



vlaamse dienst  
speelpleinwerk

# Speelpleintermen en inhoud in het Engels

## 1. Een kort overzicht van veel gebruikte termen

- Vlaamse Dienst Speelpleinwerk (VDS) vzw  
= Flemisch Playground Service
- 500 speelpleinwerkingen in Vlaanderen en Brussel  
= 500 animated playgrounds in Flanders and Brussels.
- Animator = volunteer playworker
- Hoofdanimator = teamleader playworker
- Instructeur = trainer playworker

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Opgelet!

Playworker in het buitenland bestaat ook als studiekeuze.

Vandaar wij meestal spreken over 'volunteer playworker' om duidelijk te maken dat dit op 'vrijwillige' basis gebeurt. Playworkers in het buitenland zijn volwassenen, bij ons zijn dat jongeren. Ook dat maak je best duidelijk om misverstanden te vermijden.

## 2. Open speelaanbod

An open system to play

*VDS vzw (Flemisch Playground Service) is a supporting organization for almost 500 animated playgrounds in Flanders and Brussels. Our advice, trainings and support are based on a strong and expanded vision on play. This vision starts from the concept of leisure time and sees play as pure free and fun time for children. 'Play, just for the sake of play' is the core concept. On an animated playground, children should have the freedom to play what they want.*

*We translated this vision for the playground practice and developed (through years of practical experience) a method of an 'open system to play'. This method is based on two core concepts: variety in play and freedom of choice. We use a combination of spontaneous and organized play to offer different play opportunities to children: free play with impulses, play spaces, open activities... The combination of this ways to play offers children a complete package of chances to play intensely and free and therefore a great holiday time on the playgrounds. This method can inspire playworkers who want to give children this great holiday feeling on their playground!*

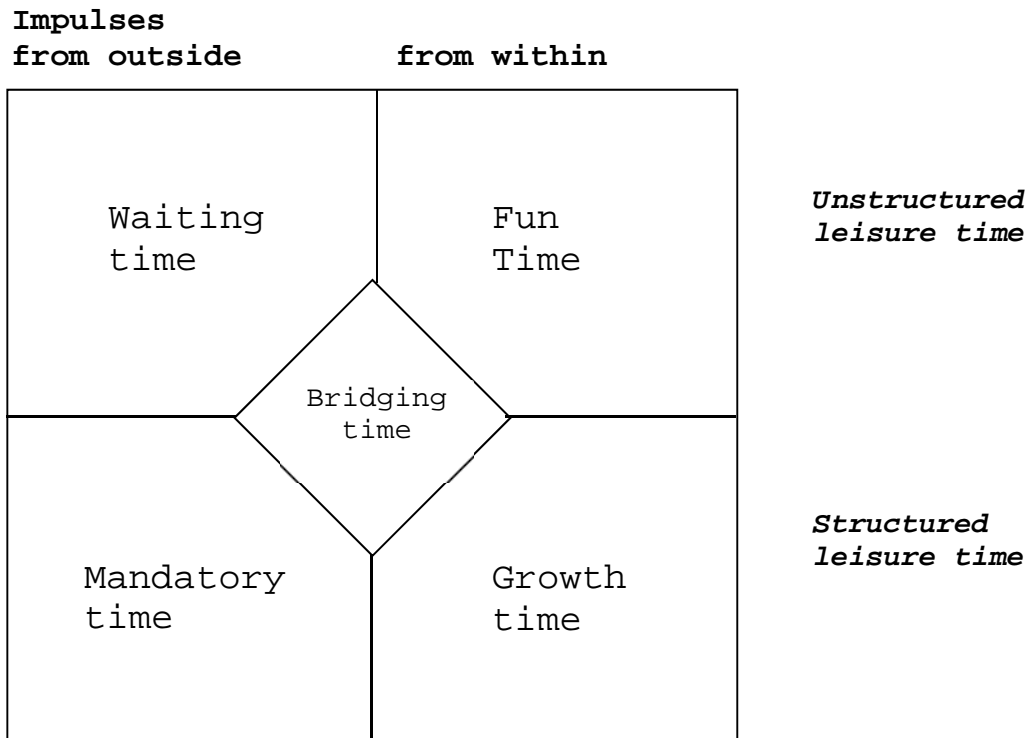
## 3. VDS visie op vrije tijd

Leisure Time

By leisure time we understand in a large sense the time children are not at school. A certain comparison can be made with the adult experience of time. The time we do not spend working,

is leisure time. Adults perceive this as leisure time because, in principle, they are not obliged to do anything or in any case they have the option to postpone a certain task.

