Practising playwork

Playwork guides – volume 2

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Contents

Notes

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 practising 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 wellbeing.

Volume 2: Practising 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 practising 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 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 practising 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.

Affordance and the affective environment: places for playing
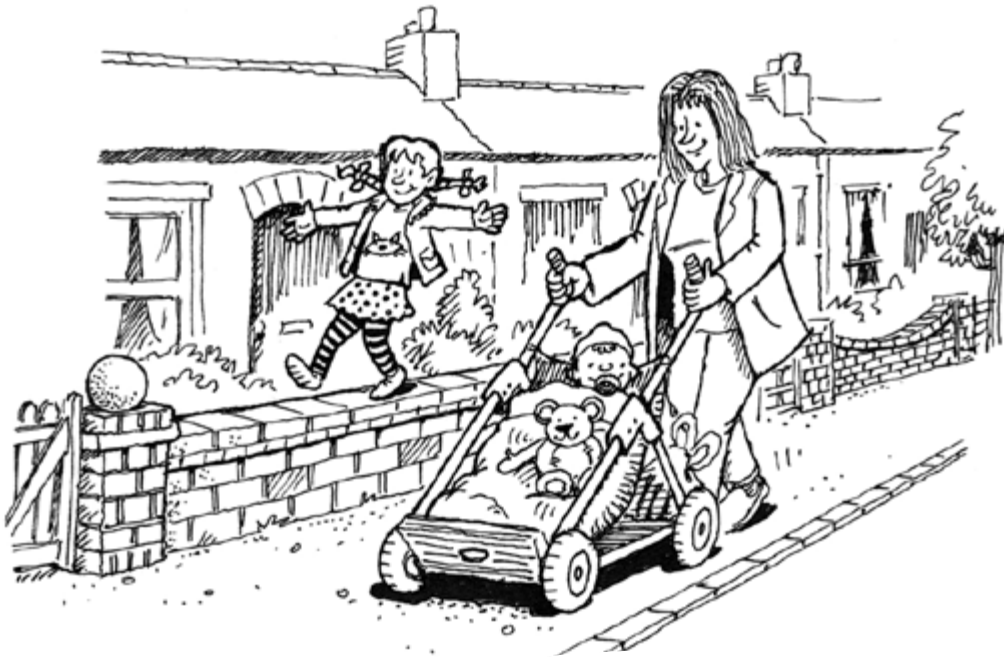
When thinking and talking about the play environment we might imagine a child thinking, 'What can I do, and how will it make me feel?' not 'What does the playground contain?'. Heft[1] suggests similarly, that rather than focus on the form, we should focus on the kind of actions the various features of the environment offer the individual – its function. Thinking in this way can reveal fresh insights into how children perceive and experience the play environment and consequently how it can be assessed, modified and enriched by playworkers.

'Affordance' is a term coined by the psychologist James J. Gibson[2] and refers to the properties of an object that allows an individual to perform an action. For example, some bushes might afford hiding, a twig might afford breaking or poking, and a ledge might afford jumping, balancing and walking. Affordances represent real and measurable possibilities, but they are always in relation to the individual who recognises them[3]. Put simply, affordances are clues from the environment that invite actions.

A small hand-sized object is perceived to be graspable, that is, it affords grasping, and a knee-height surface is perceived to be sit-onable and affords sitting-on[4]. Other examples of affordances include objects that are lift-able or throw-able, surfaces that are stand-on-able or slide-able, and features that are climb-over-able or crawl-under-able. Each of these functions are relative to the individual child so that what affords climb-over-able will vary according to ability and inclination. For example, a puddle offers splashing and playing with water but whether this is taken up depends on the needs and desires of the child, and often the level of permission if there are supervising adults.

Kytta[5] argues that it is useful to see affordances in terms of stages or levels rather than as either/or phenomena. She develops the idea of affordances into a scheme for assessing the qualities of a child-friendly space, which, in brief, we outline below:

- **Potential affordances** – These are all the affordances that are in principle available and are infinite in number.

- **Actualised affordances** – These include all the affordances that have been perceived, taken up, and shaped by individuals. 'Shaped' refers to the manipulation of the environment, creation of new affordances, and alteration of existing ones. By influencing which affordances are selected, individuals also influence the affordances that are available for others.

By adopting this scheme 'potential affordances become qualities of the environment and actualised affordances become individual relationships with the environment'[6].

Just because an affordance is present doesn't mean it will occur. 'Actualised' affordances are subject to social and cultural influences that may promote or restrict social activity. Drawing on the work of Reed[7], Kytta[8] describes three subdivisions of her scheme that describe how affordances can be promoted, constrained, or taken up independently by the child.

Field of promoted action – by virtue of us deciding a playwork project is a good idea for children we have created a field of promoted action. What we aim to do is restrain as much as is possible any unnecessarily promoting action, that might serve to reinforce social and cultural norms. For example, we might let a child learn by trial and error rather than teaching them 'the right way' or we may be careful not to reinforce gender stereotypes when engaging with children. A play space should feel free and feel like it belongs to the children even if technically it is a field of promoted action.

Field of constrained action – affordances are limited or prevented through adult prohibition or through poor design and layout of spaces. For example, children are prevented from engaging in messy or wet play because of parental concerns about dirty clothes. Playwork projects will inevitably have some field of constrained action but it is essential to keep this to an absolute minimum. For example, you may for safety reasons not allow children to climb on the roofs of containers in lightning storms. When doing playwork in non-playwork settings such as schools or hospitals it may be that there are fields of constrained action that we can do nothing about and therefore need to promote other affordances to compensate.

Field of free action – these are affordances that the child has explored and taken up independently. For example, a playworker is supervising some children sitting around a fire toasting marshmallows. A child, noticing some nearby green leaves, picks some up and throws them on the fire and discovers, first-hand and to everyone's displeasure, how to produce thick acrid smoke from a fire.

A playwork project will always be a field of promoted action. In it, children will experience fields of constrained action as well but these fields should consist of as few constraints and promotions as possible so that, as in our example, a field of free action can appear in between the two in that the child independently can realise affordances that in other circumstances may be socially promoted and/or suppressed.

Implications for practice

Maudsley[9] notes that the idea of affordances has a range of significant implications for children's play and playwork. Affordances are changeable and dynamic in the sense that the same physical feature or object may result in different responses and play behaviour from children on different occasions. Equally, the more complex the environment becomes the more affordances it offers. Natural spaces are popular because they support a wide range of play behaviours and allow opportunities for children to mediate their emotions[10]. Moreover, play provision with the highest level of safety and risk aversion tends to have the lowest level of affordances and challenge[11]. Furthermore, through manipulating and controlling their environment, children discover new affordances and will often try to increase them by creating playful problems for themselves.

Children seek out and experience a whole variety of affordances – physical, emotional, and social – all at once. There is rarely any separation between how they are perceived – they are interdependent and reciprocal.

For example, three friends sharing a tyre swing are very likely accessing a significant range of social and emotional affordances such as trust, physical closeness, belonging, co-operation, and camaraderie, in addition to any physical affordances derived from swinging.

Moreover, the physical affordances may be more likely to be taken up because of the emotional ones. Quite simply, while for many children it's more fun to swing with your friends, it also provides a wider range of affordances.

Kytta[12] describes how the affordances of a playground can seem different for each individual as well as for individuals in different situations. Each child sees the environment through his or her 'affordance spectacles' – their affordance preferences. These are influenced by their abilities, intentions and activities, but also by social and cultural factors[13]. Because of this, it is possible to use affordances to think about features of the environment for specific children. Heft[14] suggests that a gap in the fence might afford an attractive squeeze through for a small child but not for a larger one. Considered this way we can ask not only what does the environment offer children, but also what does it offer specific children?

Using the idea of affordances as a lens for reflection on the play space we can appreciate that an environment that is limited and restricted in the props and materials available to children inevitably biases the range of affordances and play behaviour. Similarly, an environment that unnecessarily restricts what the children are offered, or unduly promotes some behaviour over others, again limits the variety and richness of the environment and the affordances it contains. These influences can be blatant, such as a playground rule that prohibits bad language or climbing on the tables, or more subtle, such as the fulsome smiles and compliments for a child who helps staff tidy up. Of course, play spaces are not only places where things happen, where things are done, they are also places that must cater for the broadest range of emotion and feeling and it is to this aspect of the environment we turn to now.

The affective environment

When asked about a memorable play experience, adults often recall what it felt like – indeed the feelings involved can remain powerful and vivid for many years. Children also frequently talk about play in terms of how it made or makes them feel. Despite this, it is common for playworkers to spend considerable energy thinking about what the physical play space contains but give much less consideration to its emotional impact. This has led some to assert that playworkers have become over-concerned with the 'doing' elements of play at the expense of the role of emotion[15].

The term 'affective' is used in different ways but is generally agreed to be concerned with the emotions, feelings and moods. Used in this sense, 'affect' is what you display or experience towards an object or situation[16]. Children's emotional capability has immense importance and significance in their lives and is crucial for wellbeing and the ability to navigate social relationships. As such, it is important that places for playing enable expression and refinement of emotion. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child[17] lists the essential features of emotional development as:

• Identifying and understanding one's own emotions

• Reading and understanding others' emotional states

• Managing strong emotions

• Regulating one's own behaviour

• Developing empathy

• Establishing and sustaining relationships and friendships.

Children's experiences and the influence of their environment affect multiple regions of the developing brain. 'Stated simply, as young children develop, their early emotional experiences literally become embedded in the architecture of their brains'[18]. Moreover, the neural circuits concerned with emotional regulation are closely involved with those functions responsible for planning, judgement, and decision-making. In other words, the emotions are not separate from logical thought but integral to the process of reasoning and decision-making[19].

Kilvington and Wood[20] define an affective play space as one where children can:

• Express whatever they are feeling, whether this is an expression of their past or a response to the present

• Experiment with different feelings

• Experience new feelings from a range of stimuli.

