

HANDOUT - Play Types

The list of play types below is an extract from the document Best Play: what play provision should do for children (2000:33)

Symbolic play

Play which allows control, gradual exploration and increased understanding without being out of one's depth, by using symbols, that is, objects, designs or signs to represent people, ideas or qualities. For example, using a piece of wood to symbolize a person or a weapon; a piece of string to symbolize a wedding ring; a length of rope to symbolize a boundary; a carrot to symbolize a microphone; building a shrine or creating a flag.

Exploratory play

'Finding-out' – play that accesses factual information about an environment and engages with the area or thing and, either by manipulation or movement, assesses its properties, possibilities and content. For example stacking bricks, taking a camera apart, digging 'to Australia'.

Object play

'Problem-solving' – play which uses infinite and interesting sequences of hand-eye manipulations and movements. For example, examination and novel use of any object, for example, cloth, rope, bubble wrap, paintbrush, and cup. The fascination here is with the object itself and what it can do or be (regardless of what its 'proper use' might be).

Rough and tumble play

Close encounter play which is less to do with fighting and more to do with touching, tickling, gauging relative strength, discovering physical flexibility and the exhilaration of display. Finding out and testing one's own and other's limits; learning social and interpersonal codes of physical conduct. For example, playful fighting, wrestling and chasing where the children are obviously unhurt and giving every indication that they are enjoying themselves.

Socio-dramatic play

The enactment of real and potential experiences of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature, that is, the child re-creates scenes from his own life. For example, playing at house, going to the shops, being mums and dads,

organizing a meal, having a row, holding a funeral, going to the divorce courts etc. The child also sometimes acts out emotions too scary to express in real life – this can be therapeutic.

Dramatic play

Play which dramatizes events in which the child is not a direct participator, that is, re-creating scenes from others' lives or from the television or theatre, for example, presentation of a TV show; an event on the street or in the news; a religious or festive event; a birth or death; or being famous footballers or a band in a recent match or concert – often done for an audience.

Social play

Play during which the rules and criteria for social engagement, interaction and communication can be revealed, explored and amended. Any social or interactive situation which contains an expectation on all parties that they will discuss and abide by certain rules, customs or protocols, for example, games, conversations, making something together, challenging, discussing . . .

Communication play

Play using words, nuances or gestures, for example, mime, jokes, play acting, 'mickey' taking, singing, debate, poetry, graffiti, swearing, making up languages/words/slang, storytelling. Creating a reaction and exploring the impact.

Creative play (inventive play)

Play which allows a new response, an expression of self; the transformation of information; awareness of new connections and new insights, with an element of surprise. It is about focused but spontaneous creation with a wide range of materials and tools for its own sake, with real freedom and not necessarily an end result. It could be small or large scale, individual or group.

Deep play

Play that develops survival skills and conquers fear, through the child encountering what they perceive to be high-risk physical and emotional experiences, for example, leaping onto an aerial runway, giving an alternative opinion that is likely to be rejected, balancing on a high beam. The risk will be from the child's perspective (certainly not the adults') and so the same experience could be deep play for one child and not the next.

Fantasy play

Play which rearranges the world in the child's way – a way which is complete fantasy and unreal, for example, being superheroes, aliens, goblins, timelords, flying a UFO, casting spells, saving the world from certain destruction . . .

Imaginative play

Play exploring identity and ways of being and doing, although not normally of an intense personal, social, domestic or interpersonal nature. Often imitating someone or trying out something seen but not experienced e.g. driving a car, playing dead, being a clown or a shopkeeper.

Locomotor play

Movement in any and every direction – up down, along, at various speeds and seemingly for its own sake. For example, chase, tag, hide and seek, tree climbing, rolling, jumping, dancing: Experiencing the possibilities of one's body within a particular environment – includes ranging.

Mastery play

Generally expressed by taking (and feeling) control of the physical and affective ingredients of the natural environment; for example, digging holes and tunnels in earth or sand; changing the course of streams; gaining a new skill, for example, a jump across a river, or riding a bike . . . he conventional rules that govern the physical world do not apply, but is still based on reality. For example, imagining you are, or pretending to be, a tree, a ship or an animal, patting a dog which isn't there, having an invisible friend, imagining a table is a bus or a cave . . .

Recapitulative play (Evolutionary play)

Play that displays aspects of human evolutionary history, stored and passed on through our genes and manifested when children play spontaneously – often stimulated by aspects of the outdoor environment like forests and shallow pools/streams. For example, lighting fires, engaging in spontaneous rituals and songs, dressing up in historic clothes/uniforms and roleplaying, playing wars and making weapons, growing and cooking things, creating ancient style communities, building shelters, creating languages and religions.