

The importance of play and playfulness

Biddy Youell*

Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and Northern School of Child and Adolescent Psychotherapy

(Received 17 January 2008; final version received 8 April 2008)

This paper focuses on the roots of play and playfulness in children's early experience of relationships. The paper seeks to argue that the current debate about the loss of safe outdoor play spaces and the dangers of over-reliance on digital entertainments sometimes neglects the fact that play and playfulness are developmental achievements and that there are huge variations in children's capacity to make use of the opportunities they have.

Keywords: play; playfulness; learning; relationship; child psychotherapy; hide and seek



Introduction

The letter 'Let our children play', published in *The Daily Telegraph* in September 2007 and signed by some 270 experts, focused on the risks to play from changes in the social environment and educational system. The letter appealed for more 'unstructured, loosely supervised play outdoors' and listed the benefits in terms of healthy physical, psychological and emotional development. The enemies of play are seen as the proliferation of sedentary, 'screen based' activities and the aggressive marketing of toys. The emphasis on formal learning at pre-school levels and the influence of 'stranger danger' on the movement of children beyond the home are cited as further causes of the demise of play. It would be difficult to take issue with any of these important points but I have a slightly different area of interest. I am concerned to locate the origins of play and playfulness as being in a child's early experience and to illustrate the ways in which children's development can be compromised if play and playfulness are not established in those early stages.

Judith Edwards (1999) draws our attention to Freud's answer to the question as to what a normal person ought to be able to do well. Freud's reply was '*lieben und arbeiten*' – 'to love and to work'. Several psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic therapists since Freud, particularly those working with children, have sought to add 'the capacity to play' as the third essential ingredient in adult functioning. Indeed, Edwards quotes Erikson (1950) in

*Email: Bidyouell@aol.com

identifying play as the vital precursor of the capacity for work and love. What then is the difference between play and playfulness? In ordinary parlance, the word 'playful' carries an assumption of enjoyment, fun or amusement. In the context of this paper I am using it in a very specific way to describe a state of mind in which an individual can think flexibly, take risks with ideas (or interactions), and allow creative thoughts to emerge.

The aim of this paper is to argue a few points:

- Playfulness happens in a relationship; it is a two-person phenomenon. We can be playful alone but only if we have first had the experience of being playful with another.
- Playfulness is an essential part of play. Much of what passes for play in our current society is devoid of playfulness.
- Play and work are not opposites, nor are they mutually exclusive.
- Playfulness is an important factor in effective teaching and learning, both formal and informal.
- Inhibitions in play are an important diagnostic factor when thinking about children's emotional, psychological, and cognitive development.

The development of playfulness

Twenty-first century European society maintains a clear distinction between what is described as work and what is described as play. Although it is acknowledged that some people are fortunate enough to enjoy their work, work is most often represented as an unavoidable necessity. Play is seen as compensation, a reward. Schools promote this view from the earliest years when children are encouraged to earn 'golden time' (play) by hard work and good behaviour. Bad behaviour or poor work is punished by the loss of playtime and the imposition of extra work. At the same time, playing is often equated with 'wasting time.' It is a confusing picture for the average five-year-old child who comes into school with no such clear distinction in mind.

For the baby and toddler, play is work. It is the means by which he finds out about his surroundings and about the people he encounters. Interactions between mothers (or primary carers) and infants are characterised by playfulness. Mothers smile, tickle and talk to their babies and babies learn to respond with smiles and gurgles. 'Games' and 'jokes' (often involving noses, ears or tummies) develop between them as a vocabulary of play is established long before the introduction of toys and long before language develops.

