

**A Practitioner's Guide
to
OUTDOOR PLAY BASED LEARNING**

Ok to Play

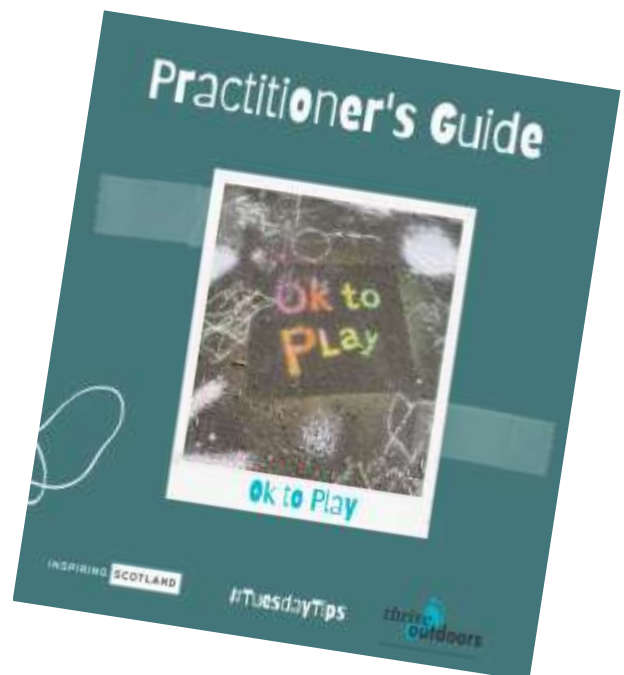
**Guest Blogger : Susan Humble,
Play Development Officer,
East Lothian Play Association**

This week's guest blog is from Susan Humble- Play Development Officer at East Lothian Play Association. In this blog she discusses how eye-catching "Ok to play" signs are popping up all over East Lothian promoting children's right to play and East Lothian Play Association (ELPA) top tips for getting your play message out there.

Ok to Play!

ELPA is always keen to share the importance of play and children's views on play. "Ok to play", our latest project, has created positive play signs encouraging children to play in parks, local spaces and green spaces across East Lothian this summer. The colourful banners are complemented by professionally made stencils for chalk spraying so that the project has an exciting edgy feel taking the message out temporarily to paths and pavements.

ELPA believes play has an important role to support recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic, which has caused children loss, uncertainty and to lead their lives under major restrictions. Play gives children a chance to reconnect with friends, to feel in control, work through emotions, have a break and importantly to have fun. All of this means we wanted to give a clear signal to adults and children in communities that it is ok to play.



Conversations on play messages

Children at Pinkie St Peters Primary School in Musselburgh told us what they think about existing signage in public spaces and how it makes them feel. All the children really disliked “No ball games” signs and felt they should be taken down. They told us it wasn’t just about ball games, the signs made them feel “unwelcome”.

“If we feel unwelcome, we’re more likely to stay home and play computer games”.

We learned from these conversations that we need to work harder so that children feel welcome to play in public spaces. Play, especially outdoor play, has a wide range of health and wellbeing benefits, there is a need to provide spaces for children to play every day.



The children we worked with came up with a design brief for the new signs to be “colourful, clear, positive and welcoming” and came up with the “okay to play” central message and bold green ‘tick’. Weather drawings reinforce the message that children need to play every day, whatever is happening with the weather.

The key messages on the “ok to play” signs are -

- **“Play gives you a break, from work, from, life, from everything”**
- **“Let your imagination run free”**
- **“When I play I feel funny, happy, cheerful, important.”**

Over the summer holidays, ELPA will be displaying more than 60 of the banners around East Lothian promoting play. Some of the signs will be displayed at community centres, libraries and play schemes; others will be part of ELPA’s pop up play and Play Rangers programme that is providing free, outdoor play sessions across East Lothian as part of #GetIntoSummerEL. Children at our sessions and play schemes have been encouraged to use chalk to add their own thoughts and messages about play.



We feel strongly about the importance of promoting play and as comments from the children have shown, there is a need to share this widely. The more people who share the message, the stronger it will be. Here are our top tips for sharing your play message.

Top Tips – Sharing your play message

Involve children in designing your campaign and collecting ideas.

Children are powerful advocates for play as they are passionate and insightful. You will find their enthusiasm is contagious! Talk to children about why play is important and how they would like to spread this message.

Some children are confident talking to adults, others may prefer to talk to another child. You may find children are confident and comfortable using digital technologies, and as long as permissions are in place, this can be a quick and direct way to collect children's views.

