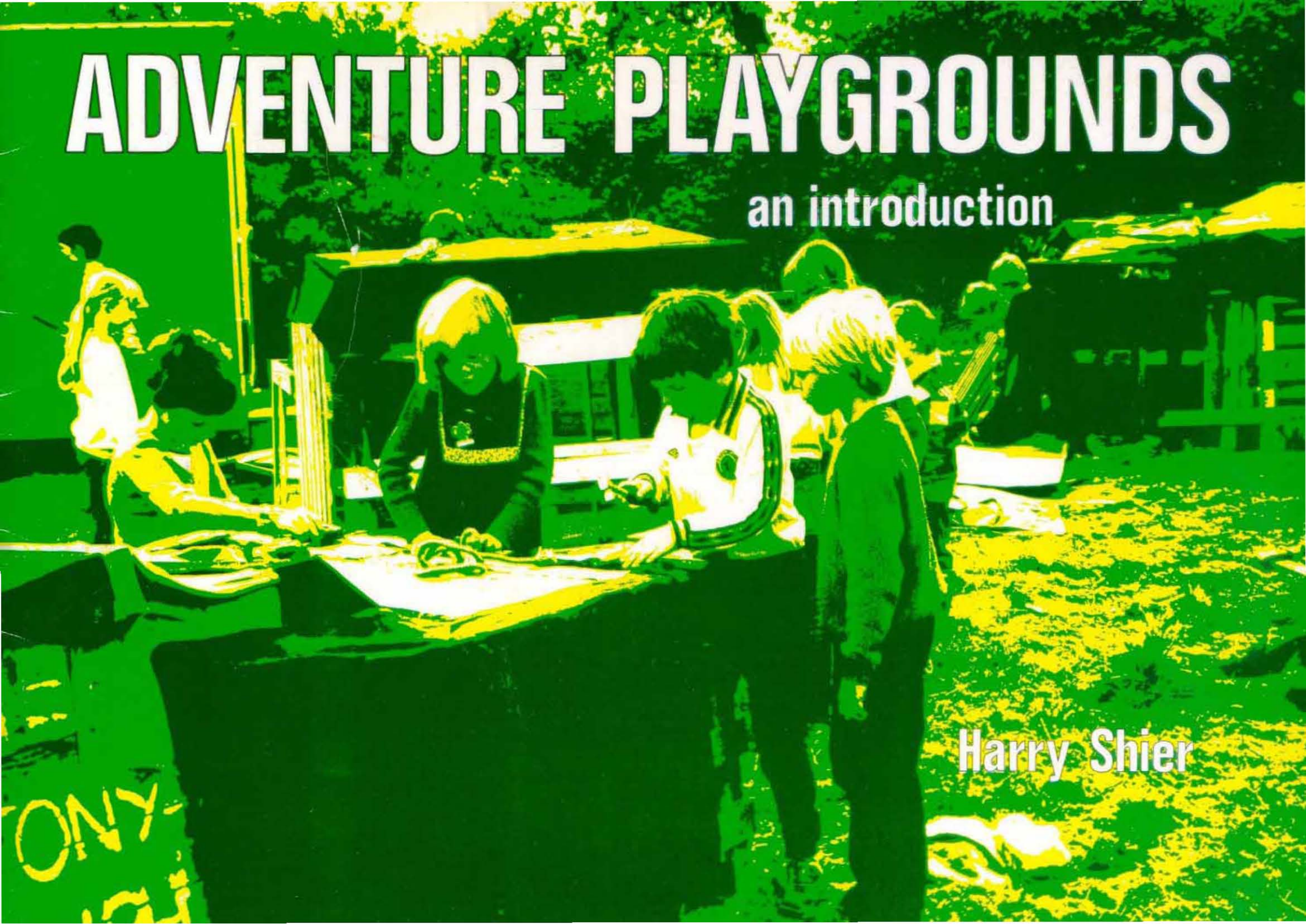


ADVENTURE PLAYGROUNDS

an introduction

Harry Shier



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Introduction

An Adventure Playground is an area fenced off and set aside for children. Within its boundaries children can play freely, in their own way, in their own time. But what is special about an Adventure Playground is that here (and increasingly in contemporary urban society, only here) children can build and shape the environment according to their own creative vision.

The modern Adventure Playground offers this unique opportunity and much else besides, but this was the aim of the founders of the Adventure Playground movement, and it is still the root of the Adventure Playground concept.

The vital ingredient that makes this possible is the presence on every Adventure Playground of Adventure Playground workers: full-time permanent staff through whose efforts the playground is able to offer many of the exciting, adventurous and creative play opportunities which children need so badly if they are to develop to their full potential.

There are few absolute rules in the multi-faceted, ever-changing world of children's play. However, Adventure Playgrounds have been run in the United Kingdom since the early 1950s, and in that time a lot has been learnt about the ingredients for a successful Adventure Playground. Some features have changed over the years and are still developing in response to changing needs and increased understanding. Others have changed hardly at all since the very first Adventure Playgrounds were established on post-war bomb-sites.

Adventure Playgrounds are only one of many valid forms of provision for children's play. They cannot be said to meet the play needs of all children all the time. They are important because the play experience they offer is uniquely valuable to the children themselves, and because the children are important. What follows in this publication is not an arbitrary set of rules for a new kind of institution, but a guide, based on the experience of many who have managed, studied and, not least, worked on Adventure Playgrounds since the beginning. It is a guide to what goes into the making of a successful Adventure Playground today. *From a child's point of view, few enterprises are more worthwhile.*

