Playspace Activity Leader Manual
Dear Friend,

We are excited to welcome you as a new Playspace Activity Leader (PAL). Play provides children with the skills they need to grow and learn about themselves, others, and their world. By giving homeless children opportunities for play, you enable them to practice these skills. Children learn through play, which is why healthy play is so critical to future educational success.

This manual provides you with information about Horizons for Homeless Children, the Playspace Program, and your role as a PAL. It is our hope that this manual will supplement your training and help prepare you for your new volunteer experience.

Horizons for Homeless Children’s Playspace Program ensures that children living in family homeless shelters in Massachusetts have the opportunity for developmentally-appropriate play. Playspaces are educational spaces in shelters stocked with books, toys, and art supplies. Horizons operates over 120 Playspaces across Massachusetts, and these Playspaces are staffed by more than 1,400 trained volunteers.

By becoming a PAL, you are providing an opportunity for young homeless children to learn, play, grow and thrive. The children who visit your Playspace will learn from their interactions with you, and they look forward to seeing you each week for singing, creating, building, game playing, and consistent attention and care.

Your commitment makes a difference every week.

Thank you,

*The Horizons for Homeless Children Playspace Team*
About Horizons for Homeless Children

One in every 30 children in the U.S. experiences homelessness each year. Horizons for Homeless Children is a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the lives of young homeless children in Massachusetts by ensuring that they are prepared for school success. We provide high-quality early education, opportunities for play, and comprehensive family support services.

Today, we serve 2,000 young homeless children each week in Massachusetts through our three early education centers and our 120+ Playspaces. We are one of the few comprehensive organizations in the state focused exclusively on the needs of young homeless children and their families.

Table of Contents

Horizons’ Programs Page 3
Being a PAL: Description of Role Page 4
Being a PAL: Guidelines Page 5
Horizons CORI/SORI Policy Pages 6-7
PAL Rights & Responsibilities Page 8
Playspace Communication Page 9
Playspace Materials & Areas of Play Pages 10-13
  • Materials, Page 10
  • Literacy Area, Page 11
  • Dramatic Play Area, Page 12
  • Manipulatives Area, Page 12
  • Art Area, Page 13
  • Infant Area, Page 13
Playspace Cleaning and Maintenance Page 14
Playspace Management: Building Relationships Pages 15-16
Organizing the Playspace Shift Pages 17-20
Managing Behaviors in the Playspace Page 21
Handling Challenging Behaviors Page 22
Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries Page 23
Frequently Asked Questions Pages 24-26
Horizons’ Programs

Early Education Centers
Our early education centers are a model for ensuring the social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development of homeless children. We engage families, and deliver high-quality education to ensure that homeless children participating in our program are ready to succeed in the future and that their parents are ready to support that success.

Our three early education centers, known as Community Children’s Centers, serve 182 children each day and are designed to meet the unique needs of homeless children. Each center takes an individualized developmental approach, providing children with quality early care and a creative curriculum to help them enter school with the skills that they need to be successful socially and academically.

As parental engagement is key to a child’s success, families receive additional support services such as parenting classes connections to community services, educational opportunities, workforce training, and financial literacy classes.

Family Partnerships
To support families enrolled in our Early Education Centers, Horizons has implemented a family partnerships model with a variety of program for parents. A few signature programs under Family Partnerships include Mobility Mentoring and Next Schools. Mobility Mentoring supports parents in goal-setting and personal empowerment. The Next Schools project assists parents in finding the next best school opportunity for their child once they leave Horizons. Staff have developed strong relationships in Boston with public, private, and parochial schools to help parents make the best transition for their family in the future.

Playspace Program
The Horizons Playspace Program ensures that children living in family homeless shelters in Massachusetts have the opportunity for developmentally-appropriate play. We build educational and trauma informed spaces in shelters and stock them with books, toys, and art supplies. More than 120 Playspaces are staffed by more than 1,400 trained volunteers, called Playspace Activity Leaders (PALs), who commit two hours weekly for at least six months. While PALs play with the children, parents can participate in activities such as parenting groups, budgeting classes or job searches.

Policy & Advocacy
The lives of families experiencing homelessness are impacted by various public policies, from state-based early education funding to federal housing policies. To further improve the lives of homeless children and their families, Horizons for Homeless Children advocates on behalf of young children, educators and human services providers, and provides research on the impact of early education on homeless children.
Being a PAL: Description of Role

Title:
Playspace Activity Leader (PAL)

Supervisors:
Shelter Staff Liaison, Playspace Program Director, and Playspace Program Manager

Responsibilities:
• Support children residing in shelter in their ability to play, learn, and grow.
• Foster positive relationships with children.
• Help to buffer the stress and trauma of homelessness through consistent Playspace shifts centered around play.

Specific Duties:
• Attend Playspace shift consistently and punctually each week.
• Prepare and lead age-appropriate and trauma-informed activities, games, and/or projects with children.
• Foster healthy interactions and play with children.
• Maintain communication with Horizons’ staff, PAL partners, and shelter staff.
• Maintain appropriate boundaries with the children and families, and confidentiality of the shelter, as needed.

Qualifications:
• Strong interest in working with children ages 0-6 and sensitivity to homelessness are required.
• Experience with children is a plus.
• Must be at least 18 years old to volunteer in an unsupervised setting. Volunteers that are 16 and 17 years old may participate with parental supervision.
• Playspaces are very active environments. PALs must be able to be physically and mentally engaging with young children. Specifically, a PAL must be able to lift and hold infants/toddlers, move from a standing to seated position on the floor, bend down and lift 25-30lbs., maintain appropriate boundaries, and make sound decisions about safety in a busy environment.

Benefits & Training:
• Initial orientation and training (3 hours).
• Ongoing learning through workshops and support from Horizons’ staff.
• Please note: additional training on domestic violence may be required at some domestic violence shelters.

Hours:
All shifts are held on weekdays between the hours of 9am and 8pm.

Commitment:
Two-hour shift, same time and day each week, not including travel time. There is a minimum commitment of six months.

