



Play and early years:

birth to seven years

Nine month old Cerys sits at a high chair continually dropping her spoon, cup and dish on to the floor and shrieks with delight when they are retrieved by her five year old brother, Rees.

Two year old Ishan rides up and down and round and round the path in the park on his little car, making a range of sounds representing engines, braking and emergency services.

Four year old Gethin has found some stones in the garden and concentrates on piling them up one on top of the other, irrespective of how many times the 'tower' falls down. He smiles quietly each time he sets a stone in place.

Six year old Sunita and her friend, seven year old Jeni, are using a dressing-up box to act out a story they have created about doctors and nurses.

What are these children doing? Playing, of course! But what does that mean and how do we recognise it? Is play important to children and, if so, how might adults inspire and support play?

What is play?

We all recognise play when we see it because one aspect of play is that it is an observable behaviour. It is also a disposition and a process¹. Observing play, we can see that it is intrinsically motivated – from within the child – and self-determined². In play, everything is possible with reality often disregarded and imagination and free-flow thinking taking precedence³.

Play is a highly creative process, using body and mind; it is flexible and often free from externally imposed goals (although children often make these up themselves). It has positive, often pleasurable, effects on the players and frequently involves deep commitment and deep level learning⁴.

Play develops and changes over time, as we can see in the scenarios, from basic repetitive and pleasurable actions and vocalisations to highly intellectual and collaborative processes. Above all play offers children freedom, choice and control over some aspects of their lives, experiences they are rarely afforded in an inevitably adult-led world. Play is a context in which children's voices can be clearly heard.

Dispositions

It has become clear that play has a huge role in developing children's dispositions or attitudes to learning and their openness to a range of experiences⁵. Learning is important for all young creatures but, equally important, is the development in children of a positive disposition to learning, which means learning how to learn and to cope with 'not knowing' something for a sufficient length of time without losing confidence. This will tide them over well into adult life where things are unlikely to always go smoothly and without challenges! Dispositions regulate how we play and learn through adulthood.

The disposition to play is innate, as is the disposition to learn. The link between the two is both fascinating and thought-provoking but can readily be seen when observing children's play. Gethin's positive disposition to learn how to pile up stones (above) has at least three components: academic (gathering information); intellectual (analysing, solving problems); and social/emotional (self-regulation). *'Playfulness is one of the most important dispositions to support children's learning'*⁶ and is both innate and learned.

Play as a process

Learning is a process that we all go through all our lives; much as it would be useful to have a unique and clear description of what learning entails, such processes tend to defy definition because of their complexity. We can think we have learned something one minute, only to have that learning questioned and changed by the next piece of information. All processes undergo continual change which is what makes learning and play so ephemeral.

For children particularly, the process of learning is incremental meaning that we build on from what we already know and can do: play is a key experience that supports such learning and offers insights for observers about children's levels of understanding and skill. That said, we can explore only the potential components of the process of play, and 'join the dots' in order to make sense of young children's play and learning.

The process of play encompasses so many different elements; to suggest only one aspect is play is to deny a whole range of others which equally constitute play – especially to children. Then there's playfulness which often reveals itself in humour as children develop greater maturity and, of course is a manifestation of playfulness in many adults, i.e. playing with words and thinking⁷. It is sometimes useful to think of play alongside playfulness, especially as adults seeking to support and interact in young children's play.

Pure play⁸ – the play in which the child and their own selected participants can be involved is 'pure' in the sense of being unadulterated with any interference or direction on anyone's part but the children's. When adults are seeking involvement in children's play, they need to do so playfully if they wish to make inroads into children's thinking and actions in play.

Play and child development

It has been established that play generates the concrete, first-hand experiences which underpin much of a child's development including abstract thinking and the child's ability to use symbols⁹. Learning is about making meaning from a sometimes confusing world and there



are clear links between play and the meanings children make as, for example, using marks for early writing and for early written mathematics¹⁰ in mud or sand or on paper. As David Elkind asserts: '*Play is not a luxury but rather a crucial dynamic of healthy physical, intellectual and social-emotional development at all ages*'¹¹.

Play underpins the holistic development of children in providing a safe, secure basis for exploration, investigation, interpretation and evaluation of the world into which, as babies, they suddenly find themselves plunged¹². Through their growing understanding of their immediate worlds, children gradually develop their sense of self-image and self-esteem. It is known that children who, for whatever reason to do with health or circumstance, are deprived of play, develop less effectively overall but especially in their sense of self, as well as physically¹³.

In these times of increasing concern over childhood obesity, play also provides a channel, for children to use increasing physical skills and energy¹⁴. Outdoor play environments and Forest Schools provide just two of these outlets which have been shown to be effective.