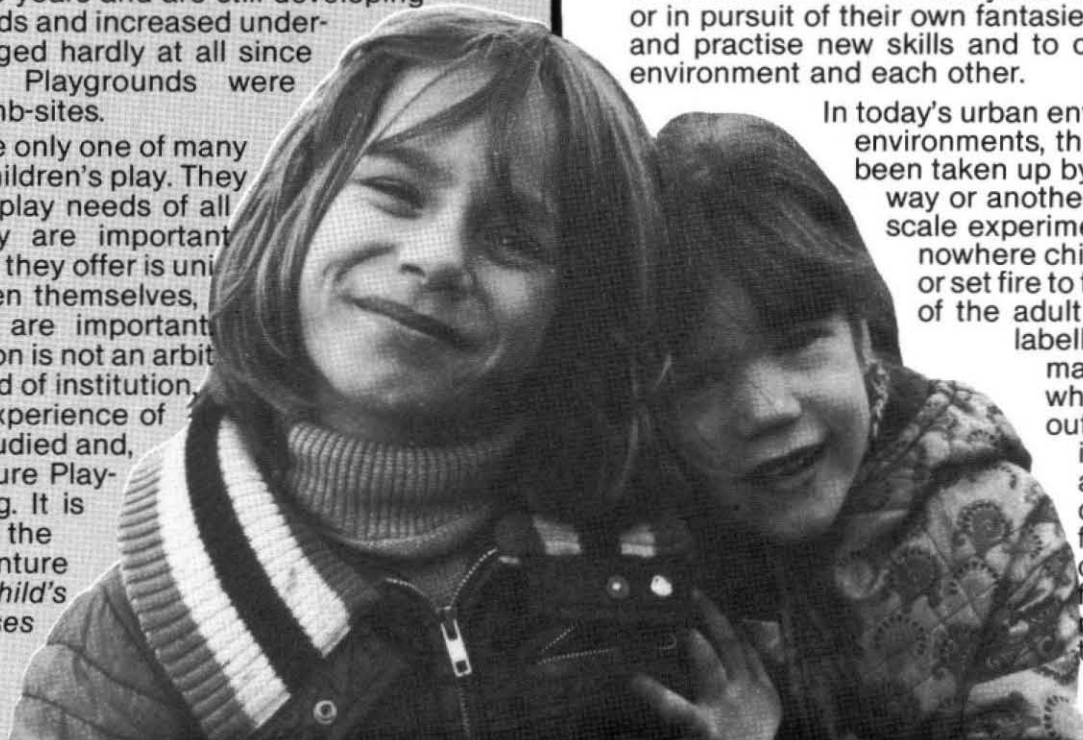
Adventure play

Play is vital to the development of children - to tomorrow's adults - and therefore to the future of society. In their play, children learn about the world, about themselves and about others. A full range of play experience enhances all the inter-related strands of a child's development - physical, intellectual, social and emotional. Although the experience of formal education (schooling) is important for a child's development, the play experience offers opportunities and insights that formal schooling cannot. It is a different kind of experience because, through play, the children are seeking answers to their own questions, realising their own aims, not those set for them by adult society.

Children play because it comes naturally. For them it is fun. It has no long-term aims but is its own reward. Nevertheless it is their right, just as it is the right of every adult in society, to choose freely their leisure and recreational activities. It is therefore the responsibility of adults, who control society, to safeguard the child's right to play, and that means being aware of what children want and need, and providing it.

Among the fundamental play needs of children is the need to explore their world and the basic materials which make it up: not just to explore, but to understand the world and get to grips with it by using these materials themselves. These basic constituents include earth, sand, water, wood, metal, clay, fire, plants and animals. And children need not simply to use these materials, but to use them creatively, to re-shape their environment, either in imitation of the way adults have already shaped **their** environment, or in pursuit of their own fantasies. Children need the chance to develop and practise new skills and to continually test themselves against the environment and each other.

In today's urban environment and, increasingly, also in rural environments, this is just not possible. All the space has been taken up by adults, and has been put to use in one way or another so that there is no room left for small-scale experiment or intervention by children. There is nowhere children can build, or dig, or paint the walls, or set fire to things, without interfering with the needs of the adult world, and thus finding their activities labelled anti-social and themselves, trouble-makers. Often there is not even a space where children can gather socially, to try out themselves and each other in developing social relationships, without causing a nuisance if they do not conform to pre-determined adult norms. There are very few places outside the family where they can relate to, and learn about, adults in a friendly, trusting social context. Perhaps most important of all, there is nowhere that children can call their own.



A bit of history

Adventure Play has probably existed for as long as children have. For a long time, when adult life was simpler than it is now, children could take a part in adult society. Sometimes this must have been good for them, sometimes bad. As adult life became more complex, and attitudes changed, children were gradually squeezed out, but there were still open spaces, nooks and crannies unused by adults, which children could take over for their exploration and adventurous play. During this century, however, modern planning, modern industry and modern agriculture began to take up all the left-over space, and so some planners and builders began to make special provision for children's play. These facilities - traditional playgrounds, playing fields and even play streets - offered a limited range of play activities, and little opportunity for children to explore, experiment or create their own world.

A few adults could see that something was missing. As far as we know, the world's first planned Adventure Playground was started at Emdrup outside Copenhagen in 1943. It was a "junk playground". The idea was that a wide range of materials, surplus to the requirements of the adult world, would be collected on the site. Tools would be provided and the children would be free to use the materials to build, demolish, rebuild, create and destroy as they chose. The playground had a leader, whose main job was to look after the tools and ensure a steady supply of building materials to the site.

Despite war-time shortages even of scrap materials, the playground, and the concept, were an enormous success, largely, it has been reported, due to the skill, enthusiasm and guiding philosophy of its first leader, John Bertelsen.

In 1946, the Adventure Playground at Emdrup was visited by landscape architect Marjorie Allen (better known as Lady Allen of Hurtwood), who returned to England to publicise the concept and to champion the cause of Adventure Playgrounds throughout the UK. In subsequent years there were several short-term experiments making use of some of the numerous bomb-sites, then a feature of so many English cities.

In the early 1950s several more permanent Adventure Playgrounds were established - one in Crawley in 1954; Grimsby and Lollard Street, Lambeth in 1955; Liverpool in 1956; all started entirely by voluntary effort, the last two being supported by the National Playing Fields Association. Gradually the concept took root in Britain, and more Adventure Playgrounds were set up. At first they were generally initiated by determined individuals, but increasingly they came to be distinguished by the close involvement of the local communities that they served. Local Adventure Playground Associations were set up and local management committees were formed.

In the sixties Local Authorities began more

and more to support Adventure Playgrounds. They had proved successful in attracting large numbers of children. In crowded inner-city areas where bored children usually meant trouble, they demonstrably kept even the roughest and toughest children happily engaged in activities which kept them out of mischief. Many Local Authorities offered grant aid to Adventure Playgrounds, and some even took on the management, running and staffing of the playgrounds themselves.

