



# Childhood, play and the Playwork Principles

Playwork guides – volume 1



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# Introduction

We have produced four playwork guides, creatively titled volume 1, 2, 3 and 4, as a collection of resources for all those who work primarily or as a part of their role with playing children. Equally, those not working with playing children but fascinated by children's play and wanting to learn more may also find them of interest.

The playwork guides introduce and explore some of the core theories, concepts, ideas and practices that are at the heart of working with playing children. The guides are by no means an exhaustive account. Children and their play are complex, as are the multiple ways we can work with their play, so there is always much more to learn.

In preparation for working with playing children, the guides begin with Volume 1, taking a look at some of the theories that influence the way adults understand children, the role of play and childhood, as well as the ethics of working with playing children. Having developed some foundational understanding, Volume 2 explores the multiple ways those working with playing children can create or enhance environments so that they are fit for play, and at practices for directly supporting playing children. Following this, Volume 3 looks at planning, setting up and managing a staffed play project, whilst Volume 4 deals in more depth with issues related to the management of staff and working with other adults.

Throughout these guides we use the terms playwork and playworkers. Playwork might best be understood as the art of working with playing children. Playwork is a sensitive and reflective role that values play for its own sake, not just as a means to an end. Playwork is both child-centred and play centred, focused on enabling children to direct their own play experiences and tries to ensure play is the central concern of the adult-child relationship.

Playwork seeks to create environments that are suitable for good quality playing to happen and attempts to reduce any power imbalance between children and adults, aiming to create a parallel working relationship as opposed to the more common hierarchical one between adults and children. For many, playwork is their profession, their main work role, and their vocation – for others it is a role they occupy as part of other broader responsibilities. Within these resources the term playworker applies to all those who find themselves facilitating and supporting children's play.

**Volume 1: Childhood, play and the Playwork Principles** provides an overview of the professional ethics and theoretical perspectives that underpin playwork practice and playwork views of childhood. There is of course much more to learn about children, play and playwork but the contents of this volume are essential to those thinking about working with playing children.

The first section – **Play and the Playwork Principles (1 and 2)** – explores some of the ideas, concepts and theories of child development and childhood that have influenced and continue to influence understandings of children and their play and as a result are important to those practicing playwork.

Section two – **Playwork Principles in Practice** – looks at the playwork role and how it both affects and is affected by the environment and the children. It considers how the play process is given precedence and how playworkers balance the developmental benefits of play with children's well-being.

**Volume 2: Practicing playwork** enables those new to playwork the opportunity to explore some of the ideas, concepts and frameworks, and the practical application of tools and approaches at the core of playwork practice.

Section one considers concepts such as affordance and the affective environment, which enable those practicing playwork to identify, create or enhance places for playing.

Bob Hughes, a lead scholar and practitioner in the field of playwork is then introduced along with his taxonomy of play types and his ideas about play mechanisms. This is valuable for appreciating the various forms and combination of forms play can take but also in developing a shared language through which to talk about children's play. We also explore his playwork curriculum, a useful framework for thinking about the scope of opportunities for playing that those practicing playwork should offer.

Having looked extensively at indirect work with playing children in section one, section two looks at a range of ideas that have and continue to influence direct work with playing children. This section will introduce Else and Sturrock's play cycle and accompanying intervention modes, as well as reviewing some every day intervention approaches. The section concludes by exploring issues related to risk and uncertainty in children's play and approaches to risk assessment, chiefly risk-benefit assessment.

**Volume 3: Developing and managing a playwork project** focuses on the practicalities of developing and managing the day-to-day delivery of playwork provision. It is underpinned by the Playwork Principles and produced for those with a good understanding of play and playwork theory and practice, focusing less on playwork concepts and theories, and more on the managerial duties of senior playworkers.

This volume is divided into three sections. Section one – Planning for play – looks specifically at the essential aspects to consider when making preparations for a playwork project.

Section two – Developing an organisational framework – will help readers identify and appreciate the role and function of policies and procedures in supporting playwork practice,

meeting our duty of care to service users and protecting the reputation of the organisation.

Finally, section three – Evaluating quality – explores issues related to evaluating the quality of play provision, looking at ways in which we can continue to review and improve the quality of the provision we are responsible for.

**Volume 4: Managing playworkers and working with other adults** is aimed at those with line management responsibilities for other staff including managers and management committees.

Section one – Taking on management responsibilities – explores subjects including leadership styles, creating effective environments for teamwork, skills for managing change and providing effective feedback.

Section two – Supporting professional development – focuses on the essential role of reflection, including methods and models to support and promote reflective practice. The section also covers mentoring, supervision and staff appraisal.

Section three – Working with other adults – acknowledges the importance of working with other adults beyond the staff team. It considers a range of associated issues from the less formal to the formal, including the value of positive first impressions, developing and maintaining trusting relationships with parents and working with other professionals.

Finally, section four – Handling conflict, criticism and complaints – establishes why conflict may occur and explores various styles for handling interpersonal conflict and how self-awareness can support effective communication.

## Play and the Playwork Principles (1 and 2)



Play is a spontaneous and active process in which thinking, feeling and doing can flourish. When we play, we are freed to be inventive and creative, in the process we may change ourselves and our view of the world. Play is important to all children no matter what their impairments or behaviour. The pleasure and excitement of playing, the intensity and concentration, the freedom to experiment, to explore and to create, to find out how things and people work and what we can do with them, to give the imagination free rein, and to fill the gap between reality and desire, all derive from the fact that in play we are in charge. *'Play is an innate drive'* producing a range of flexible behaviours to cope with change and uncertainty. Play has immediate as well as longer-term benefits and needs to be under the control of the child.

The Playwork Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. The Principles describe what is unique about play and playwork and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and teenagers. They are based on the recognition that children and teenagers' capacity for positive development

will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities<sup>1</sup>. There are eight Principles, the first two Principles attempt to describe what is unique about play and its importance in children's lives, while Principles 3 to 8 highlight some of the most important concerns for playworkers.

In this section we will look at some of the play theory that informs Principles 1 and 2 before going on to consider some of the wider issues influencing our understanding of and practice with playing children. Finally, we return to Playwork Principles 3 to 8 to describe what playworkers do, how they do it and why. We don't want to patronise, but this section comes with a bit of a health warning! Section two and volumes two, three and four are all really accessible and readable guides, for some readers this section may be less so.

Much of the content in this section comes from the fields of developmental psychology, and the sociology of childhood. For readers not used to these areas of study, there may be a lot of new words and ideas that take some working through. The ideas we discuss are incredibly embedded

in the way children and childhood are understood and provided for. It is important we have some understanding of them, to be able to critique them and work with others whose practice is informed by them. That said, they can be hard going, so, please take the time to read them but take a break regularly and be content to come back to give things a second read if necessary – it's good to do that with ideas that are new to us.

## Playwork Principle 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.*

Evidence for children's play appears in every culture, from every part of the world and from every period in history. Some of the earliest toys we know of come from ancient Egypt and consist of balls, tops and dolls. In ancient Greece both Plato (427-348 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) wrote about children's play. In the medieval period we have the famous painting 'Children's Games' (1560) by Pieter Breugel that illustrates nearly 80 different games, most of which are still recognisable today. In more modern times, cross cultural studies have found that despite varying greatly in different cultures, *'everywhere a child playing is a sign of healthy development ... Play has universal dimensions, but also culture-specific aspects'*<sup>2</sup>.

The term '**all** children' is used to mean exactly that – there are no exceptions. To use the definition from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child<sup>3</sup>, it means every child irrespective of his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, gender, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. Playworkers believe that all children are born with the urge to play. It is an essential characteristic and part of what makes us who we are. Although there is much we still have to learn about play it is certain from the scientific evidence

that it is essential for our psychological and physical well-being. Indeed, if play is taken away from young animals, including human children, the effects are harmful.

Playwork is an inclusive approach that recognises the play needs of all children. However, we know that not all children have access to a range of stimulating play opportunities. Children may be marginalised or prevented from playing because of adult fears, disability, bullying and prejudice, conflict, abuse or isolation. It is our role to actively support play for these children and advocate for their right to play.

Playwork Principle 1 asserts that *'the impulse to play is innate'*. This implies that play is present from birth in every child and is an essential component in our human identity. Indeed, play appears in virtually all mammals, and in many other animals, including birds and fish<sup>4</sup>. Play is a biological drive, which is often said to be intrinsically motivated<sup>5</sup>. Play is frequently highly rewarding and pleasurable and usually done for its own sake.

Sutton-Smith<sup>6</sup> suggests that play may have developed in two stages. First, as a way of reinforcing potential physical and chemical connections in the brain that ensure the child adapts to his or her environment. *'Play opens up possibilities in the brain that may be picked up later or discarded; the important feature is that the potential is kept alive, more so than if play never occurred in the first place.'*<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, the child deliberately introduces risks and uncertainties to exercise control and mastery over them. These uncertainties include both physical and emotional aspects.

*'The importance of play lies with developing emotional flexibility by rehearsing the emotional aspect of being surprised or temporarily disorientated or unbalanced – that is by playing in a relatively safe context, emotions are modulated in play by the frame in which play occurs and the lack of serious consequences from losing control.'*<sup>8</sup>

Play is an ambiguous behaviour. We have all played (and continue to play). There are many competing theories and opposing views on its role in human evolution and development. Play encompasses multiple areas of children's lives. It is difficult to separate this out and identify particular benefits to the child from a specific act of play. This may be because play's role *'is likely to be multifaceted, variable and often involve complex, indirect and subtle processes'*<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, play is essential for children's development in three broad areas – biological, psychological and social growth. Brown<sup>10</sup> lists nine generally accepted categories of benefits, which include:

- cognitive development
- creativity and problem solving
- emotional stability and coping with anxiety
- flexibility and the opportunity to test out new behaviour
- freedom to explore, experiment and act independently
- arousal seeking, fun and enjoyment
- physical activity, co-ordination and the development of motor skills
- self-discovery and the development of identity
- socialisation and social interaction.

## Play in the here and now

For many years the traditional way of thinking about these benefits was to list ways they would be helpful when the child became an adult. The difficulty with this approach is that the scientific evidence for any delayed benefits of play is scarce. More recently, many writers<sup>11</sup> have suggested that play may not necessarily prepare the child to become a better adult, *'rather the benefits of playing in the present moment help to make a better child'*<sup>12</sup>. In other words, play has immediate benefits for the child and is primarily about the 'here and now'. Experiences in play influence us in the moment and from moment

to moment, they enrich our lives and enable us to express and refine our emerging capabilities. Those experiences are also likely to influence our journey through growth and development, however direct links between what children play and what adults they become are almost impossible to establish.

