



# WellSpring

Sharing physical activity knowledge

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## Play Around the World:

### A service-learning opportunity

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#### Introduction

The benefits of play for children are widely recognized in research as critical for optimal development including cognitive, creative, emotional, physical, and social domains.<sup>1-3</sup> Play is an integrating mechanism, which brings together everything we learn, know, feel, and understand. During play, life is acted out, culture is practiced, and struggles are worked through. Fundamentally, play connects us to that which brings us joy. In the pure sense of free play, children control the content and intent of their play without an adult-imposed agenda; children are the experts in their play.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognizes, “the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”<sup>4</sup> This is the premise for the Play Around the World (PAW) program, a course offered by the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the University of Alberta (U of A).

Play is universal, yet culturally influenced.<sup>3</sup> PAW uses play as a vehicle to enliven the collective human spirit and empower its players. In the process, university students are provided an opportunity to engage in a transformative, cross-cultural, learning experience with the intent of opening their minds and hearts to different ways of understanding and being in the world.

#### Evolution of Play Around the World

In the summer of 2000, Professor Jane Vallentyne conducted a feasibility study in Pattaya, Thailand with an orphanage caring for over 600 children and youth. While the orphanage provided excellent care and schooling for the children, there was an observed lack of play, sport, and recreation opportunities, particularly for young people experiencing disabilities.

#### SUMMARY

Play is a fundamental right in the everyday lives of children worldwide.

This WellSpring highlights the Play Around the World program as an academic service-learning opportunity for University of Alberta students. The core learning areas and theoretical underpinnings of the program are outlined, along with reflections from recent students about their experiences as play leaders.



In 2001, student volunteers from the U of A and the University of Toronto conducted a six-week pilot project called Project Play to facilitate play experiences with the children at the orphanage. The success of the pilot project led to PAW becoming an academic offering by the Faculty of Kinesiology, Sport, and Recreation at the U of A in 2002.<sup>5</sup>

Since its inception, PAW has continued to grow and evolve to include a second location in Thailand (Chiang Mai), Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Fort Providence, Northwest Territories, and Cusco, Peru. Of critical importance to the success of the program has been collaboration with our partners in these countries and the support of many others who value the possibilities of play.

### Play Around the World: A service-learning course

As an academic course offered each year, PAW is designed to provide full time U of A students with a three-month, cross-cultural, volunteer experience in various locations worldwide. Students from diverse educational backgrounds form learning communities that provide a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to learning, leadership, and programming. Key areas of student learning include play leadership practice, intercultural competency, and global citizenship education.

*My perceptions have changed; I originally thought that I had everything to offer the world, when in actuality the world has everything to offer me.*

—Shilah, Team Thailand

The main purpose of PAW is to provide students, from various faculties, with an opportunity to develop a sense of global awareness through a service-learning course. PAW collaborates with various schools, government and non-governmental (NGO) agencies, and community-based organizations in Thailand, Cambodia, Peru and NWT Canada. Students work with staff members to provide opportunities for play, sport, and physical activity to children and youth of all abilities. From May to July, students gain a meaningful, learning experience that enhances their global education in areas such as culture, cultural dimensions of play and physical activity, child poverty, globalization effects of tourism and sex tourism, and the rights of a child as well as the rights of a person experiencing disability.

*Everything that occurred abroad happened for a reason and led to pivotal moments in our experience that shaped and molded our views of ourselves and the world we live in.*

—Samantha, Team Thailand

## Preparation

A three-month preparation period prior to the in-country placement focuses on examining assumptions and using the PAW motto “Curiosity before Judgement”. The sessions are designed to open the mind, heart and will of participants, so that they are open to considering alternative ideas and behaviours during their placement. Students learn about play leadership, adapted physical activity, cultural diversity, intercultural communication, language, team building, and reflective journaling, to name a few.

## Community service learning

Community service learning (CSL) pedagogy fosters an understanding of culture and the development of global citizenry. CSL is designed to develop critical thinking and to engage students in questions of social change. Through volunteer and course work, the students develop an understanding of the issues and complexities of humanitarian work at national and international levels. Effective service-learning is reciprocal in nature, benefiting both the community and the service provider.

*I feel like I think more critically about my own actions and the effect they can have locally and globally.*

—Chloe, Team Thailand



## Transformative learning theory

Combining content from global citizenship education with transformative learning theory, PAW students learn and use processes of inquiry, advocacy, reflection and critical thinking as they reconstruct how they choose to relate to the ideas, events and relationships in their lives.

According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning theory is based upon the following principles: activating event, opportunities to identify and articulate assumptions, critical self-reflection, critical discourse, and opportunities to apply new perspectives.<sup>6</sup> The *activating event* is central to transformative learning and shift in ontology.

The activating event in the PAW program is seen as the frequent “destabilizing moments” that students bump into on a daily basis while immersed in a culture different from their own. By deepening their empathy and understanding of others and challenging their current paradigms, participants come to loosen the tightness of the hold on their cultural ways and begin to understand that there are multiple ways to be in this world.

*This experience has allowed me to obtain a greater understanding of the people in this world and the cultures accompanying them. It has made me a more educated and aware person; a person of greater compassion and understanding.*

—Mathew, Team Cambodia



The PAW students are encouraged to be mindful of culturally appropriate practices and potentially adapt activities to meet the unique needs of the individuals or organizations (often without having a command of the language). Students are challenged to find solutions for situations that may not necessarily have “right” answers or may have many “right” answers.



Students travelling abroad also need to recognize the potential danger, particularly for “white Northerners”, of unknowingly acting out a colonizing role by not recognizing the privileged space that they occupy in the South.<sup>7</sup> These concerns need to be addressed through active critical reflexivity (or self-reflection) and an explicit focus on global citizenship education.

The PAW program endeavours to provide processes for critical thinking and problem-solving to generate unique responses to particular sets of factors and conditions. It is the contention that returning students exhibit greater civic engagement and decreased ethnocentricity.<sup>5</sup>

### Student experiences

Outcomes vary depending on country, agency, and the individual student experiences. Often PAW participants come home with more questions than they left with. However the overall impact of the experiential learning course and the cross-cultural collaboration in the area of play and recreation, strengthens the delivery of service and deepens the exchange of knowledge, culture, language, and friendship.

*The everyday observations of and experiences with the kids have affected me most profoundly. PAW helped deepen my understanding of the human experience, caused me to become more self-aware, and broadened my understanding of play and its complexities.*

—Cassidy, Team Peru

### Conclusion

In our 20th year, Play Around the World continues to promote, protect, and provide for the child’s right to play<sup>8</sup> through collaboration in locations worldwide. Over 180 U of A students have embarked on this experiential learning journey, immersing in a



*Global Citizenship is being curious about the way my actions may be impacting others and our world. The little bits everyday can add up to a larger sum of impact than one grand gesture; the bits are habit forming, last a lifetime and influence future generations.*  
—Brady, Team Cambodia

culture different from their own, broadening their worldview, and experiencing the power of play.

The alumni form an active play community as advocates of play rights and evolving global citizens. Many have volunteered as leaders for outgoing teams or as committee members for the operations of the program.

When alumni apply their learnings at work and home, the long-term benefits can be seen in their local communities and society at large. Adults as advocates in the everyday lives of children:

- consider the voices of children in the decisions that affect them;
- ensure time and space for children to play freely;
- provide safe opportunities for play without adult bias or interference;
- recognize play as a fundamental right of all children.



## A B O U T T H E A U T H O R



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More information and ways to support PAW can be found at [www.uab.ca/play](http://www.uab.ca/play).

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