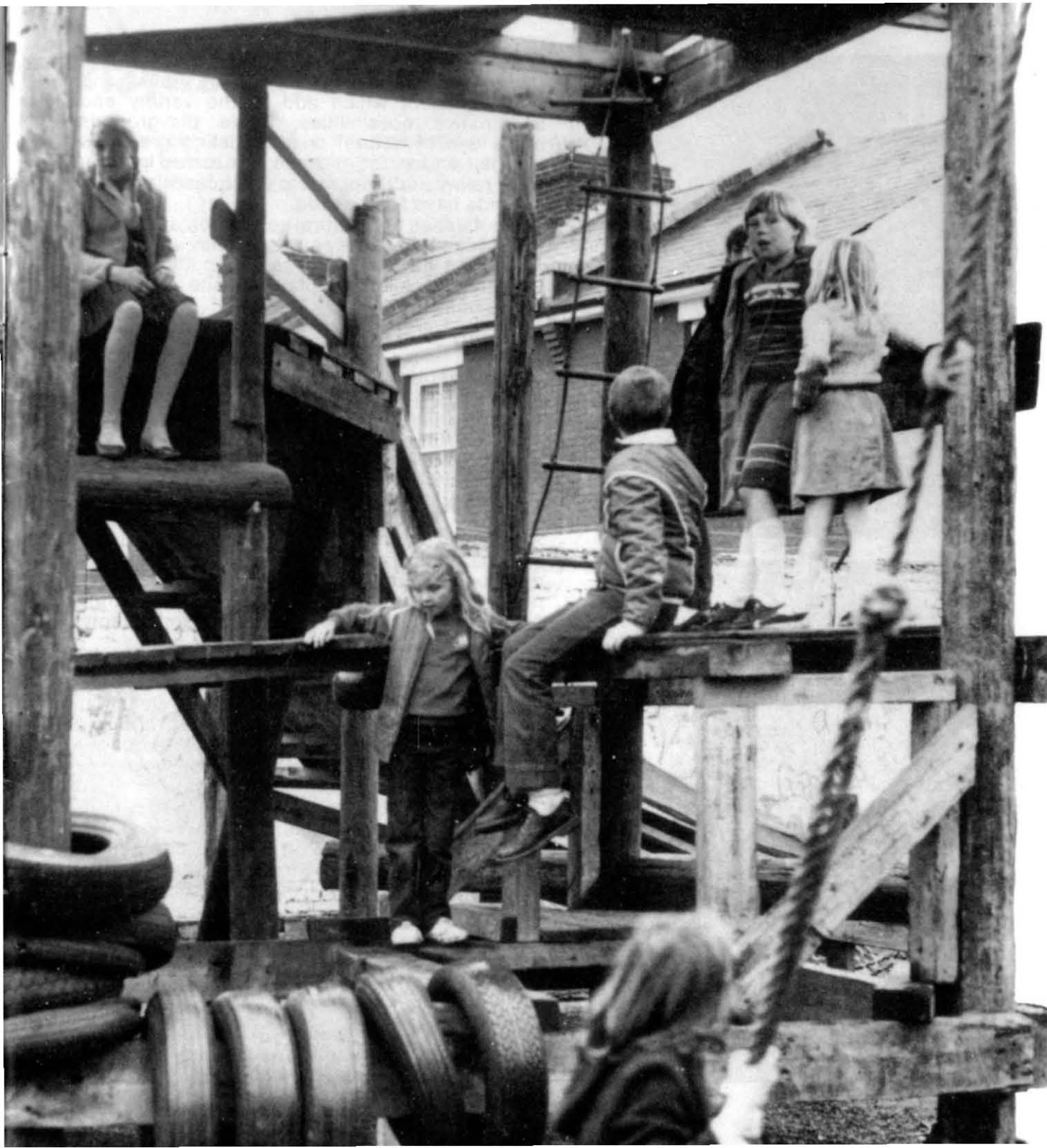
The early British Adventure Playgrounds stayed close to the "junk playground" concept that had been imported from Denmark. The playleaders sought out materials, issued tools and kept a friendly eye on things, but seldom attempted to "lead" the children's play in any way. But soon new dimensions began to be added. As the children's building activities became more ambitious, their initial huts and dens gave way to larger structures. For safety's sake, the playleaders got involved in the building, and huge inter-linked timber play structures proved so popular that eventually they became a distinguishing feature of nearly all Adventure Playgrounds, in some cases totally



superseding the children's small scale building activities and giving rise to a new range of adventurous play activities.

It soon became apparent that only in very rare cases could a single playleader run an Adventure Playground successfully for any length of time, so teams of two, three or more staff became common. To keep the playgrounds going all year round, and during bad weather, the original simple storage huts gave way to more elaborate play-huts, enabling a range of indoor activities - games, arts and crafts and social activities - to take place alongside the adventurous outdoor activities. And so the range of skills required of the playworkers (as they have now become known) increased, as did the ways in which they worked with and guided the children in new and different play experiences.

Adventure Playgrounds today offer such a rich and varied range of possibilities for play that it sometimes seems hard to keep sight of their original intentions. But always at the heart of them is the idea that children need a chance to explore, to test, to create and to build and rebuild their world, and they need to be free to do it in their own way.



The Adventure Playground today

Siting is very important for the success of an Adventure Playground, although those involved seldom have much choice. Often the availability of a piece of unwanted land is the sole determining factor in the choice of site.

However, there are several important considerations in the siting of an Adventure Playground:

Accessibility for children

Children tend to be restricted in the distance they can travel from their homes unaccompanied. The younger the child, the closer to home the chosen play environment will be. A large majority of the users of an Adventure Playground will live within a few hundred metres of its gate. A playground must therefore be sited close to the homes of a large number of children. And of course, it will be less accessible if it is separated from the children's homes by a main road, railway or other hazard.

At the same time, it may be a problem if the playground is closely overlooked by houses or flats. Although neighbours can be helpful in keeping an eye out when the site is closed, they can also be disturbed by the noise and untidiness that any Adventure Playground creates. The playground should therefore be sited so as to minimise the disturbance caused to local residents.

Size of Site

Successful Adventure Playgrounds have been established on sites of greatly varying size. However, a site of less than 0.2 hectares (half an acre) is usually too small, as it does not permit large numbers of children to choose a range of different activities without getting in each other's way. The upper size limit will depend on the nature of the site and the staff available. On a site larger than 0.8 hectares (two acres) it will be difficult for staff to be aware of everything that is going on and to keep the site adequately clean and safe.

Landscaping

Changes of level add an important dimension to many adventurous play activities. On a totally



flat site this is missing, so many Adventure Playgrounds have mounds, slopes, banks and hollows, all of which add to the variety and imaginative possibilities. Some playgrounds make use of natural or pre-existing gradients (one in London, for example, is situated in a dis-used railway cutting), but in most cases artificial mounds have to be made.

Trees, bushes and natural vegetation are a great advantage, where they exist, but they are seldom available, leaving it to the ingenuity of playworkers and children to make the site as interesting as possible.

Fencing

An Adventure Playground needs a proper fence and gates. Adventure Playgrounds exist to provide opportunities for a range of play activities unavailable elsewhere, made safe and practical by the presence on site of skilled playworkers. They are not designed for unsupervised play, so it is important that they can be effectively closed when the staff are not on duty. Any kind of unfenced adventurous play site must be regarded as an unsupervised play area, since children will use it whether or not there are playworkers present. Such sites are not truly Adventure Playgrounds, although confusingly, they are often called by this name.