In comparison with other mammals, human development from infancy to adulthood occurs over a long time period. Lester and Russell suggest this offers us the opportunity to experiment with and explore a wide range of behaviours and responses essential for coping with complex environments. Skills can be practiced, expressed and refined, with knowledge and emotions developed, safe from the consequences of the real world. Play allows us a flexible range of behaviour to cope with change and uncertainty<sup>13</sup>. It might be thought of as *'training for the unexpected'*<sup>14</sup>.

Play is essential for the well-being of individuals. Play allows children opportunities to deal with difficult emotions and overcome stress and painful feelings. Play also builds physical development, dexterity and motor skills. In addition to traditional objective measures of well-being, such as physical and mental health, Lester and Russell<sup>15</sup> note that well-being encompasses three broad subjective areas:

- emotional well-being or satisfaction and happiness with life
- psychological well-being or a positive sense of self and purpose
- social well-being or the quality of relationships, belonging, acceptance and participation.

These areas focus on the current lives of children and the quality of their childhoods in the present – as well as their future development. This reinforces the notion that play impacts on children's lives in the here and now, and is an essential component in their physical, emotional and social lives.

Finally, Playwork Principle 1 suggests that play is essential for healthy communities. Children who experience everyday life in their own community have a greater sense of connection and this in turn increases neighbourliness<sup>16</sup>. Children's play can improve community spirit, reduce social isolation and make communities more desirable to live in. However, in recent times the number of children playing out has declined and their independent mobility reduced. Children who travel to school in a car are more likely to overestimate threats such as strangers and crime<sup>17</sup>. Healthy communities are also essential for children's well-being. Public space offers opportunities for children to build social networks and to escape adult supervision<sup>18</sup>.

## Playwork Principle 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.*

A characteristic of play that often troubles adults is that the end product of play is not especially important to the child who is playing. Adults tend to prefer processes that evidently demonstrate cause and effect<sup>19</sup>. However, play doesn't usually have set goals – instead it is a process defined by how it is done rather than what is done. For example, it's not unusual to observe children spending many hours planning and organising a den only for it to be abandoned when it's complete. For the child, play is about the moment. Failure to appreciate that in play, process is more important than product, can lead us to being overly 'precious' and reluctant to accept change.

Playwork Principle 2 is arguably the most influential and is based on a definition of play developed by Bob Hughes. At the heart of this definition is the assertion that '*play is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated*'.

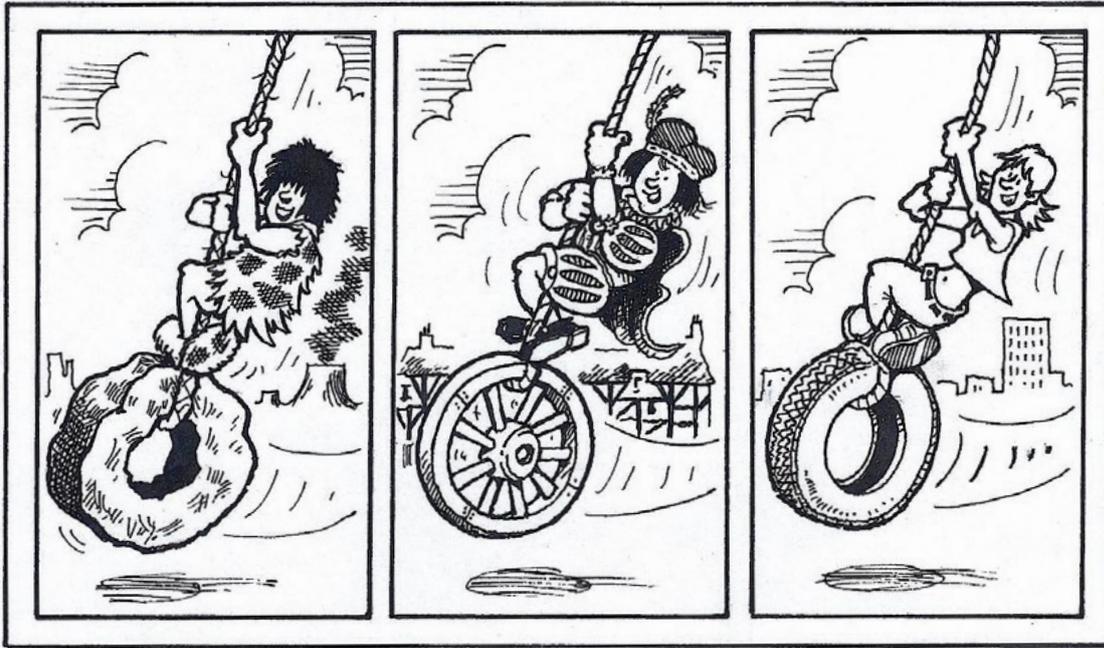
'Freely chosen' means that children should be able to make choices without pressure to conform or to participate and that those choices should be their own, and free from interference or manipulation<sup>20</sup>. 'Personally directed' means that the child controls how the play happens. '*Play relates only to first-hand interaction. It is neither overtly taught, nor demonstrated*'<sup>21</sup>. Play is not purely an individual or selfish pursuit though.

In play children will compromise and regularly be observed engaging in play with playmates where they are not perhaps playing the role they would have preferred. In these cases, there is some mutual consensus achieved amongst the players, equally a player may just submit to the will of another at times, perhaps it is better to play someone else's game than play no game at all sometimes? As playworkers we might keep a watchful eye on these aspects of play and try to ensure there are opportunities where all children can have freedom of choice and personal direction as much as they need.

Play is its own reward and needs no external goals. Children play to have fun. Not for any practical reason or overt developmental benefit. The drive to play comes from within, although it might be triggered by any number of different stimuli in the environment. '*This appreciation of play as a constant seeking out of stimuli that are personally relevant suggests that play is intrinsic, that is, it arises from motivations and urges to engage with the environment, an appetite for seeking out emotionally rewarding experiences*'<sup>22</sup>. Play is characterised by how a child behaves rather than what they do.

Taken together Playwork Principles 1 and 2 establish what we believe about play and how and why children engage in it. In the following section we will explore some of the ideas, concepts and theories about child development and about childhood that have influenced and continue to influence our understanding of children and their play and as a result are important to those practicing playwork. Following this, we will return to the Playwork Principles and consider Principles 3 to 8, which look at what is special about playwork and what playworkers do.

# The playing child: developmentalism and beyond



The Playwork Principles make it clear that *'children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities'*<sup>23</sup> and that play is fundamental to healthy development. The term 'human development' refers to the process by which we grow and change throughout our lifetime<sup>24</sup>. These changes are most dramatic during prenatal development, infancy and childhood, and consequently most theories of development are also theories of child development. Until comparatively recently the study of the child has been dominated by developmental psychology<sup>25</sup>.

In this section we outline some of the most influential theories of human development as well as some other more recent alternative approaches. Inevitably, there are too many competing theories to cover them all in this section, so the selection is limited to a small number of key theorists, theories and ideas that have been of significant influence and have demonstrated a significant interest in children's play.

Of course, this does not mean adopting – fully or partially – any of these theories without careful consideration and reflection. Studying these

developmental theories can broaden our view of children's development and encourage us to adopt a more interdisciplinary approach to play. It also provides a greater insight of the thinking behind many other professions that work with children. To reflect on our own practice as well as to engage in debate and advocacy effectively we need to understand the positions of others who work with children in different ways and from different perspectives.

## Attachment theory

Bowlby (1907-1990) thought that to thrive emotionally children need a close and continuous caregiving relationship<sup>26</sup>. This emotional bond was at least as important as nutrition and shelter. Recent studies have shown that secure attachments, where caregivers respond consistently in comforting ways, contribute to healthy brain development and in particular to the area of the brain most responsible for emotional regulation and resilience<sup>27</sup>. Other studies have found that secure emotional attachments have consequences for the ability to show empathy and form friendships with others<sup>28</sup> as well as general playfulness<sup>29</sup>.

## Attachment and play

Bowlby<sup>30</sup> himself asserted that exploration, competent play and environmental mastery could only occur when the child feels securely attached. Creasey and Jarvis<sup>31</sup> describe how, in theory, a child with insecure attachments would be less inclined to explore their environment, which in turn could lead to less interest in play materials, less competent object play, and less initiation of social play. However, they remind us that Bowlby viewed exploration and play as outcomes rather than precursors of secure attachment relationships.

Howard and McInnes<sup>32</sup> describe how play contributes to the healthy development of early attachment bonds, for example, through the first games between the child and their primary carer – usually their mother – such as peek-a-boo or tickling games. These provide a secure base from which children can explore the world around them. Coplan *et al*<sup>33</sup> reported that young children who have secure attachments are likely to have more elaborate play styles, more positive social engagement, and less behavioural inhibition than those having insecure attachment relationships. Moreover, as they developed, these secure children were more likely to engage in social play.

In their overview of contemporary views on play, Lester and Russell<sup>34</sup> state that from an early age play becomes an important process for the development of self-other differentiation and attributing value to verbal and non-verbal communication. Ultimately, it becomes essential for the ability to understand one's own and others' feelings. This capacity to regulate emotions and any attendant behaviour has lifelong consequences.

## Criticism

Bowlby's work has been criticised for being based on a narrow section of the population and for concentrating on the mother as the primary caregiver. Other cultures have different child rearing practices often where a network of adults, such as extended families, provides for the child.

Although generally supportive of the theory, Pendry<sup>35</sup> writes that attachment may also be affected by the child's temperament and personality traits.

## Theories of personality development

### Sigmund Freud

Psychoanalytical theories derive from the early work of Freud (1856-1939). Freud's work influenced many eminent psychologists including Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, Carl Jung, Erik Erikson, and Donald Winnicott. Freud claimed that development occurs as the individual goes through several psychosexual stages. Human behaviour results from the struggle to balance the demands of the pleasure-seeking part of our personality – the 'id' – with the part responsible for the conscience and our parental and societal moral standards – the 'superego'. These competing demands are balanced and discharged in realistic and appropriate ways by the third element of personality – the 'ego'.

