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## Chapter 6: Journeys Towards a More Playful Zoo

Linda Kinney and Charlotte Smith

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Playgrounds and places to play have for a long time been a common feature of many zoos, appealing to the many children and families who make up a large proportion of the 700 million people worldwide who visit zoos each year.

Yet two of these zoos, and us, two zoo staff from opposite sides of the Atlantic, felt it necessary to deepen our understanding of children's play and move beyond the view of play within zoos being restricted to playgrounds and sometimes play based learning. Through seeking out this understanding we both, in different ways, found our way to working with Stuart. Put in contact with each other by him, and having spoken about the nuances, similarities and differences of our playful zoo journeys, we want to share how his thinking has influenced us and our organisations to think about play differently and how this has manifested itself in more playful experiences for our visitors.

While we, and each of the zoos that we represent, have taken different approaches, what we have in common is an enhanced focus on learning about play and responding to play – not just as a recreational activity but as a key driver of how children behave in our spaces. Influenced by Stuart's teaching, we have both moved way beyond seeing play as the installation of playgrounds to a more holistic consideration of children's play that has found itself entangled with far more of the zoo's everyday operations. This chapter is an account of our experiences in which we present both of our playful zoo journeys, and seek to make sense of the magic and delight of what has happened since.

### **The North Carolina journey – Linda**

I began my studies at the University of Gloucestershire to learn about and experience playwork firsthand. It was at the university that I came across

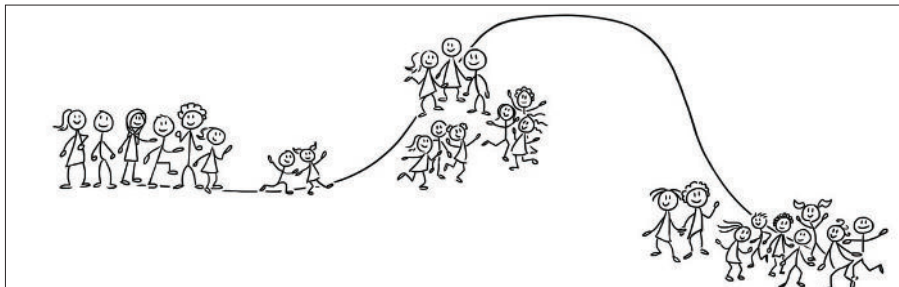
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Stuart, in fact, he taught many of my courses. And through Stuart, I realised I needed a more comprehensive understanding of what it meant to support the play process. I was unsure of how to manage the North Carolina Zoo's environmental education expectations while still being sensitive and responsive to children's play. Stuart understood my dilemma and offered encouragement and guidance as I navigated my way through Kidzone's growing pains. Play is an important component of the zoo's education programme and our playful journey began with Kidzone, a play setting envisaged specifically to support outdoor play. A mix of designed elements and naturally occurring flora, fauna and geologic features, Kidzone's nature is the nature encountered every day: those nooks and crannies many children often access around neighborhoods, parks and vacant lots.

In the beginning, many zoo staff asked why we needed an outdoor playspace in a zoo, while others felt encouraging play outdoors fitted into the North Carolina Zoo's conservation mission. Plus, the zoo is a popular outdoor family recreation destination and playing in Kidzone offers playful opportunities for guests of all ages.

One of our first challenges was creating an environment that was sensitive and responsive to children's ever-changing play needs. A place where there were no definite outcomes, few boundaries, and no adults directing the playing (Fig 6.1). Tensions developed straight away through conflicting ideologies, since the play setting was understood as a segregated space for both play and learning: 'Not enough education programmes and too much playing is taking place in Kidzone'. Senior staff often pointed out there was too much random stuff strewn about and muddy, wet children running unchecked throughout the setting. In the beginning, the solution was to have five or six adults policing the area, which restrained the play.

Stuart's guidance cultivated a richer understanding of the play process which progressed alongside the development of Kidzone, impacting how we supported the playing. Luckily (for Kidzone and the children choosing to play



6.1 Fewer adults, lots of kids and cries of "it's our place!" (Jo Knorpp, 2019)

there), Stuart helped me realise that a few playful adults who understood the principles of playwork could support the play process. Today, I see the results of trained playful adults and children taking risks, getting dirty, splashing about in the stream, running, climbing, and finding secret spots for quiet conversations.

The adults are often unsure of the setting's possibilities, whereas the children immediately respond to the setting's playful invitations. They immediately take to building a fort or swing, using the provided ropes, tarps, tree limbs, bamboo, and tyres. The boulders and standing stones (both natural and manufactured) provoke climbing-on and jumping-off.

Tensions continue to exist between parents' expectations and children's desire to play in Kidzone. A frequent question directed toward play staff is "You're letting them do that?" And yes, we are! Stuart helped me appreciate the value of children taking risks when playing, and I slowly became comfortable with risky play, and was able to train our staff. We became more skillful at assessing risk and as our comfort with risk grew so did the boundaries (Fig 6.2).