No wall or fence will keep a determined child out of a playground, but the existence of the fence acts as a deterrent and makes it clear that using the playground outside opening hours is not allowed. It will generally keep out the younger children who would be most at risk if allowed to use the playground unsupervised.

The fence is important as a visual barrier, concealing the site from adults, in whose eyes it may appear dirty and chaotic. It is also a psychological barrier, giving the children a sense of security and a feeling that the space within is their own.

An Adventure Playground fence needs to be at least two metres high. Everything from brick and concrete to split logs, chain-link fencing and even corrugated iron has been used to fence Adventure Playgrounds. The strongest, most secure and most visually attractive fencing is often the most expensive, so the final choice is likely to depend on the finance available.

Playworkers

Playwork is crucial to the concept of Adventure Playgrounds and nothing is more vital to the success of a playground than the number and quality of playworkers. It is a demanding job with a wide range of component tasks:

Supervising the playground during opening hours

Depending on the staff available, the playground should aim to be open every day after school, all day at week-ends, and during school holidays. During the whole of this time at least two playworkers must be on the site. Obviously the playground cannot function unsupervised, and many years of experience have shown that in general single-staffing increases the risk of accidents to both playworkers and children and places an unacceptable amount of stress on the worker.

While it is sometimes felt to be expedient in the short-term, it damages the playground's prospects of long-term success and stability.

The playworkers have to be constantly vigilant, but must not interfere unduly with the children's activities. They will have to enforce the rules (always kept to an absolute minimum) which have been agreed to ensure safety and equity amongst the children. And simply by their continuous presence they give the children, especially the younger ones, a vital feeling of belonging and security.



Keeping the playground supplied with materials

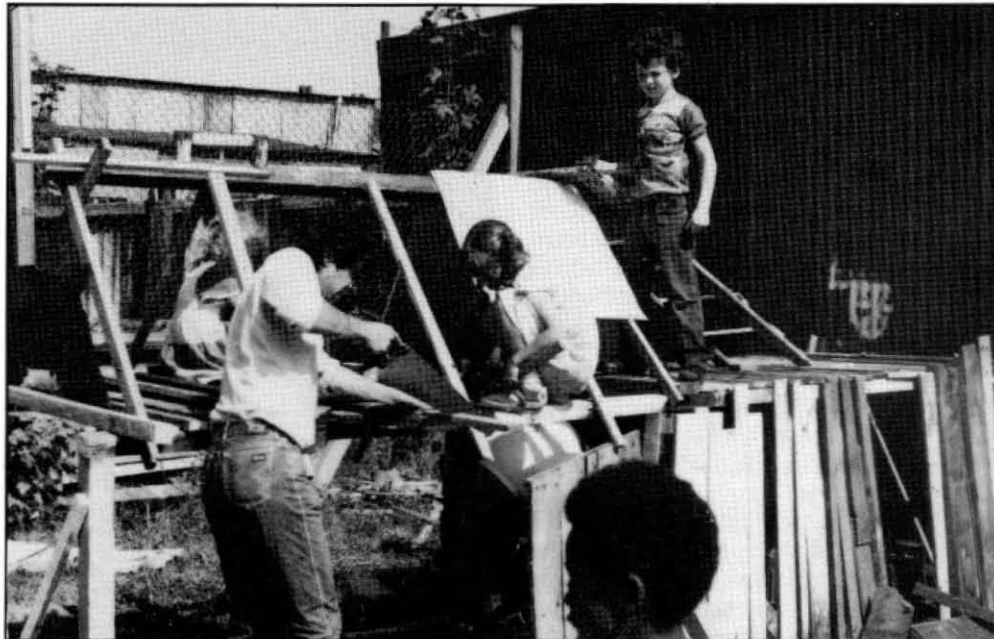
Junk materials are still fundamental to most Adventure Playgrounds - especially timber suitable for building by both playworkers and children. A great deal of work is involved in locating, transporting and sorting materials, and maintaining an adequate supply. Tools and ironmongery will also be needed, as well as a whole range of supplies for games, arts, crafts and whatever other activities are taking place on the playground.

Improvisation and imagination have always been a feature of Adventure Playgrounds, and use can be made of all kinds of scrap materials and improvised equipment

(this is often necessary anyway, because of a limited budget). The playworker therefore needs a wide range of links with the local community in order to keep the playground supplied.

Maintenance

Unlike most institutions, an Adventure Playground doesn't usually have cleaners, janitors or maintenance staff. All these jobs are the responsibility of the playworkers and all must be tackled regularly and diligently to ensure a reasonable standard of safety and hygiene, and to demonstrate to the local community that the playground is a suitable environment for their children, with responsible and caring staff.



Usually the playworkers will consider it important to encourage the children to get involved in looking after their playground.

Administration and Record Keeping

No matter how efficient the management structure is (and many are sadly inadequate in this respect) a well-run Adventure Playground will depend on the playworkers doing a certain amount of paperwork such as safety check lists, recording accidents, petty cash expenditure and ordering materials. Often more complete records are kept, including attendance figures, logs of activities, timesheets, etc.

Planning

Besides the continuing activities that are the basis of the playground, many playgrounds organise programmes of special activities, outings and events, particularly during holiday periods. All of these require forward planning and organising work.

Activities with the children

As well as all this playworkers get involved in activities with groups of children; for example, leading games or story-telling sessions, introducing new ideas and techniques for craft-work, helping (when asked) with more ambitious construction schemes, or supervising bonfires and cooking sessions. The range is endless and will obviously be influenced by the skills of individual workers. A good Adventure Playground team will

include a balanced range of different skills to open up more possibilities for the children.

Work with Adults

To run an Adventure Playground successfully the playworkers have to be able to work with a wide range of adults as well as with children. In a community-run Adventure Playground the worker has to put considerable effort into developing and supporting a local management committee to gain support from them in return. Playground staff need to create a good relationship with the community in general and with parents in particular as the playground can only thrive with their active support. There will often be volunteers available to help with the work and they will make a more worthwhile contribution to the playground if the full-time play-workers can offer guidance and support their efforts. The Adventure Playground worker will come into contact with a variety of other professionals - youth workers, social workers, community workers, teachers, probation officers etc. By tactful liaison with other agencies a playworker can help children to solve many problems to which the Adventure Playground itself cannot provide an answer. Playworkers can also develop their own skills and understanding through in-service training and working in groups with other playworkers.

... and more.

The above are just some of the essential elements of an Adventure



Playground worker's job. But playgrounds differ greatly in the range of activities that are available, and thus most playworkers acquire additional skills and undertake other responsibilities besides. They invariably work unsocial hours (since they have to be available when the children need them) and the job is nearly always under-valued and underpaid. However, it is the presence of the Adventure Playground worker more than any other factor which enables Adventure Playgrounds to make their unique and invaluable contribution to the development of children through play.



