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The Child's Right to Play

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USA



*American Association for
the Child's Right to Play*

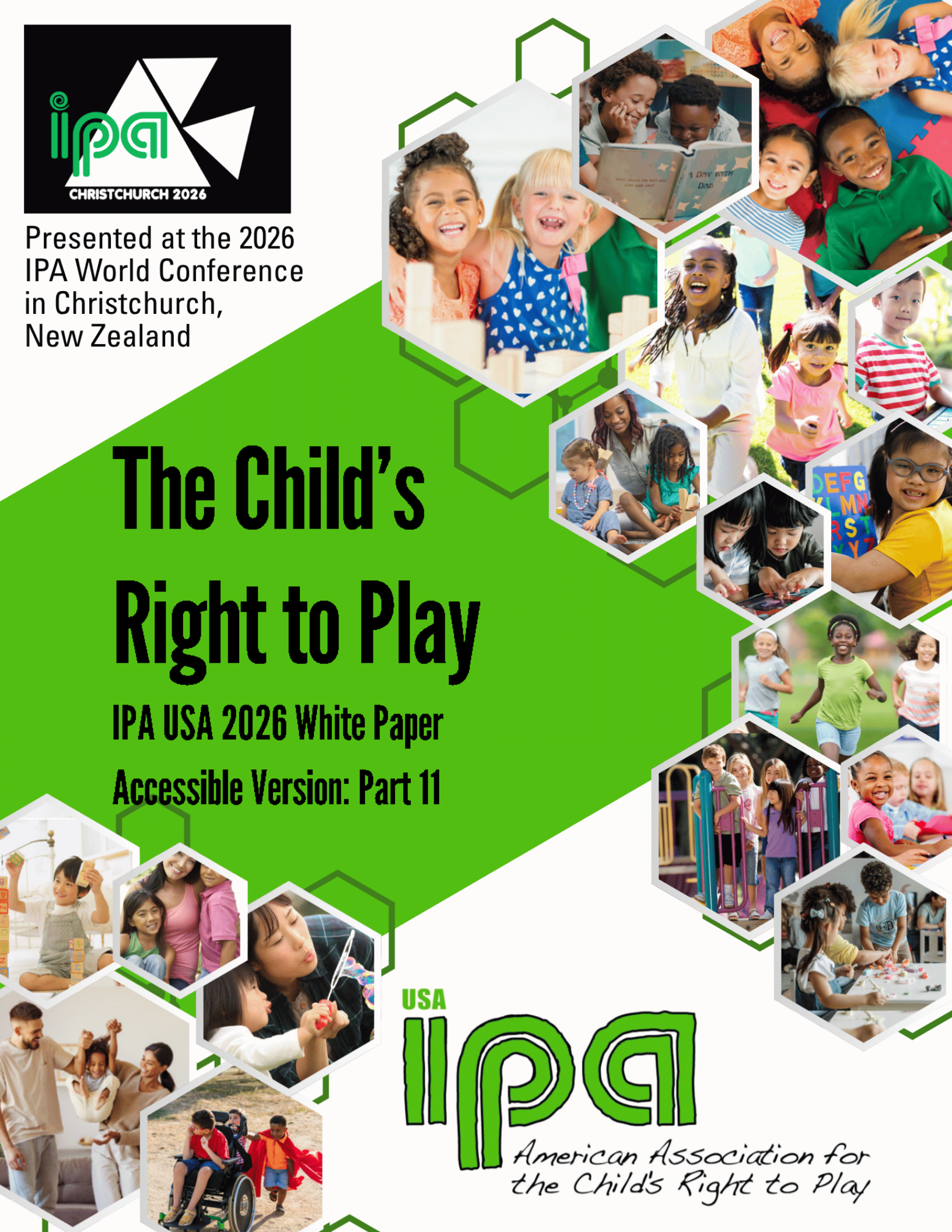


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Executive Summaries

Executive Summaries are organized by category, followed by author.



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Playwork

Play is a fundamental human need, but meaningful opportunities for child-directed play are increasingly under threat. As children's freedom, time, space, and access to play continue to diminish, the role of Playwork has never been more important. Rooted in the belief that children are experts in their own play, Playwork seeks to create and protect environments where children can freely choose, direct, and determine their play experiences.

The articles in this category introduce readers to the growing Playwork movement and examine the challenges posed by our modern play deficit. They explore why Playwork matters, how it supports children's healthy development and well-being, and what actions are needed to expand Playwork practices and advocacy efforts within communities. These authors offer a compelling vision for restoring play to its rightful place in children's lives, along with insights, strategies, and calls to action that can help readers become champions for child-led play. Through their collective work, they remind us that protecting play requires both individual commitment and systemic change.

Authors

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 1: Our National *Play Deficit*

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker
and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker
and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 1: Our National *Play Deficit*

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker
and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Introduction

The last few decades have brought substantial changes to how children in the United States experience childhood. A combination of factors has restricted and reduced childhood autonomy and agency. These include, but are not limited to, changes in parenting and caregiving practices (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019), decreases in the availability, accessibility, and usability of public and private spaces, and various legal and social policies (Gray et al., 2023; Lareau, 2011). As children have experienced this reduction of independence, their ability to play freely without adult interference has suffered dramatically. Though ostensibly well-meaning, adult expectations for children and ways of being with children have inadvertently limited children's ability to experience the truest sensation of being and presence: self-directed free play. Consequently, children in the United States are experiencing and being shaped by a socially and emotionally debilitating deficit of free play (Gray et al., 2023).

This paper, the first of two, examines the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that have contributed to our national play deficit. The authors consider how restrictions on children's freedom, time, and space; assumptions about play within adult society; and unequal access to play shape children's opportunities for self-directed play. The authors also examine emerging efforts to respond to these conditions and the need for a broader, more connected response.

