

## No.14 What is Playwork?

### Introduction

In today's UK communities, children are less visible than at any time in history (Gill 2007). There are several reasons for this: the increasing volume of traffic means that many children are no longer able to play on the streets; parental fears mean children are often driven to and from school, and consequently don't have the chance to play with their friends before and after school; a higher proportion of parents is now working, with the result that some children spend every minute from 8.00 am to 6.00 pm inside school buildings; and in recent years we have started to use Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and Curfew Orders to control the boisterous excesses of those children who are still out on the streets. These reductions in children's freedom of movement have happened too rapidly for anyone to be able to predict the consequences, either for individual children or for society as a whole. Nevertheless, one thing is clear, children's use of the outdoors has been severely restricted, and their free play has become ever more constrained.

Playworkers regard this as a serious problem for us all. The playwork

profession is rooted in a belief that play is of immense benefit, and that society has a responsibility to ensure children get the most out of their play. Playwork is not about social engineering; it is not about reducing vandalism and anti-social behaviour by 'keeping children off the streets'; nor is it about addressing the obesity epidemic; and it is certainly not about providing entertainment for bored children. In a world where children's free play is being curtailed, the playworker's role is to create environments that enable children to experience the sort of play opportunities and experiences that have been lost from daily life. This is the basic thinking that underpins most justifications for playwork.

There is also general agreement within the profession regarding the definition of play, which would be something like that provided in the recently redrafted Playwork Principles:

1. All children and young people need to play. The impulse to play is innate. Play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well being of individuals and communities.

2. Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons (PPSG 2005).

Although this is not an entirely satisfactory definition of play, as it doesn't really encompass the full range of behaviours that we understand as play, it is nevertheless a very useful starting point for playworkers. The Play Wales website says 'play which is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated is vital in a child's development', which implies that those are the elements of play behaviour that playworkers should concentrate on. Thus for the purposes of this factsheet it may be helpful simply to say that playwork seeks to encourage, and provide opportunities for, the sort of play that is 'freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated'. Indeed it has been suggested that 'those are the forms of play that ... it is ethically responsible for the playwork profession to prioritise' (Brown 2008).

What does this mean in practice? At its most basic level, playwork is about removing barriers to play, and enriching the play environment (Brown and Webb 2002). Barriers to play might vary from simple things, like broken glass left behind from a bottle tossed over the playground fence during the night, to deeply complex factors, such as discrimination and abuse. Anything that interferes with the freedom to

play must be addressed before it is realistic to expect children to get the most out of the experience.

Enriching the child's play environment is a slightly more contentious element of playwork. There is broad agreement that enrichment of the play environment is a good thing. However, there is a considerable difference of opinion within the playwork profession about the precise way in which play is beneficial to children. Some say it has to do with child development; others with evolution; some focus on therapeutic benefits. As a result there are also debates within the profession about exactly what sort of play opportunities should be provided. In recent years this has been reflected in a number of attempts to define and/or justify playwork, most of which are explored in the remainder of this factsheet.

### **Evolution and recapitulation**

Sutton-Smith (1997) suggests that play might be seen as an evolutionary mechanism; the means by which human beings adapt to an ever-changing world. We are born with the potential to be adaptable. Through play we develop and refine that ability. We now know that play activity stimulates the brain in such a way that brain cells retain their 'plasticity'. If we don't play, our brain cells rigidify, and our flexibility of thought is reduced. Ultimately we become unable to cope with change, which could have dire consequences both for the individual, and for the future of our species. Thus, Sutton-Smith concludes that play is at the very heart of the evolutionary process.

