



# Growing Adventure

## Final Report to the Forestry Commission

Tim Gill Writer and consultant  
March 2006



"I am convinced that standardised play equipment is dangerous. When the distance between all the rungs on the climbing net or the ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where he puts his feet. This lesson cannot be carried over into all the knobbly and asymmetrical forms with which one is confronted throughout life."

Helle Nebelong Danish landscape architect

"Your job isn't to hit them with another Fine Educational Opportunity, but to turn them on to what a neat world we live in."

Deborah Churchman "How To Turn Kids Green: Reinstilling the love for nature amongst children", in the journal *American Forests* (quoted in *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv)

## Contents

	Executive summary
1	Strategic overview
2	Case studies
3	Model integrated play strategy
4	Views of children and young people and parents
5	Future developments
6	Resources and further information

# Executive summary



Children playing at Hamsterley Forest

## Introduction (section 1.1)

This report sets out the activities, lessons, recommendations and outputs of Growing Adventure, a year-long project that aimed to develop the Forestry Commission's activity around children and young people's play and leisure. Central to the project are two connected ideas: that nature, adventure, challenge and even a little danger are part of the essence of woodland sites and make them ideal places for children to play, and that free play is a valuable developmental and learning process for children of all ages.

The project looked at current policies and practice within the Forestry Commission estate and at the wider policy and funding context. It has led to the production of guidance materials for managers at different levels of the Forestry Commission, and has helped staff across England to develop their thinking and practice.

## The importance of outdoor and nature play (sections 1.2 – 1.5)

Evidence is growing that limiting children's outdoor play experience is likely to damage their physical, mental and emotional development, and to leave them less likely to be concerned about the environment. As a result, public policy interest in children and young people's play and free time has been growing. However, children and young people are increasingly spending their time indoors and away from natural outdoor settings – in spite of their preferences and their parents' concerns - mainly as a result of risk anxiety and changing domestic and social circumstances.

## Forestry Commission support for play (section 1.6)

The Forestry Commission is heavily engaged in supporting children and young people's play and leisure, in a number of distinct ways. Many sites provide play spaces, structures and trails. Some offer supervised play and leisure schemes.

Some promote and/or run activities for families and local groups. In some sites there is liaison with informal user groups that number children and young people amongst their members. Forestry Commission sites also offer structured adventurous activity provision for children and adults. In addition, forest schools on Forestry Commission sites often contain a strong play and leisure component, even though they are usually run by educational institutions. Finally, children engage in spontaneous, independent, self-led play activities that represent the ultimate goal of the Growing Adventure approach.

## Key themes for development (section 1.7)

Woodland sites are probably unsurpassed in their potential for engaging children of all ages in outdoor activities. Moreover, children and young people are a key user group for the Forestry Commission. They and their parents represent around 40 per cent of all current visitors. They are in a sense the future of leisure activity in woodlands, and thus could be said to be the 'sleeping giant' in the Forestry Commission's recreational portfolio.

Not all children and young people are comfortable visiting woodlands. The core vision of Growing Adventure is that sites offer 'ladders of engagement' providing graduated opportunities to stimulate and extend young visitors' self-directed interactions with woodlands. This approach sits well with the culture and attitudes of Forestry Commission staff and with the current approach to provision.

The Growing Adventure approach has focussed on three key areas: nature play spaces, environmental play programmes and independent play in woodlands. With play structures and spaces, the Growing Adventure approach has been taken forward through drawing up new design principles and guidance and piloting these in some sites. These state that the Forestry

Commission's aim is to create naturalistic play spaces that act as a springboard for children's engagement with forests and woodlands as a whole. The approach also means that play schemes and programmes, and activities for family and groups, should aim to encourage greater engagement with woodland settings. The ultimate goal of the Forestry Commission should be to encourage free play in woodlands, with nature play spaces and environmental play programmes as stepping-stones on the way. Some children and young people are already comfortable playing independently in woodlands. Their play should be legitimised through recognising and affirming the value of their activities, as long as they are within reasonable bounds. Risk management guidance on den-building, rope swings and fires has been drawn up, taking forward this approach.

#### **Delivery and partnership (section 1.8)**

The central role of the Forestry Commission is to make the Forestry Commission estate as a whole as available for play as possible and to increase the level and extent of play activity in, and playful engagement with, woodland landscapes. Forestry Commission-managed, unsupervised, free-of-charge play spaces are the most common form of play provision in the Forestry Commission estate, and play a key part in developing the Forestry Commission's play portfolio. There are strong arguments for keeping such spaces free of charge and under the direct management of the Forestry Commission. By contrast, with play programmes and activities there is a compelling case for the Forestry Commission to take a promotional and enabling role, aiming to stimulate and support externally-run provision rather than being a direct provider.

#### **Model integrated play strategy (section 3)**

A process and template is set out for developing an integrated, comprehensive play strategy at any Forestry Commission site, area or district, together with examples of play strategies for Alice Holt and Rosliston. Any play strategy will need to take the following steps: forming a project/programme team, agreeing vision and values, finding out existing Forestry Commission activity and territory to be covered, identifying development opportunities and priorities, drawing up and carrying out an action plan and reviewing progress. The action plan should cover: play areas and structures, activity programmes, site practices and procedures, costs and funding, people and partners, inclusion/diversity, time and how to review progress.

#### **Views of children and young people and parents (section 4)**

Section 4 discusses the views of children and young people and parents, exploring the issues and the benefits of children's participation and confirming that children have an appetite for nature and the outdoors. Parents want their children to have the opportunity to play outdoors, and are worried about the impact of an indoor, sedentary lifestyle. Two participation exercises are described from within the Forestry Commission – at Moors Valley and Rosliston – and two from beyond. The 'Playing for Real' participation process developed and trademarked by devonplay – as carried out at Rosliston – offers great scope for developing sites. The Forestry Commission's market research shows that parents value play provision, and also feeling safe in the forest, suggesting that careful thought should be given to ensuring that parents understand and support the Growing Adventure approach.





Children playing in a stream

It would be valuable in future to target groups of children that rarely or never visit woodland settings to explore what would encourage them to come and help them to feel confident. There are challenges facing sites that wish to attract teenagers. Some drop-off in levels of interest and engagement from this age group is to some extent inevitable, suggesting that efforts to engage children should start as young as possible.

#### Future development (section 5)

The Growing Adventure vision is most likely to be achieved – and to mesh with other Forestry Commission initiatives - if it receives strong central support. Clear, explicit corporate support would open up opportunities for showing the relevance of its approach and outcomes to wider Forestry Commission policies and initiatives and to Government policy.

Other agencies may want to hear about the Growing Adventure approach, and may have valuable ideas of their own. The Forestry Commission should identify opportunities for discussing and sharing ideas on outdoor and nature play.

The Growing Adventure approach should be kept under review to assess its impact. Site-specific initiatives should be carefully evaluated. Data such as accident records and play inspection reports should be monitored for change. Market research should be monitored to capture the views of a range of visitors, including those outside the user groups that the Growing Adventure project is most concerned with. The Forestry Commission should review its market research protocols to give a better picture of the views of children and young people.

To be successful, the new approach to children's play put forward in this report will need a cultural shift within some parts of the Forestry Commission. One priority implied by the Growing Adventure approach is to increase the level of use of Forestry Commission woodlands by external agencies. The Forestry Commission should explore how to develop different partnership models, including site-based partnerships, and to promote their success.

If taken too far the approach to risk management implied could allow or encourage poor risk management. Clear guidance, staff support and monitoring will help to manage the risk of inappropriate responses to risk-taking or poor risk management. There may also be conflicts with environmental management and conservation work at some sites. These conflicts need to be resolved by informed, constructive discussion and negotiation with support from senior managers.

Finally, the approach will need new skills and ways of working. This will need further guidance, staff training and development on top of that already completed. It may also need more resources to build the Forestry Commission's capacity. The Forestry Commission will need to decide whether or not some critical functions are carried out in-house or bought in from outside. It will also need to decide whether or not the change in approach and expansion in activity implied needs a greater central focus than is currently available.

# 1 Strategic overview

## Strategic overview

- Explains the Growing Adventure project
- Says why outdoor nature play is important to children and young people
- Shows how the importance of play is being recognised by Government
- Discusses some key cultural trends influencing outdoor play
- Summarises the views of children and young people
- Describes how the Forestry Commission supports play
- Explores three thematic areas for developing support for play
- Sets out how the Forestry Commission should deliver change and develop partnerships

### 1.1 Introduction

This report sets out the activities, lessons, recommendations and outputs of Growing Adventure, a project that aimed to develop the Forestry Commission's activity around children and young people's play and informal leisure. It is primarily for managers and staff involved in the Forestry Commission's recreation work, though others within and beyond the Forestry Commission may find it of interest. It gives practical information about improving play opportunities, and discusses the context and ideas behind them. Central to the project are two connected ideas. The first is that nature, adventure, challenge and even a little danger are part of the essence of woodland sites and make them ideal places for children to play. The second is that free play – "what children and young

people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons" as *Getting Serious About Play*, the Government-sponsored review of children's play, put it – is a valuable developmental and learning process for children of all ages.

Growing Adventure looked at current policies and practice within the Forestry Commission estate and at the wider policy and funding context. It has already led to the production of guidance materials for managers at different levels of the Forestry Commission, and has supported staff across England to develop their thinking and practice. As a result, new initiatives taking forward and testing the approach are already underway. The project began in September 2004 and finished in November 2005.

The project was taken forward in two phases. Phase one involved setting out trends in policy and practice around play provision, mapping Forestry Commission activity and identifying case studies. Phase two involved identifying key development themes - and funders and partners for taking forward projects - and developing guidance for Forestry Commission managers. The project also involved providing site-specific support at some Forestry Commission sites.

