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Playwork National Occupational Standards Glossary

This glossary should be used in conjunction with the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for playwork. When developing qualification units, training materials, job descriptions or other NOS based materials, the glossary can help to clarify language.

A variety of terminology is in use across the four nations of the UK. The glossary is not intended to favour one term over another but instead reflect the nuances of language and ensure clarity. Users of NOS should aim to use the most up-to-date, inclusive and reflective language for their own context.

Term	Definition
Accessible	An accessible play space is a space which is barrier-free, allows users access to move around the space and offers participation opportunities for a range of differing abilities. An accessible play space is a space which is barrier-free, allows users access to move around the space and offers participation opportunities for a range of differing abilities. While not every feature or activity will be usable by every child, an accessible play space provides meaningful opportunities for all children to play and participate. In addition, skilled playworkers can adapt the environment, remove barriers and support meaningful opportunities for all children to play. Accessibility relates not just to the space itself, but also in how people might reasonably reach the space from their own home. Accessibility relates not just to the space itself, but also to how people might reasonably reach the space from their own home.
Additional support needs	Refers to the extra or different support that a child may require, at any time, to participate, learn, develop and thrive alongside their peers. A child may have additional support needs because of a wide range of factors, including (but not limited to): • disability or long term health conditions • neurodivergence or learning differences • social, emotional or mental health needs • trauma or adverse life experiences • family or caring circumstances • barriers created by the environment, systems or attitudes • temporary or changing situations (e.g. bereavement, transition, illness). Importantly, a child does not need a medical diagnosis to have additional support needs, and those needs may be short term, intermittent or long term.

Analyse	Breaking down and interpreting information.
Anti-discriminatory language	Current and relevant terminology including: equity, equality, diversity, inclusion, inclusive practice, anti-discriminatory practice, anti-racist practice, social justice, rights, poverty, neurodiversity, neurodivergence, additional support needs, unconscious bias.
Asset-based approach	An approach that recognises, values and builds on children's existing strengths, capacities, play skills, interests, identities and ways of being, rather than focusing on deficits, needs or what children are perceived to lack.
Barriers to play	Barriers to play will be experienced by all children in different ways and at different times. For some children, perhaps because of their age or because of complex additional support needs, more adult assistance may be necessary to support their right to play in a nurturing and responsive way. As playworkers, we should aim to be proactive and preventative as well as reactive in removing barriers.
Behaviour you find challenging	Used instead of 'challenging behaviour' as the emphasis should be on the adult understanding their responses to children's behaviour, in order to support the child to feel secure in their setting.
Benefit-risk assessment	A process of risk assessment focused on determining whether the benefits of a particular activity outweigh the residual risks of harm. This is used in line with the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO 4980:2023) standard. It is also widely referred to as risk-benefit assessment, and occasionally risk-benefit analysis.
Childhood development	Refers to childhood development relevant to playwork.
Children's rights	Refers to **all** children's rights.
Children/children and young people	The legal definition of a child is up to the age of 18. Whilst some practitioners may also use young people, teenagers or other terms for older children, for the purposes of the NOS, the term child/children refers to all children up to the age of 18.
Colleagues	Other adults that you work with outside of your immediate team.
Communication	Refers to non-verbal and verbal communication. Includes non-verbal communication where the cause is a condition or impairment.
Community partners	The wide range of individuals and organisations in the community that playwork settings may be required to work with. This includes local government, voluntary organisations, community groups, businesses, parents and other community members.