Locations:
To be arranged after the PAL training. There are more than 120 shelter locations statewide. Shift times vary by location.

Our PALs use a playful approach to enhance the social, physical, and emotional development of the children who visit our Playspaces. PALs facilitate activities and games that:

⇒ Create a safe and supportive environment.
⇒ Foster a social connection with caring adult and peers.
⇒ Promote the strengthening of self-confidence and positive self-esteem.
Being a PAL: **Guidelines**

The following guidelines will help ensure a safe and positive experience for both PALs and children.

**Alcohol and Drug Policy**

PALs are prohibited from attending their Playspace shift under the influence of alcohol or drugs. If there is reasonable suspicion that you are using or have used alcohol or any illegal drug prior to your shift, you will be asked to leave the shelter immediately and you will be terminated from the program. Please be cautious when attending a PAL shift after starting new medications.

**Safety and Liability**

- PALs are not allowed to take children off shelter grounds unless accompanied by shelter staff.
- PALs do not change diapers or place children on the toilet. If a child needs to be changed or go to the bathroom, PALs must find a shelter staff person who will get the child’s parent.
- PALs do not distribute food, nor should they coordinate any activities using real food, in the Playspace during a PAL shift. Some children may have allergies and/or food insecurities.
- PALs should exercise caution when engaging in physical play with children. Wrestling or other “rough housing” type play is inappropriate in the shelter setting. If you have any questions, please check with Horizons’ staff.

**Political/Religious Views**

PALs should not promote any particular political and/or religious beliefs, practices or affiliations at the shelter.

**Universal Precautions**

PALs are not allowed to provide first aid treatment. If there is an accident, **immediately** find shelter staff and/or a parent for assistance. Please do not treat injured children. Please report any accident or injury of a child or PAL to both shelter and Horizons staff.

**PAL Partners**

- Each volunteer will be assigned one or more PAL partners, depending on the number of children at the shelter/program and the size of the Playspace.
- Volunteers **may never be alone** in the Playspace with a child. There must be at least two adults in the Playspace at all times (i.e. two PALs, or one PAL and a shelter staff). In addition, PAL partners are responsible for ensuring appropriate ratios not to exceed 5:1 for school-age, 3:1 for preschool, and 2:1 for infants. Please notify shelter staff if you need to limit the number of children in a shift.
- If you have a conflict that keeps you from attending an assigned shift, please let your PAL partner(s) know as soon as possible, in addition to shelter and Horizons’ staff. Advance notice will let everyone plan accordingly to maintain an appropriate child-to-adult ratio.
- If you can no longer volunteer, please contact Horizons’ staff as soon as possible, so that a new PAL can be assigned to your shift. We request at least two weeks notice.

**Confidentiality**

- When talking about your volunteer experience, please do not use children’s full names or reveal other identifying information. Any information you share may unintentionally jeopardize the safety and/or privacy of a family.
- Taking pictures of shelter residents, especially children, is prohibited without permission from shelter staff, Horizons staff, and written permission from the parent.
- For safety reasons, PALS must keep the location of their shelter assignments confidential. This is vital for our domestic violence shelters.

**Physical Activity Requirements Policy**

Playspaces are very active environments. PALs must be able to be comfortable in very dynamic, ever-changing environments. PALs must be able to be physically and mentally engaging with children ages 0-6 years old. Specifically, a PAL must be able to lift and hold infants/toddlers, move from a standing to seated position on the floor, bend down and lift 25-30lbs., maintain appropriate boundaries, and make sound decisions about safety in a busy environment.
Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) and Sexual Offender Registry Information (SORI) background checks:

- Before a new volunteer can be placed in a shelter, a criminal background and sexual offender registry check must be conducted.
- If you have a criminal record, a Playspace Program Director will mail you a copy of your record. When you receive your CORI in the mail, you need to call your regional office to discuss and review the report to determine if you are eligible for a placement. Applicants with open cases cannot be placed.
- If you are a registered offender with the sexual offender registry, you will not be allowed to volunteer with our programs.

Horizons for Homeless Children adopts this Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) Policy in compliance with the requirements of the Department of Criminal Justice Information Services. Horizons for Homeless Children is an agency certified by DCJIS for access to CORI for licensing purposes and will generally adhere to the following practices and procedures in connection therewith:

I. CORI checks will only be conducted as authorized by the DCJIS and MGL c.6,172 and only after a CORI Acknowledgement Form has been completed. If a new CORI check is to be made on a subject within a year of his/her signing of the CORI Acknowledgement Form, the subject shall be giving seventy-two (72) hours’ notice that a new CORI check will be conducted.

II. Horizons will conduct a CORI check of all new volunteers and every three years thereafter. Horizons will also CORI any returning volunteers who have been inactive for over one year.

III. All Horizons’ shelter and program partners will complete a permission form either (1) refusing to accept any volunteer who has a CORI unless the offense is deemed a misdemeanor or (2) refusing to accept any volunteer who has a CORI unless the offense has been dismissed with a non-conviction or (3) refuse to accept any volunteer who has a CORI record.

IV. All CORI obtained from the DCJIS is confidential, and access to the information must be limited to those individuals who have a “need to know”. This may include, but not be limited to full-time Playspace Program Managers, Playspace Program Directors, Director of Playspace Program and Chief Program Officer whom have received agency CORI training. Horizons for Homeless Children must maintain and keep a current list of each individual authorized to have access to, or view CORI. This list will be updated every six (6) months and is subject to inspection upon request by the DCJIS at any time.

V. An informed review of a criminal record requires training. Accordingly, all personnel authorized to review or access CORI at Horizons for Homeless Children will review, and will be thoroughly familiar with the educational and relevant training materials regarding CORI laws and regulations made available by DCJIS. Additionally, Horizons for Homeless Children is an agency required by MGL c.6, s. 171A to maintain a CORI policy.

VI. CORI used for employment purposes shall only be accessed for applicants who are otherwise qualified for the position for which they have applied. Unless otherwise provided by law, a criminal record will not automatically disqualify an applicant. Rather, determinations of suitability based on background checks will be made consistent with this policy and any applicable law or regulations.

