

100 YEARS OF PLAY

Play Australia's centenary celebrations

By Karen Williams

The more things change, the more they stay the same – Proverb

This quote is also true about play! Over the century our society and environments have changed dramatically, through world wars, depressions and recessions, industrialisation, globalisation and our social saturation with information technologies. Yet what remains constant is that children still play wherever they are regardless of the era in which they are born.

In 2014 Play Australia celebrated the milestone of turning 100 years old! It was indeed something to celebrate and acknowledge the commitment of so many remarkable people that have supported the value of play.

To be still standing after 100 years as an independent, not-for-profit organisation, is no mean feat. When Play Australia took the time to look back over their history the stand out indicator to its longevity and continued momentum would have to be the extraordinary people who lead them to this point.

These were incredibly passionate and committed women and men from all different walks of life. They had one thing in common, ensuring children's right to play and alleviating the effects of poverty in which many lived through the tough times of the depression at the start of the last century.

In the early 1900's the Guild of Play built the foundations for the organisation that is still thriving today. Politicians, businessmen, and their influential wives created a loud and successful voice for play. These strong minded and determined women were the driving force behind the legacy of influence and advocacy that is now ours to take forward, and continuing building for the next century.

Interestingly though, as much as the organisation changed from one direction, and one name to the other, children have generally played in the same way.

How children play has not so much been defined by the decade in which they live/d, but by their social class and gender. Children will play differently in the city as opposed to a country lifestyle. The

socio-economic environment in which they are born will certainly affect access to particular play resources. Yet no matter how rich or poor the family background, children have still created their own play activities to suit their interest and amusement.

Back in the early 1900s a large percentage of Melbourne's population were children and without playgrounds, they played wherever they could, with whatever they could. They were viewed as a nuisance in suburban parks, gardens and streets where their play was disturbing to many members of the public. Children were put before the Children's Court for breaking tree branches!

The Australian playscape was changed with the introduction of purpose built playgrounds. In Melbourne, through the initiation of the Guild of Play, came the supervision of children's outside play by Play Leaders.

With school becoming compulsory early in the century, children's playtime was segregated into girls and boys sport and play areas. Teachers were on duty but not interfering. In contemporary school life we now see a significant loss of freedom in play activities, with children advised of 'no running', 'no marbles as it causes arguments', and asphalt has replaced grass. Adults have taken control.

Dr June Factor's PhD thesis of 1989 (Captain Cook chased a chook¹) analyses the Australian context of children's play and the lack of interest in the study of children's folklore by academics and educators, as this group is often seen within the community as without much status and authority.

"The traditions of play provide a secure arena for diverse and versatile linguistic, cognitive, kinetic and social improvisation and experiment. Much is possible in play, and children's folklore allows the relatively dependent and powerless 'middle childhood' young a freedom not otherwise generally available."



L-R: Mary Jeavons, Robyn Munro Miller, Mary Hughes, Jane Tindale, Cathy Kiss

There are children playing in the street who could solve some of my top problems in physics, because they have modes of sensory perception that I lost long ago. J. Robert Oppenheimer



Above: Photos courtesy of the Shirley Fitzgibbon, Dr Dorothy Howard and Miss Eva Greenhatch collections, Melbourne Museum. Below: Mary Hughes (centre) and the Play Leaders, 1950, Photo Play Australia.



“Despite constantly recurring claims to the contrary, these folkloric play traditions have not disappeared in our highly organised and mechanised world. Children continue to clap, skip, hop, rhyme, chant, tongue-twist and all the rest. It seems that childhood and children’s folklore are inseparable”, describes Dr Factor.

With contraception comes a population with less children. We have more time to

be anxious about them, and to concentrate on the few we have. This could be seen in some ways as a misplaced virtue.

In more recent years it has become apparent that adults have assumed the role of organising and monitoring children’s sport and supervised physical activity. A child’s free time out of school is converted into swimming lessons, ballet classes, little athletics, cricket games,

basketball matches, and the list goes on and on.

Stranger danger and streets crowded with traffic have sent our children indoors, on sofas watching TV or at a computer, online.

When you spend any time with adult peers and friends we spend many fond moments recalling our childhood of being outside with our mates, in the street, in the park, in the paddocks, from dawn to dusk. Our mothers on the porch calling us inside for dinner. The cycle is now turning again as research and educators are ringing the alarm bells to a generation of children that could be the first to have a shorter lifespan than their parents.

Play is vital not only to children’s physical, social, emotional health and wellbeing, but to the community at large, to our social fabric. We are bringing the focus back to encourage families and children outdoors, playing and enjoying nature.

As an early childhood community let’s continue to promote the integral value and fundamental importance of spontaneous, imaginative and unstructured play for children for the next 100 years!

Play Australia provides specialist professional development and training for early childhood educators. Training programs discuss the philosophy and practice of working outdoors with children in the early years and explore the value of quality outdoor play in the development and learning of young children. The program also has a focus on developing environments for play that enhance the value of the outdoor program, including plantings for play spaces and incorporating sustainability principles. To register go to playaustralia.org.au.

1 Factor, D (1989). *Captain Cook chased a chook: children’s folklore in Australia: its origins, development, characteristics and functions within a changing historical and cultural context*. Melbourne University.