One strand of playwork theory that follows this line of thinking is based upon Haeckel's theory of recapitulation (Haeckel 1901) and its subsequent development by first Hall (1904) and then Reaney (1916). This is the idea that each stage in a child's development corresponds to successive adult forms of evolutionary history, and that this is represented in current and future play behaviour. Reaney suggested that this life summary reveals itself as play periods that correspond to the various evolutionary stages of human history (animal, savage, nomad, pastoral and tribal). The leading playwork theorist Bob Hughes has taken this up. Hughes says that children have a fundamental biological drive to play, and that there are clear links between certain play forms and the behaviour patterns of our human ancestors (Hughes 2001). He relates the evolutionary stages to the contemporary context as follows:

- animal - children interacting with the elements
- savage - cruel interaction with other species
- nomad - ranging for mental mapping
- pastoral - mastery play e.g. gardening
- tribal - membership of gangs and clubs.

Hughes suggests children are born with a genetic expectation of the type of play they should experience (Hughes 2003). If that does not happen, they may become ill as a result. If children are deprived of the opportunity to dig holes, light fires, build dens, play games of chase, etc., we run the risk they will grow into adults who still feel the need to enact

those forms of behaviour (but in a distorted adult mode). Thus, for Hughes, one of the most important roles of the playworker is to create environments that allow children to experience fundamentally recapitulative play.

### **Compound flexibility**

Brown's theory of compound flexibility offers a view of child development linked to the play environment (Brown 2003). It concerns the way in which development takes place via 'the interrelationship between a flexible/adaptable environment and the gradual development of flexibility/adaptability in the child'. In this theory it is suggested that the degree of flexibility in a child's play environment has a direct effect on the extent to which exploration and experimentation are possible. Children who experience such things, together with the associated sense of control, will be likely to develop self-confidence, self-acceptance, etc. This in turn leads to an ability to cope with daily problems in a more creative, imaginative and flexible way. In other words this process should produce children who are flexible enough in their thinking to make the best use of whatever flexibility exists in their play environment. That's how things would work in an ideal world.

This theory was developed with playwork in mind - the idea being that we do not live in an ideal world, and it is the playworker's role to address whatever deficits may be causing the breakdown of the compound flexibility process. Hence, in this theory the role of the playworker is to create flexible environments which are substantially

adaptable or controllable by the children. One way the playworker can do this is to ensure there are lots of 'loose parts' in the play environment. When explaining his 'theory of loose parts', Nicholson (1971) suggested that 'in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.' Thus, a room full of cardboard boxes has more potential to stimulate creative play, than a fixed climbing frame. This concept links to Vygotsky's much misunderstood 'zone of proximal development' (Vygotsky 1976), via the Portchmouth principle. Portchmouth says 'It helps if someone, no matter how lightly, puts in our way the means of making use of what we find'. In many ways, that is the role of the playworker - enriching the play environment by providing the basic materials to encourage and empower children to discover the world for themselves (Portchmouth 1969).

### **BRAWGS and the edge of recalcitrance**

How is it possible for an adult to provide safe and secure provision that still offers children the freedom to explore their own ideas, feelings, skills and abilities? Russell's BRAWGs<sup>1</sup> Continuum is an attempt to address that apparent contradiction. Russell suggests that current models of playwork often fail to take account of the complexity of play settings and

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<sup>1</sup> BRAWGS is an anagram of the initials of the three people involved in the development of the idea: Wendy Russell, Arthur Battram and Gordon Sturrock

the need for playworkers to develop a range of responses to children's playing (Russell 2008). She credits Battram (2002) with helping her come to an understanding that playworkers should be adopting a ludocentric approach - working towards a middle zone, somewhere between the edge of order and the edge of chaos. As a result Russell developed a model of a continuum from the didactic (directing and teaching) at one end, to the chaotic (negligent and egocentric) at the other. A typical didactic setting would be characterised by an adult-designed, highly structured programme of activities, with a rigid set of rules, etc. The chaotic approach might be typified by unreliable staff, unpredictable opening hours and resources that are dangerous or falling apart. In between these two extremes is the ludocentric approach which is about children's play, rather than any adult agenda. Here we find playworkers working at what Battram calls the 'edge of recalcitrance'. The model was further developed, after discussions with Gordon Sturrock (2004), who suggested the important thing is for playworkers to match their feelings to their behaviours. By seeking to become more aware of where their practice lies on the continuum, it should become easier for playworkers to adopt a position that is consciously ludocentric.

