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57

Children's right to play

An examination of the importance of play
in the lives of children worldwide

By Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell



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the 1990s, the number of people with a mental health problem has increased in the UK (Mental Health Act 1983, 1990).

There is a growing awareness of the need to improve the lives of people with mental health problems. The Department of Health (1999) has set out a vision of a new mental health system, which will be based on the following principles:

- People with mental health problems should be treated as individuals, with their own needs and wishes.
- People with mental health problems should be given the opportunity to participate in decisions about their care and treatment.
- People with mental health problems should be given the opportunity to live in their own homes and communities.

These principles are reflected in the new Mental Health Act 2003, which came into force in 2005.

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Executive summary

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) states that:

1. States Parties recognise 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 the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

This Working Paper focuses on play as a discrete element of article 31, differentiated from rest, leisure and recreation as something interwoven into children's daily lives and not controlled by adults (Hodgkin and Newell 2007). This paper draws on contemporary research on the nature and benefits of children's play to show how it is fundamental to the health and well-being of children and therefore why both States Parties and adults generally should recognise, respect and promote play as a right.

Understandings of play

There are many different and often contradictory explanations of the nature and value of play. For example, adults' attitudes towards children's play vary: some ignore it, or dismiss it as a waste of time; some curb play as something dangerous or subversive, while others appropriate it as a learning or socialisation mechanism.

The status of play within the CRC reflects these attitudes, and it has often been overlooked as

a stand-alone right (Child Rights Information Network 2007). Yet Burghardt (2005: p. xii) suggests that 'only when we understand the nature of play will we be able to understand how to better shape the destinies of human societies in a mutually dependent world, the future of our species, and perhaps even the fate of the biosphere itself'.

Much of the debate on children's rights centres on the inherent tension in the CRC between children's right to express their views, and the principle of acting in the child's best interests. Who makes the final decision if a child expresses wishes that are not considered to be in their best interests?

The debates on the evolving capacities of the child (see Lansdown 2005) encapsulate this; they see these capacities as balanced against adult responsibility to take decisions on behalf of the child, with the latter diminishing as the former develops. This perspective views childhood as

the opposite of adulthood, being important only as a preparatory period during which children progress through a universal set of stages to reach adulthood. From this perspective, play becomes a mechanism for development, a way of developing the skills needed for adult life. But studies of animal play, and the growing field of brain sciences, suggest that play's benefits may be more immediate, helping children interact with their current physical and social environments.

What is play and why is it important?

As they play, children rearrange their worlds to make them either less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith 1999). In a game of chase, children are physically active and maintain the game by negotiating and agreeing to abide by the rules. Yet what they value is the thrill of the chase. The rules provide a frame within which the players know that 'this is play'; this provides a safe place where emotions can be experienced without the consequences they might bring in the 'real' world.

It is understandable to see children's play as a rehearsal for adult life, but there is little empirical evidence to support this (Fagen 1995, Burghardt 2005, Sharpe 2005, Pellis and Pellis 2009). In play, physical movements, voices and language are exaggerated, incomplete or in the wrong order; storylines become unpredictable, random and fantastical; conventional behaviours are inverted or subverted; and the rules of the game are changed to allow play to continue (Sutton-Smith 2003, Burghardt 2005, Pellis and Pellis 2009).

Play is about creating a world in which, for that moment, children are in control and can seek out uncertainty in order to triumph over it – or, if not, no matter, it is only a game. In this way, children develop a repertoire of flexible responses to situations they create and encounter (Spinka et al. 2001, Pellis and Pellis 2009). It is primarily behaviour for its own sake, for the pleasure and joy of being able to do it (Pellis and Pellis 2009). Yet play is more than mere indulgence; it is essential to children's health and well-being.

Play offers opportunities to move beyond existing ways of being, to transform structures and cross borders (Thorne 1993) and it appropriates, inverts and subverts adult cultural expectations of children. While adults may desire children's play to act as a socialisation process, at times it transgresses this, giving rise to adult concerns that play is disruptive, threatening or of no value, which leads to sanctions and prohibitions. Children, however, value these play expressions differently; they are far from unimportant and trivial.

Play and the CRC

The articles of the CRC are often grouped into the 'three Ps': protection, participation and provision. This Working Paper considers these three categories in terms of how they may relate to children's play and what this might mean for adult recognition of play as a right. It suggests that children can create their own self-protection through play, and that play is the principal way in which children participate within their own communities. Given this starting point, adults'

responsibility to provide for play involves ensuring that the conditions are right for play to take place.

Protection rights

Survival is not merely a question of maintaining life; biologically speaking, it refers to the ways an organism can favourably position itself in its environment, to maintain both current and future integrity and to respond to the demands of the environment.

Children's play can be seen as a self-protecting process that offers the possibility to enhance adaptive capabilities and resilience. The experience of play effects changes to the architecture of the brain, particularly in systems to do with emotion, motivation and reward (Burghardt 2005), leading to further playing. Play acts across several adaptive systems to contribute to health, well-being and resilience. These include: pleasure and enjoyment; emotion regulation; stress response systems; attachments; and learning and creativity.

