

# play associate's guide



## before you start playing

Please make sure that anyone working with your Imagination Playground set reads the User Manual carefully and completes our free online training session. Once you have taken our training session, this guide can serve as a reference that summarizes our training materials. For more information contact us at:

[contactus@imaginationplayground.com](mailto:contactus@imaginationplayground.com)  
or our toll-free number 1.678.604.7466

For current playground safety standards, please refer to the national standards set by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC)\*. A Certified Playground Safety Inspector (CPSI) program is offered by the National Recreation and Park Association and the National Playground Safety Institute. Visit [www.nrpa.org](http://www.nrpa.org) for more information, or write to: 22377 Belmont Ridge Road, Ashburn, VA 20148-4501, or call: 1.800.626.NRPA (6772)

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## what we're all about

Imagination Playground encourages unstructured, child-directed free play—the kind of play that experts say is critical to a child's intellectual, social, physical, and emotional development. This section will explain key ideas behind Imagination Playground, the importance of play for children, and how a Play Associate facilitates play.

### three core elements to imagination playground

Imagination Playground is designed to allow for different types of play and to give children the freedom to make up and pursue their own play activities. With Loose Parts as the main focus, three key elements are essential to our play concept:

#### loose parts

A changing collection of moveable objects lets children make each play session a new experience. Using Imagination Playground Blocks, crates, found objects and other Loose Parts, children can build, make up stories and games, or just enjoy shapes, colors, and texture.

#### manipulable environment

Children play most creatively in settings they can manipulate. Imagination Playground, which is ideal for use with sand and water, lets children design and re-design the space around them.

#### play associates

Play Associates are trained adults who oversee an open setting where children can direct their own play. They maintain a safe, welcoming environment, and manage the collection of Imagination Playground Blocks and other Loose Parts.

## play and playwork

### what is play?

When we say “play,” we mean free play. This kind of play involves unstructured activity that children choose and direct on their own—very likely what you find children doing during school recess. Activities like climbing, building sand castles, and playing hide-and-seek or make-believe are all forms of free play; organized sports like soccer or volleyball are not.

We want to clarify our definition of “play” because many people consider any enjoyable activities that are not directly related to chores or schoolwork to be “play” (for example talking to friends, watching television, participating in an orchestra, or playing video games).

Play is fundamental to imagination and creativity. Noted pediatrician and psychiatrist Donald Winnicott says that in a play space, children have the ability and power to transform their dreams into reality.

### why is play important?

Play is the primary means through which young children develop. When allowed to direct and conduct their own play, children may broaden their experiences, increase their levels of imagination, expand their linguistic abilities, exercise their physical and mental strength, and improve their dexterity.

Children develop their thinking through social interaction. Contrary to popular ideas that children learn only through adults, their interaction with each other in play has enormous value. A simple game of hide-and-seek, for example, prompts children to anticipate potential problems and their solutions, and to think spatially.

Playing in a group setting also gives children opportunities to develop and refine social skills. As children play they have conversations with each other, practicing the way they communicate (for example, “What do you call the stick that holds the wheel on a car?”). Play can increase levels of cooperation, negotiation, conflict resolution, and other interpersonal skills necessary to succeed as an adult.

Symbolic or pretend play helps children understand their environment, putting language, emotion, movement, and social dynamics into a context they can grasp. When children play, they often replicate real life. They dress up, pretend to be adults, and make up rhymes. The act of play, it seems, allows children to comprehend the actions they imitate.

## **loose parts play**

Imagination Playground provides a rich environment that encourages free play and a variety of play patterns. Imagination Playground Blocks and other Loose Parts offer opportunities for creativity and sensory exploration as well as opportunities for collaborative play. Here are some further details of why Loose Parts play is valuable to children’s learning and development:

### **logic/mathematical skills**

Logic and math skills may develop as children construct with blocks. Loose Parts play provides opportunities to count, make classifications, and estimate (for example, “To make the steps look right, I need to add one Block to each stack as I go.”).

## **imagination**

Through symbolic play, children begin to form meanings for objects in their minds, and act those meanings out through gestures or by substituting items for something else. With Loose Parts, you see kids playing with objects that are similar in shape to the object they are pretending to use. They also exercise their ability to imagine and envision, creating their own structures and spaces, dreaming up scenarios and roles, and initiating their own activities.

## **problem solving**

When children build their own constructions with Loose Parts, they set up problems for themselves and invent solutions (for example, “I need a heavy weight on the back of my diving board to hold it steady.”).

