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Identifying Unique Qualities in Play

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Chapter Objectives

This chapter locates the child at the centre of play and practice and analyses the concept of play as an intrinsic motivator for children to initiate and develop play opportunities. It explores why play is so difficult to define and how this impacts upon practitioners' ability to provide children with opportunities to express their 'unique qualities'. It also examines the EYFS in terms of 'a unique child', specifically emotional, social and spiritual development and how this translates into interpretive and subjective practice.



What is play?

The term 'play' has been used and interpreted in many ways in the early years. The pioneers of play, such as Froebel (1782–1852), McMillan (1860–1931), Isaacs (1885–1948), Steiner (1861–1925) and Piaget (1896–1980), placed an emphasis on different elements of play depending on their research interests and experiences, and over the last ten years there have been significant contributions from researchers on the implications for play and practice. What they have said about children's play has influenced what practitioners believe and do in practice. Researching different perspectives about play not only helps practitioners to develop a view about its impor-

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tance as part of a child's social world, but also supports practitioners in becoming aware of the value of play to build up children's interests, explorations, curiosity and skills. However, the challenge inherent in the term 'play' is that it is often misinterpreted by practitioners within the same setting let alone within the wider early years community. How one person defines play may conflict with someone else's view, but more often than not there will be subtle differences in what practitioners believe about what constitutes a play experience. This in turn contributes to what Sutton Smith (1997) describes as the ambiguity of play, where the diverse nature of play means that it is interpreted differently and is difficult to define.

A particular view of play may be promoted in your setting which as a result influences your practice in how it is organised, the resources you provide, and the general ethos of the setting. This is significant when applied to the EYFS because the documentation refers to 'play as underpinning practice' (DCSF, 2008e: 7) but is less clear on what this means in practice or how it may be achieved. The majority of practitioners will observe what children are interested in, plan a series of activities, record the outcomes, and then assess the children's progress. This is a clear procedural format, but when the scale of control is tipped in the favour of the practitioner the child's autonomy may be marginalised, with play then becoming something that is organised around the child rather than emerging from their own explorations. The following examples are from a range of settings that have been described by practitioners as play:

- children making identical 'Father Christmas' faces from specified craft material supplied by the practitioners;
- children having a choice of four tables with different materials on them (such as plasticine, Lego, sand and crayons) where they are not allowed to transfer items to different tables and there is a limit on the time that can be spent on each table;
- children being asked by a practitioner to count the number of cups and plates they have laid out whilst in the middle of a 'tea party' role play.

These examples illustrate the way in which play can sometimes be seen as a set of 'activities' with measurable learning outcomes. They do not however place the child at the centre of the process, as each is led by the nature of the environment, the final outcome, or the value a practitioner places on the content of an activity. To reflect a more child-centred ethos, Skills Active (2004) suggest that play

should be freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated. The three examples above could have gone some way to achieving a more child-centred approach by:

- providing a range of craft material for children to explore with the practitioner, perhaps by making a 'Father Christmas' face and supporting those children who also wanted to do this;
- allowing children to move freely between the four tables, taking with them various materials to support their curiosity, and also by allowing children to play with other things that were not laid out on the tables;
- for the practitioner to observe quietly unless invited into the role play by the children and then to follow their lead into imaginative play.

This widens the debate surrounding what play is. Perhaps one starting point in answering this question is to say that there is no common agreement as to its definition. However, in order to support children's early experiences and nurture their unique qualities it is important to consider what does constitute play. Then to try and consider what it is that *does not* constitute play. This may then provide you with more definite parameters to work within and ease your frustration in trying to find a concrete definition. One Children's Centre manager commented:

One day you think you have defined what it is, how it operates in your setting, what the benefits are to the children in your care, and then something happens which completely alters your perspective. I guess this is the reflective process that you have to go through, but I never thought play was so complex! (Interview, May 2009)

Such complexity is not hard to understand. Working towards a definition of play relies not only on your own values and beliefs about childhood, but also on your ability to be reflective and engage with the debate surrounding play. Often this will trigger a subjective and emotive response rather than a rational analysis of the situation. Hughes (2001) argues that this is because play has two main interlocking characteristics:

- *Play has an immediate impact for the child involved.* It is something that children engage in to make sense of their own situation and the context they are in.
- *Play has a wider influence which is a transpersonal characteristic.* It is

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something that practitioners are able to recognise and identify with to a certain extent as adults. They are able to see the consequences of the play, for the children involved, and speculate as to where that play may end. They can identify that the play will create a 'history' for the child; that they will remember the experience, try to recreate it again, and also try to draw meaning from it.