VII. If a criminal record is received from DCJIS, the information is to be closely compared with the information on the CORI Acknowledgement Form and any other identifying information provided by the applicant to ensure the record belongs to the applicant. If the information in the CORI record provided does not exactly match the identification information provided by the applicant, a determination is to be made by an individual authorized to make such determinations based on a comparison of the CORI record and documents provided by the applicant.
VIII. In connection with any decision regarding employment or volunteer opportunities the subject shall be provided with a copy of the criminal history record, whether obtained from DCJIS or from any other source, prior to questioning the subject about his or her criminal history. The source(s) of the criminal history record is also to be disclosed to the subject.

IX. If a determination is made, based on the information as provided in section VII of this policy, that the criminal record belongs to the subject, and the subject does not dispute the records accuracy, then the determination of suitability for the position will be made. Unless otherwise provided by law, factors considered in determining suitability may include, but not be limited to, the following:

a. Relevance of the record to the position sought;
b. The nature of the work to be performed;
c. Time since the conviction;
d. Age of the candidate at time of the offense;
e. Seriousness and specific circumstances of the offense;
f. The number of offenses;
g. Whether the applicant has pending charges;
h. Any relevant evidence of rehabilitation or lack thereof; and/or
i. Any other relevant information, including information submitted by the candidate or requested by Horizons.

X. Applicants will not be allowed to volunteer if any of these offenses are listed on their CORI record:
   a. The applicant still has an open case;
   b. The applicant was arrested and/or convicted of abuse or neglect of a child; and/or
   c. The applicant is a registered Sex Offender

XI. If any authorized official is inclined to make an adverse decision based on the results of a criminal history background check, the applicant will be notified immediately. The subject shall be provided with a copy of the organization’s CORI policy and a copy of the criminal history. The source(s) of the criminal history will also be revealed. The subject will then be provided with an opportunity to dispute the accuracy of the CORI record. Subjects shall also be provided a copy of DCJIS’ Information Concerning the Process for Correcting a Criminal Record.

XII. All CORI obtained from the DCJIS is confidential and can only be disseminated as authorized by law and regulation. A central secondary dissemination log shall be used to record any dissemination of CORI outside Horizons for Homeless Children, including dissemination at the request of the subject.

XIII. Volunteers may only begin their service after CORI results have arrived and Horizons’ staff have adequately screened all CORI records.

   The applicant is to be notified of the decision and the basis for it in a timely manner.
As a volunteer with Horizons for Homeless Children, I have the **RIGHT** to expect:

A. A comprehensive training, which will address issues relevant to the Playspace program, such as homelessness, child development, and behavior management.

B. A partner to volunteer with me. This person may be another PAL or a staff person depending on the shelter placements.

C. An updated schedule of other PALs on my Playspace shift, with contact information.

D. The name and phone number of a staff person at the shelter where I am placed. This person will act as the shelter liaison and will provide me with an orientation to the shelter.

E. Notification when there is a change in shelter liaison or my PAL partner(s).

F. Invitations throughout the year to continuing education workshops, ongoing trainings, and other events sponsored by Horizons for Homeless Children.

G. To be assigned a Horizons staff member who will act as an ongoing support and resource for issues that arise during my time as a PAL.

H. The opportunity to participate with the PAL Network, a group of active PALs who give feedback and suggestions for improvement to the PAL experience, work together to solve challenges in the Playspace, and help to plan volunteer events.

I. To make a positive difference in the lives of children and families experiencing homelessness.

As a volunteer with Horizons for Homeless Children, it is my **RESPONSIBILITY** to:

A. Provide Horizons for Homeless Children with a completed application, a signed CORI/SORI form, the names and phone numbers of two references, a signed waiver, confidentiality agreement, and a completed placement questionnaire.

B. Attend a PAL training.

C. Inform the Horizons staff of any change in my schedule, if it affects my placement, as soon as possible.

D. Contact the shelter liaison to set up an orientation once I have received my placement packet.

E. Be on time and ready to volunteer at my assigned shelter shift each week.

F. Notify the shelter, Horizons staff and my PAL partner(s) as soon as possible if I know I will not be able to attend a shift.

G. Commit to being a volunteer for a minimum of six (6) months.

H. Notify shelter and Horizons staff immediately if I perceive anything to be a safety hazard in the Playspace or have any concerns about the health or safety of a child.
Communication is essential to the success of the Playspace. We believe that everyone is responsible for having open and prompt communication. Below is a list of communications responsibilities for Horizons’ staff, shelter staff, and the PALs.

**Horizons staff will provide:**
- A three-hour PAL training;
- CORI and SORI checks and follow CORI Policy in handling any issues that MAY arise;
- Information about the placement process and work with individual volunteers to find the best placement for them;
- Notifications if any major changes are happening at the shelter or on their shift;
- Ongoing support through phone and email check-ins, workshops, social events, newsletters, and social media; and
- Issue-resolution in a timely and professional manner.

**The shelter liaison and other shelter staff will provide:**
- An initial orientation, which should include information related to bathroom facilities, shelter rules, information about the program and the families in general, emergency procedures, and any other pertinent information;
- Issue-resolution related to children, parents, or staff in a timely and professional manner. Playspace Program staff shall be updated about issues that could impact the Playspace and the PALs;
- An easily available sign-in sheet;
- Information about changes related to the shift (i.e. shift cancellation, no children at shift, anticipated construction or changes, etc.); and
- An accessible point-of-contact at the shelter.

**PALs will:**
- Abide by the Playspace Policies, Rights and Responsibilities that were signed at the training;
- Notify PAL partners, Horizons staff, and the shelter if the PAL cannot attend a shift or needs to change his/her schedule;
- Fill out the sign-in sheet every week;
- Be consistent and reliable;
- Attend scheduled weekly shift and communicate with fellow PALs, shelter liaisons, and Horizons staff if their schedule changes;
- Notify Playspace Programs staff at least two or more weeks in advance before the PAL’s last shift, so that there is adequate time to find a new PAL to replace him/her on the shift; and
- Make every effort to say a “healthy goodbye” to the children on his/her last shift.
Playspace Materials and Areas of Play

Materials
Horizons for Homeless Children equips every Playspace with high-quality educational materials for children of various ages. We work with shelter partners to keep the Playspace focused on education and creative play.