Contemporary frameworks	Legislative, theoretical, policy and evaluative frameworks relevant to play and playwork practice.
Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	Informal and formal CPD. Also know as professional development, continuous or ongoing professional development.
CPD strategies	A range of different CPD strategies including: reading, training, visiting other settings, webinars, supervision, online forums, podcasts, qualifications, reading newsletters, job shadowing.
Dietary requirements	Requirements for a specific diet which may be due to cultural or religious requirements, preferences, allergies or other reasons.
Disabled children	Under the social model of disability, a disabled child is a child who has an impairment or condition and is disabled by barriers in society, rather than by their impairment itself.
Dynamic benefit-risk assessment	Active ongoing benefit-risk assessment of situations as they occur, usually taking place as a mental rather than a written process. This is linked to playwork intervention and various models of dynamic benefit-risk assessment.
Environment (play environment)	The total context in which play takes place, including physical space, social relationships, emotional atmosphere, cultural expectations and the presence and behaviour of adults.
Equity, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EEDI)	An umbrella term which guides how organisations, services and practitioners ensure fairness, respect, access and belonging for all people. **Equity:** the practice of recognising that individuals have different needs and circumstances, and allocating resources and opportunities in ways that address disadvantage and enable fair outcomes. **Equality:** the principle that all individuals should be treated fairly and have the same rights and opportunities, without discrimination. **Diversity:** the presence and recognition of difference within a group or society, including but not limited to differences in identity, background, experience and ways of being. **Inclusion:** the ongoing process of creating environments in which all individuals feel welcomed, respected, supported and able to participate fully.
Evaluation	Evaluation in playwork is part of the reflective process of making judgements about the value of playwork practice, environments and interventions, based on observation, reflection and feedback, to support and improve children's freely chosen, self directed play. Evaluation can be short or long-term.

Inclusive play space	An inclusive play space provides a barrier-free environment, with supporting infrastructure, which meets the wide and varying needs of every child. All children will enjoy high levels of participation opportunities, equally rich in play value.
Inclusive playwork practice	An approach to playwork that actively removes physical, social, cultural, attitudinal and organisational barriers so that **all** children can access, participate in and shape their own freely chosen play, in ways that respect their rights, dignity, individuality and agency. Inclusive playwork practice is underpinned by the Playwork Principles and recognises that inclusion is not about making children fit existing provision, but about adapting environments, attitudes and practice to meet children where they are.
Line manager	The individual, or designated individuals, with formal responsibility for your supervision, direction and accountability within own organisation.
Loose parts	Loose parts include the provision of a wide range of natural and manufactured materials that can be used to build, create, destroy and be imbued with imaginary qualities, as part of children's play.
Neurodivergent	Minority neurotypes can include conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyscalculia, dyslexia and Developmental Coordination Disorder and can also be described as neurodevelopmental conditions. Collectively people with minority neurotypes are referred to as neurodivergent.
Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity refers to the fact that not all brains think or feel in the same way and that these are natural human differences. Neurodiversity refers to everyone.
Observation/ observe play	In playwork, observation is the intentional, reflective process of watching, listening to and noticing children's play, the play space and interactions, to understand the play process and use that understanding to support, protect and facilitate play. Observation in playwork is not about assessment or judgement, but about understanding play from the child's perspective so that practitioners can respond sensitively.
Organisational framework	Refers to the policies and procedures of own setting and the importance of viewing and reviewing these as a whole.
Parents	Adults with responsibility for the children including parents, primary caregivers, carers, kinship carers, biological parents, person with caring responsibility.
Play behaviours	Often described as the observable actions, expressions and interactions that children engage in when they are freely choosing and directing their own play. It reflects their internal motivations, creativity and responses to their environment.

Play bias	Refers to the conscious or unconscious assumptions, preferences, or value judgements that influence how adults perceive, enable, restrict or respond to children's play.
Play cycle	Theoretical model that describes the process of play, as suggested by Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else in the 1998 *Colorado Paper.*
Play needs and preferences	Play needs refer to the fundamental biological, psychological and social requirements that must be met through play for children's health, wellbeing and development. Play preferences refer to the individual interests, choices and forms of play that children are drawn to at a particular time.
Play policy	Setting policy document that should include setting approaches to play, the playwork approach, children's rights, risk management and other relevant information.
Play spaces	Spaces that children create, claim, adapt and use for play, within an environment, with or without the support of adults. Play spaces are not fixed or pre defined areas. They are formed through children's play actions, relationships and meanings, and may be temporary, shifting or symbolic rather than permanent physical locations.
Play sufficiency	A condition in which children's right to play is realised in practice, through sufficient time, space, opportunity and freedom to engage in play in their everyday lives, in line with the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child General Comment no. 17 on Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and relevant national legislation (as of 2026, currently enacted in Wales and Scotland).
Playwork approach	The NOS describe playwork as "a unique approach to working with children of all ages in a range of settings. The key purpose of the playworker is to support and facilitate play as described by the Playwork Principles". The term playwork approach is used in the NOS to describe an individual or organisation who is applying the Playwork Principles to their practice, either some, or all of the time.
Playwork constructions	Constructions that are facilitated by playworkers providing the resources, loose parts and tools for children to create large or small, temporary or semi-permanent structures such as platforms, go karts, tipis, sandpits or dens.
Playwork Manager	Member of staff that oversees the work of playworkers and support playworkers. Playwork managers may also have varying roles in agreeing and managing budgets, overall running of a playwork setting and polices and procedures.
Playwork practice	Refers to practice as informed and underpinned by the Playwork Principles, playwork theory, observations, interactions and reflections on own and others' playwork practice.