These characteristics are dependent upon subjective experiences. They concentrate on the processes that play initiates and the complex web of emotional responses that play can evoke. It is essential that as a practitioner you develop your own critique of play so that you are able to evaluate children's experiences in order to provide a supportive structure to facilitate the development of their own play choices and the consequences of these. Play should not be seen simply as a mechanism for socialisation. It is a journey of self discovery of which the child at the time may not particularly be aware, but it develops their play experiences through repeated behaviours and dealing with emotional responses. All of these qualities contribute to building a picture of a unique child. It is important to view this EYFS principle as a layered interrelationship between children's autonomy to reveal aspects of who they are, what is important to them, and what they feel. The most effective way in which children can demonstrate these unique qualities is through freely chosen and personally directed play (Skills Active, 2004).

Unique qualities

Play and emotional development are connected by the way in which children engage in social interaction (Vygotsky, 1978) and the choices they make within their play, for example the roles they take on and the decisions they make. Cassidy et al. (1992) refers to play as a vehicle for emotional expressiveness where children can be themselves, pretend to be someone else, or 'play out' something that has happened or might happen in the future. Through play children are able to explore not only their own feelings but also the feelings of their peers. Denham et al. (1990) explained this as a socialisation of emotional understanding, where children involved in play develop empathy towards each other based on the play they are engaged in. This is evident in the case study at the beginning of this chapter, when Michael's den is captured and Daniel consoles him and invites him into his game. By this Daniel is demonstrating unique qualities in his actions and reactions within the play.

Smith et al. (2003: 183) suggest that children can understand other people's emotions, desires and beliefs by around three to four years of age, but also that there are important precursors for children to be able to understand what another person may be experiencing. These consist of:

- self-awareness where the child knows what they are doing in play and what the consequences may be;
- the capacity for pretence and to suspend 'real world' events;
- being able to distinguish reality from pretence.

Children's natural disposition towards self-motivated play stimulates these skills, for example, using a cardboard box 'as if' it was a shield to protect them from pirates. In pretend play children are able to conjure up characters with emotions and desires of their own. This reflects, to some extent, part of their own feelings as they project this into their play to test out or rehearse different emotions and responses from others. In self-directed play children will naturally involve emotions into the play. They will watch each other's reactions, and, at around four years old, can take account of someone's actions and from this predict their emotional state (Smith et al., 2003). For example, in the case study the children were aware of Michael's anger on finding that his den had been commandeered as a pirate ship and were also sympathetic to his rather demanding request that he must then become the captain of the ship.

Emotional development has also been defined by Thoits (1989: 318) who highlighted three components which contribute to emerging unique qualities. She has argued that emotional responses can consist of one or a combination of these and here these are related to children's play:

- *children's ability to appraise a play situation or context*; for example when Michael found the biggest box, opened it up and crawled inside;
- *their ability to understand a physiological sensation*; for example when talking to the children after the play in the case study they were able to describe their feelings of uncertainty and being a little scared when they first came into the preschool, as their normal environment had been changed to include a pile of cardboard boxes;

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- *their ability to display expressive gestures*; for example when in the case study Eva showed her frustration by kicking the boxes when they fell down after making a tower.

