

Go wild with your play spaces!

There are 2 ways playworkers can provide play environments:
the zoo or the game reserve



Which one are you?

The Zoo

The Zoo is an environment that looks after 'threatened' animals; they offer safety, care, food and exercise. Here the animals are on display and we marvel at their animal antics. For the zoo to be effective there needs to be clear boundaries (bars) designed in the best interests of the animal. Here the playworker is a zoo keeper.

But if course, a zoo cannot replicate a natural environment for the animal as playworkers want everyone to play nicely together and not tease each other. Within this highly controlled space children's natural behaviour challenges the boundaries. When children play with language, engage in seemingly aggressive play, break friendships and so on, there is likely to be some intervention designed to teach the child that such behaviour is unacceptable. Children will adapt to the 'rules' just as animals in a zoo acquire patterns of behaviour that become routine, repetitive and largely passive. Children will adapt to zoo-like play spaces and take on the role that they perceive adults demand.

The Game Reserve

An alternative way of looking after endangered species is to provide 'game reserves'. This attempts to provide natural spaces for animals, in which they can live their natural lives. Such provision recognises and supports the range of behaviours that are an essential part of the animal while at the same time providing a degree of management of the site to ensure that the integrity of the space is maintained.

Here the playworker is a game reserve warden; recognising and acknowledging the range of play behaviours that will be present – the language, actions, teases, rituals, etc – as the natural state of the playing child. Their reading of the play will be different from the zoo keeper, but there will still be anxieties and concerns over what they observe. The focus is on the playworker being aware of these feelings and to reconcile these with their understanding of children's play.

First Claim tries to have a game reserve approach.

In reality playworkers are a bit of both depending on where the club is and what the parents and workers are like. But it's a useful image to have in your mind as you work through First Claim