

What is play?

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The word *play* is usually used to describe the activities of children from babyhood until the early teenage years. There is no neat definition that will cover all the meanings given by parents, early years and playwork practitioners and other adult commentators - let alone how children talk about play when their opinions are invited. Yet there are some common themes:

- Play includes a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken for their own interest, enjoyment and the satisfaction that results for children;
- Very young children, even babies, show playful behaviour when they explore sound and simple actions and experiment with objects of interest;
- Play activities are not essential to meet basic physical survival needs. But play does seem to support children's emotional well being as well as a wide range of learning within their whole development;
- Children can play alone, but often they play with other children and with familiar adults. Even very young children engage in simple give-and-take or copying games with their peers, older siblings or with adults;
- A playful quality in activities is shown by the exercise of choice, enjoyable repetition and invitation by children to others to join the play;

- Yet children's play can look serious. Players may show great absorption in the activity and disagreements can result from a difference of opinion about how the play should progress.

Do all children play?

Historical and cross-cultural evidence shows that all children play, unless their living circumstances are very harsh or the children are very ill.

- Children's available or chosen playthings and games vary across time and culture. Yet some playful activities seem to be very common. Some examples include play with dolls and similar figures, construction activities with whatever is available and imaginative play that recreates what children see in their own families and neighbourhood;
- Children who have disabilities or a continuing health condition still want to play and are often bored and distressed if circumstances severely limit their opportunities;
- Children create play materials from whatever is available and certainly do not require expensive, commercially produced toys in order to play or learn;
- Children develop social games between each other, sometimes absorbing a wide age range of children, even under very deprived circumstances;

- Only severe circumstances prevent children from playing: abusive restriction of their freedoms, being part of the labour market from a very young age or when children are forced to become active in war as soldiers.

The pattern of children's play reflects the society in which they live, including social changes over the decades. In the UK now, commercial interests promote a huge array of toys for children, including many play resources linked to ICT (Information and Communication Technology). This change has led some commentators to claim that children nowadays 'demand' expensive toys and many are promoted as 'essential for your child's learning'. Yet objective observation of this younger generation shows clearly that they are very happy to explore simple play materials including large cardboard boxes and home-made sound makers, craft activities and lively physical games. Society may have changed, but children at root have the same absorbing interest in play.

Why is play so important for children?

From babyhood children use play to promote their own learning; they do not have to be persuaded into playing. A playful orientation seems to be part of childhood for the young of all mammals, of which human beings are a part. Children's continued play supports all aspects of their development:

- Children are able to explore intellectually and physically. They can follow their current interests, experiment and find out 'what will happen if...'. They can make choices and consider possibilities;
- They often extend their skills of communication within play, through

talking and listening with child play companions as well as with adults who are involved in their play in a flexible way;

- Play allows children to give free rein to their imagination. In pretend games, alone or with play companions, they can be whosoever they want and create an imaginary setting and scenario with a minimum of props;
- Pretend play may take on the form of almost total fantasy with superheroes and heroines. Some forms of pretend play are more domestic and allow children to try out adult roles in childcare, cooking or taking on a job role such as fire-fighter or nurse that they could not do in reality;
- Given the space and resources, children promote their physical development through play that draws upon their fine and gross motor skills. They build their own muscle strength and can develop habits and interests that build a firm basis for healthy activity. Children only become 'couch potatoes' when adults have restricted their activity, limited their access to outdoor play and allowed children to spend excessive time on 'screen play' with a television or computer;
- Children sometimes use play in a spontaneous way to work through events and feelings that absorb them. They may choose to retell and sometimes rework experiences through their pretend play, story creation and artwork.

Children can learn a considerable amount through their play but they do not only learn through play. Children welcome the chance to be involved in daily routines and to be an appreciated helper to adults. In family life as well as play settings such as after school clubs or nurseries, children like to feel

a valued 'working member' and can learn vital life skills so long as adults will make the space for them.

How can adults support play?

It is useful to consider the question 'What do children need in order to play?' The answers are relatively simple:

- A welcoming play environment where they can make choices;
- Play materials of varied kinds and sufficient resources so that children do not have to tolerate long waits;
- Play companions - both children and adults.

Adults make many of the initial choices about how a play setting is organised, indoors and outside, what is available each day and in what way.