### Freud and play

Freud<sup>36</sup> was interested in many aspects of human behaviour including children's play. For Freud, play was a means of expressing and working out negative emotions, proposing play is used by children for three different reasons:

- **Reconciliation** – play is a means of coming to terms with traumatic events
- **Gratification** – play is used to satisfy libidinous desires
- **Aspiration** – play enables us to achieve wish fulfilment. Through play we can alter reality into something we wish we were
- **Repetition** – playing through a situation again and again is especially important as it allows problems to be resolved and control gained over troubling feelings.

## Eric Erikson

Eric Erikson (1902-1994) was greatly influenced by Freud and like him believed that humans develop in stages. However, unlike Freud, Erikson thought people continued to develop throughout their lives. Erikson's ideas are drawn from both the child's early psychological development, and their social interaction with the environment<sup>37</sup>. There are eight stages to his theory of development that go right across the life span.

According to Erikson, a person's sense of self (ego), develops by successfully resolving particular 'crises' or stages experienced throughout their life. 'Crises' are the results of the interaction between the developing individual and the demands, expectations and attitudes from important people in the immediate environment. Erikson considered these crises psychosocial, in other words, they involve conflict between the person's psychological needs and the needs of society. Solving these crises at each stage encourages healthy development and learning, although the specific solutions depend on the child's upbringing, the demands of the environment, and the child's own contributions.

Throughout childhood, children must navigate crises of Trust vs. Mistrust, Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, Initiative vs. Guilt, Industry vs. Inferiority and Identity vs. Role Confusion and through adulthood, Intimacy vs. Isolation, Generativity vs. Stagnation and finally, Integrity vs. Despair.

## Erikson and play

Erikson gave considerable importance to play for children's development because play provides a socially acceptable outlet for unconscious motives and instincts<sup>38</sup>. Through play children can achieve control over experiences that may be painful to them or threaten their sense of self (ego) – they can play out concerns and wishes and so come to terms with the demands of their social environment. Consequently, by observing children at play Erikson believed it was possible to learn about children's concerns.

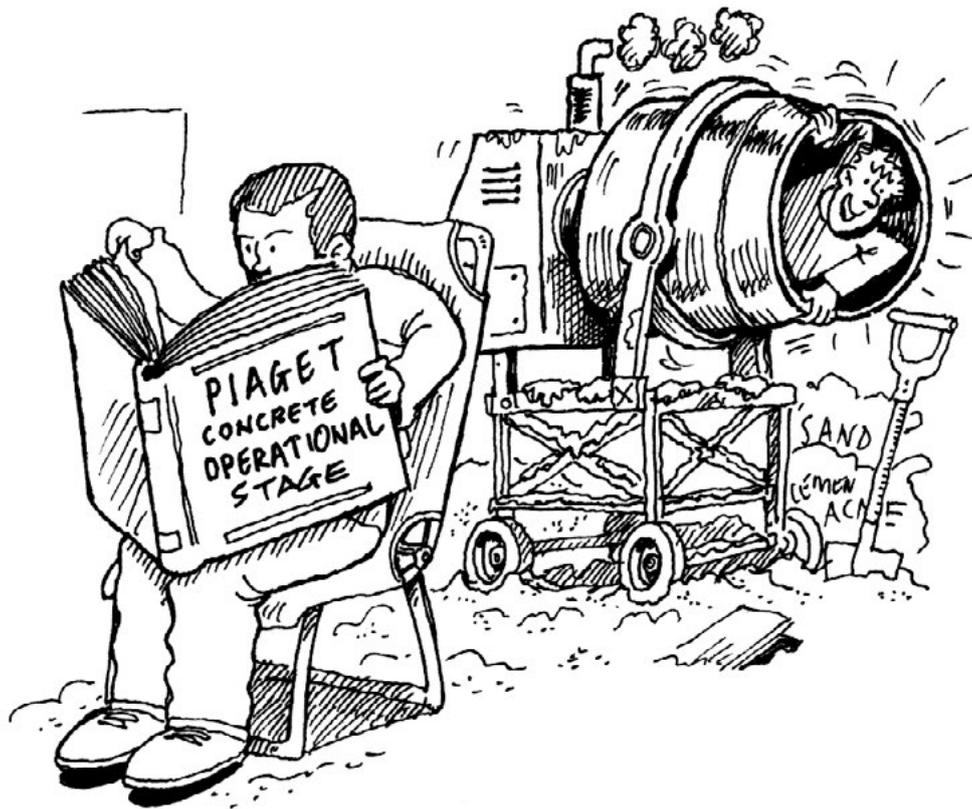
Erikson<sup>39</sup> believed that play developed in three phases:

1. First and beginning at birth, children play with their senses and their body, such as exploring their fingers and toes. Erikson called this 'autocosmic' play. This play consists of repetitive actions and vocalisations. Children also play with the available people, for example, by practicing a playful cry to see what will make their mother reappear.
2. In the second stage as a young toddler, children begin to use small toys. By projecting their feelings onto their toys they begin to gain mastery over their experiences. Erikson calls this stage the 'microsphere'.
3. Finally, at nursery-school age, children learn to play with other children and are better able to deal with social demands. Through play and games with their peers they develop a shared view of the world. Erikson calls this stage the 'macrosphere'.

Each stage incorporates the previous one, so, for example, the third stage – the macrosphere – contains elements of the previous two – the microsphere and autocosmic play. Each of these stages – mastery over one's body, mastery of objects, and mastery in social interactions – develops the child's ego and enables them to achieve mastery. Erikson proposed that '*children's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning*'<sup>40</sup>.

## Criticisms

While offering a comprehensive theory Erikson has been criticised for being vague about the causes of development. For example, Shaffer<sup>41</sup> asks, '*What kinds of experiences must a child have to develop autonomy as a toddler?*' It is not clear. Erikson is not very explicit about this type of issue and instead offers a descriptive rather than an explanatory view of human social and emotional development. Gilligan<sup>42</sup> criticised Erikson for portraying a masculine psychology and failing to include different patterns for the



development for girls and women. She argues that his model presumes as normal the values of European males. Weeber<sup>43</sup> describes how childhood disability challenges the assumed normality of Erikson's model of development. Linking physical mastery to psychosocial development is problematic for disabled children and adults who may never achieve such mastery.

## Theories of cognitive development

Cognition involves sensation, perception, imagery, retention, recall, problem solving, reasoning, and thinking<sup>44</sup>. Here, we will look at both Piaget's cognitive development theory and Vygotsky's socio-cultural cognitive theory. Each theory has had a significant influence on the way we understand children's cognitive development and children's play.

### Jean Piaget

Piaget's (1896-1980) ideas have been extremely influential, and his theory has become the dominant voice in minority world education and childcare. The basis of his theory was that children construct their own knowledge

in response to their experiences. He thought children were intrinsically motivated to learn and so could learn many things without adult intervention. Piaget referred to the process of cognitive development as adaptation. Adaptation consists of three processes: assimilation, accommodation and equilibration.

Assimilation is the process of taking in new information or experiences and fitting them into existing ideas. In other words, when a child is faced with new information, they make sense of it by referring to what they already know.

Accommodation, on the other hand, is where there is a mismatch between the child's existing knowledge and the new information, so that they must change or adapt their thinking to incorporate the new experience. For example, a young toddler sat at the dinner table suddenly becomes upset and turns their head away when given a dessert of ice cream and tinned peaches. When asked why, the child tells their mother they don't want to eat goldfish! The child is assimilating by placing this new experience into an existing way of thinking or group of thoughts (that all small slimy orange things are goldfish). When reassured by their mother that tinned peaches

are fruit like apples and bananas the child modifies or accommodates their thinking to fit this new experience.

Equilibration refers to the process of balancing (achieving equilibrium) the need to assimilate new information with the process of starting over with new ways of understanding to accommodate information that doesn't fit in. Piaget believed that equilibrium was a self-regulating process so that adaptation wasn't dominated by either assimilation or accommodation. '*Adaptation is an equilibrium between assimilation and accommodation*'<sup>45</sup>.

Piaget<sup>46</sup> argued that there was a natural sequence of development of thought that children must pass through. Children had to be at a particular stage to learn new concepts, as such, for Piaget development leads learning.

He outlined the following stages of cognitive development:

- **The Sensorimotor Stage** – from birth to approximately two years. Throughout this stage children's senses and reflexes develop rapidly and they learn about their bodies and their immediate environment, commonly through trial and error. Towards the end of this stage children realise that objects can exist separately from themselves – often referred to as 'object permanence'.
- **The Preoperational Stage** – from two to seven years. A key feature of this stage is children's language development. Children at this stage are egocentric – that is, they are unable to see a situation from someone else's point of view and assume that other people experience the same thoughts and feelings as they do. At this stage children become skilled at pretend and symbolic play and may often believe that inanimate objects have feelings, such as a doll or teddy bear feeling sad or happy.
- **The Concrete Operational Stage** – from 7 to 12 years. Children at this stage can reason about concrete or tangible objects and events and can categorise similarities and differences.

- **The Formal Operational Stage** – from adolescence through adulthood. Children can think deeply including abstractly and hypothetically and can imagine outcomes including the implications of their own and others' thinking.

Piaget asserted that all children go through each of these stages in turn – a stage cannot be skipped. However, he did admit that the rate children progress through them might vary.

## Piaget and play

Piaget defined play as generally pure assimilation, that is, a process of taking in new information and fitting it to existing ideas and concepts about the world. '*Play is when the child practices an action pattern solely for the satisfaction that lies in the feelings of mastery based on previous experiences*'<sup>47</sup>. In Piaget's theory therefore, play affords pleasure and opportunities to practice what has been learnt but it does not contribute towards new cognitive structures. He described play as '*the happy display of known actions*'<sup>48</sup>.

Piaget<sup>49</sup> classified play into four types, which parallel his four stages of cognitive development:

- **Practice play** – enjoyment of bodily sensations, repetition and variation of common patterns of movement, things and actions
- **Construction play** – using objects and materials in an organised way to make something
- **Symbolic play** – substitution of real for pretend/giving meaning to the inanimate
- **Games with rules** – rules, boundaries, organisation, objectivity.

He suggested that as children develop and exhibit more complex thinking so the complexity of their play would also increase. The most complex – games with rules – he believed would increase in number with age and '*are almost the only ones to persist at the adult stage*'<sup>50</sup>. In other words, as children develop complex abstract thinking play would no longer be needed.