### 1.2 The importance of outdoor and nature play

Evidence is growing that limiting children's outdoor play experience is likely to damage their physical, mental and emotional development, leaving them less well prepared for the adult world and also less interested in the environment.

Starting with health, there is widespread consensus on the contribution outdoor play can make to tackling childhood obesity. There is also growing evidence that children's mental health and emotional well-being is enhanced by

contact with the outdoors, and that the restorative effect appears to be strongest in natural settings. For instance, studies on children with Attention-Hyperactivity Deficit Disorder (ADHD) have shown that green outdoor spaces not only foster creative play and improve interactions with adults, they also relieve the symptoms of the disorder. Some researchers go so far as to claim that contact with nature may be as important to children as good nutrition and adequate sleep.

It is also likely that 'battery-reared' children will lack confidence as they grow up and be more vulnerable to bullying. Researchers have found a link between children who become victims of bullying and the protectiveness of their parents, and the Mental Health Foundation and others have warned of the dangers of overprotecting children and stopping them from developing their own coping mechanisms. Natural places are ideal environments for children to explore, giving them the chance to expand their horizons and build their confidence while learning about and managing the risks for themselves. Their unpredictability is part of what attracts people to them in the first place.

There is more to outdoor play than health and learning. Den-building, tree-climbing and pond-dipping also make visible the depth of children's relationship with nature. In his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our kids from nature-deficit disorder*, US journalist and parenting expert Richard Louv argues that it is the immediacy, richness and unboundedness of unstructured outdoor play that gives the nature-child encounter most meaning, and that adult-led educational activities are a poor second-best. Evidence suggests that children who have everyday access to nature and the outdoors are more likely as adults to be concerned about the environment.

Last but not least, children and young people themselves continue to enjoy outdoor environments and to seek opportunities to enjoy them. Consultation exercises and market research consistently show that they would like to spend more time out of doors, and in their middle years in particular have a preference for natural outdoor environments. Parents also state that they want their children to be able to play out more.

### 1.3 Context: play in public policy

After a decade or more of neglect, recent years have seen growing public policy interest in children and young people's play and free time, and services and facilities are receiving increasing sums of funding. 'enjoying and achieving' was included as one of 5 key 'outcomes for children' in the Government's overarching child policy document *Every Child Matters*, the 2003 Green Paper on children's services. This was followed up more recently by the imposition on top tier local authorities of a statutory requirement to plan for children's recreation and leisure, introduced through the Children Act 2004. The Government's good practice guidance on physical activity, *Choosing Activity: A physical activity action plan*, recognises the health benefits of outdoor play and announced the establishment of a cross-departmental group to devise a strategic approach to play policy. The 2005 Green Paper on young people also emphasises the value of 'places to go and things to do' for children and young people and of involving children and young people in shaping services and facilities. The growing public policy interest is shown in the frequent references to play and leisure in debates around child health and obesity, child development, mental health, public space, transport, crime prevention and community cohesion.

Policies and debates around risk and safety have for decades dominated play provision. For most of this time the focus





Traditional play area

has tended to be on minimising risks and reducing accidents of all types. However, recent years have seen a growing recognition of the importance of challenging play experiences and an acceptance that it is impossible to eliminate all risk of accidents in play and play provision. There is an emerging consensus that the duty of providers is to strike a balance between risks and benefits, in keeping with the central notion in the Health and Safety at Work Act to keep risks 'as low as reasonably practicable'. However there is still widespread confusion about the responsibilities of providers. For instance, many providers believe incorrectly that the European Standards for play equipment and surfacing set out in the European standards EN 1176 and 1177 are a legal requirement. In fact they are not a legal requirement. In effect they represent good practice in the event of an accident claim.

Other policy issues influencing children and young people's play and free time include:

- Accessibility and inclusion and the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act;
- The development of extended schools, childcare and children's centres;
- Public policy on green space, especially in urban areas.

#### 1.4 Context: cultural and social trends

Despite the growth in public policy interest in play, children and young people are increasingly spending their time indoors and away from natural outdoor settings. The cultural and social barriers to their engagement with the outdoors – in essence, risk anxiety and changing domestic and social circumstances – are the focus of growing critical examination in the media, public life and society at large.

Woodlands are ideal sites of intervention in these debates. This provides a strong argument for the Forestry Commission to make a virtue out of necessity and be explicit about the opportunities woodland settings offer to introduce some outdoor adventure into children and young people's lives. It could be said that embracing a sense of adventure is the *sine qua non* of leisure woodland use, since all other rationales for woodland activity, whether educational, environmental, cultural, health-based, social or recreational, depend for their success on people feeling comfortable and confident about being in woodland settings in the first place.

#### 1.5 The user perspective: views of children and young people

As part of Growing Adventure, some events were organised to find out more about the kinds of activity children and young people want to do in woodlands and what is stopping them from pursuing these. The outcomes, which are given in more detail in Section 4, give good support to the Growing Adventure approach, confirming children's appetite for nature and the outdoors.

One set of events took place over at Moors Valley Country Park and involved around 60 children aged 7 to 14. The results showed that they enjoyed being out of doors and doing things that involved a degree of risk. The older young people tended to mention socialising more frequently than younger children, but otherwise the responses all mentioned a range of outdoor activities like climbing trees, cycling and simply being in the fresh air. All children mentioned parental attitudes as a key obstacle to be overcome.

In a separate exercise organised by Forestry Commission staff, Rosliston took a site-specific approach to involving children and young people in planning site improvements, using the 'Playing for Real' process developed and trademarked by devonplay. The findings showed an enthusiasm for the outdoors that echoed the results from Moors Valley. Climbing trees, flying kites, running, playing hide-and-seek and making things from nature were all popular activities, and there was a strong interest in animals.

Some relevant information is available from other agencies on children and young people's views of outdoor play in natural settings. Material collected by two environmental play projects shows strong demand for improving access to outdoor spaces and for adventurous and 'bushcraft' activities such as campfire cooking, finding wild foods, exploring, climbing trees and den building.

### 1.6 Forestry Commission support for play

The Forestry Commission is heavily engaged in supporting children and young people's play and leisure, in a number of distinct ways. Many sites provide play spaces, structures and trails. Some offer

supervised play and leisure schemes, and promote and/or run activities for families and local groups. In some sites there is liaison with informal user groups that number children and young people amongst their members (eg off-road cyclists). In some locations, play and leisure activities are supported by external public or voluntary sector projects based on Forestry Commission land, and by external agencies that visit and make use of Forestry Commission facilities.

Data from three Forest Districts showed that annual expenditure on play spaces and structures was between £3,100 and £74,000 in each district, with an average of around £31,000. Figures were not available for expenditure on other play activities and programmes. A survey of recreation managers across England carried out in winter 2004/5 revealed examples of play practice for each of the types of activity mentioned above. This information is presented in Table 1 below, which gives both internally- and externally-managed activity. Section 2 below gives thumbnail sketches of case studies from both within and beyond the Forestry Commission.

Table 1: the extent of different types of activities across Forestry Commission England

	Play spaces and structures	Play schemes	Family & community activities	Liaison with informal user groups	Structured leisure activities	Spontaneous play
<b>Internally managed</b>	23 sites	Alice Holt Beechenhurst Cannock Dalby Delamere Guisborough Wyre	Bedgebury Kielder New Forest Wendover Westonbirt Wyre (probably others too)	Guisborough New Forest Okeford Hill Whinlatter (probably others too)	Mountain biking widespread Orienteering widespread	Probably widespread, though not managed as such, and no data
<b>Externally managed</b>		Hamsterley Rosliston	Hamsterley Rosliston Wendover (probably others too)		Cycle hire – various locations 5 Go Ape sites	

Forestry Commission sites also offer structured adventurous activity provision for children and adults, provided directly or through franchises (eg 'Go Ape', cycle hire, orienteering). These have not been included in this review, though it may be worth exploring possible links and learning in future. In addition, forest schools on Forestry Commission sites often contain a strong play and leisure component, even though they are usually run by educational institutions and tend to have a formal educational flavour. Finally, children also engage in spontaneous, independent, self-led play activities that in a sense represent the ultimate goal of the Growing Adventure approach: hide-and-seek, den building, damming streams and exploring wildlife, playing games in open spaces and social play with friends.



Families with children are a key user group

### 1.7 Key themes for development

The process of revisiting children and young people's play and leisure in the Forestry Commission has led to the adoption of 'growing adventure' as a unifying theme. The phrase encapsulates the twin ideas already stated, that nature and adventure are inherent features of woodland sites, making them ideal places for children's play, and that play is a vital developmental and learning process for children and young people.

Woodland sites are probably unsurpassed in their potential for engaging children of all ages in a rich diet of engaging, rewarding, healthy and developmentally valuable outdoor play and leisure activities. Moreover, children and young people are a key user group for the Forestry Commission, for two reasons. Most immediately, they (and their parents) represent around 40 per cent of all current visitors. Perhaps more critically, they are nothing less than the future of leisure activity in woodlands. The Forestry Commission's success or failure in winning over children and young people as

enthusiastic visitors will largely determine whether or not it achieves its aim of increasing access to woodlands over the long term. Hence children and young people's play and leisure could be said to be the 'sleeping giant' in the Forestry Commission's recreational portfolio.

