

## The Came, They Played, They Conquered

written by Ilona Tar, children's book illustrator and writer

Pop-up Adventure Playground | Chapter Zero Singapore | Clementi Woods Park  
September 17<sup>th</sup> 2016

--

A Pop-up Adventure Playground sounds like a guerrilla movement led by a revolution of children who just want to play anywhere and anytime! In a way, this is exactly what it is and should be.

Yes we have playgrounds full of fixed plastic/metal equipment and prescribed activities - how often though do you see children being corrected when they use play equipment in a way that challenges the norm? Told to slide down not climb up the slide.

Yes we have smooth condo lawns and vast playing fields, but most of these spaces do not have large tree roots to navigate and mud to dig up. Yes we have air-conditioned play centres, but these are like mini-amusement parks of suspended reality and don't readily translate into the real world.

*Yes we have smooth condo  
lawns and vast playing fields,  
but many of these spaces do not  
have large tree roots to navigate  
and mud to dig up.*

Daily life does not always contain playground equipment, a playing field or a play centre. Life is time at home, a walk to the shops, a bus ride or a family picnic in the park. Life contains risks but is also full of opportunities to play - if only we trusted and empowered our children to do so. And we as adults need to allow for active uninterrupted play. Below are some principles that further define active uninterrupted play:

- **Adults set safe and appropriately challenging environments for daily play**
- **Children engage in active physical play both to develop their bodies and for fun and enjoyment**
- **Children have time for and support for uninterrupted, sustained**
- **Adults advocate for children to have opportunities and environments that support active physical play <sup>1</sup>**

This is something the founders of Chapter Zero Singapore, Shumei Winstanley and Kasia Poleszak-Langner have recognised and embraced. Together with play advocate and mum of two Shwu Huey Ng, they form *Team Pop-Up* at Chapter Zero Singapore and host Pop-Up Adventure Playgrounds on a monthly basis at parks, community spaces, pre-schools and streets. Being advocates of RIE, Reggio Emilia and Playwork approaches and philosophies to childhood, they identified a need for Singapore's children to enjoy active play and exploration in ordinary places, uninterrupted by adults. "With some simple unconventional 'toys'", says Shumei, "almost any space can be a place to play."

Chapter Zero Singapore's inaugural pop-up playground last month was hosted on Baghdad Street in Kampong Glam in conjunction with Playstreets SG, closed to traffic every weekend, using all kinds of objects and materials. It was a big success, and so the team were excited to host September's pop-up playground in the amphitheatre at Clementi Woods Park. "In this park, there are trees to climb, hills to run up, tree roots and ant hills to navigate - there is an element of risk which many families here in

Singapore may not have an opportunity to explore. Active outdoor play is an important part of a child's life, and indeed learning." says Shumei.

*Children ran up hills and slid  
down them again on cardboard,  
taking appropriate risks and better  
understanding their own limitations  
as they did so, with little adult intervention.*

Chapter Zero scattered the amphitheatre and the surrounding hills with household 'junk' - old pots and pans, egg cartons, cardboard boxes, sheets and tubes. Children were invited to play from 4pm until dark. Uninterrupted social interactions happened naturally between children, objects were tugged and pulled, fought over and shared. Old sheets became tents and capes, chains became noodles and snakes, a box became both a boat and a place to hide. Children used make-shift ladders to attempt climbing tall trees, ran up hills and slid down them again on cardboard, taking appropriate risks and better understanding their own limitations as they did so, all with little adult intervention.

*"When you give your child  
the confidence to just be,  
they will transform an ordinary  
wooden spoon into a plane,  
a shovel or a conductor's baton  
without the fear of failing to  
play in a right or wrong way."*

"When you give your child the confidence to just be, they will transform an ordinary wooden spoon into a plane, a shovel or a conductor's baton without the fear of failing to play in a right or wrong way." says Shumei. When we hold ourselves back from intervening too much, a child's play is only really limited by their own imagination- that of the inventor, the scientist and the explorer - this became evident at Clementi Woods Park. When we also allow children to explore with an element of risk, they learn what is possible and not possible and make better decisions because of this. Chapter Zero's Pop-Up Team continually made their rounds to conduct on-going risk assessments, so that while the children could engage with risk in play, they were not being put in danger.

*When we also allow children to  
explore with an element of risk,  
they learn what is possible and  
not possible and make better  
decisions because of this.*

Chapter Zero's Team Pop-Up and their volunteers invited families and carers to join the children in play rather than projecting their own interests. Although the children quickly adapted to the idea, it wasn't always so easy for some adults. I observed one small child studying a snail on the ground. She picked it up, turned it over and gently placed it back again. As I watched this beautiful moment of discovery her carer strode up, took her hand and asked "What are you doing with that? Look over there! Go and play with the junk!" It may take a while for some adults to grasp the concept and let go, but for most part I think it was an extraordinary learning for everyone. Bravo and thank you to Chapter Zero for enabling us to simply *let the children play!*

The next Pop-up Adventure Playground will be held on **22 October at 4 pm in the lush space of Tanderra Singapore**. Look out for more information by following them to [www.facebook.com/chapterzerosg](https://www.facebook.com/chapterzerosg) or joining their online community **Respectful/Mindful Parenting Singapore**.

1

<http://www.cals.uidaho.edu/feeding/fortrainers/handouts/pdf/Guiding%20Principles%20Active%20Physical%20Play.pdf>, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2016