## Criticisms

Although Piaget's ideas have been enormously influential, they have been criticised in a number of areas. Most significantly, researchers have questioned the accuracy and even the existence of Piaget's developmental stages. Generally, development occurs very gradually, and Watts *et al*<sup>51</sup> note that while some theorists agree that cognitive development occurs in a coherent number of stages<sup>52</sup>, others assert that development is a much more complex process occurring over many different areas<sup>53</sup>. Piaget's theory looks specifically at cognitive development and provides little insight into other aspects of development.

The evidence does not support Piaget's assertion that a child cannot master tasks in one stage until he or she has mastered the tasks in preceding stages. For example, researchers have found that five to six-year olds are capable of concrete operational thought while Piaget thought this didn't occur until seven to eleven years of age<sup>54</sup>.

In general, Piaget underestimated the abilities of children because his tests were sometimes confusing for children to understand. Piaget developed a general theory of development that ignored individual differences and paid little attention to cultural, situation dependent, and social conditions. Donaldson<sup>55</sup> however, was able to show that when they were using more familiar objects, children were able to demonstrate knowledge beyond Piaget's suggested stage. Because Piaget defined children in terms of what they couldn't do in comparison to older children his approach has been termed a deficit model and has been especially criticised by those taking a sociological approach to the study of childhood.

*'Sociologists of childhood criticize psychology for its focus on documenting age-related competencies at the expense of investigating what it means to be a child. They argue that the developmental approach leads to a detached and impoverished understanding of children's needs.'*<sup>56</sup>

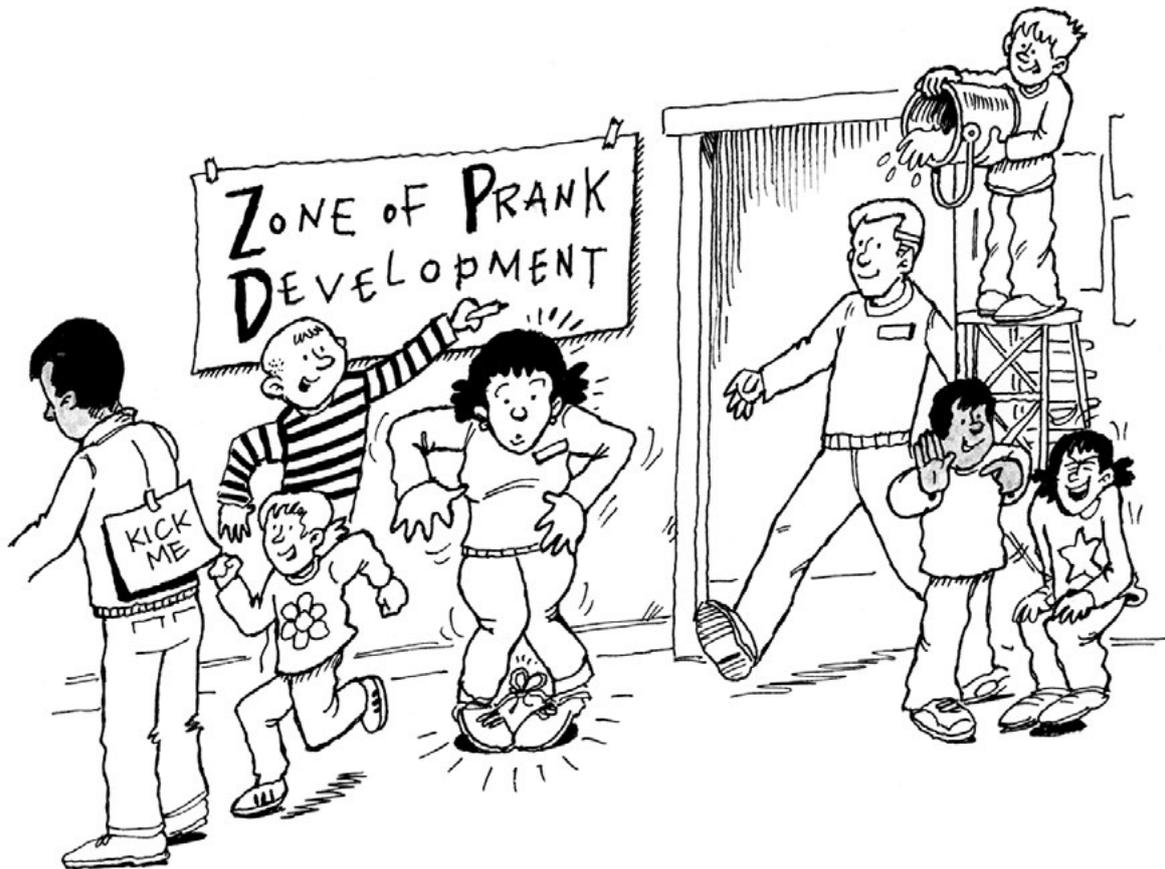
Finally, Piaget has been criticised on his view of play. Sutton-Smith<sup>57</sup> criticises Piaget for suggesting that play is a function of cognition but without explaining the nature of that function. Sutton-Smith argues that play doesn't simply copy reality – it often distorts it. More generally, Sutton-Smith proposes a much wider view with play having its own unique form that goes beyond just a cognitive, affective or purposeful function. Sutton-Smith also challenges the assertion that play becomes increasingly realistic with general development. Instead, he asserts that it becomes more complex and imaginative<sup>58</sup>.

## Lev Vygotsky

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), like Piaget, believed children actively construct their knowledge and understanding – children are not simply passive recipients. However, unlike Piaget, Vygotsky stressed the importance of social processes in learning and in particular language and the culture surrounding the person, believing children learn best through social interaction, and actively learning with others allows them to take on the values and norms of their particular society. Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky's theory has no stages of development and argues that children's learning leads rather than follows their development.

Vygotsky believed language was important in developing abstract thought. Many young children often talk to themselves in what is called private speech during play. For example, they might describe how they are playing with a particular toy or give a running commentary on their actions. Older children usually internalise this talk although it may reappear when faced with a challenging or difficult task. Vygotsky<sup>59</sup> thought that this private speech was a transition between social speech and internal or inner speech. It was important in the self-regulation of behaviour and in planning and could be used to facilitate thinking and enhance imagination.

A key concept in Vygotsky's work is the zone of proximal development, or ZPD. This concept explains how a child learns with the help of others, and, in particular, refers to the difference between what the child can achieve



independently – their level of actual development – and what they can achieve with the guidance of a more knowledgeable partner – their level of potential interaction.

To use the ZPD effectively any intervention should be beyond a child's existing developmental level so that it is challenging but not so far ahead that it is not comprehensible<sup>60</sup>. The art of effectively supporting a child to develop new information is often expertly done by more knowledgeable peers but can also be done effectively by adults and professionals that sensitively scaffold the skills or new knowledge through their involvement with the child. Telling a child that has never made a cake how to do so, is likely to be of little help. Making a cake a few times with a child and discussing what is going on will likely result in the child having developed the required skills and knowledge to do so for themselves.

## Vygotsky and play

Vygotsky believed that play was enormously influential in children's development although he focused his attention on make-believe and

dramatic play. Vygotsky's work captures some of the ambiguities and apparent contradictions that play contains, such as the child appearing to play freely yet submitting to the rules of the game<sup>61</sup>. Play teaches *'the child to guide her behaviour not only by immediate perception of objects or by the situation immediately affecting her but also by the meaning of this situation'*<sup>62</sup>. Vygotsky gives the example of two sisters playing at being sisters. Through assuming these roles, the sisters take on the social rules connected with being sisters and so become socialised.

Vygotsky believed that play does facilitate cognitive development and new learning. However, he thought that the relationship between play and development was indirect. He asserts that *'in play action is subordinated to meaning, but in real life, of course, action dominates meaning. Therefore, to consider play as the prototype of a child's everyday activity and its predominant form is completely incorrect'*<sup>63</sup>. Nevertheless, he asserts that *'the child moves forward essentially through play activity'*<sup>64</sup> and that it is the most significant source in preschool development.

## Criticisms

Vygotsky is frequently criticised for placing too much emphasis on social learning<sup>65</sup>. Brown<sup>66</sup> notes that ideas such as the zone of proximal development can wrongly be used as an excuse for adult interference in children's play, and for that reason the ZPD is often rejected as representing an adult approach that is too interventionist. Nevertheless, Brown<sup>67</sup> recognises that the ZPD is often the very mechanism that enables children to learn and develop while they are playing.

## Ecological theories

Ecological theories consider the relationship between the child and their social and physical environment (the ecology) in which the child develops. Human ecologists believe humans should be studied operating in their complex environments, and that they are subject to similar evolutionary processes as any other species<sup>68</sup>.

## Urie Bronfenbrenner

Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) is best known for his ecological systems theory of child development, the bioecological model. Bronfenbrenner's theory emphasises the importance of environmental factors on children's development. He asserts that development is the result of the mutually dependent interactions between individuals and their environments, that is, the environment influences the child and the child influences the environment. It stresses the influence of multiple contexts or 'layers' on the child and that it is important to have a broad inclusive view of development.

The layers of the child's ecosystem are nested one within the other. He called them the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. Embedded at the centre is the child

with its own unique combination of characteristics. Bronfenbrenner's approach dispenses with many aspects of the traditional developmental perspective such as assumptions about universal stages. Instead it considers child development as a series of exchanging processes involving the child and the environment, moving through time<sup>69</sup>.

