

## The role of the early childhood worker in encouraging play

### Time to play

Children need plenty of free choice of activity in order to play. They also need time to play. A rigid timetable makes it very difficult for them to develop deep-quality free flowing play. Play cannot flow under these circumstances, and this means that learning will be held back. If adults truly believe that play is central to learning, play - including free- flow play -needs to be encouraged by flexible time tabling of the day.

### Making space for play-indoors and outdoors

Play does not happen to adult order. Both the indoor and outdoor areas need to be made into spaces which encourage the children to develop their *own* play.

### Material provision

Children need things to play with -they need play props. These will need to be made, or suitable play clothes and props can be found in the materials provided. Staff will be making plans for the children based on their observations of how the children play. They will choose play props which encourage the children to play more deeply.

## CHOOSING PLAY MATERIALS

Children do not need expensive equipment in order to play. Children can play with all sorts of things. They will use whatever they find as play props. By the river, for example, they will be finding twigs and pebbles. In the park, they will be running and using the space. In the garden, they will be climbing. On the sea shore, they will find pebbles, seaweed, rock pools and sand. In a room, likewise, they will use the material provisions that adults put there. It is very important that adults choose materials very carefully and thoroughly plan the physical environment. Then, children can get the most out of opportunities for free-flow play.

- ▶ **Pre-structured materials** more often hold back rather than encourage free-flow play. If there is only one way of doing things, children cannot develop in their imaginative play, dwell on their feelings, or sort out their relationships with each other. And they will probably carry out a very narrow range of physical actions. An example of pre-structured materials is a posting box. So-called educational toys, made by commercial manufacturers and usually very expensive, are often pre-structured in this way.
- ▶ **Open-ended materials** encourage children to think, feel, socialise or concentrate deeply alone, and use a range of fine and gross motor skills. Examples of open-ended materials would be:
  - found materials, used in junk modelling;
  - transforming raw materials like clay and dough, and *self-service* areas in the provision;
  - wooden blocks;

- the home area.

It is important for children to use scissors, for example, for fine motor skills, and for them to learn to put straws in cartons of fruit juice, rather than to do exercises that are split off from life. Learning and exercise split off from the day-to-day context of a child's life can actually stop children from learning very well. When life becomes a drudge, full of boring repetitive exercises, children quickly lose the excitement of learning. It is therefore better to avoid pre-structured toys and encourage open-ended traditional toys such as dolls, peg and rag dolls, a set of wooden blocks etc.

When children play they need:

- ▶ people who help them to play;
- ▶ places to play (dens, home area, outdoor areas);
- ▶ play props which are open-ended and can be used in all sorts of ways.

Think about this when you arrange indoor and outdoor spaces. It is also probably best, in trying to provide an environment which encourages children to play, if much attention be given to the *maintenance* of the material provision. Such maintenance involves ensuring safety, but it also means keeping the children's interest.

### **Structured play-or working towards play**

Adult-led tasks are often called 'tutor-led play', 'guided play', or 'structured play'. In this approach, the adult teaches children to play. For example, there is first a visit to a real shop. A play shop is then set up in the room, and the adult shows the child how to 'play shops' guiding them through it. It is very important first to teach children what is involved in play so that they can then develop their own play.

In the Oxford Studies in the 1980s, two settings were studied in Miami and Oxford. Children in Miami were involved in adult-led, structured play. The children in this study were less involved in what they were doing than the children in Oxford. In Oxford the children were given more opportunities for free-flow play.

There need to be some adult-led sessions where children are introduced to the materials first through real experience -using them in cooking, for example -and then by using them with the adult in the home area. Children would then gradually use the experiences themselves in their own free-flow play, both safely and creatively.

Having to complete adult-led tasks i.e. 'work' before being allowed to play undermines play. But play is also undervalued when adults leave children without any help when they play-in these situations, indeed, the play quickly becomes repetitive and superficial. If adults are only found in those areas where children are doing 'work', while children are being sent off to 'play' without any help, this gives children unfortunate messages about the way that adults undervalue their play.

Free-flow play literally occurs when the play begins to flow with quality according to the twelve features described earlier in this chapter. Free-flow play can fade and vanish in a moment. Adults can be a great help to children in keeping it going.

It is important to note that free-flow play, although less directly structured by adults, is in no way inferior to the cookery session, or to the guided session with the adult. In fact, free-flow play shows children using a very high level of knowledge and understanding, as well as a sensitivity to others and their feelings. Children really appreciate adults who sensitively help them to keep their play flowing.

There is widespread misunderstanding about play. Those who are uninformed about its importance tend to see value only when it is structured by adults. These are often the very adults who worry later on when children cannot create their own stories to write. They do not grasp the connection.

