



PlayThings

Loose Parts Play in Good Times and Bad

Text and Illustrations by Penny Wilson

The Play Things come from PlayKX play sessions running in the Kings Cross Development area in London. The sessions use only loose parts and Playworkers and families who come along to play. We ensure that the unadulterated play of the child is at the heart of each session. We are 'instead of a playground' with a richer offer, that allows flexibility of space and a variety of affordances.

PlayKX is managed by Assemble Studio.



For Every Child

We have pulled together a sample list of Play Things which we know work because we use them in our practice at PlayKX play sessions running in the Kings Cross Development area in London. This list is intended purely as a way of sparking ideas and possibilities. We have looked for Play Things that are free or cheap, have as light an environmental footprint as possible, are domestic or bizarre, and are stunningly beautiful or slightly ominous.

These Play Things can be used alone, with other play equipment, and in spaces where the combination of possibilities become deep and rich and umami.

You can use them in any situation at all where

you want play to take root. Play Things are suggestions to get you thinking or yourself, that encourage you to be informed by your observations of children playing, looking in Charity shops, scrounging about, and, most of all, spending as little as possible so that you can provide a rich playing environment for Every Child.

Dressing Up

Dressing Up gets overlooked and undervalued in play settings. It can be adventurous, creative, risky, hilarious, and beautiful. It allows children to explore who they are and how they look.

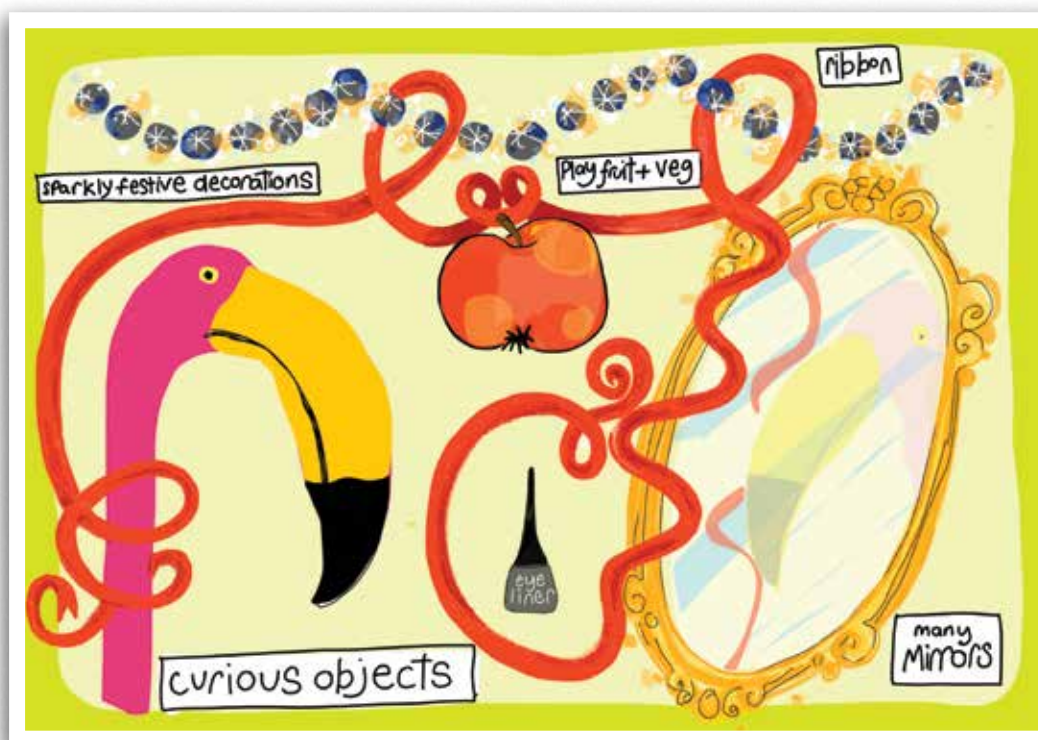
Choose clothes and accessories of many different sizes, including grown-up stuff of variable uses (skirts can be capes, dresses, or hats). Look for varieties of colour, texture, and style. Find shiny things and dark things, bags and shoes, lengths of luscious fabric. Shop in charity shops for best results, though donations from school and am-dram societies are always a cornucopia of possibilities.