Not all children and young people are comfortable visiting woodlands. Those that are more nervous are most likely to be won over if they are given the chance to gradually acclimatise themselves to woodland settings. The core vision of Growing Adventure is that sites offer 'ladders of engagement' providing graduated opportunities to stimulate and extend young visitors' self-directed interactions with woodlands. These ladders might be created in physical form, for instance through play structures that lead children to extend their interaction with woodland features and landscapes. Or they might be created through programmed activities and events that are designed to support children on a journey from controlled and supervised exposure through to confident independent exploration, via the gradual withdrawal of adult intervention and oversight, perhaps over a number of visits.

The theme of adventure sits well with the culture and attitudes of Forestry Commission staff and with the current approach to provision. Managers show a willingness to resist the culture of risk aversion that affects other providers. Several straw polls, conducted as part of the Growing Adventure project, asked recreation and management staff what the Forestry Commission should be trying to achieve in its leisure work with children and young people; the most popular choice was "to give them the chance to test themselves and their abilities and to take risks" closely followed by "to engage and interest them in the outdoors and woodland environments".



A forest school in action



Example of self-built den, from Rosliston

The paragraphs below summarise the Growing Adventure approach in three key areas: nature play spaces, environmental play programmes and independent play in woodlands. Section 3 below, which sets out a process and template for developing an integrated play strategy at any Forestry Commission site, area or district, gives more detail on these.

### Nature play spaces

With play structures and spaces, the Growing Adventure approach has been taken forward through drawing up new design principles and guidance.

These state:

Our aim is to create naturalistic play spaces that act as a springboard for children's engagement with forests and woodlands as a whole. They should encourage children to explore the natural environment and to take part in active play where they have the opportunity to create their own play environments and activities. (Sept 05 draft)

The guidance document, which is available from [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play), fleshes out this approach to play space, covering project team composition, process and detailed design principles. The approach is in the process of being piloted at Rosliston (see section 3.3 below), Haldon and Bedgebury.

### Environmental play programmes

The Growing Adventure approach means that play schemes and programmes, and activities for family and groups, should aim to encourage greater engagement with woodland settings, and structure their content accordingly. This implies taking a fluid, playful approach to facilitating activities, giving space and time for children and young people to follow their own interests and to experiment, with the adult(s) acting as a catalyst and a resource as well as overseeing general safety.

Section 2 below gives some examples of playful approaches to led activities from within and beyond the Forestry Commission. Section 6 gives sources of advice and training.

### Independent play in woodlands

The Growing Adventure approach means that the ultimate goal for the Forestry Commission is that all children and young people who visit Forestry Commission sites feel free and able to play independently in woodlands. Nature play spaces and environmental play programmes are, as already stated, stepping-stones on the way.

Some children and young people are already comfortable playing independently in woodlands. Their play should be legitimised through recognising and affirming the value of their activities, as long as they are not dangerous to themselves or other users, they stay on the right side of the law and they respect other users and the integrity of the site. Risk management guidance on den-building, rope swings and fires has been drawn up, taking forward this approach and setting out how these different 'products' of forest play should be dealt with (or not). This guidance is available from [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play).

### 1.8 Delivery and partnerships

The Growing Adventure vision of woodland spaces as places for playful, adventurous encounters with nature means that the central role of the Forestry Commission is to make the Forestry Commission estate as a whole as available for play as possible and to increase the level and extent of these kinds of encounters. In the case of the encouragement of independent play, the Forestry Commission is clearly in a position to deliver change directly through the kinds of initiatives discussed above and in Section 3 (though in woodlands leased to the Forestry Commission by landowners,



the issues may need to be explored further). Turning to play spaces and programmes, there are more possibilities for partnership initiatives. Partnerships with local authorities, voluntary agencies and the 'Go Ape' and cycling/mountain bike franchises all show how the Forestry Commission can work with external agencies to improve play and leisure opportunities.

As Table 1 shows, Forestry Commission-managed, unsupervised, free-of-charge play spaces are the most common form of play provision in the Forestry Commission estate. Such spaces – a big 'draw' at visitor centre locations like Grizedale, Moors Valley and Alice Holt – clearly have a key role in enticing children and young people and their parents to woodland sites, and therefore will play a key part in developing the Forestry Commission's play portfolio. Moreover, the delivery model is relatively well understood and easily adapted to the Growing Adventure approach, especially given the internal staffing and material resources available at many Forestry Commission locations.

There are overwhelmingly strong arguments for keeping such spaces free of charge to simplify management, maximise usage and avoid the exclusion of some groups on cost grounds. There are equally strong arguments for keeping them under the direct management of the Forestry Commission rather than looking to external agencies for management and development. Direct management follows existing practice and allows maximum advantage to be made of internal Forestry Commission resources. It ensures that delivery and development can be closely linked to corporate play and leisure priorities. It leaves legal responsibilities clear. And it allows more scope for piloting different approaches on different sites to refine the Growing Adventure approach. As at December 2005, a nature play space is already under construction at Rosliston, and similar spaces are being taken forward at Haldon and Bedgebury, all of which will provide valuable experience.



Example of self-built den, from Wendover



With play programmes and activities, the picture is different, and there are compelling arguments for the Forestry Commission to take a promotional and enabling role rather than being a direct provider. Such provision needs adequate staff. Suitable Forestry Commission staff are a very limited resource, and moreover a resource that is unlikely to grow significantly in future years. By contrast, there is a large and potentially growing market of external agencies that would be interested in running their own programmes on Forestry Commission sites, or could be persuaded of the benefits of doing so. Government policies in childcare and youth provision, and the

planned investment of National Lottery funding into children's play, are likely to lead to greater numbers of agencies interested in making organised visits to Forestry Commission sites. Hence the Forestry Commission goal in respect of play activities and programmes should be to stimulate and support externally-run provision, through 'training the trainer' programmes, good practice support, taster sessions and piloting new forms of provision that could then be taken on more widely. This approach has already been developed successfully in the Forestry Commission's support for forest schools.



Playing on a fallen tree

## 2 Case studies

### Case studies

This section:

- Gives case studies from within and beyond the Forestry Commission

This section gives brief sketches of interesting practice that highlight some of the themes of the Growing Adventure approach, from both within and beyond the Forestry Commission. They have been chosen because they highlight some aspects of good practice around the goal of encouraging children's playful engagement with nature and the outdoors, and in some cases because they also highlight some of the issues raised by this aim.

#### 2.1 Case studies from the Forestry Commission

##### Play structures: Dalby Forest

Dalby Forest has two play spaces. One, which is relatively near the visitors' centre though not immediately next to it, is fairly conventional in its layout and equipment, but makes good use of its location. It is fenced on one side with a small river forming a natural barrier on the other. The banks of the river are steep in some parts and shallow in others, allowing extensive play activity. The other play space, a few miles further along the forest drive, is set back from the road amongst trees, and is

separated from the road and car park by a grassy open space. This space, which is completely unfenced, includes an extensive chain link trail constructed using existing conifer trees alongside more conventional equipment.

##### Play structures: Grizedale

Grizedale visitors' centre reconstructed its flagship playground in 2004 to replace a very popular but old Andy Frost-designed facility. The new structures, also designed by Andy Frost, are still wildlife based and incorporate the usual elements of swings, slides, climbing and balancing. The site appears to be popular with visitors. Access for the less able was an important consideration with wheelchair access and dual slides. Various locations were visited with children to observe which elements they preferred before the structures were built. In addition, prior to construction a temporary more naturalistic play space was created, with very few conventional play structures. Although no formal market testing was carried out, some parents and carers complained to visitor centre staff about this temporary space, influencing the final design. Thus Grizedale is a cautionary tale, showing the need to think through new projects carefully, especially where they involve radical redesign of existing, popular sites.

##### Play schemes: Wyre

West Midlands FD Runs 'Wild in Wyre', a week long (10 am – 1 pm) club in the summer holidays where the same 10 children return each day to build shelters, make whistles, play games, make pottery and so on. The programme is run along forest school lines at a cost (in 2005) of £45 per child.



The two play areas in Dalby Forest make good use of their locations

Table 2: case study examples for each activity type

Type of activity	Play spaces & structures	Play activities & programmes	Family & community activities	Liaison with informal user groups
Case studies from within FC	Dalby Grizedale	Wyre Hamsterley (externally managed) Rosliston (externally managed)	Alice Holt New Forest	Guisborough Okeford Hill
Case studies from beyond FC	Balmaha, Stirling Freiburg	Wild About Play WildPlay	Greenstart	



The evolution of Grizedale's playground

#### Family activities: Alice Holt

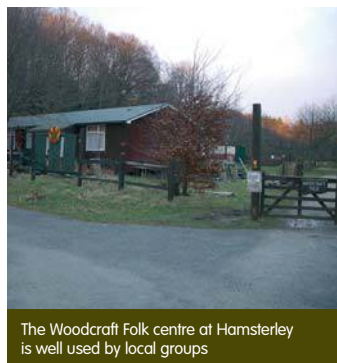
Alice Holt runs sessions called 'Babes in the Wood', intended to get small children into the woods to discover what's there and to play in the woods. It is also aimed at the parents/carers to provide them with some information and some ideas for things they might do with their children on their own visits to the woods. The session begins with a welcome and then an outdoor session of about 45mins to 1 hour during which the children are encouraged to take part in different activities, mainly sensory but also involving running about and free play. The group then goes back indoors for indoor activities and free play. The whole session lasts about an hour and a half.

#### Family activities: New Forest

New Forest forest district runs children's events through the 'What's On' programme, and a series of earth education events during school holidays called 'Child of the Wild' – structured but with some scope for allowing more freedom and autonomy. It also runs a 'discovery trail' every day in August for families, who buy a folder, then follow a trail and do activities.