Play is widely agreed to be the natural mechanism through which children better understand their thoughts and feelings and 'prevent or resolve psychological challenges and learn to manage relationships and conflicts through a natural, self-guided, self-healing process'[21]. Play can be a way for children to make sense of what is happening to them. A good play environment is also a therapeutic environment. Play provides children with a means of 'playing out' material in a way that is restorative and healing. Traumatic memories are not always accessible through language and instead may emerge gradually through imaginary play[22].

Children may frequently be seen expressing a range of strong emotions through their play and for Sutton-Smith[23] this is no accident. Sutton-Smith proposes that play acts as a kind of moderator of the emotions, giving them a voice while preventing them from overwhelming the child. Specific emotions are linked to the motivation for specific kinds of play so that 'individuals who play more will be more capable of controlling their emotional lives in terms of their capacities for performance strategy, courage, resilience, imagination, sociability, or charisma'[24].

For playworkers the implications of this are that children will – must – on occasions play through their primary emotions, including those that we find disruptive or uncomfortable such as anger or fear. We need to be able to respond appropriately and playfully to these feelings and recognise that controlling their play is a vital part of children controlling their emotions and vice versa.
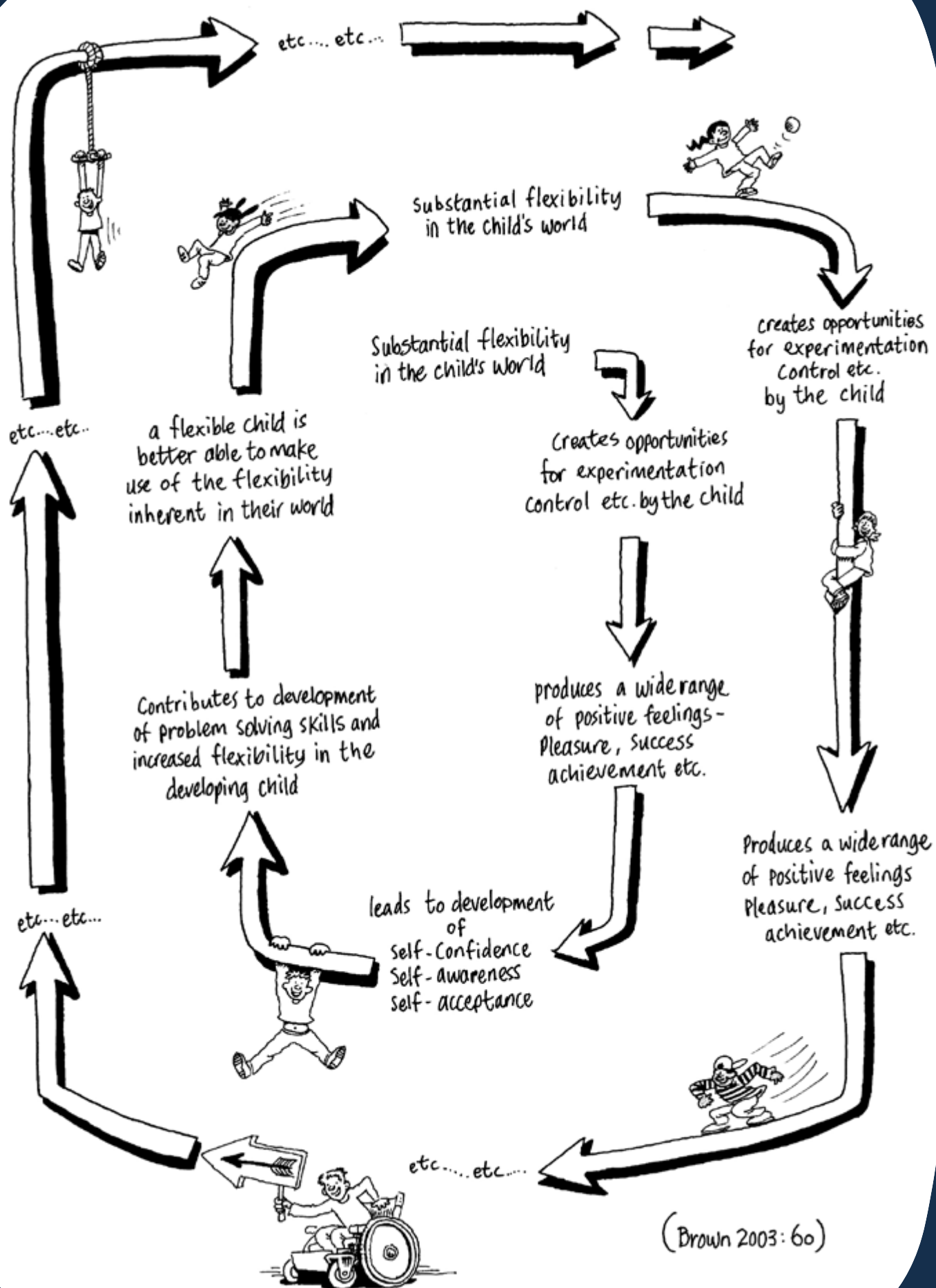
Russ[25] identifies a number of affective processes that occur in play:

- **Expression of emotion** – the ability to express both positive and negative emotions in play

- **Expression of affect themes** – the ability to include themes about specific emotions in play, for example a child building a fort with guns expresses ideas about aggression

- **Comfort and enjoyment** – children experience pleasure and joy through becoming immersed in play

- **Emotional regulation and modulation of affect** – the ability to contain and control both positive and negative emotions

- **Cognitive integration of affect** – the ability to express affect within a cognitive context, for example the child expresses aggression within a story about a boxing match.

The facilitation of a play space where children feel they can express their emotions and actualise affordance is key to the success of any play space. As previously stated, flexibility is key for adaptation and development[26]. The theory of compound flexibility was developed by Brown[27] to highlight the relationship between the developing child and the play environment. Brown[28] states that central to our role as playworkers is the creation of flexible environments that are 'substantially adaptable or controllable by the children'[29].

In essence, compound flexibility proposes that the degree of flexibility available in the environment influences the opportunities available for experimentation and control by the child: the more freedom to experiment, the greater the sense of achievement and pleasure. These in turn encourage the development of self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-acceptance, and so the child becomes more comfortable taking risks and more varied tackling problem solving. Such an approach allows the child 'to use the full potential of the play environment. Thus the child moves closer to their developmental potential than would otherwise have been the case'[30]. Brown[31] writes that, because of its self-supporting nature, the process might best be described as an evergrowing spiral of positive development.

The diagram on the next page illustrates Brown's *Compound Flexibility: A Positive Spiral*[32].

etc.... etc..

substantial flexibility
in the child's world

creates opportunities
for experimentation
control etc.
by the child

substantial flexibility
in the child's world

Creates opportunities
for experimentation
control etc. by the child

a flexible child is
better able to make
use of the flexibility
inherent in their world

etc....etc..

produces a wide range
of positive feelings -
Pleasure, Success
achievement etc.

Produces a wide range
of positive feelings
Pleasure, Success
achievement etc.

Contributes to development
of problem solving skills and
increased flexibility in the
developing child

leads to development
of
Self-Confidence
Self-awareness
Self-acceptance

etc....etc...

etc.....etc....

(Brown 2003: 60)

To be flexible, children need the freedom to try out different ways of behaving and different modes of thinking. Flexibility refers to the ability to switch between approaches and generate ideas from multiple sources[33]. Children need the opportunity to control their environment and modify it in numerous ways according to their instincts. They need the opportunity to discover and find solutions to challenges through first-hand experimentation without adult interference. They need the opportunity to engage with a wide range of materials that stimulate the imagination and fuel the emotions. In a supervised setting all these opportunities require playworkers to create an atmosphere of playful permission where children are free to 'create and recreate their own play environment'[34].

Compound flexibility describes a positive cycle of development but the model can be reversed to look at what might happen when the environment is inflexible. The damaging alternative to the virtuous cycle of development is a negative cycle of compound flexibility. In this negative version of the theory, a lack of flexibility in a child's world leads to reduced opportunities for experimentation and control by the child, and consequently they have fewer positive experiences. This in turn slows development of self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-acceptance. It also restricts the degree of flexibility and impedes the development of problem solving skills.

Implications for practice

Affordances are opportunities for action – offers from the environment to the child. They can be positive or negative as well as physical, emotional, and social. The instinct to explore and play means that children are expert at seeking out affordances, and this can lead to conflict with adults who are critical, disapproving or keen to promote other agendas.

Consequently, playworkers have a vital role in creating an atmosphere of freedom, confidence and permission. Just as children's feelings are as important as their thoughts, so the affective impact of the play space is as important as its physical make-up. 'Children's emotional health is closely tied to the social and emotional characteristics of the environment'[35].

The affective play environment should not be a static imitation of the adult world but a rich, flexible and evocative collection of loose parts, materials and opportunities that stimulate the senses and the imagination. It is an environment that is accessible, welcoming, and playful, where reality can be suspended and meaning reordered through the everyday magic of the play process. To be successful, the affective space needs to contain novelty and stimuli that arouse children's curiosity and creativity. It should be an environment of alternatives, of experimentation, and of self-direction.

Playworkers actively cede control and power to children and enable children's culture to grow[36]. They emphasise by their words and actions that it is okay to be oneself and to experiment, try out and give something a go, and explore all things in a positive spirit of play and playfulness[37]. Playworkers are confident, easy-going and tolerant, and have the knowledge and skills to assess the feel of a play space and diagnose when it is and isn't working well. They are adept at handling conflict and understand that children may play out and express strong emotions and occasionally clash with others. They are skilled at interpreting feelings and non-verbal cues and signals. Playworkers are interested in what children are interested in. Children delight in showing their interests to adults who care for them, and by responding with genuine concern we show that we respect and are interested in them. As a result, children in turn will be more enthusiastic and more motivated to continue playing. Finally, playworkers are playful and good-humoured and are able to spark off instances of play but quickly return to a more analytical reflective role as required.

Public attitudes have become increasingly hostile to children with arguably fewer opportunities for first-hand control and experimentation[38]. The spaces that traditionally offered flexibility, such as waste ground and open spaces are increasingly unavailable or colonised by adults.

