

IMPORTANCE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PLAY

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Abstract: *Children's play is first and foremost a matter of human rights. As declared in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), all children and young people have the right to play and have an intrinsic need to play. Play provides opportunities for children and young people to be free to choose what they do, and to challenge themselves, take risks and enjoy freedoms. (Playboard Northern Ireland, Young researchers' team, 2013). General Comment 17 of the UNCRC states that children need to play in order to grow, learn and that play is a way of taking part in everyday life. Play also provides opportunities to promote gender equality and is essential for children's health and well-being. The importance of play in early childhood education (ECE) will be analyzed with a specific emphasis on the sociological dimension and as a right granted to children by the UNCRC.*

Key Words: *play, right, gender equality, early childhood education.*

1. Introduction: what is play and why is it important?

Different definitions of play can be found in literature; it is a concept that is essential, and even more than essential, vital, in child's development. Literature suggests many definitions of play; some of which could be stated as follows:

“Children's play is freely chosen personally directed behavior, motivated from within by needs, wants and desires. Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing children learn and develop as individuals and as members of the community.” (Kernan, 2007).

It is primarily behavior for its own sake, for the pleasure and joy of being able to do it (Pellis and Pellis, 2009).

‘Play is a behavior that is distinguished by specific features that represent a unique way of being: a way of perceiving, feeling and acting in the world. The act of playing, where children appropriate time and space for their own needs and desires, has value for developing a range of flexible and adaptable responses to the environment’’. (Lester& Russell, 2010).

Play offers opportunities to move beyond existing ways of being, to transform structures and cross borders and it appropriates, inverts and subverts adult cultural expectations of children (Thorne, 1993).

When children engage in social and imaginative play, they build on what is perhaps our most defining characteristic as human beings: our attunement to others and our capacity for reciprocity (Kenneally, 2007 as cited in Genishi et al., 2011). Through play, children explore and know the rules and symbols of their communities, as well as recreate roles and situations that reflect their sociocultural world. As a result, they learn how to subordinate the desired social rules, cooperate with others willingly, and engage in socially appropriate behavior. Over time, these competences are transferred to children’s everyday behaviors. It is important to **recognize** (to understand the nature and benefits of play), **respect** (adults should not deny children the right to play, i.e. they should be sensitive to the child’s tendency to play), and **promote** (ensuring conditions to play) play as a right. (Lester& Russell, 2010).

Play, being the vital part of children’s development, acts across several adaptive systems to contribute to health, well-being and resilience. Through play children have a chance to experience and to learn to manage the whole range of various (positive and negative) emotions, such as jealousy, boredom and anger, but also happiness, pleasure and enjoyment (Lester & Russell, 2010). As they play, children rearrange their worlds to make them either less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

Through play children have a chance to take risks, to have adventures and misadventures, to have contact with nature and the environment, to develop friendships, to negotiate relationships, they learn how to solve conflicts, to experience the loss of friendship, to fall out with friends, etc. On the playgrounds children learn about tolerance, valuing of differences, respect for others, but also about the current fashion trends (Lester & Russell, 2010).

In a game of chase, children are physically active and maintain the game by negotiating and agreeing to abide by the rules. Yet what they value is the thrill of the chase. The rules provide a frame within which the players know that ‘this is play’; this provides a safe place where emotions can be experienced without the consequences, they might bring in the ‘real’ world. (Lester & Russell, 2010).

Play also promotes the physical health and well-being of children, it helps them to develop sensorimotor skills, coordination and balance.

There is also enough evidence in research investigating the importance of play that pretense/ socio-dramatic play has especially been supportive in coping with emotionally arousing or stressful events, such as going to the dentist or hospital as well as in therapeutic contexts with children who have been subjected to abuse, and/or experienced profound grief. (Clark, 2006 as cited in Whitbread, 2012).

The five types of play (physical, symbolic, play with objects, pretense/socio-dramatic play and games with rules) support child development in different areas as explained below:

Physical play: This type of play includes active exercise play (e.g.: jumping, climbing, dancing, skipping, bike riding and ball play), rough-and-tumble (with friends, siblings or parents/ guardians) and fine-motor practice (e.g.: sewing, coloring, cutting, junk modelling and manipulating action and construction toys. (Whitbread, 2012). The evidence suggests that this type of play is related to children’s developing whole body and hand-eye co-ordination, and is important in building strength and endurance (Pellegrini and Smith, 1998, as cited in Whitbread, 2012). The type of play that is extensively researched within this category; rough and tumble play, is often evaluated as a mechanism through which children learn to control aggressive feelings. Outdoor physical play also supports children’s developing independence, resourcefulness and self-regulation.

