

Playing ‘a la carte’ in an open system to play

Name of the organisation

Vlaamse Dienst Speelpleinwerk

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Good practice aspect(s)/themes of youth work

- Outdoor activities

Good practice category

A practice of processes and methods

Good practice aim & purpose

For the VDS, “playing” is not the same as “playing at a playground”. For the latter, there is a concrete idea of how this “playing at a playground” should be organised.

The playing system that, within a vacation context, offers the best playing possibilities in our view is a strong ‘open system of playing’. The concept is based on choice and variation.

Every child is different. One child wants to play in the sandbox, another wants to participate in a cooking activity, yet another wants to dance with friends. One child finds challenge in an adventure course, another seeks comfort in a self-built camp or reads comics. For us, this starting point defines the mission of every playground: to create a play offer with as many play opportunities as possible for all children that leads to a real holiday feeling.

Good practice description

MORE AND BETTER PLAY OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FREE TIME OF EVERY CHILD: that's what we're going for together.

By 'PLAYING OPPORTUNITIES' we mean all possible play opportunities on a playground. A football, a light switch or a puddle on the ground: all can prompt play. A large part of these play opportunities is within your control as an organiser. A sandbox, a craft activity or an animator with crazy ideas, you consciously deploy these as an operation to increase the amount of play opportunities. The totality of playing opportunities that you offer as a playground is what we call your PLAY OFFER.

The way you organise that play offer is your PLAYING SYSTEM. At any given time, play is organised in a particular system. It regulates the choices a child has in a play offer: the freedom to choose what to play, with whom, for how long and where. This system is defined by:

- The freedom of choice, between organised play and spontaneous play.
- The group arrangement, which determines which groups of children can play with each other.
- The daily schedule, which determines when which offer is chosen.

Good practice result & concrete effects

All recent researches show that when children are given the choice, they prefer an open form of playing. The open aspect of playing, spontaneous and unforced, offers the most chances of intense playing. This is the intense kind of fun they seek. When there is fun, the desire to keep playing is formed along with positive memories and a good feeling in general.

A play offer that is Open works with broad age groups and offers choice for children to be in a particular group. It works with generous blocks of time in which children have the opportunity to get to intense play. At any given time, as much choice as possible is offered to children.

We talk about intense playing when there is commitment. If you are committed to playing, it's as if only the game exists. Next to FREEDOM as a basic condition, there are 3 more conditions. To reach full commitment, you need a healthy dose of INTEREST in the game. Playing a woodland game in army theme will provoke disinterest in some children, even though the game itself might be well adapted to their age and level. On the other hand, making bracelets does not seem like a challenge, but some children will find this interesting enough to not care about the lack of challenge. Their challenge is in making a beautiful bracelet with colourful combinations.

To let go completely at a playground, to completely immerse yourself in a game, you need to feel COMFORTABLE. This feeling is a combination of physical comfort (safety) and mental comfort (feeling secure within the group). The more you get comfortable, the less you get distracted by other factors and people outside the game. Comfort and challenge might seem like opposites, but they can co-exist quite well. A challenge will only be realistically possible when it's within the child's power to complete it. If it is too challenging, the child will not feel secure and will not participate.

When you have found the right CHALLENGE, you often find yourself on the verge of your possibilities. Often you end up in a state called "flow". That is the place where your capacities and your challenges meet each other. This state is very rewarding because you do something new, starting from a base you know and feel comfortable with.

If these properties are more present, the higher the odds that the commitment level is higher which means the odds of intense playing are higher. To visualise that principle, the VICU-metre was developed in which the elements Freedom, Interest, Comfort and Challenge are visualised in four columns that show how strong each element is present.

Good practice chapter of the European Charter on Local Youth Work

Organisation and practice