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## SMART IDEAS

This Guidance Sheet aims to provide further information on sustainable play activities which could contribute operate alongside your toy loan sessions. Primarily focusing on Smart Play's Network's Play in a Pod project as a relevant example, the following information will offer some suggestions on how to utilise the resources you have already obtained to create new 'free play' opportunities for children.

### What is Free Play?

Play is activity done freely by children for their own interest and enjoyment, and includes whatever children do because they want to - from riding a bicycle to building a den. Play usually implies some aspect of freedom. Children cannot be made to play, although if left alone play is something that will usually happen spontaneously. For example, a gap under a hedge might become the gateway to a foreign land, a rolled up piece of newspaper and a tennis ball might become the equipment for a new Olympic sport, or a cardboard box might become a racing car! This form of 'free play' can be distinguished from more structured activities, such as a game of football or playing on the computer, as it has no prior rules and leaves children to create their own imaginative worlds.

### The Benefits of Free Play

Free Play' is a great way to encourage children's imaginative skills and creativity, and is often an easy form of play to initiate, whether alongside the more structured toys and games of your library project or as a separate project entirely. The following list details some of the benefits of 'free play' for children:

- Promotes creativity and imagination.
- Aids development of social and cognitive skills.
- Enhances play experience resulting in reduced conflict, longer play times and improved behaviour.
- Innately encourages children to understand and manage risk.
- Compliments Curriculum for Excellence - helping children become successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens

### Play in a Pod

'Play in a Pod' is a play concept originated by Smart Play Network to provide children with free play opportunities and learning through a personalised 'play pod' filled with scrap material. The 'pod' is the container in which the scrap resources are stored, and the play is the activities that children create using those resources. The objective is for children to engage in 'free play' to exercise their own imagination.

'Play in a Pod' can take the form of any secure container such as a garden shed or shipping container, while the play resources inside are scrap materials that a child can manipulate using their imagination. This resource is a unique way for schools and communities to provide children with the opportunity to play freely at a very low cost, and in an environmentally sustainable way.

### Sustainable Materials and Play

Here are some suggestions of easy to obtain scrap materials which are great for 'free play' activities:

- **Car/Bike Tires** - Whether you have an old bike falling apart or make a trip to your local scrap yard; get your hands on some of these and the children will be thrilled!
- **Pallets** - Local shops or factories will often be the best place to find these and when you do they are perfect for building pretend rafts, boats and cars
- **Corrugated Pipes** - If there are any construction or roadwork sites nearby ask if they are throwing away some of these. Some of them are even big enough to crawl through!
- **Clothes Pegs** - When it comes to playing you don't want anything to hold you up. Pegs are perfect for quickly clipping fabric when building a den or costume.
- **Carpet** - Make it an occasion by adding a red carpet. Other colours are perfect for building houses too! Samples are often great for variety and easier to get hold of!
- **Plastic Bottles** - Bottles rockets, rain sticks, floats or craft creations - the list is endless!



## Play in a Pod Case Study

This model has been implemented in across a wide range of schools in Scotland. Below details a case study from a Dundee school.

### Beforehand play experience

- Persistent bickering and boredom occurred during playtime.
- Football dominated (and thus disrupted) a large portion of the playground.
- There was a scarcity of play resources, partially due to behavioural issues (e.g., restricted use of skipping ropes given inappropriate use).
- Toys offered were often quickly exhausted or easily broken.
- The playground was divisive between age groups and gender.
- Wet play times were spent inside.

### What we did

The school acquired its shipping container pod with our assistance - we funded a year long lease on a vandal-proof shipping container. We further provided a graffiti workshop to design and decorate the pod to the students' specifications. With our guidance, students then identified scrap materials and arranged regular scrap drop offs with local businesses. We further worked with teachers and pupils in the playground to introduce the concept of free play and the scrap/natural materials, also providing training to all school staff.



### Outcome

We regularly met with head teachers and key staff to discuss Pod progress along with any difficulties and challenges along the way, providing advice and support as necessary. After five months, the following developments occurred:

- Playground behaviour improved when using the pod.
- No divides during playtime - all children played together.
- The 'Pod's' high demand acts as an incentive during class time.
- Children are more imaginative and are no longer stressed about breaking or losing play resources.
- Children who otherwise find it difficult to integrate excel when playing with the pod.
- Wet playtimes are now spent outside.
- Playground assistants better understand the importance of free play and risk in play after training.
- Teachers utilise the Pod as an outdoor learning resource

### A Community Pod

In a community setting, we have identified that a Pod could be shared by a number of groups and agencies working with children. The Pod, as a shared resource would be utilised to its full potential and have the ability to deliver positive outcomes for a high number of children.

### Smart Play Network Members Support

Member you have access to telephone and email support. For more information about the topics covered in this guidance sheet, or any other queries you may have about your group, please contact us using: 0131 554 2620 or [admin@smartplaynetwork.org](mailto:admin@smartplaynetwork.org)

It is free to be a member of Smart Play Network, for more information on how to become a member please refer to our website: [www.smartplaynetwork.org](http://www.smartplaynetwork.org).