The following extract from an infant observation (Youell, 2007) may serve to illustrate the way in which learning and playing are inextricably linked from the earliest stages of life. Timothy was ten months old at the time of this observation. He had been sitting on the floor whilst his two older brothers (aged eight and ten) watched TV and played around with a recorder. When their mother came in, they asked permission to go out and rushed past their baby brother, who looked put out. His mother saw the look and invited him to

come to her:

Timothy crawled over and climbed onto his mother's lap, grinning as she pulled him towards her for a cuddle. He wriggled free and down onto the floor again. He reached out for the red plastic recorder his brother had dropped. He looked at it closely and tried various bits of it in his mouth before dropping it and going instead for a plastic rattle and a card baby book. He took each in turn and examined them in detail before tossing them up in the air, his arms flapping forcefully against his sides. He played contentedly for a few moments before noticing that his mother was absentmindedly fingering the recorder. Seeing that he was looking at her, she put it to her mouth and played a single note. Timothy smiled with pleasure and reached out for the instrument. His mother gave it to him and he put it to his mouth, exploring both ends and the rounded surface in between. A few moments later, the recorder made a clear sound. Timothy pulled it away from his mouth, looking startled and his face began to crumple. Then he looked towards his mother who was exclaiming that he had played a note and his face broke into a huge smile. He put the mouthpiece back in his mouth and repeated the performance. He was soon filling his cheeks with air before blowing and the sounds were getting longer and louder. His mother was delighted and congratulated him, commenting that he was blowing deliberately... he had learned what to do. She did not think either of his older brothers could have done the same at that age. Timothy was enjoying himself but after a while seemed to become aware that his achievement was no longer a cause for celebration and he went over to the bookshelf. He reached towards the books and then paused, looking over his shoulder at his mother before putting just one finger on a book, grinning provocatively. She said 'no' quite firmly but his grin was infectious and she was soon smiling too. She repeated her command and he continued to grin at her, now spreading two hands across the books on the top shelf. He looked as if he would pull the books down in spite of her and I felt I had become part of his audience. I (the observer) looked away to hide my amusement and his mother managed to use a tone of voice which he understood really was a 'no', and then she distracted him with another activity.

In this sequence of playful interaction, Timothy learns something about playing a recorder. However, he learns much more about how he can impress and amuse his mother, how far he can go in provoking her and what might be the consequences if he goes too far. The example that follows is taken from an observation of a year five (key stage 2) numeracy lesson. When looked at from a particular perspective, it is possible to see some parallels with the observation of Timothy:

The class was asked to sit on the carpet while the teacher recapped on yesterday's lesson and explained the task of today. The children were to work in pairs, conducting their own simple survey and plotting their results on a bar graph. They were given a few ideas as to what question they might ask of their fellow classmates. The teacher suggested they could find out about each other's favourite foods, colours, lessons, pets, football teams and so on. The buzz of excitement and competition grew as she talked, most of the children looking around and whispering loudly to claim their preferred partner. Many jumped up and began to shift chairs and grab pen pots. The teacher had to call them back to check that they knew what to do and then she had to sort out the many small skirmishes which had erupted about who was working with whom. Predictably perhaps, given the children's ages, most of the boys opted to ask a question about football teams, while the girls chose to ask about favourite pets. The classroom became a hive of activity as the children drew their tally charts and began to ask each other

their questions. They rushed around the room, falling over furniture and each other as if it were a race. It quickly became obvious that the boys were heavily invested in making sure that their own favourite football team got the most votes. In short, they cheated, but they did so in an entirely open, and often witty way. Once they knew what the teacher would say (West Ham) they either avoided asking her or asked her several times! They offered inducements to people who would say 'Chelsea' or got on their knees to beg a small timid newcomer (who could speak little English) to utter 'Man U'. The girl pairings were almost as passionate about the animals; one pair cheering each time somebody voted 'dog.' Another tried to persuade everyone to say 'rabbit,' insisting that dogs were dirty and dangerous. The boys tried to sabotage the girls' work by giving ridiculous answers such as 'snake' and 'kangaroo'.

The teacher asked them to keep the noise down but decided to be flexible about time because she had rarely seen such enthusiasm. As anticipated, the graphs were inaccurate, with absolutely no consensus amongst the groups as to the results. However, the lesson had been fun and the class had grasped the basic principles of conducting surveys. The teacher said she would return to the topic of graphs the next day.