These are the basic guidelines about appropriate Playspace materials:

- We provide educational materials for children ages 0-6.
- We discourage commercialized games, dolls, toys, and materials in an effort to foster personal creativity and imagination. For example, we do not purchase movie character toys and games, Barbie dolls, etc. for the Playspace.
- We do not provide battery-operated toys and cannot replace batteries of toys that others have brought into the Playspace.
- We support cultural diversity, and strive to place materials and games representing different languages and ethnicities.
- We do not allow materials or books with a religious or political focus.
- We strive to only use materials and toys that are safe for children of all ages. Therefore, we do not allow small items that children can choke on (beads, buttons, etc.), or large items that can pose a risk of injury. In programs serving a large number of older children, the materials with many small parts are stored and should be brought out with the older children only.
- We strive to maintain a healthy and safe environment. Because they cannot be properly cleaned and sanitized on a regular basis, we do not allow stuffed animals in the Playspace.
Areas of Play

Every Playspace has five major areas of play. These are based on research of best practices among leading early education and child care settings. While all Playspaces include all the areas listed below, due to different sizes and configurations of the spaces in each shelter, they may or may not have all these materials.

1) LITERACY AREA

⇒ Board books
⇒ Book display
⇒ Books in Spanish
⇒ Books for children of various reading levels
⇒ Comfortable sitting area
⇒ CD Players and CDs

Benefits to Children:
• Builds vocabulary;
• Helps children grow accustomed to reading left to right, attributing symbols to words, turning pages, etc.;
• Provides opportunities for individual attention;
• Gives opportunities for personal expression;
• Teaches about new cultures and experiences through stories;
• Enhances ability to focus and concentrate;
• Music allows for developing gross motor skills, learning about their bodies, following a beat and rhythm, etc.
• Singing, rhyming, and following a beat promote language development, as well as social and emotional development; and
• Teaches that reading can be fun!

Remember: you can promote literacy in any of the areas—practice letters while playing with blocks, tell stories during dramatic play, sing rhyming songs with infants, etc.
Playspace Materials and Areas of Play

2) DRAMATIC PLAY AREA

- Play kitchen with pots, pans, utensils, and play food
- Kitchen table
- Dress up clothes and a mirror
- Doll bed with doll and clothes
- Musical instruments
- Animals

Benefits to Children:
- Allows them to engage in scenarios that teach social skills and problem-solving;
- Allows for learning of the difference between reality and fantasy;
- Provides the space to help process emotions they may not yet be able to verbalize;
- Gives them a sense of power and control over their lives;
- Fosters creativity and imagination; and
- Teaches them to see the world from another perspective.

3) MANIPULATIVE AREA

- Blocks
- Connecting and building materials
- Cars and trucks
- Sorting and stacking toys

Benefits to Children:
- Helps develop fine motor skills;
- Teaches problem solving;
- Provides opportunities for creative thinking;
- Teaches colors, shapes, sizes, and numbers;
- Provides a sense of control by allowing for the freedom to decide what to do with the object;
- Provides a sense of predictability. The object will always react the same way to the same movements; and
- Teaches social skills about taking turns and sharing.
4) ART AREA

- Play dough
- Bubbles
- Finger paint, smocks, paint paper
- Construction paper, crayons, markers, scissors
- Assortment of other arts & craft supplies

Benefits to Children:
- Allows them to explore using all five senses;
- Allows for self-expression through art, color, and design;
- Introduces creativity using different textures, shapes, sizes, and materials;
- Increases hand-eye coordination and other fine motor skills;
- Transforms mental images and imagination into reality through art; and
- Encourages creativity as a way to support therapeutic healing.

5) INFANT AREA

- Soft mats
- Infant climbing structure
- Soft blocks
- Infant cause-and-effect toys, such as pop-up toys
- Shakers, mouthing toys, rattles

Benefits to Children:
- Allows for socialization and positive interactions with caring adults and other children;
- Develops body strength through tummy-time and other exercises to strengthen small and large muscle groups;
- Develops fine motor skills through holding, touching, and squeezing toys; and
- Allows for explorations of all five senses.
Keeping the Playspace clean, organized, and well-stocked is very important for PALs and the children to have a safe, healthy, and overall great time! Below are guidelines and responsibilities for maintaining the Playspace.

**PALs**
- Put toys and supplies away after each shift by using the labels as guidelines to maintain organization;
- Sort out toys to make sure they are put away appropriately (children find great comfort in knowing their favorite toy will always be in the same spot, and it is always more fun to play with toys that have all of the pieces);
- Use materials in the cleaning kits to wipe off surfaces;
- Notify shelter staff and Horizons’ staff if anything is broken;
- Notify Horizons’ staff when you need more supplies;
- Encourage children to help clean up after each activity and at the end of each shift; and
- Put items that are choking hazards in a secure place.

**Shelter Staff**
- Ensure that the overall Playspace is properly maintained;
- Ensure that a safe temperature is maintained for participants in the Playspace;
- Vacuum and clean Playspace weekly;
- Fix broken items and replace burnt light bulbs;
- Communicate major issues with Horizons staff; and
- Wash infant toys, particularly those that babies put in their mouths, with bleach as often as possible.

**Horizons’ Staff**
- Provide each Playspace with a thorough deep-cleaning maintenance at least four times a year;
- Solicit information from PALs about missing items;
- Restock missing supplies as quickly as possible;
- Ensure that the Playspace is equipped with appropriate materials; and
- Organize refurbishments or re-installations of Playspaces whenever possible and necessary.

**Cleaning Kits**
Every Playspace should contain a cleaning kit, supplied by Horizons. Please let us know if you run out of any products. For stronger cleaning products, such as bleach, Windex, Magic Eraser, etc., please ask shelter staff. Make sure that no hazardous products are left in the Playspace or anywhere within reach of the children.