Symbolic play: During the first five years of life, children beginning to master the symbolic systems such as the spoken language, painting, drawing, numbers incorporate these aspects of their learning as an important element within their play. This type of play supports their developing technical abilities to express and reflect upon their experiences, ideas and emotions.

Furthermore, extensive research has clearly established that this type of play is a powerful support for developing language abilities and, crucially, through its support for phonological awareness, impacts

upon the ease with which young children develop early literacy skills. (Christie and Roskos, 2006, as cited in Whitbread, 2012).

Play with objects: Play with objects begins as soon as infants can grasp and hold on to them; early investigative behaviors include mouthing/biting, rotating while looking, rubbing/stroking, hitting and dropping. This might be described as ‘sensory-motor’ play when the child is exploring how objects and materials feel and behave. From around eighteen to twenty-four months toddlers begin to arrange objects, which gradually develops into sorting and classifying activities. By the age of four years, building, making and constructing behaviors emerge. (Whitbread, 2012).

Pretense/socio-dramatic play: Sociodramatic play is where children act out imaginary situations and stories, become different characters, and pretend they are in different locations and times. Through pretense play, children develop and improve creative thinking and learn how to fit into different situations, their self-restrain and self-regulation is also promoted.

Games with rules: Games with rules such as hide and seek, dodge ball, throwing, catching etc. as well as card games, digital games promote children’s ability to follow rules and guidelines and improve their social skills such as sharing, taking turns and understanding and valuing others’ perspectives. The main concern with digital games is that they could trigger feelings of violence in children can easily be eliminated by effective adult supervision however, the issue still remains controversial and needs further research, despite this fact, it can be concluded that games with rules help children to develop skills to subordinate the rules of the society they are going to live in. (Whitbread, 2012, Lester& Russell, 2010).

The importance of play should also be evaluated culturally as we can observe differences among cultures; Culture refers to the traditions and values of our communities and through play, children explore and learn the rules and symbols of their communities. Children reproduce, transform, create and transmit culture through their own imaginative play, songs, dance, animation, stories, painting, games, street theatre, puppetry, festivals, and so on. As they gain understanding of the cultural and artistic life around them from adult and peer relationships, they translate and adapt its meaning through their own generational experience. Through engagement with their peers, children create and transmit their own language, games, secret worlds, fantasies and other

cultural knowledge. Children's play generates a "culture of childhood," from games in school and in the playground to urban activities such as playing marbles, free running, and street art and so on. Children are also at the forefront in using digital platforms and virtual worlds to establish new means of communication and social networks, through which different cultural environments and artistic forms are being forged. Participation in cultural and artistic activities are necessary for building children's understanding, not only of their own culture, but other cultures, as it provides opportunities to broaden their horizons and learn from other cultural and artistic traditions, thus contributing towards mutual understanding and appreciation of diversity. (Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31, Adopted by the Committee at its sixty-second session (14 January – 1 February 2013)).

Cultural attitudes, transmitted to the children predominantly through the behavior of their parents, affect how much play is encouraged and supported, to what age individuals are regarded as children who are expected to play, and the extent to which adults play with children. Participation with children in play provides adults with unique insights and understanding into the child's perspectives. It builds respect between generations, contributes to effective understanding and communication between children and adults and affords opportunities to provide guidance and stimulus.

The impact of culture on play can be observed in three different ways: (Gaskins 2015)

- **Culturally curtailed play:** In some pre-industrial societies play is tolerated but viewed as being of limited value and certain types of play are culturally discouraged. For example, in Gaskins (2000) study of the Mayan people in the Yucatan she found that pretense involving any kind of fiction or fantasy was regarded as telling lies

- **Culturally accepted play:** in pre-industrial societies parents expect children to play and view it as useful to keep the children busy and out of the way, until they are old enough to be useful, but they do not encourage it or generally participate in it. Consequently, the children play more with other children unsupervised by adults, in spaces not especially structured for play, and with naturally available objects rather than manufactured toys.

- **Culturally cultivated play:** middle-class Euro-American families tend to view play as the child's work; play is encouraged and adults view it as important to play with their children. The children also often spend time with professional careers, who view it as an important part of their role to play with the children to encourage learning.