Consequently, it has become ever more important that those spaces where children can play are adaptable spaces that empower children to express their imagination and creativity. For children, a good play environment becomes a place and not just a space. It becomes defined and named according to children's culture and from their meaningful experiences as a place 'they are meant to be'[39].

Playing and the play space

Having explored some discussion about the physical and affective environment we can now turn to the practical issues involved in developing and facilitating places for play. It's important to have some guidance for the work we do and for what we might expect to see if our work is well delivered. For this reason, the section will begin by exploring various forms, or types of play. Understanding the various types of play can help us to think about our work, what we offer, what range of play we see, and enable us to use a shared language when we talk about play. We will also look at the playwork curriculum, not a list of activities for children but a set of concepts and ideas that describe what a playwork provision might include if it is to meet the play needs of children. Finally, we will look at the play mechanisms. Taken together, these tools provide valuable insights that help us both plan for play and assess and evaluate our efforts.

Play types

There are many typologies or taxonomies of play, here are just a few of the more common for illustration. Janet Moyles[40] identifies three types of play: physical, intellectual and socio/emotional. David Whitebread[41], in his review of the literature, draws out five types of play: physical play; play with objects; symbolic play; pretence/socio-dramatic play; and, games with rules. Fraser Brown[42] identifies 10 key factors present in children's play: fun, freedom, flexibility; social interaction, socialisation; physical activity; environmental and cognitive stimulation; creativity and problem solving; emotional equilibrium, sickness and health; self discovery.

Brian Sutton-Smith[43] identified 308 different types of play that he divided across seven rhetorics: progress, fate, power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and frivolity. There is no disagreement that children gain many benefits from playing, but when it comes to descriptions of the forms or types of play there are, as has been shown, many different descriptions.

One set of definitions that has become widely used within the playwork sector and across other like-minded professions, early years care and education for example, is Bob Hughes' *Taxonomy of Play Types*. This taxonomy describes the various ways children play and, playworkers have found it useful for ensuring places for play meet children's various play needs.

The various play types attempt to describe the full range of children's play behaviours and how they might support children's physical, cognitive and emotional development, this taxonomy lists the following 15 play types[44].

Communication play
Example: name-calling, mime, mickey taking, jokes, facial expression (the play face), gestures, poetry.

Creative play
Example: where children have access to lots o fdifferent creative mediums and tools, where there is plenty of time and where getting messy is not a problem.

Deep play
Example: playing in front of traffic, riding a bike on the parapet of a bridge or through a fire, high tree climbing over rivers or the sea. Play where for the player the stakes are high.

Dramatic play
Example: a dramatisation of parents taking children to school, of a TV show. Play which involves recognisable characters and plots or storylines.

Exploratory play

Example: engaging with an object or area, and either by manipulation or movement, assessing its properties, possibilities and content.

Fantasy play

Example: when children play at a pilot flying around the world, as an owner of an expensive car, or as the catcher of a giant fish.

Imaginative play

Example: patting a dog that isn't there, eating food that doesn't exist, or singing into a non-existent microphone.

Locomotor play

Example: chase, tag, hide and seek and tree climbing. Play that involves locomotor patterns in a way that suggests that the only goal is the actual performance of the pattern itself.

Mastery play

Example: fire play, digging holes, changing the course of streams and constructing shelters. An inborn drive to do and learn how to do, an urge to master the environment.

Object play

Example: examination and novel use of almost any object. For example, a ball, a marker, a piece of cloth, even live or dead animals.

Role play

Example: the child brushes with a broom, dials a telephone, drives the car. A child is expressing knowledge of particular events or sequences of events.

Rough and tumble

Example: playful fighting, wrestling and chasing, where children involved are laughing and squealing and obviously enjoying themselves by their facial expressions.

Social play

Example: building or painting something together, co-operatively moving/carrying something, team games or parachute games.

Socio-dramatic play

Example: playing house, going to the shops, being mothers and fathers, organising a meal, or even having a row. The physical interpretation of events in which children take on a role.

Symbolic play

Example: using an object like a piece of wood to symbolise a person or a flag to symbolise a group or tribe. Using a block for a bed and making peg people walk and talk.

Implications for practice

When we observe children playing, one of the challenges we face is that individual play types often seem to blur or merge. Equally, play types can be expressed in a number of ranges or subtleties meaning we should be wary of describing what we observe with just a simple (or singular) play type. Classifying play behaviour into different types should never be seen as a simple tick box activity, nor should we expect children to play in particular ways just because that is what we had planned. That said, they can also be a great help.

- Firstly, when observing children, play types can help us identify and understand different behaviours.

- Secondly, they give us an insight into different play needs and can help us plan and facilitate the environment.

- Thirdly, they can form part of the tools we use to assess the quality of our provision and provide a lens for reflection.

Playwork curriculum

The playwork curriculum aims to describe the attributes or components of a rich and diverse play space[45]. The playwork curriculum is an auditable agenda for playwork[46], devised by Frank King and Bob Hughes. It is also referred to as the playwork menu – by those wishing to avoid connotations of direction and imposition. It is a really great place to start when thinking about the range of opportunities we want children to be able to access through their play and, of course considers both the effective and affective environment.

The elements

Fire fascinates and attracts humans, and children are no exception. Gaining respect for it and mastery over it has always been part of playing through the centuries. Fire can be facilitated both indoors and outdoors and on a small to large scale, depending on the space and the number of children and adults present. It might range from lighting tea lights in jars and turning off the lights inside or trying out burning bits and pieces in a candle flame, to lighting small open fires to burn rubbish, or cooking food on an open fire.

Water delights children – it can be felt, channelled, discovered and it comes, of course, in many forms – steam, still, flowing, boiling, ice, rain, puddles, ponds, streams, rivers, canals and sea.

Earth is fascinating to children – bugs, worms, all kinds of creatures live and grow and are buried in it. It has different consistencies and colours that change when you add water to it. It includes other naturally occurring substances that fascinate children, such as pebbles, sand and clay. It can be used in combination with other elements such as water in the form of snow, or fire used to 'fire' clay. Better still, no matter how dirty you get, it washes off.

Air too is experienced in different ways – it is around us all the time and incorporates all kinds of different smells. It can be a breeze through to a strong wind, it has currents and pockets, things can fly in it or get carried and blown about, it can generate power, and amazingly we can't see it.

Identity

Children naturally want and need to explore their own identity and that of others in the security of their play. Who am I? Who could I be? Who are you? What makes me who I am, and you who you are? What makes us different? What do I look like and how can I change that? What are my limitations? A rich play environment might include clothes, materials, props, mirrors and paints to aid children in their exploration.

Senses

All children are fascinated by and enjoy exploring sights, sounds, touch, smell and taste and the ability to do so should be a fundamental aspect of all play environments. For example, we should provide an abundant and diverse range of cultural music, lighting (why is there often just neon?), colours (subtle and pastel as well as primary), wild and wacky textures, and both pleasant and possibly disgusting aromas for children to experiment with, create and explore.
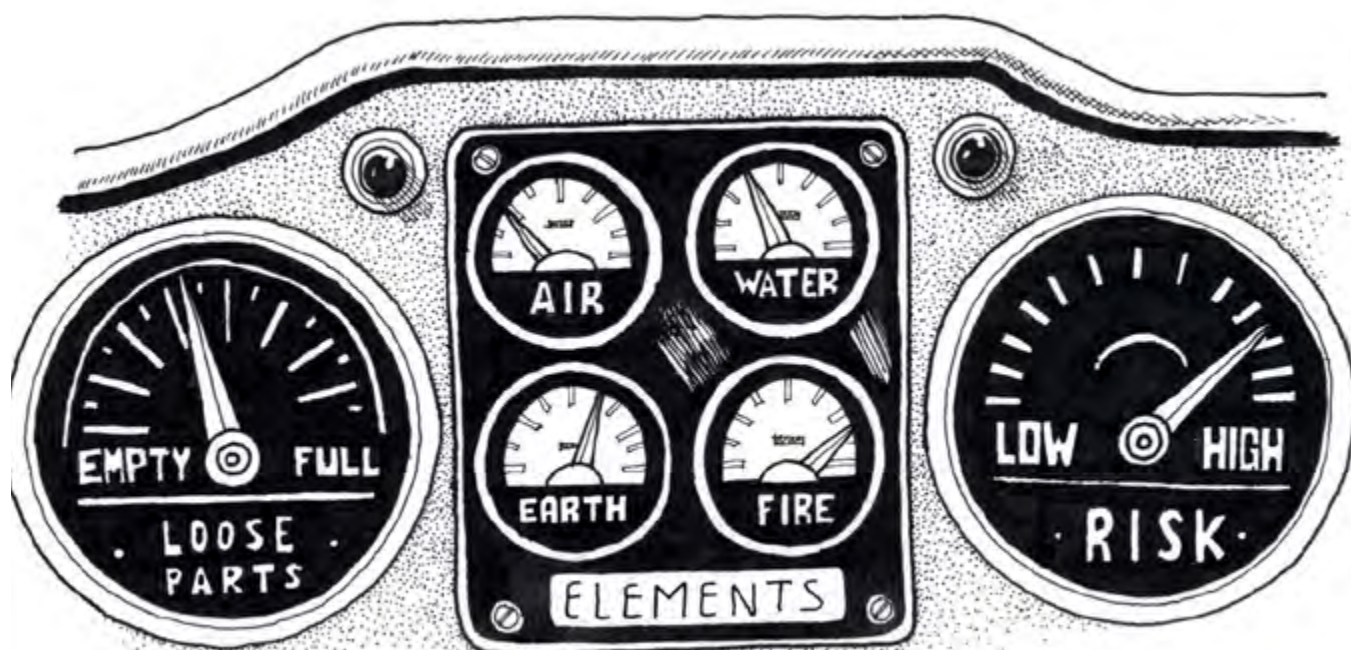
Concepts

Children want answers even when there aren't any definite ones and so naturally explore the bigger questions and ideas to make sense of the world around them. This includes playing with real and abstract concepts like birth, death, life, marriage, divorce, democracy, justice, war, terrorism, peace, gravity, time, power, religion, culture, space, and fate. We need to regularly consider what kinds of props and loose parts could support play with such concepts and be sure to be available to maintain, extend and even join in the play should it be needed.

