

PLAY IDEAS BANK

Practical Ideas for
Creative Play -
A comprehensive
collection for
Playworkers &
Playschemes
everywhere

No.2



CIRCUS

There are two aspects to creating a Playscheme Circus. Circus can be taken as a creative theme, which will give you lots of fun dressing up, creating characters with masks and face-paint, putting some simple circus acts together and maybe an instant parade and show. Circus also means developing special skills. These take practice and concentration, but children learn amazingly fast and your scheme is probably full of potential jugglers, stilt-walkers, unicyclists and acrobats.

In this leaflet, written and drawn by Harry Shier, we take a brief look at both aspects of the Playscheme Circus - starting from the Top!

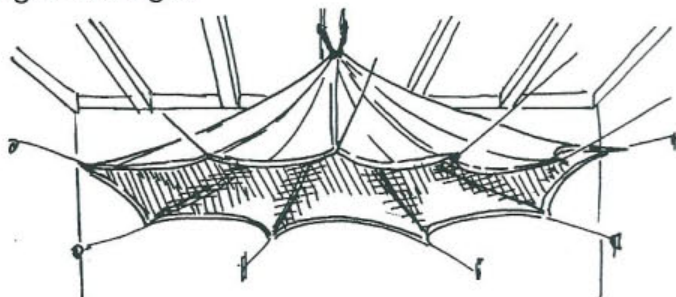
The Big Top

If you happen to have a huge marquee, so much the better, but if not create the Big Top effect with a parachute or with strings of bunting, either borrowed or home-made.

OUTDOORS: You will need a strong central pole about 4 metres high, preferably about eight outer poles, 1½-2 metres high, and tent pegs. Create an open-air Big Top like this:



INDOORS: Look for a secure central fixing point on the ceiling and additional points for tying off ropes round the walls (nearly all play and community buildings will yield some sort of fixing points, but **don't** tie things to light fittings).



A thick rope makes an ideal ring. Audience can sit on mats, benches or the ground. A curtained entrance door to the ring for performers adds a touch of realism.

The Band

Ideally every circus needs a band. In particular you want drums for dramatic rolls, cymbals or gongs for climactic crashes and a complete brass section for fanfares, parades and a grand finale. Home-made percussion and kazoo-horns are ideal: see the Ideas Bank leaflet, "Making Musical Instruments". You will need to rehearse the acts with the band to make full use of it. Circus performers can also be bandspeople when their own act isn't on. In the absence of a proper band, taped music played over a reasonably loud sound system can also be very effective.

A Circus Parade

If you've got a band, why not start the circus off with a parade? A big banner announcing the circus, the Circus band and all the performers and friends in costume. For a small parade that keeps to the pavement you don't need police permission, though you should get permission from parents if you are taking their children out on the streets. You need very good adult supervision, especially anywhere you have to cross a road, and make sure you don't obstruct anyone using the road or pavement. Then back to the big top for the show to begin...

Juggling

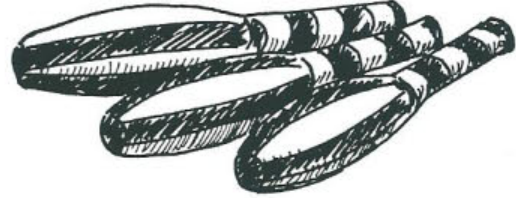
Juggling is a popular skill to work on for a children's circus. It can be learnt quite quickly and success is very satisfying. It would take several pages to give detailed instructions for teaching children to juggle, so we recommend you find someone who can show you, or buy a copy of "Circus in a Suitcase" (see below).

What to Juggle with?

- * Three balls are a good starting point. The solid rubber type are a better weight, so easier than hollow rubber or tennis balls.
- * Oranges are an ideal size and weight, but don't last long under playscheme conditions.
- * Bean-bags, either bought or home-made, are ideal as they are easy to catch and they

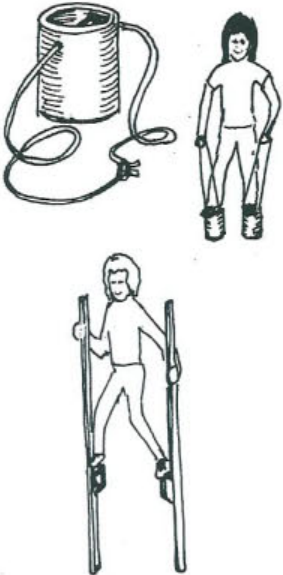
stay in one place when you drop them.

* Juggling with clubs is the next stage as you have to spin them properly as you throw them so you can catch the handle, but it looks really impressive. Juggling clubs can be made from plastic skittles, or from dowelling and plastic foam wrapped with yards of coloured PVC sticky tape.