Participation rights

Children's play represents a primary form of participation, being interwoven into everyday life (Meire 2007). The quality of children's environments influences their ability to play. Some children's local environments may be places of fear and violence; local spaces may be inaccessible because of constraints on their independent mobility; they may offer little attraction or mystery and become sites of drudgery and mediocrity; some neighbourhoods may be environmentally toxic; some may be spaces of oppression and imprisonment.

Adults generally define the purpose and use of space and time; children usually find ways to play that appear within the cracks of this adult order. The manifestation of this varies depending on how childhood is valued and understood within different societies. Numerous studies in the minority world (and, increasingly, wealthier areas of the majority world) point to the growing institutionalisation of children's time and space, and an associated reduction in children's independent access to public space (Rissotto and Tonucci 2002, Thomas and Hocking 2003, Kytta 2004, Karsten and Van Vliet 2006, Kinoshita 2008). This is evident in the decline in playing outdoors and an increase in adult supervision, although this is not a uniform pattern (Karsten 2005, Van Gils et al. 2009). In addition, play is valued for its role in learning and development and so is often used in children's settings under the direction of adults (Smith and Barker 2000, Mattsson 2002, Gaskins 2008).

There appears to be less separation of adults and children in the majority world (particularly in less urbanised communities); children play while involved in daily tasks, work and education (Punch 2000, Katz 2004). However, the globalisation of markets has increased industrialisation, leading to larger specialist and mechanised units for production; this removes child workers from their immediate neighbourhoods and reduces the opportunity for interweaving play and work (Chawla 2002a).

Children's ability to find time and space for play is affected by a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors. These include gender, socio-economic status and disability.

Adults need to pay attention to creating the conditions in which play can take place, to address a child's right to provision for play.

Provision rights

Provision implies much more than providing play facilities. It requires wider consideration of children's rights to ensure that the social and physical environment can support children's ability to play. When children's rights to survival, development and well-being are infringed, this has an impact on their capacity to play; equally, children's capacity to play will have an impact on their health, well-being and development (Burghardt 2005, McEwen 2007).

Play can help to mitigate the effects of severe stress that these infringements bring about. Given this, we see just how interconnected play is with all the articles of the CRC (Tugade et al. 2004, Booth-LaForce et al. 2005, Ratner et al. 2006). Yet children's needs for space and time to play are often misunderstood or ignored in broad development policy, plans and practice; this could have high costs for children (Bartlett 1999, Chawla 2002b, Churchman 2003). The association between playfulness, adaptive behaviour and well-being means it can be assumed that an absence of play is harmful (Siviy et al. 2003, Bateson 2005). The persistent absence of play may disrupt emotion-regulation systems, which in turn will diminish children's physical, social and cognitive competence (Pellis and Pellis 2006).

Although it may not be possible to isolate play from other areas of deprivation in children's

lives, their capacity to engage in play is significantly diminished in situations of severe stress, thus diminishing their capacity to build resilience to cope with stress (Burghardt 2005). Severe stresses that children encounter include violence, fear, discrimination, child abuse, excessive academic pressure, exploitative labour, loss of security and family support, displacement, unsafe or toxic environments, food and water shortages. Children may also experience other acute and chronic stressors, for example natural disasters and conflict, environmental degradation, traffic and trends towards over-protection and risk aversion.

Providing for the conditions for play

Given the benefits of play and the consequences of playlessness, it is clear that play is fundamentally linked to children's rights as a whole. Play is not a luxury to be considered after other rights; it is an essential and integral component underpinning the four principles of the CRC (non-discrimination, survival and development, the best interests of the child, and participation).

Adults should be aware of the importance of play, and promote and protect the conditions that support it. Any intervention to promote play must acknowledge its characteristics and allow sufficient flexibility, unpredictability and security for children to play freely. However, children's play belongs to children; adults should not destroy children's own places for play through insensitive planning or the pursuit of other adult agendas, or by creating places and programmes that segregate children and control their play.

Adults need to ensure that children's physical and social environments support their play; otherwise their survival, well-being and development may be compromised. This does not necessarily mean providing specific services; it means avoiding the temptation to dismiss

play as frivolous, restrict it through fear for and of children, or control and appropriate it for more instrumental purposes. The principle is to uphold article 31 of the CRC through supporting the conditions where play can take place.

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The Foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the sale of Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer N.V., bequeathed to the Foundation by Dutch industrialist and philanthropist Bernard van Leer (1883 to 1958).

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equal opportunities and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by local partners. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We also aim to leverage our impact by working with influential allies to advocate for young children. Our free publications share lessons we have learned from our own grantmaking activities and feature agenda-setting contributions from outside experts. Through

our publications and advocacy, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice not only in the countries where we operate, but globally.

In our current strategic plan, we are pursuing three programme goals: reducing violence in young children's lives, taking quality early education to scale, and improving young children's physical environments. We are pursuing these goals in eight countries – Brazil, India, Israel, Tanzania, the Netherlands, Turkey, Peru and Uganda – as well as undertaking a regional approach within the European Union.

In addition, until 2012 we will continue to work in Mexico, the Caribbean and South Africa on strengthening the care environment, transitions from home to school and respect for diversity.

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Working Papers in Early Childhood Development is a 'work in progress' series that presents relevant findings and reflection on issues relating to early childhood care and development.

The findings, interpretations, conclusions and opinions expressed in this series are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