This lesson would probably not have scored very highly on a standardised measure of learning outcomes and the observer was alarmed by the noise levels and by some of the physical hazards created by fallen chairs and so on. However, the group went out to the playground buzzing with ideas about the lesson, unwilling to give up their particular campaign. It was clear that it had been a valuable learning experience for the whole group. Not unlike Timothy and the recorder, they had been able to enjoy grappling with a new activity. They had taken their cues from the teacher and from each other, testing out their capacity to impress, amuse and persuade. They were pleased with their graphs and the teacher was generous enough not to dent their pleasure by criticising them at this point. Building on the learning could wait until the next day.

There is some recognition amongst policy makers that young children need to play. There has been a slight relaxing in the 'testing' regime for early years classes, with some acknowledgment that children learn through playing. The current government's enthusiasm for 'parenting classes' is, in part, a recognition of the fact that many parents struggle with the tasks involved in bringing up a family. The emphasis in these courses is very often on behaviour management, with clear limit setting and reward and punishment strategies, but there is also a belief that it is important to teach parents to play with their children. Again, there can be no argument with that but the problem is often that this is seen as a simple matter. In reality, play activities can be taught but *playfulness* is a state of mind and as such, cannot be *taught* or *learned* in the ordinary sense of those words. It takes time and skill to foster playfulness in a parent/child interaction.

There is a point to be made here about 'aggressive marketing' of sophisticated mechanical and electronic substitutes for some parental functions (e.g. electrically operated baby chairs which begin to rock in response to a child's cry). However, these 'aids' will only be adopted by parents if they feel themselves to be too depressed, busy, preoccupied, anxious or lacking in confidence to enjoy playing with their babies. Parents whose own patterns of play are impoverished, will not necessarily feel able to engage playfully with

their children. They may be all too willing to believe that their child will be just as happy with a brightly coloured, all-singing, all-dancing mobile, or a TV screen. If they are also led to believe that exposing the child to 'educational' toys as early as possible is good for their future learning, the scene is set for an early experience which privileges 'work' and downgrades 'play.'

The current media debate on play rumbles along on a rather superficial level. Are computer games good or bad for children? Do children watch too much television? Do violent games breed violent children? Should there be more facilities for outdoor play? Is obesity in children becoming more common because children aren't encouraged to play? Should sport be part of the school curriculum? Much of what gets airtime is based on the assumption that all children are the same and therefore one social policy or educational practice fits all.

In a recent article in the Times Newspaper, Guy Clapperton (2007) claimed that the popular view of computer games is wrong and that they are positive influences on children's development and learning. The article itemised what they could teach. The underlying assumption was that children can discern a good game from a bad game; that they can engage with implicit ethical dilemmas, absorb the lessons of history, develop entrepreneurial skills, learn to manage success and failure, take reasonable risks and become adept at making choices under pressure. All of this may be possible for some well endowed and well supported children, provided the time spent at the computer is balanced with other, more people-centred activities. However, all the evidence would suggest that there are many children, possibly a majority, for whom this kind of learning is not possible. There are many children who are likely to become highly anxious or over-excited, and at risk of becoming addicted to the over-excitement. The debate tends to look at the content of the game and not at the psychological make-up of the player. This particular article seemed to have a view of all children as future contestants on 'The Apprentice'!

I have written elsewhere (Youell, 2002, 2005, 2007) about the huge discrepancies that exist in children's capacity to play. The experience of working in a family centre, conducting assessments for the family courts, led me to become preoccupied with the links between relationships, play and learning. Children whose early relationships have been characterised by deprivation and neglect, or whose parents have been actively abusive, very often reach school age with severely inhibited patterns of play. I have drawn attention to the way in which play can look like play, whilst being devoid of any creativity, symbolic meaning or sense of playfulness. Toddlers can be busy with toys and can giggle obligingly when tickled, but an open-minded, reflective, detailed observation will reveal the lack of substance in the play, the lack of progression and the total absence of imagination. Children who have been traumatised often have difficulty with symbolic thinking and are likely to confuse reality and fantasy.