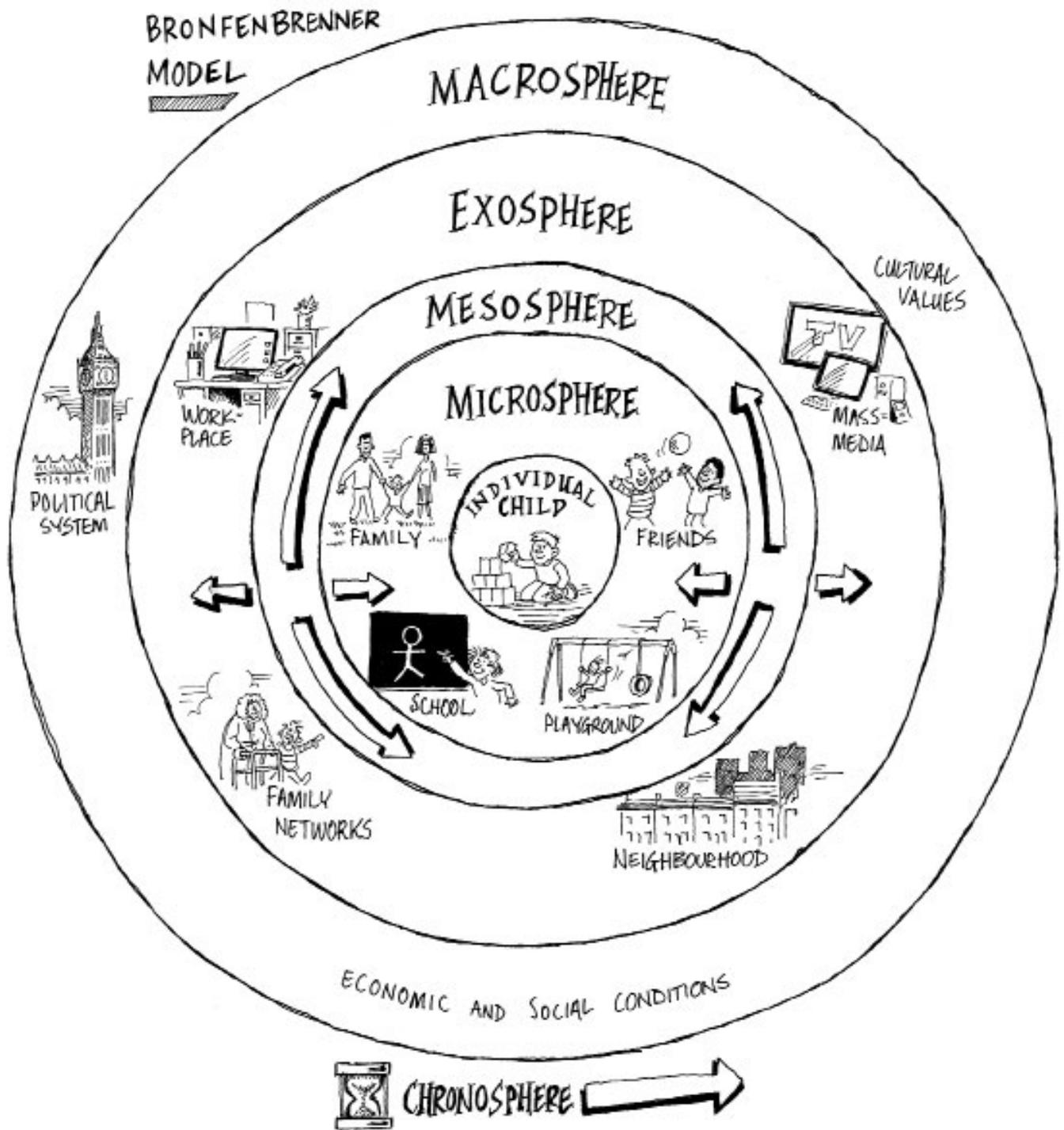
## Bronfenbrenner and play

Göncü and Gaskins<sup>70</sup> claim that play and its developmental functions can best be understood by considering some of the external contributions to play that act upon and structure children's individual expression. For example, some societies may encourage play, adult involvement in play, have access to or provide rich opportunities for play while others may not. Equally, children may be denied opportunities to play freely because they must help their family economically, or they may be denied because of fears about safety.

Each of these environmental factors combine to influence the child and their opportunities for play. Bronfenbrenner's model would seem well placed to represent some of this complexity. Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner recognised that play served to aid interpretation and representation of the child's socio-cultural context. As such his ideas could be used as a lens for reflection.

## Criticism

Bronfenbrenner's theory has generally been well regarded but one criticism is that whilst it may represent the complexity of real life, its very realism means it is difficult to test scientifically. Another criticism is that while it is adaptable and flexible the model does not provide any mechanism for how development occurs. It describes 'what' influences the child but not 'how'.



What has been introduced and discussed above is a very brief but nevertheless detailed introduction to some of the most dominant developmental theories influencing both understandings of child development and practice with children in the minority world. It will have been a challenging read for some new to the subject – well done for sticking with it.

You may be left wanting to understand more, because in the brevity of this introduction there is too little time to really explore the ideas. Much more can be learned from further reading but hopefully, this was an interesting and useful introduction. Return to it if you need and keep reflecting and thinking on the ideas. The remainder of this section moves on to consider more current ideas and concepts and is a gentler read.

## The playing child: beyond developmentalism

So far in this review of child development, we have examined some of the leading theoretical approaches of the last century. Of these the dominant voice has developed from the work of Piaget and has sometimes become known as 'developmentalism'.

*'This view is based on the idea that childhood is a universal experience during which all children progress through uniform, linear and progressive stages towards a state of completion called adulthood'*<sup>71</sup>.

From this perspective children are deficient of the full capabilities of the developed adult, this is often referred to as the 'deficit' view, where child development represents a progression from simplicity to complexity, and from the irrational to the rational<sup>72</sup>. In the structured stages of Piaget's theory children are effectively marginalised while they develop logical competence and await entry into the adult world<sup>73</sup>.

The difficulty with the strict developmentalist approach is that it is not supported by the wider historical, social and cultural studies<sup>74</sup>. Increasingly, this traditional perspective has been challenged by a more fluid and complex view of development in which genes, and the social, cultural, and physical environments interact with one another<sup>75</sup>. The relationship between these systems is bi-directional, that is, each affects and in turn is affected by, the others. For example, citing a wide range of research, Diamond suggests that what we think and feel affects how our bodies function and how our genes are expressed. Correspondingly, the health of our bodies affects how we think and how our brains work. In a similar way Rogoff<sup>76</sup> has written that we should rethink the cultural nature of human development so that it too becomes a mutual process. *'People contribute to the creation of cultural processes and cultural processes contribute to the creation of people'*<sup>77</sup>. All of these processes occur throughout human lifetime and not just in childhood.

As the old developmentalist approaches are challenged by more inclusive holistic views of development it is important we adopt a similarly wide conception of play. Children's extended period of immaturity allows for the opportunity playfully to test out a whole range of different responses to the environment. The more complex and flexible the organism, the longer the period of immaturity<sup>78</sup>. During this period, genes, hormones, neurons, maternal care, and the physical and social environment all contribute dynamically to produce behaviour<sup>79</sup>.

In this evolutionary developmental view, play functions as a mechanism to ensure children are better able to modify their behaviour and adapt to new environments, through what Sutton-Smith<sup>80</sup> calls 'adaptive variability'. Adaptable and flexible individuals are not only better able to respond to the challenges of their environment, over time individuals can also change and adapt the environments in which they live<sup>81</sup>. In this way they alter the environment for themselves and for others in the future. In the summary of their wide-ranging report *Play for a Change*, Lester and Russell<sup>82</sup> note that:

*'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.'*

For playworkers this reinforces the importance of supporting the conditions that encourage children's flexible behaviour. In practice this means creating flexible environments that are adaptable and controllable by children, where they can investigate and control their environment; where they can meet and make friends; where they can experiment and create under their own terms and in their own ways. It means recognising that play contributes towards multiple aspects of

development and that our role as playworkers is to ensure that this process is not compromised or taken over by other agendas<sup>83</sup>. Ultimately, it means recognising that play goes beyond any single aspect of development whether physical, social or psychological. As Sutton-Smith<sup>84</sup> suggests, it is essential for children's ability to survive.

## Resilience and well-being

One area that deserves further attention concerning children's development is how children are often able to develop strategies to overcome challenges and bounce back from adversity. Why are many children able to thrive despite growing up in difficult and threatening circumstances?

Resilience is a complex dynamic concept often defined as how well we respond and adapt to events and experiences in our lives – both the good ones, the very challenging and worrying ones. More precisely, Rutter<sup>85</sup> defines resilience as having a number of features including:

- Relative resistance to environmental risks
- or**
- The overcoming of stress or adversity
- or**
- A relatively good outcome despite risk experiences.

In this way, resilience is not just social competence or positive mental health. Resilience can be viewed as an outcome and a process. Resilient children are able to resist adversity, manage and cope with uncertainty and recover successfully from trauma<sup>86</sup>. Resilience is not a single trait – it contains many different processes and attributes and there are multiple pathways to resilience<sup>87</sup>.

Masten<sup>88</sup> describing key lessons from recent research on resilience, notes that resilience is common. Indeed, all children are born with the capacity to develop the traits commonly found in resilient individuals: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose and optimism<sup>89</sup>.

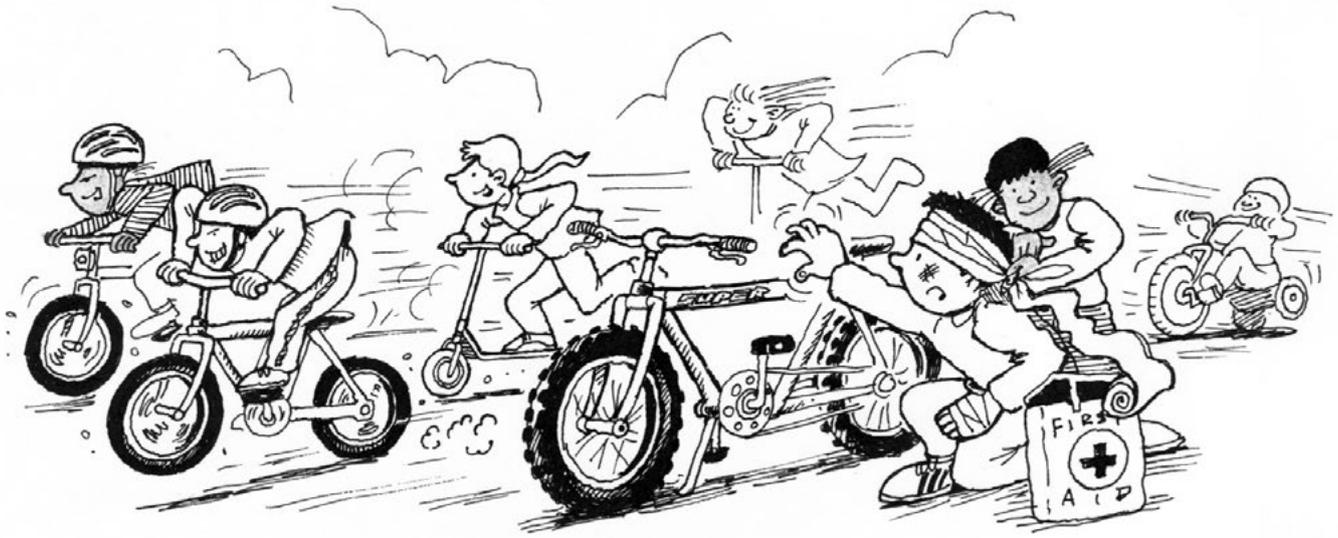
*'The development of resilience is none other than the process of healthy human development – a dynamic process in which personality and environmental influences interact in a reciprocal, transactional relationship'*<sup>90</sup>.

