

## After Dark Club

### Why?

Last year, [Learning through Landscapes](#) worked with After School Clubs in Lambeth, exploring ways of making better use of the outdoor spaces their settings offered. The nature of After School clubs means that for part of the year, it's dark outdoors. This, along with the barriers LTL and other outdoor learning providers commonly come across (weather, clothing, access, resources, time constraints) meant that the outdoor spaces, some of which were extensive and exciting, were significantly underutilised by the Clubs.

LTL's project officer Kyrstie Rowe (now at [Bright Buttons Nursery](#)) began to investigate techniques for overcoming this natural barrier, working alongside After Dark club practitioners to identify innovative or simple interventions that would open up outdoors all year around and all day long. The project was only a short one, however and ended before LTL was able to really get to grips with the reality of outdoor play after dark... which is where I came in!

I'm lucky enough to have a large green opposite my house, and most of the homes facing it are on cul de sacs, so it's safe and accessible as well as attractive to children of all ages. As an outdoor play advocate (the hands on type) I'm often out on the Green with my own children, their friends and any others who happen upon us. During the spring and summer months, the Green is well used; it's rare to find even an hour when there aren't children bike riding, tree climbing, scooting, batting, bowling, poking things with sticks or just generally hanging out. It sounds idyllic, doesn't it? But with the exception of Hallowe'en and carol singing, the children disappear once the sun drops over the horizon, which in autumn and winter, it does depressingly early.

My premise is: outdoor play is good for children, no matter what the weather or the light level.

### Getting started

I began to canvas opinions on whether playing outdoors after dark was acceptable or realistic. The space we have available is not bounded in the way a school grounds or After School Club space is, so containing children's exuberance in the dark may have been difficult. There's no way of controlling who joins in – or when they leave, and whilst I know most of the children and parents well, would they be confident in letting their children play out after dark?



The Green, late on a summer's afternoon. My glass of wine is just out of shot (this is family blog).



A dusky autumn evening across the Green. We have ventured further afield, but either my photographs are really poor or I was too busy to take any.



Hallowe'en art at our After Dark Hallowe'en party (sausages and hot choc provided, of course).



A4 magnifying sheet – silly fun pulling faces and inspecting our spots...

The short answer was, 'yes'. The very first time I headed out with my own boys, we attracted two extra friends, all keen to have a go with the after dark resources we'd cobbled together from Play Learning Life's loose parts resource boxes and the Junior PLLs' outdoor play toys.

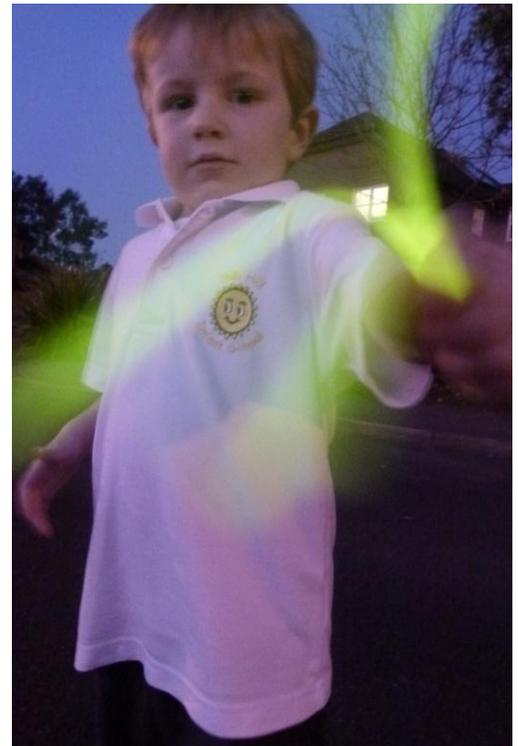
At first, the group was mainly excited to start snapping glowsticks, but immediately began using them in unconventional ways: playing hide the glowstick, hanging them from trees, joining them together to encircle a lamppost (children discovered that the contrast is almost totally lost when placed under a street lamp) or create light sabres (they discovered that glowsticks don't last long in a battle). Flinging them high into the night sky was also popular. After that, each time we went out, we'd have a few more participants until on Hallowe'en itself, there were around 20 children (and quite a few parents) enjoying an outdoor party on the Green, complete with hot chocolate, cookies and traditional games such as apple bobbing.