Cleaning kits contains the following items:
- Paper towels
- Tissues
- Hand sanitizer
- Baby wipes
- Sanitizing wipes
- Latex-free gloves
- Choke tube
Playspace Management: Building Relationships

**PALs**

Healthy relationships are all about open and honest communications with age appropriate interactions. Part of healthy relationships is thinking about and respecting boundaries. Boundaries are understood, sometimes unspoken, physical and emotional limits of a relationship. Boundaries are a framework that give the children a range of acceptable behaviors.

We ask that you be aware of your feelings and always act in the best interest of the child. Use your best judgment in the moment. If in doubt, please consult with a Horizons or shelter staff member.

**We encourage PALs to:**

- Tell the children general information (i.e. your first name, the town where you live, your favorite songs, whether or not you have children, etc.).
- Build a friendly rapport with the parents. We encourage you to find out the children’s names, ask the parents questions about what kinds of activities their children enjoy, and give them a brief recap of what their children did during your shift.
- Give the children lots of praise! As long as you praise everyone at some point, it is great to point out what individual children do well. Try to be as specific as you can! For example “I like all of the blue in your picture!”
- Tell the shelter staff if you see anything concerning. They will handle the situation based on their own shelter protocols.
Playspace Management: Building Relationships

We suggest PALs be cautious about:

- **Sharing personal information.** Be thoughtful of how this information might be used and why you are sharing. How will sharing this information benefit the child?
- **Creating friendships with parents.** Keep in mind the difference between friendly volunteering and friendship. Remember, you are there as a volunteer, not a mentor. It is the role of the staff to work with the parents, so please keep your role clear. You are there to interact with the children.
- **Becoming too attached to particular children.** It is human nature to connect with some people more than others, but be aware of how your relationship with certain children appears to the others, and how you will feel when that child moves on.
- **Volunteering at the shelter outside your shift.** Some PALs choose to volunteer through the shelter in addition to their PAL role, but you must work this out with shelter and Horizons staff.
- **Topics you discuss with PAL partners in the Playspace.** Remember, children can hear everything you say, so please think about whether or not the subject is appropriate for the Playspace or should be saved for a later conversation.
- **Providing or accepting gifts.** As a general rule, you can accept gifts that did not cost money (a card, a drawing, etc.). Any gift giving from PALs must be anonymous, and must be given to shelter staff to distribute, not given directly to residents.

PALs should refrain from:

- **Communicating with parents or children outside your shift.** This includes Facebook, text messages, email, phone calls, or letters.
- **Sharing opinions about behaviors or parenting.** Your role is to play with the children and support them for those two hours. If you have concerns about parenting practices or styles that are different than your own or that concern you, please share these concerns with shelter staff. It is the role of shelter staff to handle issues of parenting and other behaviors.
- **Disciplining children.** PALs are not responsible for providing discipline in the Playspace. It is your job to help children play safely and to redirect their play in a positive direction. Involve a shelter staff person if the situation is escalating and the child cannot be positively redirected. The shelter staff can provide support or get a parent if necessary.
- **Missing your shift without communicating with your PAL partner and shelter staff.** Many people are counting on you to be there, so please communicate with them just as you would with colleagues and co-workers.
- **Taking children off shelter property.** You may only take the children off shelter grounds with shelter staff permission and accompaniment.
- **Imposing your cultural or personal beliefs on the children.** For instance, children are allowed to speak any language in the Playspace (even if they know how to speak English), and should be encouraged to share their own cultural and personal traditions with you and the other children.
Organizing the Playspace Shift

Every shelter, Playspace, and group of children is different, and as a result, there is no one way of organizing your shift. We believe, however, that some basic guidelines can help you and the children have a fun and enriching play experience together.

**Get to know the children’s names**
As the children arrive, ask their parent to write their child’s name on a nametag, board, or sign in sheet. There are reusable name tags in some Playspaces. Ask your Horizons staff for a supply if needed.

**Be clear about rules**
The Playspace rules are a good guideline for behavior in the space. You can refer to the Playspace rules at the beginning of every shift, and be consistent about enforcing them with the children. If the children start running, try to say, “Let’s tip toe and use our walking feet” or “Let’s use our inside voices—what do they sound like?” Then whisper. Turn loud yelling into a game and then remind the children about the rule. Use positively-worded rules such as, “Inside Voices” versus saying “No Yelling.”

**Establish a basic rapport with the parents**
Greet each parent upon arrival and ask about what their children like to do. When children are picked up at the end of the shift, let parents know about something positive their child did that day. All parents appreciate hearing about something their child did that was creative or fun. Keep the conversations friendly, but not personal.

**Establish a routine**
Activities can vary from week to week, but the routine should be consistent. A simple clear beginning (circle activity with everyone saying their name or gathering at the art table with play dough), middle (children playing in the various areas of the Playspace), cleanup, and then a closing (with songs and then a story or story game) is a simple routine that is helpful to the children. You can plan the flow of your shift with the other PALs and the children will grow to expect that consistency. Children feel a sense of safety when they have a routine that allows them to know what is coming next. Routines are helpful for everyone and can help you establish a safe, fun Playspace shift.

**Give children many reminders about what activity is next**
“In five minutes, it’s story time,” then, “We need to finish up what we are playing, clean up and then we can read stories.” It may be helpful to repeat this a few times, then move on to, “Okay, finishing touches! Time to clean up!”

**Ask the children to help with clean up**
Children enjoy being helpful. It feels good and is an opportunity to foster self-esteem. “I really appreciated your help” can make a child feel terrific. Make this a fun activity through a clean-up song or by dividing up the tasks in a child-friendly way.
Give the children options
Every activity should have room for children to express themselves and be imaginative. When children have choices, they feel more in control. However, at this young age, choices should only be either/or choices. For example, “Would you like to read a book or play a game?” More than two choices can be overwhelming. Keep it simple and engaging.