Accessorizing

We watch hours and hours of play each week. Sometimes we understand the narrative in a child's playing; sometimes it is a complete mystery to us. That's absolutely fine, of course. It's not our job to analyse or interpret what we see.

We see objects and dressing up accessories used in loads of different ways. We don't always understand that either – why does that toddler always search until they find the deconstructed party pom pom? Why does the golden sequined vest cause such separation anxiety at home time?



Objets Trouvés

Many of our most beloved objects have been things we have unexpectedly found: strings of Christmas beads wriggle beautifully, ribbon can be used for lots of things, eyeliner can be used to draw on the skin. We have noticed that some objects have an archetypal weight that means they keep getting used to recreate fairy stories, ancient or contemporary myths.

Mirrors are vital. We try to get hold of as many acrylic mirrors as possible. It's great for all of us to see

ourselves dressed up or doing poses or actions. Without mirrors, the only way that a child can see how they look is via an adult-posed photograph ("smile please"). Mirrors give children the chance to see themselves through their own eyes, front and back, and into infinity.

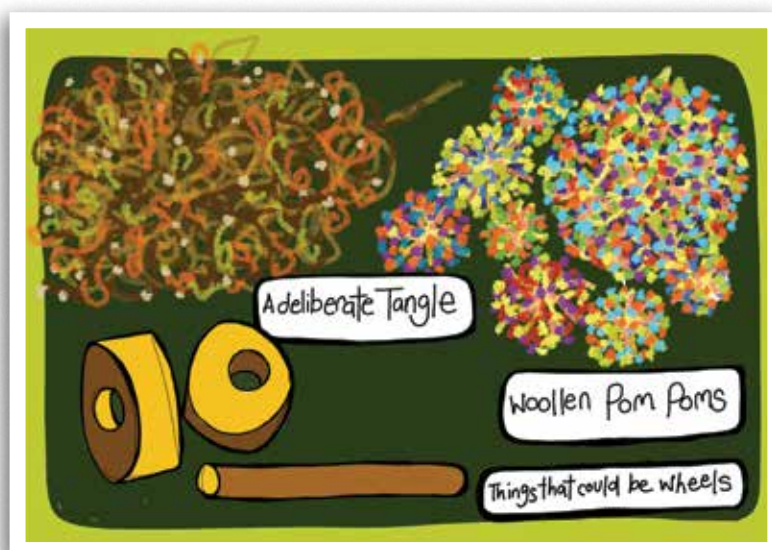
Friends

Play is a great way to be a sociable creature. Left on their own, children playing together don't seem to be aware of their differences. There is just a broader range of possibilities that comes along with each new player.

Sometimes children need inanimate friends. Since we introduced odd, soft toy creatures to our collection of Play Things, we have found that strong friendships have grown between children and the objects. The children will rush to the chicken with open arms. They will search with infinite care until that have found all four of the badgers. The animals become part of play narratives, role play, fantasy, socio-dramatic play, and all sorts of other things we don't fully understand because they are private. Sometimes they turn a different sort of object into something to have a conversation with, to care for, or to be cared for by.



Sometimes children just need something for a comedy gold moment - those moments of helpless laughter from a child who has made other children - or even an adult - laugh. Whatever it is that these creatures are doing, we like it. As one beautiful child told me about her creatures, "We talk together. They help me to work things out."



Oddities

We were surprised to find that the children are drawn to (and reinvent each play day) a big old tangle of wool. Perhaps because it is in neutral colours and has one long strand sticking out. It is almost always a pull-along object – most often it is a dog to be walked.

Pom-poms are a delightfully funny way to throw things at people. We had lovely white ones over the winter, of course they were often snowballs. Wheels are also important. So are axles. Watching things turn and move can be fascinating. It's quite fun to have off-centre options for the holes housing the axle.