Taking risks in natural outdoor and other open-ended environments also enables children to learn how to trust themselves and others and contributes to their social and emotional development¹⁵. Like all forms of play, risk-based play is difficult to theorise but essential for young children's all round wellbeing.



Children aged three to seven need many opportunities to push themselves beyond boundaries in familiar environments.

Many schools and classrooms appear to have become rather risk averse places and so it is essential that children have ownership of outdoor places and spaces to promote their general welfare and development¹⁶. For many children, it may be necessary to support their introduction to environments that offer such broad play opportunities when they are exposed to vast open areas and given freedom to play and roam.

Play can also promote the development of conflict resolution skills in young children as they negotiate roles and planning as in the scenario of Sunita and Jeni. Highly social and co-operative play such as socio-dramatic play has clear links with learning, progression and identity formation¹⁷.

Children who know themselves well are more likely to be altruistic and caring of others in their play and lives. Rough and tumble type play experiences, for example, are essential for children to learn independence and are necessary skills for them to fully engage in the complex social relationships underlying adult society¹⁸.

Social play is an evolved behaviour and is important for complex, autonomous relationships which, in turn, leads to self-knowledge and social competence in both humans and animals¹⁹.

Emotional and cognitive development are closely interconnected with play. Children engaged in play situations show greater evidence of problem-solving abilities, imagination and creativity. Children engaged in playful tasks they have initiated show higher levels of cognitive self-regulation which, in turn, leads to deeper levels of thinking and understanding²⁰.

Cognitive and brain development

Whilst establishing the value of play has proved elusive²¹, there is enough research being undertaken to show that various elements of play are crucial to the growing child. For example, there is increasing evidence of the value and importance of play experiences to children's cognitive development, related especially to appropriate stimulation and brain plasticity²².

Children's brains, especially between birth and age five, are 'plastic' which means they can change, adapt and grow but they only do that

effectively with the right kinds of stimulation. This flexibility is thought to be enhanced by play because all brains respond to novelty and such originality often arises in playful contexts, especially for babies within the family, as we see for Cerys in the scenario above.

Play enables the brain to absorb information in each child's own meaningful ways and timescale, and challenges their thinking without stress. Meade suggests that in play, children 'display high levels of motivation. Emotion, thought and action are in harmony – the dynamic system that is the brain in balance'²³.

Play is powerful

Play is powerful because it teaches young children many skills and attributes including self-motivation, independence and autonomy, control of their own thoughts and actions, persistence, confidence, competence and the ability to cope with challenges. It instils characteristics such as flexibility and creativity and ensures that children acquire positive learning dispositions and use new knowledge, skills and understandings; something required of all early childhood curricula.²⁴ As Moyles points out:

*'In addition to just being fun, play in all its forms is a powerful scaffold for children's learning: it enables metacognition (learning about how to understand one's own learning and play). It allows children to ... rehearse, practice, revise, replay and re-learn ... It frees them from worrying about doing things wrong and gives them confidence to try out alternatives. Children learn to establish their own identity and their place in the order of things through play, particularly socio-dramatic ... play enables children to learn what learning is – and should always be – enjoyable, personally profitable and challenging. This is the vital feature if we are to have happy and well-balanced, flexible learners and citizens of the future.'*²⁵

This means children need reflective adults around them to support them in their playful (ad)ventures.

Adult roles, advocacy and upholding children's rights

All children have the right to play²⁶ irrespective of their individual or special needs, disability, language, culture, background, gender or behaviour. For each child to be able to play in their own way, their individual needs and dispositions have to be taken into account. Treating children equally does not mean treating them the same! The rich cultural heritages which children bring with them often become manifested in their play.

Playful practices underpinned by an understanding of each child's own cultural understanding and interests are vital in all early years contexts²⁷. It is beholden on adults to observe and listen to children at play and learn from them about the best way to support their development.

Adults need to be – and encourage children to be – advocates for play and this means understanding as much as possible about why and how children play and the sensitivities needed by adults to interact in play and playful experiences. Respecting and trusting children will enable adults to understand the power of play in their own learning and to take a lead²⁸. Understanding the innate potential of play for children will enable all adults to uphold children's right to play and the later known benefits to society of play-based learning.

Those involved in playwork and teaching, for example, need to think about play and playfulness if they are to place themselves alongside children as players. It is vital that interaction, rather than intervention, is the norm, and then only after a period of observation so that the play, players and context are fully understood.

Children respond positively and quickly when adults convey an acceptance of play. For example, it is known that children for whom play is a regular and fulfilling occurrence in the classroom complete teacher-directed tasks more quickly²⁹

Final thought

Rather like weeds continue to grow strongly in the garden whatever we do, children will grow through play: it is innate and inevitable. As David Kushner asserts '... *the life force of play is difficult to extinguish*'³⁰ and we really want to keep it alive for the sake of all our playful young children.

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