

Realizing Children's Right to Play through Everyday Contexts of Childhood

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Abstract

Play is the basis of everyday rhythms for very young children. Their relationship with the world is grounded in elements of play such as pushing, pulling, throwing, touching as it helps children to shape their thoughts and feelings. The gamut of experiences and opportunities allows for use of skills in different domains with possibilities of constructing inter domain developmental connections. Winnicott a Child Psychoanalyst in *Playing and Reality* (p.52) stated, “playing itself is therapy”. In the modern vocabulary guided by International Conventions (UNCRC,1989) it could well read as every child has a right to play. As children enter the middle childhood phase the exploring, experimenting in play transforms to a deep search for imagined or real search for meaning. There are several profound reflections on the value of play thus this paper intends to go beyond only reiterating the accepted value of play. Descriptions of children’s activities and actions often convey childhood perception with nuances of their social world. Child’s analytical competence is often heartwarming as they infer from their limited expanse of their physical world. The objective in sharing anecdotal data is to savour the many developmental processes in childhood communication through verbal and non-verbal body movements. The underlying intention is to hope for educators and parents to respond to the developing meaning making skills of children. It is in the ordinary conversations and narratives that children search for connections that facilitates both further exploration that challenge action and imagination.

Keywords: *Playful, adult child dyad, child oriented, child spaces, Right to Play, meaning and everyday contexts of childhood*

Background Note

This paper is based on over three decades of association with an Early Childhood Centre with multiple facilities, organizing several workshops for parents, experience as a Trainer of teachers from a pan Indian contexts. One of my favourite exercise that brings out the strengths of the teachers while inspiring some others is “My success and failures”. One of the abiding features in this sharing has been teachers skill in reaching children’s inner self through playful stances, humour and engaging as sort of friends. The theoretical premise of play as children’s reality resonates with Winnicott’s writing in a book with a similar title *Playing and reality* (1989)

Introduction

Any activity that is self-chosen pursued with exploration or experimentation is play. Children from the time they are born engage with objects, visuals or sounds in their physical environment. Play allows children to build an understanding of themselves and their surroundings and this engagement provides self-amusement, behavioural social and psychomotor rewards, Play is child directed, enjoyable and spontaneous. Mostly environments are naturally organized in ways that is appealing for children’s engagement and comprehension through play.

Babies respond with body movements to caring adults, gaze at pictures; kick a mobile repeatedly to hear musical notes. Hit and trial or repeated actions slowly build simple cause and effect connections transforming to intent in actions. Parents watch every grimace to respond to their baby’s discomfort with warm soothing play of sound and touch. The environment contributes and facilitates children’s need for play.

Infants gain mobility to experience space, surfaces spotting new features to jump, push, pull and throw. At times infants drop an object, which is retrieved by a caring adult. The infant

replays the actions of drop the object and pick the object, creating a rhythm of playful interaction. The adult rebukes the child for being controlled for compliance while the child gains a sense of self worth and social competence. The adult child play dyad soon shifts to peer play as children acquire social mobility besides physical independence. From playing with pots and pans in the kitchen children move to play yards or community parks running, climbing the jungle gym to team games. This world of play becomes a microcosm of the society that comprises the adult world. The group dynamics in play simply fosters in children team spirit, conflict resolution, seeking solutions to problems with a strong sense for achieving set targets.

Children's propensity for play

Children thrive in play that is supported in environments rich in things to do, spaces to explore, spirit to experiment with opportunity to experience. Families and communities largely recognize children's curiosity and need for adventure, however as a society we need to ensure and sustain child oriented approach and attitudes of freedom and regulation in services organized for the care and education of children. The Child Rights discourse emphasizes what most communities were organizing in their local wisdom. It is the emerging of institutional settings with scaling up of teaching learning materials that diffused the individual in producing for a collective. In play, children manage to find their specific niche within the collective. Disseminating what children are entitled to with appreciation of age related needs will be creating supportive spaces for inter domain development. Children's own desire for meaning making is evident in their movements and actions.

From the time children are born there is a compelling inner drive to establish a relationship with the world around them. They respond to sounds, touch, visuals, smell and taste and diligently follow the cues provided in their immediate environment. Human infancy is embedded in dependency thus the course of growth, development, curiosity, motivation or aspirations is an outcome of how the environment is organized. If children are in a bare room bereft of colour, sound, interactions the denial of stimulation leaves little scope for the evolution of the brain. An unresponsive environment is a gross neglect of children's

basic needs of stimulation to engage and comprehend. Dialogues on play become important in the context of changed family configuration, dual income homes, non familial caregiving systems or even societal pressure on print expertise and academic performance.

Children in the family

When Children get playful time

Remember their growth to be fine

Family rhythms are absorbed by children quite rapidly as noted in parent teacher interactions in school. In fact discussions have been animated about how schedules become oppressive in the absence of humour and some elements of game like frames. Mothers often share imitation of being rebuked, "Mrs Malhotra, Tiya is again late?". This act is followed by stating, "Do you like it if Mamma is scolded?" The playfulness ensures a conviviality, shared responsibility with a proactive stance. Parents have also cited examples of children sorting vegetables after shopping while keeping alive school or office based natter. Engaging children in household chores in shared time and space helps to smoothen both parental as well as children's transitions. As children grow board games as part of family frames are positive memories. Play with adults need not only be part of therapy or a prerogative of counselors. Everyday play can foster rich bonds that inculcate confident and compassion among children.