What is the relationship between resilience and children's play? Lester and Russell<sup>91</sup> write that children's play is a mechanism for survival and protection and offers the possibility to enhance adaptive qualities and resilience. This can occur because play acts across several adaptive systems including: pleasure and enjoyment; emotion regulation; stress response system; attachment; and learning and creativity<sup>92</sup>.

Lester and Russell note that while many studies of resilience focus on severe stress and trauma, *'the capacity to develop a resilience profile may be established through everyday, ordinary, mundane experiences'*<sup>93</sup>. For example, these include the pleasure and enjoyment that play often brings and these *'positive affects can promote resilience, which can have lasting beneficial effects for many emotional problems'*<sup>94</sup>. Panksepp and Biven<sup>95</sup> note that resilience is increased by direct physically playful engagements. They suggest that these 'interpersonal delights' are sadly neglected in traditional psychotherapy. It is vitally important that as playworkers we recognise and facilitate physical play of all kinds including rough and tumble.

Significant amounts of stress such as that caused by violence, bullying, discrimination, abuse, poverty, excessive traffic, and over protection, all seriously impair children's capacity to play and damage children's health and well-being.

Yet in playful situations, small manageable doses of stress and negative emotions can be beneficial and facilitate long-term psychological resilience<sup>96</sup>. Play allows children to create and control a virtual simulation of their thoughts and urges, and in so doing enhances their adaptability and resilience. Lester and Russell<sup>97</sup> declare that play deliberately introduces disorder, uncertainty and a degree of stress to triumph over it. They emphasise that the



crucial point about whether the degree of stress leads to vulnerability or resilience is the degree of control the child has over it. This is a point reinforced by Brown and Patte<sup>98</sup> who highlight three forms of stress – positive, tolerable and toxic. They suggest the first two are perfectly acceptable (maybe even beneficial), while the third, which is characterised by children being unable to control their own destiny, is seriously dangerous.

Not everyone agrees that children are resilient, for example Perry<sup>99</sup> argues that children are not resilient but malleable. However, Hughes<sup>100</sup> states that these two characteristics are simply different intensities of the same thing. Resilience is characterised by changeability, light-heartedness, rebound and flexibility – each of which is also a major characteristic of the trial and error nature of the play experience. Drawing on Sutton-Smith<sup>101</sup>, Hughes goes on to suggest that resilience results from children's tendency towards unrealistic optimism, egocentricity and reactivity. In other words, it is a consequence of young children usually being:

- Liable to over-estimate their abilities and skills
- Likely to see things from their own perspective
- Highly responsive to any stimuli they come across.

Children's optimism makes them persistent, and their egocentricity – a negative in Piaget's scheme – means that they learn and remember more effectively. While play has an essential role in building children's resilience we must remember that:

*'These benefits arise from play's unpredictability, spontaneity, nonsense and irrationality, and also from children's sense of control. Adults need to ensure that the physical and social environments in which children live are supportive of their play; otherwise their survival, well-being and development may be compromised.'*<sup>102</sup>

Lester and Russell<sup>103</sup> note that the foundation of resilience is a sufficient stock of 'good things' in everyday life.

## Conclusions and key concepts for practice

We appreciate this first section has the potential to be a demanding read, and to those for whom it was a real challenge we commend your dedication. Children are complex beings and to oversimplify the wealth of ideas and research available to inform us would be to diminish the worth of children themselves. Good child centred intuition and a play centred approach will be fundamental to good playwork as will a sound theoretical base.

Given the number of different approaches and professional disciplines involved in the study of childhood and children's development it's easy to assume that there is little agreement on how children's development occurs, and certainly no single accepted integrated scientific theory. However, there have been attempts to summarise the current state of knowledge on children's development. In the US in 2000 and updated in 2012 the national advisory bodies on science, engineering and medicine came together to produce an interdisciplinary report outlining the best available knowledge. Entitled *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*<sup>104</sup> it reported the following key concepts about human development:

- Human development is shaped by a dynamic and continuous interaction between biology and experience
- Culture influences every aspect of human development
- Self-regulation is a cornerstone of early childhood development
- Children are active participants in their own development
- Human relationships are the building blocks of healthy development
- The individual differences among children make it difficult to distinguish normal variations from transient disorders and persistent impairments
- Children's development progresses on individual paths characterised by continuities and discontinuities
- Development is shaped by sources of vulnerability and sources of resilience
- The timing of early experiences can matter but the developing child remains vulnerable to risks and open to protective influences throughout their early lives
- Development can be altered in childhood by effective interventions that shift the odds in favour of more adaptive outcomes.



# Perspectives on childhood

## A brief history

Rooted in western history is a conception of the child as alternatively innocent and wicked, good and evil, and these contradictory views remain powerful influences today. They were expressed by Nietzsche<sup>105</sup> in his Apollonian versus Dionysian dialectic (broadly speaking, the rational versus the emotional). Brown<sup>106</sup> suggests that in both cases the child is seen as a problem.

In the Apollonian view, the child is immature and not yet fully rational, and is therefore seen as a 'problematic innocent' (in need of protection). In the Dionysian view, the child is seen by some as the 'devil incarnate'. At best they are seen as a mischievous rascal having fun (and in need of control).

Kehily<sup>107</sup> outlines three key historical influences that have shaped current ideas about childhood. Our views about the innocence of children are usually traced back to the work of Rousseau (1712-87) and the romantic writers and poets such as Blake, Wordsworth, and Dickens. In their view, the child was pure, innocent and naïve, and only corrupted by contact with the world. John Locke (1632-1704) popularised a view that children were born as 'blank slates' free of innate ideas and original sin<sup>108</sup>. The romantic view of childhood has been and remains highly influential especially in the media and in the popular conception of childhood. However, it is not supported by modern evolutionary and genetic science. Finally, an even earlier influence was the Puritan ethic and the doctrines of the early Calvinist Protestants who considered the child depraved and doomed to sin unless controlled by parents.

All of these ideas can be seen combined in the Victorian age with its inconsistent and sometimes disturbing attitude towards children. Gubar<sup>109</sup> describes how, on the one hand, children were sentimentally celebrated as the innocent ideal and reformers and educationists campaigned to improve the lives of poor children. On the other hand, reforms were slow and children were a source of cheap labour for the growing economy,

with many adults believing that work was good for children as '*Satan finds mischief for idle hands to do*'.

Today, the idea of childhood is contested. Every aspect of children's lives is under intense scrutiny and debate. In the west, governments make statements on every aspect of children's development, health and well-being, and education; concerns about abuse and children's protection are rampant; and parents and their children are bombarded with advice and often blame. There are frequent outcries about obesity, alcohol, drugs, and crime, and large numbers of best-selling books feature stories about childhood traumas. It appears that adult concerns about children have never been higher yet there are many competing voices. Some look back to a supposed 'golden age' of innocence and responsibility, while others point to the cruelty and abuse of previous times. What is our current perspective on childhood?

## What do we mean by childhood?

For developmentalists childhood is a period between birth and adulthood in which children grow and mature physically, cognitively, emotionally, and socially. In their view, development is usually divided into stages, and children's development is often considered as a series of milestones. The ideas of developmental psychology have been enormously influential on the way adults think about children. Although the specific details of individual theories may not be commonly understood, adults generally think about children going through specific stages and developing from relative inadequacy to relative competence<sup>110</sup>. It's not unusual to hear the phrase '*It's just a phase they're going through*', or, '*They'll grow out of it*'. It's important to note at this point, that childhood is usually considered to end at the legal threshold of adulthood. This is usually between 15 and 21 years and typically in many countries, including the UK, 18 years.

The developmentalist's view, however, is by no means the only way of thinking about childhood. During the last generation or so there has been a fundamental change in the study of childhood.

The existing dominance of developmental psychology has been challenged by approaches from sociology and cultural studies. Drawing on the work of the French historian Philippe Ariès, modern sociologists have argued that views about childhood have changed over the centuries and that childhood is not a natural or universal feature<sup>111</sup>. Instead they hold that childhood is a social construction.

Social constructionists don't deny the biological facts of children's growth and the process of maturing, however they argue that it is immaturity, rather than childhood, which is a universal and natural feature of children's development. In this approach James and Prout propose that *'the immaturity of children is a biological fact of life but the ways in which it is understood and made meaningful is a fact of culture'*<sup>112</sup>. They suggest that the key features of this new way of thinking are the following:

- Childhood is a social construction
- Childhood is a variable of social analysis
- Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right
- Children are and should be seen as active social agents and not just passive subjects of social structures and processes
- Ethnography (the study of people and cultures) is a valuable methodology for studying childhood
- The study of childhood influences and is influenced by the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

One of the main criticisms of the 'grand theories' of child development, such as some of the ones we examined previously, is that despite providing many insights they have surprisingly little to say about children's daily lives. Childhood is not universal, nor can it be regarded as a single category. What it means and how it is experienced depends on many factors including gender, ethnicity, social class, location and so on. It is experienced differently: by different children in different places. Perhaps, as some

have suggested, we should talk about childhoods rather than childhood?<sup>113</sup>.

The traditional way of seeing childhood is as a nurturing but controlling response from competent rational adults to needy and incompetent children. Kehily writes:

*'Within this discourse the child is always in the process of becoming, an adult-in-the-making with specific educational needs that adults should take seriously. It is the responsibility of adults to provide the appropriate education and control to enable children to develop into mature and responsible citizens'*<sup>114</sup>.

Sociological based views reject these positions and instead consider the developing child as capable and active with opinions that matter. *'Children are not incomplete human beings to be shaped into society's mould. They have needs and aspirations of their own, and rights which must be respected. Above all, their childhood is an opportunity'*<sup>115</sup>.

A recurring criticism about the debates on childhood is that all too often they have simply reflected particular minority world cultural practices and that these have been shaped by goals and expectations for children's readiness for school<sup>116</sup> often eclipsing other equally important issues. Access to clean water and sanitation; proper nutrition; immunisation; protection from violence, crime, enforced labour and trafficking; proper education and safe places to play are all vital for children yet these basic requirements are frequently lacking. Cross cultural examples highlight these inequalities but can also challenge our views. For example, Goldstein<sup>117</sup> writes that childhood in Brazil is a privilege of the rich and is practically non-existent for the poor.