Conclusion

Our national play deficit is not the result of a single policy, institution, or sociocultural moment. Our deficit has grown through the subtle accumulation of forces that narrow children's freedom, time, and space for unrestricted, self-directed free play. These forces are shaped by implicit assumptions adults hold about the nature of childhood and the purpose and value of play itself. Pervasive social inequities further shape how communities experience the play deficit. Our play deficit is therefore best

understood as a broad feature of contemporary childhood, produced and sustained through the systems and relationships that organize children's daily lives.

Recommendation

The work already underway across childhood settings and play-friendly spaces shows a desire for change and the capacity to make it happen. However, these efforts remain largely dispersed and disconnected. A meaningful response to our play deficit must mature into a holistic, unified, and unifying response. The task before us requires greater connection among those already working to protect and provide for children's autonomy, agency, and free play. Such connection can begin to create a shared language, relationships, and collective power needed to address the national scope of the play deficit.

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us.

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker
and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Introduction

This paper, the second of two, builds on the examination of our national play deficit as presented in *Cultivating a Playwork Movement, Part 1: Our National Play Deficit*. In the first paper, the authors considered how the subtle accumulation of socio-cultural forces has narrowed children's freedom, time, and space for unrestricted, self-directed free play, and how the play deficit is experienced unevenly across communities. The paper concludes that our national play deficit is best understood as a collective, structural problem, and calls for a more robust and connected response among those already working to protect and provide for children's autonomy, agency, and free play.

Playwork, a professional practice and ethical framework for being and working with children (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005), provides a needed and curative response to our national play deficit. *Playwork* provides adults with a moral and ethical framework in building their relationships with children, as well as intellectual and practical tools to create opportunities and hold spaces for children's free play (Brown, 2015; Brown et al., 2019; Hughes, 2012). This second paper, *Cultivating a Playwork Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us*, examines the history and practice of *Playwork*, considers strategies for developing a sustainable *Playwork* presence in the United States, and explains how *Playwork* can help adult society begin to repay its debt to children.

Conclusion

The national *play deficit* is multi-layered and complex. *Playwork* is a comprehensive response to that complexity. *Playwork* addresses the layers of adult society, institutions, and communities that contribute to the deficit. This paper has provided a practical, integrated framework through the credentialing continuum, the consortium model, and daylighting *Playwork*. The framework is not reliant on a single

institution or organization, nor does it depend on an individual champion. The framework is designed to grow with communities.

This paper holds another ambition: to draw the reader towards *Playwork*. Perhaps the reader's next encounter with *Playwork*, be it a conversation, conference, or community event, will feel more recognizable and more urgent because of this paper. *Playwork* is not a distant or exclusively international practice, nor is it limited to niche playgrounds that promote risky adventures. *Playwork* is portable. It is transferable and ready to meet children wherever they are.

Children are living the *play deficit* today, and adult society's debt to children and their play is real. The strategies outlined in this paper are a starting point for developing a *Playwork* movement that works simultaneously through top-down and bottom-up approaches. A *Playwork* movement starts with people already present and committed in children's lives, alongside those who prepare and support future generations of practitioners. This paper and its authors are offering an opening gesture, a challenge, and an invitation to a conversation that does not yet have a home in the United States.

Recommendation

The strategies proposed here operate together as a framework that requires a collection of individuals from multiple locations within the play studies, play-advocacy, and play-adjacent communities. The next step is to convene a National *Playwork* Summit and Working Group to address what Law's (2021) research identifies as an unmet and essential condition for a *Playwork* movement to develop in the United States. The summit should include those already working at the intersection of play, children, and professional practices across the United States. Those most obviously in need of attendance are *Playworkers* currently practicing in the United States. Play scholars and advocates, as well as academic faculty and administration, and various organizational leaders must also attend and reflect the geographic, cultural, and community diversity of the United States.

The National *Playwork* Summit is not a ceremonial gathering, but a working assembly with ambition. The summit should produce an organized body aligned by a mission, vision, and a national *Playwork* agenda. Dedicated individuals and groups

should leave the summit charged with deliverables aligned to each strategy outlined in this paper, including a set of translated *Playwork Principles* for the US context. This is not a replacement for the existing Principles but a contextually adapted interpretation that honors their origins while reflecting the social, cultural, and historical conditions of the US. Ideally, the summit would generate benchmarks for professional *Playwork* training and education to guide various actors/points along the credentialing continuum.

Who Should Be Present

The summit should include a broad and diverse representation of the play ecosystem, including:

- *Playworkers* currently working in the United States.
- Scholars from fields such as play studies, childhood studies, education, recreation, public health, and social work.
- Leaders of organizations that provide play opportunities for children and youth.
- Representatives from anchor institutions such as parks and recreation departments, schools, museums, libraries, and community-based organizations.
- Advocates for children's rights, disability inclusion, and equitable access to play.
- Professionals working in adjacent fields whose work intersects with play, including landscape architects, city and rural planners, youth workers, educators, and public health practitioners.
- Community leaders, students, and early-career practitioners who represent the future of the field.
- Teachers/educators, early childhood educators, and care providers currently working with children.

As a closing gesture, the reader who has engaged with this paper is precisely the individual the National *Playwork* Summit needs. The *Playwork* conversation has yet to find a home in the United States. This recommendation invites you to help build one.

