

Information Pack

Play

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Play

Hilary Kenny, Director, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation

Play is the most powerful medium through which young children learn. Through play their intrinsic motivation to learn is most readily satisfied. In play children learn about the world, about how other people live and feel, about creating things and ideas, about making plans, taking decisions and solving problems.

Play is never insignificant, as in 'run off and play'. From the moment they are born, and arguably, for some time before that, children want to make sense of the world. Babies following a dark shape across a bright area [as I watched a two-hour old baby do] are starting the journey to full use of their sense of sight. A toddler responding to Daddy's key in the front door has learned to distinguish sounds which are meaningful from the background noise of daily life.

This kind of making sense of the world is best done through experiential play. Babies and young children crave this kind of play, and most of them will choose to play in this way whatever their surroundings. Have you ever watched a two-year-old in a bank? They explore every corner of the premises, reach for papers on high counters, try to swing on the ropes cordoning off the queues and smile happily at men in suits while opening their shoe laces.

Becoming competent or 'mastery' is sought by even very young children. A child learning to walk displays courage, determination, ability to cope with failure and frustration, stamina, concentration and grit. Think of how often he falls before being sure that he has this walking thing cracked. And how, no sooner is walking achieved than running, jumping and climbing become the goals.

Whether in a group setting or at home, children's play should address all their developmental needs. There is a danger that quiet or tidy play may be valued more than noisy or messy play. How often have we heard a proud parent saying 'He is such a good baby' when the fact is the baby is quiet, not very demanding and sleeps a lot - goodness has nothing to do with it!

Culturally, Ireland is not good at promoting children's physical development needs. Public playgrounds are few and far between and not all of them are well-maintained. Fear of litigation rather than the needs of our children tends to dictate the provision or lack of it. In schools, how often is P.E. (Physical Education) an occasional extra? It needs to be embedded in the curriculum, and in that of all pre-school settings, because competence in one arena of development assists development in all the others. Physical development is especially important since mastering our own bodies and their space in the world provides long-lasting confidence and the ability to take risks in other areas of learning.

Stallibrass (1989) maintains that children deprived of opportunities for physical development ['sensory-motor judgement'] *will suffer ... from a sense of inadequacy and an inhibiting fear of being proved unable to respond effectively to the challenges of their environment.* This is especially important in an era of both increasing litigiousness and of regulation of early childhood settings which has led to bizarre over-emphasis on safety to the exclusion of normal opportunities for physical development.

I have always been sold on the benefits of natural and found materials in play. I have used sand and water, paint and play-dough, clay and junk both in group settings (playgroups) and at home with my own children. I recall with satisfaction the idea I hit on with my second son, who, at eighteen months, was quite demanding, in order to manage time to do the ironing. I rigged up a kind of nest of kitchen chairs at the sink, with lots of newspaper on the floor. One chair was for

him to stand on, the others were to keep him from falling off the first. The sink had a basin of water and on the draining board were colanders, plastic jugs, cups, small saucepans, bowls, cloths, mops and so on. Once I was in the background, responding verbally and in other meaningful ways to his play, I could get a good hour's ironing done in peace, while he experienced quality play with real materials and tools.

It is very important for the adult to respond meaningfully to children's play. In group settings they must understand child development, in order to provide appropriate space, materials, activities and props for play. That must be accompanied by close observation of individual children and children in groups. This is to identify individual children's developmental needs and make a plan for their fulfilment. It is also to consider the layout of the play space in 'live' situations and modify these if need be. They will in addition be monitoring the various kinds of play in which the children are engaging, and considering where, when and if intervention to enrich the play should be made.

This is a skill which takes experience to improve, but it is vital both to hold back, and to sensitively respond, as circumstances indicate. An early childhood worker relates the following story. She had spent some time in observing a continuing game of families which had developed and been embellished by a group of children over about five or six days. She noted [it is important to record, factually, what is observed] that a rather small child was repeatedly cast in the role of the baby, and that she appeared not to relish the role. The worker was anxious for the 'baby' to be getting satisfaction out of the game.