Embrace your role as the PAL
You are not there to babysit, but instead, to give the children many opportunities to learn, play, and thrive. If you have any games, activities or art projects that you enjoy, plan to share them with the children. They will love being able to engage with you and try new activities. The key is to be as interactive as possible with every child.

Be creative
Think back to your own childhood or the things you did with your children and find ways to incorporate those activities into the Playspace. Chances are, if you loved them, they will too! As you get comfortable in the Playspace, think about ways to expand the children’s interests and build language and interaction into each activity.

Your PAL partner(s) and Playspace Program staff are both great resources. Look for workshops, ongoing trainings, and other opportunities to expand your repertoire or to share your challenges and successes.
Beginning the Shift

Transition into the Shift
- Choose an opening activity that you will do each week with the children on a consistent basis.
  - Have an activity set up at the table for the children to come in and do until all the children arrive (play dough, puzzles, cut and glue activities, etc.)
  - Do an energizing activity such as Simon Says or Freeze Dance
  - Sing a welcome song such as “Hello Song” to the tune of “Good Night Ladies”

Hello song
Hello__, (Child’s name) Hello__,
Hello__, We’re glad you came to play.

Set Expectations
- Quickly and joyfully go over Playspace rules (if age appropriate)
- Go over what activities will be happening for the shift (but remember to keep your plan flexible)

During the Shift

Free Play Time:
This time can include dress up, playing with blocks, puzzles, board games, puppets, cars, dolls, reading, art activities, etc.

Story Time
- Make it interactive: Tell the children the author and the illustrator, ask children lots of questions about the story and the images. For example, start with, “What do you think the story is about? What do you think will happen next?” Or ask about the facial expressions of the characters in the story. For example, “What do you think they are feeling?”
- If the children will not focus on the books initially, try sit down clapping and rhyming games.
- Make creative use of puppets during story time.
- Use of books, such as One Fish Two Fish, is particularly engaging, as the children can actively participate by filling in the blanks that you leave. “If You Give a Mouse a Cookie, he will.....”
- Have the children pick a partner and a cozy spot to read in pairs or small groups with PALs

Activity Time Suggestions:
- Gross motor/group games
- Dance to music/freeze dance
- Simon Says
- Duck, Duck Goose
- Doggy, Doggy Where’s your Bone?
- Make a parade
- Red light, green light
- Head, shoulders, knees and toes
Ending the Shift
Transitions can be a challenging experience for all children. It is important to give children advance warnings when activities are nearing their end so that they can emotionally prepare themselves. Let them know 10, five, and two minutes before free play is over. Then, do a transition activity such as breathing exercises, singing a song, or another activity to calm them down.

Cleaning up
- It is helpful to warn the children in small groups that clean up time is coming a few times. You might say, “As soon as we clean up the blocks, we can......”
- Create a ‘clean up time’ signal such as singing a clean up song to the tune of “Oh My Darling” (Time to clean up, Time to clean up! Clean the floors and tables too! We know how to clean our Playspace, We’re the Playspace Clean Up Crew!)
- Clean up activities are not intuitive to children, so turning them into an activity works well. Have the children build boats out of the blocks and bring them to you to be put on the shelves.
- Participate with them and have fun storing the art supplies for ‘next time’, putting all the babies to bed, or organizing the refrigerator.
- Put on a favorite song and try to clean up before the song is over. Try not to make it a race; you want to move towards a calmer, quieter time.
- Call out, “Freeze!” when it is time to clean up. When everyone is as still as statues call out, “Unfreeze and clean up!”
- Sing this to each child and change goodbye into other languages (Ciao, Salam, Adios). Use instruments. Pass the instrument to the child you are singing goodbye to.

Ending Routine
It is important for children who have had so many unexpected changes in their lives to learn how to positively transition to end the shift. Each week should end with a quiet activity followed by a healthy goodbye, such as:
- Read a book
- Sing songs
- Try gentle yoga poses
- Give high-fives as the children leave
- Talking about what you’re looking forward to next week
- Telling a favorite thing about this week

Relax
Debrief with your fellow PALs and make sure you leave time to clean up before leaving. We know that the children enjoyed every moment! We hope you did too. Don’t forget to sign the sign-in sheets!

Saying Goodbye Song
Goodbye, ____ (child’s name)
Goodbye, ____
Goodbye, _____. Until we meet again!
Managing Behavior in the Playspace

To create a safe and respectful Playspace environment, it is important to be proactive and set the children up for success.

PALs have two important roles:
- Maintain safety for all children and PALs.
- Set and model appropriate limits and boundaries

Managing challenging behaviors:
- **Maintain Safety:** If a child is trying to hurt another child, get involved. It is okay to separate the children or hold them to keep them from hurting themselves or others. If the situation is escalating, get a shelter staff person involved.
- **Redirection:** Give the child a positive activity that re-focuses them. “Let’s play with the blocks until it is your turn with the cars” (then make sure they get that turn).
- **Praise:** Praise the child when they succeed in getting their need met in a positive way.
- **Determine the cause of the behavior to help prevent it from happening again.** Does the child have the communication skills to ask for a turn with a toy? Is the behavior developmentally appropriate?

During and after your shift, please keep in mind:
- **Reflect:** Be mindful of your own feelings and behaviors.
- **Be consistent:** Be positive.
- **Seek help:** For behaviors that are unsafe or cause for concern, talk to shelter staff immediately. They will know how to contact parents if necessary.
- **Call:** Horizons’ staff want to be helpful and responsive, so please give us a call.