If we extend this comparison, we can map the time children are not at school, leisure time, in the following scheme:



We examine this scheme now more in detail:

**Impulses:** by this we understand the way a child perceives its time. If the impulses are coming from within, then the child chooses itself to spend his time. The child recognizes the importance of this time and likes it. If the impulses come from outside, the child is forced by someone else to spend this time.

**Structured time:** here we mean pre-defined time, a well defined purpose and a clear pattern. The time is spent at a location, e.g. a gym, and for so long, e.g. 60 minutes. Unstructured time is not pre-defined in duration and location.

With this classification, leisure time can be divided in five different types, each with a clear different content.

- **Mandatory time:** this means that children participate in structured leisure time where they do not see the meaning of it. It is forced upon them and children would not opt for it if they had a choice: go along visiting an unknown aunt, visiting the museum of arts, tidying up their bedroom, occasionally learn to play an instrument.
- **Waiting time** is the time on which we have little control, and where we depend on others: waiting at the doctor, in the traffic jam, queuing in the shop, mammy is chatting to a friend in the street, etc. An important feature is that the children have not chosen themselves to wait. We notice an important difference with ...
- **Bridging time.** That is time when children in their own chosen leisure time activities, are confronted with the fact that for a short period of time they do not know what to

do. Their friend is gone, they have just finished a game, they just read a comic book ... and they fall for a moment into a hole. The distinction here is that children can place the fact that they have nothing to do and have the choice what to do next. Therefore they can control how long this bridging time will last.

- **Growth time** is the time in which children choose to participate in a structured offer. They do so because they like it and they are keen to develop themselves: the art academy, the youth organization, the sports club, music school ...
- **Fun time** is the time when children fill in their leisure time in an unstructured way. Their leisure time is 'open'. It's sheer enthusiasm. They can manage time themselves. A friend comes over to play, they make a trip on the bike, they are just watching TV, they play a board game, etc. It is typical for those activities that they are self-selected and have no direct use. They are just fun to do, it is free to do as long as you like or are able to.

Within this framework playground activities can be catalogued under growth time or mandatory time. Playground activities are a clearly defined structured time (there is a starting and ending time, there is a clear location). It is less evident from where the impulses start. Sometimes the parents decide whether the child goes to the playground. In that case the time spent on the playground is to be put under mandatory time. On the other hand the VDS assumes that many children like to come to the playground and would opt for it, even if they would not be forced to go. Playground activities are therefore to be placed within growth time.

The scheme referred to above, is a way to classify the leisure time of children and to understand it better through the eyes of adults. But in our view children have a different opinion. On the one hand it is stated that children experience their childhood as a long playtime. On the other hand research has shown that children make the difference between school and leisure time. They can be outraged when a teacher continues teaching once the school bell has rung and all other children are already on the playground. They are annoyed at homework because in that way they take school home. They would prefer not to think of school after school time (Van Gils, 1991).

So, what is going on here? These two distinctive perspectives allow us to think about the way children look at their leisure time. What is leisure time for children?

### Leisure time according to children

The VDS believes that leisure time for children is the time outside the school and which they can fill in with a meaning themselves. This is the time they are searching for fun. Sometimes children succeed to have fun within this leisure time and sometimes it does not work, but they will try anyway to have fun. This perception aspect is for the VDS an essential part of leisure time of children.

By way of speaking we cut in half the scheme above if we look at it from a children's point of view. This makes sense: a child considers mandatory time or waiting time not as leisure time. The VDS believes that children only see something as leisure time if they can give a sense to it. An example: soccer training is for children who give a meaning to it clearly to be classified in the leisure sphere. Children who are forced to attend will not experience the soccer training as leisure time.

An important nuance is that leisure time is not always equal to fun. Leisure time as well can be boring and annoying. Inverted one could state that 'non leisure time' is not equal to 'non pleasant time'. A child can also have great fun at school. But in leisure time one strives for pleasure, one can strive for pleasure and there is great potential to have pleasure.

The difference lies in the perception of the children and if they experience it as leisure time. For the VDS, leisure time is something dynamic. It is possible that mandatory time moves towards leisure time as suddenly, the child discovers pleasure and that time after all can be fun.

