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## PARS Playwork: Considering Who We Are Becoming and Why

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## PARS Playwork: Considering Who We Are Becoming and Why

### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement This article is based on an original presentation by the author at the TASP (The Association for the Study of Play) Conference, 21 May 2022.

## **PARS Playwork: Considering Who We Are Becoming and Why.**

### **Abstract**

The PARS model of playwork practice was developed by Dr Shelly Newstead from research into the origins of playwork from the adventure playgrounds set up in the UK just after the Second World War. This article considers why and how this theoretical model of playwork as a form of professional practice is now being applied and developed by practitioners in Brazil, contributing to the creation of an international ‘community of practice’ (Wenger et al, 2002). It describes how PARS’ underpinning philosophy and model of practice provide a strong foundation that values playwork and supports the development of a shared language and identity for PARS playwork practitioners across Brazil and around the world.

*Keywords:* playwork, childism, community of practice, play

### **Acknowledgement**

This article is based on an original presentation by the author at the TASP (The Association for the Study of Play) Conference, 21 May 2022.

IPA Brasil ‘discovered’ PARS at the first PARS Online Conference in late 2020. Since then, we have formally trained three board members and one staff member in PARS; have translated initial PARS materials to Portuguese; have introduced the model to key stakeholders in the organisation; are testing ways to incorporate it in our training program and developing a roll-out plan to fit the Brazilian context.

To grasp our enthusiasm for PARS, you need to understand a little about our organisation and play related work in Brazil. IPA Brasil ([ipabrasil.org](http://ipabrasil.org)) was founded 25 years ago in 1997, by a group of Brazilians who were convinced of the need to advocate on a national scale for the right of children and adolescents to play. From the outset, the not-for-profit organisation has focused on increasing awareness and knowledge about the importance of free play for children across all audiences in Brazil - a daunting task!

In 2004, a large national research project that I led while working at Unilever revealed that only 14% of Brazilian parents of children aged 6-12 spontaneously recognised play as a critical ally in their children’s development (Carneiro & Dodge, 2007). Almost 10 years later, another national research survey showed that only 19% of Brazilian parents believed that playing / going for walks was important for the healthy development of children aged 0-3 years (*A visão da sociedade sobre o desenvolvimento da Primeira Infância*, 2012). This study concluded that “Play is not spontaneously valued and can be a source of guilt for mothers” (p. 59). Although awareness about play has likely grown over the years, there is certainly still woefully little appreciation of the value of children’s play among parents and professionals who interact directly with children in Brazil. And there is good evidence that children’s opportunities to play actively are declining in Brazil, as they are elsewhere in the world (Aubert et al., 2018).

The lack of awareness about the importance of play is reflected in a still very notable lack of information and training about play in the curricula of relevant Brazilian college and

university programmes. When included, play is almost always presented as a tool for education – that is, it is presented as having value when it is structured, adult-led and carried out with a clear purpose in mind. There is rarely mention made of the importance of free – or child-led – play.

IPA Brasil has been working hard to change this through the development and provision of workshops and courses designed to inform and enable adults to facilitate free play for children and adolescents. The organisation has been recognised with several awards for its advocacy and training programs and is now actively sought out for training services by individuals, organisations and governmental and non-governmental agencies across Brasil. Over the last decade, we have delivered training about free play directly to more than 27,000 people.

Yet despite this considerable experience and our continuous search for external best practices, references and models, to our frustration, until we discovered PARS, we had never been able to articulate satisfactorily and effectively two critical things:

- a universal philosophy to underpin playwork, and
- the actual practice of playworkers.

Discovering PARS was a wonderful “Aha” moment! We are convinced that it is the missing link for helping to further develop a thriving, sustainable and evolving ‘community of practice’ (Wenger et al., 2002) – and for further establishing playwork in Brazil as a relevant, unique, professional form of adult practice with children. I’ll briefly illustrate how and why this is the case based on our experience.

To begin, there is no word for ‘playwork’ in Portuguese and no recognised profession in Brazil that contemplates this role. To develop our courses and approach, we proudly borrowed and gratefully learned from the experience and literature of the national play organisations in the UK and adopted similar principles. We embraced and promoted the

notion that playwork “is an approach to working with children in which children determine and control the content and intent of their play, rather than it being led or directed” (“Guidance on Playwork,” n.d.). And we shared the view that playwork aims to “to support and facilitate children’s play process” (*Play Wales / The Playwork Principles*, n.d.).