Behaviors you might encounter in the Playspace:
- **Extremely withdrawn:** No eye contact, not talking, playing alone, walking away when approached. Find out individual interests of the child and quietly try to engage them and invite them to play with you. Don’t force the child to participate or to make eye contact. Remember: they are paying attention, even if you can’t tell.
- **Inappropriate boundaries:** Overly touchy-feely, hugs everyone, climbs in laps (but too old). Teach the child healthy physical boundaries in a fun way: Introduce yourself and encourage them to ask for a hug or say, “Kisses are for family, how about a high-five?” Share your concern with shelter staff afterward, privately.
- **Hoarding/not sharing:** Must have everything, hides items for later use, trash-digging. Assure the child that there is enough for everyone. Model sharing and turn-taking. Let the child know that the toys and materials need to stay in the Playspace so they are there for next time.
- **Overly mature:** Only interacts with adults, overly helpful, bossy with others. You may need to help the child “learn how to play” by engaging with them. Explore the materials and games with the child and say: “This is fun!” Model and encourage the child to explore. “Let’s try this.” “What shall we try next?”
Handling Challenging Behaviors

It can feel overwhelming when faced with challenging behaviors. Here are some suggestions on how to handle these situations.

**Aggression:** Hitting, pushing, name-calling, or excluding others
- Use clear, short phrases.
  - “It is ok to be mad. It is not ok to hit.”
  - “You hit, you sit.”
  - “Let’s be gentle.” (Show them what a gentle touch is.)
- Give the child space and time to calm down.
- Refer to Playspace rules and enforce them consistently with all children.
- Helping the child express his or her feelings will support their learning appropriate behavior.
- If the situation is escalating, get a shelter staff person involved.

**Developmental delays:** It is always ‘best practice’ to meet children where they are and help them grow from there.
- Help the child choose toys and games based on their interest.
- Don’t worry about “fixing” the issue—your role is to provide them with an environment where they can have fun and develop positive self-esteem.

**Hyperactivity:** Fidgety, can’t sit still, bouncing off the walls
- Give them high-energy activities (jumping jacks, dancing, imitate animals, etc.) to start and then help them begin to slow down and engage in other activities.
- It doesn’t help to provide more stimulation.
- Use a calm, soft voice or try whispering.
- Plan short activities and use movement breaks or incorporate movement into activities.

**Crying inconsolably**
- For an infant, hold him/her and try to offer a distraction by pointing to colorful objects on the wall, walking around, looking in the mirror, and playing with some of the infant rattles, shakers, etc.
- Make soothing sounds or sing a quiet song.
- If the infant or child cannot be soothed, get shelter staff. The child may not be ready to leave their mother, or may need the mother to stay with them in the Playspace until they feel safe.

For ideas or support with more specific behavioral issues you see in the shelter, please feel free to contact Horizons staff. We are here to help!
Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

Working with children can be enjoyable, rewarding, challenging, frustrating, and entertaining all at the same time. As an adult, it is your responsibility to establish and maintain clear boundaries in the Playspace.

Establishing and Maintaining Boundaries

1) Communication Boundaries
   A. Pay attention to what you are saying and how you are saying it. Remember both content and tone are important. Ask yourself, “Is this topic appropriate for the age of children I am with?” or “Is my tone of voice okay for the situation?”
   B. Use only positive and appropriate language in the Playspace.
   C. Parent communication should be kept to positive conversation and always center around the children. If you need to get a parent during a shift, if behaviors are a challenge, let the shelter staff know. They will convey the message to the parent in a supportive way and get them for you. At the end of a shift, always tell parents positive things their children have done.
   D. The Playspace is for all to feel safe and welcome, and conversations or suggestions around politics or religion are not appropriate.

2) Physical Boundaries
   A. It is very important to pay attention and respect children’s personal boundaries. We are not always privy to their past history or trauma they might be dealing with.
   B. The physical boundaries will look different with the infants versus the toddlers and preschoolers. With the younger children, you might pick them up, hold them in your arms, carry them around the Playspace, or have them sit on your lap. As the children start to get older, you should defer more to them in expressing their level of comfort in terms of physical contact. However, you should refrain from kissing the children or holding them in lengthy hugs—even if this is initiated by the child. You can redirect these interactions to other more comfortable and appropriate actions. It is never appropriate to give or receive a kiss.
   C. Create your own handshake or greeting. Other appropriate types of physical contact include: high-fives, fist bumps, side hugs, wiggle fingers or head pats.
   D. The children who are in the shelter are there confidentially, often for their safety. Therefore you should never take pictures of a child in the Playspace.
   E. Discipline is the role of the parent. We never use a punishment-based system in the Playspace, and timeouts are not appropriate. For more information please review the Behavior Management section (pages 22-23).

3) Locational Boundaries
   A. PALs should NEVER be alone with a child or children. If your PAL partner(s) or a shelter staff person cannot be in the Playspace for the entire shift then you must cancel the shift. NO EXCEPTIONS.
   B. Do not take children outside the Playspace without permission. If there is an approved outdoor space, please seek permission from shelter staff before taking children outside. PALs are not allowed to transport children off-site from the shelter.
   C. Please follow and enforce all the rules posted in the Playspace.

4) Relationship Boundaries
   A. Your relationships with the children, families or shelter staff must remain in the shelter. Do not share personal contact information or seek to establish a friendship/relationship outside of the Playspace Program.
   B. When you reach out to Horizons or shelter staff via phone or email, please give them time to respond (2-3 business days) unless it is an emergency.
   C. Donations to the shelter and Horizons are greatly appreciated, but please check with staff for approval before bringing items to the Playspace.
Who is in charge of the Playspace shift—the PALs or the shelter staff?
PALs are in charge of setting up the environment for each shift, planning activities, and running the shift. Some shelters have staff that take on a more active role in running the shift. Horizons’ staff can support PALs with activities, ideas, and materials if staff do not participate in your shift. Shelter staff are in charge of shelter rules and guidelines, so please be respectful of rules and routines that staff enforce, both with volunteers and with children. Although PALs are expected to follow Horizons’ guidelines, shelter rules are just as important. Shelter staff should always be available if you need help responding to a situation.

Can I bring food or snacks into the Playspace for the children?
No food should be brought into the Playspace due to the prevalence of food allergies. We also ask that no art projects involve food because playing with food can be a sensitive issue for families who may experience food instability. Check with your shelter/Horizons staff about their food policies.