Varied landscape

A rich play environment has a varied landscape that fosters all types of play by incorporating different levels and heights, natural features, slopes, tunnels and hiding places, open space and secret spaces. Play environments should be enticing and alluring, 'calling out' to any child: 'Play here'.

Materials

Loose parts (see below) are essential, but a rich play space should also have a range of larger more substantial objects and equipment that children can access and use – this might include structures, cooking pans, computers, sports equipment and inflatables.

Building

Children enjoy building and need a variety of materials and tools to create and destroy, construct and deconstruct, on a large or small scale.

Change

Children need to be able to modify their environment, move things around, paint walls, create dens, and erect partitions and fences for example. We often glibly say that 'The children have ownership of the space' or 'It's their club' – but we need to ask ourselves, is this really true?

Focuses

Children enjoy what we call neophilic stimuli, that is, things or events that are original, new and different. Sometimes this can start a new fad or craze until the novelty wears off. As good playworkers, we periodically provide features and objects that are novel, unusual, magical, or even eccentric, and then stand back and watch what children do.

Choices

A rich play environment is one where children can genuinely make their own choices in what, where, how and with whom they play. All too often, adults have already made many choices on the children's behalf before they have arrived at the play environment. For children to control how and why they play, they need to make their own choices.

Alternatives

To provide effective alternatives, we need to know the children we work with and the environments they live in. We need to know the types of experiences they may never or rarely have. This could be something simple such as having opportunities to get dirty or take risks, occasionally it might mean providing something out of the ordinary such as sleeping under the stars, watching the break of dawn, or mudwrestling.

Tools

If children are to be able to build, create and cook for example, they need the right tools. A good play environment will have plenty of tools, ranging from scissors and staple guns through to hammers and saws, even power tools. As playworkers, we need to be skilled in tool use and have the sensitivity and confidence to teach children to handle and use tools properly and then supervise them appropriately – different children will need different levels of support.

Loose parts

Nicholson's 'theory of loose parts' is based on his assertion that 'in any environment both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number of kind of variables in it'[47]. Loose parts have high play value because unlike a purchased toy or game, they do not prescribe how they should be played with. This leaves all possibilities open and provokes increasingly imaginative use. To many adults, loose parts often look like rubbish – to children they are like treasure. Loose parts could be made of metal, wood, paper, rubber, fabric, plastic or natural elements. They can be large, small, bought, recycled or scrounged.

Risk

Great play environments will have possibilities and opportunities for children to access and experience risk – at their own pace and in their own way. This is essential for children to develop their awareness of danger, their knowledge of their own limits and the skills to cope with fear, stress and minor injury. As playworkers, we know that over-protecting children and continually making judgements about risk-taking on their behalf, makes children less safe in the long-term.

Implications for practice

The playwork curriculum can be used as a tool to check our practice and to ensure we provide an environment that truly enables play to happen. Many people have enthusiastically taken this expanded curriculum and proceeded to create settings with zoned or planned 'play areas' offering a limited number of activities for children to choose to engage in, for example kite-making, cooking and unihoc. They then believe they are offering the playwork curriculum – this is not the case.

We need to understand that we are not talking about activities – we are talking about creating an environment that takes all the above into account and then children themselves will make it their own and play what and how they wish. To create and keep creating and risk-assessing such an environment takes observation, effort, thought, reflection and time. It is much easier to plan activities than it is to build and shape possible play spaces and collect an ever-changing range of props and loose parts.

Play mechanisms

Play mechanisms is the term Hughes uses to refer to playwork interpretations of a number of scientific observations of play behaviour. These mechanisms describe the play process in greater detail than the play types[48]. However, we present them here not as replacements but as an additional tool to develop insights into children's play and to inform playwork practice. Each of the mechanisms described here can vary in its frequency, reach and intensity.

Each account of a play mechanism concludes with some suggestions about how it might be facilitated. In general, all of the play mechanisms described here need:

- **Time** to ensure children have sufficient uninterrupted periods to play freely and in their own way

- **Spaces** to play that are attractive, challenging, flexible, safe, accessible, and changeable

- **Permission** that it is okay to play as the child chooses

- **Materials** and props that are diverse and freely available.
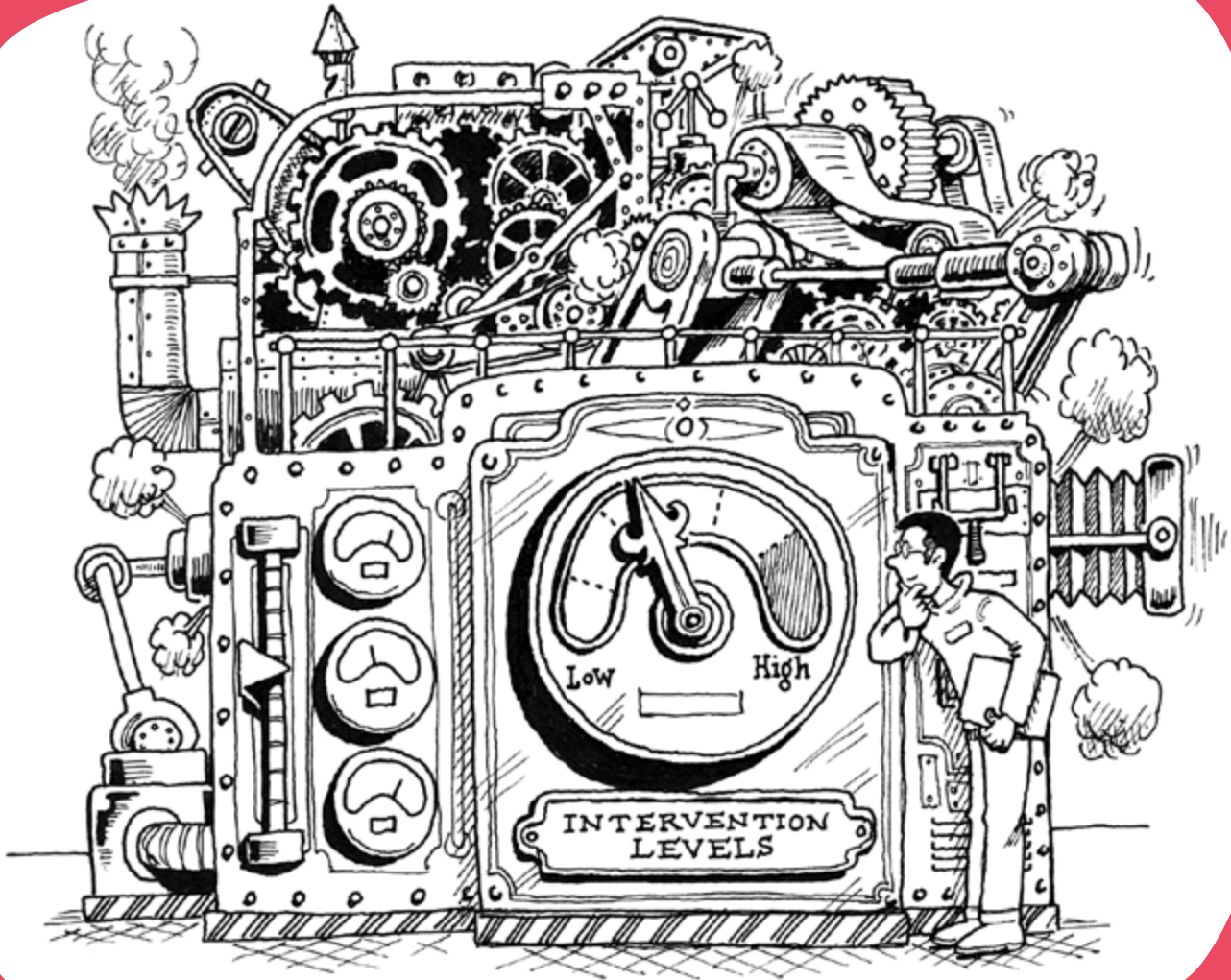
In addition to these general principles we have highlighted points drawn from *The First Claim – desirable processes* about the quality features specific to each play mechanism.

Immersion
Immersion occurs when children are fully engaged in their play and lost in thought. Immersion is defined as 'being engaged in a play experience with such focus and intensity, that temporary sensory dissociation from external reality occurs'[49]. Hughes[50] suggests that through immersion the child is transported to a place where they can become independent and powerful and that everything that happens in this imagined world is a consequence of something they have done. 'It offers a type of knowing from within, a practical handling of lived experience that cannot be achieved by other means'[51].

Non-specialisation
Non-specialisation is defined as 'being and feeling so competent with a continually changing and diverse range of play choices, that no individual play type or group of play types is allowed to dominate behaviour'[52]. Non-specialisation is a 'browsing mechanism that enables them continually to note, assess and update their knowledge and skills vis-à-vis the whole of the surrounding environment'[53].

Bio-identification
Bio-identification is defined as 'frequently interacting with a diverse range of natural elements, non-humans and other flora and fauna in preference to playing within narrow social or cultural parameters'[54]. The natural environment is rich in sensory experiences and is a space that has its own feel and aesthetic value. Kellert[55] asserts that direct hands-on experience of nature plays a perhaps irreplaceable role in affective, mental, and evaluative development. It has also been suggested that it has a vital restorative function for children's wellbeing[56].

Combinatorial flexibility

Combinatorial flexibility is defined as 'freely associating with the play space in ways which enable the use of novel combinations of behaviour and which develop an evolving combinatorial repertoire'[57] Play allows children the opportunity to try out novel combinations of behaviour that under usual functional or non-play pressure would never be tried[58]. Engaging in combinatorial flexibility promotes acquisition of information about the world and flexibility and creativity in problem solving[59].

