



Play deprivation: the causes and consequences for child development, and the potential of playwork

First, a definition to set the scene: the Play Wales information sheet, *Play: mental health and wellbeing*¹ defines play deprivation as:

‘... the name given to the idea that not playing may deprive children of experiences that are essential to their development and result in those affected being both biologically and socially disabled.’

The Play Wales definition is wide-ranging and encompasses a spectrum of disadvantage. In the early 21st century it had already been taken on board by the Welsh Assembly Government in its Play Policy². Wales was the first country to do so:

‘Play is ... such a vital component of a child’s life that the child’s capacity for positive development will be inhibited or constrained if denied free access to the broadest range of environments and play opportunities.’

Clearly, the absence of play opportunities may take many forms. At one extreme would be the chronic neglect and abuse of thousands of abandoned children in the state institutions of ex-communist countries³, while at the other end of the spectrum, we have children in modern Western cultures who may simply be unable to play outdoors because of what Gill⁴ calls their ‘risk averse society’. The former was largely the result of a lack of finance in a crumbling socio-economic system, combined with a general lack of respect for a portion of the child population. There are many reasons for the latter, which are addressed in detail later in this information sheet.

Gray *et al.*⁵ identify a disturbing outcome from this change. They suggest a correlation between the general decline in children’s freedom to play and the quality of children’s mental health. Of course, correlation does not necessarily imply a causal relationship. However, their study of around thirty of the most relevant 21st century research papers enables them to make the statement that there is a clearly identifiable causal link between a child’s mental health and the extent to which they feel they are in control of events in their own lives (known by psychologists as their ‘locus of control’).

Given that a child is most in control of their world when they are playing, this leads Gray *et al.*⁶ to conclude:

‘... a primary cause of the rise in mental disorders is a decline over decades in opportunities for children and teens to play, roam, and engage in other activities independent of direct oversight and control by adults.’

Nor can there be much doubt that this process has been accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw children confined to their homes for months on end. The impact of this has been summarised in several sources, for example Beresin and Bishop’s *Play in a Covid Frame*⁷, Kourti *et al.*⁸, and two issues of the *International Journal of Play*⁹.

Theoretical perspectives

From Plato to Freud and Einstein; from Beethoven to Miles Davis and David Hockney, many of the most significant writers and creative artists in history have highlighted the complexity of play, and the array of different types of play. For example, Piaget¹⁰ suggested (wrongly in my opinion) that there were four developmental stages of play. The 20th century’s leading play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith¹¹ identified seven play-based ‘rhetorics’ – theoretical positions, which are fundamentally distinct from each other:

- **Progress** – play as adaptation
- **Fate** – play as existential optimism
- **Power** – play as hegemony
- **Identity** – play as social context
- **Imaginary** – play as transformation
- **Self** – play as peak experience or micro-performance
- **Frivolity** – play as world upside down.

Within these rhetorics, he grouped 106 different types of play – each one deriving from a different theorist. He suggested play is so significant in human evolution and personal development that the absence of play would be likely to lead to depression¹².

In a more practical categorisation, the playwork scholar Bob Hughes¹³ proposed a grouping of 16 play types. He suggested that children need to experience the full range of these play types during their childhood to attain and maintain a state of wellbeing. Where children don't have the opportunity to experience this full range they may be said to be suffering from a play deficit, and are likely to experience lasting damage. He suggests that the causes of this damage take two quite distinct forms, either play deprivation or play bias. Hughes¹⁴ explains these two concepts as follows:

- **Play deprivation** is the result of either 'a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world', or 'a neurotic, erratic interaction'
- **Play bias** refers to 'a loading of play in one area of experience or another, having the effect of excluding the child from some parts of the total play experience'.

Hughes explores these concepts in some depth in his classic playwork text, *Evolutionary Playwork*¹⁵. He suggests that deprivation and bias in children's play are far more widespread than society acknowledges, and far more damaging. This is the result of a number of factors, including fear of traffic, perceived 'stranger danger', and parental and caregivers' fears of children engaging in risky activity.