Older children will need outdoor play with friends a deeply essential part of everyday routines. Children may be enrolled in horse riding or music or dance lessons. However much they are part of 'extra activities' it is not play. The self-chosen cricket session with friends is real play. Similarly creating your own band is different from practicing for the school choir. It is not always that tasks and enjoyment are mutually exclusive, as children do get passionate about performances. The emphasis is only to highlight the significance of play as a significant element of the culture of childhood.

Play and educational settings

Khel khel mein duniya jaani

Suni sunayi maan ne na maani

Translation: Play opened world of many kind

Listening unacceptable to my mind

The moment children are sent to a formal setting the expectation is disciplined learning, a well-behaved obedient child who has self control and social regulatory skills. The question of play may get dismissed. The questioning of “why children cry on the first day at school? is taken as a “ normal pattern” rather than why? My contention is more provocative than as a mere societal lament. We have devised strategies to ease this transition from home to school at the Child Study Centre at the Lady Irwin College. First three days the child is accompanied with the parents and we encourage parents to be animated about the different opportunities the school will provide slipping in that they will miss it all as they will only be there for a short while. From full day to half day to being present but not visible the move from security of the home to this strange new premise loses its trauma-ridden introduction in the lives of children. One mother child dyad was mutually in fear of separation.

The teacher in charge walked to the adult and gently asked, “ You are serious about the admission?” The mother nodded to affirm. The teacher then took the tearful child, body-stiffening assuring the Mother that she could take a peep after 10 minutes to note the emotional status of her child. To her surprise she came back to find her little one trying to fix a puzzle in between sobs. At the time of pick up she was keen to know what worked? Well I spotted a parakeet feeding her children and then flying away. I engaged your baby in a conversation about the baby parakeets being alone and waiting for their Mother. I focused on the fact that they were having fun with each other and perhaps we should also try if we can find something new and exciting.

In this illustration the calming influence was the playful distraction with the playful modulation of voice. The school environment for the young learners is appealing with optimal colourful visuals, accessible arranged toys, crayons, puzzles, books creating in young minds a desire to engage. Teachers who describe the classroom architecture in a child like narrative and interesting in the eyes of children.

Hello children, you all like to see picture or listen to stories. Well I have a book corner and we go there when you want to know about what different people do. OH OH, do you see the small drums, the flute, and the xylophone, what

do we do there? You see some some words on the wall and some numbers. We sit and match words so that as we become big we can also read like big people. She can also insert, Sometimes when we want alone time or we are angry we could go to this “peace corner”. We could paint or do a puzzle or just sit quietly to think or hear new sounds. There is one more corner with a basket of lots of old stuff and we could play becoming a doctor, or being grandfather or Mummy.....

A teacher who shares her classroom space organization prepares children for various experiences that could be possible. The stoking of the imagination which in due course will be energized and nourished with the experience of the promise of action, participation with the adult as a leader of the team of discoverers. Many teachers have reported that calling children by their names is magical and if you ensure some kind of gentle touch it adds to the child’s self worth. Moments of problem behaviours have posed challenges but resorting to forms of art, sit down conversations in contexts of play help children to reflect. For example a child would bang his head against a wall or on the desk. It created a fear among children as well as teacher. She devised a game of wearing a helmet made from thermacole. Four five helmets were shared while fortunately the child with head banging leanings preferred to wear it for long periods. The therapeutic element of play is well defined by Axline (1967).

Generating playfulness in teachers

Children thrive with love play and care

Freedom and structure needed there

Teachers are the pivots of the classroom especially for young learners. Seeing them as friendly, approachable and fun loving is most crucial for the well being of the young explorers. One of the most significant critical facets is the voice of the teacher. Children are intuitively lively and prone to action, which initiates child-generated sounds. We forget that children are engaging in peer play and dialogue is an indication of their feeling emotionally safe and protected. That recall of childhood emotion does not surface with ease. As adults the tendency is for order and silence that tends for the teacher to be sharp and loud. However playful acts like “ lets be stars” (raise your arms and move your hands)..... Lets be laughing stars or now lets be angry stars o ohoh “ lets be quiet stars”. Some

structures and predetermined codes can add to the classroom becoming an exciting, energetic space with many stories and acts to perform.

Dominant use of music, movement and art and craft activity with imagination can add to the children's need to understand the mysterious of the world they inhabit. The arts led classroom strategies are also effective and emotionally gratifying when the interactions are process rich and not led by transferring of competence. Education gets a firm start with experience and opportunity not stress on expertise or scorn at children's errors. Teachers do realize childhood perceptions have their own definition yet academic pressures and dominance of print proficiency diffuses teacher beliefs.

Conclusion

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In conclusion all children should have time for play. It provides foundation for establishing confidence, coping abilities, flexibility and positive orientation towards self and others. Through play, children will be able to apply these skills as they grow into a young adult in a manner that is their entitlement. Children's need to play or in the discourse of child rights, Right to play can only be realised if the different child minders are aware of how play shapes children's minds. In the course of their developmental stages, children come in contact with several adults who will benefit children if they understand play as a resource and reservoir for learning, a promise by the state as a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.