## **social/emotional development**

Through play, children have opportunities to empathize with others, support one another, and develop inter and intrapersonal skills (for example, “Are you afraid it will fall? Here, I will make the bottom stronger.”). Playing together with a finite supply of materials also requires children to master the art of negotiation. For example, if children are working together to build a house they must negotiate which Blocks will be used and how they will be placed.

## a little history

The Imagination Playground concept takes inspiration from Adventure Playgrounds, which began in Europe following World War II. These playgrounds were created from the rubble of buildings that had been destroyed during the war.

The first Adventure Playgrounds — then known as “junk playgrounds” — were developed by Danish landscape architect C. Th. Sørensen in the late 1930s. He devised this new scheme to accommodate the needs of children to “create and shape, dream and imagine a reality.” Children used these sites to play in a variety of ways, using hammers, pick axes, scrap wood, ropes, and metal to dig and construct as they liked. These playgrounds were tended by workers who kept the tools and building materials on the site of an Adventure Playground. These “playworkers” inspired the concept of Play Associates.

For more information on Playworkers or Adventure Playgrounds, please visit:  
[www.allianceforchildhood.org/playwork](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/playwork).



## the role of the play associate

Play Associates maintain the safety of the Imagination Playground space and facilitate play. Play Associates must take part in Imagination Playground training sessions for an introduction into the concepts behind Imagination Playground, their daily responsibilities, ways in which they can foster free play experiences for children, as well as the importance of unstructured play in a child's development.

Play Associates set up and step back. They manage the play space and the Loose Parts, and they are responsible for making daily safety checks of the entire site. Play Associates should not direct play or teach children how to use the objects or environment, though they might occasionally demonstrate the use of materials from the sidelines. What children do will be the result of their natural curiosity and urge to play.

### play associates facilitate play by:

- Setting the initial stage for children to play
- Observing children's play and identifying needed resources or problems by listening to and observing the children
- Sometimes animating play ideas by modestly demonstrating different play possibilities and uses of materials from the sidelines
- Building relationships with children and parents
- Promoting fair and caring behavior by their own demonstration, and by gently intervening in conflicts when necessary
- Encouraging choice and presenting opportunities for children to extend their play
- Encouraging teamwork
- Ensuring a safe and hygienic environment

## play sessions

### ratios of children to staff

As a general guideline, we recommend a Play Associate-to-child ratio of no less than one Play Associate to twenty children for ages five through twelve years old. With children under five, we recommend a higher Play Associate-to-child ratio. Imagination Playground is intended for children ages two and up.

### crowding and age groups

Imagination Playground was intended to appeal to a broad range of ages, and we find that children of mixed ages enjoy collaborating with our Loose Parts. In some cases, however, when there are a large number of children of varying ages at play, it may be more appropriate to create a separate area for younger children so that they aren't excluded or pushed to the sides by the older children. Play Associates can create a low, simple barrier with Blocks and objects for children under five. Another simple method is to mark out areas on the ground with chalk labeled "Children Under Five" and "Children Over Five."

### play session safety

Imagination Playground should always be used in a secure and safe environment for children to play. Imagination Playground Blocks and Loose Parts are intended for children ages two and up. Always follow all applicable safety rules and procedures with Imagination Playground. Parents or caregivers should always be present during play sessions.

Monitor where the materials are taken, and be sure they are not deposited within the bounds of the active areas of a playground including areas with fixed play equipment, where they could be a hazard to running and sliding children. Play sessions may become active and boisterous. Be watchful and ready to step in and give direction. Encourage children to take turns and share. If there are too many Blocks and Loose Parts in the given area, put some away.

### please be aware of particular safety issues:

- Make sure that all materials offered for play are age appropriate
- Do not allow children to stand on or jump off of stacked Blocks
- Do not allow ropes and fabrics to be used on fixed equipment or tied around children to avoid the possibility of strangulation
- If you use sand, do not allow the children to throw sand
- If you have a sand box in the play area, limit the number of children in the sand box

### checklist

You should always conduct a safety and maintenance check before and after each play session.

- Check that the play area is safe (We recommend using CPSC standards for this purpose). You can download a CPSC safety manual through the following link: <http://www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/pubs/325.pdf>. You may also request one by phone through the CPSC consumer hotline: 1.800.638.2772 (TTY 1.301.595.7054).
- Remove garbage, sharp objects, or debris from the site and from any sand
- Check that the wheels, brakes, and locks on your Imagination Playground Box or Cart are working properly
- Ensure there are no entanglement hazards such as broken hooks or protruding bolts
- Make sure there are no sharp points, corners, or edges on your Imagination Playground Box, Cart or Bag, Blocks, or Loose Parts. Storage units should be free of damage, both inside and outside.
- Ensure that there are no puddles or pooling water inside your Imagination Playground Box, Cart, or Bag.
- Make sure to lock all wheels on your Imagination Playground Box or Cart before each play session, and after positioning them for storage
- Know who are the key point people who can come to your assistance or call for help, and have their emergency contact information readily available.