The origins of the concept of play deprivation may be traced back to the experimental work of the developmental psychologist Harry Harlow, and his many collaborators. In the mid-20th century, Harlow conducted a series of experiments which involved removing baby monkeys from their mothers at birth and rearing them in complete isolation. Harlow showed that isolation had a severely damaging impact on an infant monkey's chances of maturing into a stable functioning adult. His often brutal research (using methods that would be considered completely unethical by today's standards) showed the importance of care-giving and close contact in the development of social skills and intelligent

understanding in his growing monkeys. He suggested the same would be true of all primates, including human children, but it was not until research conducted in the aftermath of Romania's disastrous communist regime that it was possible to confirm this assertion¹⁶.

Harlow's conclusions about the importance of play in this process have received far less attention than they truly merit. Harlow and his collaborators suggested the presence or absence of play was a critical factor in the developmental process. Their experiments showed that a small daily amount of play in the developing years meant the ill-effects of isolation were negated. Surprisingly, the absence of a mother figure did not seem as important as the absence of interactive play.

Another of Harlow's findings has received even less attention but is just as important when considering the therapeutic potential of playwork. Harlow's initial experiments left him with dozens of developmentally damaged juvenile monkeys. He experimented with several different techniques in the hope of returning them to normality. However, the only approach that worked was when the damaged juvenile monkey was placed in a setting where they were able to play



with a typically developing infant monkey. Harlow suggested that this unique type of encounter enabled the damaged juvenile to return to a place where they could start again on their developmental path. By way of explanation, and partly to reflect the reality of the process, Harlow called the typically developing monkey a 'therapist monkey'.

When working with a group of chronically damaged infants in a Romanian paediatric hospital at the turn of the millennium, fellow researcher Sophie Webb and myself were fortunate to witness first-hand the impact of a one-year-old child who joined the group. Quite by chance, the child had been transferred from another hospital, where he had not been abused in the same way. Consequently, his behaviour was that of a typically developing toddler. For nine months, and without any prior intent on our part, he became our 'therapist toddler', until he was eventually adopted. So, we accidentally found ourselves in a human version of Harlow's experiment. We quickly concluded that this toddler's impact on the group was wide-ranging and developmentally substantial – confirming Harlow's conclusions in human terms¹⁷.

In summary, Harlow and his collaborators gave us two conclusions of importance to playworkers:

1. No play makes for a very socially disturbed monkey. However, a small amount of daily interactive play during the developing years can help nullify the negative impact of isolation.
2. The presence of a younger monkey engaged in age-specific play can enable a damaged juvenile monkey to recover.

The final sentence of their 1971 article is poignant and particularly relevant to the subject of play deprivation:

'Then pity the monkeys who are not permitted to play, and pray that all children will always be allowed to play.'¹⁸

The consequences of complete deprivation of play, and the potential of playwork

Our study¹⁹ focused on the impact of a therapeutic playwork project on a group of abandoned children living in a ward of a Romanian paediatric hospital²⁰. The research study, which contains numerous parallels with the Harlow studies, focused on the children's subsequent play development. The children, ranging in age from one to ten years old, had suffered chronic neglect and abuse. They had spent most of their lives tied to a cot, they were poorly fed and their nappies were rarely changed. Although able to see and hear other children, they were unable to leave their cots, and therefore experienced little in the way of social interaction. In short, they had experienced the most extreme form of play deprivation imaginable.

In the early days of the project, the playworkers had to untie the children in the morning, bathe them, change their nappies and feed them properly, before taking them to a specially designed playroom. They then worked with the children all day, attending to their needs, but most importantly using a playwork approach to facilitate an environment that enabled the children to play with each other, and so start them on the long road to recovery.





