

The emergence of the play ranger

Play rangers were a significant feature in some of play portfolios recently announced by BIG. We decided to take a closer look at the emergence of the play ranger and asked Michael Follett, play development adviser in South Gloucestershire and an early champion of play rangers, to explain more.

Three years ago: An empty crisp packet tumbles across the dusty path, a mother hurries her child behind the safety of a closed door, the only sound is the creak of the swing on its hinges. On the horizon two figures appear, they stride confidently into the park, unslung their rucksacks and wait. The play rangers have arrived.

This scene is being repeated across the country, but where did the play rangers come from, why are they here, and when will they leave?

In 2001, I was a new play development officer working for Bath and North East Somerset, trying to find the solution to a problem. We had plenty of parks and open spaces, and we wanted children to play in them. Lots of children had told us in surveys that they really wanted to be out playing in the parks, however, most of them weren't getting out to play. The main reason for this was fear: parents were frightened to let their children out, children were frightened of older children, and adults were frightened of the children that were out. Something was needed to break this cycle – to form a bridge between the present state of underuse and a future where parks are active, social and playful places.

It felt like part of the answer lay in the play schemes. During the school holidays, scores of children spend hours in school halls and community centres doing what children do best, playing and hanging out together. However, a frustrating aspect of this work for playworkers, was the amount of time and energy spent building trust and

relationships with the children that could only last for the short duration of the schemes. These relationships are one of the most valuable assets in playwork, too valuable to be given up so quickly. This value has long been recognised in the adventure playground sector of playwork, where year-round staffed provision and the attraction of freely chosen play forms a strong foundation for child and community development.

As Bath and North East Somerset is a small local authority, without large dense urban centres, it would not have been reasonable to concentrate the entire play budget into one adventure playground. My goal was to take the advantages of the adventure playground approach and make it accessible to as many children as possible. I also wanted to develop aspects of other playwork approaches I had encountered around the UK; container-based play-pods in Cardiff parks, the Reccy Rangers community-based playwork in Cambridge and the advantages and flexibility of the long-established playbus schemes across the country.

An important consideration was whether to locate play in more protected environments, such as schools or community centres, so that children would feel safer. All of the evidence I came across from organisations such as CAGE Space and Project for Public Spaces showed that parks and open spaces could offer a huge range of benefits to individuals, businesses and society. The key to unlocking these benefits is to create a



virtuous upward spiral of diverse and increased use, a greater sense of safety and an improvement in quality. It seemed that a new approach should not compound the problem, but rather be part of the solution: the playworkers could have the potential to bring about lasting improvements to the quality of parks and open space and the way communities came together in them. With this in mind, I wanted to include elements of youth outreach, community development, participation and environmental park ranger work within the job.

Having thought through and developed the underlying values and principles of the role, I set up the first Community Play Rangers in Bath in 2001, using money from the Better Play fund and working with Bath Area Play Project. Two years later I secured money from the

Children's Fund to add a further four teams and expand to a partnership of five voluntary organisations.

The community part of the job title signifies that the play rangers' role is to do more than provide play sessions, it is also to help communities come together through play and to develop and use their public open spaces for the benefit of all. In order to do this, the play rangers' first challenge is to overcome the barriers that prevent children playing in their parks and open spaces. For many reasons this is a long and surprisingly complex challenge: there is usually an ingrained culture of lack of use; the environment is often not suited to the needs of the children or the local community; the parks department has no experience of meaningful dialogue with children; play is not valued by many as a worthwhile occupation; and there are both real and perceived risks.

What this all means for play rangers is that, as well as having to cope with the extremes of the climate and seasons, the work itself is challenging and requires the ability to draw on many skills. The sanctions and confines of centre-based work are not present; play rangers must negotiate with children over many issues, especially

behaviour and sharing space with other users. They need to know how to make the best use of the natural environment for play, how to make difficult judgements on appropriate risk taking and how to be catalysts for play without becoming either entertainers or childminders. They also need to be able to make the case for play in formal meetings and to advocate on children and young people's behalf to agencies.

Play rangers operate in teams of two, working outdoors year-round in public spaces. Each team concentrates their work in one or two parks to enable strong relationships to be established. Usually two or three sessions of two to three hours are provided every week. They engage fully with all stakeholder agencies in the area to ensure that play is accepted as an important part of the community's offer to children.

In 2004, Wandsdyke Play Association won the tender to run all of Bath and North East Somerset's play ranger schemes. The project has since won three national awards from Sure Start, SkillsActive and Community Care. They have just published a comprehensive guide to setting up and running play ranger projects called *The Play Ranger Guide* (reviewed on page 14). Dan Reece-Jones from Wandsdyke Play Rangers is now also working part time for Playwork Partnerships South West to help develop play ranger training for the Welsh Assembly and Play Wales.

In 2005, I moved on to South Gloucestershire Council where I set up a new play ranger project with South Gloucestershire Children's Playlink. It operates in six parks and open spaces using funds from extended schools, the parks department and the Lottery. I am now involved in setting up a play ranger network and preparing for the first play ranger conference this November in Torquay.

In an ideal future, a successful park will not permanently need play rangers; the community will use the park because they like it, because it is the place for all ages to go, to meet, to hang out, to chat, to have a coffee and to exercise. Children will feel secure and welcome in a vibrant, well-used social space that meets all their play needs and

where they are informally overseen by adults. The journey to the ideal future needs to begin somewhere, I believe the right place to start is to get as many children as possible playing in our parks and play rangers are the ones who can make this happen.

Today: A girl on a BMX bike skids to a halt at the base of the new track, behind her a group of teenagers are having a game of football using new goalposts, she calls to her mum who is sitting on a new bench talking to her friends under the new cherry trees. Behind her two figures pick up their rucksacks and quietly leave, moving on to a new range, their job done.



Playwork Partnerships first Play Ranger conference

16 November 2007– Torquay

Your chance to find out about:

- Different play ranger models
- Practical play ranger skills
- Links to national agenda
- Play ranger training course developed by Play Wales
- Play England's role in developing sustainable play provision

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