These days, it's not unusual to answer a 6pm knock at the door to find a couple of neighbourhood children asking to borrow what is now known as the After Dark Club play trug. It's even been on an outing to the local Beaver group, where we made use of the woodland in a nearby school field to play where it truly was dark. I trust the children to return the resources, and they always do (except glow sticks, of course); but I often go out with the trug and just observe what happens next...

### Getting out and about after dark

My mum is a retired Occupational Therapist and has always been very keen on being outdoors – I am indebted to my parents for instilling a love of taking learning and play outdoors. Early in the life of After Dark Club, we had a wide ranging and fascinating discussion about the techniques she used to use with elderly patients who had lost the use of one or more of their senses, and many of her observations have helped me shape the way the After Dark club has functioned. We started to collect more 'sound' objects and use them for laying and following aural trails, replicating nocturnal sounds, making up secret codes as well as obviously just making a racket.

I also introduced a small selection of 'smellies' (that's what mum used to call ladies' toiletries, back in the day) to see how they'd go down: citronella candles (not that we were plagued by midges in December) and incense sticks were fun additions and we also toured the neighbours' front gardens crushing their herbs in our fingers and tasting them (the herbs, not the fingers). Sadly, we couldn't identify any night jasmine, nicotiana or other evening smellies locally, so that's a job for my own gardening task list ready for next year.



Junior PLL the Younger never tires of glowsticks – and one in every hundred photos is worth keeping!



This bouncy ball, which lights up when it's thrown against a hard surface, has been really popular and made night-time cricket without floodlights a reality.

I'm really interested in pursuing smell next Autumn; natural smells are obviously a priority but I think there's room for experimenting with laying trails with very strongly perfumed chemical potions such as (ahem) Lynx. I expect we'll be running away from it rather than attracted to it, but I'm up for a challenge.

## Materials and equipment

I chose a trug over a tidy box as it's easier for children to transport it themselves, plus it's bright orange and often gets used as an After Dark toy in its own right. The play resources have been collected over the course of the dark months, with the children often suggesting items they think would be fun to play with. The trug contains items bought online, in pound shops, market stalls, outdoor pursuits suppliers, DIY stores and salvaged from the bottom of the toy box and shed:

- Reflective items: various sized mirrors; glittery baubles; foil plates; chrome candle holders; reflective sticky strips, bike clips, armbands, a road sign etc...
- Glowing items: glowsticks, glow in the dark skeleton; glow in the dark rope; glowing nail polish and facepaint...
- Light up items: solar, wind up and battery powered torches; impact operated light up ball; press-on LED camping night lights with hooks on; powerful head torch (mainly kept by me for emergencies)...
- Fiery items: candles and tealights; garden torches; sparklers; long handled flint lighter and long matches (only used with supervision)...
- Sound items: croaking frog / hooting owl; penny whistle; bells of all kinds; whistles; maracas and castanets, mini-didgeridoo, wobble board (large piece of plastic)...
- Smelly items: citronella candles; incense sticks; old perfume;
- Odd and ends: clear plastic food box – used as a light box with a push on LED light inside; After Eight chocolates; marbles in a string bag; string and masking tape; pegs, scissors; nappy sacks (multipurpose dog poo and treasure bags); mini first-aid kit and alcohol rub, planisphere...

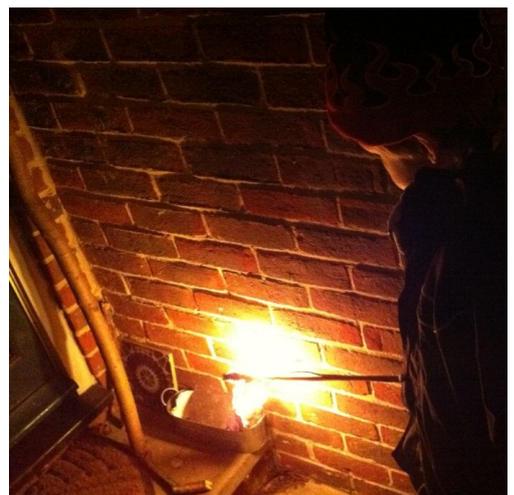
The most expensive single item I bought specially was the glow in the dark rope (I already had the head-torch and a decent camera!), but it's been worth the investment of around £10 as the children have used it for imaginative games, den building and for marking out boundaries, both in daylight and after dark. Oh, and they've tied each other up with it a few times too.