However, even in the societies where culturally cultivated play persists, there are some sociological factors in action:

Children's safety and risk: in intensely urbanized countries, the culture is currently quite risk-averse, and so children are heavily supervised and play indoors, in their gardens and in specially designed play spaces with safety surfaces, whereas in less dense urban areas (such as the Scandinavian countries) they have more opportunity to play outdoors (Lester and Russell, 2010).

Living in urban environments can have negative effects on the playfulness of children who are fortunate to live in supportive households, but whose parents, carers and teachers, perceiving a range of environmental hazards and dangers, become overly risk-averse and over-protect and over-supervise their children (Veitch et al, 2006).

This problem of parental over-supervision and over-scheduling of children has arisen quite recently, just in the last few decades.

However, according to a survey of parental attitudes in sixteen countries (Singer et al., 2009) this is now a worldwide issue. Mothers in this survey, from countries across Europe and in four other continents, reported fears about allowing their children to play outside related to increases in traffic, crime, harassment and violence, possible abduction, dirt and germs, and many more similar issues.

A report written for the UK National Trust (Moss, 2012) cites evidence that the area where children are allowed to range unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s.

Even the most playfully inclined children will not be able to play, if they are not given the time, the space and the independence to develop their own spontaneous and self-initiated play activities.

Lester and Russell (2010), have stated that, in their play, children's appropriate different spaces and features within their environment

which are quite unpredictable by adults, and that the richest play spaces are mostly natural and unplanned.

Though many urban playgrounds, designed by adults, are often too neat and tidy, the most successful ones are ‘adventure playgrounds’ which are set up so that children can adapt them and build their own spaces, using a range of natural and man-made building materials (Bartlett, 2002).

The amount of time the parents devote to playing with their children decrease as a result of the impact of living in urban areas, having to work for longer hours and the daily rush in their lives (Chawla, 2002, as cited in Lester and Russell, 2010).

In the educational domain, with the curriculum becoming more and more competitive, most of the children, again in especially urban areas, have increasingly less and less time for play and leisure activities, since they are over-scheduled. Continuous absence of play may disrupt emotion-regulation systems, which in turn will diminish children’s physical, social and cognitive competences (Pellis and Pellis, 2009).

The double benefit of more outdoor play played together by both sexes would be the prevention of major health problems such as obesity and the reducing of gender stereotyping which would be beneficial for the overall labor market in terms of more options for future subject choices (Molu, 2014).

These being said, children’s right to play should be supported by their social and physical environment, provision means more than providing play facilities; and in order to ensure children’s right to play, it is their fundamental rights which need to be secured first.

2. CHILDREN’S RIGHT TO PLAY

Article 31 says governments must guarantee the right to play for all children.

There are three kinds of things governments have to do:(IPA Summary on United Nations General Comment No: 17 on Article 31(2013).

a) Respect rights: the government must not stop children and young people from enjoying their right to play; The obligation to respect

requires States parties to refrain from interfering, directly or indirectly, in the enjoyment of the rights provided for in article 31;

b) Protect rights: the government must stop other people from interfering with children's right to play; the obligation to protect requires States parties to take steps to prevent third parties from interfering in the rights under article 31;

c) Fulfil rights: the government must make sure that all children get the necessary services, provision and opportunities to enable them to enjoy their right to play. The obligation to fulfil requires States parties to introduce the necessary legislative, administrative, judicial, budgetary, promotional and other measures aimed at facilitating the full enjoyment of the rights provided for in article 31 by undertaking action to make available all necessary services, provision and opportunities.

Even where resources are limited, governments must do everything they possibly could to make sure all children can enjoy their right to play, and must not do anything that stops the enjoyment of this right.

Governments should devote resources into:

Raising public awareness of both the right to, and the significance of play and leisure for both boys and girls of all ages (respecting gender equality) in contributing to the enjoyment of childhood, promoting the optimum development of the child and building positive learning environments;

Legislation is required to guarantee access for every child, without discrimination on any ground, to all recreational environments including public and private spaces, natural space, parks, playgrounds, services and events.

