



TIME FOR POSITIVE PLAY

BY TOM VERITY AND ALISON NADARAJAH

IN THE 2019 INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL AWARDS, ALICE SMITH SCHOOL PRIMARY CAMPUS IN MALAYSIA WON THE PASTORAL INITIATIVE FOR ITS STUDENT-LED POSITIVE PLAYTIMES. HERE TOM VERITY AND ALISON NADARAJAH EXPLAIN THEIR AWARD-WINNING INITIATIVE.

Playtimes are undoubtedly the most important times of a child's day. Play keeps our children fit, inspires imagination, and helps develop key social skills. Get playtimes right and you improve emotional wellbeing, attitudes to school, and learning in the classroom.

A NEED FOR CHANGE

Alice Smith School is not-for-profit and serves both the expatriate and Malaysian communities in Kuala Lumpur. We have two campuses: one for primary students and one for secondary. At the primary campus we have over 800 students from Early Years to Year 6. Our playtimes needed a radical overhaul to ensure they were conducive to happy, active and inclusive play for all children. This meant considering the contextual needs of our international students.

This initiative required the development of a new policy, set of systems, procedures and resources. We decided that by involving students in the process, the change was more likely to have a positive impact; student engagement increases when the students have

ownership of decisions. So, we created Year 6 leadership opportunities that enabled us to empower our students to help us to transform playtimes. Our aim was to develop student leadership training that facilitated our Year 6 leaders to drive positive playtimes, so that everyone could feel safe and enjoy themselves.

TAKING ACTION

Our students led the ideas behind our action plan, making it bespoke to the needs of the school and showing the wider school community that we had a body of students who wanted to make a difference to their school. As a result of their ideas, the following actions were taken:

1. Children were surveyed by our Student Council and students conducted research into best playground practice worldwide.
2. The school's positive behaviour policy was reviewed, including a shared language of expectations.
3. Year 6 student leadership roles were designed and created for playtimes. These included referees, equipment managers, play mentors, monitors, buddies and helpers.
4. A student leadership training programme was developed to ensure all student leaders were equipped to succeed in their roles.
5. A school code of playground practice was created by the students. This was printed and displayed around the school.
6. Our teaching assistants were trained



THE PLAYGROUND INITIATIVE HAS FOSTERED POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS OUR ENTIRE STUDENT BODY.

7. in the principles of positive behaviour management and safeguarding priorities for playtimes.
7. Physical playground zoning was planned out based upon students' suggestions. These included formal game zones, free play zones, a quiet play zone and an organised game zone, as well as an optional art, dance and chill-out zone.
8. Adult supervision expectations and duties were reviewed and enhanced.
9. Organised game prompts and zone kit guides were created for staff.
10. We worked with our learning support unit to develop a Zen room. This was an inside space with soft play and multisensory equipment specifically for our vulnerable students. A supervision plan, with

appropriately trained and skilled pastoral staff, was established.

11. We audited and ordered new playtime resources.
12. Our playground equipment storage was redesigned to make it child-friendly.
13. A system was developed to register, record, monitor and review playtime behaviour.
14. We introduced a quality assurance tool to give us data on the effectiveness of playtimes.
15. As our positive playtimes progressed, we identified next steps, which resulted in integrated playtimes. Mixed ages were able to play in common areas and loose play equipment was added to inspire more creative thinking.



- 16. Senior leadership staff planned a schedule for visible presence during playtimes to support teaching assistants and student leaders.
- 17. We communicated our new initiative to all stakeholders and launched the new playtime programme to all students during an assembly.

THE BENEFITS OF A STUDENT-LED INITIATIVE

Over 75% of all Year 6 students were appointed to a leadership role, receiving weekly training. Crucially, they were given responsibility for organising and overseeing the wide range of different playtime activities on offer across the school. This included setting up and putting away the equipment, refereeing sports games, and mediating conflict resolution. This has given these children invaluable experiences that, we have observed, have positively impacted their emotional wellbeing.

Student involvement has proved vital in the success of the playtime initiative. We discovered that, by having the children closely involved in developing and looking after their playtime equipment and environment, it developed their sense of belonging, participation, and respect for each other and for adults. In addition to this, the critical mass of students adapted their behaviour to follow the positive examples set by the student leaders. One teaching assistant summed it up: “The younger children really listen to the Year 6 leaders.”

EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Student surveys that were completed after the implementation of the initiative showed an overwhelmingly positive response to the student leaders, playground zones and wider range of activities available. Complaints about football disagreements and about domination of the playground significantly dropped. With clear demarcation of zones, students could choose an area that made them feel safe. Overall, we observed a higher engagement by children in a range of playtime activities.

SEVEN STEPS TO CLARITY OF PLAYGROUND VISION AND POLICY

1. A student leader programme and training plan
2. Annual teaching assistant training
3. Playground zones enabling all children to participate in a range of activities
4. Dedicated playground resource budget
5. A clear cycle of resource auditing and purchasing, plus half-termly maintenance and cleaning
6. Easy, child-friendly access to materials that are well organised and attractively presented
7. Quality assurance tools and a schedule for monitoring, evaluating, reviewing and planning

Staff have observed that students are now more often seen to either deal with their own problems or seek help from a student leader. In addition, teachers have noted that there are fewer playtime issues being taken into the classroom resulting in more time for learning.

Not only has the playground initiative had a significant impact on our student leaders, it has also fostered positive relationships across our entire student body, and between students and adults. We have developed aspects of the initiative as results have been identified. For example, initially we observed that the children more actively listened to the student leaders than the teaching assistants. We were keen to develop our students’ respect for our teaching assistants and so, during the year, we provided our teaching assistants with positive behaviour management training and effective resources. Now, 95% of our teaching assistants believe that the playtime initiative has had a significant, positive impact on both the quality of play and on students’ behaviour during playtime.

Today, our playground offers a safe environment for our children to practise and apply the skills, knowledge and understanding that we teach in our PSHE lessons and weekly assemblies.



THE AUTHOR

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