Whilst Brown<sup>118</sup> describes how, despite being amongst the most materially deprived children in Europe, children from a Transylvanian Roma community he studied are incredibly happy. He asks, is this because they are free to play how and wherever and whenever they please, or is it because they can play with friends and relations, or perhaps is it caused by the strength

of their common culture? Prout cautions that although poor children certainly do need urgent improvements in their social and economic conditions, it is important not to assume that there is only one childhood and that childhood is the experience of the rich. Equally, it is important not to assume any direct link between the quality of opportunities for play a child may experience and their economic context.

## Competent children

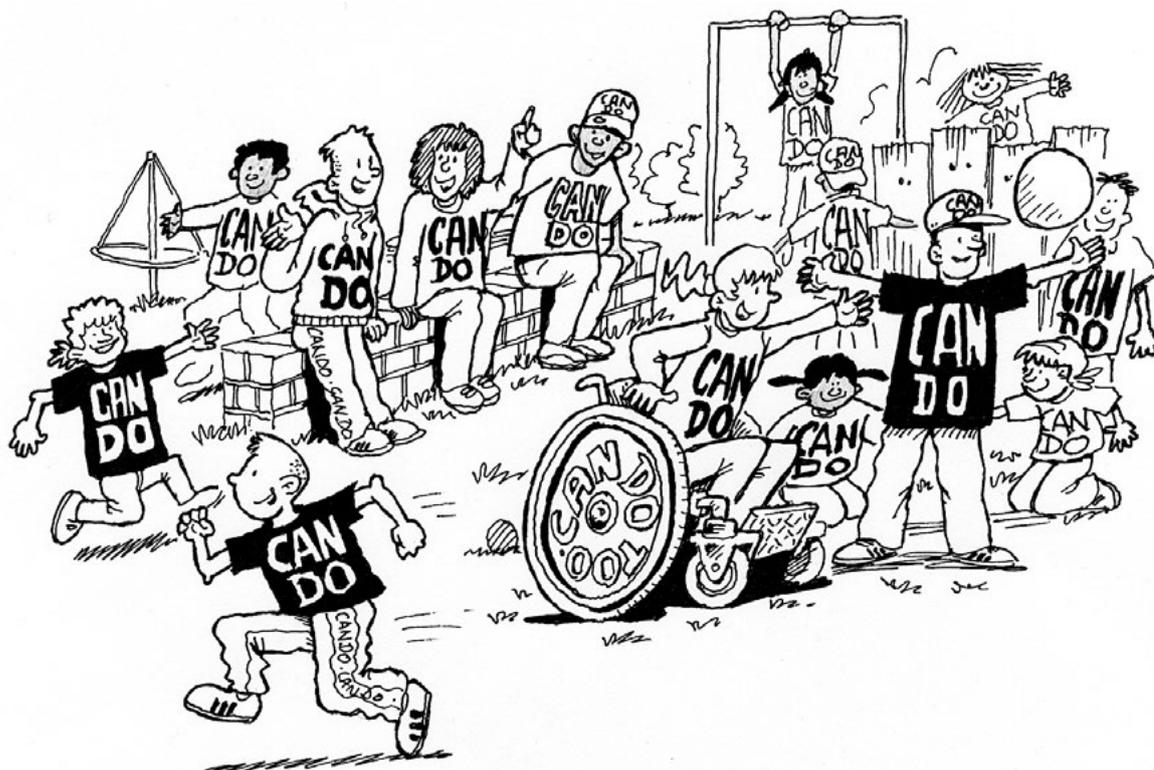
A key area in the discussion about childhood concerns adult views of children's competence. In the UK we hold a somewhat contradictory position about this. On the one hand we deem children criminally responsible at the age of 10 (12 in Scotland), yet the traditional position is that children are incomplete adults not able to make valuable decisions, and potentially a threat to themselves and others due to their lack of reasoning and experience<sup>119</sup>.

Woodhead<sup>120</sup> asserts that '*Children are not incomplete human beings to be shaped into society's mould. They have needs and aspirations of their own, and rights which must be respected*'.

Stainton Rogers<sup>121</sup> points out, although childhood is a time of considerable growth and development it doesn't mean that children are somehow 'less' than adults and not deserving of the same rights and respects. The danger of the needs discourse is that it allows adults to abuse the power it gives them. Phrases like '*in the best interest of the child*' can be used as a smokescreen to sanction actions that instead serve adult interests and purposes. Examples from playwork might include opening hours that are arranged to suit adult and not children's needs, or artificially limiting the age of the children who can attend a particular play provision '*to keep them safe*'. As playworkers we must always ask ourselves '*Whose needs am I serving by doing this?*'

## Children's rights

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)<sup>122</sup> is the single most comprehensive instrument of human rights law and is the most widely accepted treaty in world history. On 26 January 1990, the Convention was opened for signature with 61 countries signing on that day. Governments who agree to it (all, except the USA) must ensure a complete range of human rights based around four key principles:



1. **Non-discrimination:** The Convention applies to all children whatever their race, religion, ability, gender, background or any other category.
2. **The best interest of the child:** Adults must do what is best for children and consider their interests when making decisions that affect them.
3. **Right to life and development:** Governments must protect the lives of children and ensure their healthy development.
4. **Respect for the views of the child:** When adults make decisions about children they must listen to their views according to the child's level of maturity.

The United Kingdom signed or 'ratified' the Convention on 16 December 1991. Ratification means that a government ('State Party') is declaring their intention to uphold the articles in the Convention and weave these into their country's legislation. The Welsh Government formally adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2004, committing itself to making the principles of the UNCRC a reality for all children and teenagers.

Each State Party must also submit a national report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child every five years, to show how they are ensuring compliance and improving on their previous report. The Committee investigates these reports, taking additional evidence from non-government organisations and charities and in turn produces its own 'concluding observations', making recommendations to each country for further improvement.

The Convention is a wide-ranging treaty addressing the rights of children and teenagers – that is everyone under the age of 18 years – and the resultant obligations on governments to recognise and realise these rights.

The Convention has 54 articles – the first 42 set out how children should be treated and Articles 43 to 54 set out how adults and governments should co-operate to ensure that all children's rights are

promoted and fulfilled, with full regard for their origins, status and ability. The Convention also makes clear that these rights are interdependent and indivisible – no-one's entitlements should be met at the expense of anyone else.

All the articles are important but perhaps for playworkers there are three significant articles. These are:

### Article 31

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.

In effect, Article 31 says that children have a right to play and that governments should provide opportunities for children to play.

### Article 15

1. States Parties recognise the rights of the child to freedom of association and to freedom of peaceful assembly.
2. No restrictions may be placed on the exercise of these rights other than those imposed in conformity with the law and which are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of national security or public safety, public order, the protection of public health or morals or the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

In effect, Article 15 says that children have the right to hang out, socialise, be with their friends in public and that this should not be curtailed or constrained for any other reason than breaking of laws or the diminishment of somebody else's rights.

## Article 12

1. States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

In effect, Article 12 says that when adults take decisions that affect children, children should be able to express their opinions and be listened to.

The articles are often grouped into what is described as the three P's:

- **Protection** – Children have the right to be protected from abuse, exploitation and harmful influences
- **Participation** – Children have the right to participate fully in family, social and cultural life
- **Provision** – Children have the right to survive and for their developmental needs to be met.

The debate about children's rights has always been influenced, on the one hand, by concern for children's welfare, and anxieties over parental rights and family privacies on the other<sup>123</sup>. In this debate, some rights have proven more controversial than others. Issues around child safety and, in particular, protection from physical and sexual abuse, remain high on the policy agenda. However, rights that underpin children's autonomy are far more threatening to many adults<sup>124</sup>, and, we believe, far more likely to be ignored or given token acceptance. This is despite the assertion that the rights of the child contained in the Convention are indivisible and interdependent.

This ambivalence between rights that protect and rights that support autonomy is nowhere better illustrated than with children's play. The need for safe places to play usually receives universal support (although less often resources), and play, when co-opted for educational purposes, is uncontroversial. However, when children play in ways that they determine – ways that are often

perceived as risky, chaotic and disruptive of authority – there are far fewer adults advocating for children's right to play.

Lester and Russell<sup>125</sup> have demonstrated how each of these categories relates to children's play and what this means for adult recognition of play as a right. The right to play contained within the Convention was clarified for governments worldwide in 2013 with the adoption of a General Comment on the meaning and importance of Article 31<sup>126</sup>.

A General Comment is an official statement that clarifies and elaborates on the meaning of a particular aspect of the Convention. It aims to raise the importance of the Article and increase accountability among the countries that have signed up to the Convention.

The General Comment on Article 31 aims to raise awareness of play worldwide and provide guidance to governments on what they must do to implement it. Its three objectives are to:

- Increase understanding of the importance of the Article for children's well-being and development
- Ensure respect for the rights under Article 31 as well as other rights in the Convention
- Highlight the obligations and implications for governments, the roles and responsibilities of the private sector, and guidelines for individuals working with children.



## Concerns about childhood

A powerful force on our conception of childhood is the influence of the media, and images and stories about children and childhood are ever-present and rarely without clear moral overtones. Portraits of children as angels or devils abound. Fuelled by high profile cases of abuse and violence involving children, media commentators, politicians and many others frequently invoke the idea of crisis<sup>127</sup>. This view connects powerfully with the idea of innocence lost, and a desire for a return to a better more 'natural' time.

Kehily<sup>128</sup> suggests that this view of childhood as debased and in crisis is a reflection of adult anxieties and insecurities in new and uncertain times. Certainly, it can be difficult to be objective when thinking about children's experiences when so many views about it are presented in dramatic extremes. Despite the intensity of recent debates about the nature of modern childhood, governments and academics have been concerned about childhood for at least a hundred and fifty years – ever since the state began to take some responsibility for children's well-being<sup>129</sup>.

Wyness<sup>130</sup> identifies three distinct themes in the crises that surround childhood:

1. The association of youth and trouble
2. The street child as a visible and worrying symptom of social disintegration in developed societies
3. The child 'trapped in the net' whose play and ultimately their innocence, has been compromised by technology.

