

Play for Life

Play for Life was established to promote and encourage placing a greater value on the importance and benefits of play for children. As outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) in Article 31, all children have the right to play. Every child fosters a natural desire to play. It is considered by children to be the most important thing they do each day and therefore critical to the promotion of their holistic development and wellbeing. Play often surpasses any societal barriers such as age, ability, gender, race, religion and social standing, so therefore can be inclusive to all children. Overall then, play is critical to children's physical, social and emotional development and is central to a healthy child's life. To learn more, visit: <http://www.playforlife.org.au/>



Play for Life in action at Noble Park Primary School.

Governance

Play for Life is a not-for-profit organisation that was formed as a pilot in June 2010 in Victoria. A Board of Directors meets bi-monthly. More recently, three sub-committees of the Board have been established on finance, research and education, and fundraising. The Board developed very early in its establishment, out of the start-up phase of *Play for Life*. During this phase, board members had a greater hands-on role in establishing *Play for Life*. One of the board members, for example, drafted the business plan. The four founding board members have continued and the board now has seven members, including a principal of one of its partner schools.

An important "leg up" for *Play for Life* in the very early days was the three year recurrent

funding received in their first year from the R E Ross Trust. This was significant in that it is notoriously difficult to attract multi-year funding in a start up phase. Social Ventures also provided some seed funding and office space in the early days.

Having been in operation now for nearly three years, *Play for Life* is undergoing another transition as it develops its growth strategy for expansion into other states. They have put together a skills matrix to guide seeking out new board members.

Through our early days, we had a little bit of a road map thanks to two of our board being from Social Ventures Australia. This really helped us establish the initial business and strategic plan for 'Play for Life'. Did we make mistakes? Yes, but with the assistance of the board, it meant we were really disciplined around finance, staffing and identifying what impact 'Play for Life' was trying to achieve. (Marylou Verberne, CEO, Play for Life)

Innovation

Within a suite of activities, the Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools Program, featuring the *Play for Life* Pod or 'The Pod' is a key pillar program. The Pod is a modified shipping container filled with carefully selected high quality and clean materials that otherwise

Without a doubt, in all of my 25 plus years of working in disadvantaged schools, the Play for Life Pod is by far the most effective innovation I have seen. Every school should get one. (Stephen Wilkinson, Principal, Eastbourne Primary School, Victoria)

The first day they [the school] launch their Play for Life Pod, often any fears about 'risk' is outrun by the reality. The teachers are blown away. They see a different side of children at play in this way rather than in the classroom. They see children taking leadership roles, such as setting up an obstacle course for the other children. (Marylou Verberne, CEO, Play for Life)

would be destined for landfill. For example, car tyres, milk crates, telephones, fabric. Located on the primary school playground, The Pod provides an alternate play source for self-directed play for children. Audited once per term, materials within The Pod are checked for their cleanliness and refreshed to reflect different play needs for the children.

The school makes a financial contribution to establishment of the Creating Positive Playgrounds in Schools Program and *Play for Life* seeks philanthropic and other funding support for the rest.

Factors for effective engagement

(see all 10 factors on p. 22)



Most schools have little or no knowledge of what’s involved in working with a philanthropic. Similarly, philanthropics may not get a lot of opportunities to engage directly with schools. In this context, *Play for Life* finds that they can provide an important brokering and educative role between the two sectors. To facilitate this, they believe relationships based on trust are the most important factor. To develop trust, the CEO from *Play for Life* and the principal from a school discuss how the Positive Playgrounds Program will work in the school, ironing out any issues in the process. *Play for Life* also facilitates opportunities for the philanthropic to connect with the school. For example, philanthropics are invited to join the school for the launch celebration of The Pod.