Municipal planning: Local municipalities should assess provision of play and recreation facilities to guarantee equality of access by all groups of children, including through child-impact assessments. Consistent with the obligations under article 31, public planning must place a priority on the creation of environments which promote the well-being of the child. In order to achieve the necessary child-friendly urban and rural environments, consideration should be given to, inter alia:

- Availability of inclusive parks, community centers, sports and playgrounds that are safe and accessible to all children;
- Creation of a safe living environment for free play, including design of zones in which players, pedestrians and bikers have priority;
- Public safety measures to protect areas for play and recreation from individuals or groups who threaten children's safety;
- Provision of access to landscaped green areas, large open spaces and nature for play and recreation, with safe, affordable and accessible transport;
- Road traffic measures, including speed limits, levels of pollution, school crossings, traffic lights, and calming measures to ensure the rights of children to play safely within their local communities;
- Provision of clubs, sports facilities, organized games and activities for both girls and boys of all ages and from all communities;
- Dedicated and affordable cultural activities for children of all ages and from all communities, including theatre, dance, music, art exhibitions, libraries and cinema. Such provision should comprise opportunities for children to produce and create their own cultural forms as well as exposure to activities produced by adults for children;
- Review of all cultural policies, programs and institutions to ensure their accessibility and relevance for all children and to ensure that they take into account the needs and aspirations of children and support their emerging cultural practices; Establishment of safe and accessibility standards for all play and recreational facilities, toys and games equipment.

Schools: Educational environments should play a major role in fulfilling the obligations under article 31, including:

- Physical environment of settings: States parties should aim to ensure the provision of adequate indoor and outdoor space to facilitate play, sports, games and drama, during and around school hours; active promotion of equal opportunities for both girls and boys to play; adequate sanitation facilities for boys and girls; playgrounds, play landscapes and equipment that are safe and properly and regularly inspected; playgrounds with appropriate boundaries; equipment and

spaces designed to enable all children, including children with disabilities, to participate equally; play areas which afford opportunities for all forms of play; location and design of play areas with adequate protection and with the involvement of children in the design and development;

- Structure of the day: Statutory provision, including homework, should guarantee appropriate time during the day to ensure that children have sufficient opportunity for rest and play, in accordance with their age and developmental needs;

- School curriculum: Consistent with obligations under article 29 concerning the aims of education, appropriate time and expertise must be allocated within the school curriculum for children to learn, participate in and generate cultural and artistic activities, including music, drama, literature, poetry and art, as well as sports and games;

- Educational pedagogy: Learning environments should be active and participatory and offer, especially in the early years, playful activities and forms of engagement;

Post conflict situations, government should take active measures to restore and protect article 31 rights by:

- Encouraging play and creative expression to promote resilience and psychological healing and explore identity and belonging;

- Creation or restoration of safe spaces, including schools, where children can participate in play and recreation as part of the normalization of their lives.

Control the marketing and commercialization of play; many children and their families are exposed to increasing levels of unregulated commercialization and marketing by toy and game manufacturers. Parents are pressured to purchase a growing number of products which may be harmful to their children's development or are antithetical to creative play, such as products that promote television programs with established characters and storylines which impede imaginative exploration; toys with microchips which render the child as a passive observer; kits with a pre-determined pattern of activity; toys that promote traditional gender stereotypes or early sexualization of girls; toys containing dangerous parts or chemicals; realistic war toys and games. Global marketing can also serve to weaken children's

participation in the traditional cultural and artistic life of their community.

Training and capacity-building: All professionals working with or for children, or whose work impacts on children (Government officials, educators, health professionals, social workers, early years and care workers, planners and architects, etc.), should receive systematic and ongoing training on the human rights of children, including the rights embodied in article 31. Such training should include guidance on how to create and sustain environments in which the rights under article 31 can be most effectively realized by all children.

International cooperation: Governments should promote international cooperation in the realization of the rights provided for in article 31 through the active engagement of United Nations agencies including UNICEF, UNESCO, UNHCR, and UN Habitat, UNOSDP, UNDP, UNEP and WHO, as well as international, national and local NGOs. IPA Summary on United Nations General Comment No: 17 on Article 31(2013)

2.1. Children requiring particular attention to realize their rights under article 31

Girls: A combination of significant burdens of domestic responsibilities and sibling and family care, protective concerns on the part of parents, lack of appropriate facilities and cultural assumptions imposing limitations on the expectations and behaviour of girls can serve to diminish their opportunities to enjoy the rights provided for in article 31, particularly in the adolescent years. In addition, gender differentiation in what is considered girls' and boys' play and which is widely reinforced by parents, caregivers, the media and producers/manufacturers of games and toys serve to maintain traditional gender-role divisions in society. Evidence indicates that whereas boys' games prepare them for successful performance in a wide range of professional and other settings in modern society, girls' games, in contrast, tend to direct them towards the private sphere of the home and future roles as wives and mothers