- Adults have the responsibility to plan ahead in a flexible way. But children cannot benefit from their play if adults over-plan and over-supervise the daily events of any setting or the family home;
- A broad plan of possibilities may include some activities that need a bit of forethought by adults. But children then choose whether to be involved and how to use the available materials;
- Children cannot enjoy what they would regard as play, when adults make all the key decisions about what, when and how, even sometimes as far as detailing the outcomes of what children will allegedly learn from the experience;
- Children enjoy and gain benefit from a play environment when there is generous scope for them to access materials and determine their own play for today. They can then be informed experts about what they have enjoyed, what works well and

sometimes also what they feel they have gained;

- Children need space to spread out in play. Physical games and some imaginative play themes need space if children are to be able to explore and enjoy their play;
- Some favourite resources can never be provided in sufficient quantity. Helpful adults can enable children to work out fair ways to take turns or keep the numbers around an activity to a size where everyone can enjoy the play;
- Children need a setting in which they can play in emotional and physical safety and adults are responsible for addressing avoidable accidents. But children cannot play and learn if adult fears about 'what if....' have created an atmosphere of 'watch out', 'stop that' and 'it'll have to stop right now.';
- Excessive risk control removes the enjoyment of play. Playful activities and resources need an element of uncertainty and challenge: too safe is boring.

Children benefit from a wide range of play resources, certainly not all commercially produced toys. Different settings can offer a range of materials and resources that enable children to:

- Construct and build, from small scale to larger scale chosen projects, often using recycled materials and the scope of the outdoor area as well as indoors;
- Resource their imaginative play with basic dressing up materials (not all pre-determined outfits), domestic child size equipment and simple props to create pretend settings such as an office, a garage, a space station - whatever children want;
- Explore creative activities such as arts and crafts, working with tools, gardening or cooking. These

materials remind adults that for children there is a blurry boundary, if any boundary at all, between play and learning useful skills that enthuse the children now;

- Practise and extend their physical skills through use of space, active imaginary games and use of climbing, riding or games equipment;
- Use their skills in the outdoor as well as indoor environment, exploring natural materials and their properties;
- Find out about the world around them, what makes what happen, the details of everyday life and the natural world of the outdoors.

Children can benefit from a choice of play companions. Some children will be directly chosen as a play companion, whereas others may draw together as a result of shared enthusiasms in the play.

- Adults cannot direct children into liking one another. But there is an adult responsibility to help oil the social wheels and ensure that children are not excluded from play for discriminatory reasons;
- Children can develop their social skills through play. But they often encounter difficulty when there are unresolved arguments about use of play resources, taking turns or who exactly is part of this game;
- Helpful adults model skills of conflict resolution: helping children to explore 'what happened here... and what can we do to work this problem out?' rather than determining as an adult who was to blame and what will happen now;
- Helpful adult playmates will not be the same as children chosen to be part of play. But adults can be welcome play companions in some pretend play games and team members in some physical games.

They are also welcomed as admirers and observers when children call out, 'Look at me!' or share, 'Look what I've done.';

- Adults can be a valued source of guidance on technique in arts and crafts or use of equipment in physical games. Advice can be given in ways that leaves children with wide scope for applying the skills;
- Children want adults in play settings and school playgrounds to be responsible adults, to watch out for them and offer even-handed support when there are arguments or bullying;
- Children want support to resolve difficulties in play, but they do not appreciate adults who ban lively activities without any discussion. A problem solving approach by adults can help children to resolve the current difficulty, shows respect for their perspective and builds experience to enable children to address problems in the future.

Thoughts for your own practice

Helpful adults use their skills of observation and communication to be alert to what is working well for children in a play setting and what may need some attention for change.

- Look and listen to what is actually happening in your setting. How do children use your environment at the moment?
- What do the children think about the play resources and use of your indoor and outdoor environment? Even quite young children can be involved in consultations that use different forms of communication: smiley and downturned sticker faces, spoken as well as written responses;

- Children's ideas are often better invited by questions about what they like doing or would like to be able to do in your setting, than starting with wish lists about specific equipment;
- Children have a strong sense of natural justice. If they say, 'It's not fair', then adults need to listen, understand and reach some resolution in which the children feel involved and consulted.

Further reading

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The Children's Play Information Service produces factsheets and student reading lists on a variety of play topics, and can also provide customised reading lists in response to individual requests.

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