What goes on . . . the traditional activities

From the beginning Adventure Playgrounds have aimed to give children a chance to build and re-shape their environment. Amongst the most important activities on Adventure Playgrounds are building and digging and learning to manipulate and control fire and water. Because of the increasing range of activities to be found on Adventure Playgrounds, these four do not predominate to the extent that they used to. They remain, nevertheless, fundamental to the Adventure Playground philosophy.

Building

Children need no encouragement to build themselves camps, dens, forts and tree-houses. The more suitable and plentiful are the tools and materials they can use, the more rewarding their effort will be. This is a prime example of an activity that, for most children, would not be possible at all were it not for the Adventure Playground. Scrap timber is required in large quantities and of course the playworkers have to ensure it is free from protruding nails and safe to use. The workers have to issue supplies of nails and tools, and show the children the correct way to use and look after these. Children generally co-operate and work in groups on a building project, and often whole villages are created. Besides using tools, they learn how to plan, design and share responsibility. A building project can be scaled to suit the abilities of the children involved, and once built, a den or play-house can be continually improved and decorated until it is decided to demolish it altogether and build an even better one.

Building by children must not be confused with the construction of play structures. To ensure safety, the design and building of these structures must be controlled by experienced adults, although the involvement of children is very important. They need to be consulted at the design stage and given suitable opportunities to help; otherwise it is very easy for their playground, like the rest of their environment, to be taken over by adult ideas.

Digging

As with building, many children seem to have a natural desire to dig holes and tunnels, and an Adventure Playground is often the only place where they can do this. Once again the playworker must provide suitable tools and show how they can be used safely. The playworker will be aware of other potential dangers and will insist on the shoring up of deep holes and the filling in of abandoned excavations. On some sites this activity may even become an introduction to archaeology!

Fire

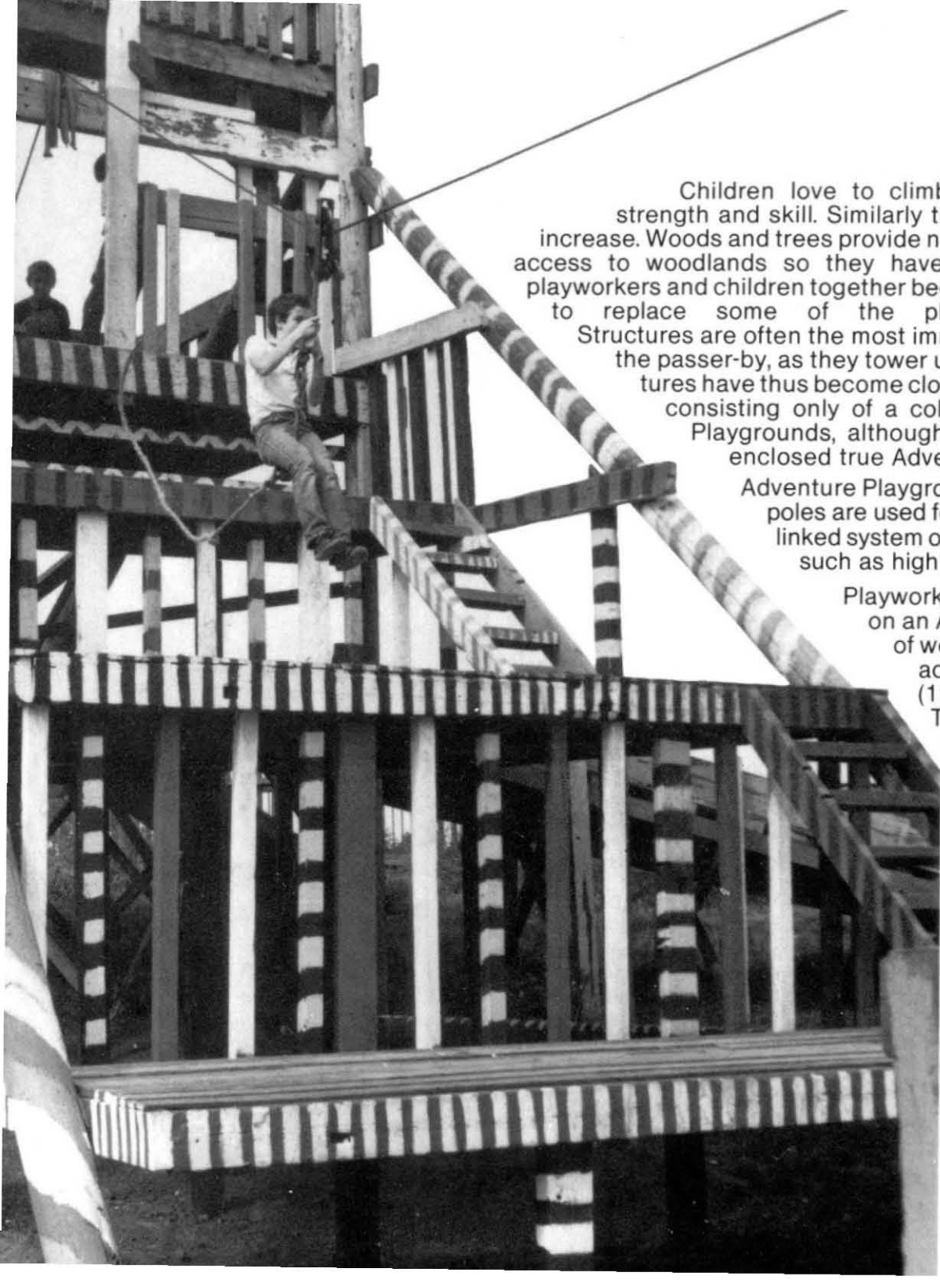
Children tend to be fascinated by fire, but now that open fires are less common in homes they rarely get a chance to learn to understand and respect fire at first hand. Fires have many uses: for cooking on, for keeping warm on a cold day, or as a focal point to gather round and talk. However, indiscriminate fire-lighting on an Adventure Playground would be very dangerous. The playworkers have to supervise the building and lighting of all fires, explain basic safety rules (and enforce them), but at the same time allow the full involvement of the children.

Water

Water is another basic material that children want to explore and experiment with. Few Adventure Playgrounds can provide rivers, lakes or ponds, but many use improvised paddling pools, buckets and hose-pipes, especially in the summer, for water-play. Water may be combined with sand to provide a further range of activities, particularly for younger children. Many playgrounds include water-based activities in programmes of off-site activities as well.