Children living in poverty: Lack of access to facilities, inability to afford the costs of participation, dangerous and neglected neighborhoods, the necessity to work and a sense of powerlessness and marginalization all serve to exclude the poorest children from realizing the rights provided for in article 31. For many, the risks to their health and safety outside the home are compounded by home environments

which provide no or little space or scope for play or recreation. Children without parents are particularly vulnerable to loss of their rights under article 31; children in street situations are not afforded play provisions, and are commonly actively excluded from city parks and playgrounds, although they use their own creativity to utilize the informal setting of the streets for play opportunities. Municipal authorities must recognize the importance of parks and playgrounds for the realization of the rights provided for under article 31 by children living in poverty and engage in dialogue with them in respect of policing, planning and development initiatives. States need to take action to ensure both access to and opportunities for cultural and artistic activities for all children, as well as equal opportunities for play and recreation.

Children with disabilities: Multiple barriers impede access by children with disabilities to the rights provided for in article 31, including exclusion from school; informal and social arenas where friendships are formed and where play and recreation take place; isolation at the home; cultural attitudes and negative stereotypes which are hostile to and rejecting of children with disabilities; physical inaccessibility of, inter alia, public spaces, parks, playgrounds and equipment, cinemas, theatres, concert halls, sports facilities and arenas; policies that exclude them from sporting or cultural venues on the grounds of safety; communication barriers and failure to provide interpretation and adaptive technology; lack of accessible transport.

Children in institutions: Many children spend all or part of their childhood in institutions, including, inter alia, residential homes and schools, hospitals, detention centers, remand homes and refugee centers, where opportunities for play, recreation and participation in cultural and artistic life may be limited or denied. The Committee stresses the need for States to work towards the de-institutionalization of children; but until that goal is reached, States should adopt measures to ensure that all such institutions guarantee both spaces and opportunities for children to associate with their peers in the community, to play and to participate in games, physical exercise, cultural and artistic life. Such measures should not be restricted to compulsory or organized activities; safe and stimulating environments are needed for children to engage in free play and recreation.

Children from indigenous and minority communities: Ethnic, religious, racial or caste discrimination can serve to exclude children from realizing their rights under article 31. Hostility, assimilation

policies, rejection, violence and discrimination may result in barriers to enjoyment by indigenous and minority children of their own cultural practices, rituals and celebrations, as well as to their participation in sports, games, cultural activities, play and recreation alongside other children. States have an obligation to recognize, protect and respect the right of minority groups to take part in the cultural and recreational life of the society in which they live, as well as to conserve, promote and develop their own culture. However, children from indigenous communities also have the right to experience and explore cultures beyond the boundaries of their own family traditions. Cultural and artistic programs must be based on inclusion, participation and non-discrimination.

Children in situations of conflict, humanitarian and natural disasters: The rights provided for in article 31 are often given lower priority in situations of conflict or disaster than the provision of food, shelter and medicines. However, in these situations, opportunities for play, recreation and cultural activity can play a significant therapeutic and rehabilitative role in helping children recover a sense of normality and joy after their experience of loss, dislocation and trauma. Play, music, poetry or drama can help refugee children and children who have experienced bereavement, violence, abuse or exploitation, for example, to overcome emotional pain and regain control over their lives. Such activities can restore a sense of identity, help them make meaning of what has happened to them, and enable them experience fun and enjoyment. Participation in cultural or artistic activities, as well as in play and recreation, offers children an opportunity to engage in a shared experience, to re-build a sense of personal value and self-worth, to explore their own creativity and to achieve a sense of connectedness and belonging. Settings for play also provide opportunities for monitors to identify children suffering from the harmful impact of conflict. (Committee on the Rights of the Child General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31, Adopted by the Committee at its sixty-second session (14 January – 1 February 2013)).

Conclusion

Play is essential in children's lives; having observed the pedagogical and sociological importance of play, special care and attention should be given on the practice of the right to play, granted to children by Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(UNCRC, 1989), Governments and NGO's as well as academics need to focus on the implementation of this right and further research is needed and should be encouraged.

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