Demonstrating this type of emotional response in play is just one dimension of 'a unique child'. Whalen (1995) has identified another important aspect in exploring a child's sense of who they are and considering the fine detail of children's social worlds. She has suggested that the interactional richness children acquire in social situations is essential to their development. When children play with others they learn social rules and gain an opportunity to practise what they have learnt in their immediate home environment. When children enter into role play, for example, there is usually much discussion about who is going to take on the main characters: this is very clear in the case study, with a large amount of negotiation being undertaken to decide on the role of 'captain', 'head pirate' and 'parrot'. Play can also teach some tough lessons when dominant characters (in this case Michael) usually seem to get their own way. He managed this through being physical with the boxes, making the first move on the largest box, and not being afraid to voice his opinion. Fabes et al. (2003) identified this play as active forceful play that can help children establish a hierarchical pecking order and then use this position to direct the play to their own advantage. Only when the majority of the group 'ganged up' on Michael did the dynamics of the play change, yet he was quickly able to re-establish himself by seeking peer support from Daniel. This demonstrates the detailed way in which children will first initiate, then organise and accomplish play as a socially shared experience. This fine balance of collaborative interactions is dependent upon the children in the play situation using their individual qualities to contribute and extend imaginative play. The children were not aware that they were practising and extending their capabilities, but the practitioners were able to record significant examples to build on their evidence for 'a unique child'.

Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)

The overarching message of the PSED element of the EYFS is that children should have experiences where they can explore who they are and can interact with others. The cardboard box play provided an ideal opportunity for the children to display high levels of engagement that were personally directed by the choices they made. The open-ended nature of the play ensured that there was not a preconceived outcome and using observation practitioners were able to

examine what individual children did with the boxes. Cherry, the preschool manager, noted:

Eva was very interesting to observe; usually in more structured play she would have given up on building the tower when it fell down. Although she displayed her frustration she stuck with it, which really showed a more determined side to her. (Interview, May 2009)

In the case study the cardboard boxes facilitated the children's ability to be creative and immerse themselves in imaginative play. They were able to adapt their game and follow their own play needs, but also play collaboratively when they come together as a group. The children demonstrated their capacity to express themselves individually (with outbursts from Michael and Eva), while others demonstrated an understanding of what was required on a practical and emotional level to help their friends in the play (Daniel and Shona). The way in which the children interacted with each other demonstrated how they were able to assess the situation and have an understanding of each other's needs. Bauman and May (2001) have suggested that children gain a sense of power by having the autonomy to make play decisions and respond to their peers' emotional needs. They argue that having a sense of power in play provides children with the capacity to develop emotionally and socially. The relationship between Daniel and Michael in the case study demonstrates how Michael maintains his sense of control over the play, but how Daniel facilitates this through his ability to understand and empathise in the situation. These actions support both boys' self-confidence and self-esteem.

Spiritual development

It is important to recognise that these observations are subjective as they are based on the prior knowledge and understanding the practitioners had of the children's personalities and their experiences. Therefore, it is essential not to underestimate the knowledge you possess about the children in your care. It is important to discuss with colleagues how you interpret and apply the principles and six areas of learning of the EYFS within your practice. For example, within the PSED area of learning and development the EYFS recommends that you 'plan activities that promote emotional, moral, spiritual and social development together with intellectual development' (DCSF, 2008e: 25). At first glance this seems straightforward, however, there are perhaps further questions to ask based on your knowledge, understanding and interpretation of children's play:

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- What do you believe supports development? Are you supporting or directing play? Are you providing opportunities to explore or deciding upon ways that could be seen as controlling how, when and why children play?
- Are you and your colleagues clear about what is meant by spiritual development?
- Do you believe that all activities should contain these elements and how easy is it to incorporate this into your practice?

It is important to discuss these types of questions with your colleagues in order to have a united approach when working with children so they can receive consistent responses to support their development. For example, spiritual development is something that is highly subjective and can be interpreted in many different ways. Hyde (2008) states that the underlying factor of spiritual development is listening to children's voices, something that you may consider you do on a daily basis. However, how do you safeguard against implementing your own perceptions on what children choose to engage in and how do you know that what they choose to do is actually providing them with opportunities to develop their intuitive or spiritual capacities?

A child-centred approach

One way to investigate this is to use the Mosaic Approach with children (Clark and Moss, 2001). Allowing children to use different mediums (such as taking pictures, making a video, or taking you on a tour of their play space) where they have the autonomy to express their interests and explore their emotions can provide an insight into how they experience and perceive their environment. This not only allows you to evaluate how the opportunities you provide for them are received, but also offers an insight into what children value. However, as professionals you need to be open to 'hearing' what children are saying and to also be prepared for the fact that they may not see the setting in the same way you do. Children see their play differently to adults as it is they who are immersed in the fantasy, role play, rough and tumble, outside play, etc. You may observe and record your interpretation of the play, but only the children involved in that play will know the motivation for wanting to do whatever they are engaged in. Children who feel safe and secure enough to share their perceptions and experiences will often offer more personal reflections, for example positive and negative comments about

their play environment or playmates. This can be a valuable resource to inform future planning for positive play opportunities.