### **Types of play**

Different types of play have been described by early childhood workers of all kinds. These different types have been linked with:

- ▶ particular kinds of material provision -the home area, construction kits, the outdoor area, natural materials, a messy area, a computer, wooden blocks, climbing frames, bats/balls, hoops, clay, paint;
- ▶ different aspects of the child's development -manipulative play/practice play/repetitive play, symbolic play, superhero play, exploratory play, discovery play, investigative play, pretend play, ludic play, heuristic play, role play, therapeutic play, solitary play, parallel play, cooperative play, epistemic play, imaginative play, physical play, manipulative play, creative play, rough-and-tumble play, boisterous play, fantasy play, socio-dramatic play, phantasy play.

The word play is widely used, often without much thought. In the following breakdown of different kinds of play, you will find play given a high status.

### **Free-flow play**

This is where the child learns at the highest level, using ideas, feelings and relationships that have been experienced, and applies these to what they know and understand with control, mastery and competence. It involves the twelve features of play stated earlier in this chapter (see p. 241).

1. **Symbolic play** (usually from 1 year): this includes pretend play, role play, socio-dramatic play and imaginative play:
  - ▶ **Pretend play** or **ludic play**: when an action or object is given a meaning symbolically which is different from real life -a clothes peg becomes a door key.
  - ▶ **Role play**: this occurs when 'pretend' symbols are used together -the child pretends to drive to the shops and locks the door with a pretend clothes-peg key, sits on a box (a car) and turns the steering wheel (holds a plate and twists it round), and pretends to be the parent 'doing a shop' for the family.
  - ▶ **Socio-dramatic play**: when several children role-play and pretend-play together.
  - ▶ **Imaginative play** or **creative play**: children use their own real-life experiences and rearrange them -they make a pretend swimming pool together out of wooden blocks. One of them pretends to be a lifeguard and rescues

someone who can't swim. The children already know about learning to swim and rescue.

- ▶ **Fantasy play:** here children role-play situations they do not know about but which might happen to them one day-the experience of getting married, going to the moon in space travel, going to hospital.
  - ▶ **Phantasy play:** here children role-play unreal events using characters from cartoons on TV -Power Rangers, Superman. War play dominates this kind of play. Because it is not rooted in real experience, it is difficult to help children to use this kind of experience for their benefit.
2. **Manipulative play:** when children use and celebrate physical prowess-playing on a skateboard with great competence, riding a two-wheeler bicycle. It is about what they can do, not what they are struggling to do (which would not be play).
  3. **Play using props:** sometimes children make their own props and use them to pretend-play-they make a telephone out of boxes and then pretend to book a doctor's appointment by 'phone. This is sometimes called constructive play, but it is really a representation, a prop (telephone), that the child uses in order to pretend-play.
  4. **Rough-and-tumble play:** this often involves chasing, catching, pretend fights, pillow fights. Unless children are sufficiently coordinated to manage it, it often ends in tears: it requires great sensitivity to other people in order not to hurt them physically. This form of play often occurs before going to sleep (bedtimes). It bonds those playing emotionally and socially. It is difficult to cater for in an early childhood setting, however, as it frightens those not taking part.

### **Areas of learning which are sometimes called play**

These include exploratory, heuristic, discovery and investigative play, as well as epistemic learning. Corrine and John Hutt agree with the authors of this book that when children are exploring materials and finding out about them they are learning but not playing.

### **Therapeutic play**

This kind of play helps children who are in emotional pain to find out more about how they feel, to face their feelings and to deal with them, so that they gain some control over their lives. Helping children through play therapy requires professional training, but every child is helped to be mentally healthy through the feeling of control that play gives. Some children need more help than early childhood workers can give. Looking at different types of play has become an increasingly unwieldy way of describing play, with more and more categories being added all the time. It is probably better to:

- ▶ focus on setting up the basic areas of provision with as much quality as possible;
- ▶ focus on how adults can help children to play both alone and together.

Remember that all of these types of play can be catered for through setting up the room with great care. This is why it is very important for staff to work as a team in planning the curriculum for young children. The material provision and the way the

space is used are very important in either encouraging, or not, the children to free-flow-play.

It is important to remember that children, when they play, need to be physically active, using fine and gross motor skills; and they need to be actively thinking, actively feeling and actively relating to each other.