Adventure Playground structures



Children love to climb, and will climb up anything that presents a challenge to their strength and skill. Similarly they love to swing and slide, going further and faster as their abilities increase. Woods and trees provide natural climbing opportunities for some children, but for many there is no access to woodlands so they have to seek out alternatives. As Adventure Playgrounds developed, playworkers and children together began to build large climbing structures, swings, slides and aerial runways to replace some of the play opportunities denied to them by urban development. Structures are often the most immediately noticeable aspect of an Adventure Playground, especially to the passer-by, as they tower up to thirty feet into the air, visible above even the highest fence. Structures have thus become closely identified with Adventure Playgrounds, to the extent that play areas consisting only of a collection of large play structures are often referred to as Adventure Playgrounds, although they have little else in common with the permanently staffed and enclosed true Adventure Playgrounds discussed here.

Adventure Playground structures are normally made from second-hand timber. Telegraph poles are used for the main uprights and heavy joists are bolted to these to form an inter-linked system of towers, platforms and catwalks, typically including several specific items such as high rope swings, aerial runways, climbing nets and slides.

Playworkers are morally and legally responsible for the safety of children playing on an Adventure Playground. Moreover, an Adventure Playground, as a place of work which is also open to the public (i.e. the children), must be operated according to the provisions of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (1974).

This means that high standards of design and construction have to be used in the building of Adventure Playground structures. Extra care must be taken in selecting and using second-hand timber and in making secure fixings and fastenings. Because of this, structure building will be a totally adult-controlled activity with children joining in only as helpers under the guidance of the playworkers. It also means that if playworkers choose to build structures they must learn the necessary skills and techniques, and they must devote a great deal of time and effort to doing the job properly.

Many playworkers believe this effort is worthwhile because of the play opportunities a well-designed set of structures can provide. They can offer a series of challenges to the child's developing strength, co-ordination and agility. Children are generally aware of their own level of physical ability and will only tackle things they can cope with safely. Therefore, provided the structures are properly designed and built, they will stretch and encourage children without putting them in unnecessary danger. They can also provide the setting for a whole range of games, both physical and imaginative.



The playground building

The early Adventure Playgrounds had only a simple storage shed for tools and equipment. All activities were out-of-doors. This meant that during bad weather or in the winter when it got dark early the playground was of little use. Shelters of every conceivable kind have been built on Adventure Playgrounds, often by children with or without the guidance of the playworkers. Buildings have even been improvised from old goods wagons, barges and container lorries.

Although many home-made or improvised shelters are still in use on Adventure Playgrounds it is probably now more common for them to have a purpose-built building. Depending on the funds available, these vary in size from simple one-roomed play-huts to large complexes serving as multi-purpose youth centres. They also vary in appearance and method of construction; brick, stone, concrete and timber buildings all being used successfully. They vary correspondingly in the flexibility with which they can accommodate children's play.

An Adventure Playground building generally contains the following:

storage space, toilets, one or more rooms for activities, often a rudimentary kitchen and a playworkers' office. Many have just one large activities room but some have two or more, usually designed specifically for different types of activities.

The availability of indoor facilities increases the range of activities found on Adventure Playgrounds. Many offer a range of arts and crafts, depending largely on the number of staff and their abilities. Some stick to basics such as painting and clay modelling, while others take on more ambitious projects like screen-printing or enamelling. (Of course, during fine weather these activities can take place outside as well as inside the building). Playground buildings are used for games - table-tennis is usually popular and various board games are common. Not least they are used by the children as a social centre where they can meet and talk in a relaxed atmosphere, free from many of the pressures of the adult-dominated world outside the playground. In wet weather the whole of the playground seems to move into the building, so it has to be designed to stand a lot of wear and tear.





Animals

On many Adventure Playgrounds animals are kept, looked after by the children for whom this is yet another experience that may not be available elsewhere. Many playgrounds keep rabbits, guinea-pigs and the like, but some have developed virtual city-farms including donkeys, goats and chickens. Of course this can only be attempted where the staff know the children will treat the animals with care and respect. Where a lot of animals are kept, workers and children must be willing to take on a great deal of extra work to look after them properly. Keeping animals can be valuable for children, not just for what they learn about the animals, but because of the caring and committed approach to the job that it can help to develop.

Gardens

Yet another important experience of which many urban children are deprived is that of gardening – planting seeds, tending them, watching them grow, eventually producing food from the soil (as opposed to the supermarket). In many cases it is an experience that Adventure Playgrounds can provide. Unlike many of the children's natural activities, however, gardening requires enormous patience, and playworkers will need to work closely with the children, encouraging them to respect the garden and to tend it patiently while things are growing. Gardening is much easier where there is room to set aside a garden patch well out of the way, and it is often more successful on an established playground where there already exists a good relationship between the children, the workers and the playground itself.

The role of fantasy and imagination

Much of the play of younger children is deeply rooted in the world of fantasy and make-believe, and this play is a very important part of growing up.

The atmosphere of an Adventure Playground should encourage this. It is their own place where they can create a fantasy world without interference from adults. The environment can also stimulate the imagination: simple wooden dens can become castles, hideouts or forest encampments; structures can be ramparts or tall ships. Playworkers can encourage imaginative play by providing materials for dressing up, masks or face-paint, or just by telling stories and suggesting new ideas. If possible, playworkers will try to ensure that the imaginative play of younger children is not precluded by the different needs of older and more assertive children using the site.



The Adventure Playground community

An Adventure Playground is not just a play area, nor is it merely the sum of the various activities that go on there. As much as anything its value lies in the fact that it is a social entity - a community of children within the larger community. It has this role because it is usually the only place that children can regard as their own. Unlike most other recreational facilities, it is always available during the hours when children need it, costs nothing, and therefore becomes a natural meeting place and social centre for children in its neighbourhood. Thus, as it becomes established, an Adventure Playground develops the unique atmosphere of a genuine small-scale community.

One of the most important activities on all Adventure Playgrounds, often neglected by the unaware adult, is the continual social intercourse involving both children and playworkers - meeting people, talking, getting to know one another, arguing, making friends or just passing the time, but always discovering more about the society of which they are all part. Here the playworkers have a particularly important role, as friendly, accessible and sympathetic adults.





Holiday Playschemes

Children need play facilities more than ever during school holidays, so many Adventure Playgrounds take on extra staff and plan detailed programmes of activities for holiday periods. Playgrounds open for longer hours, and the extra staff permit a wider range of organised activities. There also will be more special events and outings.

Other activities

An Adventure Playground is a children's place and should be able to respond to what the children want to do though the range of activities is determined to some extent by the skills and interests of the staff. It would therefore be impossible to provide a complete list of what goes on in Adventure Playgrounds as it varies so much from place to place. Besides the activities already mentioned you may find one or more of the following:

Sports and games: Both traditional team games and newer non-competitive games. Sometimes inter-playground events are organised.

