



dirt is good

The concept of 'Play Malnourishment' in the UK

By Doug Cole

Introduction

My work with the International Play Association promoting the child's right to play has inspired me to write this paper on behalf of Persil for their 'Dirt is Good' campaign. In my opinion in the same way parents / carers and teachers have been educated about food and nutrition people should start thinking about play in a similar way and understand the importance of play in a child's development. This paper will hopefully highlight what I feel are the dangers that children face in the UK and how we can overcome them.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY AS ONE OF THE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF LIFE

Play is what children do, it is what they are, it is their way of making sense of the world around them. It is through play that they develop skills and abilities that not only enable them to develop as human beings but also helps us as a species to continually adapt and survive.

There are some pretty bold statements within that paragraph and at first sight you might be forgiven for thinking that there must be a whole host of other things that are far more important, what about school, what about exercise, what about food, what about just about everything else which must be more important than children playing. Play is effectively just children messing about when they aren't doing anything useful. Play can't be that important ...can it?

Well, play is that important; it can be and should be regarded as one of the fundamental building blocks of life. The value of play is increasingly being recognised in relation to what it does for individuals, communities and society in general.

"Play is the elemental learning process by which humankind has developed. Children exhibit a behavioural imperative and instinctive desire to play. It has contributed significantly to the evolutionary and developmental survival of our species. Children use play in the natural environment to learn of the world they inhabit with others. It is the very process of learning and development, and as such all that is learnt through it is of benefit to the child".

(Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy, October 2002)

WHAT IS PLAY?

So what exactly are we talking about when we talk about play, because as a phrase it covers a multitude of behaviours, it means different things to different people. This is a definition, which is widely used by those who have an understanding of play and playwork:



“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons”.

Notice that within this definition play is defined as a process, i.e. it is not product orientated, when children engage in play it does not necessarily mean that there is something at the end of it, children may decide to produce something but if they don't it does not mean the play is any less valuable.

In essence, play is freely chosen when children decide **what** they do, it is personally directed when they decide **how** they do it and it is intrinsically motivated when they decide **why** they do it.

A BALANCED DIET OF PLAY

“I am going to play some computer games with my mate / on my own because I want to get past level eight”

If you apply the what, how and why notions already outlined then the conclusion must be that playing with computer games etc is fine. But that goes against all of the information that is bombarding us at the present time that children are at risk of obesity unless we get them off their backsides and into some sort of activity.

To apply the nutritional analogy, which parents across the UK are already familiar with, we know that we need to eat from a wide range of food types to gain sufficient nutritional value.

The same principle applies to play. It is vital that children are given the opportunity to engage in a wide range of play behaviours, so the occasional bit of play with computers and so on is fine as long as it is part of a 'balanced diet of play'.

What makes a 'balanced diet of play'?

For organisations and / or individuals operating play provision, the balanced diet of play is already explained. Fifteen play types have been defined and associated criteria for enriched play environments have been outlined.

(Children's Play Council; Best Play. Play Wales: First Claim. Hughes. B: A playworkers taxonomy of play types, Hughes .B: Play Environments: A Question of Quality)

At first sight parents / carers could be forgiven for concluding that while it may be suitable for the local play centre, adventure playground or after school club to offer such a breadth of play experiences, there is neither the time nor space for such opportunities to be explored as part of what might be called 'normal' family life.

On closer examination though, there could be ample opportunities in the normal week to encourage children to indulge in a 'balanced diet of play'. Examples of these include:

- 1) Engaging in **physical play** such as, chasing, balancing, bike / skateboard riding, hide and seek, building things, digging, playing with water.
- 2) Engaging in **imaginative play** such as pretending to be someone or something, play acting, dressing up
- 3) Engaging in **creative play** such as painting, making models, cooking, singing.

Given time, space and permission, children will engage with all of these play types and a whole host more. Giving children the freedom to experience the widest possible range of play experiences need not be dependant on finance, there could be opportunities in and / or around every house and flat in the UK for children to explore their own environment and play.

THREE PORTIONS OF PLAY A DAY

To use the nutritional analogy once again, we are all aware of the “ five portions a day” concept as it applies to fruit and vegetables, let me suggest that as well as those five portions a day, children should be given the opportunity to engage in a minimum of three portions of play a day.