When children are deprived of play, the consequences are catastrophic. The emotions of this group of children were in turmoil. When the project started, the children just stared vacantly into space, rocking to and fro in a rolling motion which we often see in caged animals. They generally looked several years younger than their actual age. For example, the playwork team worked with a ten-year-old boy (complete with nappy) who could have passed for a toddler in any UK nursery. The children's gross motor skills were poorly developed, and they possessed hardly any fine motor skills. They were incapable of meaningful social interaction and showed few signs of cognitive functioning. In the first few months the slightest disturbance was deeply frightening and resulted in a return to the rocking motion.

In its early stages, the parallels between the children in this study and the monkeys in Harlow's study were clear:

- Both lived their lives behind bars – caged monkeys, children tied to their cots
- Both were raised in conditions where they could see their peers, but were not able to play with them, or interact in any meaningful way

- Both exhibited compulsive and stereotypic rocking and weaving behaviours, as well as an avoidance of eye contact, and staring into the distance
- Both engaged in self-harm
- Both appeared to have unimpaired cognitive abilities, except where there was other evidence of birth defects.

Once in the playroom:

- Both were reluctant to explore what the room had to offer
- Both rejected close contact with their peers
- Both showed a lack of understanding of social norms
- Both exhibited erratic unpredictable behaviour.

However, the children in our group quickly showed benefit from the interaction with an infant going through the early stages of development (our 'therapist toddler'). In less than a year, these chronically abused and neglected children made the sort of progress on the road to recovery that many experts assumed would be impossible. The focus of our study was the children's play development,

which we assessed using an instrument developed for a previous study²¹. During a period when nothing changed in their lives, other than their introduction to the playwork project, the children themselves changed dramatically:

- Their social interaction became more complex.
- Their physical activity showed a distinct move from gross to fine motor skills.
- Their understanding of the world around them improved.
- The children began to play in highly creative ways.

The children no longer sat rocking, staring vacantly into space. Instead, they had become fully engaged active human beings.

Our conclusion was straightforward – the children’s developmental progress was clearly identifiable, and apparently made possible through their experience of the playwork project.

During the year-long research study, the playwork project was the only change in the children’s life experience. Therefore, it is sensible to ask what it is about playwork that contributed to these changes. Apart from some very specific work focusing on each child’s personal agenda, we felt strongly that the most fundamental causal factor was that the children now had play-mates – all of whom, regardless of their biological age, were starting their development from a similar place. In essence, the children’s development was largely a result of their playful interaction with each other.

Play deprivation in the life of today’s UK child

At the other end of the spectrum of play deprivation is the everyday experience of children in modern societies. In his book, *No Fear: Growing up in a Risk Averse Society*, Gill²² speaks of the ‘shrinking horizons of childhood’²³. He reminds us of the findings of Hillman’s²⁴ study – namely that in 1971 eight out of ten children went to school unaccompanied; by 1990 that figure had fallen to one in ten. Hillman reported again in 1999²⁵ to the effect that the situation had now become worse. Gill²⁶ goes on to lay out a range of familiar changes that had taken place in the previous 30 years, all of which have a considerable impact on children’s freedom to play. He also examines the culprits – the factors that have produced the ‘risk averse society’ of his title. These include:

- a general lack of understanding that risks can be intrinsically beneficial
- a fear of litigation on the part of those who should be providing play facilities
- the disproportionate sums of money spent on safety surfacing for children’s playgrounds, at the expense of more and better play equipment

- stories about anti-social behaviour exaggerated in the media
- the redefining of bullying to include teasing
- excessive child protection measures that have the effect of reducing the number of volunteers prepared to run after-school activities for children
- parental fear of strangers, exacerbated by media stories about paedophiles
- fear of the internet, exacerbated because children are so much more competent at using modern technology than their parents.

When all this is added to the very real increase in traffic on our streets, it is clear that the opportunities for children to explore their neighbourhood in free-ranging play activity are becoming more and more restricted. There is no evidence to suggest that any of this has changed in the years since Gill’s stark summary – quite the opposite. Play deprivation is almost certainly getting worse. Yet, we know that play is essential for children’s healthy development. As their social and physical horizons shrink, so do their opportunities for development during play. This is extremely dangerous for both the individual child as well as for society in general.