Neophilia (literally love of the new), children's fascination with their surroundings and all things new, keeps them playing and encourages them to explore increasingly wider and more diverse interests. Desmond Morris[60] describes this as 'the greatest survival trick of our species'[61].

Repetition

Repetition is defined as 'repeating particular actions or patterns of behaviour, whilst gradually incorporating minor and major variations to them'[62]. Repetition is not simply repeating the exact same behaviour again and again. Rather, it is behaviour that is repeated but with crucial differences each time, sometimes small and sometimes large.

Absorption

Absorption is defined as 'integration of externally generated stimuli in the form of behaviour, language, culture and values into one's own identity without being taught or instructed'[63]. Absorption might include watching other children play a game and taking on the underlying rules about power, influence or gender roles, coming to understand rules can make things work and that they can be challenged and changed.

Co-ordination

Co-ordination is 'moving different parts of the body, in relation to eye and object in a balanced, efficient and fluid manner'[64]. Co-ordination involves the management and synchronisation of motor skills, and provides opportunities for children to develop control and agility over their bodies.

Abstraction

Abstraction is 'visualising and rearranging or restructuring objects and ideas in, and into their component parts'[65]. Much of what is gained from play is not tangible and concrete but abstract ideas, for example a game of touch may be as much about feelings of friendship, loyalty or pride, as it is about physical speed and co-ordination. Playing provides experiences children can reflect on and in so doing abstracting ideas and concepts, from those reflections and foster the ability to problem solve.

Ranging

Ranging is defined as 'moving through, exploring and engaging with an ever-widening area of the play environment'[66]. Children's 'play radius'– the area around their home where they are allowed to roam unsupervised – has decreased dramatically over recent generations[67]. Ranging enables children to construct an internal map of their local environment and highlight the potential opportunities and threats it offers for different kinds of play behaviours. Children's ranging 'is an important factor in the development of their senses of environments and of their spatial capability in navigating their way through and between places'[68].

Recapitulation

Hughes proposes children's play can be seen as a repetition or replaying of the various successive stages of human evolution. For example, the evolutionary stages termed 'the animal' would equate to children interacting with the elements; the 'savage' stage would translate as sadistic interaction with other species; the 'nomad' as children ranging; the 'pastoral' as mastery play; and the 'tribal' stage as membership of gangs and clubs. Hughes[69] asserts this connects the child's present with its genetic past, providing a sense of continuity and permanence that contributes towards their emotional and physical wellbeing. Recapitulative play is a controversial idea, not because of children's desire to sometimes engage in ritualistic behaviour, which is well documented, but because of the unproven assertion that it represents a genetic link to our evolutionary history.

Calibration

Calibration is defined as 'developing a relative relationship with the world based upon physical comparison – weight, height, speed of movement – by playfully interacting with an ever-changing physical environment'[70]. Interestingly, while this play mechanism is concerned with the physical environment, recent work by researchers suggests that calibration may be primarily concerned with the emotions[71].

Of course, we do acknowledge, and provide evidence for, the possibility that some motor, cognitive, and social skills are improved, directly, by the experience of play. Nonetheless, we consider that the primary avenue for the improvement of skills is via emotional calibration.

Implications for practice

This overview of the play mechanisms may feel difficult and challenging to employ in practice. Perhaps this is inevitable. Given the multifaceted nature of play it follows that these mechanisms, as interpretations of specific play behaviour, will themselves be complex and many-sided. Recognising, interpreting and facilitating the conditions for these mechanisms to flourish requires skill, understanding and persistence.

Much like the taxonomy of play types we examined earlier in this volume, the play mechanisms described here may occur singularly, or together in combinations. Moreover, as Hughes[72] makes clear, several of the mechanisms share similar facilitating features although in practice there is considerable variation.

While facilitating these mechanisms effectively will always likely be challenging, the crucial point for improving our practice, as *The First Claim – desirable processes* makes clear, is that we repeatedly engage in observation, analysis, reflection, action and review. Only if we are prepared to delve deeper can we more fully understand the forces that drive children to play and how we might address them.
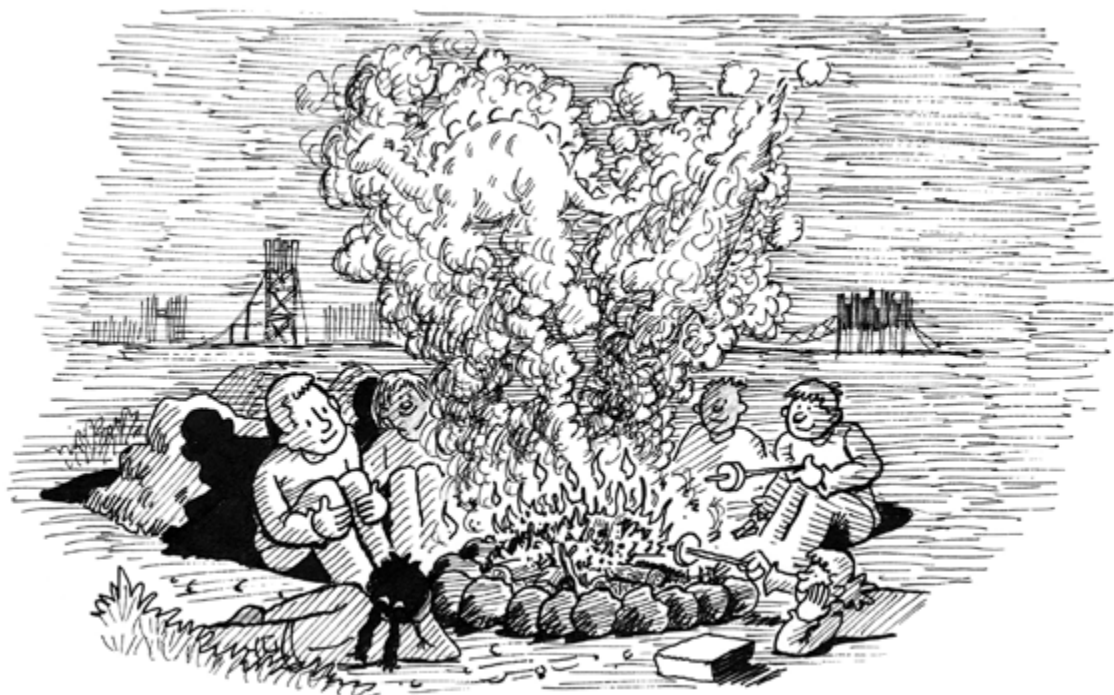
Working directly with playing children

So far in this guide we have looked at what playworkers do to make an environment fit for play, or how we create the conditions for play. In this section we will look at the various ways playworkers work with playing children, through playwork intervention. Playworkers favour an approach to intervention that is 'hands off' and cautious to avoid influencing children's play with adult power or adult agendas. Essentially, playwork seeks to enable children to be in control of the content and intent of their play so far as is reasonably practicable.

So, when we are working directly with playing children, we attempt to refrain from imposing any of our adult 'baggage' on children – in playwork we call this avoiding adulteration. Intervening in children's play can disrupt the control children have and can interfere with the flow of children's play. Too much adult encroachment on play can inhibit the play process and as a result reduce the benefits children gain from playing. It is important to identify here that intervention refers to the act of becoming involved, as well as actively choosing not to become involved – a kind of non-intervention. For playworkers, this non-interventionist approach is central to best practice. Bob Hughes[73] lists eight intervention styles,

'intervention' here is used in the sense of little or no intervention.

1. Wait to be invited to play
2. Enable play to occur uninterrupted
3. Enable children to explore their own values
4. Leave children to improve their own performance
5. Leave the content/intent of play to the children
6. Let children decide why they play
7. Enable children to decide what is appropriate behaviour
8. Only organise when children want support.

All of these styles are based on the approach that children must have the time and space to control their own play and should be able to decide how and when they play without undue interference from adults. Low intervention does not mean low activity. Continually checking the play space is working, monitoring and observing children's play, being sensitive to play cues, being an accessible resource for children, and being vigilant for inappropriate risks are just some of the tasks we carry out throughout a play session. This is a low intervention but high response approach[74].

It is also a necessary component of reflective practice[75]. There are times we will engage in heightened levels of intervention.

The challenge for anyone who facilitates children's play is to balance our ethical, legal and organisational duties to prevent serious harm while at the same time trying to replicate the feel of an authentic space that previously would have been largely adult free[76].

Play is a natural process that belongs to the child. It is a process of trial and error where children can experiment, try things out, and repeat and refine behaviour. Central to this behaviour is that children can choose how, why and with whom they play. The level of control children have over their own play is part of what makes it play, 'along with its characteristics of flexibility, unpredictability, spontaneity and imagination'[77].

As playworkers, the first thing we really need to understand before considering how we might engage in heightened intervention, is how play actually operates. Sturrock and Else provide a useful framework for this purpose.

The play cycle and levels of intervention

The play cycle[78] is a framework that depicts what happens when children play. It is like describing a universal expressive 'language' that children use when they play. As with all languages, we can learn the simpler aspects easily but it takes time and practice to become fluent and really understand its meanings.

In some ways, it is very simple and makes sense. In others, it is deeply complex and can be fascinating to explore further. It uses very specific terminology so that it cannot be easily misinterpreted. It splits the process of playing up into discreet stages, helping practitioners in their understanding and ability to recognise, analyse and evaluate play.

Play drive – The drive to play that the majority of children are born with. (Playwork Principle 1 describes this urge as a 'biological, psychological and social necessity'). This drive powers the play cycle.

Metalude – A term to describe the initial internal drive to play. This is sometimes conscious – 'I want to ...' but more often a natural subconscious or unconscious 'push' to play. This drive manifests itself in the child issuing a play cue.

Cue – A lure or an invitation to someone, or something to 'play with me'. Cues often don't use actual words which is one of the reasons adults miss them. Children communicate far more with their bodies than with verbal sentences. Children's play has parallels with real life events so it is thought these cues and gestures that signal play help to differentiate it as playing and so help avoid conflicts or misunderstandings[79].

