

Five steps to create happy and powerfully positive playtimes

Children's brains also develop outside of the classroom when you give them the right tools.

Step 1: Develop a child's seeking system and brain power through play.

Playing games activates a child's brain, in particular the mammalian, lower brain, which contains a "seeking" system. When seeking is activated in mammals, they explore and investigate their environment with curiosity and motivation. In humans, the seeking system can activate an appetite for life, energy to explore the new and an eagerness to seek out whatever the world has to offer. According to Margot Sunderland, when the seeking system is working in a well coordinated way with the frontal lobes/upper brain, dopamine gets released, the motivation chemical, which enables us to sustain motivation and sense of purpose and helps us attain our goals.

In infants and toddlers, the seeking system must be activated by stimulation; if not, low levels of arousal will follow your child into adulthood, and result in low levels of energy, drive, and a sense of "is that all there is?" The same system that enables a child to build and create dens and sandcastles is the one that enables the adult to turn a dream into a successful business accomplishment.



This seeking system in our brain is like a muscle: The more you use it, the more curious and creative you become. Providing an enriched learning and play environment for a child helps them develop in numerous ways: self-confidence, increased stress adaption, improved social skills, more brain cells in the memory and learning regions.

Sunderland states that, “The benefits of creative play are many. Research with both humans and other mammals demonstrates that play can lower stress chemicals, enabling us to deal better with stressful situations.”

Research also hints that play actually appears to make children smarter.

In one fascinating study, rats were given an enriched environment with climbing tubes, novel food and lots of social interaction. Two months later, the rats had an extra 50,000 brain cells in each side of the hippocampus, one of the key memory centres of the brain.

Look today at the opportunities for creative play in your playground and school.

Key ideas

Provide:

- Imaginative play area
- Dressing up box
- Tea set
- Small world play equipment
- Sandpit and water play
- Games area

Older children can develop the seeking system through playing games and imaginative play/drama, outdoor adventures and more. Look at the Forest schools web site, www.forestschools.com, for some great ideas.

Step 2: Rules and responsibilities

Since playground injuries are the leading cause of injuries to children aged 5 - 14 in the school environment and 75 percent of school bullying happens in the school playground, rules that keep children physically and emotionally safe are essential.

School rules also provide clarity and consistency to all concerned.

In many schools, you will see rules displayed inside the school, but not outside in the playground. We encourage schools to think through with students the rules or values that need to be in place. We then get these written up, designed by a sign writer and put onto Perspex and displayed in various places of the playground.

The 4R's for school and the playground:

Some basic rules that we find work well are:

- Respect for self
- Respect for others
- Respect for property and the environment.
- Responsibility for all your actions
- When playing games, I often find that children are good at adapting and creating their own rules, often through common consent.

Step 3: Rewards

At playtime, the reward is always that they get to play and have fun.

Additional incentives such as the following can be used:

“The Great Play Award” (see 101 Playground Games appendix for the certificate) is a special certificate that is given out in assembly to a specific child who has kept the rules/values of the school; alternatively it can be a plaque, or just a sticker. Teachers choose criteria for selection from week to week and ideally choose different children each week.

“Star Player,” “Star Child,” “Caught Being Good” slips (see 101 Games appendix for the slips).

These are reward systems for you to choose between or you may choose to use them all. When children are seen playing cooperatively, being kind and keeping the rules, they get a paper slip. These incentives can then link back into the teacher's classroom rewards or children can collect their slips each week and every class can give a certificate to the child or children who

get the most slips. Alternatively the school can give a certificate to the class with the most slips. Many teachers also like to do drum roles. When a child receives a slip, his name is put on it and then it is put into a “drum” box. At the end of the week, the drum roll takes place in a dramatic fashion with someone beating a drum and the box being turned over a few times. Then two to six names are drawn out, and the teacher awards those children a prize.

Step 4: Consequences

Consequences vary from school to school. Most schools agree that there needs to be some sort of restorative consequence, such as time for the student to think through how they could have acted and how they could choose to behave differently next time, time to restore relationships that may have broken down. In the first instance with low-level incidences, a verbal warning is often all that is needed. However, if the child breaks the rule again, a five to 10-minute “time out to think” is a good consequence. The child usually has to sit in a solitary place, on a bench, in the hall or classroom away from other children, thinking through which rule they have broken and which rule they need to be keeping, and who they need to apologise to. Children can join in the game or activity once they have had time out and as long as relationships have been restored.

You may know some children who are hugely reactive at playtime. Danger stress and anxiety trigger the release of adrenalin and cortisol, which often leads to the fight or flight response.

These children do not have the stress-regulating brain chemicals to calm themselves and need soothing, calming adults to help regulate the chemicals that have flooded their brains.

Positive play experiences and positive social interaction for these children lead to positive emotions and a cocktail of good chemicals, such as opioids and oxytocin, which make them feel calm, content, secure and safe. ▶

Step 5: Playground Activity Leaders (PALS)

PALS consist of a group of children whose job it is to play games in the playground.

When considering adopting this system in your school, please give consideration to:

- How many PALS you need, given the size of your playground and number of children in your school.
- How many times a week would be suitable for them to be out on games duty.
- How the PALS would be chosen.
- What support will they need.

Training the Playground Activity Leaders (PALS)

Their role:

To encourage and organise games and activities during play times and the lunch break.

Teaching the games

Ideally a learning support assistant, lunchtime supervisor or a teacher will take responsibility for the PALS, their training and on going support.

Step 1: Discuss roles and responsibilities, rules for themselves, playground rules, period of time that they are elected to be a PAL (weekly, half termly or termly).

Step 2: Introduce a selection of games and remind children of games they already know.

Print out the “Traditional Playground Games” section from the *101 Playground Games* CD Rom or download the free version from www.successpartnership.co.nz and give each child a pack of games that they can keep and use as a reference. This will give the PALS 10 playground games to learn and introduce to other children.

Step 3: The children plan and organise a game to play with younger children.

Step 4: The PALS evaluate how the game went and continue to learn new games.

Step 5: The PALS choose a uniform that distinguishes them in the playground, this may be a baseball cap, bib, or badge.

Step 6: A rota is agreed upon.


Step 7: The PALS are introduced in assembly to all the school.

Step 8: The PALS on their assigned days go out and play games in the playground with the children.

Step 9: The PALS contribute to “Playground news” at assemblies.

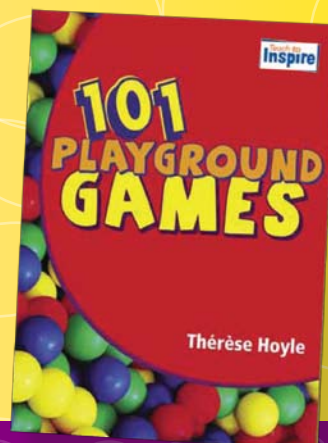
Step 10: The PALS meet weekly with the assigned adults who support them.

Ongoing support

The PALS need to have a regular time to talk about their experiences, the successes and the challenges with a specified adult. Ideally this meeting is weekly or every two weeks. At the end of their term as a PAL, they receive a certificate to thank them for their contribution and hard work. This is given out in assembly. 

A collection of active
and engaging games
for children

by Therese Hoyle



available from www.spectrumeducation.com