

Play for a change

Play, policy and practice: a review of contemporary perspectives, by the University of Gloucestershire

***Play for a change*, completed in October 2007, illustrates substantial and wide-ranging evidence of the importance of play in the lives of children. Despite this, discussion of play has been consistently undervalued in public policy for children, which tends to focus on children's development into adulthood while overlooking the importance of the physical, social, cultural and emotional worlds that children both inhabit and create in their daily lives. Since the completion of this review, the Government has published *The Children's Plan* (DCSF 2007) and *Fair Play*, a draft national play strategy (DCFS 2008). These recent and much-welcomed initiatives offer the potential to redress this situation through acknowledging that play is fundamental to children's enjoyment of their everyday lives.**

This briefing gives a summary of the key findings of *Play for a change*, a review of perspectives on play, policy and practice carried out for Play England by Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell of the University of Gloucestershire. The review complements and updates the review undertaken for the Children's Play Council in 2001 (Street 2002).

The authors of *Play for a change* drew on a range of academic disciplines, especially brain sciences, sociology and geography. While recognising the foundation that developmental psychology has given to theories about children and play, the focus of this review has largely been on alternative approaches. It considers three strands:

- the policy context for supporting children's play, including an analysis of the literature on approaches to policy-making and on children and childhood
- the literature on the benefits of children's play and on children's play patterns
- provision for play and working with children at play.

These three strands provide a triangular framework for analysis in which evidence, policy and practice should inform each other. However, the review reveals that this framework could more accurately be described as a 'tension field' in which the three elements pull against each other. This is due in part to particular ways of understanding children and play.

There has been a rapid growth in policy initiatives relating to children and young people and this has been dominated by a perspective which sees children primarily in terms of their and the nation's future and not in terms of their present lives. This perspective views the main purpose of childhood as a preparation for adulthood, with all children passing through a series of universal stages along the same developmental pathway. According to this view, the main role of adult professionals is to correct any deviation from this pathway, which can only be achieved if the right interventions can be identified, measured and embedded in technical and rational practice at the right time in each individual child's life (Moss 2007).

Within this frame of reference, play is understood to be instrumental – a vehicle for learning and social development, a tool for social cohesion, a diversion from crime or antisocial behaviour or a way of tackling obesity. This leads adults to intervene in play to ensure that children play in ways that are 'productive and socialising' (Meire 2007).

This view of childhood and play has dominated policy and practice, marginalising other ways of understanding and talking about childhood and play.

Yet the evidence from research across a range of disciplines suggests that the benefits of playing may be more relevant to the experience of a good childhood today than to preparing children for adulthood tomorrow – although there are connections between the two. A focus on the socialising purpose of play leads to policies that gloss over or try to control types of play that adults may see as frivolous or disturbing but which may, in fact, have an important purpose.

What is play?

The authors of *Play for a Change* report that there is no coherent understanding of 'play' within social policy and that this reflects a lack of agreement among scholars themselves on an overarching definition, other than to acknowledge that play has many different forms, may serve different purposes and has different defining characteristics.

Despite disagreements, a number of common characteristics of play can be found in the literature. These include play being:

- based on a sense of free will and control, either individually or within the group
- motivated for its own sake rather than any external reward
- pleasurable and positively valued
- flexible and adaptive, using objects and rules in a variety of changing ways
- non-literal, 'as if' behaviour – it can rearrange or turn the world upside down
- unpredictable, spontaneous, innovative and creative.

These characteristics are broadly in line with the definition used by the Big Lottery Fund in its Children's Play initiative and both the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and Department for Children, Schools and Families: that play is 'what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas, in their own way and for their own reasons' (DCMS 2004, DCSF 2008).

Research, policy and practice

This definition presents a significant tension in the evidence-policy-practice triangle. Whilst policy-makers might espouse the idea of play being self-directed by seeing it as empowering or as encouraging autonomy as a developmental milestone, there is a tendency for them only to support it insofar as the play behaviour mirrors or simulates socially acceptable behaviour, or is understood to relate directly to instrumental policy objectives. Yet the research from both brain sciences and social sciences seems to point to the significance of play arising more from the emotions generated by the characteristics listed above than with the acquisition of specific cognitive or motor skills. Children deliberately seek out physical and emotional uncertainty in their play (Spinka and others 2001),

and this uncertainty can be manifested in behaviour that may not appear to be 'positive' in building skills or preparing children for adulthood. It may include, for example, war and superhero play, rough and tumble play and play fighting, teasing and bullying, jokes and obscenities, thrill seeking play such as parkour or skateboarding, as well as behaviour in the public realm that is increasingly understood as risky or antisocial.

Much of the evidence from neuroscience suggests that, rather than developing specific skills that may be needed later in adult life, playing is a way of building and shaping the regions of the brain that concern emotion, motivation and reward, and developing a range of flexible responses across a number of adaptive systems that link the brain, the body and the social and physical environment (Burghardt 2005).

First-hand experiences of the raw, primary emotions of joy, fear, anger, sadness, shock and disgust are essential for these processes to take place, and are evident in these kinds of playing. Play provides a relatively safe context in which these primary emotions can be expressed, while being held in check by the rules, rituals and play signals of the game. These rules, rituals and play signals are, in turn, driven by the more social, secondary emotions such as pride, shame and sympathy (Sutton-Smith 2003). This analysis is supported by studies which show that playing helps to build resilience through developing regulation of emotions, attachment to peers and places, stress response systems, emotional health through pleasure and enjoyment, and physical health.