Return – A positive and equally playful response to a recognised cue, which can also act as a further cue – an indication to take the play further. As playworkers, we have a responsibility to recognise and return cues given to us.

Flow – When cues are returned, which in turn generates more cues and returns within the frame, play flow starts to occur. Csikszentmihalyi[80] says that when that occurs, children become immersed in playing and their play becomes highly important and absorbing. Sometimes, play flow can last for hours, days or even weeks – children keep returning to it because it holds such meaning for them.

Frame – According to Bateson[81], before engaging in interactive contact, children establish a 'frame' or context to confirm that this is play, not reality (for example this is done by smiling or laughing). Like the stage on which a play takes place, the play frame holds the play together. A play frame is initiated and created by the child or children to provide the context and the enclosure for expression, to give meaning to the play content. It is the stage to contain and constrain the play. The frame is organic and can change in shape and size. It is a self-imposed 'boundary' where children decide, or just know, that whatever they are playing happens within that boundary, and not outside. It also acts as a signal to others that 'this is our game'.

Annihilation – The naturally occurring process of the play coming to an end. Children may get bored with their current play, it may morph and change into something new, they may be attracted to something else. The flow comes to an end and the play frame dissolves.

Adulteration – An expression to describe the multiple ways in which adults stop or try to control children's play. Playwork Principle 2 states that 'children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play' but all too often an adult will see it differently and intervene to change things. We all do it at some point for a variety of reasons and an important part of reflective playwork practice is thinking through honestly when, how and why we intervene.

Dysplay – When play cues or the cycle are not fulfilling the needs of the child, so their cues become more frantic, disturbing or destructive of the play environment. A child experiencing dysfunctional play may issue play cues that others fail to read accurately or return quickly enough resulting in their annihilation, the child may cue again with more intent and increased regularity. These cues can be challenging or off putting for other children and adults who may not respond and again the potential cycle is then annihilated.

Containment – What the adult may do to ensure continued flow either by providing appropriate returns or allowing the frame to remain intact over time, or stopping serious harm occurring to the child or other children.

Having described the play cycle, Sturrock et al[82] outline a range of intervention from the subtle to complex. To remain 'authentic' we should consciously resist any temptation to control or influence the play and having intervened should aim to withdraw and leave the play to the child as soon as possible. Whenever possible, we 'should aim to offer a response that is playful rather than controlling or prescriptive'[83]. Playwork Principle 8 continues and directs us to '... choose an intervention style that enables children and young people to extend their play'. Supporting and facilitating play is the primary reason for the playwork profession and this extends to how we intervene. Will children continue to play because of our actions? This is by no means an easy thing to do and of course there are times when we must directly and urgently intervene for safety reasons (for example, when we intervene to prevent a child being seriously harmed).
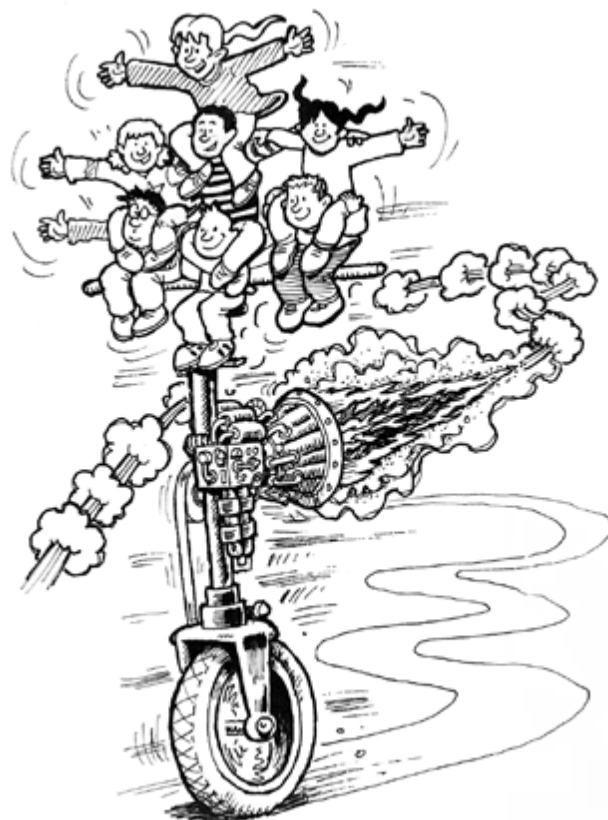
Levels of intervention:

1. **Play maintenance** – The playworker observes the play and no intervention is required

2. **Simple involvement** – The playworker becomes a resource for the play and this involvement may be subtle or overt

3. **Medial intervention** – The playworker becomes involved in the play at the request of the child before withdrawing

4. **Complex intervention** – 'There is a direct and extended overlap between playing children and the adult – the adult may need to take on a role in the play, or act as a partner to the playing child'[84].

An alternative and arguable more detailed approach developed by Bob Hughes[85] identifies nine different approaches to playwork intervention. These intervention modes have a range of applications; some are more general in use while others may be best in specific contexts or locations. In addition, Hughes[86] notes that they are not always exclusive – sometimes an intervention may be a combination of two or three different modes. Whichever approach is taken, it is the playworker's responsibility to reflect on the suitability and effectiveness of the intervention used.

All of these intervention modes are based on the premise that, if the child is to get maximum benefit from playing, the play space must be authentic, that is, it must provide the opportunity for children to control how and why they play without excessive or unnecessary interference from playworkers[87].

Intervention modes

Distance
Using a sensory – internal intervention – the playworker listens and watches without overtly looking.

- **Operational rationale**: The general supervisory mode for playwork. It enables the playworker to constantly scan the 'theatre of action' looking and listening carefully, but without children feeling that what they are doing is being constantly overlooked or observed or under adult scrutiny.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel free to play in adult-free modes, interacting with peers and the environment in a way which indicates a non-adulterated play process.

Perceived authentic
The playworker navigates and engages with the play space in obvious comfort and enjoyment, interacting with the children when initiated by them and responding to them in a manner which demonstrates a non-adulterating perspective.

- **Operational rationale**: The play space will always be operated more enthusiastically by the children if they perceive it as a context which is valued and one in which what goes on there is also valued.

- **Operational outcome**: Children perceive the playworker almost as an honorary child. They feel relaxed with their presence and continue to play in an unadulterated way.

Without preconceptions
The playworker is totally focused on children's play processes and does not bring external adult agenda issues into the play space.

- **Operational rationale**: The play space is very vulnerable to the importation of ideas current in adult spaces. The play space only exists to enable and facilitate play. It is neither designed nor intended for social, political, cultural or civic education.

- **Operational outcome**: Children's total playtime is dedicated to playing. Children feel relaxed and able to engage in immersion, interacting with the environment and their peers in a spontaneous and naturally driven manner.

Unadulterating
The playworker generally only engages with children when invited or when responding to a child-initiated enquiry.

- **Operational rationale**: Adult-free play can only be experienced if children are generally left to navigate a world of their own creation. If the need for any adult involvement is left with the child then she is always in control of the scale, duration and frequency of it. Obviously, even this child centred control can be minimised further by the playworker who judges that the child's frequency of invitation or enquiry is a symptom of an adulterating dependency.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel responsible for their actions and their consequences and interact with the playworker only if or when they need information, props or resources.

Permissional
By engaging in them, the playworker conveys or transmits to children that certain, often censored or disapproved of 'ways of being', are permitted.

- **Operational rationale**: True personal identity can only evolve if children feel able to display behaviours or personas that are manifestations of who they feel they are. However, they may feel unable to engage in that display unless someone else – the playworker, for example – has broken that new ground and demonstrated that it is permitted and emotionally safe to do so.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel comfortable, knowing they can engage freely in play modes or types that might otherwise open them to ridicule or risk.

Perceived indifferent
The playworker deliberately ignores specifically targeted children.

- **Operational rationale**: Some children will have suffered trauma of such magnitude that any adult

engagement with them may rekindle it. Whilst these children may need very close supervision, the appropriate approach is to ignore them therefore enabling them the undisturbed focus to create a play reality in which they can either address or ignore the trauma.

- **Operational outcome**: Targeted children feel unmonitored and engage in play with the environment and peers in an unselfconscious, natural and spontaneous way.

De-centred
This is the formal process of elimination. The playworker is analytical and diagnostic in certain circumstances or under certain conditions, standing back and describing symptoms, collecting facts and evidence.

- **Operational rationale**: Sometimes situations occur – involving children's emotions or their physical behaviour – that need analysis and explanations that identify causes and possible curative strategies from a purely play and playwork perspective. For example, where a child is behaving erratically or violently as a result of deprivation of a general or specific play type.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel increasingly comfortable and secure and less vulnerable as their affective or physical behavioural situation is analysed and diagnosis and remedy are offered. Children feel less disturbed as the situation is dealt with effectively.

Without stereotypical play narratives (SPNs)
The playworker does not have a set of expected or allowed games, narratives or interactive limitations which are imposed or enforced to confirm their social, moral, political or cultural power or control over children. So, there is no little box of what's allowed and expected. Children cannot be behaviourally blackmailed because of the circumstances they are in.

- **Operational rationale**: In some situations children can be vulnerable to behavioural pressure and veiled threats from adults, for example 'Do it how I say or you'll be punished'. Playworkers should be conscious that they will have play type preferences and avoid enforcing them as the right or the only permitted way to play, for example children can't get wet; they mustn't play fight; they must dress up; they must be quiet; they must play in a home corner.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel relaxed, empowered and in control of the content and intent of their play. Their relationship with the playworker is joyful and happy.

Compensatory
The playworker bases aspects of intervention strategy on an analysis of children's socio-economic and geographic context and attempts to compensate for any play deficits that may be resulting.

- **Operational rationale**: From a developmental or evolutionary view, play has to be a comprehensive experience, engaging all play types, elements, senses and so on. For many children, for all sorts of reasons, a comprehensive experience will not be available. In this context, it is the playworker's function to assess the range and depth of the children's experience and provide supplementary experiences for them with which they may engage if they choose.

