The Open University

Growing up with Disability

Local Authority Play Support

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My name is Sue Gutteridge and I'm Play Services Manager for Stirling Council and I'm based in Children's services.

Play is really important because its what children do – its part of the culture of childhood and I'm sure every adult knows that that is what they did – every adult can see that that's what children do and its something absolutely intrinsic I would say to children's being and the way they operate in their world.

Many people have tried to define what are the characteristics of children's play and I think there's general agreement now in the field that it's a concept of play that is to do with play being self-directed – under children's own control, and intrinsically motivated, an activity that may, but does not necessarily have, specific outcomes but is valuable for the process.
I think play has an enormous role to play and I think what we do know is that play seems to be evident in every kind of society. That in every society children play –that suggests strongly that there is an innate drive to play. We know that children play in very adverse kinds of circumstances – so it's quite actually difficult to stop children playing – you don't have to do a huge amount to stop them playing and I suppose our role as adults and the role of society in general is to just give them the space to do it and give them the support some children in particular may need to do it – it's their work, it's the way they learn, it's the way they enjoy themselves, it comes into all kind of things, its not confined to one place or to one kind of activity, it's there in their lives.
I think that society – to be specific – social organizations, have a duty to think about what children actually need in terms of good environments and good social environments and that can be unsupervised play spaces which offer good opportunities for play.

I think it's important that society as a whole and social organizations within it – recognize their responsibility to children before it's too late – to preserve – that we actually have to consciously think about preserving childrens' opportunities to play. Which maybe, it doesn't have to be anything very elaborate at all it maybe towards preserving provision and settings and so on that we've already got and make sure they don't get encroached on, that they're good quality and children have those kind of play opportunities – I think it is also to do with actually giving out messages that the adults who are responsible for children need to know about – that this is actually important – its important for children's wellbeing – its important for their health, for their physical and their mental health – that this happens. And that, for example, alarm about perceived dangers when we know that the reality is objectively children are not more at danger, for example, from strangers, than they ever have been in the past, that that message is put across strongly and clearly – I think that people responsible for children are in a very, very difficult position – because it's difficult not to respond to that kind of media presentation of dangers and it's difficult not to respond to what everybody around you appears to be doing in terms of children's health and safety. We are more anxious about playing – there's a high level of perceived dangers to children and it is documented that children have less independence than they have done in the past – they had freedom to travel by themselves, for example to and from school, they have less freedom to play outside in unsupervised situations – and there's also the effect and I suppose a materially better standard of living and the whole like -computer, media, television thing which is very attractive to children and may act to keep them in doors and therefore spending less time outside and less time playing truly independently, physically independently of an adult presence.

I believe that collective free municipal- type old-fashioned municipal provision is very, very important because by definition it's inclusive because it's there for everybody – it's meant for everybody – it's not targeted, it's not stigmatised, it's just there – and everybody kind of expects to be able to use it.
I think it's important to remember that play is what children do and there are actually limits to what adults can or should know about it or seek to kind of intervene with it – but I think its important that adults respect it as children's culture and remember and spend time thinking about their own childhood and what it meant to them then. And things appear inconsequential, maybe dangerous or insignificant to adults, actually can have huge meaning for children as being part of that culture and the way they communicate with each other and the things that they do when they're together.