Her dilemma was - should she intervene and gently encourage the assigning of a different role to the 'baby'? She held back, because the 'baby' never refused to join in and seemed to be working on the problem herself, for example, she told the 'Mammy' four days into the game that she was a bold baby and 'cried' and threw her bottle away.

The breakthrough came on the sixth day. 'Baby' announced that today she was the Granny, and that Mammy had to bring her a cup of tea. She proceeded to hold court in the home corner, demanding cups of tea at regular intervals, and sending the other 'children' to the shops for messages. Not only did she achieve the confidence and competence to change the game to her desired scenario, but the introduction of a Granny greatly enriched the play and led to further development and enhancement of the children's imaginative play. This goal needed to be met and would have to be addressed by the adult.

When I think of all that Cathy and her friends were learning in the Pretend play I am in awe. They were imagining what it would be like to be themselves in different circumstances, and to be in another's role entirely. They were playing a game with rules, most of which they themselves were constructing. They were gaining social skills and mathematical skills (one-to-one correspondence with cups of tea for each person). They negotiated with each other, and they solved problems. They planned their play, they remembered where they left off each day and made decisions about each new direction. And they had great fun.

When children are playing, they are at their deepest levels of learning, so ... they need all the support adults can give claims Bruce (1996), adding *Indirect help is usually the best. Direct help often causes the play to evaporate.* Bruce notes that children often need up to half an hour to get into deep levels of play. Thus group settings or families which structure children's days very tightly, and leave little free time, constantly inhibit quality play, thus inhibiting learning.

The competitive atmosphere generated by the buoyant economic situation has filtered down to affect parents' and families' attitudes to even very young children and their learning. Learning is sometimes seen as being serious business only transactable in a school-like atmosphere. In other words, sitting at tables, performing adult-generated and directed 'educational' activities is seen as the 'best' way for young children to learn.

However, studies like those of Elkind (1993) and Schweinhart et al. (1986) have shown the danger of such an approach. Children exposed to curricula which are academic and instructional in approach have shown fewer long-term benefits in terms of school retention and achievement, and in later adolescence have become alienated and rebellious. This may be because such programmes have tried to *teach the wrong things at the wrong time* in Elkind's words. By contrast, approaches which build on the child's own interests and scaffolds their learning from that starting point, hold more promise for enabling competency and risk-taking in children. Such an approach values the child, and demonstrates that learning has to be done by the learner and cannot be compartmentalised, as in school topics.

My young friend Martin demonstrated this very effectively in his water play. He was only two when he began to demand time at the water tray. At first, he wanted (needed?) to play by himself so that his experiments were not interfered with by other children. Thus by three, he was able to fill containers right to the top swiftly, stopping just in time to prevent any spills. He began to notice that the water curved slightly 'like a bubble, but it's all water' when containers were full. He experimented with other materials to try to replicate this experience, with varying degrees of success, leading to other experiments.

As his competence increased, so also did his readiness to engage with other children in co-operative play in water. By the time he was three and a half, he and his friends were engaged in complex play involving varying sizes of containers, hoses, pumps and sluices (made from car tracks with raised edges). The concepts absorbed were mathematical, scientific and technological, not to mention planning, negotiation and problem-solving. This was quality play.

Quality play requires flexibility on the part of the adults. It requires them to be tuned in to each child's needs, to balance those needs with other children's and to respond in imaginative and creative ways. Martin's achievements would not have happened in a setting where turn-taking was rigidly applied, where materials were not permitted to be mixed or transformed into a different play prop, where one topic or area of play was not allowed to overlap into another or where 'children have to share' whether they are ready or not.