When consulting with children, provide a range of ways to take part. Writing or drawing may work for some children, modelling or building for others. Chalk, large sheets of plastic with paint pens, post-it notes to add to a map are some fun ways to encourage children to take part. Create a safe, welcoming space where children have plenty of time to share their ideas.

Ask children about their feelings. Some of our most powerful feedback has been when children are invited to share feelings about play and play spaces.

Remember to follow up on your conversations with children - let them know about anything you create or do as a result, and any feedback you receive.

Make it visual with photography

Photography is a simple way to document play. Before taking any photographs or videos, ensure permissions are in place. If possible, allow children to take photographs too. Here are a few tips for photographing children's play.

- Be patient – first observe, take your time and take photos when it is meaningful.
- Be purposeful - have a reason for taking the photo and focus on that.
- Consider perspective – it is often best to photograph children down at their level however, changing the camera angle may also offer an interesting perspective.



- Capture movement – blurred photos are effective to show movement and action.
- Capture expression - capturing emotions may be more effective than writing about them and enable discussion with the child
- Tell stories - you may not even need children in your photos. Take photos of things the children are interested in.
- When permissions are not in place, you can take photographs that do not identify children, or document the traces of play left behind – for example things they've made, marks on the ground.
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Keep it simple

An image with a simple quote or some text can sometimes give a lot of information and be enough to grab people's attention.

Doodles and illustrations can be effective ways to capture the energy of children's play and show themes.

Children's own words can really be powerful. One of ELPA's favourite quotes from our projects is "When I play, I feel like the best kid in the world."

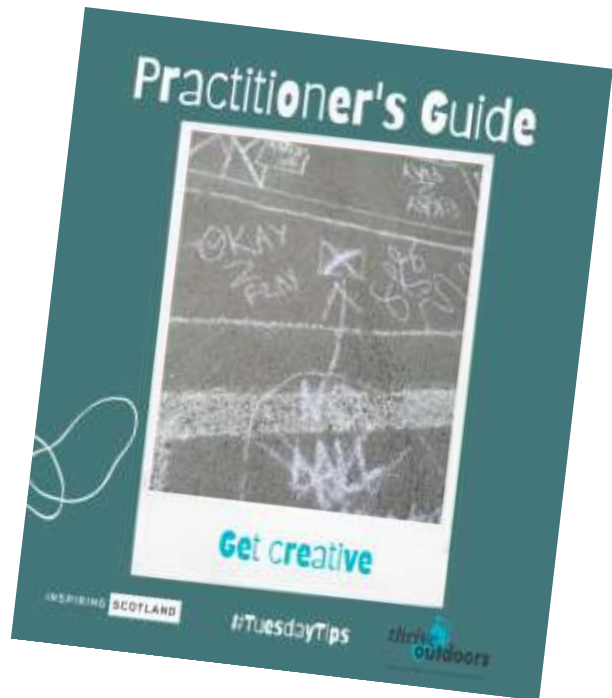
If you hear something brilliant like that, write it down!

We love children's drawings and writing. To show them off to the best effect, it can be good to work with someone with the right design skills. This could be someone within your team or a professional designer. Our senior Play Ranger, Ethan does lots of this as he understands children's play and also knows how to combine the children's ideas with professional design.

The pandemic has challenged ELPA to think differently and to increase our use of social media to reach people. For example, we redesigned a report into a short series of tweets; we created films of play tips for families. These formats can have a wider reach than a written report and then direct people to more information.

Think about your audiences

This one is plural as you may have more than one audience and you may need to use different methods to reach different people. Start by making a list of the different people you would like to reach, your goals and the different communication methods that work best for them.



Create newsworthy stories

With so much online, it's easy to forget the power of traditional media like local and national newspapers, community radio and TV. A well-worded press release may attract their attention and be a good way to reach a different audience with your play message. You can suggest a photo opportunity if you have suitable activities or take good quality photos and offer to send them. Include a strong headline that sums up your message, and some direct quotes from children and relevant adults. Try to think what the questions might be so you can provide the information – if in doubt go for 'what, where, when, why, how!' Keep a press release short and to the point – you need to capture a journalist's interest in the first paragraph.

About ELPA

East Lothian Play Association (ELPA) works to promote a culture of play across East Lothian. During the Covid-19 pandemic, we quickly started to explore alternative ways to reach families and spark play. Some of the things we created are a playful storybook, play boxes of resources, online play challenges, social media campaigns and packs of Play Challenge Cards. We are delighted that this work was recognised with an international Right to Play in Times of Crisis Award.

ELPA supports schools to introduce loose parts play and is part of a European ERASMUS+ loose parts research project. Funded by Scottish Government's Organised Community Play Fund, we run a Play Rangers Project in several East Lothian locations.



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