



vlaamse dienst
speelpleinwerk

About playground work

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PLAYGROUNDS ARE A UNIQUE FORM OF YOUTHWORK

There's not a single youthwork form as diverse and widespread as playgrounds in Flanders and Brussels. There are 563 playgrounds, each with their own organisational culture.

- Differences in organising party (communal, private, schools, ...)
- Difference in animator statute (student jobs, volunteers, both, ...)
- Difference in playing system (open, closed, a mixed form, ...)
- Difference in participants (toddlers, teens, primary school children, children with handicaps, ...)
- ...



Diversity is an asset, a part of our identity. Alongside the differences, there are many traits we share and allow us to take the name "playground". There are **five criteria** since September 2015 that form [the main definition of playgrounds](#). By focusing on these traits, VDS and playground organisers can further profile playgrounds as strong forms of youthwork with a strong identity and uniqueness. This definition answers the question: "What is a playground and what isn't?"

A definition of playgrounds as a lower limit of what playgrounds are.

These are all images that show the necessity of playgrounds for children. By considering these limitations on playground work, we, as VDS, focus on who we are and what we do. It drives us forward.



Playgrounds situate within the frame of youthwork and has the following traits:

1. Playing is the main goal

Playgrounds are open in the vacation period and are leisure time for children. In their free time, children often go playing, so playing is the main goal of a playground.

There are not necessarily other educational goals here. It's playing without a "hidden agenda". Playing is not a means to an end, but the end in itself. It's their own free time which they can fill in however they like.

A playground tries to offer a maximum of playing chances to its children in order to reach this goal. To do this, a playground creates stimulating environments that invite playing behaviour. This environment envelops interaction between animators and children, children amongst each other, the toys, the infrastructure (inside and outside). A playground tries (within her possibilities) to use these four elements optimally, the goal being to create an adventurous and comfortable place to be a child and to give them the space they need to thrive. Playgrounds view children as full "actors" in the realisation of a playground. They give form on how playing works on a specific playground. On the other hand, playgrounds constantly look for ways to make children participate in choosing how the playground changes and improves.

Next to these playing functions, a playground is not blind to other functions. In practice, playgrounds also have caring, preventive, integrative and communal functions. However, playing does remain the most important one.

2. Children as the target audience: from toddler to teen

Starting at 3 years, children start getting more and more independent and have less need of the caring function. The maximum age limit on playgrounds is 15, since they can become animators themselves at this age. Exceptionally, children with an impairment (mentally or

physically) can stay longer as a participant. The name “playground” itself implies the main audience of this youthwork form is children.

Playgrounds offer playing chances to children, mainly. This can range from 3 years old to 14 or 15 years old.

By doing this, it remains one of the only youthwork forms open to toddlers. They even form a considerable slice of the total of children on a playground, amounting around 33%. A small minority of playgrounds even allows children from the age of 2,5. However, they only add up to 3% of the playground population.

The group of primary school kids form the largest audience, with about 55% of the total population.

Next to this, a lot of playgrounds succeed in attracting teens (12-15) as well, with 8% of all playground kids being teens. Often they have their own specific playground within the larger playground, to better suit their needs. Playgrounds take their main goal very seriously and almost never make distinctions based on origin, language, religion, etc. Children of foreign descent or from a poor background are also part of the main audience. In 2010, almost 80% of all playgrounds said that these special groups are most welcome and that the playground can adapt to their needs.

3. Young people carry out the playing system and are involved in shaping it

Playgrounds are youthwork and so the main portion of the animators are young people (ranging 15 to 20 or older). These young people prepare everything and can evaluate everything on their playground. Therefore, playgrounds are a socio-cultural initiative for children and by young people aiming to provide children with a fun holiday.

It has its active period in holidays, since that is when children don't have school and can use their free time to play. This playing is overviewed and encouraged by young people who trained for this with emphasis on commitment.

Playgrounds are organised by private initiatives or local authorities and is, in many cases, professionally run and supported. Despite the growing professionalisation, playgrounds are still youthwork.

A strong playground stands or falls with its animators. The quality of a playground is linked strongly to the enthusiasm and the liveliness its animators have when playing with the kids on their playground. Their job is to find a varied and attractive playing assortment every day.

Because of their enthusiasm, they slowly become experts in stimulating and drawing out child's play.

To optimise the playing function of a playground, it regards the training and improvement of its animators as a goal of itself. Because of this, a playground invests a lot of time and energy in stimulating the commitment, unity and participation of the group of animators. It creates, from a youthwork philosophy, an environment in which young people can grow: to hone their playing skills, to get chances to discover themselves and to participate in making the playground grow.