White Papers



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Playwork

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 1: Our National *Play Deficit*

Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us



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Cultivating a *Playwork* Movement, Part 1: Our National *Play Deficit*

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Introduction

The last few decades have seen a substantial change in how children in the United States experience childhood. A combination of factors has restricted and reduced childhood autonomy and agency. These include, but are not limited to, changes in parenting and caregiving practices (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019), decreases in the availability, accessibility, and usability of public and private spaces, and various legal and social policies (Gray et al., 2023; Lareau, 2011). As children have experienced this reduction of independence, their ability to play freely without adult interference has suffered dramatically. Though ostensibly well-meaning, adult expectations for children and ways of being with children have inadvertently limited children's ability to experience the truest sensation of being and presence: self-directed free play. Consequently, children in the United States are experiencing and being shaped by a socially and emotionally debilitating deficit of free play (Gray et al., 2023).

This paper, the first of two, examines the social, cultural, and institutional conditions that have contributed to our national play deficit. The authors consider how restrictions on children's freedom, time, and space, along with assumptions about play within adult society and unequal access to play shape children's opportunities for self-directed play. The authors also examine emerging efforts to respond to these conditions and consider how those efforts might be identified and connected as the beginning of a broader, more holistic response.

Problem Statement

The Contemporary *Play Deficit*

A growing body of multidisciplinary research highlights a visible, decades-long shift in U.S. childhood, characterized by a significant decline in opportunities for free, self-directed play. Where previous generations enjoyed independent neighborhood

roaming, children's movements today are heavily restricted and closely managed by adults.

Unsupervised free time has steadily been replaced by rigorously scheduled, adult-supervised activities (Gray et al., 2023; Lareau, 2011). Consequently, children are often hyper-monitored, both figuratively and literally (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2019; Gray et al., 2023; Lareau, 2011). Spaces and activities that allow for play are most often designed by adults with safety and risk prevention at the heart of the design (Gill, 2007; Louv, 2008), meaning that play is allowed primarily within adult-determined parameters (Gill, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2014). The overall decline in free play and the dulling of the childhood experience have happened across a diverse sociocultural spectrum, leading to what is referred to as a "*play deficit*" (Gray, 2013a, 2013b).

In this paper, the term *play deficit* refers to long-term structural conditions that negatively affect children's freedom, time, and space. These include overprotection, busy daily schedules, standardized, high-stakes academic pressures, and the loss of public and shared spaces (Gray et al., 2023; Lester & Russell, 2014). As *play deficits* remain pervasive, the effect is *play deprivation*: a condition experienced as a result of a lack of play, characterized by negative social and psychological development and well-being (Gray, 2011; Gray et al., 2023; Hughes, 2012). Strong cultural tropes suggest that today's youth do not want to play as much as earlier generations did because of phones and social media (Haidt, 2024; Skenazy et al., 2025). However, scholarship demonstrates that children retain a natural, vibrant, and strong motivation to play. Moreover, they retain the drive toward unrestricted outdoor social play, despite technology (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Gray, 2013b; Haidt, 2024; Skenazy et al., 2025). Thus, this paper focuses on deficits in and restrictions on free play.

Background

Freedom, Time, and Space

The systems of oversight and control that now shape children's experiences were largely created with good intentions. Adult society has recognized increased vehicular traffic and less pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. There is also greater awareness of and a more proactive stance toward crimes against children. Furthermore, the invasive

and predatory nature of today's media landscape has amplified and sensationalized parents' and caregivers' worst-case scenarios. These factors have created a cautious adult society that has withdrawn children's permission to play unsupervised outdoors. Children and adolescents who play freely in the public view now draw suspicion and judgment from contemporary adult society. Unfortunately, a disproportionate measure of condemnation is aimed toward parents of color and those living in poverty (Calarco, 2018).

The United States' hyper-litigious liability culture compels adults to anticipate and resolve as many conceivable disputes as possible before they arise. Consequently, any possible hazard, however improbable, is something to eliminate rather than manage (Marshall & Citylab, 2016). The modern "safetified" childhood has reduced, culture-wide, children's ability to govern their own movement (Gill, 2007; Skenazy et al., 2025).

Adult Assumptions About Play

The turn of the new millennium brought a variety of educational policies designed to reward and punish schools, communities, and children in pursuit of academic achievement and economic competitiveness (Au, 2022). Free time, once part of school life, is now seen as unproductive. School days that once valued recess, freedom to explore the school library, or creative exploration have been reduced or eliminated to maximize instructional time (Council on School Health et al., 2013; McMurrer, 2008; West, 2007). Out of school, a similar trend exists, as extracurricular activities and organized athletic programs have proliferated, in part because of the assumed skills and competencies they confer. Ultimately, children's daily schedules, both within and outside of school, have become increasingly filled with outcome-oriented programming, framed as preparing children for future success and skill-building (Elkind, 2007; Gray et al., 2023).

Compounding these factors, children experience considerable inequities in public space, including accessibility, usability, and quality. Where public green space or parks exist, their designs frequently prioritize the efficient movement of motorized traffic. These spaces are increasingly governed by surveillance to maintain order and mitigate liability (Lipman, 2026). While well-intentioned, these systems restrict childhood

behaviors and gatherings, and they even vilify adolescent behavior (Hochman Bloom, 2026; Lipman, 2026). Ironically, as public green spaces grow in importance to society at large, their design is narrowing the kinds of open-ended, natural childhood behaviors permitted within them (Gill, 2007, 2021).

Beyond policies and schedules, adult beliefs about play quietly shape how children experience the cognitive and emotional inner world of play, often co-opting it to fit an adult agenda. The child/adult relationship has shifted so that adults feel childhood requires intentional adult design and intercession (Lipman, 2026). Play has increasingly become a tool used by adult society for skill-building, learning, or socialization, as evidenced by modern school language, replete with phrases such as *"playful learning"* and *"play-based pedagogy"* (Mardell et al., 2023). However, depending on its design, gamifying a math problem or literacy task remains schoolwork, not play. Similarly, the United States toy market has become almost singularly driven by the multibillion-dollar educational toy segment, imbued with adult and market agendas (Byrne, 2023; Global Toy News, 2025; Hassinger-Das & Fletcher, 2023). Organized youth sports are leveraged to build character and leadership potential, again adult constructs and desired outcomes (Coakley, 2011). Self-directed play is often viewed as a reward, and the denial of play is used to punish or control behavior. From this vantage point, play can be interpreted as lavish or wasteful rather than as an innate developmental need, a fundamental human right, or a biopsychosocial drive (United Nations, 1989, art. 31).