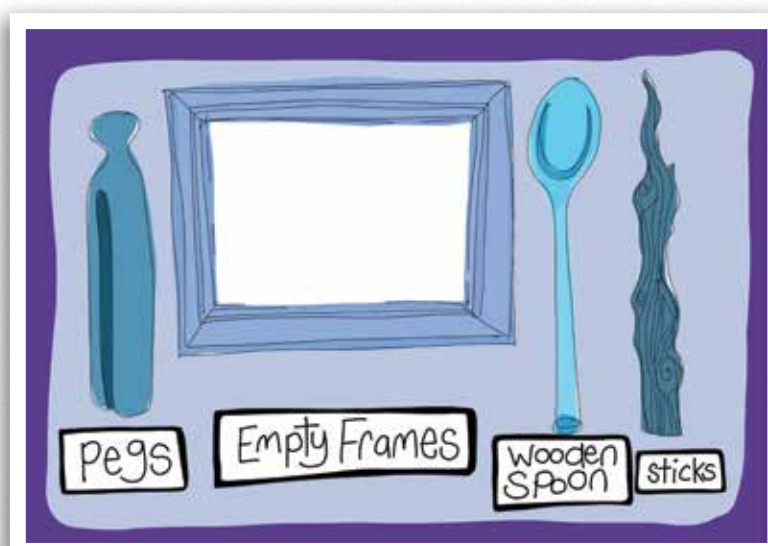
May Be Useful

Old style wooden dolly pegs: good for attaching things to other things, and also turning into other beings.

Wooden picture frames: great prop for playing with self-image, and for the child to 'frame' the adult.

Wooden spoons: can be a tool for storing and carrying, a conductor's baton, a drum stick...

Sticks: while they seem to strike terror into the hearts of adults, children invariably use them safely if you show them how (just as with ropes, scissors, knives, water, and climbing). Sticks are great. They can help wave a fabric flag twirling high in the air, they can be a wand, a hurdle, a fishing rod, and all the other things.



Cozy

During the cold weather we bought blankets to wrap up in. We bought pillows for pillow fights.

Almost always we found that these had been snuggled up into little dens to make bedrooms. These were used by children and objects to take real or pretend naps or just make an excuse for comfy restful times.

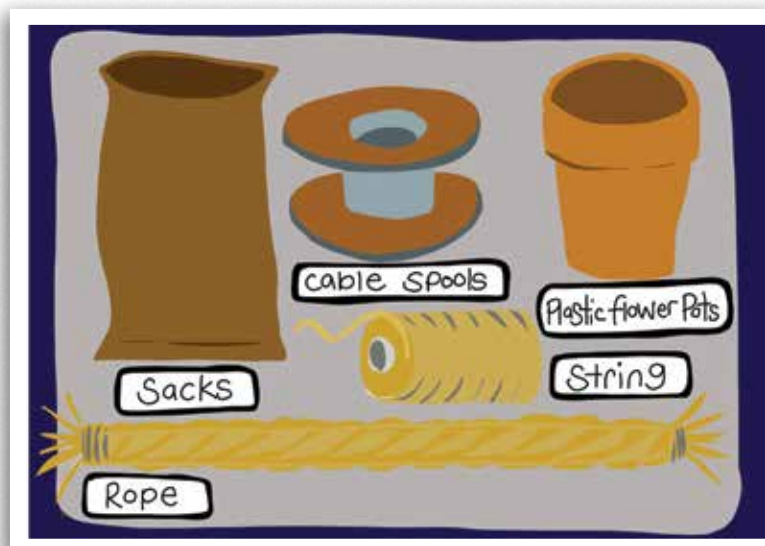
Quiet options are always massively important options in play settings. The contrast between high energy play and sweetly soft times is important. And every child has different play preferences at different times.



Construction

A gripe with outdoor fixed-play of bent metals is that they are nothing more than a kiddie gym and don't have affordances for the sorts of brilliant playing we see happening when Play Things are available. The same can be said for some large scale 'loose parts.' Used in isolation they are an amazing offer. Used with Play Things a whole new world of stuff becomes possible.

We could work with cardboard boxes, butter knives, and tape all the time. These things never fail.



