

Hayes, Tracy ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6330-6520> (2017) Playful practitioners: playing along with children and young people, in and with nature. In: 20th International Play Association (IPA) Triennial World Conference, 13-16 September 2017, Calgary, Alberta, Canada. (Unpublished)

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Tracy Hayes, Lecturer & Researcher
Playful Practitioners

Playing along with Children & Young People, in and with Nature

"You really get stuck in, don't you?" I look at the mother as she speaks, and laugh as I nod. I can't disagree as a 'high ten' in celebration of making some magnificent mud pies has just resulted in me being spattered from head to toes in mud from her child's muddy fingers.

The mud pies really were magnificent. We hadn't intended to make them, it was supposed to be a natural art activity. The gardener had scooped some mud from the bottom of the beck (the Cumbrian name for a stream). We'd started off by making animals from the sticky mud, leaves and twigs. I made some funny faces to stick to tree trunks – a couple of children copied me, making their own versions.

Some of the parents were standing together, clearly relishing the company of other adults whilst their children played. Two more children came over to join us. Their parents encouraged them, *"It's ok, you can get muddy. You can clean up later."* Reluctant to put their hands in the bucket of mud, they asked me to scoop some out for their children. I passed each child a handful, then moved aside, watching from a distance. Their parents watched from even further away.

One child moved to the picnic table and began making swirly patterns in the mud, with a stick she had found. That looked fun. I scooped up some more mud and joined her. PLOP! I dropped some of the wet mud on the table, and started making a pie. 'Hmm... a bit thin...' PLOP! I added some more mud. The girl looked at me and announced, *"You like that sound, don't you?"* I grinned in response and PLOP! I dropped some more. She laughed out loud. The we each carried on, doing our own thing, side by side, in silence (with the occasional swish and plop of mud being moved).

"Time to pack up," We were both startled by the words of the other volunteer. We'd lost all sense of time. Looking at each other, we grinned at the mess on the table, the state of our hands. *"That was fun,"* she said, *"Look at my patterns."* I looked, *"Well done,"* I said, *"High Five."* We gently slapped hands. Her bigger sister appeared, showing me what she had made. *"High Ten,"* she said to me.

SMACK! SPLATTER! We laugh.

Further information

My poster uses a short story and refers to the 'Play Cycle' (Howard & McInnes, 2013) to explore issues relevant to the play community, including:

- Playfulness in practice: what does this look like?
- Playfulness in research: playful methodological approaches to gathering and presenting data.

I believe there is a need for playful, creative approaches that allow children and young people to have fun and to feel comfortable being in nature, rather than always doing things to, in and for nature.

The role of the facilitator is key: effective communication – direct and indirect - is vital. If we say one thing, but do another, what message are we communicating?

Keywords: Playfulness; Creativeness; Responsiveness; Belonging; Comfort; Story; Nature; Outdoor Learning.

For more about me and my work, please see www.makingsenseofnature.co.uk **or email me:** tracy.hayes@cumbria.ac.uk

Reference: Howard, J. and McInnes, K. (2013) *The Essence of Play*. Oxon: Routledge

Discussion Points

Being a role model...
Play partners...
Effective communication...

Discussion Points

Play cues given...
received...
responded to...

Discussion Points

Making memories...
Muddy Moments...
Play terminated...
or is it?