Adults, and in particular, parents and teachers, are worried about children's happiness. In these debates there is often a disconnection between children's and adult's voices, and it is essential that we listen to what children have to say about their lives. These comments should inform central and local government decision-making<sup>131</sup>.

However, when asked, children are considerably more optimistic than adults. Alexander<sup>132</sup> suggests

that a better question might be, why are so many adults worried about Britain's children?

*'What we may well be witnessing at the moment, therefore, is in part a justified concern about the condition of childhood today – especially in relation to those children and families who are vulnerable and suffer poverty, disadvantage, inequality and marginalisation – and in part a projection onto children of adult fears and anxieties, not least about the kind of society and world which adults have created'*.<sup>133</sup>

## Conclusions

In his conclusion on the childhoods of children today, Cunningham<sup>134</sup> suggests that we should reflect on the one striking difference between childhood now and childhood over the past millennium. Children in the past were regularly assumed and relied upon to have capabilities that are now rarely considered. Children worked in factories and cleaned chimneys, although, as Cunningham says, we wouldn't want children to do these things today. Nevertheless, children could do these things.

*'So fixated are we on giving our children a long and happy childhood that we downplay their abilities and their resilience. To think of children as potential victims in need of protection is a very modern outlook, and it probably does no-one a service'*.<sup>135</sup>

Jones<sup>136</sup> provides a more optimistic view in his summary of the differences between the recent views of childhood and the previous traditional understanding as:

- *'capable rather than incapable*
- *active rather than passive*
- *visible rather than invisible*
- *powerful rather than vulnerable and needy*
- *valued and attended to in the present rather than seen and attended to as an investment for the future*
- *an individual with their own capacities rather than a mini-adult lacking in full adult capacities'*.

In this overview of perspectives on childhood we have attempted to counterbalance some of the attention given to the developmental psychological theories that focus on children's biological nature, by looking at approaches that emphasise the impact of culture on development. However, it could be argued that this is also just one way of looking at childhood.

Prout<sup>137</sup> writes that childhood is part natural and part social. Children are individuals and part of society – they are 'beings and becomings'<sup>138</sup>.

What is needed is a way of thinking about both that doesn't artificially set them in opposition; an approach that is tolerant of ambiguity, much like our approach to play itself.

Finally, perhaps children's writer Michael Morpurgo provides a sensible place for us to conclude this section:

*'Childhoods, I have discovered, may have changed, been reinvented through the ages, but children have not'*<sup>139</sup>.



# Playwork Principles in practice

## Playwork Principles 3 to 8

Having explored some of the theories and concepts underpinning and influencing playwork and in particular, Playwork Principles 1 and 2 we can explore how Playwork Principles 3 to 8 influence practice. In this section we will examine the playwork role and how it both affects and is affected by the environment and the children. It considers how the play process is given precedence and how playworkers balance the developmental benefits of play with children's well-being.

### Playwork Principle 3

*The prime focus and essence of playwork is to **support and facilitate** the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.*

Playwork Principle 3 is an unambiguous statement about what playworkers do and informs the remaining Principles. The playing child is at the centre of our practice and facilitating the play process is the primary reason for the existence of the playwork profession.

Note the significance of the words 'support and facilitate'. These imply that playworkers aid, help and assist the playing child – they do not lead, control or educate. This is particularly important to remember in relation to assisting a disabled child to access their play. As the previous two Principles make clear, play is a process that should be under the control of the child and if we are to facilitate it effectively, then we must adopt a sensitive and thoughtful approach that is wary of taking over or adulterating. We work 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'*<sup>140</sup>.

Despite this insistence that the focus of playwork is the playing child, it is all too common to encounter playwork practice that is dominated by other concerns, such as compliance with regulations and legislation, health and safety

fears, education, the needs of working parents, or crime prevention. Where playworkers have a responsibility to oversee or develop policy, procedures, strategy or training, then they ensure that, whatever their particular message, everything they do whether directly or indirectly should ultimately be in the service of supporting and facilitating children's play.

### Playwork Principle 4

*For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.*

Children make it very clear that they want and need to play. Despite this need being recognised as a universal right, in practice it is often ignored, overlooked or drowned out by adult concerns. At the 2011 International Play Association (IPA) World Conference, the Children's Commissioner for Wales told delegates about a town where a highly valued play space that had been used for generations was destroyed to make way for new houses. The local children were not consulted. Playworkers have a responsibility to speak up for children: *'we need to be bold enough and strong enough to shout very loudly indeed when people make decisions that will actually damage children's lives now'*<sup>141</sup>.

The child's agenda should be our agenda and this approach is distinct to playworkers. Sometimes, especially when burdened with managerial responsibilities, it is possible to feel swamped by the weight of competing demands that seem far removed from supporting the play process. During these times it becomes vital to remember that the play process takes precedence. For a further discussion about the pressures that can lead playworkers to compromise their principles and whether these can be managed effectively, see Mike Wragg's reflections on 'Guerrilla playwork' in *Foundations of Playwork*<sup>142</sup>.

Playworkers speak up for playing children at every level of society, from campaigning and influencing national and regional policies to

chatting about play with a local parent over a cup of tea. Consequently, this responsibility to advocate for play means we all should be able to explain why and how we facilitate play and the local conditions that might promote or hinder it.

## Playwork Principle 5

*The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.*

Playworkers do this by removing barriers to play, providing a varied and flexible environment rich with possibilities, providing affective stimuli and access to loose parts and facilitating opportunities in which children can engage with risk and challenge. Play spaces need to be accessible, inclusive and flexible enough to meet the changing play needs of children. Good play spaces genuinely look and feel as though they belong to the children who use them, and '*children perceive and treat the environment as their own*'<sup>143</sup>. The atmosphere and sense of freedom to play that the environment offers is crucial to its effectiveness.

As such, this Principle can create particular challenges for playworkers working in shared spaces. These spaces inevitably entail some compromise in the ownership of the space and often require creative solutions to ensure children feel proper ownership.

## Playwork Principle 6

*The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.*

Until comparatively recently there was little widespread shared understanding of what constituted effective playwork. Good practice was often isolated and new understandings not shared beyond local areas. Documents like *The First Claim ... a framework for playwork quality assessment*<sup>144</sup> and the Playwork Principles<sup>145</sup> together with various theoretical advances have led to a wider understanding and the establishment of a professional ethos.

It has allowed us to deepen our understanding, advocate more effectively for the right to play, and ensure quality in provision, training and education, and policy.

The playwork approach is, as we have seen, one where children are able to control their own play. It is also one where those practicing playwork are required to respond to sometimes subtle, complex cues and signals, and to keep an open mind without jumping to conclusions or prejudging a situation. Added to this there may be organisational and managerial demands to balance. This is a complex role to master, and demands an honesty about one's own motives and beliefs. Reflective practice allows us to examine thoughts and feelings and to question judgements. Using reflective practice before, during and after play can help those practicing playwork 'practice with principle'<sup>146</sup>. Reflective practice is a crucial skill for playworkers and is discussed more in Volume 3: Developing and managing a playwork project.

## Playwork Principle 7

*Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.*

In a space where children genuinely have the freedom to play in their own way, those practicing playwork can find themselves faced with play behaviour that is in turn puzzling, inspiring, challenging, inviting, or at odds with their personal beliefs and values, and deliberately or unconsciously being drawn into the children's play. Without self-knowledge and the ability to reflect on practice, the danger of taking over and adulterating the play is always present.

Our tendency as adults is to protect, teach or socialise, and this construct of adult-child relations is often deeply embedded in social policies<sup>147</sup>. Those practicing playwork need to be active in continually examining their motives to avoid sleepwalking towards a practice that organises and directs, rather than one that facilitates and supports. Furthermore, as adults we may have dormant unfulfilled play urges that

can be awoken when invited to play by children. Termed 'unplayed out materials' by Sturrock, these can adulterate children's play if not recognised and addressed<sup>148</sup>.

## Playwork Principle 8

*Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well-being of children.*

Playwork intervention is a conscious act. To avoid adopting an automatic, unthinking response playworkers first need to be alert to a range of options and then select the approach most likely to extend playing. This approach may well be subtle, non-intrusive or may even involve not intervening at all. There are times when immediate intervention is necessary to prevent serious or imminent harm. Harm must be a real possibility to make intervention essential and not just because of a personal fear of heights, for example. Even intervening in such a situation, it may be possible to remain playful. *'We may distract or redirect the child, or reframe the playing, rather than directly tell her to stop what she is doing'*<sup>149</sup>.

Since the publication of the Playwork Principles, approaches that balance risks with the benefits of play to children have been formalised in a number of strategies and guides including advice from the Health and Safety Executive<sup>150</sup>.

These approaches require weighing up the likely benefits of a particular action and comparing them against potential risks to decide whether a risk intrinsic to a play opportunity is worth taking. Risk-benefit assessment and dynamic risk-benefit assessment will be discussed in more depth in Volume 2 – Practicing playwork, and will also be discussed in Volume 3: Developing and managing a playwork project and Volume 4: Managing playworkers and working with other adults.

## Conclusions

Taken as a whole, the Playwork Principles provide an essential underpinning philosophy – a concise guide to what we do and what we believe about the value of play in children and teenagers' lives. The Playwork Principles offer a framework to analyse and assess practice and provide a common ethos to compare and contrast experience and understanding with others.

Since the Principles were endorsed in 2005, playwork has inevitably moved on with new theoretic insights and changes in practice. Some writers such as Brown<sup>151</sup> have suggested additions to the Principles, to better illustrate how playworkers engage with children. However, to date they remain unchanged. Whatever form they take in the future, the Playwork Principles encapsulate our professional ethos and provide the scaffolding to our approach to play and playwork.



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# Appendix: Playwork Principles

The Playwork Principles establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork and as such must be regarded as a whole. They describe what is unique about play and playwork, and provide the playwork perspective for working with children and young people. They are based on the recognition that children and young people's capacity for positive development will be enhanced if given access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.

Where the Principles refer to children and young people, they mean **all** children and young people.

- 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.
- 3** The prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process and this should inform the development of play policy, strategy, training and education.
- 4** For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.
- 5** The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play.
- 6** The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice.
- 7** Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.
- 8** Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play. All playworker intervention must balance risk with the developmental benefit and well being of children.

*The Playwork Principles are held in trust for the UK playwork profession by the Scrutiny Group that acted as an honest broker overseeing the consultations through which they were developed.*

# Notes



[www.playwales.org.uk](http://www.playwales.org.uk)