Playwork setting	Any setting for children where the playwork approach can be applied. This includes adventure playgrounds, childminders, day nurseries, hospitals, out of school childcare, peripatetic playwork, prisons, open access playwork, schools, youth clubs.
Playworker	A professional who works to support and facilitate children's play in line with the Playwork Principles. May work unsupervised as part of a wider team and have various responsibilities within that team. May also work in play development or play sufficiency roles.
Professional practice	An understanding of how to operate as a professional, including the importance of a professional demeanour, working to deadlines, responding to communications and presentation.
Reflection	The intentional process of thinking critically about one's playwork practice, observations, decisions and interactions, to understand their impact on children's play and to inform future practice.
Reflective practice	Playworkers thinking deeply about what they do to identify what they do well and what they could improve to enhance their professional practice. It is an ongoing process and can happen before, during and after practice. Playwork reflective practice involves looking, not just at what happened, but also at our ethics, emotions, feelings and beliefs and how these impact on practice. In some contexts, this is known as 'reflexive' practice. For the purpose of the NOS, reflective practice includes reflexive thinking.
Risk	As defined by the International Organisation for Standardisation: a combination of the probability of occurrence of harm and the severity of that harm.
Risk management policy	A policy that articulates the setting approach to risk management and may include reference to dynamic benefit-risk assessment, the importance of risk taking in play and written benefit-risk assessment.
Safer recruitment	May also be known as safe recruitment and refers to DBS checks, following up on references and other practices that support the recruitment process. Guidance varies across the four nations.
SLLRRRP	Reflective practice model for dynamic benefit-risk assessment. Refers to Stop, Look, Listen, Reflect, React, Reflect, Practice.
Staff	Throughout the NOS, the term staff refers to staff within the setting whether paid or unpaid and may have a number of different roles (including non-playwork roles).

Supervision and appraisal	**Supervision:** a regular, planned process that supports employees to reflect on their work, manage responsibilities and wellbeing, and maintain safe and effective practice. **Appraisal:** a formal review of an employee's performance over a set period, used to recognise achievements, identify development needs and agree future objectives.
Support and facilitate	Interconnected terms used in the Playwork Principles to describe the ways that playworkers work with playing children. Support and facilitate are deeply rooted in the Playwork Principles. **Support:** in respect of playwork practice, support refers to the child-led, relational and responsive way in which playworkers practice. **Facilitate:** in respect of playwork practice, facilitate means to protect and enhance the play process by creating and maintaining the conditions in which children can play freely, without directing, controlling or imposing adult agendas on their play.
Team	People that you work closely with towards a shared objective. This can be either in your own organisation, critical friends or other playwork colleagues.
Trauma-informed practice	Trauma informed practice is an approach to working with people that recognises the widespread impact of trauma, understands how trauma can affect behaviour, relationships and wellbeing, and actively seeks to avoid re-traumatisation by creating environments that are safe, respectful and empowering.
Unconscious bias	Unconscious bias refers to the automatic, unintentional assumptions, attitudes or stereotypes that influence how we perceive, understand and respond to other people without conscious awareness.
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Wellbeing	State of being comfortable, healthy or happy.

For academic citation purposes, this glossary should be referenced as:
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