#### Play activities – externally managed: Hamsterley

The site contains Hamsterley Forest Outdoor Centre, a woodland field centre with warden provision originally run directly by the Forestry Commission, but now managed by the Woodcraft Folk and leased from the Forestry Commission. The Woodcraft Folk hire out the centre to groups, many of whom work with children and young people e.g. Children's Fund supported community based play schemes, local authority play services, youth groups, Home Office funded groups working with socially excluded young people. Woodcraft Folk groups also use the centre.



The Woodcraft Folk centre at Hamsterley is well used by local groups

#### Play activities – externally managed: Rosliston

Rosliston has a partnership arrangement for the site – the Forestry Commission owns the 'green space' and S Derbyshire DC the buildings. Different programmes and activities are drawn up in different ways, and the Forestry Commission has some input into some of these. Rascals (after school and holiday club) is massively popular as it is the only low cost child care in area. It uses the indoor classroom and on site restaurant for dinner as well as the forest environment in good weather. It is run as franchise by a private child care provider.

#### Liaison with informal user groups: Guisborough

Forestry Commission staff had discussions with local young people about BMX jumps, to work out a suitable site for them. The cyclists had built in an inappropriate place where there were conservation concerns, so Forestry Commission staff established contact with young people and a new location was agreed with them. Forestry Commission staff asked for no built structures to be added, but were otherwise relaxed about the construction of the site.

#### Liaison with informal user groups: Okeford Hill (New Forest)

The site is a draw for downhill cyclists. This use has traditionally been viewed as unpermitted and people found cycling in this area have been challenged and asked to stop. A review prompted a new approach: a wildlife ranger made contact with some of the cyclists and as a result an area within the forest was identified for cycling and a club established. Forestry Commission staff view it as a template for growing similar clubs elsewhere where the demand exists. Unpermitted cycling in the wider area has eased considerably.



## 2.2 Case studies – other agencies

As well as internal case studies, the project has also identified projects undertaken by other agencies that provide insight and learning for the Forestry Commission. Section 6 below gives contact details and information sources.

### Play structures: Balmaha play landscape, Stirling Council

Balmaha play landscape is a new play facility at a visitor's centre in a part of Stirling Council that is in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. It caters for both visitors and local children. Stirling Council adopts an approach to the design and development of public play areas that: recognises the importance of the site and context as a whole; emphasises the importance of non prescriptive materials such as trees, logs, boulders, sand, grit and water that encourage imagination and suggest many different ways of being played with; and incorporates challenge and risk - essential for healthy child development - in a 'safe enough' context. Forestry Commission staff have visited nature play sites in Stirling Council and discussed them with staff there.

### Play structures: Freiburg public playgrounds

The German city of Freiburg has over recent years been systematically removing conventional play equipment from its public playgrounds as they need to be refurbished, and introducing instead naturalistic play landscapes incorporating mounds and ditches, fallen trees, bushes, boulders and other natural features, with only a few pieces of conventional play equipment. The programme is driven by cost (the new approach is around half the capital cost of conventional playgrounds) and the wish to increase outdoor activity and to reflect environmental concerns. Anecdotal evidence suggests that more children play in the spaces, and that in their play they engage more with the landscape and natural features. In June 2005 a visit to Freiburg was organised as part of Growing Adventure, and a report detailing its findings is available from [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play)



The Stirling Council nature play area at Balmaha, in the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park



Three of Freiburg's nature playgrounds

### Play programmes: Wild about Play

This project provides training and support in facilitating children and young people's play in natural outdoor settings, for playworkers and conservation and environmental workers. It has played a key role in stimulating interest in outdoor play and in promoting constructive dialogue across traditionally these separate disciplines. Originally funded through the National Lottery, it now operates as part of the University of Gloucester. Martin Maudsley from Wild About Play facilitated a day of teambuilding/environmental play activities for Forestry Commission District Managers at their annual meeting in Grizedale in June 2005.

### Play programmes: Wildplay

WildPlay is a project run by Herefordshire Nature Trust to promote environmental and nature play in and around Herefordshire. It has produced a DVD entitled 'WildPlay Kitbag' that explains some of the principles of environmental playwork, and gives practical ideas and information about activities.

### Family activities: Greenstart

This project aims to demonstrate the role of green space and the wider countryside in improving the confidence and aspirations of young children and their parents. It does this by organising and facilitating activities and visits by parents and their children to outdoor settings such as woodlands, parks and country parks. It operates in SE Northumberland and North Tyneside, is hosted by the partnership Greening for Growth and complements the Government-funded Sure Start programmes in these areas.



Artwork created during Forest District managers meeting at Grizedale



# 3 Model integrated play strategy

## Model integrated play strategy

This section:

- Sets out an integrated play strategy for any Forestry Commission location
- Gives two worked examples of play strategies for two Forestry Commission sites: Alice Holt and Rosliston

- Find out existing Forestry Commission activity and territory to be covered;
- Identify development opportunities and priorities;
- Draw up an action plan;
- Carry out actions;
- Review progress.

The rest of this section looks at each of these steps in more detail.

### Project/programme team

Ensure that all relevant functional roles are represented, including those involved in:

- Play space design, construction and upkeep;
- Other on-site recreational activities used by children and young people;
- Activity programmes (recreational and educational);
- Wider site maintenance and oversight;
- Management;
- Interpretation and information.

Don't forget key staff from partner agencies – local authorities, landowners, private/voluntary partners.

### Vision and values

As Section 1 states, the Growing Adventure vision is that nature and adventure are inherent features of woodland sites, making them ideal places for children's play, and that play is a vital developmental and learning process for children and young people. Staff should be encouraged to discuss and explore this vision, its meaning to them and its implications for policies, procedures and practice, through looking at issues such as:

- what play is;
- risk and safety;
- nature play;
- inclusion and cultural diversity.

### 3.1 Process and template for an integrated play strategy

This section starts with a process and template for developing an integrated, comprehensive play strategy at any Forestry Commission site, area or district. It aims to:

- Help clarify and refine vision and values;
- Map out the territory to be covered by any strategy. This territory will include play spaces, on-site recreational activities and activity programmes, and also other policies, practices and procedures that have an impact on children and young people's use of the location;
- Set out a process for planning and carrying out improvements;
- Highlight key opportunities and issues.

The section is suggestive rather than prescriptive, helping managers and all relevant staff to be clear about aims and plans for play. The section ends with two brief worked examples of play strategies for Alice Holt and Rosliston.

Regardless of the location, any play strategy will need to take the following steps:

- Form project/programme team;
- Agree vision and values for children and young people visiting the site;



Simple activities like sharing childhood memories of favourite play places will enrich these discussions.

In embracing the Growing Adventure vision, the Forestry Commission accepts that risks, especially in natural settings, cannot be eliminated, though they can and should be managed. Hence its provision and activities will strike a balance that offers children and young people opportunities to take risks while keeping the risk of adverse outcomes – especially those that are serious or life-threatening – to an acceptable level.

The Forestry Commission is committed to ensuring that all children and young people and their families have equal access to its estate and facilities, regardless of their background or disability. It will take action to ensure that provision takes into account the views and needs of disabled children and young people and children and young people from minority ethnic groups and their families, and will address the barriers that may prevent these groups from enjoying good access to facilities and sites.

#### Existing Forestry Commission activity and territory to be covered

The play strategy should address all the site contexts in which children and young people play. It should gather financial information on historic and planned expenditure (capital and revenue) and should embrace all relevant activity that exists or is firmly planned. This might include information on:

- Play areas and structures;
- Forestry Commission-led activities and events (recreational and educational);
- Recreational activities provided by others (Go Ape, cycle hire, partner agencies, off-site agencies);
- Other relevant public areas and amenities (car parks, trails, toilets, catering, visitor centres)

- Signage, public information, leaflets, notice boards;
- Level, type and location of independent/self-led activities by children and young people (cycling, den building, hanging out).

The strategy should also look at all the policies, practices and procedures that have an impact on children and young people's use of the site: for instance, maintenance and safety regimes, conservation work.

#### Opportunities and priorities

Different sites will present different opportunities for change. But the following opportunities are likely to be present at many sites:

#### Creating more naturalistic play spaces:

creating/redesigning spaces that encourage a wide range of play activities in what is in effect a managed and modified version of a woodland setting. England-wide design guidance on play spaces has been drawn up as part of the Growing Adventure project, stating in more detail the design, management and process issues in creating more naturalistic play spaces. This is available from [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play). This design guidance includes a discussion of options for dealing with existing play structures, including bespoke timber structures such as those made by Andy Frost, as they come to the end of their useful life.

Section 2 gives some case studies of naturalistic play spaces, including examples from the Loch Lomond & the Trossachs National Park and Freiburg.

#### Environmental play programmes:

making educational and recreational activities for children and young people more supportive of self-directed play and less structured and adult-led. This means taking an approach that differs from an

‘educational’ relationship between leader and children, in which the leader keeps close control on what the children do and acts as a source of knowledge and guidance. In place of this, leaders should aim for a more fluid, playful approach that gives space and time for children and young people to follow their own interests and to experiment, with the adult(s) acting as a catalyst and a resource as well as overseeing general safety.

Over the long term, those devising activity programmes should explore how they can move from being a direct provider to being an enabler, running programmes that cascade approaches and ideas that will help adults to feel more confident about engaging groups of children in woodland settings. Activity leaders may benefit from support and/or training to give them the confidence and skills to take this approach.

Section 2 gives some examples of playful approaches to led activities from within and beyond the Forestry Commission. Section 6 gives sources of advice and training.

**Encouraging independent play in woodlands:** ensuring that all staff allow and, where appropriate, support independent, self-led play and take a balanced approach to assessing the risks of self-led activities and self-built structures such as dens and rope swings.

