EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 9

The Right to Play

EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS

Series edited by Martin Woodhead and John Oates

Early Childhood in Focus is a series of publications produced by the Child and Youth Studies Group at The Open University, United Kingdom, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

The series provides accessible and clear reviews of the best and most recent available research, information and analysis on key policy and practice issues, offering clear messages on core policy topics and questions, spanning all aspects of early childhood care and education, as well as the full age range, from infancy through to the early years of school.

Each publication is developed in consultation with world leaders in research, policy, advocacy and children's rights. Many of these experts have written summaries of key messages from their areas of work especially for the series, and the accuracy of the content has been assured by independent academic assessors, themselves experts in the field of early childhood.

The themes of the series have been chosen to reflect topics of research and knowledge development that address the most significant areas of children's rights, and where a deeper understanding of the issues involved is crucial to the success of policy development programmes and their implementation.

These publications are intended to be of value to advocates for the rights of children and families, to policy makers at all levels, and to anyone working to improve the living conditions, quality of experience and life chances of young children throughout the world.

Also in the series:
Attachment Relationships
Early Childhood and Primary Education
Developing Positive Identities
Effective Early Childhood Programmes
Supporting Parenting
Culture and Learning
Developing Brains
Healthy Environments

The Right to Play

Editors

Liz Brooker

Martin Woodhead

EARLY CHILDHOOD IN FOCUS 9

States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and arts.

(United Nations, 1989, Article 31, Paragraph 1)

A definition from *General Comment No. 17:*

Children's play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone. These forms will change and be adapted throughout the course of childhood. The key characteristics of play are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. Together, these factors contribute to the enjoyment it produces and the consequent incentive to continue to play. While play is often considered non-essential, the Committee reaffirms that it is a fundamental and vital dimension of the pleasure of childhood, as well as an essential component of physical, social, cognitive, emotional and spiritual development.

(United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013, Paragraph 14c)

This issue of *Early Childhood in Focus* is dedicated to the memory of Valerie Fronczek, 1937–2013, tireless advocate for children's rights, International Play Association (IPA) Vice President, and leading coordinator in the preparation of *General Comment No. 17*.

EDITORS
Liz Brooker, Reader in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, United Kingdom

CONTRIBUTORS
Laura Berk, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Illinois State University, United States of America

Daniel Thomas Cook, Professor of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University, United States of America

Sue Dockett, Professor of Early Childhood, Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia

Suzanne Gaskins, Professor Emerita, North East Illinois University, United States of America

Linda Harrison, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

Margaret Kernan, Senior Programme Manager, International Child Development Initiatives, Leiden, Netherlands

Gerison Lansdown, Independent Consultant, London, United Kingdom

Jackie Marsh, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Adena Meyers, Professor of Psychology, Illinois State University, United States of America

Jennifer Sumsion, Foundation Professor of Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

Elizabeth Wood, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

ACADEMIC ASSESSOR
Artin Göncü, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, United States of America

Contents

Preface

'We all play occasionally, and we all know what play feels like' according to one prominent play researcher (Sutton-Smith, 1997: 1). Recognising that play is a feature of early childhood should be a good starting point for answering some key questions: What is play? What is the role of play in children's lives and learning? What should parents and teachers do to protect and promote children's play in the face of the multiple pressures of modern living? Unfortunately, the answers to these questions turn out to be anything but straightforward. 'Play' is a slippery and contested concept that has been debated by researchers, educators and policy makers for more than a century, initially within the somewhat narrow frame of reference of Western early child development and education, but more recently within a more a global framework encompassing a far wider spectrum of young humanity (Lester and Russell, 2010).

The challenge has not just been to define the concept. Play is also contested because individuals, communities and governments have such different notions of the value and importance of play for children. Is this distinctive way of behaving understood simply as 'having fun'? Or does play serve an important function in development, helping children to become sociable and socialised? How far is play a means for promoting early learning, so that children are ready for school? Does the idea of adults planning for play run counter to the basic principle that play is self-directed by children?

Numerous lines of research enquiry provide insight into the early origins of playful behaviour, and its crucial function in the infant's first relationships with parents, siblings and others. Research also draws attention to young children's extraordinary cognitive and social understanding, most clearly revealed within imaginative play, as children as young as 3 or 4 negotiate complex 'pretend' roles and activities. Arguably, the current priority is for researchers, educators and advocates to confront the many challenges to children's play. For example, global expansion of preschool and primary education is generally welcomed, yet play-based approaches too easily give way to formal, didactic teaching to a narrow curriculum. At the same time, growing urban environments put pressure on spaces for outdoor play. Finally, the pace of technological change is transforming children's as well as adult lives, with particular concern about children's early initiation into electronic games, television, computers and other devices.

The most urgent contribution to this complex field comes from the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), in response to concerns that Article 31 (on the right to play, rest, leisure, recreational and cultural activities), was being widely neglected. The UN Committee's *General Comment No. 17* (2013) is a landmark document, and the motivation for compiling this issue of *Early Childhood in Focus*.

Liz Brooker
Martin Woodhead
Editors

I. What is play?

Play is a universal activity and the universal right of all children, but it is not always straightforward to secure and safeguard.

A century of research has provided detailed definitions and theories about the crucial function of play in children's lives, learning and development.

The cultural organisation of societies shapes the kinds of play that children experience, where they play and whom they play with.

In traditional agrarian societies, young children's playful activities may take place in the context of domestic work and other responsibilities, and may not be recognised as distinctive and important.

Provision of nurseries, kindergartens and other forms of early education and care in industrialised societies was associated with increasing separation of children's from adults' daily lives, with play frequently identified as young children's main occupation.

Children's own views of play focus on the opportunity to choose their own activities, in company with their friends.

Children's right to play

Despite the centrality of play to the health, well-being and development of children, it is rarely taken seriously by governments. Either by omission (neglecting to protect and invest in the creation of spaces and opportunities for play) or commission (the imposition of excessive constraints on children's lives), many children all over the world are unable to fully realise their right to play. These concerns prompted the UNCRC to produce a General Comment focusing on Article 31 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, in order to provide guidance for governments on how to fulfil their obligations to children.

General Comment No. 17 highlights the fundamental importance of recognising and facilitating this right for girls and boys of all ages. It emphasises the role of play in providing opportunities for the expression of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and for the development of physical, social cognitive and emotional strength and skills. It further highlights that, through play, children explore and experience the world around them, experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences, and in so doing learn to better understand and construct their social position within the world.

The General Comment stresses that play is essential for the realisation of other rights. For example, Article 31 itself recognises the interrelationships between play, recreation, leisure, rest and participation in cultural life and the arts. Play is also a key dimension of education, necessary to achieve the best possible health, integral to the child's optimum development, and a valuable route to recovery and reintegration after trauma, loss, neglect or violence.

Although children have a spontaneous urge to play and will seek out opportunities to do so in the most unfavourable environments, the Committee recognises that certain conditions need to be assured if the right to play is to be fully realised. Children need to be free from harmful stress, violence, discrimination and physical dangers. They require appropriate time and space. They need access to natural environments, material resources and other children. They also need the key adults around them to recognise the importance and legitimacy of play, as well as support children in play activities. Governments must therefore act to promote and protect these conditions.

Gerison Lansdown, Independent Consultant, London, UK

- *Government laws and policies tend to neglect play, despite its fundamental importance to children's health and well-being.*
- *Play is valuable in itself, but also contributes to the realisation of other rights such as to health, education, identity and participation.*
- *Action is needed to provide conditions in which children's play is recognised, valued and fostered.*

Defining play

The formal definition provided by *General Comment No. 17* (UNCRC, 2013) (quoted above) is the culmination of a centuries-long scholarly debate about the essential characteristics of play, and its function in children's lives and learning. For example, the commonsense view that 'play is what children like to do', or 'do for fun', or 'do without being asked' sounds persuasive but does not take us very far. Many young children 'like to' help an adult with an important task, and 'have fun' feeding the hens, carrying the shopping, or baking a cake, activities which confirm their own sense of belonging and their role in family life.

