

Play

The characteristics of play tend to relate to motivation and emotional attitude. This definition of play draws closely on the work of Bob Hughes and Frank King and is widely accepted in the field of play and playwork.

“Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child”.

Freely chosen

The motivation to play comes from within the child and play can be described as an expression of freedom as the player has chosen to participate rather than feeling obliged to do so.

Personally directed

Players choose not only to play, but how they play. Players direct their own actions and play is generally considered to be a democratic process where leaders and rules may arise but usually at the will of those involved.

Intrinsically motivated

Play is activity conducted primarily for its own sake and the process rather than the end product is the motivating feature.

Active engagement

In the state of play, players are usually alert and actively thinking about what they are doing. However play is relatively free from pressure or stress due to the lack of external demands/goals.

Play has a purpose

The exploration and learning that is central to play is open-ended and has been linked to psychological, personal and social development, as well as the acquisition of skills and knowledge.

“Play appears to allow our brains to exercise their very flexibility, to maintain and even perhaps renew the neural connections that embody our human potential to adapt, to meet any possible set of environmental conditions” (Hara Estroff Marano).

Play and Older Children

In terms of children’s development, play tends to receive greater attention in the early years than later in childhood and is often associated with the behaviour of young children. However this approach overlooks its value and purpose for older children.

This information sheet explores the play of older children, particularly those in early and middle adolescence (around the ages of 11 to 16). It challenges our assumptions based on age alone, and covers topics such as understanding the adolescent brain, play behaviours of older children and their benefits, where older children play and why, barriers to play and the social consequences.

Older children play too

<https://www.playwales.org.uk/eng/news/1102-older-children-play-too--new-info-sheet->

There are many different types of play, each have different roles in child development. Bob Hughes, from his observation of play recognised 16 types of play from which he devised his taxonomy. They provide practitioners with a common language for describing play.

By facilitating the play types in practice we ensure children experience a wide range of opportunities and experiences. All play types benefit from a varied environment supported by a range of basic materials or ‘Loose Parts’.

Play Types

- 1. Symbolic Play** – play which allows control, gradual exploration and increased understanding without the risk of being out of depth e.g. using a piece of wood to symbolise a person or an object, or a piece of string to symbolise a wedding ring.
- 2. Rough and Tumble Play** – close encounter play which is less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength. Discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display. This type of play allows children to participate in physical contact that doesn't involved or result in someone being hurt. This type of play can use up lots of energy.
- 3. Socio-dramatic Play** – the enactment of real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature e.g. playing at house, going to the shops, being mothers and fathers, organising a meal or even having a row.
- 4. Social Play** – play during which the rules and criteria for social engagement and interaction can be revealed, explored and amended. E.g. any social or interactive situation which contains an expectation on all parties that they will abide by the rules or protocols, i.e. games, conversations, making something together.
- 5. Creative Play** – play which allows a new response, the transformation of information, awareness of new connections, with an element of surprise. Allows children to design, explore, try out new ideas and use their imagination. They can use lots of different tools, props, equipment. It can have a beginning and an end, texture and smell. e.g. enjoying creation with a range of materials and tools for its own sake. Self expression through any medium, making things, changing things.
- 6. Communication Play** – play using words, nuances or gestures e.g. mime / charades, jokes, play acting, mickey taking, singing, whispering, pointing, debate, street slang, poetry, text messages, talking on mobiles / emails/ internet, skipping games, group and ball games.
- 7. Dramatic Play** – play which dramatizes events in which the child is not a direct participator. For example presentation of a TV show, an event on the street, a religious or festive event, even a funeral.
- 8. Locomotor Play** – movement in any or every direction for its own sake. E.g. chase, tag, hide and seek, tree climbing.
- 9. Deep Play** – play which allows the child to encounter risky or even potentially life threatening experiences, to develop survival skills and conquer fear. E.g. light fires with matches, make weapons, conquer fear such as heights, snakes, and creepy crawlies. Some find strength they never knew they had to climb obstacles, lift large objects, etc.. E.g. leaping onto an aerial runway, riding a bike on a parapet, balancing on a high beam, roller skating, assault course, high jump.
- 10. Exploratory Play** – play to access factual information consisting of manipulative behaviours such as handling, throwing, banging or mouthing objects. E.g. engaging with an object or area and, either by manipulation or movement, assessing its properties, possibilities and content, such as stacking bricks.
- 11. Fantasy Play** – This is the make believe world of children. This type of play is where the child's imagination gets to run wild. Play, which rearranges the world in the child's way, a way that is unlikely to occur. E.g. playing at being a pilot flying around the world, pretend to be various characters/people, be where ever they want to be, drive a car, become be six feet nothing tall or as tiny as they want to be the list is endless as is a child's imagination.