Deliberately Sourced Stuff

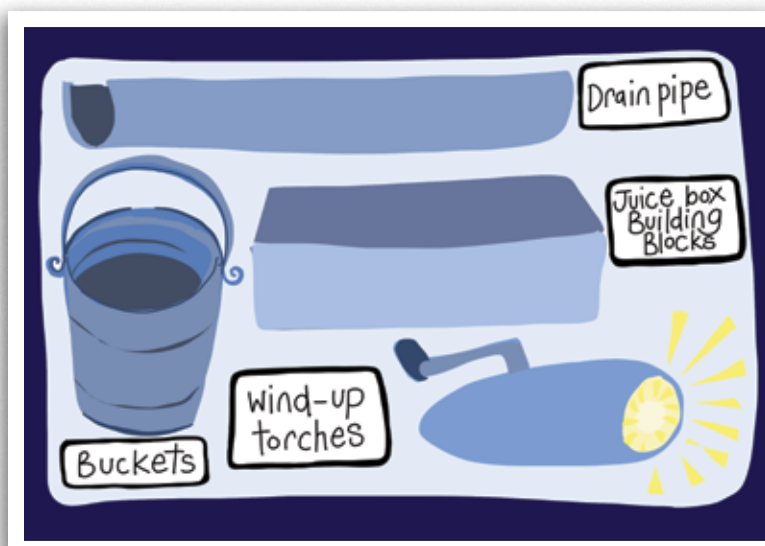
Here are a few of our favourite things:

Coffee sacks: we play with them and use them for storage.

Cable spools: because of wheels and balancing and vases, etc.

Rope and string: two very different things, both absolutely wonderful.

Plastic plant pots: you can put things in them, including your bums or your heads. Mostly they are worn as 'hearing hats' because they look silly and change the sound of everything around you.



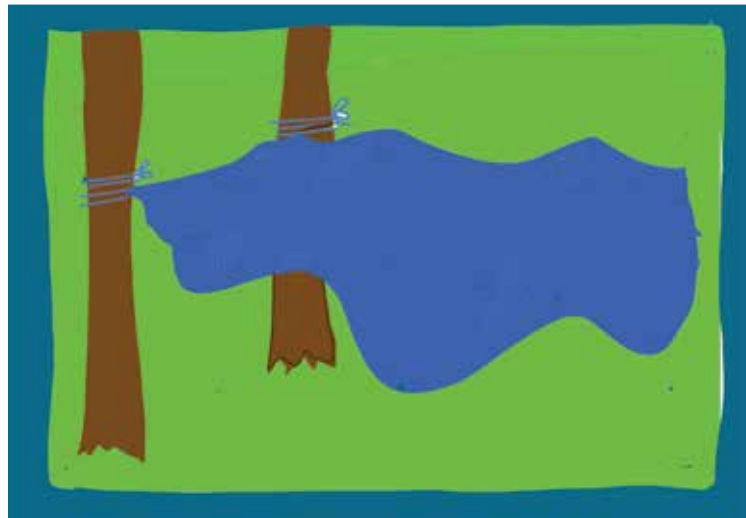
Keep Your Eyes Open for:

Lengths of drainpipe: for rolling things down, making bridges, supporting beams, or water if there is some nearby.

Buckets: they are great to collect things in and carry around. Adult-sized buckets are a little bit unwieldy and heavy for a child, which is a positive thing. It makes them more appealing. Also, you may want to find some washing line to tie to the handle so that it can be dragged along.

Robust wind-up torches (flashlights): for exploring dens and light through fabric.

Building blocks: made with up-cycled containers, filled to a satisfying – but not crushing – weight with sand (or whatever) and sealed with duct tape.



Making the Sea

In the park where we play there is a constant breeze. This is one of the very best Play Things that we have access to.

Sometimes we tie a huge tarpaulin between two sturdy trees. (We protect the bark of the trees from damage from the rope.) Depending on how we tie it the tarpaulin can be a rippling pool or a surf wave that you can lean into. It can also be a big den or tent shared by families or big groups of children. The noise it makes is amazing.