Much of the research highlights the importance of seeing all these aspects of play as being interconnected and mutually dependent. Human development is a lifelong process (rather than one that stops when we reach adulthood) in which the brain, the body and the environment constantly influence each other to shape the individual. This relationship has been described as 'an embodied mind embedded in the world' (Thompson and Varela 2001). Through their play, children both adapt to and shape their environments. Understanding play and childhood in this way challenges both the concept of the universal child developing through fixed stages towards the goal of adulthood and also the notion of fixed opposites such as nature/nurture, adult/child, girl/boy, black/white, rich/poor (Prout 2005).

The dominant framework of preventative policies aimed at children at risk of social exclusion is criticised for focusing too much on the individual child and family, overlooking the importance of children's relationships within their social and cultural networks and with their physical environments (Evans and Pinnock 2007). Playing is an excellent way to engage with emotions, with other people and with the environment in a way that helps to develop resilience, which is a key protective factor in preventative policies.

Children need freedom

Children derive a sense of pleasure and reward from play which motivates them to seek out further opportunities to play at times and in places of their own choosing, which are not necessarily those favoured by adults. Ethnographic studies of children's own experiences of playing in their local environments and in school playgrounds show that they use space and time to play in ways that evoke contradictory responses from adults, including anxiety, recrimination and nostalgia. Children's ability to make use of their local environments as spaces to play depends on their ability to move independently within and between those spaces.

The opportunities for children and young people to play outside and become familiar with their locality are narrowed by restrictions to their mobility, a heavy promotion of adult agendas that focus on play for particular purposes, prohibitions and constraints on the use of space and dull, featureless environments. Understanding children's play patterns can help adults appreciate how to design spaces that support children's play – or indeed to acknowledge that they should do little other than protect children's right to move and play freely within their local environments.



Play for a change: key messages

Play for a change has revealed a resonance between the academic research on the benefits of play for children's health and well-being and the broad aims stated in current policies for children and young people. However, policies and practice do not reflect this resonance because of their instrumental understanding of play and the nature of childhood. These key messages distil the findings of the review.

1. The well-being of children in England

A 2007 Unicef report on the well-being of children in 21 of the world's richest countries ranked the UK bottom. This sends a strong message that we need to think again about children's experiences of childhood. There are many statistics and many moral panics about the lives of children in England. Policy-makers need to heed the fact that, when children and young people themselves are asked about what is important in their own lives, playing and friends are consistently at the top of the list.

2. Play, development and well-being

We are now beginning to understand the interrelationship between genes, the brain, the body, behaviour and the physical and social environment. This has enabled a deeper understanding of how play contributes to children's physical and emotional well-being and to their development. Contrary to the dominant belief that it is a way of learning specific motor, cognitive or social skills, play has an impact on the architectural foundations of development such as gene expression and physical

and chemical development of the brain. In turn, these foundations influence the child's ability to adapt to, survive, thrive in and shape their social and physical environments. Children's development and well-being cannot be understood as separate from their environment.

3. Play and resilience

Play can help build resilience – the capacity for children to thrive despite adversity and stress in their lives. Emotions have a key role in playing and play makes a major contribution to developing emotion regulation, building strong attachments and peer friendships, engendering positive feelings, and enabling children to cope with stressful situations through developing creative approaches and problem solving skills.

4. Play and social policy

The role of play in building children's resilience and in their health and well-being chimes with the emphasis on building resilience in social policy. The evidence is compelling. However, there is a need to move away from an instrumental view of play that *Play for a Change* has found in much policy and practice, and towards a recognition that the benefits of play accrue from its characteristics of unpredictability, spontaneity, goallessness and personal control, rather than directly from its content. If policy-makers accept the evidence for the significance of play for children's well-being and development, then play provision should be judged on whether it enables children to play rather than

on more instrumental outcomes. Because of the interrelationship with the environment there is no guarantee that playing will deliver on the five Every Child Matters outcomes; we can, however, be confident that these outcomes are more likely to be realised if children can play.

5. Time and space for play

The pleasure and enjoyment that children gain from playing leads them to seek out time and space to play. The prevailing understanding of childhood and play has led to an increase in adult control of children's use of time and space which in turn constrains the ways in which children can exploit the opportunities that local environments offer for playing. Where children can range independently, their environment becomes a field of 'free action' in which they can follow their own desires and create situations of wonder and uncertainty (Kytta 2004). An appreciation of the relationship between the nature of play and an environmental field of free action is crucial in designing play friendly neighbourhoods. This calls for partnership and cross-departmental working at local and national level.

6. The children's workforce

Evidence from the brain sciences shows that benefits accrue in part from the very characteristics of playing that adults often find

uncomfortable and so seek to suppress. This raises questions, for example, about the effectiveness of anti-discriminatory practices, approaches to challenging behaviour, and if, when and how to direct or intervene in play. The evidence from ethnographic studies of children's play provides an excellent foundation for building an understanding of play through the eyes of children themselves. Given the significance of play in the lives of children, both from their own accounts and from the brain sciences, it would seem that it should, as a minimum, be part of the common core of knowledge that every adult needs when working with children.

7. Gathering the evidence from practice

The rich source of research about play, drawn from a range of academic disciplines, provides evidence of the need to ensure that children can play. However, this review has shown that there is a dearth of academically rigorous research into how best to make sure that children are able to play, either in the general environment or in children's spaces. Much of the literature on practice aims to show instrumental outcomes for play provision, whether that be motor, cognitive, social or emotional skills, physical activity or crime reduction. There is a need to gather the evidence on what works best in providing for play for its own sake.

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