Transcript: Grounds for Learning - The role of adults

Narrator: We often use the word ‘play’ to describe an activity that adults have organised for children, for example a game of rounders or a treasure hunt. But the kind of play that we are looking at in this series is about what happens when you create a wide range of possibilities and then let children take control of their own activity. Often described as ‘free play’, this kind of play is commonly defined as behaviour that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It’s freely chosen because, within the bounds of safety and practicability, children are empowered to choose what they do, where they do it and the people and materials they do it with. It’s personally directed because adults stand back and let children use their own imaginations, develop their own ideas and make their own rules and decisions. And, it’s intrinsically motivated because the purpose of the activity is children’s personal satisfaction rather than any particular adult agenda. The child-led approach of free play is quite different to what normally happens in school where adults usually take charge and direct the activity.

So, what is the role of the Playground Supervisor in helping free play to flourish?

Irene McCafferty, Playground Supervisor: Before we used to, you know, if we saw the kids maybe running up the hills, running up the bank and, you know, you’d say ‘you’re not supposed to do this, don’t go here, it’s too wet to go there, that’s muddy’. Now, you just observe and let them get on with it.

Helen Downey, Playground Supervisor: Well I’ll be over (points) this part away over there, where they call the den building and we just, they pull tarpaulins out, they get pieces of wood, they have tyres, they just make what they want to make and I’ll just stand back.

Anne Daniels, Playgound Supervisor: We have basic roles of being considerate to each other and they know if they got into a fight or anything they would be asked to leave the urban jungle or sit out on anything but they’re having such good fun they don’t want to leave it and so they don’t fight most of the time.  I think it’s helped their co-operation, it’s helped their behaviour, they get on with each other and all the different age groups.

Narrator: As we’ve heard, Playground Supervisors should stand back and allow children to lead their own play. The Supervisor’s role should be to provide an environment that has lots of play possibilities, only intervening when necessary for the children’s welfare. Take the opportunity as you stand back to observe and use your observation to inform future decisions about resources and materials, the rest is up to the children.

Irene McCafferty: There’s a lot more freedom I think, you know, that they’ve got plenty of activities to do, because it’s good to watch them being able to do a lot of things that we might have done when we were younger, they have great fun.