Loose materials - sand, soil, bark, branches, brash, cones, leaves – are valuable resources for creative and imaginative play. They are also frequently generated on Forestry Commission sites as a by-product of timber production, landscaping, conservation or other work. Because of their play value, these materials should ordinarily not be cleared away. In many locations simply leaving them in situ, or moving them to a more

accessible part of a site, will add greatly to the possibilities for play.

Sites with visitor centres or notice boards may be able to use them to stimulate independent play and share ideas with parents/carers and children. For instance, whiteboards could display ideas for seasonal activities such as playing with piles of fallen leaves, and could also be used as a space where visitors could be invited to share their experiences, ideas and memories of woodland play activities.

England-wide risk management guidance on den-building, rope swings and fires has been drawn up as part of Growing Adventure, setting out how these different ‘products’ of forest play should be dealt with (or not). This guidance, which is available from [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play), puts into practice the vision and values set out above. It also aims to help those working on sites and with children and young people to make better judgements about striking the right balance between risks and benefits.

### Action plan elements

Having formed a team, clarified the vision, mapped out the territory and explored options, the next step is to draw up an action plan. The action plan will need to cover:

- Play areas and structures: what scope is there for modifying existing facilities and/or creating new ones?
- Activity programmes: how might existing programmes be made more play-focused? What scope is there for developing new programmes, perhaps with external partners?
- Site practices and procedures: do any of these need to be modified to allow greater independent play or to strike a better balance between risks and benefits?

- Costs and funding: how might the funds being spent on play spaces and activity programmes be better used? What opportunities are there for funding new initiatives – perhaps linked to planned capital projects or other developments?
- People and partners: who needs to do what? Are there any outside agencies/individuals who can help to develop play spaces and run programmes, to encourage better use of existing facilities and to bring expertise or resources?
- Public involvement: how will children and young people, parents and other users and potential users be involved in developing and carrying out initiatives?
- Inclusion/diversity: how will initiatives address the needs, wishes and concerns of disabled children, children from minority groups and other under-represented groups?
- Time: what is a realistic timescale for initiatives and the action plan as a whole?
- Reviewing progress: how will the team know if changes have been successful? Do targets need to be set? How will user feedback be gathered?

The team should look for quick wins from the action plan: improvements to spaces, activities or procedures that can be carried out relatively quickly and that lead to tangible improvements. These might include:

- Changes to risk management procedures for dens or rope swings;
- Making woodland loose materials available for play;
- Holding ‘den-building days’ or other low-cost events to stimulate activity and generate interest;
- Duplicating and disseminating leaflets and promotional materials on play activities for families or user groups.

The team should also plan for possible concerns and criticism from the public and/or other sources. For instance, different people have different views on risk and the levels of risk that should be tolerated, especially for children and young people. As Section 4 on parents states, a good communication strategy can help reduce the level of concern by forewarning users of planned changes and explaining their rationale. Maintaining robust risk assessment and accident monitoring systems will also ensure a good evidence base to review the impact of changes. Gathering user feedback, especially from children and young people themselves, will also be a valuable source of evidence of the benefits of initiatives.

### 3.2 Play strategy, worked example 1: Alice Holt

Alice Holt Woodland Park is a popular visitor attraction. The site is owned and managed by the Forestry Commission and has the facilities expected for a destination of its size.

#### Project/programme team

About a dozen staff from Alice Holt and South East England Forest District met in August 2005 to discuss children’s play and the Growing Adventure project and to conduct a brief site visit/tour. A project/programme team has yet to be formed, and although no formal decisions were taken at this meeting, those attending should be able to form the basis for a team that includes:

- District Manager;
- South East England Forest District landscape architect;
- Recreation manager(s);
- Forest craftspeople;
- Interpretation and information staff.

#### Vision and values

Staff attending the August 2005 meeting had an opportunity to discuss the Growing Adventure approach. Once a team is

formed, it should clarify a vision for Alice Holt by drawing up and agreeing a vision statement for children's play opportunities at the site, addressing such issues as risk and diversity.

### Territory to be covered

The team should gather financial information on historic and planned expenditure (capital and revenue) and should embrace all relevant activity that exists or is firmly planned. This should include information on:

- Play areas and structures;
- Forestry Commission-led activities and events (recreational and educational);
- Recreational activities provided by others (cycle hire, off-site agencies);
- Other relevant public areas and amenities (car parks, trails, toilets, catering, visitor centre);
- Signage, public information, leaflets, notice boards;
- Level, type and location of independent/self-led activities by children and young people (cycling, den building, hanging out).

The team should also look at all the policies, practices and procedures that have an impact on children and young people's use of the site: for instance, maintenance and safety regimes, conservation work.

### Opportunities and priorities

Creating more naturalistic play spaces: the team should review the existing play sites and consider how they can be developed along more naturalistic lines, based on the new Forestry Commission design guidance and the discussions that have already taken place. Alice Holt has an interesting and varied topography, with some slopes and streams and a mix of species of tree. It also has a well-established set of play spaces and structures that offer good opportunities for development. The site tour revealed extensive signage around the play structures, and the team should review the level of signage needed.

The main play space is by Forestry Commission standards fairly conventional and conservative. It is near the car park (possibly acting as a disincentive to further exploration of the site), level, almost devoid of trees and completely enclosed by wooden fencing too high for many children to climb over. It contains pieces of bespoke timber play furniture – including swings, tree stump trails and a climbable vehicle – dotted around the space and a complete covering of wood chip. It thus offers few opportunities and little encouragement for children to develop their engagement with the natural features and landscapes of the site.



The main play area at Alice Holt: conventional and conservative



The extensive wood chip surfacing impedes access for children in wheelchairs and buggies and for some with mobility impairments.

However there are other play spaces that better reflect the Growing Adventure approach, thanks to their location and design. A second significant though smaller play site, some 600m from the car park, is well integrated with the woods. It is located amongst conifer trees, and some of the timber structures are less conventional in design, complementing the setting, with some chain-link play trails built into the trees. Although fenced, the wooden fencing is low, so that for many children it was no obstacle to venturing further into the woods. And they clearly did: the site tour revealed two groups of children engaged in building projects: a dam over a dry ditch and a den.

A third site a little further away from the car park is perhaps even more well connected to the woods. Again, it is set amongst trees (this time, deciduous) and contained an unusual timber climbing structure. In front of the space a dry ditch offers a stimulating landscape feature that is a good focus for play activity. Although enclosed, the fencing is again low enough in parts for children to venture easily into the woods beyond, and there is evidence of children building dens in the woods near the space. The site is intensively used.

Alice Holt also has a play structure trail through the woods around half a mile in length, with perhaps three or four sites that include Andy Frost constructions. As at other Forestry Commission sites, some are striking and memorable. They are, however, not well integrated with the woodlands around, acting as stand-alone objects that children play on for a while, before moving on to the next structure. Even the iconic woodpecker/tree stump/viewing platform, with its wooden

binoculars pointing to wooden animals installed on nearby trees, offers a transitory if delightful experience. Moreover, some of the structures are reaching the end of their useful life (the tree stump is closed).

As for the future development of play spaces, the obvious focus is the main site near the car park. The team should use the design guidance to shape a discussion about how the site could be developed. A vision for the site should be drawn up. Given its proximity to the car park, at least part of the space should be designed for younger children, including babies and toddlers. A sandpit would be an obvious enhancement – even better if combined with a water supply. Access should be improved, perhaps by including some harder surface paths. Other ideas might include introducing changes of level, lowering or even removing the fencing around at least the part of the site furthest from the road/car park and extending some structures or landscaping features – possibly designed for older young people – into the trees beyond.

The team should also think about what to do with the Andy Frost features as they near the end of their life as play structures, along the lines suggested in the Forestry Commission's design guidance. The woodpecker tree would serve well as a visual signifier of the site, moved to a location near the car park. Some of the other structures could be knocked down and left to decay slowly but visibly in an appropriate location not too far from their original spot, ideally to be replaced by structures and landscaping that offer more opportunities for extending play into the surrounding space.

**Environmental play programmes:** the team should review plans and activities, especially those with a recreational and/or family focus, and discuss how they could be run so as to encourage more



This play area is better located



This ditch proves to be an engaging play landscape



independent, playful engagement with woods. They should also discuss how recreational staff could support professionals working with groups of children to take such a role when visiting.

**Encouraging independent play in woodlands:** the team should review policies, procedures and practice in the light of the new Forestry Commission guidance on rope swings, dens, tree houses and fires. Visitor centre staff should consider using a notice board to stimulate independent play and share ideas with parents/carers and children: for instance, inviting visitors to share their experiences, ideas and memories of woodland play activities.

#### Costs and funding

Although some of the measures suggested – for instance changes to procedures – are cost-free, others such as play space improvements and activity programmes may have cost implications. Even here there may be scope for making changes within existing budgets by making creative use of staffing and other resources.

Alice Holt is in an affluent part of SE England with few nearby areas of disadvantage. It is thus harder to make the case for public or charitable funding than at some other Forestry Commission sites. The urban areas of Southampton/ Portsmouth, Reading/Slough and SW London are around an hour's travel from the site and there may be scope for developing programmes with agencies based in these areas, opening up opportunities for external funding.

#### People and partners

There may be scope for building partnerships with local agencies that run activities suitable for children and young people – in August 2005 both archery and a climbing wall were on offer.

#### Public involvement

The team should consider from the outset how children and young people, parents and other users and potential users could be involved in developing and carrying out initiatives.

#### Inclusion/diversity

The team should consider ways to get the views of disabled children about how the site could be improved, especially the main play space near the car park.

#### Timescale

The team should draw up a realistic timescale for initiatives and the action plan as a whole. It should look for 'quick wins' along the lines discussed in Section 3.1 above.