Good play provision respects children and their interests and strengths, it challenges and supports them, soothes and stimulates, satisfies and excites and above all extends their learning. It meets their need for creativity and aesthetic development. It helps them process difficult life events. It develops their sensitivity to other people and cultures, ages and abilities. It enhances their resilience. As Bruce emphasises *Childhood play becomes a resource that remains deep inside the maturing person to be used later in adult life.*

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Play: A Developmental Model

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This article will look at play, what it is and why it is important to children. It will present a developmental model of play which can be adapted to work with children in a wide variety of contexts including children with learning difficulties and other special needs. It is also used in the Play Therapy Method. Adult play is also addressed within this model.

Introduction

‘Deprived of play the child is a prisoner, shut off from all that makes life real and meaningful.’ (OMEP, 1966 as cited in Doherty, 1992) Play has long been recognised as the child’s means of exploring and making sense of their world. Play helps the child to understand materials and relationships. They get to know their own body and its parameters. They learn that actions have a cause and effect. Play is the child’s natural and preferred medium of self expression (Axline, 1969)

What is Play?

Play has been researched and defined for over a century by psychologists, educators and anthropologists. Early definitions looked at the development of the industrial revolution and talked about work versus play and surplus energy theory. As we became more industrialised and mechanised, we had to spend less time in basic survival and therefore had more surplus energy (Spencer, 1873 as cited in Cattanach, 1992). This energy was then diverted into play.

More recently, Rubin et al (1983, as cited in Bruce, 1991) reviewed the literature on play and identified six criteria that distinguishes play from other activities.

- Play is intrinsically motivated.

Play can be pleasant or frightening but somehow children remain motivated to be involved in the play. I remember a colleague describing how as a child they played a game of Funerals. In this game she had to be the corpse and be put in the cardboard box, as she was the youngest. This was very frightening but she spoke about been driven to participate.

- It is characterised by attention to means rather than ends.

Play is a process for the child without a particular motivation to produce something.

- Play is distinguished from exploratory behaviour.

Children do explore their environment and may need to do this before they can play. An example of this is pre-schoolers in the sand tray. In exploration of the sand, children will see what happens when you wet it, put it through a sieve and build castles. In play they will use these skills to develop moonscapes, dinosaur lands, car-racing tracks etc.

- Play involves ‘as if’ or pretend.

Even very young children can be heard saying that its only pretend. They begin with very simple scenes replicating home life and experiences and move to very imaginative ‘movie like’ play scenes.

- There are no externally applied rules.

This distinguishes play from other activities such as games, which have general external rules. However I believe that play has some implied rules, based around role and sustaining the play.

Think of a group of children playing mummies and daddies. There is a negotiation of the roles, which also include big sisters, twin sister (as a compromise over seniority). During the play, if the big sister starts doing too many mother tasks or the mother doesn't give the big sister enough relevant tasks, the play deteriorates very quickly.

- The child is actively engaged.

This is not daydreaming – there is evidence of both mental and physical engagement, even absorption.

Why Do Children Play?

Bruner (1972) identified two main functions of play. For children, play minimised the consequences of their activities therefore reducing the risk in learning. You have only to think of the excuse much used by children 'I was only playing'. Play also provides opportunities to try out combinations of behaviours. Monkeys have been observed using sticks to get objects out of their reach, and at the same time their walk changes to indicate that they are playing about. In humans it may be the rehearsal of the possible, trying out different options to see which works best.

Freudian theory identified play as a cathartic experience allowing mastery and control. In play the child dictates what will happen, thus allowing a child to cope with fears and anxieties. Erickson (1977, as cited in Bruce, 1991) researched children's play. He asked them to create movie scenes and found that the scenes served as a metaphor for their own life. They also reflected their chief concerns and interests, goals and fears, strengths and weaknesses. They had created scenes where they could plan, master and control the situation.

Millar (1969) in her book *The Psychology of Play* identified four functions of play. Play offers the opportunity to:

1. Explore the familiar. Children will play mums and dads, and as they begin school the role of teacher will also begin to appear.
2. Practise things already mastered. This is where we observe repetitive play, especially in times of stress. The child knows they "can do it".
3. Be aggressive in a friendly manner. This is where we observe children in rough and tumble play. The children explore their physical strength.
4. Be excited about nothing. Children become totally absorbed in their play being excited about this involvement.