Collectively, evolving adult beliefs have shifted children's play experiences from self-directed, informal, unsupervised play spaces to adult-designed childhood activities that must be managed, monitored, and optimized for future gains. This paper advocates free play: play that is motivated and guided by the players themselves and largely free of adult involvement (Bateson & Martin, 2013; Mardell et al., 2023). However, even the shift in the character of play does not unfold evenly across communities.

Unequal Access

Broadly speaking, the aforementioned structural and cultural shifts have shaped modern childhood; however, their effects have been felt unevenly across communities.

Race, wealth, disability, and local policies strongly influence children's ability to access safe, usable spaces for free play (Huang et al., 2023; Jarrett et al., 2023). In some communities, public green space is abundant and informally supervised by community adults. However, in other communities, green space is scarce or subject to restrictive rules and heightened surveillance. Children from historically marginalized communities are more likely to face a narrow field of permission regarding play, and fewer behaviors are interpreted as harmless play (Pinckney et al., 2018). Children with disabilities may face social barriers that limit play, as well as architectural barriers that limit both access and meaningful participation (Smythe et al., 2024). The *play deficit* is therefore not a uniform condition but one that is shaped by a range of social and economic inequities. Such inequities determine how, and whose, play is protected, tolerated, and constrained.

Emerging Responses

Despite these conditions, children's free play is not absent in the United States. A variety of groups, from educators to community organizations, create and hold spaces where free play can flourish. Over the last two decades, nature and forest school programs have expanded, offering children time outdoors with opportunities for exploration and play. A group of early childhood practitioners champions free play in childcare settings, and several community-based pop-up play programs have gained recognition (Leichter-Saxby, 2022; Leichter-Saxby & Law, 2015; Sobel & Bailie, 2016). These efforts illustrate a growing recognition that children need time and space to direct their own play. However, these initiatives have developed independently and are guided by different philosophies, vocabulary, and community needs. The commitment to children's free play is real, yet it remains dispersed rather than unified (Law, 2021).

These emerging responses stand as an important illustration and signpost: the forces contributing to the play deficit are neither fixed nor beyond remedy. The work already underway demonstrates the possibility of change. What is also revealed, however, is an existing landscape of dispersed and disconnected individuals and organizations working to protect and provide for children's free play. Those doing this work may also be unaware of others pursuing similar aims. Therefore, a twofold

problem surfaces. These efforts exist in relative isolation, and the free play landscape is not yet visible to itself.

Strategies

A holistic and unifying response should be developed to bring the free play landscape into focus. The authors propose a *Play Deficit Response Task Force* that can begin to recognize and document work being done by individuals and organizations to protect and provide for children's free play. The task force's immediate purpose is to bring these efforts into view across communities and settings and begin the broader work of cultivating a response that addresses the national scope of the play deficit.

The work of the task force can begin with two complementary approaches: an invitation and active outreach. One approach would use a public call through play advocacy groups, professional associations, and various other networks to invite individuals and organizations to recognize their work as support for free play in the United States. The other approach would ask task force members to actively seek out related work unfolding in schools, parks and civic organizations, early childhood settings, and other locations that shape children's daily lives.

Both approaches, however, require a functional description of what comprises work intended to protect and provide for free play. Individuals and organizations engaged in this work are likely to be unique and hyper-local. Therefore, specialized language drawn from play scholarship or academia would not adequately capture the breadth of this work. The task force could instead use a descriptive profile drawn directly from the conditions previously outlined in this paper. Those recognized through this profile would demonstrate work that addresses all three dimensions:

- 1) expands children's freedom, time, and space for unrestricted, self-directed play;
- 2) resists the imposition of adult-desired educational and developmental outcomes on children's play; and
- 3) addresses the sociocultural inequities that shape children's access to play.

Such a profile could guide both the public invitation and the task force's active outreach.

The purpose of the task force's work extends beyond mere identification and documentation. It is to bring the existing free play landscape into view and establish relationships among those whose current work exists in relative isolation. These relationships provide a starting framework for a holistic and unifying response to the national scope of the play deficit.

Conclusion

Our national play deficit is not the result of a single policy, institution, or sociocultural moment. Our deficit has grown through the subtle accumulation of forces that narrow children's freedom, time, and space for unrestricted, self-directed free play. These forces are shaped by implicit assumptions adults hold about the nature of childhood and the purpose and value of play itself. Pervasive social inequities further shape how communities experience the play deficit. Our play deficit is therefore best understood as a broad feature of contemporary childhood, one that is produced and sustained through the systems and relationships that organize children's daily lives. The emerging responses named in this paper illustrate that these systems and relationships may also become sites of change. The forces and conditions sustaining the play deficit are, once again, neither fixed nor beyond remedy.

Recommendation

As an initial response to the work described in this paper, the authors recommend assembling a *Play Deficit Response Task Force*. The authors can initiate the first conversations toward its development, while acknowledging that the task force is intended to grow and include representatives from across the free play landscape. The task force's work could produce a record of individuals, organizations, and communities that reflect the descriptive profile above. An institution or organization with existing technology infrastructure could house the record, which could continue to grow as the work commences. The record would function as more than a simple directory. It would support relationship-building and collaboration among those engaged in protecting and providing free play, while also supporting continued outreach.