#### Reviewing progress

The team should draw up a review process to assess the impact of changes. It should consider whether any targets need to be set and how user feedback can be gathered.

### 3.3 Play strategy, worked example 2: Rosliston

Rosliston Forest, part of the National Forest, is a 62 hectare site. A partnership between the Forestry Commission, the National Forest Company and South Derbyshire District Council (SDDC), the site is planned to become the main activity centre for, and gateway to, the National Forest. The site, which centres on a ridge overlooking the surrounding countryside to the East, includes a meadow and stream, Fox Culvert (a small wood of mixed mature deciduous trees) and an area of memorial woodland. Facilities include a visitor centre, indoor and outdoor play, restaurant, classrooms, cycle hire and crazy golf. It has been in development for at least 10 years and much of the woodland has been planted in that time.

Various projects are in hand at Rosliston, including major proposals to rearrange the layout and location of facilities and also some initiatives concerned with play and play spaces. As part of this, the Forestry Commission commissioned the voluntary organisation *devonplay* to conduct a 'Playing for Real' exercise. This process had two aims: to work with a group of 16 local primary school children to develop ideas about making the site as a whole more playful, and to train site staff so that they could use some of the techniques themselves in future.

#### Project/programme team

Although developments have taken place and continue to take place on site, supported by various teams, there is no project or programme team focusing on play. A group that could form the basis of such a team has come together as part of the 'Playing for Real' exercise.

#### Vision and values

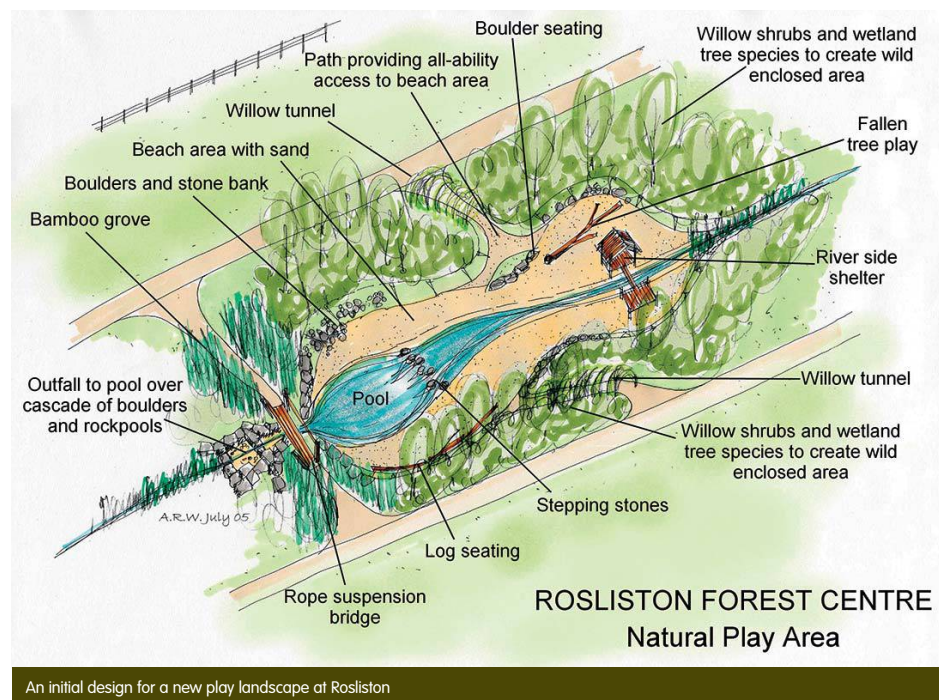
Staff attending the 'Playing for Real' meetings and activities have had an opportunity to discuss some of the issues.

The team, once formed, should clarify a vision for Rosliston by drawing up and agreeing a vision statement for children's play opportunities at the site, addressing such issues as risk and diversity.

#### Territory to be covered

The team should gather financial information on historic and planned expenditure (capital and revenue) and information on all relevant activity that exists or is firmly planned. This should include information on:

- Play areas and structures;
- Forestry Commission-led activities and events (recreational and educational);
- Recreational activities provided by others (cycle hire, off-site agencies);
- Other relevant public areas and amenities (car parks, trails, toilets, catering, visitor centre);
- Signage, public information, leaflets, notice boards;
- Level, type and location of independent/self-led activities by children and young people (cycling, den building, hanging out).







Two views of Rosliston play structures

The team should also look at all the policies, practices and procedures that have an impact on children and young people's use of the site: for instance, maintenance and safety regimes and conservation work.

### Opportunities and priorities

**Creating more naturalistic play spaces:** the team should review the existing play sites and the site as a whole and consider how they can be developed along more naturalistic lines, based on the new Forestry Commission design guidance and the results of the 'Playing for Real' exercise. Work has already begun on this, in the form of a new play landscape - designed using principles outlined in the Forestry Commission's design guidance - in the Long Valley, a part of the site some 400m walk from the visitors' centre.

All the fixed play structures are in a grassy field that extends from the terrace outside the visitors' centre buildings. Placing all the equipment so near the car park and centre acts as a disincentive to explore the site any further. The field slopes downhill from the terrace and is largely devoid of trees (some young conifers fringe one edge). The equipment, which been installed in a piecemeal fashion over the years, includes an iconic Andy Frost owl tower, some lower (and lower key) Andy Frost play structures in a fenced area, a new wooden multi-play structure from a manufacturer, a zip wire, and some 'obstacle course' style timber structures. The field also contains some timber circuit training structures (which appear to be underused, judging by the lack of surface wear around them). Sand is used for safety surfacing in some areas - this has proved popular as a play material with younger children - with grassy areas between the patches of surfacing. Overall the space is not that different from the kind of larger playground that might be found in a municipal park. It offers few opportunities and little encouragement for

children to develop their engagement with the natural features and landscapes of the site.

There is also a sensory garden close to the visitors' centre. This has a formal, enclosed design that, to the children visiting during the 'Playing for Real' exercise at least, gave a message that the space was private and not for them. Finally, further along the woodland walk there is a willow dome structure.

The team should use the design guidance to shape a discussion about how the site as a whole could be developed for play, based on broader plans for its redevelopment. As the 'Playing for Real' exercise showed, there are strong arguments for developing playful structures and landscapes at points along the visitor routes being planned for the site. These would entice children and families away from the visitors' centre and encourage them to explore the site as a whole. The plans for the Long Valley should be a sound start to this. Given its proximity to the car park, at least part of the field near the terrace should be designed for younger children, including babies and toddlers. More extensive use of sand would be an obvious enhancement – even better if combined with a water supply.

**Environmental play programmes:** the team should review with SDDC and other partner agencies planned programmes and activities, especially those with a recreational and/or family focus, and discuss how they could be run so as to encourage more independent, playful engagement with woods. They should also discuss how recreational staff could support professionals working with groups of children to take such a role when visiting.



Rosliston's sensory garden does not look welcoming to children

### Encouraging independent play in

**woodlands:** the team should review policies, procedures and practice in the light of the new Forestry Commission guidance on rope swings, dens, tree houses and fires. Visitor centre staff should consider using a notice board to stimulate independent play and share ideas with parents/carers and children: for instance, inviting visitors to share their experiences, ideas and memories of woodland play activities.

### Costs and funding

Although some of the measures suggested – for instance changes to procedures – are cost-free, others such as play space improvements and activity programmes may have cost implications. Even here there may be scope for making changes within existing budgets by making creative use of staffing and other resources.

Given the likely scale and duration of development across the site as a whole, the team should aim to ensure that play is integrated into the overall plans. One way to do this would be to secure agreement with partners that a proportion of the overall investment should be allocated to improving play opportunities, through a mechanism analogous to the ‘per cent for the arts’ formula used in some commercial developments.

### People and partners

Obviously SDDC and the National Forest Company are key partners and should be involved from the outset. There may be scope for building partnerships with other local agencies that run activities suitable for children and young people.

### Public involvement

The team should consider from the outset how children and young people, parents and other users and potential users be involved in developing and carrying out initiatives. The after-school and holiday club run on site by a private provider offers one source of children and young people who could be involved in planning and construction activities.

### Inclusion/diversity

The team should consider ways to get the views of disabled children and those from minority ethnic groups about how the site could be improved.

### Timescale

The team should draw up a realistic timescale for initiatives and the action plan as a whole. This may be complicated by the need to fit in with broader redevelopment plans for the whole site. Nonetheless, there may be scope for ‘quick wins’ along the lines discussed in Section 3.1 above.

### Reviewing progress

The team should draw up a review process to assess the impact of changes. It should consider whether any targets need to be set and how user feedback can be gathered.



## 4 Views of children and young people and parents

### Views of children and young people and parents

This section:

- Sets out the benefits of involving children and young people
- Describes two Forestry Commission participation projects
- Summarises two other consultation exercises
- Discusses the views of parents
- Makes proposals for future Forestry Commission involvement work

There is a growing trend to involve children and young people in projects and services aimed at them. This has two potential benefits: it leads to greater understanding of their needs and wishes, and it raises their level of engagement with, and hopefully ownership of, the project or initiative. Children's involvement works best when it combined with a clear vision from adults about a service or space, and with adult expertise in creating spaces or providing services for children and young people. Children's involvement is not sufficient on its own to guarantee good spaces or services, because the children taking part may have limited experience of what is possible and limited expertise in design and delivery.

#### 4.1 Participation events

##### Moors Valley

As part of Growing Adventure, some events were organised at Moors Valley Country Park to find out more about the kinds of activity children and young people want to do in woodlands and what is stopping them from pursuing these. These events took place over two consecutive days in July 2005. This exercise not only gave valuable information to the project, it

also generated learning for the Forestry Commission as a whole on ways to improve practice on involving children and young people.