Developmental Play

Having identified what play is and why it is an important aspect of childhood, we will now look at how a number of writers have conceptualised a developmental model of play with particular reference to the EPR model (Jennings, 1993, 1999).

As early as 1875, Spencer suggested three stages of play. These were:

- Sensory - motor play, where the world is explored through the senses,
- Games with rules, where play becomes more structured and organised,
- Artistic – aesthetic play, leading some to become artists and writers in adult life.

Groos, (1901, as cited in Cattanach, 1992) identified two stages of play development, namely Experimental Play and Sociometric play. Experimental play was seen as games with general functions such as perception, ideation, sensory, motor intellectual and emotional play. Sociometric play had a special function of rehearsal of fighting, chasing, courting, social and family games and imitation play.

Jennings identified three developmental stages of play namely, Embodiment, Projection and Role and Dramatic Play. Parallels can be seen with some of the above stages.

- Embodiment Play. This is most prominent in the first year of life.

1. It reinforces the development of body self.
2. It is a stimulus for sensory awareness.

Developmentally this begins with close holding, rocking and nursing of the infant. The infant begins to have sense of self, finding and playing with their hands and feet. Sensory play develops with the taste of solid food and the movement of objects into the infants mouth.

Embodiment and sensory play continues to develop throughout life – the young child playing with playdough, sand, and water, to the adult enjoying a massage or a day on the beach with the children.

Materials of Embodiment Play.

Feely bag.

Sand, water, playdough.

Clay, fingerpaints.

Bikes.

Toys with different textures or made from a range of materials (e.g. wood, plastic, cloth).

Scented materials, essential oils.

- Projective Play: As children develop language and bring objects together, projective play emerges. This is in the second year of life.

1. In projective play the child develops the capacity to pretend in symbolic ways.
2. The child projects feelings and ideas onto surrounding media.
3. The child creates/recreates and formulates new constellations of past, present and future experiences.

This play is observed as children play with toys, projecting life and feelings onto farm animals, being able to use the box as the stables for the horses, etc. As adults, one only has to think of the range of executive toys, squeezing the stress ball, while imagining it as the manager or an irritating employee.

Materials of Projective Play.

Animals – wild, zoo, domestic and prehistoric.

Cowboys, Indians, soldiers, sailors.

Architectural structures, e.g. gates, houses, fences, signs, bricks, etc.

Dolls house and furniture.

Families of dolls/figurines including ones in role, e.g. nurse, policeman, fire-fighter, etc.

- Role Play and Dramatic Play: This emerges with the continuing development of language and the awareness of role.

1. Role play provides opportunities to practise appropriate behaviours necessary for the child's social universe.
2. Character work enables the child to encounter a whole range of experiences, both positive and negative.

The child becomes the character/role and acts out the story. They do this in two ways, imitation and personification. In imitation the child pretends to be what they see, i.e. mum, teacher, dad. In personification characters from TV, stories, etc are the source of the story. The story is not an exact replica but the story is expanded or added to. As adults we may be very dramatic people in

the way we act and tell stories or even choose acting as a profession. We may enjoy a night out at the theatre, all adult versions of this form of play.

Materials of Role and Dramatic Play.

Home corner.

Dressing up.

A range of items including pieces of materials, cardboard boxes, etc.

Exposure to a range of experiences, e.g. visit to the fire station.

Exposure to a variety of stories and authors.

- Games with Rules. This emerges in school age children and becomes the dominant form of play in adulthood.
 1. Games structured with agreed rules.
 2. There is a clear beginning and end.

Children begin to enjoy board and card games and sports. They are part of a peer group or team. Children are actively involved and require participation and adherence to the rules. Rules may be negotiated at the beginning. One only has to think of the range of rules people have for monopoly. Our family rule is that all fines go into the centre and whoever lands on Free Parking gets the money in the middle.