Simple equipment and resources – many from the Pound shop – have been used in creative ways. Light against mirrors has been a recurring theme; this arrangement is to aid night-time tree climbing.



An early iteration of the After Dark trug – stacks more in there now.



Not surprisingly, playing with fire has been a compelling activity. Here, we're burning the neighbour's broken pampas grass stems to see whether we can make 'flaming torches' for a night-time procession. We couldn't – they flame dramatically for a couple of seconds and then die out quickly. But an important lesson learned nonetheless!

There are a number of non-trug items we've also made us of over the dark months; I have a helicopter drip tray... a what, you say? Um, it's like a car's drip tray only utterly ginormous. A solidier housemate gave it to me many years ago and it's great for making instant sand pits, water trays, building fires in, cooking in over a bonfire, using as a picture frame, making small worlds in, it's a handy instant table... its uses are myriad and I'd highly recommend trying to source one from your nearest friendly helicopter engineer.

We've also had the bikes and scooters out, the trampoline and the hosepipe. The Nerf guns were popular one evening, with the group hiding in the bushes and stalking one another; it's handy that the bullets are orange, although we still found quite a few the next day! I adored watching PLL the Elder playing Luke Skywalker with his lightsaber, in the blue black twilight of Autumn, and the simple joy of climbing a tree with the added challenge of doing it in the dark has been a continual activity.

My big regret is the sheer lack of snow this winter. I've been desperate to get out and build shelters that we can have stories in; go sledging; make giant pictures and trails we can light with candles... and whatever else this fantastic group of imaginative children can come up with.

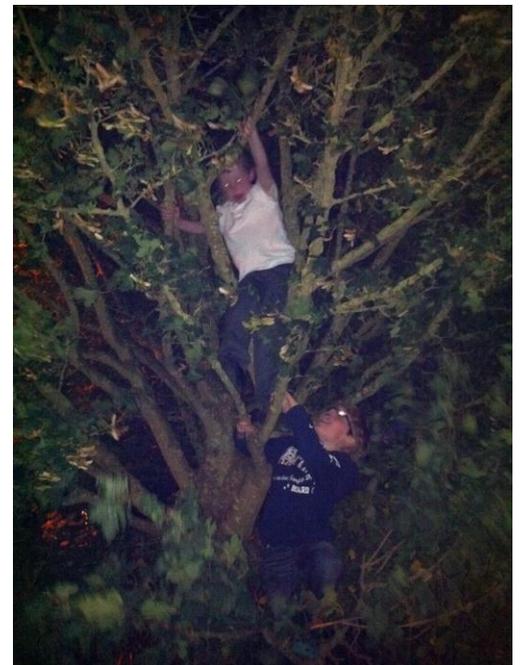
### Moving forward

My advice to anyone thinking about starting an After Dark play club is: do it! It's great fun and is undoubtedly encouraging active, noisy, innovative play at a time of year when it's very easy to slouch in front of a screen after school. Next autumn, I'll be formalising the club; we'll still also head out whenever we feel like it, but there has been enough interest over this winter to justify running a weekly session for pre-booked children, at which we will range further afield. This will change the complexion of the Club on these sessions, but I think it's worth it in order to enable more children to get out.

- I'll have to start writing out risk assessments rather than relying on solely on dynamic risk assessment and my knowledge of the children and the space we use.
- I'll have to plan ahead more, to ensure the spaces we visit are accessible and that parents are okay with us paddling in the stream or hiking across fields.
- I'll need to call in at least one more adult to help manage the group and shepherd it around safely.
- I'll happily spend a bit more on resources to ensure there's enough choice for everyone and that they are robust enough to survive the rigours we'll put them through.
- WILL learn how to take better night-time photos on my DSLR. I will.



Poo in the road: could a night hike GET any more exciting than this?



Grrrr. My pics are sooo poor! Must practice night-time photography over the summer...



Love this pic of Luke Skywalker

- For the first time, I'll ask parents to sign a waiver making it clear that they know we'll be out in the dark, taking risks, likely to get dirty or scratched and that they fully accept the common sense approach to health and safety that I advocate and practice – I won't be doing this for the informal sessions on our Green.