Later on, the child considers this time as leisure time. An example: a family party where there are no children present, will previously not be seen as leisure time but rather as mandatory time. But let's suppose that you are placed next to a funny uncle who plays with you all the time and who does pleasant things, then it would turn into a lovely afternoon. As a child you start getting pleasure and the afternoon becomes meaningful. You will consider this time as leisure time.

Another example: the first time you go to a playground, you don't know what to expect. You are prepared for the worst and you don't consider this as leisure time, you have to do it and absolutely, you do not want to do it. But after one day, you noticed that there is a lot of fun and from that moment on you love to go. The remaining part of the holidays you will look at the playground as leisure time.

### **The importance of leisure time for playground activities**

From the adult perspective one can only state that playground activities are leisure time. Because going to the playground is not going to school. Depending on the child, one can say that it is mandatory time (you have to go), waiting time (nothing interesting is happening), growth time (a particular game is a challenge for you) or fun time (you play what you love to play). From the children's perspective one can clearly understand that they do not always consider the playground as leisure time. Many children have to go to the playground, without liking it or they think it is not (always) fun.

To achieve a correct notion of leisure time we must combine the two stories. The mature and the children's approach towards leisure time differ. It is all about the content of a notion and how it is experienced. Therefore it is a 'and'-story with the sole aim to understand better how children look at playground activities. Is the playground leisure time for them or not? Now we can answer the question much better: for some children the playground is leisure time, for others it is not and for others it depends: are their friends also there, is there a nice animator, is my favourite game played, can we choose what to play, etc.

## **4. Diversiteit en inclusie op het speelplein**

*VDS vzw (Flemish Playground Service) is a supporting organization for almost 500 animated playgrounds in Flanders and Brussels. A playground is a meeting place for all children who want to play in their free time. One of the core concepts in our support is accessibility of playgrounds: every child should be able to access a playground and to join in the play opportunities.*

*Our organization offers training, coaching and support to make playgrounds more accessible for all children. A vision on diversity is the starting point, both 'every child is unique' as different target groups (handicapped children, children with less opportunities, multilingual children) are part of this vision. We start a change process with the playground team and try to involve them as main actors. In this process, we organize meetings, trainings and observations. We give the team tools to change for example the external communication, the play system, the role of the animator, the registration system, networking. This leads to a profound change fit to the needs of the local context, because the playground team and the animators are the main actors in the process,. The playground adapts in various ways to different children and becomes an "inclusive" playground where every child can find play opportunities fit on their capacities.*

## INTRODUCTION

VDS recognizes and supports **children's right to play**. This right belongs to every child. This is why VDS supports animated playgrounds to be accessible to every child that belongs to the neighborhood of the playground. The playgrounds are supposed to be an accessible way to work with children, since they are located in and are directed to a specific neighborhood.

With diversity as one of the priorities, VDS supports animated playgrounds in being **accessible for every child**. VDS starts from the vision that every child is unique and has its own needs, possibilities and challenges. Besides this, VDS also focuses on different target groups. Efforts need to be done to make animated playgrounds accessible for these target groups, because these are the groups that are less likely to profit from what the playground supplies normally.

The support VDS offers, implies supporting a change process towards more awareness and the **decreasing of barriers** on animated playgrounds. VDS wants to simulate playgrounds to think about how they can adapt their expectations and how they can offer support in a way that every child can participate on the playground.

In the first part of this paper I will describe the vision of VDS on diversity and on the different target groups that VDS wants to reach on animated playgrounds. In the second part I will describe how this vision is brought into practice, by describing some good practices on animated playgrounds.

## VISION: INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

### 1. Diversity on the playground

When we talk about the right of every child to play, this implies that a diversity of children can get access to the animated playground. **Diversity** are those aspects in which people differ from each other, that make them unique. These aspects can be personal differences or differences from a certain group of people. These differences should be valued, supported and used.

In the organization of an animated playground we should make the distinction between 'diversity thinking' and a 'diversity policy'. **Diversity thinking** implies that the playground directs its organization to certain target groups while considering differences between all the children. Animators should recognize and adapt to the fact that every child has different expectations, needs and challenges. A **diversity policy** is a policy that aims optimal participation of every child and every animator on the playground. In this kind of policy the goal is not to eliminate differences between children, but to eliminate barriers. By eliminating barriers (for certain children or for certain target groups) differences between children and animators can be recognized, valued and stimulated.

Diversity thinking is directed to an individual level of differences, the differences between individual children and animators. A diversity policy is directed to an organizational level, where target groups become an important aspect. Both diversity thinking and a diversity policy, both a focus on target groups and on individuals, are needed. The policy directs its work to target groups, the animators on the playground direct themselves to the individual children.