The task force's work would provide an initial pool of individuals, organizations, and communities for future national collaboration. Part 2 of this paper series

recommends a national summit and working group that could draw participants from this pool. The work proposed here becomes a starting point for the professional and practice-based response developed in the second paper, *Cultivating a Playwork Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us*.

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Cultivating a Playwork Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us

Jonathan McCloud, PhD; Susan Chlebowsky, UK-trained Playworker and Forest School Leader; & Jill Wood, MLIS

Introduction

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Playwork, a professional practice and ethical framework for being and working with children (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005), provides a needed and curative response to our national play deficit. *Playwork* provides adults with a moral and ethical framework in building their relationships with children, as well as intellectual and practical tools to create opportunities and hold spaces for children's free play (Brown, 2015; Brown et al., 2019; Hughes, 2012). This second paper, *Cultivating a Playwork Movement, Part 2: The Task Before Us*, examines the history and practice of *Playwork*, considers strategies for developing a sustainable *Playwork* presence in the United States, and explains how *Playwork* can help adult society begin to repay its debt to children.

Problem Statement

Regrettably, in the United States, the history, philosophy, and professional standards of *Playwork* are neither commonly known nor practiced among those who work with children (Law, 2021; Wilson, 2009). A handful of practitioners and organizations identify as Playworkers and *Playwork*-informed, and a few provide training and professional learning opportunities. A variety of other *Playwork*-adjacent

settings and organizations create environments and adopt *Playwork* practices without acknowledging or even recognizing them as *Playwork*. The result is not a total absence of *Playwork* in the United States, but a fragmented free play landscape that lacks a shared language, professional identity, or support system.

The fragmented landscape is reinforced and perpetuated by the near-complete absence of *Playwork* education and effectively zero pathways for professional preparation and mentorship. Those interested in *Playwork* or currently working with children may encounter *Playwork* through community or professional experiences, yet then see no coherent or visible avenue toward sustained professional practice. Without a connected educational and professional infrastructure, *Playwork* remains difficult to recognize, access, and develop across settings in which adults work with children. A coordinated approach capable of supporting *Playwork* as a practice, profession, and field of study is needed.

Background

Playwork as a Response

What changes must occur within adult society to allow children to experience more opportunities for free, self-directed play? Playwork emerges as a comprehensive response to this question. *Playwork* is an ethical framework that:

- 1) rearranges the role of the adult relative to the child,
- 2) provides a set of techniques and approaches capable of protecting and fostering environments for children's free play, and
- 3) offers a scholarly unifying language around children's play (Hughes, 2012; Law, 2021; PPSG, 2005).

The Origins of *Playwork*

The origins of *Playwork* lie in the aftermath of the Second World War and the efforts to create spaces for children despite arduous social conditions in an increasingly invasive adult society (Cranwell, 2003; Hughes, 2012). *Playwork* emerged and developed most notably in the United Kingdom within specially curated playgrounds known as Adventure Playgrounds and other community-based play initiatives.

Individuals who worked with children in these contexts sought to understand and articulate what children need from adults during free play (Cranwell, 2003; Hughes, 2012). Broad and emergent practices of observation, reflection, and training led to the eventual creation of shared professional ethics (Brown & Taylor, 2008; PPSG, 2005). While *Playwork* has both its roots and the ground of its development in the United Kingdom, Playwork's crowning tenets are transferable to any context where children's free play is limited (Cartmel & Worch, 2022; Wood et al., 2024).

Of primary concern to *Playwork* is how adults can protect and provide for children's play without compromising its integrity (Hughes, 2012; PPSG, 2005). *Playwork* positions play as valuable in and of itself. Play does not need justification through external perspectives and frameworks, such as education, development, or therapy. *Playworkers* maintain that the act and expression of play spring from a deeply human drive. The drive to play persists despite the restrictions and limitations on play. The integrity of play resides in its capacity to emanate from within the individual (Hughes, 2012; PPSG, 2005). Therefore, *Playworkers* create, manage, and advocate for environments that allow for children's interests to emerge in play.

Professional *Playwork* practice is articulated in various formats, including academic scholarship, specialized credentialing programs, and, most notably, a set of internationally recognized *Playwork Principles* (PPSG, 2005). *Playwork* practice aims to remove limitations, restrictions, and barriers to "freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated" play (PPSG, 2005, Principle 2).

These barriers may be physical, social, or cultural and include inaccessible and uninspiring spaces, excessive adult supervision and behavioral expectations, and the adult imperative to instrumentalize play for educational or developmental purposes. Such barriers suppress the drive to play and deny children meaningful play experiences (Hughes, 2012; Wood et al., 2024). In contrast, *Playworkers* create rich and generative play environments that support free play.

Playwork primarily reframes the adult's role (Brown, 2008; PPSG, 2005; Wood & Kilvington, 2018). *Playwork* practice compels the adult to consider *how* and *when* their actions influence children's play. The *Playworker* seeks to understand the

meaning of play from the child's perspective. *Playwork* requires an individual capable of disciplined, sustained reflection, patience, and restraint in interfering with children's play (Brown et al., 2019). *Playwork* is therefore not a practice of leading or guiding children's physical and intellectual actions, but rather a *way of sharing space* with children while being ethically attuned to their play.