During the 1980s, a partial consensus was reached among developmental psychologists, based on six characteristics. Play is always intrinsically motivated; it is enjoyable; it has no external rules, only the rules invented by the players (as in pretend play, where a rule may be 'the policeman isn't allowed in our house'); it is goal-less, and valued for its process rather than its outcomes; it shows active engagement on the part of the players; and it is non-literal: the 'policeman' and the 'robber' are just small children like everyone else, and the 'house' is just a corner of the room (Rubin *et al.*, 1983).

Some scholars have questioned this benign image of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). They point out that play is not necessarily fun for all the players, but may be a means for children to exercise power and control over each other (MacNaughton, 2009). Play can also be manipulated by adults seeking to achieve their own intended outcomes for children, using playful activities and routines to enforce adult rules (Ailwood, 2011) through a kind of invisible coercion (Burman, 2008).

Negotiating the 'rules' of play may sometimes have painful consequences for the players. For example, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010: 28) describe a scene in which four girls appear to be happily 'playing Cinderella'. Only later does it emerge that one child was allocated the role of 'the piece of paper that was in front of the fire, collecting the cinders', while the others played Cinderella, the Prince and the Fairy Godmother.

Liz Brooker, Reader in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *Play is a feature of young children's lives, but it has proved to be a difficult concept for researchers to define.*
- *Many definitions describe play as a source of fun and pleasure for children, with its own rules and scripts.*
- *Recent research suggests that play is a more complex experience and may serve multiple goals for children and adults.*

How culture organises play

Although young children around the world spend time at play, radical differences in how their everyday lives are organised lead to important differences in their play. Such differences are based on each culture's values and practical realities, including the centrality of play in children's lives, how play is understood by caregivers, the kind of play partners and contexts available, and children's motivations for play (Göncü *et al.*, 2000; Gaskins, in press).

For young children growing up in North America and Europe, play is often considered their primary 'occupation'. But in other cultures, helping with family chores is given greater significance, and play is considered a secondary activity occurring alongside work or after work is done. If play is seen as the primary medium for learning cognitive, social, and emotional lessons, limiting play opportunities seems clearly undesirable. But such lessons may also be learned through collaborating in, or observing, the work of adults (Gaskins *et al.*, 2007).

Play's value reflects the meaning that caregivers ascribe to it, their beliefs about children's development and learning and their role in everyday life. Ethnographic studies show that depending on particular cultural beliefs of a society, caregivers can 'cultivate', 'accept', or 'curtail' play (Gaskins *et al.*, 2007).

The cultural organisation of children's social worlds also determines whom they play with. Playing with parents, siblings, same-aged peers, or alone provides very different opportunities for children to control the play and engage in social exchanges. Playing at home under adult supervision, outside in an unsupervised group, or in an institutional setting also leads to different experiences (Lancy, 1996). And play may become a more important resource for children's emotional regulation when children both play a lot and are under higher levels of stress (Gaskins and Miller, 2009).

Recognising these cultural differences helps us to understand the potential impacts of play on children's development. This issue cannot be adequately addressed when play is conceptualised as simply a universal behaviour for all children. Recognising its cultural foundations is central to understanding the complexity of children's play, its potential for supporting their well-being and circumstances where opportunities to play are encouraged or constrained (Göncü, 1998).

Suzanne Gaskins, Professor Emerita, North East Illinois University, USA

- *Play is a universal activity of children, but it takes different forms, and assumes different kinds of importance, in the diverse contexts of childhood.*

- *Adults' beliefs about children's play are closely associated with the family's economic circumstances and way of life.*

Example: Play in a Yucatec village

In this description of daily life in a Mayan village, 18-month-old Mari 'plays' by helping with, or imitating, the work of her mother and sisters. Her family are too busy to play with her, and she has no special playthings, but her activity is playful – as well as potentially useful.

> It is midmorning on a weekday, and Mari is walking around in the yard of the compound looking for something to do. Everyone in her family is busy working. Her two oldest sisters (ages 17 and 19) are washing clothes in cement washing tubs, which are placed in the yard under trees several meters from the house.

> Mari goes into the back house and walks over to her sister near the fire. The sister tells her to shoo the chickens out of the house and to give them some corn outside. Mari runs around the house, chasing the chickens out through the back door of the house into the yard, laughing as she does it. The sister calls to her to remind her to feed the chickens, and Mari comes back into the house. Her sister fills a gourd with dried corn from a basket, and Mari takes it outside and sprinkles it on the ground not far from the back door. The chickens quickly gather to eat the corn, and Mari watches them as they eat.

> Near where she is standing, her mother is washing the furniture. Mari turns to watch her mother and then goes over to her. She pulls a leaf from a nearby bush, dips it in the bucket of water her mother is using, and begins to scrub a stool with it. (Her mother is using a leaf as well to scrub with, but it is a special leaf with an abrasive surface.) Her mother laughs and calls to the two oldest daughters to take a look at Mari washing the furniture. Mari doesn't look up from her work, but continues to scrub diligently, pouring water over the stool from time to time using a gourd. Eventually, she turns the ground to mud, and her mother takes the leaf and gourd away from her, picks Mari up and sets her down away from the mud.

> *(adapted from Gaskins, 1999, pp. 31–2)*

- *In traditional agrarian societies, small children observe and imitate the activities of their parents and siblings.*

- *Children's playful activity is not distinct from the 'work' they are attempting to undertake.*

- *In many situations, older members of the family and community support and encourage the efforts of young children.*

Play and the nursery tradition

The belief that play should be the major activity for young children gradually took hold in European societies alongside industrialisation and the introduction of mass schooling. Children's lives were becoming more separated from adult workplaces and enlightened thinkers such as Pestalozzi (1746–1827) and Froebel (1782–1852) designed environments especially for young children, which became the forerunners of contemporary nursery schools (Nutbrown *et al.*, 2008). They advocated a 'natural' regime which included playing with simple objects and working at simple tasks: exploring balls and blocks, learning songs and rhymes, and digging the garden (Manning, 2005).

Froebel's *Kindergarten*, or 'Children's garden', was the starting point for many 19th- and early 20th-century nursery pioneers, including Elizabeth Peabody in the USA, Maria Montessori in Italy, and Susan Isaacs in England. Nursery 'play' takes many forms but builds on the idea that young children's learning needs to be 'hands-on', enjoyable and self-directed: building with blocks, exploring sand and water, playing 'pretend', listening to stories, singing and dancing. Susan Isaacs' (1930) account of everyday life in her Malting House School captures the way children playfully explore important concepts as they talk with their teacher about a dead rabbit:.

> 14.7.25. The rabbit had died in the night. Dan found it and said, 'It's dead – its tummy does not move up and down now.' Paul said, 'My daddy says that if we put it into water, it will get alive again.' Mrs. I. said, 'Shall we do so and see?' They put it into a bath of water. Some of them said, 'It *is* alive.' Duncan said, 'If it floats, it's dead, and if it sinks, it's alive.' … They then suggested that they should bury the rabbit, and all helped to dig a hole and bury it.

During the later years of the 20th century the nursery tradition became more diverse, with numerous innovatory programmes claiming some role for play in young children's development (Miller *et al.*, 2003). Many national curricula also advocate that preschool children should learn through exploring and discovering the world through self-chosen activities which stimulate their interest and curiosity (OECD, 2004).

Liz Brooker, Reader in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *The tradition of creating specialised settings for children in kindergartens, nurseries and preschools began in Europe and intensified with industrialisation, urbanisation and the growth of school systems.*

- *Imaginative play and play with objects were advocated by many early childhood pioneers within their nursery environments.*

- *Many contemporary early childhood education policies continue to advocate play as the major way that young children learn and develop.*

How do children view play?

Brendan has some clear views about play:

> Play is having fun. Not doing school work. When you're having fun, you're sort of doing it the way you want to do it yourself … play is fun and when no one makes you do it. You can do it alone, but sometimes with friends. You don't always need your imagination for play, but it's not play if you get told what to do, only if it's what you want to do.

(Harrison, 1993, cited in Dockett and Fleer, 1999, p. 20)

Brendan is 8 years old and growing up in Sydney, Australia, but his views are consistent with those of other children (Dockett and Perry, 2007) who describe play as a time when they:

- have fun
- spend time with their friends
- use their imaginations and pretend
- choose what they do, how they do it and with whom they do it, and
- decide whether to finish something, or leave it.