Special events: Discos, barbecues, bonfire nights, fetes and fund-raising events, parties, theatrical events both by children and by visiting theatre groups.

Outings: To the seaside, swimming pool, countryside, places of interest, parks, zoos, rambles, hikes and camping trips.

The many and varied activities described so far demonstrate why it is no longer possible to define an Adventure Playground in terms of a particular type or range of play activities. The modern Adventure Playground should be seen as an unlimited range of possible play experiences, flexible and responsive to the children who use it, but also reliable and secure.



Adventure Playgrounds for all children

Girls on playgrounds

Girls are often encouraged to choose gentle or domestic pastimes and, even more than boys, have limited opportunities for exploring, building and adventurous physical play. Because of their focus on these types of activity, Adventure Playgrounds have been dominated by boys. However, with sensitive leadership, an Adventure Playground can become a place where girls can join in all activities on equal terms, learning to build and use tools, and being free to climb, swing and tunnel if they choose, without the fear of being condemned as unfeminine. With the commitment of the playworkers, an Adventure Playground can provide an all-too-rare experience of sexual equality, with enormous benefits to children of both sexes.

Racial minorities

A significant proportion of Adventure Playgrounds are in multi-racial areas and must strive to provide play opportunities for the children of all races. In fact they often go further than this, and through play they help children to develop a better awareness and understanding of each other's cultures. This can be done, for example, in the choice of games from different cultures, in cooking, in story telling, in the celebration of community festivals and so on. In the relaxed and tolerant atmosphere of an Adventure Playground, playworkers can carefully offer new ideas to counteract the racial prejudice so often passed on to children by their elders.

An Adventure Playground can help to bring adults from different cultures together through a common interest in the provision of play for their children.

The age range

Most Adventure Playgrounds try to avoid rigid age limits and because of the range of play they offer, they attract both toddlers and teenagers and all ages in between. It is generally considered that they are intended for children roughly of school age (i.e. five to sixteen), but many users are either above or below this range. Integrating the play of different age groups on an over-crowded site can be a challenge for playworkers. Older children and teenagers are generally more assertive and can demand all the staff's attention, or monopolise swings, table-tennis tables and other equipment. The playworker must insist that they learn to respect the equal rights of younger children on the playground.

On the other hand, the problems of teenagers are acute, for they can outgrow an Adventure Playground but at the same time find difficulty in



being accepted into adult society, finding a job and so on. An Adventure Playground is often the only place available to them as a meeting place and as a haven from a seemingly uncompromising adult world. Although they have different approaches to working with youth, this is an area that few playground workers can ignore. Their understanding and support can be really important to the young people who come to their playgrounds.

The Adventure Playground in the smaller community

Most Adventure Playgrounds are in cities. This is because they are most cost effective where there is a high density of child population in the neighbourhood, and because the inner-urban environment is often considered to be particularly hostile towards the development of children.

However, it is increasingly being realised that the suburban, small town or rural environment is also adult-oriented and fails to provide for the play needs of children. There is no longer any free space for children to use, but more than this, play requires not just space, but a constant supply of new ideas and both mental and physical stimuli.

New towns in particular need to pay special attention to the play needs of children, for they frequently place large populations of children on featureless new estates. Even if these estates are surrounded by open countryside, modern farming methods require that children are prevented from using this space. In many cases, then, there is a clear need for Adventure Playgrounds outside inner-city areas, to provide a space for children to regard as their own, and, more importantly, to provide through playleadership the ideas and stimulation still lacking in the environment.

Adventure Playgrounds for children with handicaps

Children with handicaps have the same play needs as the all other children but for them it is even more difficult to find opportunities for adventurous and creative play. The Adventure Playground formula has been adapted with great success to make it accessible to children with physical and/or mental handicaps. Some Adventure Playgrounds are used by children with or without handicaps at different times, while others have been successfully integrated. There is a growing movement to provide Adventure Playgrounds specifically for children with special needs. Although much of the equipment has to be specially adapted, these are true Adventure Playgrounds in every sense, having full-time staff and offering a complete range of adventurous, stimulating and creative activities.



Sharing responsibility

Many playworkers consider it important the children themselves should share the responsibility for the development of their playground, and this happens in various ways. All Adventure Playground workers consult the children about their plans and listen to their suggestions, but in many cases they also give children more formal responsibility by holding meetings to discuss the affairs of the playground. Sometimes they arrange the election of a children's committee, which can make various decisions, for example about what rules should be enforced, how tools should be shared out and so on. This children's committee should have a regular opportunity to present the views and opinions of the users to the playground's adult management. The giving of responsibility in this way teaches children to take and use the responsibility offered, to understand democratic decision-making, and for the first time, to control aspects of their own lives.



Making the most of Adventure Playground facilities

When the children are at school the playground need not be empty, for many ways have been found of sharing Adventure Playground facilities with other groups, to maximise the benefit to the community. Some have pre-school playgroups or mother-and-toddler groups using their facilities during the day. Others have co-operated with schools to provide alternative education for groups of children having difficulties at school. Some playgrounds can be adapted for use by children with handicaps, and yet others share their buildings with pensioners' groups, community associations and other adult organisations. Although co-ordinating these activities means still more work for the playground staff, they make the Adventure Playground a real resource for the community, needed and valued by adults and children alike.

The management and financing of Adventure Playgrounds

An Adventure Playground needs a regular guaranteed income which must, almost inevitably, come from public funds. Local fundraising can be a great help with running-costs, but only a Local Authority can come up with the money required to employ full-time staff and ensure an adequately resourced playground. Adventure Playgrounds may be managed by a Local Authority, by an independent voluntary organisation, or by some form of partnership between the two. In some areas Adventure Playgrounds are managed by Local Authority officers, in much the same way as

parks or swimming pools are managed. This system can be very efficient, and with sensitive administration can create excellent playgrounds. However, they remain a Local Authority service, staffed by servants of the authority, and are controlled by the council, rather than directly by the community they serve.

Voluntary management takes various forms. In some places a large voluntary agency will receive a grant to run several Adventure Playgrounds on behalf of a Local Authority. More often, playgrounds are established and

run by local management committees receiving grant aid directly from the Local Authority. The make-up of playground committees varies: some consist entirely of local parents, while others include various professional people. Their efficiency as managers (and employers) also varies, and some require considerable support both from their playworkers and from outside to do the job properly. Besides managing the playground, the committee can help to locate sources of materials in the neighbourhood, it can raise extra funds, provide a link with the

wider local community, and its members are often actively involved with the work of the playground itself.