Strategies

How *Playwork* Confronts Barriers to Play

Ultimately, *Playwork* offers a virtuous and practical response to many of the conditions contributing to the contemporary *play deficit*. *Playwork* provides assessments and benchmarks for how communities, organizations, and decision-makers address children's play. The following list considers how *Playwork* responds to the barriers to children's free play identified in Part 1 of this paper series:

Freedom, Time, and Space

- **Children's Autonomy & Agency.** *Playworkers* serve as *non-directive facilitators* and do not impose adult ideas or agendas, empowering children to make decisions about their own play and about their relationship with the play environment.
- **Safety Culture and Overprotection.** In *Playwork* environments, adults remove or mitigate real danger while trusting children to take self-chosen risks: perceivable, manageable challenges the child can choose to engage in or not engage in, such as climbing a tree. Risk-benefit assessments guide this process and help adults remove barriers to adventurous play.

Adult Assumptions About Play

- **Adult-Centric Play Culture.** Grounded in scholarship that treats play as an intrinsic biological imperative essential to holistic human and societal health, the *Playworker's* role is to establish and protect open-ended, child-centric environments where play is entirely the children's domain (Hughes, 2012).

- Public Space and Environmental Design. *Playwork* provides guidelines for establishing and developing permissive play environments that respond to and change with the child's desires, rather than adult-designed spaces.
- Schooling and Achievement Culture. *Playwork* asserts that play is a fundamental aspect of human life and well-being and is valuable in its own right, rather than a tool for developing future skills.

Unequal Access

- Inequities in Play. *Playworkers* recognize that sociocultural and economic contexts shape play, and that fields of permission vary by race, gender, ability, and so forth.
- Accessibility & Usability. *Playwork* rehumanizes play spaces. Meaningful access and usability of play spaces often emerge through relationships rather than being designed into playscapes and fixtures/equipment.

Fragmented Responses

- Fragmented Efforts. *Playwork* has the potential to unify play practitioners and advocates around evidence-based methods and terminology that foreground play as a biological necessity in childhood (Hughes, 2012).

The barriers and obstacles to children's free play described in Part 1 are deeply embedded in adult society, institutional and organizational landscapes, public policy, and community life. Individuals and organizations are already engaged in work that aligns with or is adjacent to *Playwork's* ethical approach to children's play (e.g., Acera School, n.d.; Adventure Play at The Parish School, n.d.; "The Yard", n.d.; Timbernook Academy, n.d.). However, these initiatives exist in relative isolation, without a shared language, professional identity, or support system.

Law's (2021) doctoral research on *Playwork* and play advocacy empirically establishes these conditions and barriers to developing a *Playwork* movement in the United States. *Playwork* practitioners, scholars, and advocates must extend their attention beyond individual practice to the conditions necessary for *Playwork* to flourish. *Playwork* must develop as a practice and field of study. The following section is

forward-looking rather than descriptive. Three interconnected strategies are presented here as pathways to:

- 1) educate practitioners on *Playwork* ethics and philosophy,
- 2) create a professional and credentialing consortium, and
- 3) kindle a national conversation about what a distinctly American *Playwork* movement might become.

Children Are Everywhere: Where do *Playworkers* and *Playwork*-informed adults practice?

Ordinary institutions and everyday people shape children's lives. No single Goliath has created the deficit, nor is there a single setting where it can be addressed. Just as children do not exist within a single space or moment, children's play does not reside in a single location. Equally so, adult society permeates every layer of a child's life. Adults are present, irreducible, and impossible to design out. Therefore, *Playwork* must be understood as portable and transferable to multiple environments. Children are everywhere.

At its core, *Playwork* is an ethical framework (Brown, 2015; Brown et al., 2019). *Playwork* is not location- or context-dependent (Cartmel & Worch, 2022; Wood et al., 2024). The *Playwork* mindset moves with the *Playworker* into all spaces. To reduce *Playwork* to a set of actions and behaviors would be insufficient and would fail to capture its full scope. Playworkers' decisions and responses emanate from this ethical foundation. *Playwork* fosters conceptual change in the adult. The *Playworker* does not simply modify a space so that children's play will emerge naturally. *Playwork* changes the adult's relational orientation toward the child. Therefore, this first strategy is not to transform everyday settings into playgrounds, but to transform the quality of the adult presence within those settings. In so doing, settings that children trust and use become playable.

Adults who work with children are also shaped by their everyday encounters with organizations and other people. Cultural frameworks and discourses position adults as providers, managers, and controllers. An invisible and pervasive child/adult binary shapes adults' actions toward children. For example, children are framed as dependent

and in need of guidance, whereas adults are framed as capable and in control. As a result, adult actions and interventions in the child's experience become normalized. *Playwork* does not accept this binary as given; instead, it asks the adult to regard the child as a full person with unique spatial, relational, and temporal experiences. A U.S. orientation to *Playwork* must frame play as a product of the relational environment rather than a phenomenon that emerges solely from the child.

Playwork is a *human practice* and a way of *being* with children. It is not performed for an audience, and *Playwork*-informed spaces are not sites of exhibition. One may ask, then, how *Playwork* becomes knowable and identifiable in everyday spaces? *Playwork* cannot be identified simply by the presence of loose parts, risky elements, or partially completed building projects. *Playworkers* may not be dressed in uniforms or otherwise recognized as *Playworkers*. Instead, what might a visitor see in a *Playwork*-informed setting?

A visitor might sense, and perhaps observe, that children move more freely. A wider field of permission exists, with less suppression of children's behavior and movement. Free from reflexive adult interference, children are empowered to make choices, and their self-directed activities reveal competence, negotiation, and a wider spectrum of emotions, most notably joy. A *Playwork*-informed environment may appear less ordered than traditional settings, but what is visible is children exercising authentic autonomy and agency rather than compliance.

Playwork-informed settings intentionally limit adult behaviors that interrupt play. In many established adventure playgrounds, *Playworkers* are the only adults permitted in the play space. In mixed-use play settings where other adults are present, signage may explicitly ask adults to consult a *Playworker* if tempted to intervene in children's play. These boundaries signal that the space operates under a different set of values regarding children and adults. To those unfamiliar with *Playwork*, this palpable narrowing of the power gap between children and adults may cause discomfort. This tension, however, promotes constructive dialogue that addresses the adult imperative to intervene, while the boundaries themselves stand as a structural expression of respect for children's autonomy and agency.