Children throughout the world discuss the differences they expect when they start school, especially that school is about work and not play. While they say that they sometimes play in their classrooms, school is usually associated with work and learning. One child who had just started school in a rural town in Australia explained how play and learning are separated:

> At big school you play and learn. You line up when you go into the class. When the bell rings again you go inside to see the teacher … then you learn and after you learn you play again.

(Perry and Dockett, 2008)

Thinking about starting school, a preschool child in the same study commented:

> I'm excited because I like the school I'm going to. I love doing reading and it will be fun. You'll be able to play just a little bit. […]

(Perry and Dockett, 2008)

While there is great variation in the ways children like to play, children consistently regard play as a chance to spend time with friends (Rogers and Evans, 2006). They do not expect teachers or other adults to play and are sometimes surprised if adults do join their play (Howard *et al.*, 2006).

Sue Dockett, Professor of Early Childhood, Charles Sturt University, Albury, Australia

- *Children understand play as activities that they have chosen themselves and that are entirely within their control.*
- *Being with friends is an important part of children's pleasure in play.*
- *Preschool children already understand that their play will be limited when formal schooling begins.*

POLICY QUESTIONS

- How can the full implications of respecting children's right to play become more widely understood?

- What is an appropriate balance between proactive planning for children's play and respecting children's autonomy to play without interference?

- How can the necessary 'conditions' for play be made more widely available to children through effective national policies, child-friendly urban planning, school and playground design etc.?

- What should be the role of adults in supporting, partnering or regulating young children's play activities in different contexts?

- How far are play theories and educational practices that originate in relatively affluent Western contexts applicable in diverse, low-resource contexts?

- How can an awareness of cultural diversity in play be used to inform play provision in early childhood education and care settings?

- What can be learned from young children themselves about the importance and meaning they attach to their play, and how can this inform policies and practices?

II. Why does play matter?

Play makes a significant contribution to all aspects of children's development, and many early skills and competencies can be acquired through play.

Babies learn about themselves and about the world they live in through playful interactions with their early caregivers.

Young children develop physical and social skills through inventing and sharing games with peers and siblings.

Pretend play is a key context for fostering skills of perspective taking, role rehearsal, self-regulation, turn taking, joint planning and negotiation.

Active play, particularly with adult support and guidance, introduces children to ideas about language and literacy, mathematics and the physical world, as well as helping them to develop thinking skills.

The role of play in development

While young children may play purely for pleasure, research in the last half-century has focused on the ways that play contributes to their development (Bruner *et al.*, 1976; Göncü and Gaskins, 2007). As a result, both free play in family settings and planned play in preschools have been encouraged by parents and educators keen to promote all aspects of children's development: their physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development. Every type of play, from infant peekaboo and catching games to older children's sports and board games, can be seen to contribute to the growing child's skills and competencies.

Psychologists and educators have also been eager to explain exactly how children's play contributes to their development (Wood, 2010). During much of the 20th century, Jean Piaget's theories dominated Western child development research. Piaget recognised the importance of play for young children, but understood its function mainly as an opportunity for the child to practise newly acquired skills and concepts (Piaget, 1951). In recent decades the theories of Lev Vygotsky (1967, 1978) have become much more influential. Vygotsky viewed play as having a key role in children's learning, arguing that play is a social and cultural activity, embedded in 'the social situation of development … the path along which the social becomes the individual' (Vygotsky, 1998: 198). He described children as learning, first *interpersonally*, in relation with the minds of others, and then *intrapersonally*, within the individual child's own mind. In consequence, mental development is seen as a process in which children first borrow the ideas and language of others while playing, and then transform them into mental structures which they can use and apply independently. For Vygotsky (1967), all play, at any age, is an 'imaginary situation' which allows the player to think beyond her or his everyday constraints.

Though children will play spontaneously and without adult support, Vygotsky and others have argued that adults or 'more experienced others', such as older children, are required to help them to transform the 'common-sense knowledge' gained from interactions with objects and people into 'scientific knowledge', a more accurate and fine-tuned understanding of the world (Fleer, 2010).

Liz Brooker, Reader in Early Childhood, Institute of Education, University of London, UK

- *Play has been shown to support many aspects of children's physical and mental development.*
- *Many contemporary theories of development through play describe children's learning as social and interactional, rather than individual.*
- *Adults and older children support young children in developing and refining their knowledge and understanding of the world.*

Playing from birth with mothers and early caregivers

From soon after birth, babies are close observers of their parents or other caregivers. They begin to participate in shared imitative games, which often involve imitating an adult's facial expressions, movements and vocal sounds. The adult–baby dialogue of imitation reveals the infant's innate ability to 'regulate the interplay of intentions … acknowledging, asking, inviting, testing and so on' (Trevarthen, 2005: 95). These playful exchanges, in which the infant actively participates in a familiar and meaningful social world, support the baby's developing sense of themselves as a separate person and a growing awareness of others as being 'like me', as well as supporting their self-confidence to engage with others (Thompson, 2008: 8).

Research demonstrates the important role for imitation. Babies show increased interest (more looking and smiling) when an adult imitates their play actions or plays with the same toy, and less interest when the adult plays with a different toy or makes different actions (Hauf *et al.*, 2007). This research suggests that the infant becomes sensitive to 'the intentions of an adult imitating them' and begins to see the adult 'as potential partner in playful social exchanges where roles can be interchanged and mutual impersonation can take place' (Agnetta and Rochat, 2004: 33).

When a toy or object is incorporated into adult–child play, the playful exchange becomes more complex, involving the baby, the caregiver and an object. The infant actively coordinates attention to both the object and the (play) partner at the same time (Bigelow *et al.*, 2004: 518). Research shows that 1 year olds' play is more advanced when mothers engage in joint attention and 'scaffold' their infant's play activities, for example by positioning objects to be within the child's grasp, showing the child how to complete an action ('modelling') as well as encouraging turn taking within their game.

Although most research is conducted in Western societies, the formative role of adult caregivers in infant play is also clearly demonstrated by international comparative research (Göncü *et al.*, 2000).

Linda Harrison, Professor of Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

- *Babies show a keen interest in their surroundings soon after birth and begin to engage in shared imitative games with parents, siblings and others.*
- *Adults typically respond to a baby's interest by imitating their facial expressions and their actions with a toy, which reinforces playful exchanges.*
- *Parents or other caregivers play a key role in 'scaffolding' early play, and encouraging turn taking.*
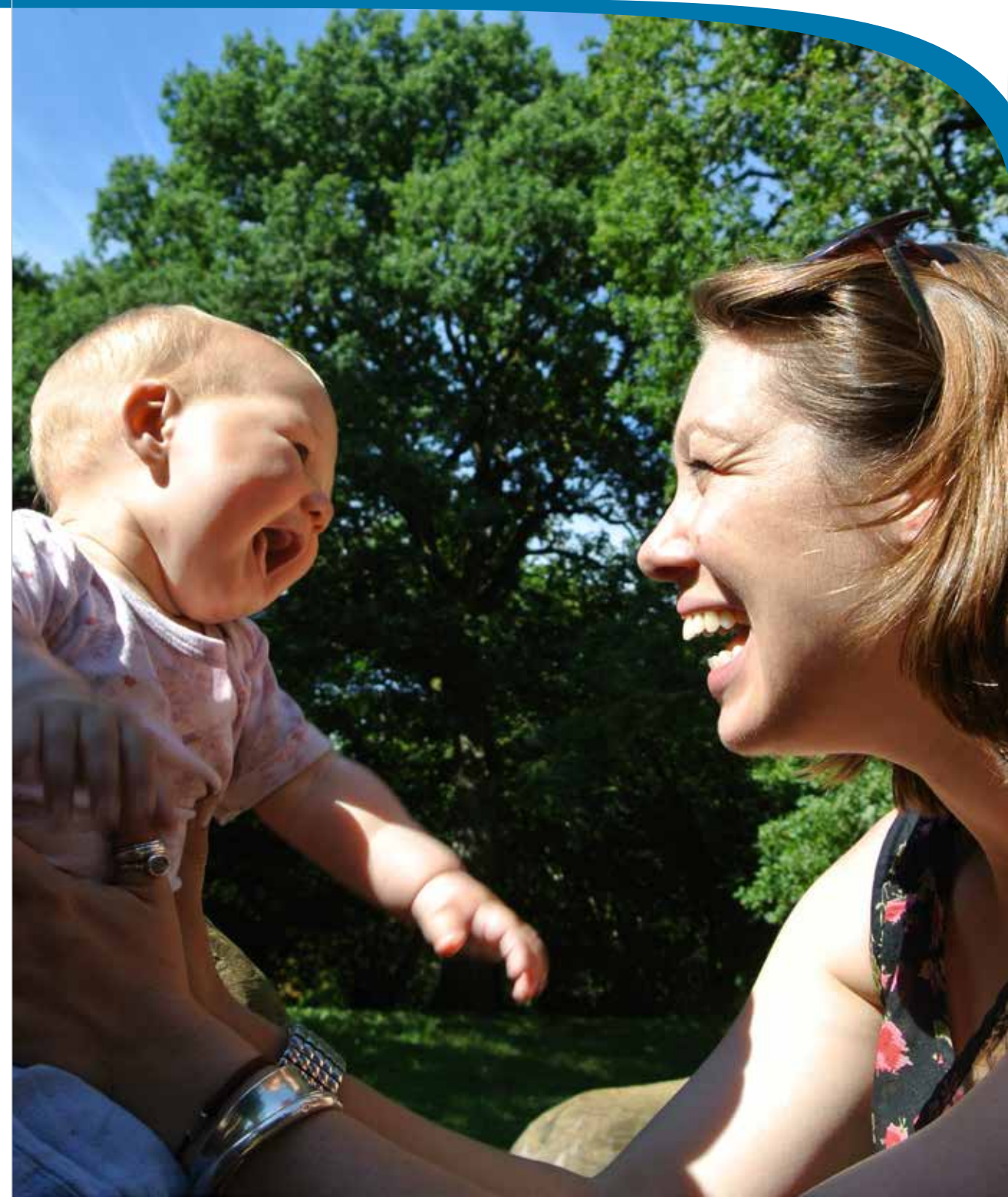
Playing with peers and siblings