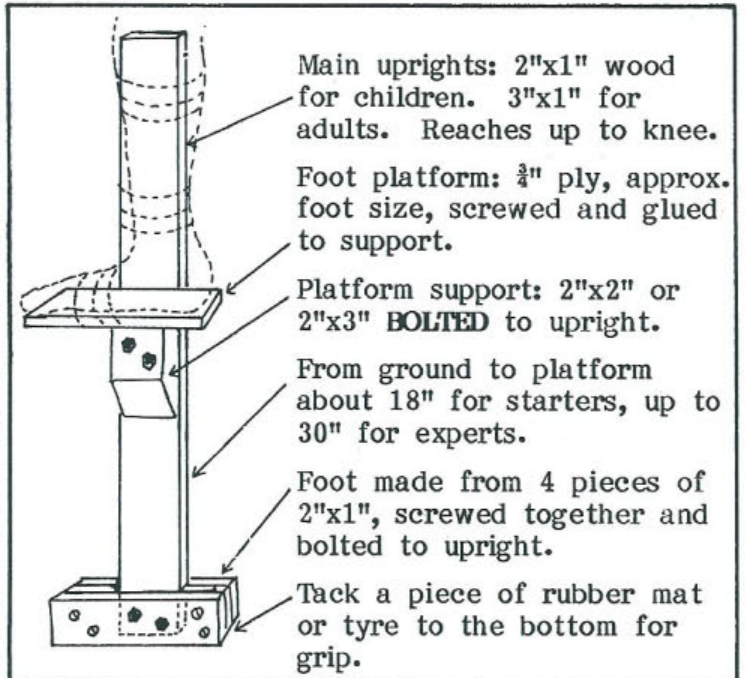


* Scarves (chiffon squares) are an alternative way to learn, as they move more slowly. The technique is a bit different as you have to pull them up and let them float down.

Stilts

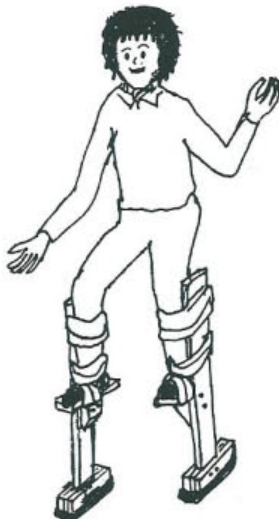


The first and easiest kind are tin-can or cardboard tube stilts; drill two holes, put strong cord through and tie off to the right length as shown. These are ideal for very young children. Then you may want to try hand-held wooden stilts. Really high ones can be very impressive, and if you lose your balance it's safe and easy to jump down. Make your own by screwing a footrest firmly to a long piece of wood.



TIE-ON STILTS

These are the real thing: The stilts are tied to your legs and feet, leaving hands free - to help you balance at first, but then for other things; juggling, playing an instrument etc. If you lose your balance on these you can't jump off, so there is a risk of falling and hurting yourself, but with a bit of practice you'll never fall anyway.



Tie stilts to feet and legs with 3" crepe bandage. Tie firmly at the calf, ankle and instep, or use one long bandage and bind from the top down. Start learning to walk by holding on to a helper, first by the shoulders, then two hands, then one, then try letting go and you're away!

Eventually you can move on to footless, or Chinese stilts, which are made the same way but without the feet. These seem impossible at first, but are actually easier and safer once you are used to stilt-walking.

Finally make yourself a long skirt or super-baggy trousers to cover legs and stilts down to the ground so you appear to be an enormous giant. To complete the illusion nail old boots to the feet of the stilts.

Clowns

Clowns are the mainstay of most playscheme circuses; a silly costume and some face-paint and every child is an instant clown. Unfortunately, however, putting on the costume and face-paint do not necessarily make you very funny; a good clown works very carefully to bring out the funny side of their personality, and develops skills of acting, mime, co-ordination and communication with the audience. A good clown act is carefully put together and rehearsed (though there may be lots of ad-libbing and audience participation thrown in as well).

COSTUME: It's easy enough to re-create traditional types of clown costume. The jumble sale should yield trousers, shirts, coats and hats that can be adapted for the purpose. Baggy trousers, braces, wigs, over-sizes shoes, garish colours and checks, enormous paper flowers in button-holes (preferably that squirt water at you!) will all help to create the traditional clown image.

MAKE-UP: See the Ideas Bank leaflet on **Face Painting** for advice on clown make-up. Basically, a big red nose, big red mouth and



exaggerated arched eyebrows will create an immediately recognisable clown face. But better to work out with the child what is the personality of the clown - what is the funniest aspect of their own personality - and how do we bring that out in the clown's appearance?

SLAPSTICK: Putting on a clown act based on slapstick appeals to many children, but even the wildest slapstick is best if planned and rehearsed properly. A number of standard props can be built into the act:

Custard Pies: Shaving foam on paper plates is easiest. The custard pie act is much more effective if instead of just slinging it, you build the excitement ("Oh yes I will", "Oh no you won't", etc) then finally take a wild swipe, the target ducks and the custard pie ends up on the wrong person. Make up all kinds of variations on this sort of thing; it's easy laughs really!