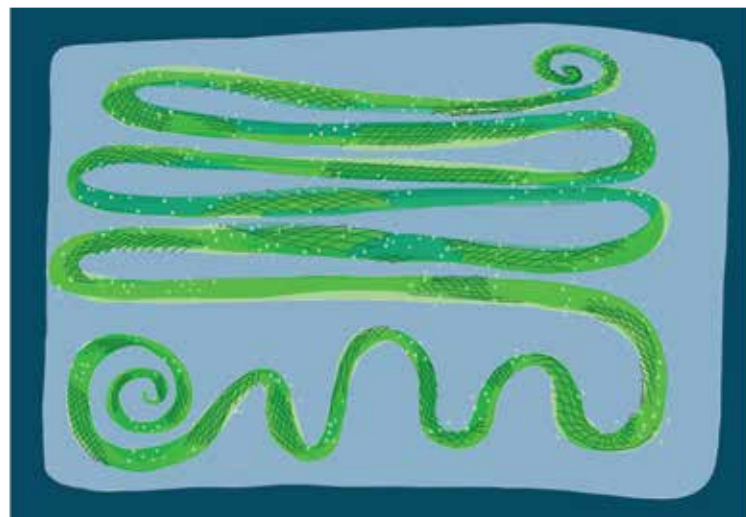
Be aware that if the winds get strong, the tarp can pick little people up and send them flying, or whip them with flapping edges. An adult nearby is the best way to support this.

Catching the Breeze

Purchasing a pre-used parachute is a good investment. They are designed to do spectacular and powerful things. Again, children will need to have an adult around while they use this.

Children seem to be very used to parachutes, but the ones they have at schools are single thickness and circular. The children and adults will stand around and flap them up and down.

By comparison a heavier parachute is a wild and untamed Beastie when there is a breeze. It is the inside of the belly of a whale, a wall of water, the sky falling in, then rising again. It teases and rages and dances and shelters. It makes small people laugh and stare in awe.



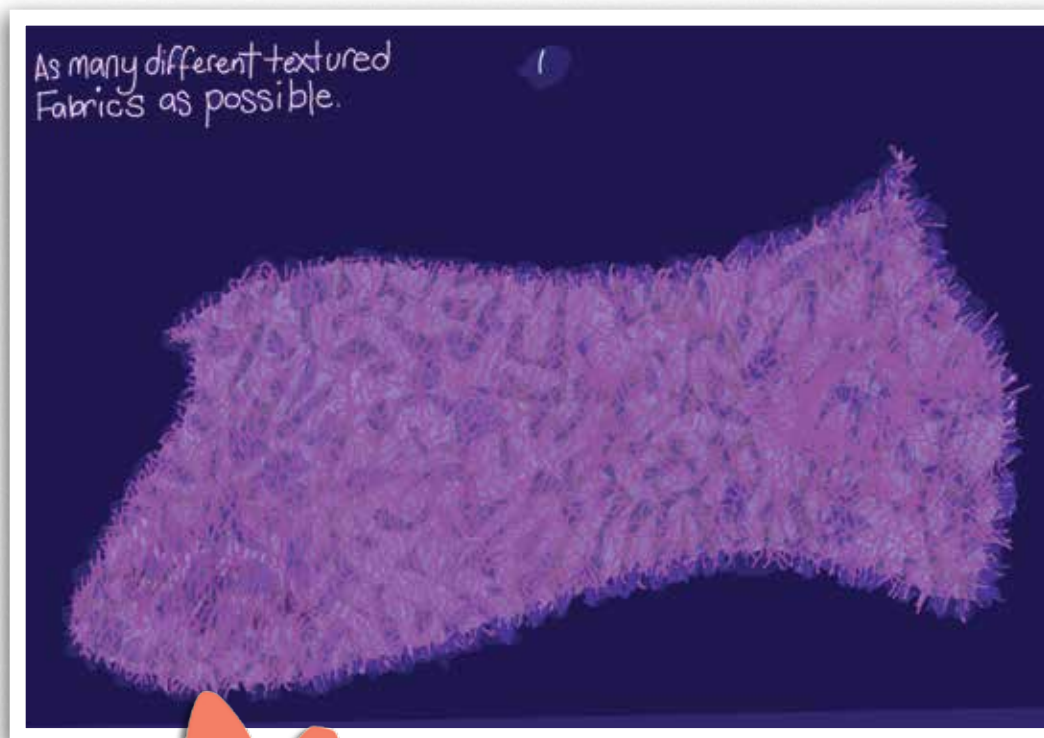
Scaffolding Net

This is the netting that is draped over the outside of buildings when work is being carried out. It comes in many different colours, in huge long rolls. It is strong and delicately translucent and, it is cheap.