Already in the first months of life, babies reach out to other babies and young children as play partners through 'looks, scowls, smiles, complaints, coos, squeals and laughter' (Trevarthen, 2011: 180). They often imitate and playfully tease others and enjoy the fun and humour involved in these mutual exchanges. Their play has been described as 'responsive companionship' (Trevarthen, 2012: 176).

Research demonstrates young babies' ability to initiate a playful exchange with their peers. When three 8–12 month olds in their strollers were left together in a group without an adult present, the infants spontaneously began to reach out to each other with their feet to begin a game of 'footsie' (Selby and Bradley, 2003).

As children become more mobile during their second year of life, their play with peers may become noticeably more physical and involve 'running, jumping, trampling, twisting, bouncing, romping and shouting, falling ostentatiously, laughing ostentatiously' (Løkken, 2000: 531). It can also involve many affectionate gestures such as gently patting and caressing each other. Løkken describes toddlers' playful 'social style' as a kind of physical and emotional fusion. Toddlers delight in each other's presence and in the play opportunities in familiar, everyday objects. This gives toddlers' play a distinctively joyful quality. By around 3–4 years old, young children can take great pleasure in playfully and intentionally flouting 'rules', routines and the expectations of others. They begin to demonstrate quite sophisticated non-verbal social skills in organising themselves into a group to pursue their shared interests, while resolving conflicts that can arise during play.

Through play encounters with peers and siblings, children develop interpersonal understandings and friendships (Dunn, 2004). But not all play is positive. Young children's play can reinforce social and cultural divides and power inequalities, for example through teasing, bullying, unkindness and isolating games. Consequently, some children can be routinely excluded by others because of their gender, social class, ethnicity, ability/disability or other kind of difference (Grieshaber and McArdle, 2010). With support from adults who demonstrate inclusive values, young children are able to learn about playing fairly and how they can build relationships and friendships within diverse groups of children.

Jennifer Sumsion, Foundation Professor of Early Childhood Education, Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia

- *Even very young babies can intiate playful exchanges with other babies, which become increasingly lively and joyful.*
- *As they become more mobile, young children begin to organise sophisticated games, including negotiating activities and rules.*
- *Children can be encouraged to express inclusive values through playing fairly and with consideration for others.*

Example: Young children are eager to join in play activities

Sumsion and Goodfellow (2012) describe the strategies used by Charlie (aged 14 months) to join in the play of Bianca (also 14 months) in their shared family daycare setting, in Australia.

Charlie, sitting alone on a mat, notices that Bianca and the caregiver are playing together with a toy cash register which has colour-coded levers and plastic money designed to fit into colour-coded slots.

Charlie stands up and joins them at the table where they are sitting. He hears the caregiver talking to Bianca about the plastic money, notices a piece lying on the floor, and picks it up to bring to the cash register.

He re-positions his chair to be very close to Bianca, who is attempting to fit money into the slots. He moves the lever on the cash register up and down.

The caregiver talks to Bianca, asking her to show Charlie how to use the cash register.

Charlie turns to look at Bianca's face, and when she does not respond, he touches her arm. Bianca now looks at Charlie and makes eye contact.

Charlie offers Bianca the money he is holding; Bianca looks at the money and then takes it, while Charlie watches.

Charlie continues to watch as Bianca tries to fit the money into the cash register by placing it on a button.

(adapted from Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2012)

This short extract illustrates the ways that a young child observes and listens to the others, and takes his own initiative, in an attempt to join a game and make contact with a potential playmate. The authors describe such learning activity as 'looking and listening-in'. Children's early play and friendships are made up of many such initiatives and learning moments.

- *Early peer relationships often centre on objects that one child has, and another child is interested in.*
- *Children as young as 1 year old initiate joint activities with other children.*
- *Recent research studies have paid close attention to the clues which pre-verbal children can give about their intentions, including their wish to establish relationships with others.*

Pretend play supports development

Early childhood is the 'high season' of imaginative play – a period in which make-believe flourishes, and simple games evolve into elaborate construction of plots and negotiation of 'pretend' roles (Singer and Singer, 1990). A large body of research has suggested that pretend play is a key context and source of intellectual, social and emotional development (Smilansky, 1968; Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2009).

Pretend play requires children to concentrate and sustain their attention as they create, and elaborate on, imaginative themes. Pretend games strengthen children's memory for both narrative information (such as the characters and events played out in a story) and list-like information (such as items on a grocery list) (Silvern *et al.*, 1986; Newman, 1990). Pretend play facilitates all aspects of language development, as children both enact and negotiate their roles and actions through speech (Meyers and Berk, in press). Moreover, when imaginative play is enriched with literacy and math materials, and when adults guide and prompt children's engagement with those materials, preschoolers' emergent literacy and maths knowledge advance (Zigler and Bishop-Josef, 2004).

Pretend play provides a context for children to develop self-regulation and socially responsible behaviour (Berk *et al.*, 2006; Meyers and Berk, in press). As children use substitute objects in imaginary situations (for example, a broom becomes a horse), they become adept at distinguishing symbols from real-life objects. Consequently, they become better able to use words, gestures, and other symbols as tools for controlling reality, including managing their own behaviour. Other self-regulating functions fostered through play include working through ideas, surmounting obstacles, and managing intense emotion. Play scenarios require children to devise and follow social rules. In enacting 'bedtime', 'school', or 'a rocket launch', children learn to overcome their immediate impulses and increasingly understand and commit to the rules of social life (Elias and Berk, 2002).

Research findings also link pretend play to a range of social competencies. Much joint pretence is rich in talk about desires, feelings and beliefs, thereby increasing children's awareness of and encouraging them to discuss differing perspectives. Pretend play, then, is a rich context for learning to resolve differences of opinion, interact cooperatively and solve social problems (Taylor *et al.*, 2004; Kavanaugh, 2006).