12. Imaginative Play – play where the conventional rules, which govern the physical world, do not apply. E.g. imagining you are ..., or pretending to be, a tree or ship, or patting a dog, which isn't there.

13. Mastery Play – control of the physical and affective ingredients of the environments. E.g. digging holes, changing the course of streams, constructing shelters, building fires.

14. Object Play – play which uses infinite and interesting sequences of hand-eye manipulations and movements. E.g. examination and novel use of any object e.g. cloth, paintbrush, cup.

15. Role Play – play exploring ways of being, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature. For example brushing with a broom, dialing with a telephone, driving a car.

16. Recapitulative Play – play that allows the child to explore ancestry, history, rituals, stories, rhymes, fire and darkness. Enables children to access play of earlier human evolutionary stages.

References

Hughes, B. (2002) A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types, 2nd edition, London: PlayLink.

Play Types Resources

Information Sheet by Play Wales https://issuu.com/playwales/docs/play_types

Play Types Toolkit

Bringing more play into the school day (2017) Play Scotland <http://www.playscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/Play-Scotland-Play-Types-Toolkit-bringing-more-play-into-the-school-day.pdf>

Loose Parts

In play, loose parts are open ended materials and can include both natural and manmade objects that can be combined and used in multiple ways without a specific direction. Loose parts theory arose from Landscape Architect Simon Nicolson (1971) who influenced the way we look at children's play spaces today. He believed that it is the 'loose parts' in our environment that empower our creativity. Playing in a space rich with loose parts supports a wide range of development including flexibility, creativity, imagination, resilience, problem solving, self-esteem and spatial awareness.

Loose Parts Play film <http://elpa.org.uk/loose-parts-play/>

Loose Parts Toolkit: <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Loose-Parts-Play-web.pdf>

Resources for playing - providing loose parts to support children's play

<http://www.playwales.org.uk/login/uploaded/documents/Publications/loose%20parts%20toolkit.pdf>

The Loose Parts Play Toolkit (updated version 2019) provides a greater focus on helping adults develop the skills to support inclusive, all-weather outdoor play in Scotland.

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Loose-Parts-Play-Toolkit-2019-web.pdf>

Fraser Brown's Compound Flexibility

"The flexibility of the environment, the range and diversity of resources, how they can be used in lots of different ways. This is what feeds the success of the children. It influences their ability to manage whatever task they have set themselves. This success nurtures the child's self-esteem which in turn makes them more able to interpret their environment flexibly. It's a positive spiral." Lily Horseman, Kindling Play and Training <http://kindlingplayandtraining.co.uk/forest-school/compound-flexibility/>

Supporting Play

Adults who facilitate free play with Loose parts have a crucial role. In particular they need to understand what free-play involves and when and how to get involved in play. Some of the tried and tested approaches that adults can use to support free play include:

Facilitating access to the play environment

- Supporting children to access resources on request (e.g. sellotape).
- Pushing resources you think might be useful for what they are doing nearer their reach (e.g. judging that some twine might be useful for their den and putting some nearby).
- Note that this is different from suggesting to children how they should use materials or what they should do with them, instead you are following their lead.