Play is both autotelic and heterotelic

Perhaps the most well known quote relating to play and mental health is:

‘The opposite of play – if redefined in terms which stress its reinforcing optimism and excitement – is not work, it is depression. Players come out of their ludic paradoxes ... with renewed belief in the worthwhileness of merely living.’²⁷

If Sutton-Smith is correct then the absence of play from a child’s life would be potentially damaging not only for that child, but for their family, and for society as a whole.

Unfortunately, in recent years it has become increasingly common for playwork theorists to promote the idea that play is essentially an autotelic activity – something ‘we do for its own sake because to experience it is the main goal’²⁸. But, in terms of play deprivation that is not helpful, because it ignores the multi-layered impact of play. For the individual child at any specific moment in time it is indeed true to say that play is largely autotelic.

However, there can be no doubt that at one and the same moment play also has a much longer-term impact on the child’s development. This may not be intentional on the child’s part, but in terms of what Rousseau²⁹ (1762) called the ‘social contract’, play clearly has an impact outside of itself – it is also strongly heterotelic. This means, when exploring the impact of play deprivation we must take account of **all** aspects of children’s play development, by asking the question: What would it mean if a child was unable to play in this particular way?

Figure 1³⁰ provides a summary of the benefits of play and the dangers of play deprivation.

A child’s play is like an impressionist painting – a representation of how they see reality. Playwork provides the canvas for children to produce an ever-changing masterpiece of their own reality.

Figure 1: The benefits of play and the dangers of play deprivation

The first column in Figure 1 provides a categorisation of ten key factors that contribute to development while we are playing. The second column draws on these factors to reinforce that during play we learn, enact and develop a range of essential life skills. While it is true that some of these can be taught in a classroom, many cannot, and all can be absorbed during play, for example how to be playful, make friends, use and interpret mimetic behaviour. Throughout childhood and beyond, the development of these life skills helps in the production of a range of broad-based benefits, such as the development of friendship groups, self acceptance and problem solving skills. The fourth column offers an extensive listing of the outcomes that are likely to follow from an extended period of play deprivation. Obviously, we are all a product of our genes and our life experience, and so it is important to understand that every child is an individual in their own right. However, that uniqueness merely means that each child will suffer the consequences of play deprivation in their own way.

Key factors contributing to development while playing	Process During play we learn, enact and develop a range of essential life skills – how to:	Product In the longer-term playing helps to produce:	Implications of play deprivation Over time play deprivation will result in:
Fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be playful • be funny • use humour • tease effectively • get and give enjoyment • reduce boredom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • continuation of brain plasticity • happiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • rigidification of synaptic connections • brain cells dying off before their time • increased likelihood of depression • poor understanding of humour • negative consequences of boredom • inability to give and receive enjoyment
Freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • assess risk • test boundaries • exercise control • be assertive • use power effectively • make the best use of freedom of choice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a sense of independence • an understanding of the parameters of risk, challenge and danger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor understanding of the parameters of risk, challenge and danger • reduced development of independence • reluctance to be assertive • inappropriate use of power • chaotic use of freedom of choice • a general fear of personal freedom



Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • investigate effectively • explore the unknown • experiment with possibilities • cope with uncertainty • adapt behaviour to get the most out of the environment • develop combinatorial thinking • test unusual combinations of behaviour and thought 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • broader horizons • an understanding of the world, and an open-mindedness about its true potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • narrow-minded thinking • poor understanding of how the world works • inability to investigate effectively • fear of the unknown • reluctance to explore alternatives • panic in the face of uncertainty • inability to adapt behavior • lack of combinatorial thinking
Social interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make friends • co-operate to achieve an agreed goal • chat informally with friends • understand and appreciate socio-cultural diversity • enjoy solitude • negotiate and resolve conflicts without resorting to violence • develop and use play cues • interpret mimetic actions • use a personal theory of mind 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • friendship groups • an understanding of social networks • transmission of children's cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social isolation • lack of support groups • poor social interaction skills • inability to engage effectively in social networks • only minimal informal relationships • poor appreciation of the potential benefits of socio-cultural diversity • poor negotiation skills, and a tendency to become violent in conflict situations • inability to interpret mimetic actions • low level development of a personal theory of mind

Socialisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • practice social roles • learn cultural rules • interact with children’s culture • prepare for adulthood • challenge social norms • establish social hierarchies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • self acceptance • respect for others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poor understanding of social roles • misinterpretation of social hierarchies • inability to internalise cultural rules • general lack of respect for others • under-preparation for adulthood
Physical activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • run, jump, climb, crawl, balance, swing, slide, spin, hang, etc. • develop and use gross motor skills • develop and use fine motor skills • develop hand-eye co-ordination • use the body effectively • develop mimetic behaviour • improve physical strength 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • muscular-skeletal development • physical health 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restricted muscular-skeletal development • poor physical health • reluctance to engage in physical activity • likelihood of developing obesity • poor development of gross and fine motor skills (at the extreme) • inability to use the body efficiently and effectively • poor development of mimetic behaviour • general physical weakness
Self discovery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make use of the safe practice elements of play • explore a range of different selves • mix fantasy and reality • exercise autonomy of the play experience • develop and use survival skills • step up the pace and range of exploratory activities • control a personal microcosm of the world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a unique individual personality • self awareness and self-confidence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • insecurity about the self • poor self-awareness • inability to use the safe practice elements of play • low levels of autonomy within the play experience • tendency to confuse fantasy and reality • poor development of survival skills • no development in the pace and range of exploratory activities • lack of control over personal space

Environmental cognitive stimulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • acquire information and knowledge • explore the unknown • understand cause and effect • play games with rules • understand shape, size, texture, weight, etc. • understand scaling, calibration, sharing, etc. • make good use of thinking time • analyse and evaluate • inspect and contextualise • develop and use technical prowess and competence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowledge and understanding • a sense of wonder about the potential for expanding our horizons 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of nature and the outdoor environment • only low level acquisition of information and knowledge • poor understanding of causality • inability to play games with rules • poor understanding of physical concepts • inability to use spare time • inability to analyse and evaluate • reluctance to inspect • only low level development of technical competence
Creativity and problem solving	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • how to use objects to represent other things • use the imagination • make believe • adapt the environment • develop an understanding of complexity • explore combinatorial possibilities • appreciate beauty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • abstract thinking • aesthetic appreciation • problem solving skills • combinatorial flexibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not much abstract thinking • poor problem solving skills • very basic levels of aesthetic appreciation • inability to use the imagination and engage in make believe • reluctance to adapt the environment • poor understanding of complexity • little exploration of combinatorial possibilities • not much use of symbolic representation

<p>Emotional equilibrium, sickness and health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use symbolic play to express innermost feelings • come to terms with traumatic events (reconciliation) • reduce objective anxiety (fear of the outside world) • relieve tension and neutralise the stress of everyday life • use transitional objects as a security mechanism • master subconscious conflicts and feelings • satisfy libidinous desires • explore aspirations • construct a preferred reality • create a secure and controllable world 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • homeostasis and stress reduction • speedy recovery from illness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of consistent emotional balance • inability to use symbolic play to express innermost feelings • long delays in coming to terms with traumatic events (reconciliation) • heightened levels of objective anxiety (fear of the outside world) • inability to relieve tension and neutralise the stress of everyday life • no use of transitional objects as a security mechanism • inability to master subconscious conflicts and feelings • confused (or no) aspirations • inability to create a secure and controllable world
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What does playwork have to offer?

I especially like Katherine Fisher's³¹ use of a metaphor to explain the impact of playwork. Fisher suggested the playwork approach involved removing adult agendas and needless restrictions from the child's play world, at the same time as providing an environment that enabled children to explore their own ideas. This, she suggested could result in an almost magical outcome. Fisher used the metaphor of a prism to explain the value of the playwork approach:

'A prism acting on white light is the analysing instrument that separates its constituent rays into their original classes³². My definition is that play might be compared to white light which contains all the colours of the spirit of the child. Only a prism can divide the light and make the colours appear. When the spirit of the child has been locked away, this prism could be playwork.'