### 2. Inclusion and accessibility

To reach a diversity of children and to support the right of every child to play, playgrounds should strive to become inclusive playgrounds. An **inclusive playground** is a playground that includes different target groups that are more vulnerable in society and have less chance to reach the playground. This implies an adaptation of what the playground offers to children. The playground should adapt its daily practice to these groups, since they have the same right to play.

This way, the playground is working to increase its **accessibility**. Accessibility indicates the degree by which a place, product or a service can be reached. Playgrounds need to strive to be easy accessible and to lower barriers to this accessibility. The goal is to meet the expectations, needs and challenges of different children and target groups. Accessibility goes wider than inclusion. By making a playground accessible, we want to improve the quality of the whole playground for every child.

VDS has the ambition to make playgrounds accessible for all children. To reach this goal, an animated playground should be aware of its accessibility and of the diversity of children that they (could) reach. The starting point of an accessible playground are the needs of different children

in the neighborhood. Playgrounds are directed to a certain neighborhood, which implies that every playground is directed to a different mix of children.

### 3. Target groups

Previously we talked about the importance of a combination between a focus on individual children and a focus on target groups. These target groups are groups that are more vulnerable in society and have less chances to experience the positive aspects of playgrounds. This is because of the expectations playgrounds have towards children and parents. These expectations are inspired by the norm in society, but they create barriers for groups of people that differ from the norm. To increase its accessibility the policy of playgrounds should pay attention to these target groups to question these expectations and to decrease barriers.

To support playgrounds in doing this VDS collaborates with different organizations that have expertise in working with these target groups (e.g. Uit De Marge, vzw de Rand). Together with these organizations VDS supports playgrounds in the change process of decreasing barriers for a certain target group. This support is offered for three target groups: children with disabilities, socially vulnerable children and multilingual children.

**Children with different disabilities** (mental, visual or physical disability, ADHD, autism etc.) are able to play at animated playgrounds. This is made possible by adaptations in the provided play possibilities, by supporting them in their play and by giving personal attention. Parents are a good source of information on how to interact with their children.

**Socially vulnerable children** are children that have a risk of bumping into the negative aspects of provided services in society instead of enjoying the positive aspects. The source of this mechanism is the difference between the context and culture of these people on one side and the norm and expectations in society on the other side. Every negative contact with society makes a person more and more vulnerable. Most of the time these children live in poverty. A playground should provide some services so these children are not excluded (e.g. lower price, provide food for the children etc.). For this target group rules and expectations are difficult to handle, because of the difference in culture. This is why playgrounds must consider the rules that they formulate and reflect if these rules are necessary, needed and clearly formulated towards the children. Attention should be paid to the context of the child.

A lot of these children don't speak the language of the playground at home. VDS wants to support playgrounds to work with **multilingual children** to provide a comfortable context to play and to provide chances for interaction. To achieve this, the language of the playground is a possible, but not the only language, to communicate and to play. In this way the language of the playground can be stimulated positively. Providing chances to communicate is more important than the language on itself, because interaction improves the wellbeing and involvement of children on the playground.

In the next chapter of the paper, some practical examples will be given about how to make animated playgrounds more accessible for these three target groups. Most of these good practices are useful, both for the three target groups and for every child. In this way, working on accessibility helps to improve the quality of the animated playground as a whole and is thus useful for every child.

## IN PRACTICE: ACCESSIBLE PLAYGROUNDS

### 1. Back to the basics

How do we start to work on the accessibility of animated playgrounds? We must go back to the **basics of the organization** and the functioning of the playground. These are the steps that a playground can take to start working on and with diversity:

- Create a vision on diversity that will guide the policy and practice of your playground.
- Create a policy about diversity that is based on your vision on diversity. This policy should consider:
  - Diverse play opportunities for a diversity of children.
  - Diversity in your team of animators for a diversity of perspectives.
  - An open organization.
  - External relationships for support and expertise.

A vision and a policy on diversity are good starting points. Another important aspect of a good functioning basis, is the **team of animators** on the animated playground. This is created when a strong team of animators is present at the playground. First of all, to guarantee an evolution to more accessibility, the team should be aware of this challenge and the motivation to work on this theme should be shared by all the members of the team. In this team we need a few animators who are willing to pay attention to accessibility and to put it on the agenda. Secondly a good preparation is needed to plan and accomplish adaptations. Thirdly the playground must have enough animators to be in the possibility to pay attention to individual children.

