



## An Interview with Barb Champion

By Dr Barb Chancellor

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After 25 years of service, Barbara Champion is retiring from her role as Executive Director of Play Australia at the end of 2022. We will miss her enthusiasm for all things 'play' and the wonderful culture she has created and maintained in the organisation. Those of us who have worked alongside Barb have experienced first-hand, her ability to foster respectful and enduring working relationships. Her networks extend into a wide range of fields associated with the work of Play Australia and Barb always knows someone, somewhere, who is happy and willing to help, something the organisation has benefited enormously from over the years.

Barb has led Play Australia through a major expansion, growing from Victorian based, to national. This echoes the original aim of the organisation over 100 years ago, then known as the Guild of Play, which saw the benefits of a national approach to playground provision.



*The Board 2022*

Unfortunately, this initial expansion failed, and the organisation only survived in Victoria. But survive it did, continuing to advocate for children's play at every opportunity, reaching out to, and supporting interstate colleagues wherever possible. Originally, convincing communities to provide playgrounds for their children was the focus, an expensive exercise for local councils and residents.

Photographs taken of children in playgrounds since the early 1900s show some wild and wonderful playground equipment, often locally built from old farm machinery and other odds and

ends. Looking at these images today makes us gasp as we spot the hazards and consequently, working on Standards to regulate the playground industry as it developed became important work of the organisation.



*Patti Morgan and Barb at IPA Conference in Istanbul 2014*

In August 1998 when Barb was employed by PRAV (The Playground and Recreation Association of Victoria), Barb recalls, 'PRAV was, in one sense, on its last legs...my predecessor Gerard had died after a long illness and we had 8 members...The Committee of Management: Cath, Jeff and Felix nearly closed it down but their strong commitment to the importance of advocating for children's play saw them persist. When I began, I really had to start again. They wanted PRAV to be a very different organisation from its regulatory past, with a strong commitment to play. There was a lot of work to do.'

Barb embraced the challenges she faced and PRAV grew into a vibrant community, ready to adapt to changing community needs. 'The major growth during my time has been in taking the play agenda beyond playgrounds and Standards development,' Barb notes. Today children's play is not always prioritised in early childhood settings, schools and public open spaces and with increasingly urbanised lives, there are significant health and wellbeing consequences for children who do not have access to outdoor play every day. Play Australia continues to have a major role advocating for every child's right to play, a fundamental right enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In this challenge we join our international colleagues through the International Play Association (IPA) and we have been regularly active in this forum for many years. Barb Champion is a familiar face at the IPA

conferences and has seen them as an opportunity to bring Play Australia to the world and the world to Play Australia.

Creating a sustainable national organisation became the Board's priority. Barb recalls, 'In 2015 when we became Play Australia, we focused on increasing membership outside of Victoria.' Barb's ability to connect with people was essential in this work, she notes, 'We developed relationships with other state bodies and governments, at this point particularly in South Australia.' The national organisation began to grow.

Educating the public about children's play is a vital role of Play Australia and an area Barb notes as particularly significant is the importance of risk in play. With playgrounds and equipment becoming increasingly safer, new problems emerged as children became bored with what was on offer. Barb recalls, 'Play Australia started to take on sensible views about risk management regarding playground Standards,' to enable designers and manufacturers to respond in creative ways that enhanced the quality of children's play experiences. Alongside this, Play Australia shared new understandings through training programs and the sharing of information. Barb reports, 'The general public is now much more aware of the benefits of risk taking for children.'



*With Kim Stoney at Farmhouse in Mansfield 2011*

Another important evolution influencing Play Australia's work is in the area of inclusive playspaces. In 2006 Play Australia produced the Good Playspace Guide for the Victorian Government, not only advising on physical accessibility issues but also the importance of social, cultural and emotional aspects of play provision for all children. Barb notes, 'Other state governments are now taking up Inclusion and Play Australia is currently developing an online training program which will target designers and Local Government planners to support the ongoing development of outdoor playspaces to support ALL children to play.'

Barb reflects on highlights of her time working with PA, 'The people I have met have been the absolute standout...the diversity of people.' She fondly recalls, 'Pattie taught me about the importance of Play Australia connecting with the community, not just our members, something that has seen the organisation become increasingly relevant across Australia.'



100th Birthday Party with Mary Jeavons and Cathy Kiss

'We are now the national peak play organisation. Mary and Sally were designing for inclusive play before it was a thing.' She adds, 'How lucky and fortunate I have been to work with such an amazing bunch of people. I have been so happy working for 25 years with such wonderful people from across Australia which has been so professionally stimulating and rewarding.'

Play Australia brings people together across the play sector, with their specialised expertise and professional experiences. Barb remembers, '...many times driving home from

a Board meeting late at night feeling that the decisions we arrived at were better than what I would have made alone.'



Human Rights Awards 2014 with Robyn Monro Miller and Ric McConaghy

***Congratulations on a job well done Barb. Steering this organisation over the last 25 years, navigating the shifting landscapes and overcoming varied challenges see Play Australia today, ready and able to continue into the future. The thanks of all those who have shared this journey go out to you on your retirement. Most importantly, to all the children who have opportunities to play outside in playspaces that are designed for them, hazard free but full of fun, risk and challenge, you may not have heard of her, but Barbara Champion had a lot to do with that.***



The Board 2019