The advantage of local community-based management is that the playground is run by the community it serves, and by the parents of the children who use it. Local control of Adventure Playgrounds ensures that they are responsive to local needs and conditions, but more than this, running its own facilities can enrich the community in general and help to develop its own hidden resources.

Unsupervised adventurous play areas

It has already been stressed that a true Adventure Playground is fenced in and supervised by full-time playworkers whenever it is in use. Some mention should also be made of the numerous unfenced and unsupervised play areas which contain Adventure Playground-type play structures. These are commonly located in parks and other centres of recreation, and are confusingly referred to as Adventure Playgrounds. They should be given an alternative name such as "Adventurous Play Areas" to avoid this confusion.

Play areas of this type are sometimes thoughtfully and imaginatively designed, and these can provide an exciting play experience, at least for short periods. However, without leadership they can only offer climbing and physical play, which are just a small part of the range of play activities available on a true Adventure Playground. For example, there can be no building, digging or creative play without staff to provide materials and look after tools and equipment.

Different criteria must apply to the design of structures and equipment for these play areas, as without constant supervision they are at risk from vandalism and abuse, and are unlikely to receive the daily safety checking that is required on Adventure Playgrounds. Items involving ropes or nets, for example, will

rarely be safe on an unsupervised play area.

If the funds available for a particular project will not provide a properly staffed Adventure Playground, a less ambitious play-leadership scheme will be more valuable to the children than this type of adventurous play area without leadership.



The child and the community

Adventure Playgrounds can be seen as a space for children set aside and protected from the adult world. Alternatively they can be seen as places to keep children out of trouble and out of the way of adults.

But perhaps we should be concerned that children cannot be properly integrated into society and can only play freely in a special preserve behind a high fence. It has been suggested that our priority should not be the building of playgrounds, but the re-designing of the environment as a whole, and indeed the restructuring of society so that the needs of children are recognised and provided for in every aspect of community life. Such changes would be more than welcome, but nevertheless the importance of this challenge should not be allowed to obscure the continuing relevance of Adventure Playgrounds. Even in some future society which accepts and values its children, the children will want special places for themselves where they can pursue their own interests. They will need the stimulation and support of skilled and sensitive playworkers.

Adventure Playgrounds have changed and developed throughout their history, both in response to the needs of successive generations of children, and under the influence of external factors, such as the availability of resources and changes in Government policy and legislation. They will probably continue to change. They will also probably continue to differ one from another, as they always have done. What is unlikely to change is the unique contribution Adventure Playgrounds can make to the development of children through play.



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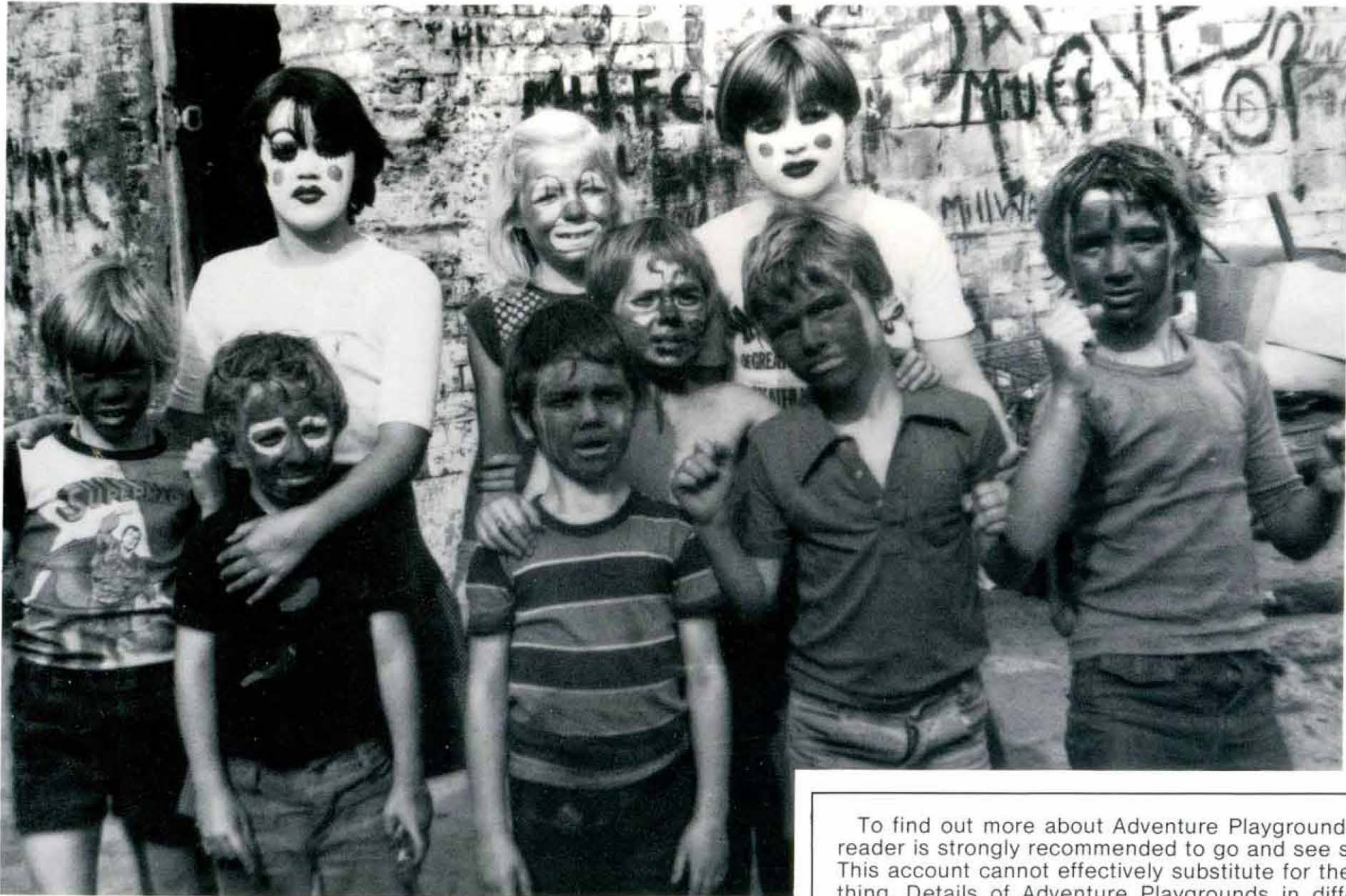
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To find out more about Adventure Playgrounds the reader is strongly recommended to go and see some. This account cannot effectively substitute for the real thing. Details of Adventure Playgrounds in different parts of the country, may be obtained from the Association for Children's Play & Recreation Ltd., Britannia House, 50 Gt. Charles Street, Queensway, Birmingham.