- **Operational outcome**: Children feel greater wellbeing and more at ease as the range and depth of their play experience increases.

Hughes'[88] intervention modes provide a technical, complex description and rationale of different interventions useful for a range of purposes. One area that frequently provokes interest from playworkers and others who facilitate children's play is dealing with challenging or aggressive behaviour. How should we respond in a way that is consistent with our non-directive, non-judgemental approach? Put succinctly, our intervention in behaviour that is detrimental to others is preventative or curative rather than punitive. In other words, we aim to prevent a situation getting to the stage where behaviour is damaging to others, or we aim to help children whose behaviour is detrimental to others to reframe their behaviour so that they and others can get back to playing.

Every day intervention approaches
Of equal value is this list of approaches adapted from an original list of 'everyday intervention approaches' compiled by the Table Twenty Three Group during the 8th National Playwork Conference[89].

These approaches often confound the usual power dynamics between children and adults. They are likely to wrong-foot, startle, distract, or amuse children so that the situation becomes reset or re-evaluated by the participants. They are neither a theoretical justification nor a 'selection box' of intervention approaches to choose from – rather, they represent a real-life selection of play-focused responses from playworkers in the field. The examples are presented to encourage discussion and reflection.

Affective approach
In this subtle approach, the playworker changes the mood and atmosphere by the introduction of a change of music or lighting for example.

Sparkling approach
The adult issues a play cue to redirect behaviour and suggest new playful possibilities. For example, they start walking around with a book on their head.

Win win approach
The playworker enters the frame but takes on a role so that harmful behaviour is modified without the child losing face. For example, the intervening playworker declares, 'I'm a reporter from the Saturn Herald and I have heard that one of the alien enemy is being tortured. Do you have any comment Captain?'

Wrong foot approach
This approach uses the element of surprise to wrong-foot the child that the playworker would respond in such a way. It derives from an example when a playworker suggested a different kind of grip to a child who was grappling another child in a play fight to avoid a visit to A&E but without actually stopping it.

Big bang approach
This is an extreme mode of intervention that carries significant risks. The playworker stops everyone in their tracks, for example by doing extreme acrobatics or smashing a plate.

Back tracking approach (oops)
This simply describes an approach where the playworker takes back their suggestion, says sorry and admits they got it wrong.

'Eyebrow' approach
The playworker uses body language to convey a message such as the raised eyebrow or strong stance.

The lurgy approach
The playworker suggests what they consider to be a funny but undesirable (for the child) consequence in response to unacceptable behaviour. For example, 'If you can't stop smashing other people's stuff up, the first dance at the disco is mine'.

The whistler (hey you!)

The playworker whistles to attract attention.

Presence approach (be there)

The playworker subtly lets the child know they are available, maybe by a touch of the arm, or perhaps by moving closer.

Affectionate approach

The playworker responds to the challenging behaviour designed to attract attention by being caring, warm and friendly. This perplexes the child, as it is not the expected response.

Taking notes

This involves very obviously appearing to write down what the playworker sees. This may cause the children to be curious or even suspicious. However, the 'writing' turns out to be a drawing or a doodle.

Giving notes

The playworker gives small post-it notes to a child with their thoughts on what is happening, asking them what they think.

It's for you

A phone call is surreptitiously arranged for the child about something completely different to the situation involved.

The Pavarotti approach

The playworker sings the words they say to children. (They will likely think you are very funny or just plain weird!).

Implications for practice

Intervention in children's play is a complex and difficult area. While it is underpinned by our core professional beliefs, in practice it can be infinitely subtle and nuanced. It requires personal qualities and skills that are often believed to be in opposition: considered yet timely, knowing yet spontaneous, analytical yet playful, and dispassionate yet empathetic. Our approach is both hands off and, when necessary, hands on, or as Hughes terms it, 'facilitative and empowering'[90]. It is facilitative because it allows for children who have lost some of their skill and freedom to interact playfully, and it is empowering because it is about stepping back and returning the initiative and control to children.

We have outlined a range of approaches to intervention, some of which are detailed, complex and analytical. They are characterised by an approach that seeks to relinquish adult power to children at almost every opportunity. While these intervention approaches often identify why and how playworkers might intervene there is still significant skill in deciding when to intervene, as well as taking into account knowledge about specific children.

Some of these approaches clearly do not extend play, but they may well allow it to restart, re-engage or take off in other directions. Others may only work once or even not at all. While the intention behind these inventions may be to prevent serious harm, they are still carried out in playful ways that are more likely to reignite play.

'There may be times when our adult responsibility, our duty of care, requires us to intervene in a play frame and terminate it or re-direct it in order to prevent imminent harm or to protect another play frame. Such a professional judgement, a reflection-in-action, would be made using all our understanding of the children, the context and, crucially ourselves. It would be non-ludic, (nonplayful, not in the service of play) in that its intent is to prevent harm rather than protect the play of the child at that moment. However, our manifest behaviour might still appear ludo-centric (play-centred or play-focused): we may distract or redirect the child, or reframe the playing, rather than directly tell her to stop what she is doing.'[91]

Playworkers should always consider each situation afresh and take into account their own self-knowledge, play history and experiences. Intervention in children's play can be described scientifically but its application is more of an art. Where possible, intervention should be carefully considered although often it will be the result of professional intuition. The practice of intervention is a defining area in the quality of supervised play provision, and as such it should be routinely considered as part of reflective practice. Children seek uncertainty in their play, they seek challenge, novelty, and create the unexpected. Risk is an inherent and valuable aspect of their playing and as playworkers we have a responsibility to ensure they can express their desire for risk in their play.

Playwork Principle 8 directs playworkers to balance 'risk with the developmental benefit and wellbeing of children' when choosing an intervention. This is a difficult balancing act and requires accurate and sensitive judgement and for this reason the subject is given over to the following section.

Play and risk

This section explores the importance of risky and challenging play in children's lives and how as playworkers it is our role to balance risk with the benefits of play in a play setting. We live in paradoxical times. While most in the minority developed world are reasonably healthy, wealthy and safe there exists a powerful desire amongst many adults to avoid all risk and uncertainty. This is especially so when it comes to children and how they play.

Despite occasional attempts to point out the futility and stupidity of some of the worst alleged 'health and safety' rules (such as bans on playing conkers or climbing trees), the message that adults should keep children safe remains ever-present. This is often taken to mean that removing or dramatically reducing all risks and hazards will make children safer. For everyone who supports children's right to play, this presents a serious challenge, as risk and uncertainty are an essential part of play and children will actively seek them out.
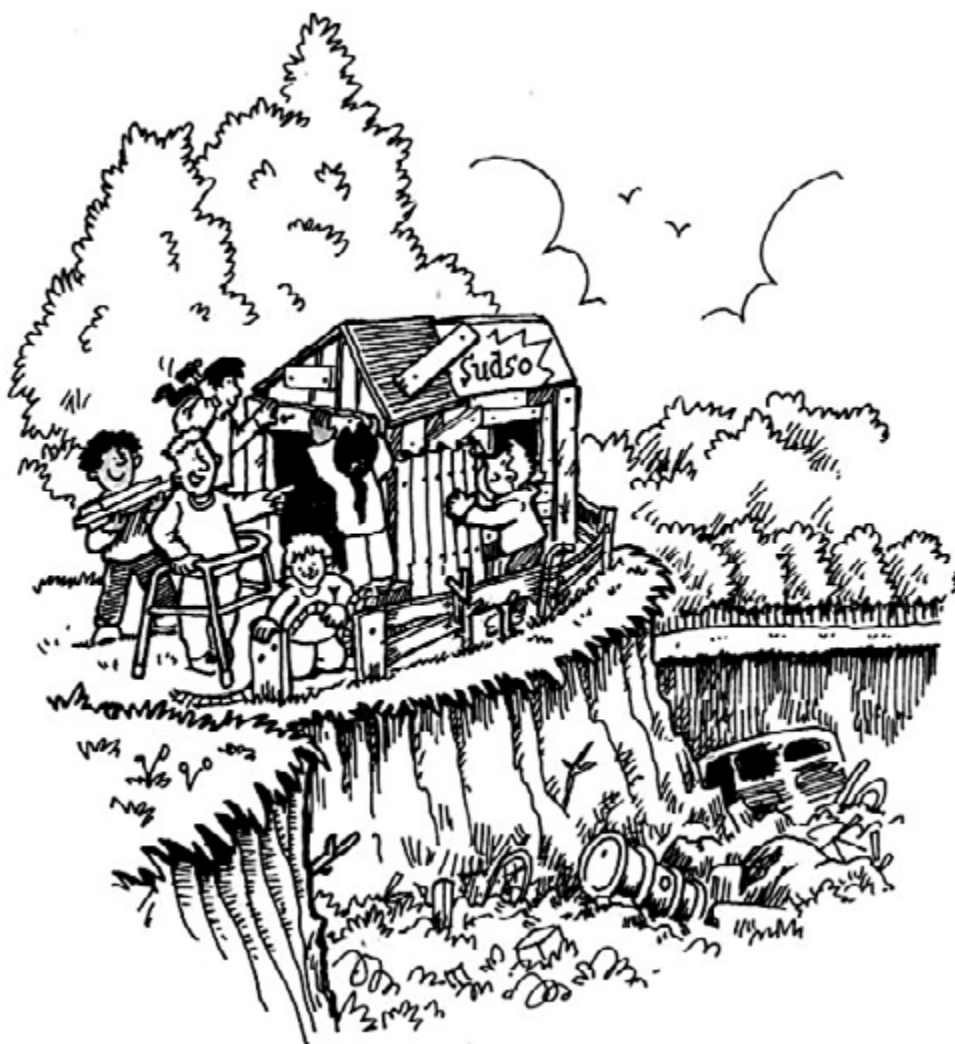
Removing opportunities for risk taking denies children the opportunities to experience and manage risk for themselves. It denies children the chance to learn about their physical capabilities and emotional lives. It denies them opportunities to develop and strengthen their resilience and decision-making. Without it, risky situations may never be mastered, and a child may remain anxious and fearful long after others who have had the opportunity to conquer their childhood fears[92].

