

# The right to play and have fun

## IN YOUTH AND COMMUNITY WORK<sup>1</sup>



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In youth and community work children and young people meet each other on a voluntary basis in their leisure time. There is an atmosphere of confidentiality and friendship and the youth worker or youth leader working with the young people is often considered as ‘one of us’ rather than a supervisor or, as they are called in the Lisbon Treaty,<sup>2</sup> a ‘socio-educational instructor’. Sometimes there is no youth leader at all, as young people organise themselves; they are learning by doing and trying

to analyse and manage their time in the most appropriate way. That is the particular power of youth work, where everyone feels important and contributes to the process through his or her specific personality while learning in non-formal and informal settings. This is the task and greatest effort of youth NGOs all over Europe (and beyond): providing an opportunity to participate in this non-formal environment and to find a way of contributing to youth work.

By participating in youth and community work, even in a game, children and young people gather information about a great number of things and become aware of socially relevant subjects such as relationships and sexuality, democracy, social issues, diversity, sustainability or solidarity. Reacting to friends’ comments creates an environment in which each child and young person is learning and teaching at the same time.

In youth and community work, young people learn without even noticing, just by doing and enjoying. Life is lived in a spontaneous and informal way, where no teachers or parents can interrupt and regulate the communication and its atmosphere. It is the ideal biotope to train and develop opinions and attitudes and in particular interpersonal skills. Young people are eager to listen, to know and to learn; they are eager to share and to participate,



*Having grass between toes and sand in the trousers*



*Dreaming and living the dreams, exploring boundaries and getting lost*

which is most important when finding one's social position and acquiring relevant life skills.

Research has shown that information collected while playing is likely to be more quickly remembered and better processed and understood. And even if formal education is better equipped in the area of knowledge transfer, learning in the context of youth and community work is more sustainable. We will most likely never be able to describe the specific power of youth work because it is experienced individually by each and every person.

There are some who do not think very positively of youth and community work; they think it is just 'playing games'. But youth work offers significant advantages. It enables children and young people to better understand themselves and others, to link up with peers and to explore the environment and the unknown. Even more, by playing simulation games children and young people have the opportunity to 'try on' the roles of parents, parliamentarians, doctors, etc. Through this, young people become acquainted in their teenage years with such difficult things as time planning, process management and administrative issues, which are topics one usually studies at university.

Playing is experienced as pleasure, entertainment and effortless exploration. The possibilities and limitations of the theme or subject treated can

easily be seen. Playing is a way to discover, to experience, to learn and to get acquainted with new things, to develop tactics and strategies. But, above all, it is fun, amusement; it sticks in the mind and is experience based. Playing in youth work is considered as a non-formal and informal education process, where fun with purpose is one of the main elements.

Today, more than ever, youth work is a 'third educational environment' in addition to the family (as a first educational environment) and school (as a second one); it is needed for the development of our societies, in social, civil and economic terms. In youth work, children and young people discover that they are someone of worth and that they are taken seriously. They can make mistakes without being pointed out or punished. They get a second and a third and a fourth chance! They also learn how to give their unselfish help to someone else or to society. They learn in concrete terms about solidarity. But it is of paramount importance that youth work gives them the opportunity to meet friends and peers and that it considers friendship as particularly valuable and important. Having fun together and experimenting seem to be major



*Smelling the camp fire, singing along but not being able to carry the tune*



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motivations to join youth work (the intrinsic value). In this respect youth organisations are a unique environment for young people to be part of youth work and educational processes. Every youth organisation uses (or at least should use) educational principles, where young people are encouraged to participate and take decisions as well as responsibility. On the one hand they are encouraged to have fun and on the other hand to take



*He could enjoy leisure time without being controlled and bothered by adults*

on responsibility where it is important for them to understand the power they have.

The typical strength of youth work can best be described in the words of Professor Danny Wilmersch who once said, 'speelse nuttigheid en nuttige speelsheid' which means, 'playfully doing something useful and useful playfulness'. Looking from this perspective it appears that youth work does not consider itself as a socially integrative instrument although it evidently performs and



*Working together, changing the world!*



develops very important educational and social functions, both in depth and breadth.

In recent years, in our discussions about youth and community work, the role and importance of playing has – at least at higher political levels – faded into the background. And yet it remains a special vehicle – one could say a royal vehicle – for effortlessly learning to find one's place in the world and in our complex societies. Therefore youth NGOs are struggling to increase the visibility and recognition of the important role that youth work plays in children's educational life.

Article 31 of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees<sup>3</sup> that each child has the right to rest and leisure; to engage in play and recreational activities; to participate in cultural life and the arts. The reputation that this is a 'trivial' right is evident in the fact that the parties to the convention hardly mention this right in their periodical reports to the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child. Also youth NGOs have no specific position on the application of this provision whereas they are a main provider of the right to leisure.



Once in a scout camp in Italy, there was a very heavy rain. All the people were hiding under trees, dressed with their raincoats. A group decided there was nothing to lose and took their raincoats off, starting to sing and dance in the rain. Within a couple of minutes several hundred people were doing the same. This is what I call having fun and making the best of even the worst situations.

# PLAY AND HAVE FUN

Moreover, at European level, in the discussions and political strategies of both the Council of Europe and the European Union, this aspect of youth work does not seem to be of high priority. There is a risk of focusing the role and value of youth work too strongly on economic, educational and social dimensions. Is there a threat in recognising that youth work and youth organisations provide a unique setting for playing and having fun, and that this work is a serious endeavour with a clear mission? Isn't it about helping children and young people to be active citizens? Maybe we need to start changing our attitudes and opinions towards playing and having fun and realise the added value

they bring for the development of individuals and society.

A society which needs happy and open-minded people must first and foremost take care of the biotopes where children and young people can grow and develop in a warm, joyful and friendly atmosphere. Today, in most countries, youth work offers this possibility. In Europe, the challenge is to cherish these valuable places and to provide more oxygen for their development with, for and by children and young people! Let's be serious – let's play and have fun!

1. This article looks strictly from the perspective of 'open' youth and community work taking place in child and youth clubs, youth NGOs, leisure-time centres, youth movements, etc. It does not focus on other important disciplines or strands of youth work, which are grouped around non-formal and out-of-school education as well as youth (welfare and care) services and socio-educational provision for young people, even if borders between the different fields are often porous. 2. Lisbon Treaty, TITLE XII - EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING, YOUTH AND SPORT Article 165 (ex Article 149 TEC). 'Union action shall be aimed at: encouraging the development of youth exchanges and of exchanges of socio-educational instructors, and encouraging the participation of young people in democratic life in Europe.' 3. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted in the General Assembly of the United Nations in New York on 20 November 1989 (UN Doc. A/Res/44/25). The convention entered into force on 2 September 1990.