Today, Kidzone is immediately recognised by children as a place for play, but we are looking to move beyond a segregated space for play, increasing the opportunities for playing children. Senior staff are beginning to explore ways playfulness can be incorporated throughout the zoo. We have begun to introduce 'play pockets,' invitations to play along zoo pathways. Recently, a natural log Gorilla Climber was installed next to the Forest Glade Gorilla Habitat – inviting children to climb, crawl and swing alongside the Western Lowland gorillas.

Stuart's generous gift of time, patience, humour and willingness to work with an international time difference is very much appreciated. His encouragement as I navigated my way through Kidzone's development was significant and eye opening. For me now, planning for play is about planning for disturbance of space and for the unexpected. Boundaries are loose and open and Kidzone now



6.2 Risky travel: choosing to travel across the maze rather than through it! (North Carolina Zoo, 2015)

sports an Adventure Play area in the 'Woods' (Fig 6.3). Children perceive the world differently; they act differently. As Stuart pointed out, children are 'other' than adults and children need time/spaces for this otherness – even at the zoo.

He also helped me see the importance in paying attention to little moments in time – momentary encounters of children with the environment. Perhaps, to really support children's play, adults need to take the time to notice the little things. Which brings me to where I am now – a strong advocate for more playful pockets throughout the zoo, and in time, playing beyond designated playspaces. It is important to remind zoo management that children are not just Kidzone's main stakeholders, but major stakeholders for the entire zoo. We need to create a more equitable use of the environment for children. If they are to be considered equal citizens within the zoo community, then they should have an equal opportunity to navigate the zoo playfully: to find special 'kid pass throughs', climb a rock, find a secret path, discover hidden treasures, and anticipate what might be around the corner.



6.3 The Woods: adventure play at Kidzone (North Carolina Zoo, 2014)

### The Chester Zoo journey – Charlotte

Similar to North Carolina, our playful journey at Chester Zoo began with the development of a physical space for play. As part of the zoo's strategic development plan, which guides the physical development of the zoo site, the zoo planned to convert a large lawn space and garden into a new play environment themed to its work in Madagascar.

Early on in the project, I, alongside other members of the zoo team, advocated that we make the project about more than the installation of play equipment. In line with our conservation objectives, we wanted to create an immersive space that would transport visitors to Madagascar, so that we could use that as the jumping off point to talk about some of the amazing species that live there and the ways in which we can prevent their extinction. We also wanted to make sure the new play space supported a broad spectrum of different modes of play and that we created an experience that was really responsive to the needs of our guests, particularly children. Furthermore, alongside developing the physical environment it was important to consider how staff supported play – and this was where the zoo team sought the expertise of Stuart Lester and his colleague Charlotte Derry.

Through a series of playful training sessions (Fig 6.4) we deepened our understanding of play and were encouraged to observe play as it happened



6.4 Play training at Chester Zoo involved staff from different areas of the zoo coming together with Stuart's support to embody what it means to be playful (Chester Zoo, 2017)

around the zoo, finding where moments of play were really happening, even if this was not where it was expected or 'supposed' to occur. Playing together and developing a shared understanding of play was a crucial way of exploring what play could and should mean at the zoo. It enabled staff to embody play and consider more deeply their own role in facilitating it for visitors. Staff from across marketing, education and guest services teams worked together, in itself an unusual activity, and play brought them closer as a team as they shared experiences of childhood and child rearing as well as considering the nature of the zoo space and its propensity to support play. The approach was built on experimentation and watching what happened as new ideas were tested out. And this freedom to try new things and to learn by observing what happened opened up new opportunities to embed play into the zoo experience. Giant chalk drawings appeared on hoardings and on pathways, with visitors and staff collaborating together to create new games and to challenge how different spaces could be used.

As Stuart helped us to understand play as the way children move and behave in physical space, we began to think about how we could facilitate more playful movement around the zoo. So 'play on the way' became as important as the major destination play spaces that have been a feature of the zoo for some time. A simple wiggly line on the floor and skipping lane along one of the longer stretches of zoo path (Fig 6.5) became simple ways to move people around the zoo more playfully.