We know that children need and want to take some level of risk and that playing is a key mechanism for how it is experienced and assessed. However, children's judgement is developing and we must consider whether the risk is within the child's current competency. Risk and challenge are desirable, but inappropriate hazards are not, and we have a duty to ensure children's safety. This doesn't mean children can't suffer minor cuts and bumps – these are the inevitable consequences of playing. What it does mean is that children are not subjected to dangers that are hidden, beyond their competency to assess, pressurised or coerced into, without any compensating benefits, and generally excessive and inappropriate.

As playworkers in a risk-averse society we need to acknowledge that the children who choose to come to our play provision today need to take risks and seek out deep stimulating playful challenges.

'Children deliberately seek out physical and emotional uncertainty in their play… Such playing with uncertainty can be manifested in behaviour that may not appear to be "positive" in building skills or preparing children for adulthood. It may include, for example, war and superhero play, rough and tumble play and play fighting, teasing and bullying, jokes and obscenities, thrill seeking play such as parkour or skateboarding, as well as behaviour in the public realm that is increasingly understood as risky or antisocial.'[93]

As playworkers, we will be constantly challenged by the different life experiences children bring to the play setting. This will include their explorations of risk taking – some significant and potentially hazardous, others more measured and calculated.

If we accept that risk is an integral part of children's play how should we assess it? Risk assessments have become common place today but they were introduced in the UK with the Health and Safety at Work Act of 1974 and only became an explicit requirement with the Management of Health and Safety at Work regulations of 1992 and 1999.[94] In any discussion about risk it is important to clarify some key terms as they can have different meanings to different people and in different circumstances.

Key terms

Hazard
A hazard is something that can potentially cause harm. Although usually applied to objects it can also refer to activities. In certain circumstances, almost anything can be a hazard to some degree.

Risk
A risk is the chance or likelihood of a hazard causing harm. The type of harm can vary from slight injury to death and includes psychological or mental harm.

Risk assessment
'This is the systematic use of information to identify hazards and estimate the associated risks'[95]. Ball and Ball-King[96] note two important considerations when we attempt to assess the risk associated with any hazard.

First, we need to be clear about the outcome we have in mind. For example, if we were to assess the risk of children swimming in a river we could assess the chance of drowning, especially related to the children's swimming skills, but we could also assess the chance of infection or contracting a disease. These two consequences could have very different risks attached.

Second, we need to specify the time over which a risk is measured. Returning to our example of swimming in the river, does it refer to a particular instance or perhaps to a wider period of say a year after heavy rain?

Risk management
Risk management is 'what to do, if anything, about the risks identified'[97]. Risk management is about decision-making, and takes into account our principles, ethos, policies, economic, and strategic considerations.

Safe

Safe is an ambiguous term. For some, it means there is no risk of harm at all. For others, it might mean compliance with industry standards. For still others, it might mean that the level of risk is below what is normally considered acceptable[98].

Risk-benefit assessment

Traditional risk assessment has tended to score things, to give things a numerical value or colour code them. Quantifying risk and benefits in this way is a very artificial process. It is somehow easier to give a score to a particular injury than it is the degree of self-esteem a child may get as a result of an activity. More importantly though, is the lack of opportunity this method provides to evidence the reasoned judgement the assessor has arrived at. For this reason, playworkers use descriptive risk-benefit assessment.

'Risk benefit assessment is a descriptive process which highlights the balance of risks and benefits in the light of a provider's play policy.'[99]

Instead of a scoring system risk-benefit assessment uses a descriptive evaluation that is informed by:

- our play policy and our knowledge of the benefits of play

- our specific knowledge of the local conditions and the children involved

- our knowledge of playwork practice and experience from other circumstances

- guidance from relevant professional, specialist and technical sources.

Risk-benefit assessment takes into account local conditions and is open to learning from other comparable provision. When we assess any particular risk, it is essential that we are competent and knowledgeable in that area. It is also crucial to consider the visibility of the risks to the child. Risks should not be hidden or beyond the knowledge and experience of the child engaging in it. Nor should they be over sanitised or dull. The Danish architect, Helle Nebelong comments:

'When the distance between all the rungs on a climbing net or ladder is exactly the same, the child has no need to concentrate on where to put his feet. Standardisation is dangerous because play becomes simplified and the child does not have to worry about his movements. This lesson cannot be carried over to all the knobbly and asymmetrical forms with which one is confronted throughout life.'[100]

If the risks are in plain sight and familiar, most children are able to make sensible decisions about risk. Supporting children to risk assess for themselves enables them to take ownership of the process, to discuss and negotiate how to solve a problem, how to achieve a goal, how to modify decisions, and to build a body of shared knowledge that will inform future challenging situations that they will undoubtedly face. If we hastily intervene, we take away that valuable childhood learning experience. Risks and hazards that offer no developmental benefits should be avoided. For example, there are no possible developmental benefits for broken glass at the bottom of a slide or dog mess in the sandpit. Other things we should avoid are hidden or surprising risks that are outside of children's experience or which require specialist expertise.

We can sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that risk taking largely lies in physical play. As described with affordances, many physical risk taking opportunities also afford the opportunity for other aspects of risk taking, intellectual, emotional and social. We need to consider how to offer and manage possibilities for taking **emotional**, **social**, and **intellectual** risks that don't always rely on the players' willingness to engage in physical risk taking. Opportunities for performance, for feeling scared, to feel lost, to experience the dark or shock, to engage with new problems and with new people. Equally, we need to be able to assess the risks of these opportunities. For some, engaging with the emotional risk of being in a performance may result in a tremendous feeling of achievement, for others it may put them off for life.

A formal risk-benefit assessment of opportunities available should be written up and understood by all playworkers staffing a project. A formal risk-benefit assessment can, where possible, be written up before the provision of opportunities based on expectations and experience. Equally, if an opportunity has been developed by children and is happening routinely and requires a risk-benefit assessment then one should be written. However, children's play is quite unpredictable and can change at an alarming pace. A dynamic risk-benefit assessment enables playworkers to continue to assess and manage risks on a moment to moment basis and as such is a demonstration of our commitment to the wellbeing of the children in our care.

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment considers risk and benefits 'on the job' and is not written down in the first instance. It is based on a careful ongoing observation of children playing and involves making assessments in sometimes stressful circumstances about how to manage a changing situation. It may require an on the spot judgement about children being exposed to potentially unacceptable harm.

The word dynamic relates to constant change or activity. As playworkers, we assess risk as an ongoing process when we observe each and every new play behaviour that may mean reasonable likelihood of injury. We weigh that risk against the benefits children gain from experiencing that play behaviour. The dynamic risk-benefit assessment flowchart[101] on the next page explains the steps we go through in our mind when a situation occurs that requires a dynamic assessment of risk.

It sounds like a lot to take in – but remember, we already have risk assessment skills that we use in our everyday lives – we already have common sense. Our work already requires getting to know children, the play setting and the community. All this informs our dynamic risk-benefit assessment.

Dynamic risk-benefit assessment happens in our head or in conversation with children and colleagues – there is no written record of our thinking and decisions. If we write a reflective log at the end of each session or even during our work, this provides us a with a memory jogger if something happens in that session as a result of our intervention or risk assessment that we may be challenged on later.

Implications for practice

Different children have widely varying desires and capabilities for risk taking and we ensure that:

- We have assessed the likely benefits and potential for harm using our local and professional knowledge and relevant guidance

- More substantial risks are only available to those children who actively seek them

- Risks are made available incrementally beginning with the most minor

- The levels of risk available are proportionate to the child's ability to understand and take them. In particular, this requires us to rely on our knowledge of the individual child and their knowledge and capabilities around specific risks.

Some final notes

Playwork has a long history but like any reflective practice-based profession it is constantly evolving. What we try to do across each of these playwork guides is introduce the reader to some established ideas that are core to playwork understanding and practice at the time of publication.

It is our aim as an organisation to support those who wish to develop their understanding and skills and we would encourage all readers to continue to visit the Play Wales website: **www.play.wales** for the most up to date research and resources into children's play and playwork.

DYNAMIC RISK BENEFIT ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Observing Playworker
Consider:
▷ The Playwork principles
▷ Their Risk management policy and procedures
▷ Playworker Intervention
▷ Children's play behaviour

Allow Play to Continue

STOP

Does the child/childrens play behaviour make you feel uncomfortable? Consider:
▷ Knowledge of children involved e.g. age, ability and competence
▷ Your Prior experience of similar play opportunities
▷ Local context: weather, recent behaviour patterns, locations, N° of staff, N° of children

NO

YES

LOOK & LISTEN

What steps are children taking to manage their own risks?
Consider: ▷ Have they removed or made safe any unnecessary hazards?
▷ Have they changed elements of the activity to make it safer?
▷ Have they made up their own safety rules?
▷ Are they making allowances for different ages and abilities?

Are the children's risk management steps working i.e. are they aware of and in control of the risks? Is the risk reducing?

REFLECT

Are the risks proportional to the play value?
Consider: ▷ Likelihood and severity of potential injury
▷ Physical, emotional, environmental and social benefits of the play opportunity

YES

REACT

Is it reasonable to allow the play to continue as it is?

NO

YES

Can you take steps to allow play to continue with changes?
Consider: ▷ Asking another member of staff to help
▷ Encouraging children to identify controllable risks
▷ Removing unnecessary hazards
▷ Encouraging children to make new rules
▷ Have you got time to implement changes?

NO

Stop the activity!
Consider: ▷ Is it possible to offer alternative play opportunities which provide similar types of challenge?

REFLECT & PRACTICE

What was the impact of your intervention?
Consider: ▷ What did the children do after your intervention?
▷ Could an alternative intervention allowed play to continue?
▷ Discussing the incident with your team members

Use your experiences from the incident to influence risk/benefit assessments & future Practice

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Notes

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.