When we pack the net away we daisy chain it, like a crochet chain, so that it is fun to pull apart at the next session. The children watch with incredulity as the net expands and expands and becomes a giant filling the space beyond anything they had expected. It can be used to make hammocks, mazes, paths, or a giant thing that follows you or that you can be pulled along on top of.

Strong Stretchy Stuff

In the days when we worked on an adventure playground, we were always looking for cheap ways to adapt what we had into what we needed. We started to use Lycra to make swings and hammocks that held onto children who couldn't hold on to the swings. Tied between trees (higher up than you would expect) it is an adventure to get into and out of. It bounces and swings and holds you close. It is restful and exciting. We have never stopped using Lycra. It is great fun in large quantities.



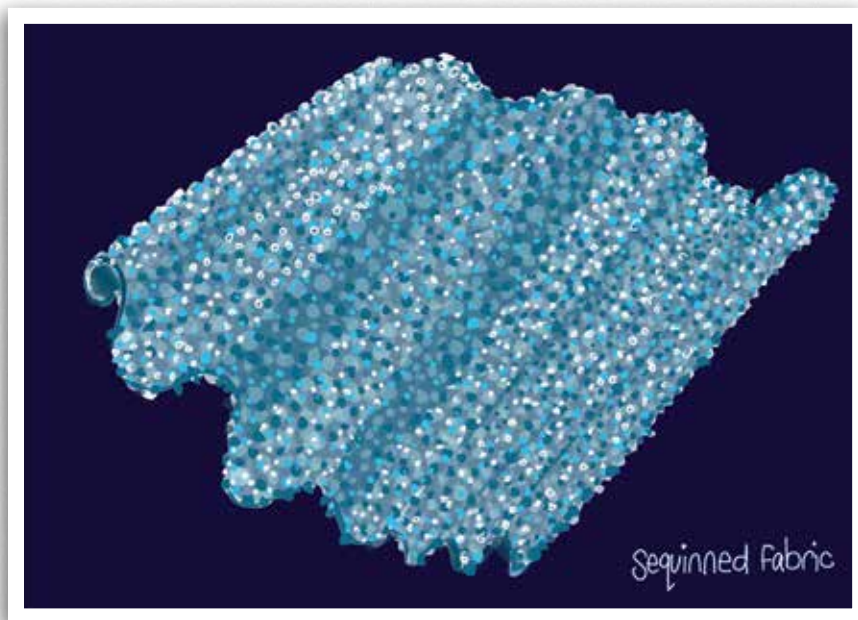
Textures

I have seen children playing with plastic objects on plastic ground. Often the plastic is designed to look like something from the natural world. Fake wood Wendy houses, fake grown-up dress-up clothes and hats, fake grass. Why do we think it's ok to lie so blatantly to children, and why do we find it so hard to notice that this lie is being perpetrated?

Find as many textures as you can. We use fake fur out of preference but have had real fur donated to

us and some children love the touch of it. Velvet is a luxury with a weighty lavish feeling. Silks and satins are a sensual delight as they slip like water around you. Linens and cottons are cool and refreshing. Use as much variety as possible.





Breathtaking Beauty

To many children a strong element in play is an aesthetic one. I can't justify this with any formal research, but it was true for me, for many adults I have spoken to, and is evident in what I see in playing children. It is so frequently overlooked in play settings. Somehow mess and scrappiness are given priority over the beautiful and breathtaking.

We have a blue piece of sequined fabric that sends out shards of light. It is a royal cloak, a merperson tail, an ice dress. It is something that children search out upon their arrival, remembering it from last time.

It helps adults warm to the Play Things when they are beautiful, but it is the children who absorb that beauty into their playing.

Something Like Sweet Wrappers

Colour. Vivid, undiluted, dense or translucent colour. A way to colour with light. A thing to give shape to the wind as it flies and twirls. I grew up playing with sheets drying on a washing line in the back garden. Since children seldom get to do that now how do they see what the wind does? How do they feel that?

How does it feel to grab a long length of organza and wrap it around you, or tie it to a long stick and twirl it in the sky? Drape the frame of a den with overlapping colours. Make jellyfish colour bubbles over hot air vents.

How does it feel to run your whole body into a long wisp of fabric as it flies to meet you? It's the perfect illustration of qualia. "I can *feel* the red." ●

