comments from Play rangers support this view, "I feel we're just flitting in and out...we are not going to have a major impact in a few days".
- 8.3 There are times when poor weather and organisational pressures from user settings mean that the planned programme is disrupted. If, for example, a school decides not to let children out for a lunch-time because of wet weather, then the programme loses time for face to face development work.

- 8.4 It is this issue of available time to work with user settings that is viewed as a challenge to programme development. As noted above there are historical reasons for this and the decisions taken then were considered best at that time. However, now that the programme has been running for some time it is evident that although running successfully within the current time constraints, it leaves little time for error and limits the programme in flexibility.

## **9 Training**

- 9.1 The Play Quest team have accessed a number of training opportunities since the programme began. Additionally, the team has been able to attend a number of conferences and a study visits to other play focused projects. The staff team considered this to have been effective and useful in supporting delivery.

## **10 Conclusions**

- 10.1 The members of the Play Quest team have shown themselves to be an effective, cooperative and adaptive group of people. They work in a way that provides a very good example of what the programme is all about – promoting involvement and participation through the medium of play in an enjoyable and engaging way. The programme is proving itself to be viable, meeting its outcomes and providing added value in its contact with user settings.
- 10.2 In the time the Play Quest programme has been operating it has succeeded in extending the play opportunities of children and young people in the programmes it has engaged with and enabled those children to let the adults in their settings know more about what their play needs are. The programme has also largely succeeded in enabling children and young people to be more involved in wider decision making in their setting. This evaluation concludes, therefore, that the Play Quest programme is meeting its aims and objectives and targets.
- 10.3 The Play Quest model of participatory practice devised and developed by the team has proved to be a robust and effective model. Putting this into practice through a combination of play and playwork practice is proving to be a powerful tool in developing and increasing participation and involvement. The programme has the ability to develop further.

- 10.4 The positive remarks of past user settings and the level of interest shown by prospective settings demonstrate there is a need for this unique approach. This programme has facilitated children and young people to realise their right to participate and be involved in many aspects of decision making in their lives.

## **11 Recommendations**

1. Ensure adequate time is established for base line audits.
2. Further development of the current auditing tool to ensure base line data is specific to participation and overall project outcomes.
3. Adopt a system to transmit the evidence of informal learning and outcome/curriculum links to settings.
4. Further develop and formalise the current contract with user settings to include a contact with staff to aid greater understanding of the programme aims and methodology.
5. Explore further the potential link between involvement, participation and enjoyment and its wider effect on settings.
6. Continue to provide continuous professional development opportunities to ensure staff can grow to further develop the project.
7. Further resources need to be made available. Staff time extended and finance to continue in line with the other Big Deal programmes to ensure the learning and achievements accomplished to date are maximised and cascaded throughout Northern Ireland.

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### National Play Organisations

PlayBoard Northern Ireland [www.playboard.org](http://www.playboard.org)

Play Wales/Chwarae Cymru [www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk)

Play Scotland [www.playscotland.org](http://www.playscotland.org)

Play England [www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)

Play Ireland/Sugradh [www.playireland.ie](http://www.playireland.ie)

Skills Active Playwork Unit [www.skillsactive.com/playwork](http://www.skillsactive.com/playwork)