4. Participants choose for themselves how long they participate

Playground work does not require a long and steady engagement from its participants (e.g. no obligatory engagement for a year or for the weekend, etc.)

Playgrounds distinguish themselves from other youthwork forms through its high degree of openness and by lowering thresholds and limitations people can experience. A playground is a place where every child, regardless of philosophical or ideological ideas or mental and physical restrictions, can go to play. This openness translates in practice into openness in participation, frequency of use, low prices and accessibility for all children.

Playgrounds do not use memberships, but profile themselves as a “service to society”. Not every child has to be there every day. A child that comes for one day is equally appreciated as a child that comes a whole summer. Playgrounds strive to acquire maximum openness by reflecting on their activities and whether they allow every child to feel welcome.

As the main goal, playgrounds focus to make “the right to play” come true. Conscious choices by the organisers make sure that the prices stay as low as they can. There are, however, few places where playgrounds are free completely. Most ask for a small contribution after much thinking to pay for the basic costs.

Playgrounds are known to play to a wide audience and because of this, they are a place where diversity is clearly visible. Children of different ages, social “classes”, origins, religions, etc. all come together on a playground. It does not make any difference between these children, but does try to make sure their needs are met.

Depending on the accents and focus a particular playground puts on its accessibility, it can choose to work extra hard for:

- Children or teens with mental or physical limitations
- Children or teens with socio-economic issues
- Children or teens that have a different origin
- Children or teens that are often involved in aggressive conflicts

5. It's active in the holidays, mostly without sleeping over

Playgrounds are open in at least one holiday period in the year. Sleeping over is considered an exceptional activity and is not often done.

Playgrounds often host the most children in the summer vacation and less in the Easter holiday. A small minority in playgrounds also opens in the Carnival vacation, fall vacation or in the Christmas period.

In these holidays, playing is the need children feel the most. They have more free time and less school work, so they want to have fun and play with friends. Playgrounds open their doors to allow this need to be fulfilled.

To most playground workers, “vacation” has a positive sound to it, as it does with children and probably you as well. It's a time in which you have no (or few) obligations, and a lot of free time to invest in whatever you choose, whether that be to dream around, do nothing, play outside, etc.

These are all images that show the necessity of playgrounds for children. By considering these limitations on playground work, we, as VDS, focus on who we are and what we do. It drives us forward.

Our view on playground work is the striving goal!

The definition covers the basics of playground work. If playgrounds do not stick to this definition, they are technically not playgrounds. VDS strives to do more than the basics though. We are constantly seeking to find ways to give more and better playing chances to children. [Our view on playing](#) is what drives us forward.

**“IF A PARENT OR THE LOCAL
AUTHORITIES CHOOSE FOR PLAYGROUND
WORK, THAT MEANS THAT THEY SHOULD
ALSO SUPPORT ITS PHILOSOPHY.”**



WHAT PLAYGROUND WORK IS NOT...

Playground work is often compared to other initiatives, but this comparison is not always fair.

Playgrounds are different than daycares

- Daycares fill in a caring function first and foremost, while playgrounds do not view this as a goal in itself. It is a means to get children to play.
- Daycares work with trained professional and not with young people who participate in its organisation.
- A daycare is limited in place, while playgrounds strive to make place for more children if possible.
- Daycares are an initiative of welfare, while playgrounds are youthwork.
- Daycares are strongly and strictly regulated from a structural point, while playground work makes more use of the common sense view. There are no strong rules or restrictions on playgrounds, except for rules on volunteer work, ngo's, sabam, etc.
- Daycares focus more on playing chances in indoor infrastructure, while playgrounds focus on outside infrastructure and playground worker impulses as well.

Playgrounds do not fit in with other youthwork initiatives (youth movements)

- A youth movement works with fixed groups for the whole year, while playgrounds do not always have the same children every day.
- A youth movement asks membership fees for the year, while playgrounds ask money for each day the child is present.
- At a youth movement, you wear your uniform, which does not exist at any playground.
- The main goal of a youth movement is belonging together, the sense of group bonding. Playgrounds focus more on playing and have, because of this, more need of infrastructure and playing material.
- Playgrounds are open in holiday periods, while youthwork movement focus on the weekend throughout the year. In this sense, they are perfectly complementary.
- Youthwork movements have a fixed group of youth workers. Playgrounds often have a core group too, but often needs more playgrounds workers in the summer period.

