

Importance of play

Children need to play - it is part of their world that helps to develop their imagination, communication and understanding. **Diane Rich** sets the case for promoting play.

A seven year old girl watching angel fish at the London Aquarium. She sits, hardly moving in her wheelchair, but her eyes track the beautiful fish as they dart around their water world. A younger child approaches. They are both entranced by the tank. Their mothers, who were strangers before the aquarium encounter, talk. Both of the children have had chemo therapy. The older child is due for more treatment.

The younger child speaks: 'You're like me', she says, touching her own hair. It is not clear whether she means, 'We are both blonde haired,' or 'We've both had chemo treatment.' They stare at each other silently. The older child then speaks. 'I was so sick I couldn't even play.' Both children nod. Nothing more is said. I was struck by their measure of sickness - 'so sick that they could not even play'. Play is so important to children that when

they cannot play, they sense that something is wrong.

Children need to play

Today many children are denied play experiences both at home and in their education world, not because of sickness, but often because of busy, hectic highly structured home, pre-school and school lives. Play is very often squeezed out and replaced by programmed activities, going to clubs, watching TV, DVD and computer games.

Although early years curricula in the UK emphasise the importance of play, many practitioners express concern about their own understanding of the importance of play, and their role in supporting children. When unsure that play based activities are worthwhile, play opportunities become minimised and quality pay is reduced.

I heard some children in a nursery complain, 'I thought she

would have let us play with the bricks!' and 'She never lets us play.' When I asked what they had done instead, they chorused miserably, 'o' and 'u and word work,' with one boy adding, 'For a long time!' In play however, children are rarely clock-watchers who wait for activities to finish. In play, time passes quickly; children are focussed, willing participants.

In Sally Jenkinson's book, *The Genius of Play* she refers to the declaration of the International Association of the Children's Right to Play which states that play is 'instinctive, voluntary and spontaneous' as well as vital to develop the potential of all children. Jenkinson reports working with an international group to discover why play might be important to human beings and why it matters to them. The result of the work included a Charter for Children's Play, setting out what enables children to play best.

Charter for Children's Play

Children play best:

When adults are watchful, but not intrusive, when safe ground lends courage to their discoveries and adventures.

When their trust in life is whole, when they welcome the unknown, and are fearless.

When their games are free from adult agendas and when their transformations require no end product.

When their senses are directly engaged with nature and the elements.

When they are free to become gatherers, makers, and world creators in their own time and in their own ways.

When they can play with others and make relationships.

When they can play alone, be solitary and private.

When they can become new selves through their play with others and in their own imaginings.

When they can reveal themselves, their joys, sufferings, and concerns, without fear of ridicule, and when mystery and imagination are not denied by fact.

Jenkinson, S. (2001) *The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood*. Stroud: Hawthorne Press (p. 129)

When children miss out on opportunities to 'play best', they miss out on a practically endless list of opportunities which play offers. In play children can:

- be creative
- be in control
- be on their own
- collaborate with others
- explore how to keep safe from dangers in the world
- express themselves
- imagine
- make their own decisions and their own rules
- make their own props
- make sense of their experiences
- make sense of the people, places and things they encounter
- manipulate materials
- move freely using a range of motor skills
- recreate events
- test out new knowledge
- use and explore language freely
- work to the limits of their skills
- and much more.

Despite the potential of play, some adults are concerned that play is not a worthwhile activity. Tina Bruce identifies 12 features of play in *Learning Through Play: Babies Toddlers and the Foundation Years*. Bruce states that if more than half are present, the play is quality play.

The 12 features of play

1. Using first-hand experiences
2. Making up rules
3. Making props
4. Choosing to play
5. Rehearsing the future
6. Pretending
7. Playing alone
8. Playing together
9. Having a personal agenda
10. Being deeply involved
11. Trying out recent learning
12. Co-ordinating ideas, feelings and relationships for free-flow play.

Bruce, T. (2001) Learning through play: babies Toddlers and the Foundation Years. London: Hodder and Stoughton (p. 117)

These features can be useful to educators who are determined to value play and promote quality play. (Further reading of Bruce's material is recommended if using these.)

In practice

Play is more likely to be quality play when the children know that it is valued by adults. Unless all children know that their play is valued, some may be reluctant to take part, while others become ridiculed for the play themes and play styles they adopt.

One key role for educators is to ensure that children know their play is highly valued. This message is not only important for children, but for parents too.

Send this message in a variety of ways, such as:

- **display** and promote the Charter for Children's Play
 - **use** the 12 features of play to reflect on and develop children's play
 - **play** with the children, but do not dominate the play or prescribe themes
 - **create** opportunities to involve parent helpers in play activities, and support them in their understanding of the value and purpose of play
 - **respond** to the children's interests and life circumstances and make provision for these
 - **observe** the children playing and make use of observations: catch the themes or stories of children's play and, with their permission, retell these and make them into books
 - **ensure** that all play themes and all players are respected and valued establish play champions: staff members or parents, who are committed to ensuring that all staff continue to develop their understanding of the value and purpose of play, promoting quality play in the setting, and model playing with children.
- Children do not expect to be deprived of opportunities for play. It is central to the activities of childhood. They are distressed when they are unable to play. Educators and practitioners have the responsibility to ensure that highly valued and worthwhile play opportunities are available to all children.

Diane Rich runs Rich Learning Opportunities www.richlearningopportunities.co.uk.

She is publisher and co-author of 'First hand experiences: what matters to children' which can be ordered on the website, by phone 01473 737405 or fax 01473 737613