Within a more structured hour long session, I may introduce themes (i.e. stargazing), and suggest new locations to meet at (i.e. the ford). But I intend the children to continue to shape their own play; I'll supply resources in the trug (ok, maybe it'll be a couple of trugs by next Autumn), but if they suggest other things they'd like to do or can bring along, then all the better.

I won't be changing the free play aspect of being outdoors; the most fascinating thing this winter has been watching children experiment with the darkness itself, not necessarily the resources. Sometimes they've revisited 'daylight' games like quick cricket (reflective tape on the bat, glow in the dark ball) and at other times, invented their own ways of using the environment, with or without special after dark resources. Watching a four year old conquer a tree he only just mastered in daylight the weekend before was inspiring. Quick cricket was hilarious. The rules of First One To Hit the Lamppost with a Glowstick were incomprehensible, despite the name. Night hikes were creepy. Using our (unlit) local play area after dark felt delightfully illicit.

The After Dark club children have loved playing out at night and having fun was our main motivation, along with getting physically active during the potentially sloth-like winter evenings. But along the way the group has learned new skills, strengthened friendships, collaborated with children of all ages, developed leadership skills (yes, I mean you, Miss PLL Pal SB), solved problems and puzzles, explored our environment with 'new eyes' and applied descriptive language to fresh situations and scenarios.

This is an experiment I will most certainly be continuing next Autumn and I hope that the things I've learned as a play practitioner will help me work up a more academically rigorous research project on behalf of Learning through Landscapes, measuring the tangible benefits for After School Clubs of active outdoor play in the British autumn and winter. I'll keep you posted.

Oh, and the clocks don't go forward for another month, so if you haven't done it before, why not get out there in the dark with your own group or your own children and their pals? A pack of baby wipes and a head torch are all you really need... have fun!



Night-hike led by Beaver leader 'Squirrel' who surprised us all by producing hot chocolate outside of his own house on the way back to the Scout Hut. Hurrah!



Great times around the campfire with singing, stories, sausages and other things that didn't begin with an 's'.



Balloon ball games in the twilight – there had been a hard frost all day and the grass was delightfully crunchy underfoot, adding to the sensory experience.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to

- LTL's Lambeth project settings and Kyrstie for sharing ideas so generously
- [Jan White](#) and [Juliet Robinson](#) for flagging up extra resources and articles on play out after dark
- The parents of the After Dark children and the Beavers for trusting me with their kids and allowing me to take lots of (not very good) pics
- And finally to the children themselves, who never fail to inspire and innovate.

## Useful links

[www.maplin.co.uk](http://www.maplin.co.uk) – for glowing rope

[www.glow.com.uk](http://www.glow.com.uk) - for everything glowing

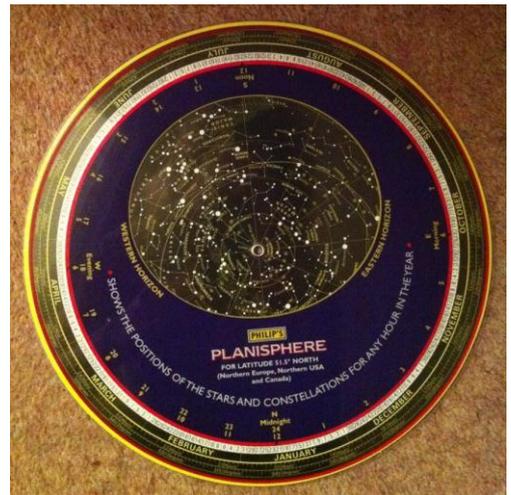
[www.glowsticks.co.uk](http://www.glowsticks.co.uk) – for glow in the dark gloves

<http://www.darkskyscotland.org.uk/> - star parties in scotland

iPhone apps – Pocket Universe; NASA; Morse Code Flashlight (uses sound, and screen (not LED)); Compass



These brilliant torches are one of our best finds: A pound each from (ahem) the Pound Shop and they shine (L), shine and glow (M) and flash on and off (R). We've used them several times a week since October - they've been dropped, occasionally come apart and yet they still work perfectly.



Planispheres are clever 'old school' tools for star gazing and still hold their value against the iPhone apps. There's also a southern hemisphere one – we took one to Aus with us last year.