Materials of Games with Rules.

Board games.

Cards.

Football, tennis, etc.

Conclusion

The EPR model of play development offers a clear approach to the development of children's play. Children will not develop one level before the previous one. However children and, as we have shown, adults retain access to all levels of play once they have been achieved. A spiral curriculum approach can therefore be used in the provision of play materials and in the understanding of children's play. This also allowed adaptation for children with a range of special needs.

Adults play an important role in supporting and facilitating children's play. Bruce (1991) has identified three important aspects of this. The adult's role is:

1. To provide an appropriate and exciting environment.
2. To converse with children in ways that are sensitive to their ideas and feelings.
3. To look ahead to what is needed next.

In conclusion, play is important to the social, mental and spiritual wellbeing of the child. Adults can support this. As adults we need to explore our own media of play and access the playful parts of ourselves, thus modelling and supporting the child's play. This also energises us as players and supports our continuing mental and physical wellbeing.

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The Value of Play for Young Children How Parents Can Play and Learn with their Children

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Play is central to all early learning experiences and development for young children.

Young children need to be given the opportunity to learn and express themselves through the medium of play.

Through play, young children are able to experiment, succeed, fail, try again, repeat or stop the activity they are involved in and move on to something else. Play is one of the only ways to engage in this type of learning where there is no right or wrong way and nobody expects a product or should not.

Simply providing a range of activities for children to play with is not sufficient to extend their knowledge nor is it enabling them to develop; in order to benefit and learn from their experiences young children need to be nurtured, guided, counselled and facilitated by adults or older children. Empowering children is not enough. They should be encouraged and supported by an adult or older peer/sibling to extend their experience and knowledge in a positive, non-threatening and supportive way.

Play has a meaning and purpose for young children and it is the best way for them to make sense of their world. It is fine for children to be given freedom of choice but the value of this depends on the choices available, how they are presented, interaction with adults, siblings or peers and recognition of their competence.

Having considered all the benefits of play for young children we should then look at how best to ensure that they have access to play situations. Interaction with peers and older children, (some of whom will have a greater knowledge of the task at hand), provides support and potential for developing tasks. Young children can play with each other at home or in playgroups – they can play with older children or siblings – most importantly they should have the opportunity to play with their parents.

The home is the most important environment for the young child and therefore should provide them with the best opportunity to explore, experiment, acquire skills and learn about themselves and others.

In addition to the normal everyday toys that one provides, parents can play with their children in many ways that may not be thought of as play but are extremely important to their development and can be made 'fun'!

- Shopping – ensure you both have a list – yours may be written – your child's can be made from pictures, drawings, marks. Give him/her money to pay for their purchase at the till. (Many supermarkets now have children's trolleys).
- Everyday activities around the home –
 - Washing in the sink/bath/wash hand basin, dishes, clothes, dolls, toys, paint brushes/pots etc., so many homes have dishwashers/washing machines these days children may not have the opportunity to see that it is possible to clean things by hand! (One word of advice – when children are washing things, if possible let them use baby

- shampoo as washing-up liquid, ordinary shampoo or soap can really sting if it gets into their eyes).
- Laying/setting the table/tidying up/vacuuming/dusting/sorting clothes – these may seem very ordinary, boring activities but they can be good fun and the concepts learnt from them are invaluable, e.g., matching, one-to-one communication, spatial awareness, scientific investigation, sorting, counting, etc.
 - Cooking – this can be both a spectator and participating activity. Children should know where things come from, how they get from the shop to the table. Particularly if they have helped with the shopping. It is also beneficial if they can help you to make cakes, biscuits, milk shakes, etc. Again these activities involve a range of learning concepts – maths, science, language, social skills, sharing, fine motor skills without the child realising that they are internalising these skills.
- Walks/Visits/Outings/Trips – these are a wonderful opportunity to ‘talk’ to and ‘listen’ to your child. You can discuss your environment, look at different environments, travel by different means (bus, train, planes, etc.) and continually observe similarities and differences. This also gives you the opportunity to discuss safety with your child – how and where to cross the road, to stay close to you or hold your hand crossing the road, in shops, on the path etc., understanding how easy it is to get separated in a crowd and some of the dangers of this.
 - If possible provide outdoor activities for your child in your home – sand, water, climbing, digging, planting, etc. If this is not possible then try to take them to a local park or leisure centre where activities are available to promote gross motor skills, climbing, running, jumping, swimming, gardening, weeding, shop, etc.