Adena Meyers, Professor of Psychology, and **Laura Berk**, Distinguished Professor of Psychology, Illinois State University, USA

- *Pretend play serves important functions in intellectual, social and emotional development.*
- *Children's language and story-telling skills are developed as they enact (and negotiate) complex roles and events.*
- *Children's capacities for self-regulation, social understanding, joint planning and effective collaboration are practised through pretend play.*

Play and cognitive development

A long-standing challenge has been identifying more precisely what it is that children learn through their play, and how that learning occurs. According to Vygotsky (1967), play serves a key function in preparing children for the advanced psychological processes that they will encounter in formal schooling. Subsequent research demonstrates ways that the freedom to explore, discover and be inventive prepares children for intellectual enquiry. For example, by using blocks and other materials to make and build things, children encounter concepts of shape, space, pattern and number (Aubrey *et al.*, 2003). Less clear is how children progress in their thinking from the emergent theories that are evident in play activities, to the abstract knowledge and symbolic reasoning valued in modern societies.

Edwards *et al.* (2010) describe how children, with the careful support and scaffolding of adults, can move through play from naive conceptions of the world towards more scientific concepts. In their study, children in an Australian kindergarten were invited by their teacher to 'make dirty water clean' by playing with different filtering materials such as sand, grit and cotton wool. The children played freely at first, and then, following some suggestions from an adult, were able to discover for themselves how to remove impurities from water. This useful scientific experience excited the children's curiosity and enthusiasm as they watched the water emerge from their funnels:

> *Thomas*: Oh look, mine is coming out! Look, boys!
>
> *Toby*: Is it cleaner?
>
> *Thomas*: Yep … It is turning the cotton wool into dirty wool. Yeah, it is getting all the dirty water out!
>
> *Clayton*: Clean! Mine is clean.

In an example of this kind, the children's play has revealed their thinking to an observant adult. Following this, adult guidance in the play has supported them in engaging with the forms of knowledge which are valued in the curriculum. Edwards and colleagues (2010) demonstrate how adult support for play allows children to develop new conceptual networks.

During early childhood, most children's discoveries about the world may be made through hands-on exploration. As children move into educational settings, practitioners resource play in intentional ways to ensure that they experience academic concepts, and that these concepts are consolidated.

Elizabeth Wood, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, UK

- *Active play with natural and manufactured materials introduces children to key concepts of shape, size, pattern and number.*

- *With the support of adults, children gradually move from their own working theories of the world to a more scientific or academic understanding.*

- *Through play children also learn higher-order skills needed for creative thinking, planning and problem solving.*

POLICY QUESTIONS

◆ What steps are required to embed understanding about the importance of play in national curriculum guidelines, design for early childhood centres and professional training for all who work with young children?

◆ How can mothers and other early caregivers be encouraged to understand their crucial role in supporting play from the earliest months, including through parenting courses and more informal sources of support?

◆ How can the social dimensions of learning through play be protected and fostered in school contexts that increasingly emphasise individual learning achievement?

◆ Is there a risk that the importance of play will be underestimated because it is by definition most often 'playful', 'imaginative' and 'fun'?

◆ What further research is needed to fully understand the role of play in children's cognitive, social and emotional development, including the function of early years play as a foundation for later abstract scientific reasoning?

Boys and electronics
BvLF M225-006

III.

Threats to play, opportunities to play

Modern societies provide new opportunities for children to exercise their right to play, but these rights are often accompanied by new constraints.

The global expansion of primary schooling requires many young children to spend long hours in rote learning in formal classrooms, while also attending to domestic and other chores in their free time.

Beliefs about the value of play as a medium for school learning can produce a 'play pedagogy' which ignores children's interests and intentions in favour of promoting adult goals.

The benefits of playing outdoors, or 'playing in nature' need to be safeguarded through urban planning and support for children in adverse circumstances.

The rise of commercial toy industries is widely viewed as a threat to children's freedom to play creatively, but can also create new opportunities for children's imagination.

New technologies are increasingly available to children and create further opportunities for playful engagement, if certain conditions are met.

Challenges to realising children's right to play

Children all over the world face multiple challenges in realising their right to play. Too often, the centrality of play in children's lives is misunderstood and ignored. Play is perceived as 'deficit' time, better filled by adult-directed, 'purposeful' activities. Growing pressure on children to achieve in school is reducing the perceived legitimacy of 'playfulness'. Too often, the curriculum and daily schedule fail to recognise children's need for play and recreation. At worst, early childhood education becomes focused on academic targets and formal learning at the expense of participation in play and broader development outcomes, while extracurricular tuition and homework often intrude into children's free time, leaving little time for child-initiated activity (Katz, 2012a).

For many children, living environments pose significant hazards – uncontrolled traffic, pollution, lack of local safe play areas and green spaces, and also high levels of crime and violence (Bartlett *et al.*, 1999; Brooker and Woodhead, 2012). Fears over these risks are leading, in some parts of the world, to higher levels of surveillance of children, with consequent constraints on their freedom to explore and to learn to balance risk and safety. With the rapid expansion of electronic media, and in response to parental concerns over safety in the outside world, children are spending more time playing online games, social networking, watching films and television, or listening to music. While these new platforms offer huge opportunities for children, there are, nevertheless, growing concerns about the risks to children's health and well-being.

However, the challenges are not the same for all children. Differential beliefs about what is appropriate for girls and boys, the constraints of poverty and low resources, as well as the pressures of living in conflict zones, for example, introduce additional barriers to play. Meanwhile, the opportunities for children with disabilities to engage with other children tend to be very limited – institutional care, exclusion from school and rejection by their peers serve to isolate them with little scope for social engagement and play.

In order for children to experience the freedom to play, the adult world around them must remove the physical, social, economic and cultural barriers that currently impede its realisation for every child.

Gerison Lansdown, Independent Consultant, London, UK

- *Too often, the significance of play in children's lives is denied, misunderstood or ignored.*
- *Increasing pressure for early academic achievement marginalises play as less important than 'serious' learning.*
- *Social change, urbanisation and new technologies offer challenges to play, as well as opportunities, if these are properly managed.*

How universal schooling affects opportunities for play

The lives of millions of young children have been transformed through the impact of global policies, notably the Millennium Development Goals, the Dakar Goals of Education for All, campaigns of the International Labour Organization to eliminate child labour, as well as the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. While progressive in many ways, new challenges are emerging for children's rights to play, rest and leisure, in two respects.

While preschool and primary enrolments have increased dramatically (UNESCO, 2006), far too many young children are being taught in classrooms that are overcrowded and with few resources, and taught by formal 'rote learning' methods, with little opportunity for more activity and play-based learning (Woodhead *et al.*, 2009; Orkin *et al.*, 2012). For example, poor parents in India who recognise the potential of schooling increasingly enrol their young children in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classes in private schools, where they begin formal 3 Rs teaching by the age of 4 years old, (Streuli *et al.*, 2011). For these children, play is relegated to the margins of the day.

Second, new opportunities for young children to attend school often sit alongside traditional expectations that they should also contribute to household chores and farming, especially in rural areas. As part of her research in rural Sudan, Katz (2012b) describes the creative ways that children integrate play into their work. But as a rule, combining school with work leaves children little time for play, rest and leisure. For example, research with 2000 children in Ethiopia reported that over 90 per cent of the sample already undertook some kind of paid or unpaid work, by the age of 8 years old, including household chores, caring for others, and farming. Expectations are different for girls and boys. One 12 year old described how he went to the morning school shift, returning at noon. Then in the afternoon he was responsible for taking the family's livestock to find grazing, including a cow, two horses, two donkeys, and eight sheep (Morrow *et al.*, in press). Initiating young children into work is still crucial for many poor families.

Martin Woodhead, Professor of Childhood Studies, The Open University, UK

- *While educational opportunities for young children have improved throughout the world, quality is highly variable, and children may have little opportunity for play-based learning.*
- *In the poorest communities young children may be expected to do household chores and farm as well as attend school, which restricts their opportunities for rest, leisure and play.*

The value of play-based teaching

While play is undervalued in some societies, in others it may be highly valued as the means to achieving an adult-directed curriculum. The educational potential of play is now widely accepted, although the evidence that play is the *best* medium for early teaching and learning is still contested. In consequence, the concept of 'play as pedagogy' offers both potential threats and opportunities (Broadhead *et al.*, 2010).

Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes how young children benefit from adult 'scaffolding' of their imagination, pretence and subject knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978). The concepts of ZPD and scaffolding have been widely employed in studies of the role of play in cognitive development, and are the starting point for curriculum initiatives such as the Tools of the Mind programme (Bodrova and Leong, 2007). But the risk in 'educational play' is that adults may begin to dominate play, or disguise didactic teaching as support for play. When this happens, the benefits of play may be lost, as 'educational play' will have become another form of instruction.