### **Play cycle and the play stage**

In the conference paper, *The Playground as Therapeutic Space: Playwork as healing*, Sturrock and Else put forward a strong argument for playworkers to be regarded as potential healers. They focus on the study of the mind or psyche at play,

and to describe this they coined the term *psycholudics*. They argue that playwork is not about control or management, but rather its value rests in the richness of response that a play exchange, setting or artefact generates. It is therefore crucial for playworkers to be able to interpret the subtle signals offered by a child during his/her play (Sturrock and Else 1998). They use Sutton-Smith's concept of the *play cue* to describe those signals (Sutton-Smith 1984). From such interactive experiences playworkers may be able to 'develop insights and interpretative responses, aiding further, and perhaps deepening, expressions of this *ludic content*'.

However, in some circumstances this ideal process breaks down, especially where play cues are ignored or misinterpreted over a long period of time. Sturrock and Else call this *dys-play*, and suggest it might lead the child to start forming neuroses. They suggest that playworkers are in a potentially important position because they are right there when neuroses are being formed. They therefore ask whether playwork might be seen as either curative or at least cathartic, and suggest that playworkers might be seen as *freely associating in the free associations* of children.

### **Play deprivation and therapeutic playwork**

Hughes's second major contribution to playwork thinking lies in his focus on play deprivation, and especially the lessons to be drawn from his award-

winning<sup>2</sup> study of children's play in urban Belfast during the period of 'The Troubles'. His thesis is based on the idea that a lack of balance, or a deficit of one or more play types during childhood, will do lasting damage to the developing child. Hughes came to the conclusion that play had been 'adulterated'. Adulteration is the term he uses to describe the 'negative impact of adults on children's play'. In Belfast he identified four damaging outcomes from this: the adulteration of social play fostered the continued propagation of sectarianism; the militaristic nature of the child's environmental experience encouraged the adoption of an extremely limited range of play narratives; restrictions on children's range behaviour created mental mapping deficits; and the stress, trauma and play deprivation of every day life resulted in neurochemical and neurophysiological mutation of the brain (Hughes 2000). Studies of abandoned and abused children in Romania have provided confirmation of the damaging effects of play deprivation in relation to all forms of development (Brown and Webb (2005). The studies also provide substantial evidence of the healing potential of playwork projects.

Hughes goes on to suggest that play deprivation may be far more widespread in the UK than is generally acknowledged (Hughes 2000). This may be the result of a number of factors, including fear of traffic, perceived stranger danger, parental

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Hughes was awarded the Mike Taylor Memorial Prize for Originality and Innovation in Professional Scholarship.

fears of children engaging in risky activity, etc. He therefore proposes that one of the major roles of playworkers is to address the ill effects resulting from play deprivation.

### **The unique relationship**

The Playwork Principles (PPSG 2005) highlight the need for playworkers to facilitate the play process, choose appropriate intervention styles, support children in the creation of a play space, and act as advocates for play. This is a reasonable summary of what playworkers do. However, these are very general statements. The thing that sets playwork apart from all other professions is the methods employed. One of the unique things about playwork is that it is the only profession which seeks to work predominately to the child's agenda. In other words playworkers will regard the child's experiences, desires and wants as the starting point for playwork interactions. By 'joining' the child wherever s/he is at any moment, instead of taking control, the playworker is able to form a strong relationship (Kaufman 1995). There is great subtlety in this. For the playwork interaction to be effective, it is crucial that the playworker suspends all prejudices, and adopts a non-judgemental attitude - something Fisher refers to as 'negative capability' (Fisher 2008). The fact that the adult is not dominating the interaction but responding to the play cues (Sturrock 2004) of the child, is unusual in the child's experience, and suggests the adult is treating the child with respect, which in turn enhances the child's self esteem. The fact that the child is playing means s/he is likely to be in a state of relaxed absorption. All this

tends towards the development of a relationship of trust - a relationship which sometimes develops at surprising speed, and which often lasts a lifetime.

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**Written by Fraser Brown, June 2009.**

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