However, over the years, we have found that existing playwork definitions and principles seem to lead many playworkers to get sucked down the rabbit hole of focusing their attention on the act of play: defining it, describing it, analysing it, measuring it, evaluating it, discussing it, etc. Consciously or unconsciously, this results in playworkers only minimally reflecting on their own actions and sometimes almost forgetting about the child or children playing, and the unique nature of each individual child. As an organisation, we struggle to ensure that our trainees, in their enthusiasm, don’t lose sight of the fact that we are all working on behalf of children – first and foremost – and not play in and of itself.

PARS presents a fresh, clear way of thinking about what we do as playworkers. PARS at the same time expands and focuses our work. PARS practice “aims to compensate children for the presence of adults in their time and space, by avoiding adulteration wherever possible” (Newstead, 2021a, p. 1) regardless of whether the children are technically playing or not. Thus, PARS practitioners envision spaces where children can do what they want to do, not *play* spaces. This is an apparently subtle, but – in our view – incredibly important and meaningful difference.

The PARS model of playwork practice is explicitly based on the philosophy of ‘childism’ (Wall, 2007, 2022). This describes how adults “take the perspective of the experiences and concerns of childhood” (Wall, 2007, p. 52) when interacting with children. In other words, it asks playworkers to continually try and put themselves in children’s shoes before acting – recognising the intrinsic, unique and different needs and experiences of children to adults.

As Newstead (Newstead, 2021c) rightly describes, this approach creates a different range of interactions and responses from other professional approaches to working with children, because PARS practitioners are constantly questioning whether it is necessary or possible to prioritise children's perspectives and knowledge rather than their own. Childism also provides a common basis – or starting point – from which playworkers can explore and evaluate their own actions and discuss their experiences with others that keeps children themselves front and centre.

A second critical and step-changing contribution of PARS to playwork is that it demystifies the infamous “cloak of invisibility” (Wilson, 2010, p. 10) that playworkers are expected to be able to don. As experienced playworker and author Penny Wilson (2010) wrote in ‘The Playwork Primer’: “Part of the oxymoronic nature of playwork is that we need to be present and not present at the same time. For those of you with a cloak of invisibility this is easy. For the rest of us, we have to learn skilful modes of intervention that allow us to support the play process without adulterating it with our own agendas.” Wilson tries to describe what she considers to be an example of a successful supporting role by a playworker, but then recognises her own inability to do so: “I watched him doing this and still could not work out quite how he managed to be so effective and so invisible at the same time” (Wilson, 2010, p. 11). The PARS model of playwork practice removes the cloak of invisibility.

Incorporating philosophy, theories, techniques and methods, PARS articulates the actual practice of the playworker. Indeed, the aim of the model is “to enable practitioners to articulate, develop and evaluate their playwork practice” (Newstead, 2021a, p. 2). Our experience in Brazil is that playworkers frequently feel themselves cloaked in guilt for not being invisible and frustrated as their role of providing support for and considering the safety of children is not recognised or seen as essential. The PARS model unapologetically

contemplates adults and explicitly describes how playworkers may determine ‘necessary’ and ‘unnecessary’ interventions or adulteration in any given situation (Newstead, 2021c, pp. 8–10). In so doing, the model helps alleviate playworkers’ guilt and frustrations and empowers them to provide opportunities for children to play freely in any number of contexts.

Importantly, for us at IPA Brasil, given the intense demand of early childhood educators, teachers and social workers for training about play, the PARS model can be embraced and applied by all professionals who interact with children as a complementary practice to their other professional activities. Looking forward, I suggest that playwork practitioners may best serve their own profession (and children) by embracing the PARS model as a breakthrough iteration of their craft – one that enables all practitioners, regardless of their background, to articulate, evaluate and further develop their own practice and learn from others. It offers us a language that values our work and facilitates sharing experiences across geographies and cultures, locally and internationally, in a meaningful and relevant way. In conclusion, at IPA Brasil, we see PARS as a very important way to further up-skill a generally undervalued workforce and enable the continued development of a vibrant, influential national and international PARS community of practice – one that provides the opportunity for more children to engage in more everyday child-led play everywhere!

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