See Figure 2³³.

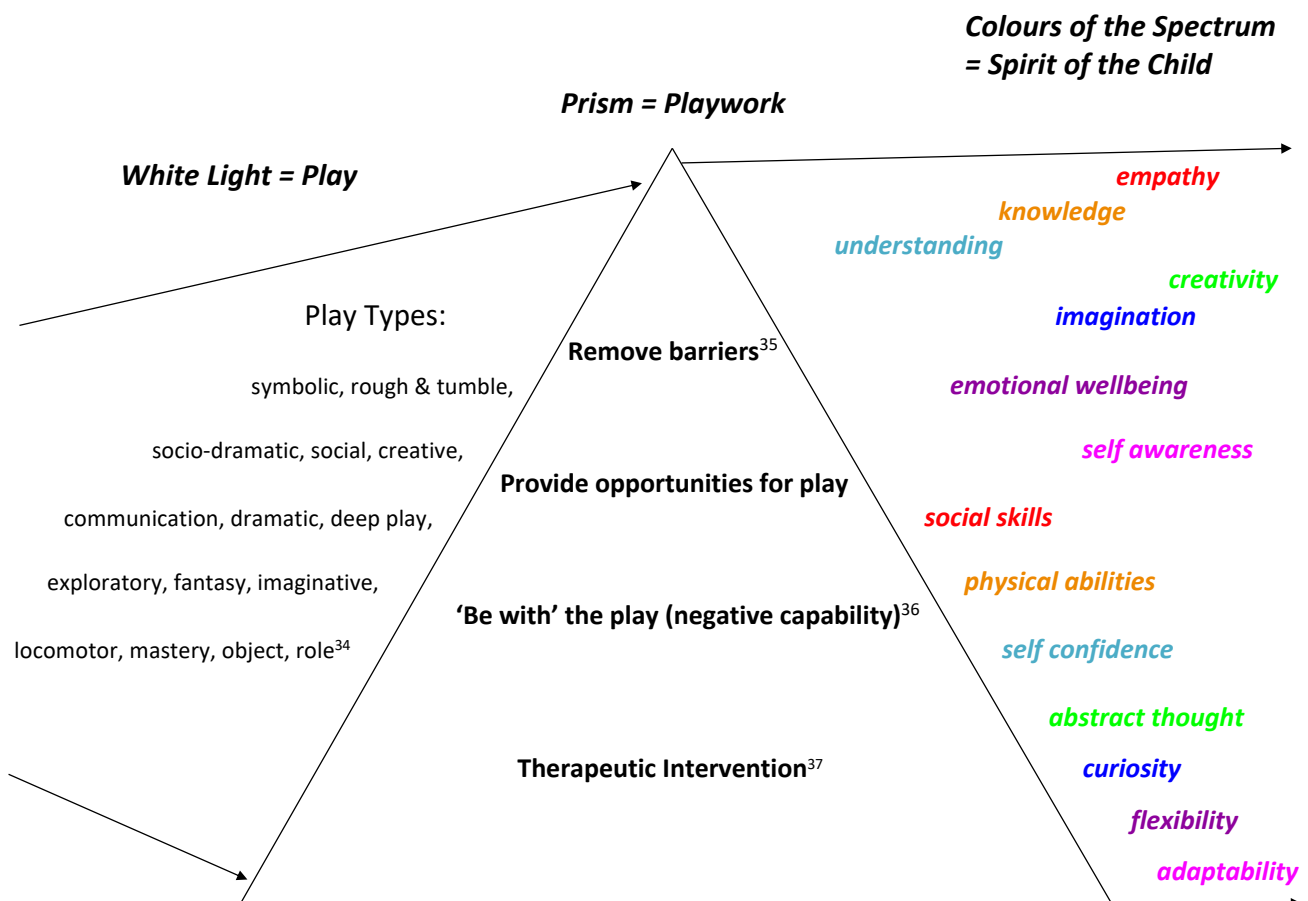
For Fisher, 'negative capability' describes a paradox:

'... by sometimes appearing to do nothing, we enable ourselves to do most. By hurriedly reaching to "solve" situations we limit our capability, but by actively "being with" a situation, without trying to change it, influence it, explain it or understand it, we keep all options open – anything is possible and nothing is closed off.'