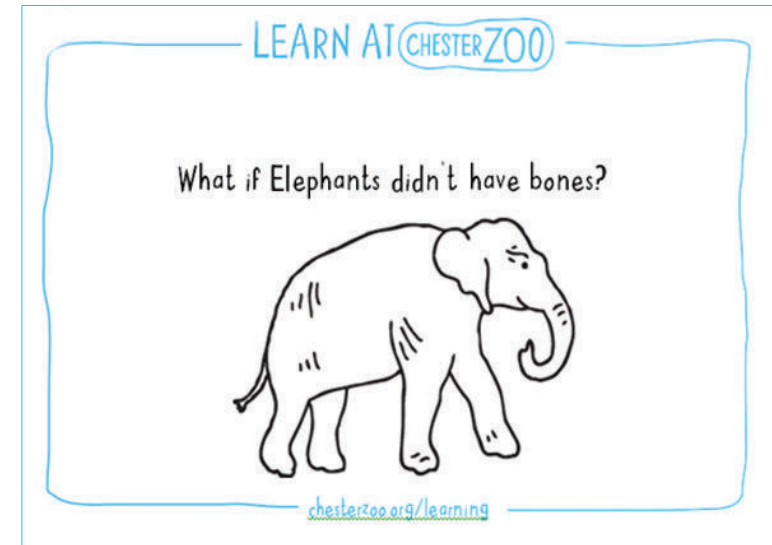


6.5 A skipping lane encourages more playful wayfaring through the zoo (Chester Zoo, 2017)

As we became more confident in our understanding, further playful interventions were considered to prompt and give permission for play to happen in new ways. Principles of 'what if', another learning from the training, became embedded into even the most formal of our education programmes, enabling the zoo to make children's experiences of learning more joyful (Fig 6.6). The team were able to appreciate that the lack of fixed outcomes which defines play, whilst difficult to balance with a very outcomes focused approach to learning that conservation requires, supported children's enjoyment and enabled them to connect with the zoo's content in different ways.

Destination play spaces also evolved. They became looser and focused more on creating landscapes where children could create their own adventures, and introduced new elements such as water and sand play (Fig 6.7).

With a large staff, an evolving audience profile and dynamic site, a journey towards being playful is never complete, but there is new energy for focusing how we facilitate play as part of the design process of new zones, regardless



6.6 Example of worksheet incorporating the 'what if' principle (Chester Zoo, 2018)



6.7 Sand play is now a popular element of destination play (Chester Zoo, 2017)

of whether they include a formal playground. Site-wide guidance has also been produced to define why play matters to the zoo and how it should be supported.

### A playful future for zoos

Zoos can provide opportunities for a wide variety of playful experiences for children, not just those that might be traditionally expected. They are places for children and families to wayfare, to explore and have adventures – and when careful consideration is given to how these experiences are supported and designed for, zoos can provide for extraordinary moments of playfulness. From our experiences at North Carolina and Chester, play in the zoo requires staff training, collaboration, thoughtful planning and an openness to challenge established ways of working. It is about thinking broadly about how children experience the world and should not be compartmentalised.

Stuart's support and expert guidance enabled both zoos to explore what play could mean in their settings, moving them beyond a traditional understanding of play as something that happens in playgrounds to a focus on responding to how children behave playfully throughout their visit.

In both organisations, his questioning approach enabled us to push the boundaries of what play could mean and increase our own confidence in advocating for it. He enabled us to be comfortable with the messiness of play and to focus on how children want to and indeed do play rather than how institutions might like children to play. Learning to observe, document and share experiences of children playing in our spaces enables us to design better environments where play is encouraged and to widen the parameters of play as a fundamental aspect of the zoo visit.

Realising that children's play is everywhere not just where we had originally expected was an important learning. At first when Stuart was describing with great joy how he had observed a young visitor trailing chalk across one of our hoardings I didn't understand the significance. But then I came to realise, thanks to Stuart's patience and understanding, that play can happen anywhere and at any time and it isn't for adults to decide what that play looks like. That moment of pleasure derived from moving the chalk across the hoarding while walking was as important as any other, and collected together with other moments contributes to the most satisfying experiences.

In a world where children's play is becoming more restricted and opportunities to play outdoors in particular more limited, and with these two zoos now working together to share their experiences with others in the sector, is it possible that zoos could be a place where children can have their need to play met and where children's play is welcomed? Stuart's influence has contributed to this being the case.

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## Chapter 7: The Bushbaby and the Giraffe Calf: Recollections of the play world wizard

Rebecca Willans

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Stuart once asked me, 'If you were an animal what would you be?' I replied a giraffe calf because they have a long neck and legs, and lack co-ordination, initially not knowing what's going on around them. Stuart's reply – eventually everything would fall into place, you would grow into a co-ordinated and graceful giraffe who had learnt, gaining knowledge and an awareness of your surroundings. When I asked Stuart what animal he would be he instantly replied, 'A bush baby, because of the beard'.



7.1 Bush Baby and Giraffe (Becky Willans, 2019)

A fitting choice I thought, nocturnal, intelligent, sociable and wise, like the animal equivalent of a professor. At that time, it was apt as these two animals seemed to reflect our current positions, the learner and the teacher. Stuart was always willing to share knowledge and help others to learn a little bit more.

I first saw Stuart at the *Beauty of Play* conference in 2003. The conference took place in a manor house, owned by a lovely lady called Betty. Everyone attending camped in the grounds on the sloped front lawn. As I looked up the hill, searching for a flat place to pitch up, I saw a bearded man standing next to an amazing bell tent. I remember turning to my friend, Steve, and