A *Playwork*-informed setting and a credentialing pathway are mutually dependent. *Playwork*-informed settings become environments for practical learning, mentorship, and supervised *Playwork* practice. In turn, a credentialing continuum can support and develop *Playwork*-informed professionals where they are, just as *Playwork* itself meets children where they are.

A Credentialing Continuum

The *play deficit* is overlaid with a moral urgency which begs a swift and wide-ranging response. Roughly speaking, every five years, a new cohort or wave of children enters adolescence and their teenage years, having experienced the cumulative impact of the *play deficit*. Children cannot wait for a fully realized *Playwork* movement to mature. A credentialing structure should be developed as a continuum with multiple entry points into *Playwork* practice, offering a strategic response to that urgency.

Practitioners in the Field

The fastest route to changing children's daily play experiences is through adults currently working with children in anchor institutions. *Playwork* credentialing at this level can be delivered within existing professional development structures. A variety of professions require continuing professional development, such as workshops, in-service training, and conference attendance. *Playwork* content can enter into the channels that already serve parks and recreation staff, librarians, museum educators, and so forth. This form of instructional delivery meets practitioners where they are and can be incorporated into existing institutional structures with relatively little additional infrastructure.

Practitioners in Formation

Playwork becomes sustainable when *Playwork* content is incorporated into undergraduate and graduate curricula. Degree programs in Outdoor Parks and Recreation Management, Library Sciences, Environmental Studies, Education, and other related fields are natural homes for *Playwork* content. This is a longer-term vision for *Playwork* education and credentialing, yet it is also essential. Future generations of

practitioners can enter children's lives already oriented toward *Playwork's* ethical framework.

From Urgency to Sustainability

The full continuum spans immediate reach and long-term transformation. Every location along the continuum addresses the same goal: increasing the number of adults in children's daily lives who understand how to protect freely chosen play and regard the child as a whole person. No single location along the continuum is sufficient on its own, as the continuum is an integrated whole. A continuum approach grows *Playwork* without delay and sustains it without relying on isolated champions or singular institutions.

The Consortium Model: Who Prepares *Playworkers*?

Providing a credentialing continuum requires more than isolated programs or individual champions. To the authors' knowledge, few opportunities for *Playwork* education currently exist in the United States. Commonwealth University of Pennsylvania at Bloomsburg (2026) offers a minor for degree-seeking students, and smaller alternative, non-collegiate organizations, such as Pop-Up Adventure Play, offer *Playwork* training and skill-sharing (*Pop-Up Adventure Play*, 2025). Current US-based practitioners may learn about *Playwork* through adjacent fields such as education, outdoor recreation, and early childhood care. However, for interested individuals, no coherent or visible pathway remains from initial introduction to *Playwork* through sustained professional practice.

A sustainable *Playwork* movement will require a collective, scalable approach to *Playwork* education, mentorship, and supervised practice. Higher education in the United States is uniquely positioned to provide these through established colleges and universities, community colleges, and community partnerships and extension programs. Higher education goes beyond instructional delivery and includes financial aid systems, employer recognition, assessment and quality assurance systems, and a recognized credentialing authority. Play-focused organizations such as the International Play Association (IPA World, 1961), The American Association for the Child's Right to Play, IPA USA (IPA USA, 1973), the National Institute for Play (Brown, 1994; National

Institute for Play, 1994), and the Alliance for Childhood (Alliance for Childhood, 2005) provide expertise, networks, and advocacy capacity required of any social movement. Isolated programs and individual champions cannot adequately address the current *play deficit*, nor can any single college, institution, or organization (Law, 2021, pp. 196, 225, 243). A consortium model signals that *Playwork* is larger than a single program or organization.

Given the modern realities facing U.S. higher education, individual institutions are unlikely to shoulder the investments needed to develop *Playwork*. A consortium model enables sustainable cost-sharing and administration across institutions and allows institutions to contribute within their established areas of impact. For example, community colleges could provide continuing education and workforce development, land-grant universities could contribute through extension agencies aimed at community enrichment, and other institutions could provide academic coursework and research. Community colleges serve a unique function in the higher education ecosystem. They specialize in adult learners, community partnerships, and affordability, and appeal to individuals and established professionals not pursuing a traditional four-year degree (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2024). A *Playwork* consortium established across a range of institution types would support multiple entry points into *Playwork*, from introductory workshops to professional and academic coursework and credentialing.

Moreover, a consortium model allows *Playwork* to mirror the geographic and cultural diversity of the United States. The *play deficit* is not experienced equally across the country. The play needs of immigrant communities, rural Appalachia, urban and densely populated areas, and tribal nations differ significantly. A consortium would establish a nationally connected, unified presence for *Playwork* while remaining responsive to the unique social, cultural, and historical conditions of regions and communities (Jarrett et al., 2023).

Daylighting *Playwork*: How Does the Public Come to Recognize and Understand *Playwork*?

Playwork is largely invisible in the United States. As one learns about and develops a deeper understanding of *Playwork*, its limited and shadowed presence becomes increasingly apparent. The curious facial expressions in others, the failed searches for information from trusted sources, and the absence of play events on community calendars collectively highlight the need to cut back the canopy of unknowing and bring *Playwork into the light*.