These are just some ways to encourage your child to learn through play with your help and involvement. Learning should be an enjoyable experience for both parent and child, and through the use of everyday activities this can be reinforced. Learning through play is a very positive experience and being able to relate everyday experiences to this enables the child to see their world holistically rather than compartmentalise it.

This is not the definitive list of how to engage in a range of activities with your child, but may give some ideas of how daily life can be viewed as a play based environment, leading to positive learning experiences for both you and your child.

The Benefits of Play – UK Perspective

Cathy Street

Key messages

- There are different definitions of play, often with an emphasis on activities which children freely choose to undertake when not being told what to do by others.
- Throughout the literature available on play, there is widespread acceptance that play has positive effects.
- Play has been considered from many different perspectives and in several academic disciplines, including child psychology and psychotherapy, education, human geography, anthropology and studies of children's folklore.
- Traditionally, the focus has been on the benefits of play to the individual child – notably, to their health, education and social learning. The attention has also been largely on pre-school and young children.
- Recently, a growing interest in the benefits of play to society in general and in how play can influence children's use and experience of their environment has emerged. Accompanying this is a heightened interest in the play needs of older children.

Introduction

There is a considerable amount of literature on the various dimensions of play, giving different definitions and taken from a variety of perspectives. For the purposes of this Highlight, 'play' is defined as activities which children choose to undertake when not being told what to do by others. The activities are freely chosen, personally directed and may take place with or without adult involvement. They may take place within the home; the street or local community; the school premises, including the playground; and in the countryside. Children may play on their own or with peers. This Highlight does not include specialist applications of play therapy for children who may be experiencing some form of difficulty, or organised play activities such as those offered through out-of-school clubs.

The benefits of play – its relevance now

Currently in the UK, there is a particular interest in children's opportunities for play. Within education, there is concern that children are under increasing pressure, and that opportunities for free play are being squeezed out or downgraded in learning value. There are also anxieties that the emphasis on the National Curriculum may erode the child-centred principles of early childhood education based on play as a means to learning. This concern is especially pertinent given the increasing numbers of four-year-old children beginning formal schooling in this country – a trend which is at odds with many other European countries. Within the health arena, there is concern about children's increasingly sedentary lifestyles and increased rates of obesity.

Overall, as society becomes more complex and competitive, spontaneous play is in danger of being replaced with structured activities both at home and in school. This process is being exacerbated by loss of space available for play, the commercialisation of play space and the growth of organised leisure activities, and heightened parental fears for the safety of their children.

It is within this context that there is a growing need for a more in-depth and robust understanding of the benefits of play. Whilst there is a popular view that play is ‘natural’ or ‘good’ for children, more specific information about both immediate and long-term benefits is required – or, alternatively, gaps in current knowledge identified. Whilst the following sections summarise some of the argued benefits of play, various limitations need to be borne in mind. Most importantly, much of the literature is focused on pre-school and younger children, with less attention given to adolescents. There is also a lack of longitudinal data and a tendency for sample sizes in studies of play to be small. The definitions used for play are often imprecise, and data about young people from minority ethnic groups, those with disabilities and other special needs remains generally sparse. Much of the material about play is also of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature, which, makes it hard to establish evidence as to the scale of the benefits play may bring.