Rogers (2010) describes an episode in an English reception class in which a teacher has set up a 'travel shop' as a play opportunity for children, but with a clear pedagogical intention: children who are invited to 'play' at buying and selling holidays are actually being required to 'work' at mathematical and geographical concepts.

> Two children are directed to 'work' in the shop and two are to be the customers. As the children make their way to the role play area, it is clear that none is willing to play the customer.
>
> *Kim* (to the teacher): 'Me and Chloe don't want to be in the travel shop'.
>
> The teacher says they have to stay there. Chloe and Kim stand in the shop but refuse to join in the play …
>
> Lauren comes into the shop and Chloe says, 'We don't want to be here, it's boring.'
>
> *Lauren*: 'Well, come out then'.
>
> *Chloe*: 'We're not allowed'.
>
> *(adapted from Rogers, 2010, pp. 159–60)*

In short, maintaining play and playful approaches in the classroom requires considerable pedagogical knowledge and skills to integrate adults' and children's goals.

Elizabeth Wood, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, UK

- *The recognition that children learn through play has encouraged the development of play-based approaches to the curriculum.*

- *Children's freedom to play is threatened when educators attempt to disguise 'teaching' as 'play'.*

- *Adult-initiated, planned and structured play activities, though supporting learning, may not be experienced as playful by children.*

Playing in nature

The virtues of encouraging children to play in nature have a long history in Western thinking (Rousseau, 1762). Play in natural environments is viewed as potentially more complex, imaginative, self-determined and 'playful', compared to play in indoor environments, notably in schools and preschools, where play is often constrained by adults' agendas. The idea of playing in nature is often romanticised as being about exploring a forest or woodland, a seashore or an area of 'wilderness'. But contact with nature is possible even for children with few opportunities to visit coast or countryside. Nearby nature, in the marginal green areas of housing estates, in city gardens, in a single tree with low-lying branches or a sand or mud and water area in preschool, can equally respond to young children's curiosity, exploratory urges and playfulness.

Contemporary childhoods are faced with a range of threats to such play. These include increased urbanisation; risk-averse parenting; attractive indoor play technologies; commercialisation of children's play; as well as the pressures of educational attainment at ever-younger ages. Young children growing up in poverty in high-rise apartments or other dense residential complexes, in informal urban settlements on the margins of cities or in refugee camps, have particular difficulties in accessing play opportunities in nature (Brooker and Woodhead, 2012).

Early childhood education and care settings can function both as a 'nature refuge' and a provider of play in and with nature. For some children, attending a kindergarten or preschool may be the only opportunity for regular and sustained outdoor play in a safe environment. Access to nature can reduce the impact of abuse and neglect, excessive noise, pollution and traffic in young children's lives (Louv, 2012, online).

The importance attached to play in nature within early childhood pedagogy is shaped by multiple factors, and varies between different contexts. The concept of 'affordances' – what an environment offers children, either for good or ill (Gibson, 1979) – has proved to be a powerful tool in understanding children's play experiences outdoors, and in ensuring that all children have opportunities to benefit from outdoor play in nature (Kernan, in press).

Margaret Kernan, Senior Programme Manager, International Child Development Initiatives, Leiden, Netherlands

- *Belief in the power of playing in nature has been strongly influential on theories and practices in early childhood education.*
- *Even for city children, parks and marginal green areas can foster curiosity and exploration.*
- *Early childhood settings can serve as a 'nature refuge' for young children.*

Commercialisation of play and the toy industry

The rise of the modern toy industry in the last 150 years has increased resources for play but is not always seen as beneficial for children's play. According to some observers, the commercialised world of toys, games and playthings constitutes a 'threat' to children's 'natural' play. This view is based on a deeply held belief in the prior existence of a pure and innocent childhood – one untouched by the ravages of a modern commercial–industrial order and not yet subject to the equally polluting onset of adulthood. Buttressed by an emerging middle class and a growing commercial infrastructure of toys and games, the view that the 'right' kind of play is essential to producing healthy children paradoxically leads to a situation where many forms of play activity are seen as undermining 'appropriate' childhoods.

It is evident that children's play cannot be understood as existing completely outside of commercial contexts and media. Nor is it useful to theorise children simply as vulnerable innocents. Research on children's play in this vein seeks to recognise how children use play – including the toys, games and characters that act as props for play – in the service of building and testing their relationships with each other, and with adults.

Adults may be alarmed by the media characters, dolls and forms of entertainment that find a place in children's play, and may question whether commercial and consumer cultures are having an adverse effect on the quality of play. Yet research presents a different picture, highlighting the ways children transform the meanings of commercial toys to craft their own interpretations of key concerns in their lives. Bratz and Barbie dolls may become ways to handle issues of ethnicity and/or gender in ways not anticipated by manufacturers (Hains, 2012; Chin, 1999). Researchers not only find that children transform narratives of superheroes and TV characters to address issues that confront them in their own lives, but also advocate using these media texts to promote various kinds of literacies (Dyson, 1997; Marsh, 2000; Wohlwend, 2011). In short, when the ways that children make use of commercial ideas are taken into account, their play is cast in a new and more positive light.

Daniel Thomas Cook, Professor of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University, USA

- *Strongly held beliefs about play and early childhood often lead to modern commercial and media influences being viewed as harmful.*
- *Research looking closely at how children incorporate these influences into their play tells a more positive story.*
- *Children find creative ways to use toys and media to address the issues that concern them.*

Technology in children's play

Technological changes have affected all areas of social, economic, and cultural lives across the globe, including young children's play. Even in the poorest regions, many children have access to games on mobile phones, which have leapfrogged traditional technologies to reach a global audience. In more affluent societies, young children have access to a wide range of technologies, including television, computers, mobile phones, console games and music players. Toy producers increasingly incorporate new technologies into more traditional playthings, such as stuffed toys, dolls and cars. There have been concerns that this growing relationship between technology and play is detrimental to children's creativity (see Buckingham (2000) for a review), but there is no robust research evidence for these claims.

Arguments against the use of technology in play point to children's need for concrete, first-hand playful experiences in order to promote cognitive development. Yelland (2011), however, proposes that the concept of play needs to be rethought in the digital age. There are three key ways in which technology intersects with play: its use *for* play; its incorporation *into* play; and its use to *inform* play.

With regard to the first point, the extent to which technological tools can be used to promote children's play depends very much upon their design and affordances. Relevant criteria include: transparency (the extent to which the inner workings of a device are understandable); challenge (the extent to which it opens up challenges and creative possibilities); and accessibility (the extent to which it promotes collaboration with others) (Carr, 2000). Technological toys and artefacts that embed these affordances are likely to foster rich play.

Secondly, technology can be incorporated into play, as when children use a real mobile phone to make a pretend phone call. Finally, children can draw on their experiences with technology to inform their play, such as when they replay narratives and characters from television, film and computer games in socio-dramatic play (Willet *et al.*, 2013). There is no doubt that technology has enormous potential to foster productive play; whether or not it does so depends both on the nature of the technology and the context in which it is used.

Jackie Marsh, Professor of Education, University of Sheffield, UK

- *Globally, technology and play are becoming increasingly interrelated in the 21st century, although the extent to which technology informs play differs according to access.*

- *The quality of play will differ according to the affordances of technological tools used and the contexts in which they are deployed.*

- *Future developments are likely to blur the boundary between 'online' and 'offline' as children play with physical resources that relate to on-screen spaces and images.*

POLICY QUESTIONS

◆ What are the different interventions required to ensure the right to play for all children (girls and boys, children with disabilities, children in institutions, minority groups, etc.) within an overarching commitment to equal rights for all?

◆ What are the risks to children's well-being in situations where they have little space for rest, leisure and play, due to the pressures on their time from school attendance as well as after-school coaching, or their need to combine school with agricultural work or other economic activity and domestic chores?

◆ How can the potential of 'play as pedagogy' be applied within classrooms in ways that maintain a balance between children's freely chosen activities and educators' wish to plan and structure play towards specific goals?