Given this explanation of how magical play can be, it is not surprising that when we talk to adults about their most powerful childhood memory, the experience they generally get most energised about is a time when they were playing – most especially a time when they were free from adult control, free to roam, to explore, to experiment, to make their own friendships, to solve their own problems. There is something deep inside reminding us of how important playing can be.

Despite this, as we have seen, in many modern cultures freedom is routinely restricted because children tend to be regarded as either dangerous monsters or little angels in need of protection.

Figure 2: Fisher's Prism



Both characterisations are unhelpful. In contrast, at its most fundamental level, the role of a playworker is to provide an environment within which children are free to play as they wish. The playwork approach is well placed to address the ills of play deprivation. It is an approach that has many unique characteristics, all of which are potentially relevant in the alleviation of the issues highlighted in the fourth column of Figure 1.

Those characteristics have been summed up as follows:

The unique elements of playwork

- ‘A conceptualisation of the child that actively resists dominant and subordinating narratives and practices.
- A belief that while playing, the “being” child is far more important than the “becoming” child.
- An adherence to the principle that the vital outcomes of playing are derived by children in inverse proportion to the degree of adult involvement in the process.
- A non-judgemental acceptance of the children as they really are, running hand in hand with an attitude, when relating to the children, of “unconditional positive regard”.
- An approach to practice that involves a willingness to relinquish adult power, suspend any preconceptions, and work to the children’s agenda.
- The provision of environments that are characterised by flexibility, so that the children are able to create (and possibly destroy and recreate) their own play environments according to their own needs.
- A general acceptance that risky play can be beneficial, and that intervention is not necessary unless a safety or safeguarding issue arises.
- A continuous commitment to deep personal reflection that manages the internal relationship between their present and former child-self, and the effects of that relationship on their current practice.’³⁸

The first of these characteristics refers to an active refusal to accept the idea that ‘adults know best’. The characteristics as a whole seek to place the child’s immediate agenda at the heart of everything – an approach that is reinforced in a genuinely flexible environment by the adoption of Rogers’ (1954) concept of ‘unconditional positive regard’³⁹ – showing support and acceptance of the child no matter what they say or do. All this leaves the child free to explore, experiment and develop their own life skills at their own pace. It ensures that the ‘locus of control’, which Gray *et al.*⁴⁰ identified as being fundamental to a child’s mental health, remains with the child at all times. Taken as a whole, these characteristics suggest the playwork approach is ideally suited to providing the sort of play environment within which play deprived children can gradually regain and retain the state of whole wellbeing referred to by Hughes⁴¹.

Returning to our Romanian study⁴², the children’s learning and development resulted substantially from the playworkers’ ability to create an enriched play environment that was substantially supportive of the play process. The playworkers’ use of ‘negative capability’,⁴³ their suspension of judgement and prejudice, coupled with a determination to take each child’s agenda as their own starting point, helped to create a good quality playwork environment. In other words, an environment that offered adaptability to the children, and so encouraged the compound flexibility process⁴³ – an ongoing interplay between flexibility in the play environment and increasing flexibility in all aspects of the developing child.

Through their empathy, and their ability to interpret the children’s play cues effectively, the playworkers were able to create strong trusting relationships, which in turn helped to enhance the children’s self-esteem. If such approaches were applied in a typical playwork setting in the UK, we would expect children to learn and develop naturally. The remarkable thing about our experience in Romania was that this straightforward playwork approach worked just as effectively with some of the most play-deprived children in the world.

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³² Zajonc, A. (1995) *Catching the Light: The Entwined History of Light and Mind*, New York: NY: Bantam Books, p.84.

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