It needs to be stressed that what is being suggested here is the opportunity, i.e. the time, space and permission for children to engage in such play behaviours – once this is provided, children will

actually be able to indulge in a ‘play banquet’

switching between play types all of the time.

They should not be directed or

compelled. They do not want to be

entertained. Their own natural instincts will kick in and they will play.

Remember the **What**,

How And Why.

A question we should be asking ourselves as parents / carers is how can we create the time, space and an atmosphere where children understand that it is okay to play. Many parents / carers had the benefit of this balanced diet of play as children and we must ensure that our children have access to a similar balanced diet of play.

The 51-minute challenge

There is time within the day outside school time that needs to be protected for children to play. Recent analysis of children and young people’s lives suggests that between the ages of 0 and 16 children and young people have the equivalent of **51 minutes of every waking hour available** outside formal educational setting to participate in whatever opportunities they wish.

(The 51-minute challenge – A national conference, organised by Groundwork, the National Youth Agency, CABE and the Children’s Play Council, exploring approaches to the use of space and facilities for children and young people)

When playing, children will find and **explore their own limits** and take risks, this is a crucial part of their play behaviour and should be recognised as of value. They will engage with the environment around them and explore its possibilities and

limitations. There is a pretty good chance that they will get dirty, and pick up scrapes, bumps and bruises, which are all vital parts of a normal childhood. Getting dirty is a natural part of experiencing, enjoying, growing, learning, developing and living.

Examples of play

As already noted, in a lot of cases the most vivid memories of our own childhood are around play and the time and energy we put into play. Play isn’t just about kicking a football around it can be anything from....



- dressing up
- trying to find insects or worms
- mixing soil and water to make mud or soil potions
- trying to keep spiders, woodlice and so on in jars or boxes
- making and flying kites
- blowing up balloons
- making streamers
- hiding and playing in dens
- riding bikes / skateboards
- making up dance routines and performing them for parents and friends
- throwing sheets over furniture and turning bedrooms into spaceships, planes or boats
- costumes made from all sorts where you became whatever you want
- using cardboard boxes to make a dolls house, a garage for cars, an airport and a thousand other things

BARRIERS TO PLAY

Given the pressures that parents are under from all sides, there is some sympathy with the view that other things are far more important than play. Parents and carers in the UK are working some of the longest hours in Europe, they are living on a relatively small island where land is at a premium and consequently space for children to play is at best an afterthought and mostly not a thought at all.

Added to this is the constant pressure on parents that if you are not supervising your children every minute of the day you are somehow a bad parent. And given the pressure put on children to achieve educationally from the earliest age by passing exams it is hardly surprising that parents don’t think of play as particularly important.

There is however something deep inside us all that instinctively

knows that play is important to children, in many cases our own most vivid childhood memories revolve around where we used to play, who we used to play with and the kind of things that we used to do.

Children's play needs in the twenty first century will not differ significantly from children of previous generations, however there are barriers to play that are quite obviously more a part of life nowadays than they were previously - in particular the almost total domination of the car. However ensuring that children have access to this 'balanced diet of play', in the same way that children over the years have had such access, is such an important part of a child's life that we must create the time, space and permission for it to happen.

'PLAY MALNOURISHMENT' IN THE UK

There is a growing body of research that has begun to identify the disturbing consequences of children being denied access to stimulating play experiences. The various pieces of research suggest that there are distinct physiological consequences of play deprivation. More specifically this is around poor neurological development as well as the more tangible impacts such as children becoming more violent, aggressive and antisocial as well as running the risk of becoming unfit and obese.

"An inability to engage in play can only result in behavioural instability, neurological dysfunction, unhappiness and a lack of mental well being in affected children"

(Play Deprivation – Facts and Interpretations: Play Wales / Play Education)



Applying the nutritional analogy again the concept of play deprivation could be likened to 'play malnourishment'. As a society we are becoming increasingly aware of the long term affects of a poor diet i.e. malnutrition, and it is time we became more aware of the potential long term affects of play deprivation or 'play malnourishment'.

"The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens"

David Lloyd George 1925

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Sources

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