I would want to argue further that children who cannot play (in the full sense of the word) are at a disadvantage when it comes to making relationships and to tackling new learning tasks. If early relationships have not introduced the child to ideas of playfulness and shared humour, these elements will be missing in later attempts to make connections with people. Similarly, if early learning has not

included an element of playfulness, the child will be likely to approach new tasks with an unmanageable degree of anxiety. Groups of older children, adolescents and adults are often told to 'play around with an idea' as part of a task. For children who do not know how to play, this is a frightening notion, and is enough to send many children into a flurry of disruptive or avoidant behaviour. It is well-documented that children in the 'looked after' system, who have difficulty with making relationships with the adults who care for them, are often the same children who have difficulties with learning and behaviour in school.

My ideas in this field were consolidated when I made a visit to an orphanage in Kenya, taking a supply of toys for a newly appointed teacher to use with the children. Observations of the ways in which the children used the toys over a two-day period were very revealing. Some children could do little more than make towers of bricks. Others made accurate representations of aspects of their immediate surroundings, such as a queue of Duplo children lining up, just as the orphanage children did at meal times. The older children who attended schools outside the orphanage chose the board games, keen to demonstrate their knowledge of draughts and snakes and ladders. Very few children used the toys in ways that might be described as imaginative or truly symbolic. What was significant, however, was that these were the same children who actively sought a response from the adults; they wanted to show us what they had done and looked eagerly for our reaction. One six year old 'flew' a car/plane around our hire car, clearly taken up by an idea of travel. A ten-year-old girl made a 'shamba' (homestead) with fences and a few animals. Most striking perhaps was a five year old boy who gathered the necessary items for a shamba in an upturned Frisbee and carried it away on the back of a tricycle. When we sought information about these different children, we discovered that the children with the most impoverished play were the ones who had been abandoned at the orphanage at birth. The children who were more creative and playful, and who looked to the adults for approval, were those who had spent their early months or years with their families.

Play in child psychotherapy

This paper has been concerned with the idea that play and playfulness in a child's early relationships is of crucial importance in the development of what I might call *a good internal object* and which others might call *a secure sense of self* or *self esteem*, *secure attachment* or *resilience*. These are not the same thing but have much in common. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy with young children is based on the play technique pioneered by Melanie Klein. The central focus is the relationship with the therapist rather than the play itself. Play in a therapy session may be cathartic, it may be expressive; it may be that a child is working through something through symbolic re-enactment, but the point about psychoanalytic psychotherapy is that the child is playing in the presence of a mindful adult, within a relationship. The child is communicating something about his or her experience, about his or her internal world to another, who is receptive and thoughtful. Thoughtful, but also robust and challenging.

Deprived or traumatised children have impoverished patterns of play and these, for the most part, are the children who come to see child psychotherapists. In recent years, I have become fascinated by the very high incidence of one particular game in the therapy of children who are 'looked after' or adopted. I could quote a dozen or more cases, my own and those I hear about in supervisions, where weeks and sometimes months of weekly or thrice weekly sessions are characterised by seemingly endless games of hide and seek. Very young children whose early experience has been disrupted play rudimentary games of peek-a-boo with their therapists. Older children become completely absorbed in repeated games of hide and seek, constructing elaborate hiding places behind or underneath items of furniture. In small, relatively simple, sparsely-furnished therapy rooms, children whose cognitive capacities would tell them that they could not possibly hide become very excited as the counting to 20 reaches 18. They often shout 'ready,' somehow convinced that their therapist could not possibly locate them, from the direction of the sound of their voice. They crawl under the therapist's chair as if the fact that they are pushing up on the seat from below would not be noticed. I once had a twelve-year-old patient, a hardened, streetwise boy insist that there were still plenty of places to hide in my tiny office. He was head and shoulders taller than any of my furniture! Children of all ages giggle expectantly as the therapist makes a show of looking for them and exclaims on finding them. A ten-year-old, adopted boy told me recently that he likes hiding but most of all just loves being found. A thirteen-year-old girl rather sadly announced after nearly two years work that she thought it was probably a bit silly to try to hide herself in the room but asked earnestly whether the therapist would go on playing if they agreed to hide a small teddy instead; a significant moment in terms of this girl's capacity to use symbols.