Having effective communications can be a perennial challenge. If relationships based on

trust have been established, then this helps because, as Marylou, the CEO of *Play for Life* states, “I can ring the foundation and ask them for some guidance. This kind of ‘soft mentoring’ from the philanthropic is invaluable and again it’s not about over burdening them, it’s about benefitting from their experience in the sector and another perspective”. In addition to the CEO of *Play for Life* meeting with the principal, the organisation also gives a presentation to the school at a staff meeting. These are important forums to identify whether the school is ready to take on the Positive Playgrounds Program or what the barriers are,

before going in too far. There is an imperative on *Play for Life* to maximise the investment of the philanthropic dollar through the careful selection of partner schools. Some barriers to success are things like a particularly toxic working culture amongst the staff or rotating and unstable leadership or schools just looking for a “quick fix” to some very entrenched problems. A simple and clear partnership agreement, outlining what the school and *Play for Life* agree to do is signed by the principal and School Council president and the CEO of *Play for Life*.

Seeing the Pod in action was a terrific experience – the excitement on the children’s faces and the enthusiasm from the teachers and Principal demonstrated immediate impact. Building a highly engaged relationship with *Play for Life* has been rewarding and inspiring. By talking through challenges and opportunities, the learnings have been two-way with taking the time to develop openness, trust and transparency. (Philanthropic supporter Ruth Johnstone, Executive Director, Caledonia Foundation)

Models over time	Guiding principles and practices <i>Play for Life</i> uses to engage effectively with philanthropy and schools ...
<p>First wave</p>  <p>(<i>Play for Life</i> approaches philanthropic foundations)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>Conversations are critical:</i> The ability to meet face-to-face and have a conversation with someone from a philanthropic foundation or trust can be mutually beneficial. This is especially the case if you are in the start-up phase and are still working through an idea and how it could work, or when there is little understanding of the idea in the public domain.
<p>Second wave</p>  <p>(<i>Play for Life</i> and a school approaches a philanthropic or approaches a philanthropic who brokers connections with other philanthropics)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — <i>Keep communicating around what is expected from the relationship:</i> <i>Play for Life</i> brokers the relationship with a school first and then together they approach philanthropics or other funders. This helps clarify the purpose and objectives of the relationship with the school first, which in turn helps clarify this for a philanthropic.

Impact

After playing in the POD, I have all these ideas in my head so that when I go back into the classroom and my teacher asks me to write a story it is easy because the ideas are already there. (Grade 4 female primary school student)

What are the main outcomes?

Play for Life seeks to improve;

children's:

- access to self-directed creative play
- learning
- wellbeing
- confidence levels
- leadership and team work
- physical activity
- school attendance

principal and teacher;

- knowledge about the benefits of play
- overall school culture
- enjoyment of yard duty and classrooms through happier children
- teaching and learning
- knowledge about philanthropy in education

It's not just about 'play'. There is a broader purpose and network of people and opportunities that through the 'Play for Life' program, principals and students connect with. (Marylou Verberne, CEO, Play for Life)

Play for Life connects what it does with the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Play Australia* is the representative body on the International Play Association (IPA). In partnership, *Play for Life* and *Play Australia* seek to also bring about changes in Australia's position on play within the Convention.

How is information gathered?

In the pilot phase of *Play for Life*, the CEO and Board identified what to measure and what change was being sought. Each term *Play for Life* returns to a partner school and does a play analysis. As Marylou notes, "a play analysis we did showed that the time allowed for lunchtime play has increased from 20 minutes to 45 minutes. This shows that the staff are feeling more comfortable about having children playing and addressing some challenging behaviours that were manifesting on the playground. The teachers are more confident and those challenging behaviours are diminishing".

How do you share the information gathered and with whom?

A unique and creative way to gather and share information is through the Australia's Children's Play Summit, which was created by *Play for Life*. In partnership with *Play Australia*, *Play for Life* ran the Play Summit at the Melbourne Town Hall for the first time in 2012. At the Summit were 59 children, 'play summiteers' from primary schools across Victoria. Apart from a lot of fun, the Summit was curriculum aligned and through various processes of sharing, the group explored the importance of play and current barriers to playing that children experienced. The outcome was a 'Play Manifesto' presented to the Governor of Victoria and *Play Australia* at Government House at the Closing Ceremony on Day Two. The Manifesto created by the children was then formally presented to the President of International Play Association in Geneva, forming part of the discussions with the United Nations Committee on Rights of the Child. Another Summit is planned for 2013.