## beginning a play session

Start your session by creating an open environment, flush with points of inspiration. For instance, you could set up one or two configurations of Loose Parts in the play area to initiate new creations. Configurations should be abstract and non-specific, so that children can apply their own stories and ideas.

## encouraging self-directed play

A Play Associate can best encourage independent thinking by responding to questions or requests for help, and allowing children to create themes, stories, and games for themselves.

## providing inspiration

On occasion, Play Associates can discretely inspire new potential uses for materials by quietly using them on the sidelines. If no children are building structures, for instance, you might construct a small shelter of fabric draped over columns made of Blocks. You might create a small waterfall using a stack of chutes. The key is to modestly demonstrate rather than to direct so that children have the choice to draw from your examples into their play if they wish.

## ending a play session

As a Play Associate it is important to understand how to close out a play session to avoid making the children feel rushed.

- Let the children know that cleanup time is coming ten minutes in advance. You might ask them to help gather the Blocks and other Loose Parts, and sort them into stacks outside your storage unit. Allow approximately 20 minutes for cleanup before closing for the day.
- Empty vessels containing water
- Follow Safety and Maintenance Checklists
- Rake through sand, remove any refuse, and secure the lid.

## tips for supporting children's play

- Provide developmentally appropriate materials: a variety of materials that provide a challenge without being too difficult for children. Make sure the materials are safe and age appropriate.
- Observe how your children play to help you understand what inspires them and how to encourage them. Notice how children are interacting with each other and the materials. If a child typically follows the lead of others and one day announces a game of her own, this signals a new development in her play.
- Stage materials prior to the start of a play session in a fun, creative way that children can mirror and build upon. During the play session, you may want to add materials that support the children's play. Be sure to place the objects close enough so that they can find them, but not so close that you interrupt their play.
- Encourage children to help each other. If a child wants help building a boat, refer him to another child who has built a boat in the past.
- Promote opportunities for peer play. Sometimes, a child will struggle to enter into play with the others. As a Play Associate you can suggest roles ("Would you like to deliver the mail to other students?") or ask the group what roles the new child could play ("What could Jessica be? A lion, a zoo keeper?"). Allow them to negotiate what role the child will take on.

There is no better way to understand play than by taking time to enjoy some play time for yourself! Play sessions for Play Associates alone can help you and your team to engage further with your children, and also to give you great new ideas to incorporate into play session with your kids.

## references

- British Adventure Play  
[www.adventureplay.org.uk](http://www.adventureplay.org.uk)
- The Alliance for Childhood  
[www.allianceforchildhood.org](http://www.allianceforchildhood.org)
- The Free Play Network  
[www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk)
- Imagination Playground  
[www.imaginationplayground.com](http://www.imaginationplayground.com)
- The Child Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College  
[www.slc.edu/cdi/index.php](http://www.slc.edu/cdi/index.php)
- Children's Play Information Service  
[www.ncb.org.uk/cpis/resources](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpis/resources)
- Skills Active: Playwork  
[www.skillsactive.com/playwork](http://www.skillsactive.com/playwork)
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## other recommended resources on play and play work

### books

- Forman, George E. and Fleet Hill (1984). *Constructive Play: Applying Piaget in the Preschool*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Louv, Richard (2008). *The Last Child in the Woods*. Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill.
- Piaget, Jean (1974). *To Understand Is to Invent*. New York City: The Viking Press

### web pages

- PlayEducation  
[www.played.dial.pipex.com](http://www.played.dial.pipex.com)
- Play England  
[www.playengland.org.uk](http://www.playengland.org.uk)
- PLAYLINK  
[www.playlink.org.uk](http://www.playlink.org.uk)
- Play Wales  
[www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk)
- Videatives Views  
[www.videatives.com](http://www.videatives.com)
- Youth Farms and Activity Playgrounds in Germany (BdJA):  
[www.bdja.org](http://www.bdja.org)
- Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood  
[www.commercialexploitation.org](http://www.commercialexploitation.org)
- Children's Play Information Service:  
[www.ncb.org.uk/cpis](http://www.ncb.org.uk/cpis)



- Free Play Network  
[www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk)
- International Play Association  
[www.ipaworld.org](http://www.ipaworld.org)
- PLACES for PLAY Exhibition  
[www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/playlink/exhibition/index.html](http://www.freeplaynetwork.org.uk/playlink/exhibition/index.html)
- Play Association Tower Hamlets  
[www.playtowerhamlets.org.uk](http://www.playtowerhamlets.org.uk)
- Playwork Partnerships  
[www.playwork.co.uk](http://www.playwork.co.uk)