Playgrounds are no (sports)camp

- You need to enrol in a camp, which is not necessary for most playgrounds.
- When children go on a camp, they often do it to get better at something (sports, theatre, creativity, music, etc.), while playing is the goal itself on a playground.
- The offer camps have is often one-directional, theme-focussed and works in a specialising way. On playgrounds, a distinct variety is presented to children.
- Camp prices are often high and offer problems for some people. Playgrounds focus on accessibility for all.

NUMBERS ON PLAYGROUND WORK

There are 416 playground organisers which organise about 563 playgrounds all together, spread out over 302 communities in Flanders and Brussels. There are only 25 communities which do not have a playground. On an average summer day, about 44.000 children play at a playground. In total, about 185.000 children visit a playground in summer and there are about 23.000 playground workers to play with.

- Statute of the organiser

	Gemeentelijk	Particulier
2010	62,8%	37,2%
2015	69,8%	30,2%

- Number of children

Totaal aantal kinderen per dag		Totaal aantal verschillende kinderen	
1990	61500	1990	175000
1995	57000	1995	180000
2000	48000	2000	160000
2005	37000	2005	140000
2010	43000	2010	147000
2015	44167	2015	184384

- Evolution in age

	< 3 JAAR	3-6 JAAR	7-12 JAAR	>12 JAAR
2000	1,9 %	32 %	56 %	10 %
2005	2,1 %	33 %	55 %	10 %
2010	3,1 %	33 %	55 %	9 %
2015	3,2 %	33 %	55,6 %	8,2 %

- Accessibility: no other youthwork form does better

	Kinderen met een beperking	Meertalige kinderen	Kinderen uit een kansarm milieu	Kinderen via het OCMW ingeschreven	Kinderen uit de Bijzondere Jeugdzorg
2010	2,4 %	13,6 % *	7,9 %	3,0 %	1,0 %
2015	6,3 %	18,2 %	18,6 %	7,9 %	4,0 %

	Speelpleinwerk	Jeugthuizen	WMKJ's	Jeugdbeweging
% allochtone kinderen	17 %	9,6 %	61,6 %	2,1 %
% kinderen in armoede	14,8 %	8,9 %	59,6 %	3,6 %
% kinderen met een beperking	6,7 %	3,3 %	2,9 %	2,1 %
% kinderen uit de bijzondere jeugdzorg	4,4 %	- %	10,2 %	- %
% meisjes	49,8 %	31,8 %	28,4 %	- %

- The amount of organisers and playgrounds per province

Regio	2010		2015	
	organisatoren	werkingen	organisatoren	werkingen
West-Vlaanderen	92	142	92	139
Oost-Vlaanderen	89	134	95	140
Antwerpen	73	101	72	91
Vlaams-Brabant	69	87	68	86
Brussel	18	28	26	35
Limburg	65	78	63	66
Totaal	406	570	416	557

- Playing systems: more choice, less obligations

The playing system tells us in which way the combination of activities from playground workers, materials, terrain, fantasy and children is created. It determines how playing happens on a playground, how time is used and what possibilities there are for children to use these chances.

So many playgrounds, so many systems

Nothing is as difficult as asking a playground the right questions on their system. With these questions and categories, we will try to structure this. This structure will make a difference between morning and afternoon, since most playgrounds have different systems in these periods.

We see five options:

1. A strictly guided offer: the playground makes age groups and children play within their age group with fixed playground workers.
2. Age groups with choice: Children are split in age groups, but they can also choose to not play in the activity.
3. The playground worker as a watchman (free play): Children can play freely (with material and terrain too) while the playground workers makes sure there are no problems.
4. Choice of activities (choosing is losing): Children make a choice between several activities that are organised. When they have chosen, they have to stay with that activity.
5. Open system to play: Children make a choice out of prepared activities by playground workers. However, they can also do other things and use the material and terrain the playground has.

The numbers in the table below show a slightly skewed image. In 2010, they had to choose one out of five options, while 2015 allowed to choose multiple options. We tried to make some conclusions anyway.

	Elke voormiddag	2010	Elke namiddag	2010	Eén of meerdere keren per week	Nooit
Strikt geleid aanbod	35%	42%	38%	23%	21%	36%
Leeftijdsgroepen met keuze	10%	8%	18%	11%	20%	63%
Begeleider als toezichthouder	13%	17%	22%	20%	41%	38%
Keuzeactiviteiten	10%	26%	12%	21%	34%	52%
Open speelaanbod	21%	8%	28%	24%	24%	46%

This declines:

- Less fixed offer in the morning.
- Less watching free play/ only choice of activities (with no switching)

This increases:

- More choice in their fixed age groups.
- More open system to play (especially in the morning).