Inspiring children to use resources in new ways

- Making small changes to the set up while children play can inspire new ideas.
- For example, draping some fabric from a tree, moving some resources somewhere else in the play space, attaching a bit of tarpaulin to the fence to make a den – anything different or surprising – then standing back to see if children take a renewed interest.

Working with dynamics

- If children are not used to loose part resources then one of two dynamics can happen and either way the best approach is often to wait for things to change naturally.
 - Energy can erupt, with a lot of movement and noise – this can feel unsettling but may feel fine to the children and the dynamic tends to settle down over a few sessions.
 - Children can seem stuck and unsure of what to do but children usually warm up to free play over time – boredom leads to invention – or try the other tips on this handout.

Responding to invites to play

- Joining in with all sorts of play when children seek a playmate – watch out for signs they might like you to get involved, whether by asking directly or with playful looks or gestures called 'play cues'. <https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/sites/default/files/file/working-early-years-out-school/theplaycycle.pdf>
- Some children may particularly need this level of support and your involvement can help with inclusion, the adult providing the glue that holds play together for children of different abilities.

Extending play

- Asking open ended questions can help children to extend their play while keeping control of play with them, for example 'that's great, can you tell me about it?' or 'what could you do next?'
- Creating a relaxed atmosphere is important as children will not play freely if they feel they might be judged for all their spontaneous expressions and experimentation.
- The above are in contrast to approaches where adults try to define what should happen next for example 'why don't you paint it?' or have an idea about a right or wrong way of playing.

Facilitating communication

- Some children particularly benefit from some extra support to their communication.
- This could entail, for example:
 - 'Translating' what a child means for other children where there might be confusion e.g. 'Sam's turned into a monster – he's trying to scare you! You'd better run away!'
 - Clarifying what is going on in a game for children that are struggling to keep up.

Levels of intervention

- Sturrock and Else (1998) wrote about levels of intervention in relation to playwork. These are helpful for thinking about the different ways in which adults can be involved in play.

The levels are:

- **Play maintenance** – adult takes an observer role, good for reflective practice.
 - **Simple involvement** – adult acts as a resource i.e. helps child access resources
 - **Medial intervention** – adult responds to play cues from child and joins them in their play
 - **Complex intervention** – adult involved more actively in play i.e. role play
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- Essentially these levels of involvement are the range of adult support from simply being aware of what the children are doing and ensuring play can continue, through supplying resources or other minimal assistance, to being involved in the play, perhaps significantly involved in the play, to help hold that play together for the children (using, perhaps, some of the approaches suggested above).

Other Useful Guides

Sourcing materials for children's play Play Wales (2018)

https://issuu.com/playwales/docs/sourcing_materials_for_children_s_p?e=5305098/66326935

Play out of hours! - A toolkit for the use of school grounds for playing out of teaching hours (2016)

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/02/6688>

Play Ranger Toolkit: A guide to setting up and running an effective play ranger service in Scotland (2014) <https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Play-Ranger-Toolkit-March-15.pdf>

Play Champions: A guide for developing Young Play Champions in Primary Schools (2016)

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Play-Champions-Toolkit-2016-web.pdf>

Funders of play: A guide to foundations, trusts and charities who support play in Scotland (2016)

<https://www.inspiringscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Funders-of-Play-2016.pdf>

Play Map Resource for Community Planning Partnerships, (2015)

A practical support to help Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) build play into their strategic plans. It will help CPPs deliver on their objectives to support the wellbeing of children, young people and their families across communities.

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/12/6702>

Benefits of Play

Play in Education, Learning and Development

Cambridge University's play research project, funded by Lego. PEDAL's mission is to conduct academic research into the role of play in young children's education, development and learning to inform wider practice and policy

<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/pedal/>

The Importance of Play, <https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/centres/pedal/>

A report on the value of children's play with a series policy recommendations, 2012

David Whitebread, University of Cambridge; PEDAL – Play in Education Development and Learning

“What is increasingly recognised within the research and policy communities is that one vital ingredient in supporting healthy intellectual, emotional and social development in young children is the provision of opportunities and the support for play.”

