

OPENING ADDRESS
on behalf of the International Play Association: Promoting the Child's Right to Play
(IPA)
Theresa Casey, IPA President
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Croeso. Welcome to the International Play Association, 18th Triennial World Conference, **'Play into the Future – surviving and thriving'**. When IPA was founded in Copenhagen in 1961 as the International Playgrounds Association and, as we celebrate our 50th anniversary, I wonder what IPA's founding members could have pictured the scene here today in City Hall, Cardiff.

Fifty years on, members, friends, supporters of IPA and the right to play from across the globe coming together in a celebration of play, sharing knowledge, experience, dilemmas and challenges. 500 people for four days focussed on the right to play.

IPA is a membership based association - the members and Branches in more than fifty countries are IPA. IPA is multifaceted, is rich with culture, language and histories. It embraces many disciplines and perspectives. Our actions are not only the wider international ones to which we bring our collective energies, but the priorities identified locally. In the course of this week the programme will illustrate that diversity.

Back in 1959 it was decided that the Danish Playground Association would call a conference with the object of setting up an international playground organisation. The meeting took place on the 10th – 12th May 1961 in Copenhagen and the association was founded and open to all who were especially interested in playgrounds for children.

It sounded like an altogether memorable occasion with the first IPA constitution drawn up over a coffee in half an hour in a café in the course of the conference. One of the drafters was Lady Allen of Hurtwood a name with great resonance here in the UK for her work on adventure playgrounds for disabled children.

A splendid party was held at the summer house of Max Siegumfeldt – splendid parties also being a tradition we have sought to uphold. The first IPA President did not take part in that conference as he was abroad at the time and it was only on his return that he discovered he had been elected World President. That first President was Professor C. S. Sorenson the acclaimed landscape architect whose creation of junk adventure playgrounds in Emdrup near Copenhagen inspired the development of the adventure playground movement around the world – then and now.

The dynamism and vision of the IPA founders is echoed throughout the IPA 50 year history. Although experiencing growing pains at times while it emerged from

Northern Europe to become an association with members in more than 50 countries, it is an organisation that seems to have a knack of doing the right thing at the right time.

Notably of course, in the 1980's IPA decided it should take action to ensure that 'play' was included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child so that play was recognised with the status of a child's right – a human right. This gave play advocates a powerful tool in fighting for children's play. And a fight it often is – IPA's purpose is to protect, preserve and promote the right to play and sadly we have to spend a lot of time on *protecting* and *preserving* as we see great losses to the time, space and conditions children need for play.

In the three and a half years since the last IPA World Conference, we have gathered detailed information on the circumstances for children's play through our IPA Global Consultations project. We have found persistent, global issues impacting on play, major infringements of children's right to play.

We have heard described some devastating pictures of unsafe environments, excessive pressure pressing down on children, exclusion, discrimination, segregation, poverty and exploitation. In the last three years we have also seen the work of colleagues effected by human and natural disasters: earthquakes, tsunami, floods and fire. We have watched, in a world more immediately connected than could possibly have been imagined 50 years ago, as IPA members have sent each other messages of support and solidarity. And in return we have received, at the click of a button, pictures and messages of hope and inspiration. I'm thinking for example of an uploaded photograph of flags fluttering above an adventure playground built from scratch in Japan in an area struck by the recent earthquakes.

It strikes me that this brings us right back, at a very fundamental level, to the conference theme of 'surviving and thriving'; unless play survives and thrives, how can children survive and thrive?

Nic Nilsson, President of IPA from 1981-1990, said in his introduction to our recent IPA History (PlayRights, 2011), that while IPA's work in its first 50 years contributed to play being recognised as a human right,

the realisation of this right must be the main goal for IPA in the next 50 years.

This is a goal we are intent on working towards.

There are days to celebrate achievements, not to be shy of them, so today is a day when we want to celebrate another example of IPA doing the right thing at the right time.

Over the last few years, IPA has been talking to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child about what has been called the neglected state of the right to play. The former chair of the UN Committee helped us to set a course to try to rectify

that situation: from the ground up with IPA branches and groups around the world and from the top down with the Committee and governments.

So I was with great pleasure indeed that we were informed in February 2011 of the UN Committee's decision to draft and adopt a General Comment on article 31, addressed to the governments of the world. And we can allow ourselves a little immodesty in recognising the role IPA played in influencing that decision. The significance for children will reveal itself not just in the drafting but in how we mobilise around the General Comment. You'll hear more about this on the coming days.

Finally between IPA Conferences, members naturally work together locally and nationally. Nowadays we are increasingly in almost continuous contact using all the tools of communication technology. And although it is wonderful to be able to work across continents and time zones – miraculous even! – it does lead to all sorts of possibilities for cultural misunderstandings, headaches and punch lines lost in the virtual ether.

Far better to misunderstand each other in person! So for the next few days of pursuing the purpose of **protecting, preserving and promoting the child's right to play**, we can relish the real conversations, the eye contact, the debate discussion and who knows, some singing, dancing and playing.

Theresa Casey

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www.ipaworld.org

References

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International Play Association (2010) *Global Consultations on Children's Right to Play*, Faringdon: IPA.