Conclusions:

Playgrounds evolve to give children more choice. We can see this in the age groups on one hand: they are less fixed than they were. On the other hand it's obvious in the numbers that there are less fixed choice activities, but more free play with watching playground workers, which scores high. In this system, children can do whatever they want, although VDS would like to see playground workers offer more activities too.

Next to this, it's interesting that most changes are obvious in the morning. This could mean that some playgrounds that experimented with an open system to play in the morning have now adopted it structurally.

Finally, 46% of the playgrounds says they never use an open system to play. This supports the view that playgrounds are experimenting with mixing forms and systems more than they use an open system to play.

HISTORY OF PLAYGROUND WORK

Playgrounds are a fairly old type of youthwork, finding its origins in the beginning of the previous century. This small chunk of history will give the evolution of playgrounds in five major steps. It is not a complete overview, but sums up the most important points in its history. It gives an image of flows and helps to understand how it has become what it is.

The fresh start: a discussion on prevention



The first discussion on the necessity of playgrounds arise at the turn of the century. The housing situation changes strongly in this period, partially by the abolition of child labour (1889) and the introduction of compulsory school attendance (1914). Children have “obligatory time” they spend in class, but that does mean they have contrasting “free time” too.

After the first world war, unrest exists on the negative influence the “street” has on children. Some initiatives sprout to bring children together in a responsible environment in the summer periods. This meant the birth of playground work. Next to this preventive function, playground have a pedagogical function too. By playing with other children, they receive positive social feedback.

Playground work between 1930 and 1960: playing in a healthy environment

In 1931, we see the first playground in Ukkel. Between the two world wars, playground work grows rapidly and by 1937, there are 165 playgrounds in Flanders. Another war causes a decrease, but by 1948, the number of playgrounds is even higher than before.

Next to the preventive and pedagogical functions of a playground, the NWK (National Child Care) subsidises the playgrounds to fill in a caring function too, which includes sports. Sports increases in importance in this period, but comradery as well along with fair play and solidarity. Following the French example, courses are organised to train these supervisors.

Playground work in the sixties and seventies: worldwide attention to playing

In the sixties, “game and play” pierces into the playgrounds. From '68, creativity and expression are more and more present in activities. From abroad (Denmark and England), ideas fly over that include adventurous playing, water games, building, etc.

Slowly the attention to the value children themselves give to playing becomes important. They want to do their own thing and want the right to decide for themselves. This new attention allows children this right on filling in their free time. Playgrounds allowed children free play and the development of their “selves”, while watching over children’s rights.

This view on playing leads to a decree to acknowledge playgrounds as youthwork in 1984. This also means that playgrounds become subsidised and it allows playgrounds to build infrastructure and buy attractive toys and materials. It also allowed to train young people as youth workers. This decree gave playground work a reason to exist, rights and centralised playing.

Was it 1980 or 1990: important functions of the playground.

In the last decennia, playground work undergoes several important changes in functions. The care for “chastity and safety” of the child evolved into “care for the pedagogical game of the child”.

By extra needs parents have in the '80s, the “day care”-function is of a different core. On the one hand, parents can't always care for their child because of lacklustre housing, social networks and poverty. On the other hand, both parents as working parents, rigid working structures and a growing need for child care forces playgrounds to fill in this socio-economic need.

Playgrounds hesitate to profile themselves as day care initiatives. A lot of playgrounds explicitly refuse this since they fear they will lose their youthwork character; an actual problem. Day care is a necessity, but not at the expense of playgrounds. More and more, the realisation grows that playgrounds are built up by and for the local community and it has to take a responsibility in this community.

Playgrounds also receive another function in this period. Young people are given a place where they can work with and for children on a voluntary base.



1994: playgrounds get a place in the communal youth politics

A important boost in the development of playground work arrives on the 9th of June, 1993 with the decree on local youthwork policy. This decree started on January 1st 1994 and stimulated the local Flemish and Brussels governments to think about their own youthwork policies and put them into action.

Ten years down the road, we can see playground work flourish and thrive into a basic need of every local government. They always viewed playgrounds as “their business” and now they view it as “their job”.

VDS defines playground work in 1995 as follows : “A playground is an open vacation initiative for children between 3 and 16 years old. It offers playing chances in as much variations as possible. To do this, a playground uses a functional infrastructure and trained youth workers to give a varied offer to children.”

