

What is an adventure playground?

Adventure playgrounds are unique spaces where children can play in ways that they often can't elsewhere, engaging in the full range of play types and exploring risk, physical and psychological experiences. Instead of traditional, fixed equipment, adventure playgrounds offer loose parts - such as wood, tyres, rope, pipes - that children can manipulate to build, experiment and shape the environment themselves. There are three 'frees' of adventure playgrounds: free of charge, free to come and go, free to choose. These ensure children have genuine autonomy over their play. Adventure playgrounds are staffed by a team of skilled playworkers who, working to the Playwork Principles, are there to support children's play, not direct it.

Adventure Playgrounds in Portsmouth

There are six adventure playgrounds in Portsmouth, offering play opportunities to children aged 6-13 years old. Whilst all six fit the above description of adventure playgrounds, they are all quite different with unique personalities in response to their local communities. The playgrounds are all well-established, often used by generations of families, with the oldest playground turning 50 years old this year.

Each playground has a team of four playworkers who bring a wide range of skills, experience and knowledge to the setting. Our work is underpinned by the Playwork Principles and Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Playworkers believe that children are the experts in their own play and recognise the value in stepping back, observing and reflecting on children's play. Playworkers are committed to promoting the welfare of children through robust safeguarding with a contextual focus.

The adventure playgrounds are open six days a week, all year round, in all weathers. Each playground has both inside and outside spaces, including toilets, a kitchen and an office. Many of the children will be regular users of the playground, familiar with the staff and the site. Parents are asked to register their children before they use the playground. Under 6s are welcome to use the playgrounds at set times and must be accompanied by a parent or adult.

What does a session on an adventure playground look like?

Sessions on our playgrounds are generally between 3 and 4 hours long. Some children may only stay for 10 minutes; others will stay for the whole session. Sessions are open access and children are free to come and go as they please. The sessions are very much led by the children's needs and wants and playworkers will support these as far as possible. Regular users may be aware of what resources are available, others may not. Sometimes there will be specific activities happening on the playground, these tend to come about organically, led by the children or in response to their feedback.

Working on our adventure playgrounds

There are four playworkers in a team on our adventure playgrounds. One of those is the Playground Manager who takes overall responsibility for the site, staff, safeguarding and everything in between. In the Playground Manager's absence the Deputy Playground Managers share the responsibility, leaning into individual skill sets. Playgrounds need a 'site responsible' person plus at least one other member of staff to open. Site responsible people are managers and deputies.

During opening times playworkers will often be spread across the site to meet the needs of the children using us, however will regularly come together to share information and support each other in challenging moments, ensuring good practice.

Outside of the playground's opening hours teams will spend time maintaining and developing the site, planning and reflecting on delivery, responding to safeguarding needs, completing training, engaging with other agencies and the community, and supporting other playgrounds.

The scope of a playworker's role reaches beyond the physical boundaries of the playground. Engaging with children, families, and internal and external agencies embeds the playground within its community, facilitating contextual safeguarding and supporting connection and inclusion.

Everything we do is substantiated by a strong foundation of playwork theory and practice.