Can I bring in my own art supplies or materials?
We provide all the materials and supplies needed for the shifts and do have guidelines for what toys we place in each Playspace. Some PALs choose to bring materials to use during their particular shift, which is allowed as long as the materials fit with our guidelines. When in doubt about a particular item, please check with Horizons staff. Remember, materials may break or get lost, so only bring disposable items. Horizons for Homeless Children nor the shelter is responsible for damages that occur to personal supplies brought into the Playspace.

Can I donate toys or other materials to my Playspace/shelter?
If you wish to donate to the Playspace, please contact Horizons staff. We need to ensure that any donated items are consistent with our design guidelines. We can direct you to a WBMason Wish List of preferred Playspace items. If you wish to donate supplies directly to the shelter, please speak with shelter staff first for approval.

What do I do if there is a large number of children in the Playspace?
For safety reasons, Horizons’ suggested ratio is 5:1 for school-age, 3:1 for preschool, and 2:1 for infants and toddlers. If your numbers exceed this ratio, talk to shelter staff immediately to strategize how to handle the shift. You can limit the shift to the first 10 children or allow the younger children to come the first hour, the older ones the second. Be sure to contact the Playspace staff so that we can help you work out a long-term solution. We might break up the shift, create a sign-up sheet, or, if possible, assign another PAL to the shift as suggestions to help with the overflow of children.

Do parents pick up their children or do I return them to their rooms?
Parents are responsible for child pick-up. PALs should contact the shelter staff if a parent does not come to pick up their child. PALs should NEVER go to residents’ rooms or allow young children to leave without supervision.

The children keep coming in and out of the Playspace, what should I do?
Children should never leave the Playspace without adult supervision, as this can be unsafe. Some solutions might include adding a gate, providing room dividers, and creating guidelines around this issue. Please contact Horizons staff if you need assistance in this issue. As a general rule, children should not come in and out of the space more than two times. On the second “out” they should be done for the shift. Inform shelter staff immediately if a child is leaving the Playspace regularly during the shift so that they may address.

If I’m sick, who do I contact? Am I responsible for finding coverage?
If you are unable to attend your shift, please call your shelter liaison, PAL partner(s), and Horizons’ staff to let them know as soon as possible. Talk with Horizons staff about whether there are substitutes or other back up plans available in your shelter.
Frequently Asked Questions

There are only two kids in the Playspace, so am I still needed?
Yes! Numbers fluctuate. What you are able to give to one or two children during a shift is immeasurable. Use the shift to provide one-to-one time with each child which is very meaningful. Being there provides them with consistency and gives their parents a break. It also gives them a chance to play with someone on a regular basis. Check with the shelter staff to see if this is a one-time problem or if their numbers have dropped. If that is the case, contact us and we can discuss changing your placement to another site. If you are afraid that no children will show up to your shift, give the shelter a call before you head out to find out if there will be children at coming.

What should I do if children are fighting over toys?
There are a few techniques to help with fighting over toys. These include redirecting a child or using a timer. Brainstorm with your PAL partners, shelter liaison, and Horizons staff for other ideas.

Our shelter has kids of all ages. How do I engage them without it being chaos?
It can be challenging to work with kids of all ages in one space. There are several ways to solve this problem. Assign certain PALs to certain ages. Have one or more PALs work with each age group (infants, toddlers, preschoolers, school-age) and have special activities and/or sections of the room ready to capture their interest. Engage the oldest children in helping play with the youngest children. This works especially well if you have children that like to be helpers! It makes them feel needed and important, and reinforces a cooperative environment. Try to find universally appealing activities and adapt for all ages. Play dough is easy for little ones and is still fun for older kids. Infants and toddlers can squish the dough, while older kids can work together to build tall play dough towers or create play dough creatures.

What do I do if my PAL partner does not show up for the shift?
PALs are not allowed to be in the Playspace alone with the children. If your PAL partners are not there, staff can join you or assign another adult to help you with the children. If these options are not available, you will need to cancel the shift for that day. Shelter staff can help you make this determination.

The kids are FULL of ENERGY! Why can’t we play wrestle around in the Playspace?
The most important thing to remember in the Playspace is that we need a safe environment for everyone involved. We are working with children who are experiencing the trauma of homelessness, and many of them may have witnessed or been a victim of violence. Our role is to help them learn how to respect body boundaries and build healthy relationships with caring adults. Redirect this behavior to dancing or other healthy body movements/activities.

Items keep disappearing from the Playspace. What should I do?
It is our responsibility to keep the Playspace well stocked, so please call a Horizons staff person or talk to the shelter staff. There might be times where an item is not being replaced for a specific reason. If you see a child storing toys or materials in his/her pocket, just remind them that this is a safe space and all everything will still be there for all the children for the next Playspace shift.

Can I volunteer for more than two hours?
We ask that all our volunteers start with a two-hour shift, once a week. Once you have settled in with your shift, please contact Horizons’ staff if you would like to discuss additional volunteer opportunities.

Can I bring my child or a friend with me to the Playspace shift?
Please do not bring children, friends or other guests to the shelter for you Playspace shift. Horizons’ policy is that all volunteers must attend a training and must be 18 or older, and go through a CORI and SORI background check. Sixteen and seventeen-year olds may volunteer with a parent or guardian (if trained). No other parties may attend your shift, as it is against our policy and the shelter/program’s policy.
Frequently Asked Questions

I have a vacation, school break or other issue that will require me to miss multiple shifts. Can I still volunteer?
Absolutely. Please let Horizons staff, shelter staff, and your PAL partners know when you will be absent so arrangements can be made. It is also important to let the children know that you are going to miss your shift(s), but will come back.

Can we maintain a relationship with the children/families outside the shelter?
No. We feel it is very important to maintain healthy boundaries with the children. We do not want you to share personal information with the children or their families (phone numbers, Facebook, etc.). Sharing such information can set up expectations for the child or the parent that you may not want or be able to keep.

The shelter has rules that were not covered in the Horizons PAL training. Do I still need to follow them?
Yes. Horizons creates rules and guidelines based on the needs of the Playspace Program. However, each shelter has rules that fit with the needs of their families, and all volunteers are expected to follow them as well.