“The evolutionary and psychological evidence points to the crucial contribution of play in humans to our success as a highly adaptable species. Playfulness is strongly related to cognitive development and emotional well-being. The mechanisms underlying these relationships appear to involve play's role in the development of linguistic and other representational abilities, and its support for the development of metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities.”

Getting it Right for Play: The Power of Play: an evidence base (2012).

“Children who sleep fewer hours a day are more at risk of obesity and active children tend to sleep longer.” (Cole-Hamilton, 2011, citing Milano, 2007)

“Three studies with children diagnosed as having ADHD have indicated that they are positively affected by spending time in natural environments” (Cole-Hamilton, 2011 Citing Bird, 2007)

“If children are not allowed to take risks whilst playing they might either grow up over-cautious in many everyday situations, or be unable to judge potentially dangerous situations, placing themselves in danger” (Cole-Hamilton, 2011)

“Pretend play, role play and rough and tumble play allow children to form highly sophisticated attachment systems ... Relationships are strengthened through play.” (Cole-Hamilton, 2011 citing Lester and Russel, 2008 and Lindon, 2007)

“Children playing together, and their parents meeting and talking whilst they do so, helps develop community relations and friendships and helps reduce the isolation experienced by many disabled children and their families” (Cole-Hamilton 2011, citing Dunn, 2004)

Play for a change. Play, Policy and Practice: A review of contemporary perspectives (2008)

'Play for a Change' cites literature that supports an understanding of play as developing the structure of the brain in ways related to:

- Pleasure and enjoyment
- Emotion regulation (as 'play is a relatively safe context within which children can experience the primary emotions of joy, anger, fear, sadness, shock and disgust yet without the real consequences.')
- Stress response systems (as 'moderate and temporary stress over which children can feel an element of control is beneficial and plays a role in building resilience to more harmful kinds of stress.' For example, risk taking.)
- Attachment (to people and places)
- Learning and creativity

Free Play in Early Childhood: A literature review (2007)

The review found, in summary, that 'through free play children:

- Explore materials and discover their properties
- Use their knowledge of materials to play imaginatively
- Express their emotions and reveal their inner feelings
- Come to terms with traumatic experiences
- Maintain emotional balance, physical and mental health, and well-being
- Struggle with issues such as birth and death, good and evil, power and powerlessness
- Develop a sense of who they are, their value and that of others
- Learn social skills of sharing, turn-taking and negotiation
- Deal with conflict and learn to negotiate
- Solve problems, moving from support to independence
- Develop communication and language skills
- Repeat patterns that reflect their prevailing interests and concerns
- Use symbols as forms of representation – the use of symbols is crucial in the development from learning through the senses to the development of abstract thought
- Practice, develop and master skills across all aspects of learning and development'

Benefits/outcomes from projects introducing materials for free play in schools

The Play Return: A review of the wider impact of play initiatives (2014)

- Playground break time initiatives are amongst the most promising interventions that lead to increased physical activity.
- Play activities in school break time are linked with a range of improvements in academic skills, attitudes and behaviour.
- Play activities are linked with improved social skills, improved social relations between different ethnic groups
- Parents associate playing in playgrounds with family wellbeing.
- Play and young facilities in public spaces have led to reductions in levels of anti-social behaviour and vandalism
- Children are more physically active in free play sessions than in organised activities
- Children's wellbeing is promoted through playing in a playwork setting with a strong focus on outdoor play in the natural environment.

Play Inclusive (P.inc) (2007)

This project found that some of the more frequently reported benefits of developing free play in the playground were:

- 'children included in play who are not usually;
- some children more confident in play and interaction;
- more imaginative play than usual;
- a general reduction in fighting and frustration;
- some children more active than usual;
- strengthening relationships between children;
- a greater variety of play occurring than usual;
- more to do;
- strengthening relationships between children and staff.'