Practical tips for play rangers to facilitate play in the dark

Inside:
• Overview
• Safe ways of working
• Parental concerns and professionalism
• Ideas for playing in the dark
• Different approaches
• Useful suppliers
• Resources
Play rangers provide opportunities for children to use parks and open spaces all year and in all weather.

It is therefore inevitable that play rangers will have to spend some proportion of this contracted time providing play sessions in the dark.

While in many ways this can be a daunting prospect, with the logistics of running a night session and reassuring anxious parents, it can be a very exciting and magical time too.

‘Night transforms the natural world into a very different place; for some children it is a time of excitement and discovery, but for others it is sinister and frightening. Yet darkness itself is not something to be fearful of, and the more the children find out about the mysteries of night the less scary they will seem.’

(Danks, F and Schofield, J. 2005)

This briefing explores the key considerations that play rangers and managers need to address when providing sessions in the dark as well as providing practical tips and ideas for activities.

**Key points**

- Children enjoy playing in the dark
- Playing in the dark adds variety to experience of a familiar setting
- Playing in the dark offers a greater range of possibilities and play opportunities
- Play rangers need to balance risk and safety
- Communication to children, parents and other stakeholders (schools, youth clubs, police etc) should cover details about operating times, aims and values, nature of activity.

**About these briefings:**

This series was compiled by Dan Rees-Jones; a practising play ranger and author of *Playing on the Range*. The briefings have been developed in response to FAQs to the Play Ranger Support Service e-group. The e-group was set up by Dan in 2008 with support from Playwork Partnerships and Play England to provide play rangers and playworkers with an access point to share experiences, information, advice and good practice.
Safe ways of working

It is important that play rangers follow guidelines for safe ways of working. This is especially important in the dark, as the senses are restricted. Although each specific play organisation will have its own health and safety policy to inform and guide play rangers, the following list contains important aspects of personal safety for play rangers to consider.

- Play rangers should always work in teams of two, as a minimum, and be clearly identifiable to parents and children. Brightly coloured uniforms or high visibility vests may be useful in this respect but visible official identification, to validate a play ranger’s identity, should also be worn.
- Play rangers should always work together and be within vocal range of each other. If a situation arises where only one play ranger is left on site then the session should finish.
- Each play ranger pair should have a charged mobile phone and a wind-up torch for each session.
- Play rangers should have up-to-date first aid training and carry a first aid kit. They should also be aware of the organisation’s accident and emergency procedures, in most cases their role is as responsible adult rather than in loco parentis.

Parental concerns and professional image

When the light starts to fade and the nights draw in it is important to be reliable and consistent with the delivery of play ranger sessions. This will really help to establish trust with children and their parents.

A survey commissioned by Natural England in 2009, Childhood and Nature: A survey on changing relationships with nature across generations, found that:

- Eighty-one per cent of children would like more freedom to play outside. Nearly half of the children said they are not allowed to play outside unsupervised and nearly a quarter are worried to be out alone.
- Eighty-five per cent of parents said they would like their children to be able to play outdoors unsupervised but a fear of strangers and road safety concerns prevent them from giving much freedom to their children.

Playing outside in the dark during the winter months naturally causes some parents to become slightly concerned about their children’s safety.

As well as being regular and consistent, play rangers should also try to clearly promote the aims and intentions of the play provision.

Developing relationships with other agencies such as local schools, youth clubs and community police will help to further instil the trust and confidence in the communities where play rangers will be working.

Investing in professional glossy leaflets that detail the who, why and what of play rangers, as well as contact details, is a good way to get this message across. These can be regularly distributed among children and any new people who are unaware of the service.
When darkness arrives, children tend to choose play things that involve light and heat. Below is a list of ideas and starting points that may assist play rangers working in the dark.

**Torches**
Torches are a hugely versatile, cheap and fun resource, and are great to experiment with. The only downside can be that they tend to be so popular they can sometimes go missing! There are numerous types available, and prices and quality vary considerably. Wind-up torches cost nothing to run while head torches provide a hands-free option. Both types can be easily sourced via local and online stores.

**Generators**
A good quality 110 volt generator can be a relatively cheap way of providing an effective outdoor lighting system. On health and safety grounds, generators will need to be diesel run and be covered with a strong wire basket to keep children's fingers away from the hot parts. The only downside with this are the transportation, noise and storage issues.

**Flood lights and portable lighting sources**
Battery-charged flood lights attached big tripod legs are capable of lighting up a vast area. They will need to be taken home every now and then to be charged but are really good for outdoor sessions on those dark evenings.

**Glow in the dark equipment**
There is a range of different toys and sports equipment that glow in the dark and light up that are really good fun to use. Items include light-up footballs, glow in the dark frisbees and light-up skipping ropes.

**Fires**
Making a fire creates a natural place for people to gather. It provides a focal point of interest and is warm and comforting as well as being perfect for cooking hot snacks and drinks on. They also look great in the dark too!

It will be necessary to request permission from the landowner before doing any fire activity. Once permission has been sought it is also advisable for organisations to have a fire policy or safety guidelines in place so that all staff are aware of the principles and procedures. A generic example can be found on the Playwork Partnerships website at: www.playwork.co.uk

Other useful information on using fires can be found on the following web sites:

- Tips on how to make fires with children: www.scoutingresources.org.uk
- Cooking on a campfire: www.woodlands.co.uk

**Note:** instead of using wire to create fire shelves, use household bricks to line the edge and a cooling tray. This will create a much sturdier shelving system.
**Den building**

Den building is a lot of fun, very accessible for children of all ages, and useful if the weather gets wet and cold. It is possible to construct makeshift dens out of virtually anything to hand but standard equipment could include large sheets, tarpaulins, tent pegs, big nets, bamboo canes and ropes.

Scrap stores are excellent places for acquiring cheap resources and these can be found at various locations around the country. Visit the UK directory of scrap stores: [www.childrensscrapstore.co.uk](http://www.childrensscrapstore.co.uk)


The Play Rangers Google group has some useful discussions on den building: [http://groups.google.com/group/playrangers](http://groups.google.com/group/playrangers)

For more robust shelters it may also be worth considering inflatable or portable types but these will obviously have more of an impact on the budget.

---

**Games**

Many seeking games like 1-2-3, block and forty-forty are best played when it is dark. Torches for the players can add an extra dimension.

Games that involve a higher degree of physical exertion such as sports and tag tend to be very popular in the winter months as it helps to keep the cold out.

Manhunt, a variant of tag, is an extremely popular game that children like to play in the dark.

One player is designated as ‘it’ and stands at an agreed base point (such as a goal post) and counts to 10 or 20 while all the other players hide. Once the countdown is finished the hiding players have to try and return to the agreed base while avoiding being tagged by ‘it’. If ‘it’ catches anyone before reaching the base they join ‘its’ team for the next go. Repeat until everyone is tagged. The last person is the winner and starts as ‘it’ for the next go.

Further ideas and resources relating to popular games that children enjoy can be found in the publication *The Lore of the Playground* by Stephen Roud, 2010.
Different approaches

If the darkness is causing issues such as diminishing numbers it may be worth considering alternative approaches to providing the service.

In Bath, play rangers used a local church hall with a large garden during the three darkest months and successfully provided busy play sessions with indoor and outdoor activities.

Stafford play rangers adopted a twilight approach to cope with the diminishing light.

They identified car parks in the areas which were often not used at night but were well lit, and obtained permission in writing from the owners.

These well-lit spaces proved popular with the children and young people during the winter months.

Resources