## **GUIDELINES**

### **Helping children to play-a summary**

- ▶ Think back to your own childhood memories of play. What did you enjoy doing? Remembering back helps you to help children play.
- ▶ Take time to observe children as they play. It will help you to tune into the child's play agenda and to help the play along.
- ▶ Think about equality of opportunity. Some children might be left out of the play when they want to join in. Can you help them to develop access strategies?
- ▶ Gender issues need to be given care. Boys and girls need to experience a broad range of play.
- ▶ Children with special educational needs might require extra help in developing their play.
- ▶ Remember that when children play, they can learn at a very high level.
- ▶ Remember that you cannot *make* children play, because play only happens when the conditions are right for it.
- ▶ Work at getting the conditions for play as good as you can in your work setting.
- ▶ People matter. Adults who help children to play are adults who help children to learn. It is important to make play a high priority for this reason.
- ▶ The provision of play props is important. These should be open-ended and flexible in the ways that children can use them. Don't pre-structure props and equipment so that there is only one way to use it (e.g. a template, cutters in the dough, posting boxes).
- ▶ Children need places for play, indoors and outdoors -dens, home areas and so on.
- ▶ Children need uninterrupted time for play.
- ▶ Allow children freedom of movement indoors and outdoors.
- ▶ Give children freedom of choice for activities. Some children like doll play, while others prefer to play on climbing frames.
- ▶ Mixed-age groups encourage play because older children will help younger children and teach them how to play.
- ▶ Adults can help too by play tutoring. But remember, this is not itself play: it is a way that adults can help children take a step towards play.
- ▶ Adults can also help children by entering into the spirit of play. You can play with the children as long as you do not try to take over their play and control it.
- ▶ Know about and provide for the whole network for learning:
  - a) Encourage quality first-hand experiences through carefully chosen provision for both indoors and outdoors.

- b) Help children to represent and keep hold of their experiences by using a wide range of materials and activities.
- c) Organise games.

These are all important parts of the network to learning, and they will help children to play-an activity which is also part of the network for learning.

- ▶ Observe children at play, and add provision that might help their play to make further progress. Extend their play -add shoes to the dressing-up box if children are playing 'shoe shops.'
- ▶ Do not invade, dominate or change the direction of the children's play.
- ▶ Join the free-flow play, and try to catch what it is about so that you can help it along.
- ▶ Protect disputes.
- ▶ Make a safe and healthy environment.
- ▶ Maintain the environment (stocks, layout, servicing the area). For example, if the block play area has become very messy by 10.00 a.m. ask a group of children to help you tidy it. No-one can play well in a chaotic area.
- ▶ Watch out for the twelve features of play so that you know what the child is doing. Then you can help.
- ▶ Help the children to stay in character when they are making a play story.
- ▶ Help children to keep in mind the storyline of their play.
- ▶ Children need to be free to play indoors or outdoors.

## RESOURCES

### Books

T. Bruce, *Time to Play*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1991

T. Bruce, *Helping Young Children to Play*, London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1996

P. Barnes (ed), *Personal, Social and Emotional Development of Children*, Oxford, Open University/Blackwell, 1995

RNIB, *Play it My Way*, RNIB/HMSO, 1995

L. Neilson, *Space and Self: Active Learning by Means of the Little Room*, Sikon Press, 1992

J. Moyles (Ed.), *The Excellence of Play*, Milton Keynes, Open University, 1994

### Videos

RNIB, *One of the Family, No.4*, 1995

RNIB, *Play it My Way*, 1995

Froebel Blockplay Project, *Building a Future*, 1991 (available from Community Playthings, Darvill, Robertsbridge, East Sussex)

Video Reportage Productions

Number 3

20 West Parade

Northwich NR2 3DW

*The Many Functions of Children's Play*

## **ACTIVITY**

### **Making time for play**

1. Plan ways of giving children sufficient time to develop rich free-flow play. Plan a flexible routine for children, with a balance between leaving children to 'get on with it' (a leave-it-to-nature approach) and adult-led activities (a transmission model). Observe a child of 3 or 4 years of age. Evaluate your observations.
2. Research how the day is timetabled for children in a reception class and in key stage 1, years 1 and 2, in a primary school. Observe a child of 4-7 years of age for a day: remember to include the mid-morning, afternoon and lunchtime play periods.
3. Plan an outdoor area suitable for children of 3-7 years of age. Remember: it should be possible for a child to do everything that is on offer indoors in the outdoor area also. How will you organise outdoor experiences of paint, water, sand, drawing, home area, clay? In one school there was a clay table indoors and a mud patch to dig in outdoors. In this way, the outdoor provision complemented the indoor provision. Observe a child of 3-7 years of age in the outdoor area. Evaluate their experiences, and compare these with your plan of an outdoor area.

*Extract from Tina Bruce and Carolyn Meggitt, Child Care & Education, 2/e  
(Hodder & Stoughton Educational, 1999)*

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