Historical theories of play

In Sutton-Smith’s analysis of the benefits of play, two basic viewpoints are described – one which says that play is *preparation for the future*, the other, that it is *an adjustment to the present*. Some researchers have identified play as reflecting different developmental stages that children pass through, whilst others have identified physical play, intellectual play and social/emotional play.

An interest in play as a means of helping children to learn became evident in the 1920s, with Sigmund Freud’s work highlighting the emotional aspects of play – play providing one way in which children learn to control their feelings and deal with anxieties. Piaget’s theories of how children take in and make sense of experiences took the understanding of children’s play a stage further in the 1940s, with attention then shifting to the importance of play in encouraging cognitive development.

This theme is highlighted in Rogers and Sawyer’s analysis of the importance of play in children’s lives. They identify a number of key areas where play is important: in encouraging children to develop problem-solving skills; in supporting their language development and literacy; in developing their social skills and in expressing their emotions. They note that play is an important element of children’s motivation and therefore participation in society; and that since children cannot be passive recipients of play, but are actively involved, autonomous thinking is encouraged. They suggest that play provides the opportunity to practice new skills and functions and to consolidate previous learning. Play allows children to retain their playful attitudes, providing a learning set which contributes to flexibility in problem solving. It also enables them to learn about learning – through curiosity, invention and persistence and without the pressure, or fear of mistakes, that is otherwise associated with having to achieve or needing to learn.

Health benefits of play

The literature on this dimension of play suggests that there are two main areas of benefit. Firstly, the physical activity involved in energetic play is traditionally recognised as of benefit to children in terms of providing exercise, encouraging coordination and the development of physical skills. Secondly, play can enhance the mental health of children and young people by building self-esteem, independence and respect for others; it can also foster resilience to stressful life events.

These benefits are discussed in the review **Best Play** undertaken by the National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children’s Play Council. The adverse consequences that may arise if children are deprived of play are also noted – they may have poorer ability in motor tasks, lower levels of physical activity and less competence in dealing with stressful situations. Their abilities to assess and manage risk may also be curtailed. A further result may be poorer social skills, which in turn may lead to difficulties in negotiating social situations.

Research by the Mental Health Foundation highlights the importance of children being able to play, to take risks and to use their initiative. It is also essential for them to have opportunities to practise making and consolidating friendships and to learn to deal with conflict – the basic skills needed in order to become ‘emotionally literate’. Earlier research by the Foundation suggests that play may provide enriching experiences that, in helping to develop children’s emotional and social skills, may help to reduce their risk of developing mental health problems later on.

New research on the effects of physical activity on brain development is also relevant to the debate about the contribution of physical play to children’s health. The research, which is still at an early stage, is based on the premise that increased physical activity increases blood flow to the brain, which when coupled with learning tasks causes the formation of dendrites which increase the neural pathways and neural mapping of the brain. Various school-based projects, that have introduced more physical activity into the school day, have reported positively: for example, children have appeared more alert and have shown improved scores in school tests.

Play and education

In much of the literature, play is recognised as a major route to learning, particularly in children’s early years. Play can support and consolidate learning from both informal and formal school settings and, as already described, is widely seen as having an important role in children’s cognitive development and ability to concentrate.

There is, however, a range of work which examines other benefits of play for children’s learning and education. For example, there is a sizeable literature on play and social learning that examines the role of break-times in schools. This suggests that these times are important in terms of children forming social and peer networks and friendships; practising role-taking activities including socialisation into adult roles; and cultural transmission.

There is also a small body of literature that has examined the views of teachers towards the value of play. Several studies have examined the impact of the National Curriculum on a play-based curriculum for younger children. These indicate that teachers value play; in particular, teachers frequently mentioned language development and socialisation and reported that free play experiences and exploration can enhance learning in more structured subject areas. Play can be a valuable way of supporting positive attitudes towards learning and schooling. It can also assist a child’s progress by providing information about his or her developmental stage, needs, interests and knowledge.