Creating a public vocabulary around children's free play and the adult's role is essential to building a *Playwork* movement in the United States. Growing concern about the unwellness of America's youth (Jiao & Segrin, 2023; Let Grow, 2025, 2026; University of Michigan, 2025). Parents' and communities' concerns consistently point to the factors that contribute to the national *play deficit*. Regrettably, the techniques, approaches, and language of *Playwork* that address these factors are often misunderstood (Law, 2021; Wilson, 2009). Policymakers, educational institutions, and others are unlikely to support *Playwork* when they are unfamiliar with the practice or its underlying ethics and motivations (Law, 2021; Voce, 2015). Public awareness campaigns, like those addressing childhood and adolescent well-being, often effect little change when they lack a shared language. However, public awareness and a shared language are prerequisites for the growth and uptake of a new approach to being with children (Law, 2021; Voce & Sturrock, 2018). Therefore, daylighting *Playwork* requires public-facing resources, intentional partnership development, and visible demonstrations of *Playwork*.

Playwork becomes visible when trusted organizations, institutions, and communities both practice and name it. Community anchors must articulate the values and practices that distinguish *Playwork* from other approaches serving children. Schools, public libraries, pediatric healthcare, and parks and recreation departments all regularly encounter families and children (Hagan et al., 2017; National Recreation and Park Association, 2025; Public Library Association, 2023). These anchor institutions already possess channels for communication and outreach (Public Library Association,

2023, pp. 45). They can illustrate *Playwork's* relevance across multiple settings and provide robust introductions to *Playwork* concepts.

Communities can also demonstrate their commitment to children's free play. A designation similar to Tree City USA, Bicycle Friendly Communities, or Main Street USA (League of American Bicyclists, n.d.; National Main Street Center, n.d.; Tree City USA, n.d.) could encourage local investment in children's free play and serve as a symbol that *Playwork's* values are present within the life of the community. Such national, civic designations have shown that public recognition and shared standards foster local action (Arbor Day Foundation, 2026).

The *play deficit* is not a mystery. Multiple voices have identified and discussed it across multiple arenas of public thought. Part 1 of this paper series considered those causes and conditions and described how adult society and organizations have contributed to the deficit. The strategies offered here are not intended to resolve the deficit or erase its impact, but rather to name an approach that renders the deficit manageable rather than overwhelming. *Playwork's* most significant contribution is not a policy or program, but a lens. *Playwork* is an intellectual and ethical tool that indelibly reorients how one sees children, the adult's role, and play itself.

Conclusion

The national *play deficit* is multi-layered and complex. *Playwork* is a comprehensive response to that complexity. *Playwork* addresses the layers of adult society, institutions, and communities that contribute to the deficit. This paper has provided a practical, integrated framework through the credentialing continuum, the consortium model, and daylighting *Playwork*. The framework is not reliant on a single institution or organization, nor does it depend on an individual champion. The framework is designed to grow with communities.

This paper holds another ambition: to draw the reader towards *Playwork*. Perhaps the reader's next encounter with *Playwork*, be it a conversation, conference, or community event, will feel more recognizable and more urgent because of this paper. *Playwork* is not a distant or exclusively international practice, nor is it limited to niche

playgrounds that promote risky adventures. *Playwork* is portable. It is transferable and ready to meet children wherever they are.

Children are living the *play deficit* today, and adult society's debt to children and their play is real. The strategies outlined in this paper are a starting point for developing a *Playwork* movement that works simultaneously through top-down and bottom-up approaches. A *Playwork* movement starts with people who are already present and committed in children's lives, in tandem with those who prepare and support future generations of practitioners. This paper and its authors are offering an opening gesture, a challenge, and an invitation to a conversation that does not yet have a home in the United States.

Recommendation

The strategies proposed here operate together as a framework that requires a collection of individuals from multiple locations within the play studies, play-advocacy, and play-adjacent communities. The record developed by the *Play Deficit Response Task Force*, as proposed in Part 1 of this paper series, offers an initial pool from which to draw this collection. The next step is to convene a National *Playwork* Summit and Working Group to address what Law's (2021) research identifies as an unmet and essential condition for a *Playwork* movement to develop in the United States. The summit should include those already working at the intersection of play, children, and professional practices across the United States. Those whose attendance is most essential are *Playworkers* currently practicing in the United States. Play scholars and advocates, academic faculty and administrators, and various organizational leaders must also attend and reflect the geographic, cultural, and community diversity of the United States.

The National *Playwork* Summit is not a ceremonial gathering, but a working assembly with ambition. The summit should produce an organized body aligned by a mission, vision, and a national *Playwork* agenda. Dedicated individuals and groups should leave the summit charged with deliverables aligned with each strategy outlined in this paper, including a set of translated *Playwork Principles* for the U.S. context. This is not a replacement for the existing Principles, but a contextually adapted

interpretation that honors their origins while reflecting U.S. social, cultural, and historical conditions. Ideally, the summit would generate benchmarks for professional *Playwork* training and education to guide various actors along the credentialing continuum.

Who Should Be Present

The summit should include a broad and diverse representation of the play ecosystem, including:

- *Playworkers* currently working in the United States.
- Scholars from fields such as play studies, childhood studies, education, recreation, public health, and social work.
- Leaders of organizations that provide play opportunities for children and youth.
- Representatives from anchor institutions such as parks and recreation departments, schools, museums, libraries, and community-based organizations.
- Advocates for children's rights, disability inclusion, and equitable access to play.
- Professionals working in adjacent fields whose work intersects with play, including landscape architects, city and rural planners, youth workers, educators, and public health practitioners.
- Community leaders, students, and early-career practitioners who represent the future of the field.
- Teachers/educators, early childhood educators, and care providers currently working with children.

As a closing gesture, the reader who has engaged with this paper is precisely the individual the National *Playwork* Summit needs. The *Playwork* conversation has yet to find a home in the United States. This recommendation is an invitation to help build one.

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