◆ How far and in what ways can early childhood policies and services contribute to extending opportunities for children's play in natural, outdoor environments?

◆ How far is the growth of the commercial toy industry a threat to children's play and how far an opportunity for children to incorporate new possibilities into their play?

◆ What steps are required to protect children from potentially detrimental effects of modern technologies while encouraging the potential for extending their imagination and skills?

References

Agnetta, B. and Rochat, P. (2004) 'Imitative games by 9-, 14-, and 18-month-old infants', *Infancy*, vol. 6, pp. 1–36.

Ailwood, J. (2011) 'It's about power: researching play, pedagogy and participation in the early years of school' in Rogers, S. (ed.), *Rethinking Play and Pedagogy*, London, Routledge.

Aubrey, C., Bottle, G. and Godfrey, R.C. (2003) 'Early mathematics in the home and out-of-home contexts', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 91–103.

Bartlett, S., Hart, R., Satterthwaite, D., de la Barra, X. and Missair, A. (1999) *Cities for Children: Children's rights, poverty and urban management*, London, Routledge.

Berk, L., Mann, T. and Ogan, A. (2006) 'Make believe play: wellspring for development of self-regulation' in Singer, D., Hirsch-Pasek. K. and Golinkoff, R. (eds), *Play = Learning*, New York, NY, Oxford University Press.

Bigelow, A.E., MacLean, K. and Proctor, J. (2004) 'The role of joint attention in the development of infants' play with objects', *Developmental Science*, vol. 7, pp. 518–26.

Bodrova, E. and Leong, D. (2007) *Tools of the Mind: The Vygotskian approach to early childhood education (2nd edn)*, Columbus OH, Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Broadhead, P., Howard, J. and Wood, E. (2010) (eds) *Play and Learning in the Early Years: From Research to Practice*, London, Sage.

Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. (2012) *Healthy Environments, Early Childhood in Focus 8*, Milton Keynes, Open University.

Bruner, J., Jolly, A. and Sylva, K. (eds) (1976) *Play: Its role in development and evolution*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.

Buckingham, D. (2000). *After the Death of Childhood: Growing up in the age of electronic media*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

Burman, E. (2008) *Deconstructing Developmental Psychology*, Hove, Routledge.

Carr, M. (2000) 'Technological affordances, social practice and learning narratives in an early childhood setting', *International Journal of Technology and Design Education*, vol. 10, pp. 61–79.

Chin, E. (1999) 'Ethnically correct dolls: toying with the race industry', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 101, no. 2, pp. 305–21.

Dockett, S. and Fleer, M. (1999) *Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood: Bending the rules*, Sydney, Harcourt Brace.

Dockett, S. and Perry, P. (2007) *Starting School: Perceptions, expectations and experiences*, Sydney, UNSW Press.

Dunn, J. (2004) *Children's Friendships: The beginning of intimacy*, Chichester, Wiley.

Dyson, A.H. (1997) *Writing Superheroes: Contemporary childhood, popular culture, and classroom literacy*, New York, NY, Teacher's College.

Edwards, S., Cutter-Mackenzie, A. and Hunt, E. (2010) 'Framing play for learning: professional reflections on the role of open-ended play in early childhood education', in Brooker, L. and Edwards, S. (eds), *Engaging Play*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Elias, C.L. and Berk, L.E. (2002) 'Self-regulation in young children: is there a role for sociodramatic play?', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol. 17, pp. 1–17.

Fleer, M. (2010) *Early Learning and Development: Cultural-historical concepts in play*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Gaskins, S. (1999) 'Children's daily lives in a Mayan village: a case study of culturally constructed roles and activities' in Göncü, A. (ed.), *Children's Engagement in the World*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Gaskins, S. (in press) 'Children's play as cultural activity' in Brooker, L., Edwards, S. and Blaise, M. (eds), *Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*, London, Sage.

Gaskins, S., Haight, W. and Lancy, D.F. (2007) 'The cultural construction of play' in Göncü, A. and Gaskins, S. (eds), *Play and Development: Evolutionary, sociocultural and functional perspectives*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Gaskins, S. and Miller, P.J. (2009) 'The cultural roles of emotions in pretend play' in Clark, C.D. (ed.), *Transactions at Play*, Lanham, MD, University Press.

Gibson, J. (1979) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston, Houghton-Mifflin.

Göncü, A. (1998) 'Development of intersubjectivity in social pretend play' in Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. and Littleton, K. (eds), *Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood*, London, Routledge/Open University.

Göncü, A. and Gaskins, S. (eds) (2007) *Play and Development: Evolutionary, sociocultural and functional perspectives*, Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Göncü, A., Mistry, J. and Mosier, C. (2000) 'Cultural variations in the play of toddlers', *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, vol. 24, pp. 321–9.

Grieshaber, S. and McArdle, F. (2010) *The Trouble with Play*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Hains, R.C. (2012) 'An afternoon of productive play with problematic dolls: the importance of foregrounding children's voices in research', *Girlhood Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 121–40.

Hauf, P., Aschersleben, G. and Prinz, W. (2007) 'Baby do – baby see!: how action production influences action perception in infants', *Cognitive Development*, vol. 22, pp. 16–32.

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., Berk, L.E. and Singer, D.G. (2009) *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the evidence*. New York, NY, Oxford University Press.

Howard, J., Jenvey, V. and Hill, C. (2006) 'Children's categorization of play and learning based on social context', *Early Child Development and Care*, vol. 176, pp. 379–93.

Isaacs, S. (1930) *Intellectual Growth in Young Children*, London, Routledge.

Katz, C. (2012a) *Superman, Tiger Mother: Aspiration management and the child as waste*, podcast of talk, 25 January, Birkbeck, University of London, available at: http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/01/cindi-katz-superman-tiger-mother-aspiration-management-and-the-child-as-waste/ (Accessed August 2013).

Katz, C. (2012b) 'Work and play: economic restructuring and children's everyday learning in rural Sudan' in Spittler, G. and Bourdillon, M. (eds), *African Children at Work, Working and Learning in Growing Up for Life*, Münster, LIT Verlag.

Kavanaugh, R.D. (2006) 'Pretend play' in Spodek, B. and Saracho, O.N. (eds), *Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children* (2nd edn), Mahwah, NJ, Erlbaum.

Kernan, M. (in press) 'Opportunities and affordances in outdoor play' in Brooker, L., Edwards, S. and Blaise, M. (eds), *Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*, London, Sage.

Lancy, D.F. (1996) *Playing on the Mother Ground: Cultural routines for children's development*, New York, NY, Guilford.

Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) *Children's Right to Play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*, Working Paper 57, The Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Løkken, G. (2000) 'The playful quality of the toddling "style"', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 531–42.

Louv, R. (2012, online) 'Nature's neurons: do early experiences in the natural world help shape children's brain architecture?', Columns by Richard Louv, Children and Nature Network, available at: http://blog.childrenandnature.org/2012/07/26/natures-neurons-do-early-experiences-in-the-natural-world-shape-childrens-brain-architecture/ (Accessed August 2013).

MacNaughton, G. (2009) 'Exploring critical constructivist perspectives on children's learning' in Anning, A., Cullen, J. and Fleer, M. (eds), *Early Childhood Education*, Society, Culture, London, Sage.

Manning, J. (2005) 'Re-discovering Froebel: a call to re-examine his life and gifts', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol. 32, no. 6, pp. 371–6.

Marsh, J. (2000) 'Teletubby tales: popular culture in the early years language and literacy curriculum', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, vol. 1, no. 2, pp. 119–33.

Meyers, A.B. and Berk, L.E. (in press) 'Make-believe play and self-regulation: key ideas' in Brooker, L., Blaise, M. and Edwards, S. (eds), *Handbook of Play and Learning in Early Childhood*, London, Sage.

Miller, L., Soler, J. and Woodhead, M. (2003) 'Shaping early childhood education' in J.Maybin and M.Woodhead (eds.), *Childhoods in Context*, Childhood Vol 2, Chichester, Wiley/Open University.

Morrow, V., Tafere, Y. and Vennam, U. (in press) 'Changes in rural children's use of time: evidence from Ethiopia and Andhra Pradesh, India' in Boyden, J. and Bourdillon, M. (eds), *Growing Up in Poverty: Findings from Young Lives*, Basingstoke, Palgrave.