Socialisation, citizenship and play

Throughout the literature on the health and education benefits of play, a common theme is that play provides a range of benefits for the individual child relating to their physical, social and cognitive development. This to some extent has been the ‘traditional’ approach to looking at the benefits of play. However, in recent years a new perspective has emerged in the play literature that has examined the wider benefits of play and play provision to the community as a whole.

In Coalter and Taylor’s review, some of the benefits of ‘successful’ play for the wider community are described. These include: fostering inclusion and tackling social exclusion through the engagement of marginalised families; tackling anti-social behaviour; supporting families and communities through the provision of a focus for informal networks of support and by allowing children autonomy within an environment about which parents feel secure; and offering opportunities for exploring cultural identity and difference.

These benefits assume that children have access to their local environment and its facilities, and through such access, develop a sense of 'ownership' and social inclusion. Woolley and colleagues, working in the fields of geography and urban studies, take a contrasting viewpoint, in their examination of how young people feel marginalised in the decision-making processes about the use of urban areas. Similarly, Kapasi's analysis of play opportunities for young people from minority ethnic groups, and Petrie's work, which looks both at the importance of play provision for disabled children as a means of making friends and at the barriers to play faced by these children, provide important alternative insights into the value of play and community cohesion.

Conclusion

Of all the benefits of play, perhaps the least controversial and most agreed upon area is that play enhances children's acquisition of social skills. What remains problematic with regard to other areas of benefit, however, is the fact that the *evidence* is complex, often inconclusive and subject to some limitations. Set against this, there is currently a high level of interest in the value of play and concern that this valuable dimension of children's development is being lost.

There is a wealth of information about play from different perspectives and a widespread view that play brings positive benefits for children. New research and perspectives are also emerging. The challenge remains to share this knowledge effectively across different disciplines, with backing from more systematic and rigorous research to substantiate the argued benefits of play.

Taken from The benefits of play (Highlight No. 195) by Cathy Street, published by the National Children's Bureau, 2002

Websites, Contact Details and Resources for further information

Barnardos National Children's Resource Centres:

Christchurch Square, Dublin 8.

Tel: 01 4549699

Fax: 01 4530300

Email: ncrc@barnardos.ie

Bowling Green, White St., Cork

Tel: 021 4310591

Fax: 021 4310691

Email: ncrc@cork.barnardos.ie

10 Sarsfield St, Limerick

Tel: 061 208680

Fax: 061 440214

Email: ncrc@midwest.barnardos.ie

River Court, Golden Island, Athlone

Tel: 090 6479584

Fax: 090 6479585

Email: ncrc@athlone.barnardos.ie

41 – 43 Prospect Hill, Galway

Tel: 091 565058

Fax: 091 565060

Email: ncrc@galway.barnardos.ie

<http://parentstoyguide.com/>

This website has articles on the importance of play, tips for safety amongst others.

http://www.rollercoaster.ie/development/toysguide_intro.asp

This website contains a web version of Barnardos "Guide to Choosing Toys".

Play Therapy Ireland

55 Gortgreine, Millar's Lane, Galway

Tel: 091 520647

Email: playtherapy@esatclear.ie

Play Therapy Ireland is a professional association for Play Therapists. It aims to promote the development of play therapy through training workshops, supervision and conferences. It also holds a register of play therapists for public information.

Sugradh

"Springfield"

3 Hollybrook

Bray

Co. Wicklow

Ph: 01 2866991

Fax: 01 2866990

The aim of Sugradh is to promote and protect children's play as a fundamental human right of all children in Ireland.

Irish Association of Hospital Play Staff (IAHPS)

C/o Avonmore

Leopardstown Road

Dublin 18

Tel: 01 4143836 (secretary)

01 2980083 (chairperson)

This is the professional association for Irish Hospital Play Specialists and those interested in this area of work.

Aims to establish hospital play and to provide support for its members through sharing ideas and dissemination of information regarding play and the care of children and young people in hospital.