The value children place on play stems from cultural influences where children link their play experiences to their family, their immediate play environment, and the wider community to which they belong. Play is something that happens in all cultures, although it may be organised in different ways and also be dependent on the play environment. Hyder (2005: 21) recognises that 'all children in all societies appear to engage in activities which would fulfil some of the criteria of play'. He defines this as children exploring and pretending as a mechanism for engaging with the world. This also provides a commonality of bringing children together and contributing to their sense of belonging (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2006). This is not always an easy process and children can feel rejected and frustrated at not being able to be fully part of the game. It is evident that in the case study James may have had a similar experience. He chose to stay on the periphery of the play for some time, not sure how to enter into the game with the others. He attempted to make contact with Peter who was playing to one side of the main action, but was rejected by him. He then moved around to the other side of the play space and was finally able to join in with the 'pirate' game as the different groups of children joined together in a common aim of capturing the 'ship'.

Key person

The EYFS, by incorporating the role of the Key Person into how you design your practice, has underpinned the value and importance of continuity, progression and security for the child. The Key Person is an essential link between home and the early years setting. This was exemplified in the case study through Sarah, James's key person. She has worked with James for six months and admitted that she wanted to 'rescue' him when she saw how he was struggling to mix with the other children. James has delayed speech and because of this finds it difficult to communicate and make his needs known to other children. Sarah has built a close relationship with James but also confessed:

On reflection, perhaps I have been doing too much for James. After observing him today I can see that although initially he found it difficult to fit in, he figured out a way to get involved and play with the others. He does tend to rely on me when we do more structured activities, so from this free play I have learnt that I need to let him do more for himself. That's going to be quite hard for me! (Interview, May 2009)

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Further discussion with Sarah revealed that she had been taking the role of Key Person very seriously and had felt both privileged yet anxious to provide the best possible support for James. She had taken 'You must plan for each child's individual care and learning requirements' (DCSF, 2008e: 6) literally and the cardboard box play demonstrated to her that she could allow James to have autonomy, and that while he may not have met his own needs initially, he was ingenious enough to figure out a way to be involved. She reflected:

I find the EYFS documentation difficult. On the one hand it is very woolly and vague, saying play should underpin everything we do. What does that mean? It has created a lot of stress in our setting – and then it can also be very prescriptive and you think, 'right, well at least I know where I am with that', but then, like I have done with James, you take it too literally and still end up worrying if you are doing the right thing for the child. (Interview, May 2009)

The personal battle Sarah demonstrates here is something that many practitioners experience. The way in which the EYFS is perceived and the way play is interpreted are vitally important. They set the tone for what you do and how you respond to all children's play needs regardless of their background or individual needs. To support children in developing a 'unique self' they must be supported in following their own interests where the motivation for them to engage with other children and different play materials comes from them. It is important that these interests are not imposed by practitioners via outcome-driven activities (however hard this may be for you). Play is initiated by children – to satisfy their own curiosity, to push their own boundaries, to master new skills, to build new relationships, to explore their environment, and for a number of other needs, some of which will not always be clear to practitioners. However, in providing the space where children will be able to follow their own play interests you are building children's foundations for them to express who they are in relation to the world. Katz (1993) has suggested that while this appears to be intangible, it does in fact value the process of unpacking what children do when they engage in self-directed play opportunities. The challenge for the practitioner is to recognise that this play must be owned by the child and not by the adult. For quality play to emerge it must be child initiated and led, with practitioners only taking a role when invited to by the child.

Continuing Professional Development Activity

It is important to have a shared understanding of what play means in your setting. One way of moving towards an answer is to agree what is *not* play. This is necessary because when you find something difficult to articulate it is often easier to define what it is not rather than what it is. However, this is only a starting point. The process of reaching a consensus on how you approach play can be quite arduous: there is no 'quick fix' if you want this to be effective and to help new and existing members of staff to really understand what it means for play to underpin practice.