Buckets of Water: As long as the clowns (and their parents) don't mind getting soaked,

this is another great routine. Use the water intelligently as with custard pies.

The ladder or plank: This is where the clown carrying the plank keeps turning round and "accidentally" bashes people with it (unless they duck). Obviously this could be dangerous if not rehearsed and controlled. Hardboard is safer than a solid wooden plank. The victim musn't be whacked hard - it's the way they go flying that creates the comic effect.

The Clown Car: Construct this out of cardboard (see the Ideas bank leaflet "**Cardboard Construction**") in such a way that bits keep falling off it and eventually the whole thing falls to bits.

Banana skin/Slippery Floor: Obviously everyone keeps falling over. Can be combined effectively with a chase.

Skilled Clowns

Perhaps the most effective clown is the clown who is also a skilled artiste, but who appears to do incredible things as if by accident and somehow brings it off. E.g.:

- * The clown who picks up three apparently boiling hot potatoes and has to juggle them.
- * The clown who finds a unicycle and amazingly manages to ride it.
- * The clown who is chased onto a tight-rope and somehow gets across.
- * The clowns who are being chased and only avoid capture by amazing acrobatics.

The (Fake) Strong-Person

You're unlikely to have any real strong-men or women in your playscheme, so why not take the mickey instead? Make the fake weights from black-painted foam balls, or better still large disc-shaped pieces of polystyrene on a broomstick:



The strong-person in suitable costume and make-up comes on and shows off their amazing strength. They need to mime well to create a believable illusion of weight. The act can have different endings, but it usually involves the tiniest clown picking up the weight like a feather and being chased round and out of the ring by everyone else.

Ring-Master

This term describes a circus anchor-person of either sex. It's an important role - introducing the acts, working up the audience and keeping things moving, so it needs someone (or several people sharing it) with a lot of confidence, panache and a bold, striking costume. If your circus is going to need a lot of adult direction it may be easier if a grown-up acts as ring-master to start with.

Unicycling

You will have to make, borrow or buy a unicycle, but once you've got one it's thrills and spills all the way. Lots of practice needed - but watch out - it can become an obsession.



Acrobatics

All you need are some decent gym mats. Simple forward rolls and cartwheels will look impressive if done in sequence by a co-ordinated group. Practise headstands, handstands and even hand-walking. Practise the shoulder stand: Small child climbs on large child's shoulders. Bottom child holds top child's legs and top child stands upright. Once a few of you can do this, try a variety of human pyramids. You may also find some young dancers with good acrobatic skills, like spinning on their heads or shoulders.

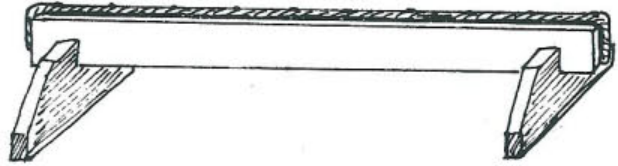
Animals

The role of animals in circuses is a controversial topic these days. If one of your children has a dog that likes to show off a good trick, would you include it in the show?

Younger children love dressing-up animal acts. So if you don't mind having pretend animals in your circus, see the Ideas Bank leaflets on **Masks** and **Dressing Up** for ideas for animal costumes such as lions, tigers, elephants and chimpanzees. You also need a flashy "animal trainer" to introduce the tricks and stunts. The "animals" can parade around, dance and do acrobatics.

The Tight-Rope

For beginners, start with a wooden beam a foot or so above the floor. If you want to practise real rope-walking, nail a rope to the beam so you can start to get the feel of it without the risk.



A real tight-rope (or tight-wire) is very difficult to rig up for an improvised circus. The best bet may be to stick with your beam, or use a pole. It should never be above 2m high without expert training and supervision available.

On some sites, such as an Adventure Playground, it may be possible to rig a proper wire, but this should be supervised by an experienced worker. The technique is similar to that for an aerial runway (see "Towards a safer Adventure Playground", NPFA 1984), but the wire is level, and under greater tension, which can most easily be maintained with a heavy-duty turnbuckle.

Hints: Wear soft soled shoes to feel and grip the wire. Place each foot straight along the wire and balance the body's weight on one foot at a time.

Other Acts

Balancing acts (balancing things on top of poles, for example), Escapology, Skateboarding or Trick-Cycling (Any good BMX-er is an instant expert).

Fire-eating, knife-throwing and similar acts need expert tuition and **careful checking of your insurance policy**, so are perhaps safest avoided!

The Book

If you want to want to take your Playscheme Circus further than this leaflet can go, the one book you must get is "Circus in a Suitcase" by Reg Bolton (New Plays Inc. 1982). You can get it direct from Suitcase Circus, 4 Stratford Road, Salisbury, Wilts.

For more Play Ideas Bank leaflets go to:

www.grcltd.org