## join the community of play associates

Once you and your Play Associates have read through the User Manual and taken our online training session, you're ready to start the fun. We'd love to hear about your experiences with Imagination Playground and your efforts to encourage free play. We invite you to join us as we work to bring free play to kids and communities across the nation and around the world. Become a part of our community of Play Associates and participate in our online forum at <http://www.imaginationplayground.com/purchase/welcome-play-associates/index.html>. For login information and any questions about Imagination Playground, please contact us at:

[contactus@imaginationplayground.com](mailto:contactus@imaginationplayground.com)

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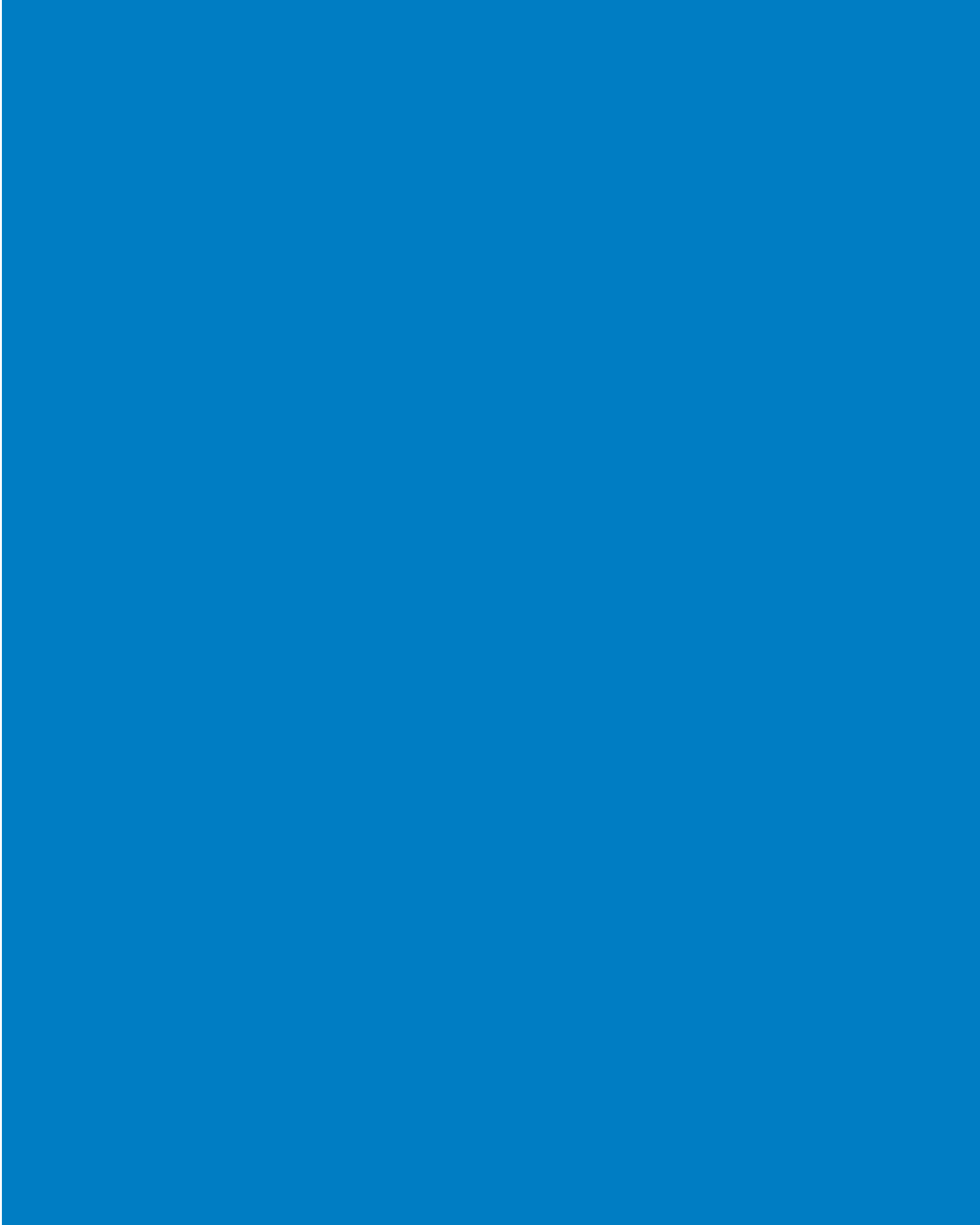
 [community.imaginationplayground.com](http://community.imaginationplayground.com)

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