The Moors Valley consultation events set out to find out what children and young people want to do, and enjoy doing, in woodland settings, what is stopping them from doing this and what the Forestry Commission can do to overcome these barriers. On each day, around 30 children and young people from a local school were given the chance to share their views and experiences through the medium of a fun outdoor programme of consultation and participation activities. Staff from the Swansea-based participation agency Dynamix planned and facilitated the days. Pupils from Year 7/8 of a local comprehensive school attended the first day, while children from Years 3, 4 and 5 of a local primary school took part in the second day. Groups were from mixed classes; there was a good gender balance but there were very few minority ethnic children, in keeping with the demographic of the area. Almost all children had visited Moors Valley before. The small sample sizes mean that the results are best seen as offering a flavour of the kinds of issues raised by children of different ages, rather than giving a representative overview of children and young people's views.

The results showed that children and young people of all ages enjoyed being out of doors and enjoyed doing things that involved a degree of risk. When asked what they enjoyed, the older young people tended to mention socialising more frequently than younger children, but otherwise the responses all mentioned a range of outdoor activities like climbing trees, cycling and simply being in the fresh air. Turning to the barriers, all children mentioned parental attitudes as a key obstacle to be overcome. The Year 8 children clearly felt that there was not enough on offer at Moors Valley for their



Children give their views at Moors Valley



age group: one said “it’s mainly for young kids and adults.” This age group also highlighted the temptations of the free time alternatives to being outdoors – TV, computer games, magazines – the time pressures from school and homework, and the inconvenience and discomforts that can accompany being outdoors, including poor weather and insects. They were also articulate about the value of good facilities such as food and drink, toilets and litter bins (which are absent at Moors Valley, on the grounds that they can cause more problems than they solve).

Only the Year 8 pupils explored in detail what the Forestry Commission could do to make woodland settings more engaging, due to constraints on the programme. Their suggestions focused on both improving the range of activities and spaces offered to their age group and on tackling safety, litter and other practical issues. Their responses showed a recognition that maintaining good relations with other users was a shared responsibility. A full report of the event is available from [the Forestry Commission’s England manager for recreation and education].

**Rosliston: Playing for Real**  
Staff at Rosliston took a site-specific approach to involving children and young people in planning site improvements. Staff from the charity devonplay and Forestry Commission staff spent a day in April 2005 with 16 children aged 7 – 11 from a local primary school, exploring the site, their views about it and their ideas

about how it could be improved, using the ‘Playing for Real’ process developed and trademarked by devonplay. As with the Dynamix events at Moors Valley, the children were familiar with the site.

The findings showed an enthusiasm for the outdoors that echoed the results from Moors Valley. Climbing trees, flying kites, running, playing hide-and-seek and making things from nature were all popular activities, and there was a strong interest in animals. Children’s comments about the site – that it can feel vast and under populated, and that the walks can be long – led the devonplay team to draw up recommendations, informed by their experience in environmental play, about how the site can be made more engaging. Some of these have since been incorporated into the proposals described in section 3.3 above, to create a play landscape on the site.

Some relevant information is available from other agencies on children and young people’s views of outdoor play in natural settings. Material collected by two environmental play projects, both featured as case studies in Section 2 above, is summarised in Table 3 below. It shows strong demand for improving access to outdoor spaces and for adventurous and ‘bushcraft’ activities such as campfire cooking, finding wild foods, exploring, climbing trees and den building. The Forestry Commission’s corporate market research has not so far addressed children and young people as a distinct user group.

Table 3: surveys of children and young people’s views on outdoor play	
Wild About Play	Wild Play (Herefordshire Nature Trust)
Surveyed 104 children and young people, mainly aged 5 – 10. When asked what they would like to do in the outdoor environment, the top choices were making and cooking on fires and collecting and eating wild foods, followed by making dens, exploring nature and climbing trees. Least popular were playing with water, playing outdoor games and relaxing outdoors.	Child-friendly paper survey of around 100 children mainly aged 5 – 10 from across Herefordshire. The most popular idea for increasing access to outdoor play was creating nature play areas; having adult workers in outdoor spaces was quite popular (more with girls than boys), while web-based resources were least popular.

## 4.2 Parents

Parents are increasingly the gatekeepers of their children's free time. Large Forestry Commission visitor-centre sites – the location of probably the majority of child visits – are largely inaccessible to unaccompanied children and young people, so parents or other adult carers have direct control over the time and length of their stay, and many also supervise their children fairly closely during visits. Sites nearer to towns and cities are different: here, significant numbers of children and young people may be able to make independent visits.

Opinion polls show that parents want their children to have the opportunity to play outdoors, and are worried about the impact of an indoor, sedentary lifestyle. The Forestry Commission's own market research at large sites with play facilities (Grizedale, Dalby and Thetford) shows that children's play equipment are fairly important to visitors with children (though as already mentioned, the data only includes people over 16). 'Feeling safe in the forest' was very important to parents. The Grizedale market research states that "families rated signposting, toilets, play

equipment, the 'go ape' course, safety in the forest and being able to spend time together as most important to them."

In general visitors to these sites were fairly satisfied with the play facilities on offer at sites surveyed. Play facilities did feature quite highly on the priorities for improvements, though against a background of high levels of satisfaction overall, with most visitors failing to offer any suggestions. The play equipment was the aspect of Grizedale that visitors were least satisfied with. This may relate to the temporary changes at the site during the period covered by the survey (see Section 2 above).

These findings suggest that careful thought should be given to ensuring parents understand and support the Growing Adventure approach and the changes that it implies to play spaces and recreational activities. While parents who visit Forestry Commission sites with their children are probably less risk-averse than average, many are likely to have a view of what play spaces should look like that is strongly based on conventional fixed equipment playgrounds.



Children working with an artist



Sites contemplating major landscaping projects may want to draw up a communication strategy alongside any consultation/participation work. One useful approach to 'selling' the idea of naturalistic play space would be to make explicit appeals to parents' own childhood memories of favourite places to play through signs, exhibitions and notices.

#### **4.3 Developing Forestry Commission work on involving children and young people**

The consultations and participation events summarised above give good support to the Growing Adventure approach, since they confirm children's appetite for nature and the outdoors and for opportunities for adventure and challenge. It would be valuable in future to target groups of children that rarely or never visit woodland settings to explore what would encourage them to come and help them to feel confident. [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play) has information on a participation exercise involving disabled children and young people.

The Moors Valley findings hint at the challenges facing sites that wish to attract teenagers, and also the issues raised at sites where teenagers already visit. Some drop-off in levels of interest and engagement from this age group is probably inevitable given the competing calls on their free time and their rapidly evolving interests and social preferences. This is not to suggest that teenagers should be ignored or neglected. But it does imply that efforts to engage children should start as young as possible, to build a platform of interest in, and familiarity with, the outdoors that will be sustained over a lifetime even if it temporarily recedes during adolescence.

The 'Playing for Real' process offers great scope for developing relatively self-contained sites in child- and play-friendly ways, and should be considered in any site looking to make significant investment in improving play opportunities.



Children playing around an old tree



## 5 Future development

### Future development

This section:

- Draws some parallels between play and the Forestry Commission's approach to off-road cycling
- Makes suggestions for refining the Growing Adventure approach
- Proposes that the Forestry Commission share its approach with other interested agencies
- Suggests ways to evaluate and review progress
- Raises issues to be addressed in taking forward the Growing Adventure approach

There are parallels between the development of the Forestry Commission's approach to children's play and its approach to off-road cycling. This was originally seen as an activity to be discouraged because of perceived safety and management problems. But it has gradually become an accepted and increasingly exploited feature of woodland sites, to the extent that it is now a major focus of Forestry Commission leisure activity and thus of the Forestry Commission's public policy value (for instance in health terms) as well as, directly and indirectly, a significant economic activity for the Forestry Commission. This evolution was made possible by recognising the value and legitimacy of off-road cycling in woodlands and supporting its development, and by taking a sophisticated, balanced approach to managing risks faced both by users and by the Forestry Commission as provider.

The same approach is needed with children's play. The Growing Adventure project has taken the process forward in

the form of a vision, a rationale, a set of principles and an evolving body of guidance. The next step is, as with off-road cycling, to consolidate play as a central feature of the Forestry Commission's leisure activity.

### 5.1 Spreading the approach within Forestry Commission

The Growing Adventure vision is most likely to be achieved – and to mesh with other Forestry Commission initiatives – if it receives strong central support. Clear, explicit corporate support would open up opportunities for showing the relevance of its method and approach to wider Forestry Commission policies and initiatives and to Government policy around physical activity, education, the environment and children and young people.

The integrated play strategy outlined in Section 3.1 above puts forward a generic model for taking forward children's play on a site- or location-specific basis. While the core of the model reflects the Growing Adventure approach, its detail may need refining in specific circumstances. It will probably need to be refined for use in urban and community woodland sites, where there is likely to be much heavier use by local children and young people and a greater likelihood of vandalism and inappropriate or unforeseen uses. It would be valuable to identify such a site for piloting the Growing Adventure approach as soon as possible.

The model may also need refining for atypical Forestry Commission sites that do not have a strong visitor centre/car park hub: for example very dispersed woodlands. Here there may be scope for piloting ideas such as introducing very small-scale nature play structures or landscapes in appropriate sites. Finally, as Section 4 states, the approach may need to be refined to ensure the Forestry Commission engages better with teenagers and also with children and

young people who rarely visit woodlands, in order to increase the numbers of such children who visit and the quality of their experience. This latter group of children and young people is likely to include those from black and minority ethnic communities and disabled children, who should be a priority for future involvement.