## 2. Hardware and software

When the basics are present, the playground can start to make adaptations. Making an animated playground accessible is a process that takes time and that consists of trying, failing and trying again. To work on the accessibility of a playground, we can distinguish between the hardware and the software of the playground. Playgrounds who strive to be accessible for every child, should question the hardware and software of their playground and work actively to decrease barriers in both components.

The **hardware** of the playground is the physical component of the playground. The playground changes its infrastructure, visualizes the activities and places available to play, creates a quiet place or a place where children can experience with all their senses (“snoezelen”) etc. All these actions are meant to make the playground more physically accessible.

When we want to adapt the **software** of the playground, we try to discover the barriers that exist on the playground. The goal is to decrease these barriers and to adapt the functioning of the playground to the needs, possibilities and challenges of every child. This can be done by providing individual support for children, by gathering information from parents about their child, by providing a clear structure or by adapting the offered possibilities to play.

## 3. Good practices

In this last chapter, I will give some examples about how animated playgrounds work on accessibility in practice. Some of these examples are useful to work with every child (with children that belong to a specific target group, but also other children). Some other examples are specific for working with a certain target group.

In general, to work with a diversity of children, animators can try to **communicate with parents**. When animators have an open communication with parents at any time (not only when there are problems), they can get more insight in the background and context of different children. They can also obtain information about the children that can help the animators in playing with the child.

In getting to know the children, **expertise and experiences can be shared** between animators. In this way they can work efficiently and can improve the quality of the interaction with and the play of the child. This can be done by a format, e.g. an image of a drawn child, in which animators can write things about a specific child (what the child likes/doesn't like to play, how to communicate with the child etc.). The focus should be on positive aspects and possibilities, more than on disabilities and problems.

**Visual support** helps children. An animated playground can visualize e.g. the rules on the playground, the animators that are present, an overview of the day and the activities offered, an indication of what can be found where.



*Picture: Visualization of the rules on the playground.*

In working with children with disabilities, animated playgrounds can create a quiet room where children can experience things by seeing, feeling and hearing different objects. This is called “snoezelen”.



*Picture: Snoezelen.*

Some children with disabilities need more **personal attention** because of a severe disability. These children get the support of one animator who plays and helps them the whole day long. This personal attention is also important for other children (with or without disability) but can be given by different animators or once in a while.

Some animated playgrounds possess an "**inclusion box**" with different tools that give the opportunity to experience how it is to live and play with a disability. In the box you can find swimming glasses that are blinded, headphones, a stick for people with a visual impairment etc. Animators can organize games in which children can use these tools.



*Picture: Using the inclusion box.*

In working with socially vulnerable children, animated playgrounds organize a bar in which parents can drink something when they pick up their children. This makes **communication** with animators possible and gives the parents the opportunity to get to know the working of the playground.

Other animated playgrounds work with a **mobile organization**.

They use e.g. a van in which they transport all kinds of material to play with. Every day during the holidays they pick another location where they put the material and where animators play with the children of the neighborhood. This is a good way for an animated playground to reach children that they usually do not reach.



*Picture: A mobile playground.*

Another example is sustaining a **collaboration with partners** that work with vulnerable children, e.g. organizations that provide poor people with a benefit. This collaboration can help in reaching socially vulnerable children. Another adaptation is decreasing the price for a day of playing at the playground and providing food, drinks and clothing to play for the children.

In working with children with another mother language, animators try to put as much **chances to interaction** as possible in their activities and play opportunities. This can be done by a puppet who interacts with the children, by visualizing things or by giving certain animators an explicit task to talk with the children. Also by playing together with the children, a lot of opportunities to interact are created.

## CONCLUSION

Every child has the right to play and to participate in leisure activities that meet his or her personal interests and needs. To guarantee this right at animated playgrounds, animators should **question the basic functioning** of the playground and should develop a vision and policy about diversity. Besides working on the basic organization, animated playgrounds should also **make adaptations** in the hardware and software of the playground. In this way diversity can be recognized, used and valued. On these playgrounds there is a focus on the possibilities of children and animators. Differences are valued and celebrated.

As long as diversity and inclusion are not taken for granted in working with children and youth, animated playgrounds play an important role in taking the lead in **working on accessibility**. The ultimate goal is an animated playground where it is taken for granted to work with a diverse audience.