“PLAYGROUND WORK IS YOUTHWORK AND IS UNIQUE IN THE WORLD. THE POWER AND NOT THE COMPLAINT!”

ANNO 2016: A PACT FOR THE FUTURE

Focussing on strong playgrounds offers a local advantage. Because of the lack of local policy and the growing instrumentalization of playgrounds, it's important to create a strong policy on every level. About 150 local government youth employees and different partners from the youth sector gathered on the 23rd of February for the first Playground Congress in history and made a pact. They wrote a story on challenges, opportunities, realisations and choices.



Does playground work stay youthwork within local contexts?

In 2016, about 75% of all playgrounds are communal. The support from the local governments has increased strongly, even for private playgrounds. This is clear in the distribution of employees, means and terrain. Most playground organisers also saw the local government as the instigator and inspirer for a playground.

Are we naïve to think that playgrounds will keep existing in local governments? When the decree on local youth policy raised priorities, it was easy for local governments to see playgrounds as youthwork. They used this to subsidise playgrounds. However, that root is gone and local governments can freely choose how to label playground work.

Is playing just for fun still the most important thing?

A large variation in playing possibilities is spreading in playground work. The number of different playing items has noticeably increased: adventurous playing areas, rolling toys, water games, fantasy games, etc. Playgrounds say "playing, having fun and having a great holiday" is the most important part of their identity in the youthwork sector, "view on playing and rethinking on what we do" is a hot topic and point of attention and "leading the market in adventurous and challenging holidays" as the point of attention for the next ten years. Unmistakeably, playgrounds put playing on the first spot.

We think it's incredibly important that playing is the goal, with no hidden goals or side goals. Just having fun! Experiencing the holidays as they were intended! But this core value is under pressure, since children (and parents) now have the choice between "playful usefulness" or "useful playfulness". The Flemish government chooses the first one, while the government in Brussels opts for the second. Since 2015, this government sees playing as a means to an end. They took playground work from the youth departments and put it under the educational departments. The congress and the questioned playground organisers made clear that playing just for the sake of playing will always be the most important value.

Staying ahead in accessibility

No other youthwork form accomplishes to reach a wide and diverse audience as playgrounds do. When we talk about diversity, we talk about children in poverty (7,9% in 2010 to 18,6% in 2015) and children with limitations (2,4% to 6,3%), reaching double in five years. About 4 out of 10 playground boards are thinking about how to increase the accessibility of their playground. About 70% calls themselves “inclusive”. Even though there are good and lacking students in the inclusive class, they have honourable intentions. We are living in times where politicians are calling to make work of diversity and superdiversity and playgrounds can reach this goal successfully.

The last few years, steps were taken in the right direction. However, raising prices, working with registrations, limits on amount of children, refusing children from other communities, ... are several measures that do not attribute positively to accessibility. We have to give answers to reach the root of the problem without touching accessibility.

The need for daycare is lurking

Playgrounds already fulfil this function. About 70% of playground organisers feels the external pressure to fill this function. About a fourth even thinks that we should profile ourselves as such in the future. Is the increasing need for daycare a threat or an opportunity? At any rate, it is a story of balance. Experience teaches that playgrounds with a strong base not only succeed in giving in, but in taking as well. It's not unimportant to remind ourselves this all happens in a conditional context. Playgrounds receive funds to do what they do, but they need to fulfil certain conditions for these funds. VDS will look at the new decree “Daycare and free time of school children” by Flemish minister Jo Vandeurzen with attention.

A definition “playground work” and a local view on playing as a fundament

The importance of a view on playing, the importance of knowing what you stand for, knowing who you are, aren't and want to be. If you cannot give the answer to these questions, or your team gives different answers to the same question, then you need to review your view on playing. About 40% of the playgrounds have a text on their view on playing and about half of these share this online. About 20% of the playgrounds thinks about writing one. In other words, this is a large opportunity for a lot of local playgrounds. VDS views this as challenge. There will be a definition on playground work and this will be necessary to focus on the future.

The organisational pressure on playgrounds is increasing

Playgrounds often get to face increasing professionalisation. Organisers are increasingly tasked with taking care of legal obligations. This increasing pressure weighs on playgrounds, especially on the private initiatives, but also on the functioning of local youth departments.

High expectations on playing “safely and responsibly”

The expectations of society on the “protection” of children grow larger. This means, for playgrounds, that the expectations parents have of the playground workers grow larger too. Playgrounds think about how “safe and responsible” their playground is and take less risks. In some cases, this leads to losses in adventurous playing and playfulness. Every child needs a bruise once in a while.