Of course, there are many ways in which the hide and seek game might be seen to have significant meaning for children who are separated from their birth parents and who desperately want their families, or a new family, to seek them out and claim them. It is easy to see that they are desperate to exert some control over their lives; to know that the person they are with will look for them, will find them, and will be pleased to do so. These are generalisations and the exact meaning will be different in each case, but what I find compelling is the way the game recurs and the way the children suspend their ordinary senses, their awareness of reality, in order to enjoy the game. Some are looking to repeat an experience they had long ago and cannot consciously remember while others are trying something out for the first time. For many it is a courageous experiment in relatedness; the kind of experience which is the basis for the development of more sophisticated forms of play and playfulness. I will conclude by quoting a section of a chapter on play from the Tavistock Clinic publication, 'Talking Cure' (1999). Here the author is describing the place of 'Peep-Boo!' in the development of the baby's capacity to tolerate 'small amounts of being alone'.

'Peep-Boo!', one of the very earliest games is about a disappearance and a return. It gives us an interesting and significant idea of one of the functions of play.

The timing of the mother's hiding her face before allowing it to reappear, often not quite where expected, is absolutely crucial. Too brief and too predictable and the baby will quickly become bored. Too long and too unexpected will make the baby's capacity to play break down and be replaced by real anxiety about the whereabouts of the mother.

The idea that there is a 'just right' length of time for the baby to be left with mother's vanished face amounts to a rule. All games have rules, even one this simple. This rule amounts to a structure, one that appears to control the baby's anxiety and allows fears of being abandoned – a precursor of the fear of death itself – to be made safe.

A brief extract from an observation of a thirteen-month-old toddler will perhaps best illustrate the point:

Jerome goes to the side of the kitchen where there is a big table and a glass cupboard. His mother tells me that this is where goes to beat his hands on the cupboard but he knows he shouldn't and when he sees that she's coming, he runs away. Now he has stopped behind a chair and she says he is waiting for her to go and play. She goes up to him asking, 'Is there a little baby here?' I hear Jerome laughing but I can't see him until he appears in front of his mother. She says playfully, 'Booo!' He shudders and for a moment I am not sure if his expression is one of fear or joy, but his face breaks into a smile and he laughs loudly. He goes back behind the chair and again his mother asks, 'Where's the little monkey gone?' She walks round the table and when they come face-to-face, he laughs and she takes him into her arms and kisses him.

Conclusion

In summary, the point I have sought to emphasise is that each individual's capacity for playful exploration of ideas, when playing alone or with others, is dependent on his earlier experience of playful interaction with the adults who care for him. Although environmental factors play a significant part in the promotion or otherwise of 'healthy' play opportunities, playfulness is a state of mind, and one that is established within a relationship. Teaching children or adults to play when they have not had satisfying experiences in their early years is no simple task.

References

- Clapperton, G. (2007, October 18). Computer games are good for you. *The Times*.
- Edwards, J. (1999). Kings, queens and factors: The latency period revisited. In D. Hindle & M. Vaciago Smith (Eds.), *Personality development. A psychoanalytic perspective* (pp. 71–92). London: Routledge.
- Taylor, D. (1999) (Ed.). *Talking cure. Mind and method of the Tavistock clinic*. London: Duckworth.
- Youell, B. (2002). The relevance of infant and young child observation in multi-disciplinary assessments for the family courts. In A. Briggs (Ed.),

Surviving space: Infant observation and other papers: Essays on Mrs Bick's centenary (pp. 117–135). London: Karnac.

Youell, B. (2005). Observation in social work practice. In M. Bower (Ed.), *Psychoanalysis and social work practice* (pp. 47–58). London: Routledge.

Youell, B. (2007). *The learning relationship. Psychoanalytic thinking in education*. London: Karnac.

Copyright of European Journal of Psychotherapy, Counselling & Health is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.