The Mosaic Approach with your team – what is play?

Aim

- To support your practice in thinking about what play means to you.
- To share your ideas of play in a visual and oral format.
- To stimulate discussion and pull together key themes which may help in forming your setting's definition of play.



Activity

This activity requires you to take photos in your setting of those examples that you believe represent play. These photos should remain exclusively for this activity and should follow your settings policy for taking photographs and gaining consent. If you are unable to take photographs you can adapt the activity to describing play rather than visually representing it.

- 1 Gather together enough digital or disposable cameras for your team.
- 2 Think about what play means to you and allow 30–60 minutes (depending on the number of colleagues and size of the setting) to take pictures of anything in that setting that significantly represents play to you. At the end of this activity you will need to explain why you have chosen to take pictures of particular things, so ensure your pictures have a purpose and are not random shots of the environment.
- 3 You will need to download or process the pictures and print them for the second half of the activity.
- 4 Devise some ground rules for the following discussion. These might include: being respectful of other people's views; allowing everyone to contribute; keeping the discussion focused on 'what is play?'; listening to each other and minimising diversions into other issues.

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- 5 Spread the pictures out on a table and start a discussion by looking for the similarities in the pictures that you and your colleagues have taken.
- 6 Any discussion should focus on the diverse set of pictures you will be presented with. Facilitate this discussion away from individual photographs and try to draw out the common themes. This may include the outside environment, specific toys/games, or a particular space within the setting.
- 7 The discussion will feature different views, such as what you consider a stimulating play space to be. It is important to explore these various outlooks further and to understand other people's perspectives without this becoming personal. If that does start to happen, try to refocus on the aims of the activity.
- 8 Set a date for a review of the activity. This needs to be about 7–10 days after the event. In the meantime, set up a message book or use a whiteboard to write down the common themes and perhaps a definition of your setting's ideals for play. In the review/reflection period you and your colleagues will then be able to add to or change the statements made by others.
- 9 At the review of the activity focus on what children are experiencing when they play, what they are learning, saying, exploring and discovering. What impact has it had on how you view play? What made you record or take the photographs you did?

Questions to consider

- *How challenging did you find this activity?*

Some people are able to complete this activity very quickly if they have a definite view of what play is. Others will take longer in selecting what they want to photograph. It is important that the activity is taken seriously and valued, otherwise you will just end up with a series of meaningless pictures. Some people may become frustrated during the activity as they may not be able to find what they think play is. This is quite rare, but if it does happen encourage staff to reflect on why they cannot find what they are looking for and then open this up for discussion when you have the pictures in front of everyone.

- *What have you learned from the experience?*

The activity helps staff to re-evaluate what they think play is and how they can provide and resource it in their setting. By taking the photographs it may remind them of their own play experiences or what they

have provided for their own children. It is important to focus this question in a professional capacity so the discussion does not become centred on a trip down memory lane. It has to have relevance to your practice and provide a basis for further discussion. You may choose to highlight common themes or any strategies you use to support play, or you might want to use your reflection to start to make changes to your practice.

- *What will you do with the information that you have gathered from the activity?*

As a team you will need to decide what you will do with the material you have collected. Part of the aim is to reflect on a personal understanding of play, but more significantly to work towards a definition of play for your setting. This does not have to be set in stone at the end of the activity and can be developed over a period of time. If you have a white board or message book in your staff room it is worthwhile to try to write down what you have achieved from the activity, how your feelings towards play have changed or developed, or perhaps to have a go at writing a setting definition. This can then be available for everyone to view over the following weeks and then to discuss this period of reflection at your next team meeting.

Summary

Not only is the child central to the process of play, but also the way in which you respond to children's actions and reactions within play is crucial to the success of children in developing their unique qualities. The more opportunities there are that can provide the potential to direct their own outcomes, to practise their skills and explore their own autonomy, the more children will develop a sense of who they are. It is important that throughout this process practitioners consider the impact of how they interpret and apply the principles of the EYFS on children's play experiences. Consequently, as a team, it is important to know what 'play-based practice' means to your setting and how you interpret the EYFS documentation.