Newman, L.S. (1990) 'Intentional versus unintentional memory in young children: remembering versus playing', *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, vol. 50, pp. 243–58.

Nutbrown, C., Clough, P. and Selbie, P. (2008) *Early Childhood Education: History, philosophy and experience*, London, Sage.

OECD (2004) *Starting Strong: Curricula and pedagogies in early childhood education and care, Five curriculum outlines*, Paris, OECD.

Orkin, K., Abebe Yadete, W. and Woodhead, M. (2012) *Delivering Quality Early Learning in Low-resource Settings: Progress and challenges in Ethiopia*, Working Paper 59, The Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation/Young Lives.

Perry, B. and Dockett, S. (2008) *Voices of Children in Starting School*, Wollongong, Wollongong Transition to School Network; also available online at: http://www.transitiontoschool.com.au/knowledgebase.html (Accessed August 2013).

Piaget, J. (1951) *Play Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, London, Routledge.

Rogers, S. (2010) 'Powerful pedagogies and playful resistance: role play in the early childhood classroom' in Brooker, L. and Edwards, S. (eds), *Engaging Play*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.

Rogers, S. and Evans, J. (2006) 'Playing the game? Exploring role play from children's perspectives', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1, pp. 43–55.

Rubin, K., Fein, G. and Vandenberg, B. (1983) 'Play' in Hetherington, E. (ed.), *Manual of Child Psychology: Socialization, Personality and Social Development* (vol. 4), New York, NY, Wiley.

Selby, J.M. and Bradley, B.S. (2003) 'Infants in groups: a paradigm for the study of early social experience', *Human Development*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 197–221.

Silvern, S.B., Taylor, J.B., Williamson, P.A., Surbeck, E. and Kelley, M.F. (1986) 'Young children's story recall as a product of play, story familiarity, and adult intervention', *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, vol. 32, pp. 73–86.

Singer, D.G. and Singer, J.L. (1990) *The House of Make-believe*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Smilansky, S. (1968) *The Effects of Socio-dramatic Play on Disadvantaged Preschool Children*, New York, NY, Wiley.

Streuli, N., Vennam, U. and Woodhead, M. (2011) *Increasing Choice or Inequality? Pathways through early education in Andhra Pradesh, India*, Working Paper 58, The Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation/Young Lives.

Sumsion, J. and Goodfellow, J. (2012) '"Looking and listening-in": a methodological approach to generating insights into infants' experiences of early childhood education and care settings', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 313–27.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Taylor, M., Carlson, S.M., Maring, B.L., Gerw, L. and Carley, C.M. (2004) 'The characteristics and correlates of fantasy in school-age children: imaginary companions, impersonation and social understanding', *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 40, pp. 1173–87.

Thompson, R.A. (2008) 'The psychologist in the baby', *Zero to Three*, vol. 28, pp. 5–12.

Trevarthen, C. (2005) 'First things first: infants make good use of the sympathetic rhythm of imitation, without reason or language', *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*, vol. 31, pp. 91–113.

Trevarthen, C. (2011) 'What young children give to their learning, making education work to sustain a community and its culture', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2, pp. 173–93.

Trevarthen, C. (2012) 'Finding a place with meaning in a busy human world: how does the story begin, and who helps?', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal,* vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 303–12.

UNESCO (2006) *Strong Foundations: Early Childhood Care and Education*, EFA Global Monitoring Report 2007, Paris, UNESCO.

United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, UN General Assembly Document A/RES/44/2, New York, NY, United Nations.

United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child (2013) *General Comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31),* Geneva, UNCRC; also available online at: http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/comments.htm (accessed August 2013).

Vygotsky, L.S. (1967) 'Play and its role in the mental development of the child', *Soviet Psychology,* vol. 5, pp. 6–17. (Original work published 1933.)

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: The development of higher psychological processes*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1998) *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky. Volume 5: Child psychology,* New York, NY, Springer.

Willett, R., Richards, C., Marsh. J., Burn, A. and Bishop, J. (2013) *Children, Media and Playground Cultures: Ethnographic studies of school playtimes*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Wohlwend, K.E. (2011) *Playing Their Way into Literacies: Reading, writing, and belonging in the early childhood classroom*, New York, NY, Teachers' College.

Wood, E. (2010) 'Developing integrated pedagogical approaches to play and learning' in Broadhead, P., Howard, J. and Wood, E. (eds) *Play and Learning in the Early Years*, London, Sage.

Woodhead, M., Ames, P., Vennam, U., Abebe, W. and Streuli, N. (2009) *Equity and quality? Challenges for early childhood and primary education in Ethiopia, India and Peru*, The Hague, Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Yelland, N. (2011) 'Reconceptualising play and learning in the lives of young children', *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 4–12.

Photography

Front cover – Sahnaya, Syria. Nour, 6, playing with her brother Mohammad, 4, with scrap material found near the tent where they live. © Carole Al Farah/Majority World

Opposite p. 1 – UK. Boy in ball pool. © John Oates

p. 3 – Afghanistan. Two girls playfully slide down a hill in the village of Rag-e-Shad, on the outskirts of Bamyan city, Bamyan Province. © Shehzad Noorani/Majority World

p. 5 – Pécs, Hungary. Kindergarten play. © John Oates

p. 7 – Afghanistan. A young boy wheels his younger brother in a wheelbarrow. They work as porters at the main market in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, in the northern province of Balkh. © Shehzad Noorani/Majority World

p. 9 – Yucatan, Mexico. Young child with older siblings. © Suzanne Gaskins

p. 11 – UK. SureStart Centre. © John Oates

p. 13 – Bandipur, Nepal. Three children play at 'being mothers going shopping'. © Mahmud/Majority World

p. 15 – Hungary. *Biztos Kezdet* children's centre. © John Oates

p. 16 – Dhaka, Bangladesh. Infants at a daycare centre. © Doli Akter/Majority World

p. 19 – Plymouth, UK. Lark Centre. © John Oates

p. 21 – UK. Mother and 6-month-old baby girl. © Martin Woodhead

p. 23 – Bangladesh. Two children are playing in Kaligang, Gazipur. © Chandan Robert Rebeiro/Majority World

p. 25 – Bathurst, Australia. Stills from research video. © Infants' Lives in Childcare project research team, 2011

p. 27 – Mezősas, Hungary. Kindergarten. © John Oates

p. 29 – Zákány, Hungary. *Biztos Kezdet* children's centre. © John Oates

p. 31 – Amsterdam, Netherlands. *Stichting Pedagogiekontwikkeling* 0–7: Traces/*Sporen* preschool group. © Devi Roebers/Sporen

p. 32 – Young child in the street holding on to railing. © Khamidulin Sergey/Shutterstock

p. 35 – Thailand, Ko Samui. Harvesting of coconuts. Photographer: Mickael David. © Authors Image/Robert Harding

p. 37 – Andhra Pradesh, India. Nursery class at a private English medium school. © Young Lives/Sarika Gulati

p. 39 – Amsterdam, Netherlands. *Stichting Pedagogiekontwikkeling* 0–7: Traces/*Sporen* preschool group. © Devi Roebers/Sporen

p. 41 – New Hampshire, USA. Young boy playing in forest in rural Lake Ossipee. Photographer: Justin Bailie. © Aurora Photos/Robert Harding

p. 43 – Milton Keynes, UK. Toys 'R' Us. © John Oates

p. 45 – UK. 18-month-old boy explores iPad. © Martin Woodhead

p. 47 – Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. Kichangani Community Preschool. © Jim Holmes/Bernard van Leer Foundation

Back cover – Dhaka, Bangladesh. Street child playing with Styrofoam in a dumping ground beside the river Buriganga. There are almost half a million street children live in different parts of the country. © Munir uz Zaman/Majority World

This Early Childhood in Focus *summarises issues of utmost importance to early childhood educators, developmental psychologists and teachers. Discussion of children's right to play, contributions of play to children's development, and the role of play in children's schooling are a high priority at a time when play opportunities for many children are gradually taken away from them by their own governments, school districts, and economic hardship.*

Artin Göncü, Professor of Educational Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago, USA

With the support of:

Bernard
van Leer
FOUNDATION

www.bernardvanleer.org