### 5.2 Sharing ideas with others

The Forestry Commission is by no means the only non-profit landowning agency providing outdoor leisure and recreation opportunities on its estate. Other agencies may well want to hear about the Growing Adventure approach, and may have valuable ideas of their own. The Forestry Commission should at an early stage identify opportunities for discussing and sharing ideas on outdoor and nature play through publications, events, websites and other dissemination and communication activities. There may be opportunities for this to take place through the 'Wild Adventure Space' scoping research project being taken forward by OPENspace with funding from the Countryside Agency, English Nature and Rural Development Service (to be merged in 2006 as Natural England).

### 5.3 Evaluation and review

The Growing Adventure approach should be kept under review to assess its impact. This should happen at a number of levels. Site-specific initiatives should be carefully evaluated to find out if their objectives have been achieved. Data such as accident records and play inspection reports should be monitored for change. Market research should be monitored to capture the views of a range of visitors, including those such as walkers and dog-walkers who largely fall outside the user groups that the Growing Adventure project is most concerned with. The Forestry Commission should also review its market research protocols to give a better picture of the views of children and young people themselves.



Learning from play spaces in Freiburg

#### 5.4 Issues in taking forward the Growing Adventure approach

As with any change process, adopting the new approach to children's play put forward in this report raises some issues. To be successful, it will need a cultural shift within some parts of the Forestry Commission, and there is a risk that this will be difficult to achieve. Having said this, so far the approach has received an enthusiastic reception across many levels and sections of the Forestry Commission.

One priority implied by the Growing Adventure project is to increase the level of use of Forestry Commission woodlands by external agencies. One way to do this, as at Rosliston and Hamsterley, is for external projects to be located on Forestry Commission sites, as these can then become an independent focus for new initiatives, investment and partnerships. The Forestry Commission should explore how to develop different partnership models, including site-based partnerships, and promote their success.

If taken too far the approach to risk management implied by Growing Adventure could encourage inappropriate risk-taking or poor risk management. Clear guidance and staff support will be key to managing this risk, and good

accident records and careful monitoring will be key to identifying and responding to it.

There may be conflicts with environmental management and conservation work at some sites. These conflicts, which are almost inevitable in intensively used outdoor natural settings, can only be resolved by informed, constructive discussion and negotiation with support from senior managers.

Finally, the approach will need new skills and ways of working. This will need further guidance, staff training and development on top of that already completed. It may also need more resources to build the Forestry Commission's capacity, though as Section 3 implies there is much that can be carried out within existing resources. The Forestry Commission will need to decide whether or not some critical functions are carried out in-house or bought in from outside, including managing the design and modification of play space, and involving children and young people and parents. It will also need to decide whether or not the change in approach and expansion in activity implied by Growing Adventure needs a greater central focus than is currently available.

## 6 Resources and further information

### Resources and further information

This section:

- Gives sources of further information and support
- Includes information available from Forestry Commission England and elsewhere
- Covers organisations, publications and websites

Please contact

[www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play) to update or correct any inaccurate or out-of-date information.

#### 6.1 Other Forestry Commission materials produced as part of Growing Adventure

- Design guidance for play spaces;
- Rope swings, dens, tree houses and fires: A risk-based approach;
- A brief report on the 'Growing Adventure' Study Tour, Freiburg 7 to 9 June 2005;
- Rosliston Forest Playing for Real report;
- Dynamix Moors Valley participation event report;
- Play equipment safety standards guidance.

These are all available from  
[www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play)

#### 6.2 Environmental play and playwork **devonplay**

devonplay is a play development agency. It is proprietor of 'Playing for Real', the participation process used at Rosliston and described in section 4. devonplay also distributes *Growing Spaces for Play: The value of play in the natural environment*, a practical guide to creating environmental and naturalistic play spaces written by Philippa Wood and published by RoSPA in 2001. [www.devonplay.co.uk](http://www.devonplay.co.uk)

#### **Greenstart**

One of the case studies mentioned in Section 2. [www.greening4growth.org.uk](http://www.greening4growth.org.uk)  
Contact Caroline Jackson, Groundwork Northumberland: tel. 01670 514876, email [caroline.jackson@groundwork.org.uk](mailto:caroline.jackson@groundwork.org.uk).

#### **Stirling Council**

As well as the play landscape at Balmaha - one of the case studies mentioned in Section 2 - Stirling Council has built a number of other naturalistic play spaces. Contact: Sue Gutteridge, tel: 01786 430125, email [gutteridges@stirling.gov.uk](mailto:gutteridges@stirling.gov.uk).

#### **Wild about Play**

One of the case studies mentioned in Section 2, Wild About Play is an environmental playwork training project based at the University of Gloucester, and runs an annual 'Wild & Away' conference. Martin Maudsley of Wild About Play facilitated a day of teambuilding/ environmental play activities for Forestry Commission District Managers at their annual meeting in Grizedale in June 2005. *Playing on the Wildside* is a practical guide to environmental playwork edited by Martin and published by Playwork Partnerships in 2005: [www.playwork.co.uk](http://www.playwork.co.uk), tel. 01242 532949, email [team@playwork.co.uk](mailto:team@playwork.co.uk)

#### **WildPlay (Herefordshire Nature Trust)**

One of the case studies mentioned in Section 2, Wildplay is an environmental playwork project that has produced a 'WildPlay kitbag' in DVD format. [www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/hereford/wildplay/index.htm](http://www.wildlifetrust.org.uk/hereford/wildplay/index.htm). Contact: Lily Horseman: tel. 01432 356872, email [lhorseman@herefordwt.cix.co.uk](mailto:lhorseman@herefordwt.cix.co.uk)



### 6.3 Risk and safety in play

#### Managing Risk in Play Provision:

##### A position statement

A four-page document from the Play Safety Forum (a body that includes the HSE, RoSPA, Child Accident Prevention Trust, Association of Play Industries and other agencies with an interest in play safety) published in 2002.

[www.ncb.org.uk/cpc/res\\_detail.asp?id=279](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpc/res_detail.asp?id=279)

#### Playgrounds: Risks, benefits and choices

Research report on playground accidents by Prof David Ball of Middlesex University, commissioned and published by the HSE in 2002.

[www.hse.gov.uk/research/crr\\_hrm/2002/crr02426.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/research/crr_hrm/2002/crr02426.htm)

#### Register of Play Inspectors International (RPII)

Organisation of playground inspectors contact [www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play)  
[www.playinspectors.com/](http://www.playinspectors.com/)

### 6.4 Inclusive play and playwork

#### Developing accessible play space: A good practice guide

Published by ODPM in 2003 and written by Karen Dunn, Michele Moore and Pippa Murray.

[www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm\\_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm\\_urbanpolicy\\_026876.hcsp](http://www.odpm.gov.uk/stellent/groups/odpm_urbanpolicy/documents/page/odpm_urbanpolicy_026876.hcsp)

#### Can Play will Play: Disabled children and access to outdoor playgrounds

Published by the National Playing Fields Association in 2004 and written by Rob Whewy and Alison John.

[www.npfa.co.uk/pdfs/can\\_play\\_will\\_play.pdf](http://www.npfa.co.uk/pdfs/can_play_will_play.pdf)

#### Kids National Development Division

(formerly Kidsactive) promotes inclusive play.

[www.kids.org.uk](http://www.kids.org.uk)

### 6.5 Play agencies and networks

#### Association of Play Industries

Trade body for UK play equipment manufacturers.

[www.playindustries.org](http://www.playindustries.org)

#### Children's Play Council

National NGO and umbrella body for voluntary and statutory agencies with an interest in children's play. Hosts the Play Safety Forum.

[www.ncb.org.uk/cpc](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpc)

#### Children's Play Information Service (CPIS)

Library and information service based at the National Children's Bureau.

[www.ncb.org.uk/library/cpis](http://www.ncb.org.uk/library/cpis)

To find your nearest local play association or network contact CPIS.

#### Free Play Network

Network of play providers and interested people and agencies – website includes Places for Play, an online exhibition.

[www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk)

### 6.6 Funding

Big Lottery Fund programme: contact Children's Play Council for up-to-date information.

#### Children's Play Council

(See above)

#### Play England

A five year project to promote strategies for free play and create a lasting support structure for play providers in England.

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

## 6.7 Background reading and other resources

*If you go down to the woods today:* feature article by Tim Gill published in the October 2005 edition of the Ecologist magazine:

[www.theecologist.org/archive\\_detail.asp?content\\_id=481](http://www.theecologist.org/archive_detail.asp?content_id=481)

*Last Child in the Woods: Saving our kids from nature-deficit disorder* book written in 2005 by US journalist and parenting expert Richard Louv.

Website maintained by Frode Svane, Norwegian play expert:

[www.barnas-landskap.org](http://www.barnas-landskap.org)

Website of Helle Nebelong, landscape architect formerly with Copenhagen City Council:

[www.sansehaver.dk/asp/side/english.html](http://www.sansehaver.dk/asp/side/english.html)

Website of the River and Lake Swimming Association:

[www.river-swimming.co.uk](http://www.river-swimming.co.uk)

*Nature's Playground: Activities, crafts and games to encourage children to get outdoors* written in 2005 by Fiona Danks and Jo Schofield.





---

## Contacts

---

Forest Enterprise  
340 Bristol Business Park Coldharbour Lane Bristol BS16 1EJ  
Tel 0117 906 6000

For more information on this guidance note go to:  
[www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england-play)

For more information on the Forestry Commission look up [www.forestry.gov.uk/england](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/england)