



UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE



Centre for Science and Policy

Workshop Report:

The Benefits of Play in Middle Childhood – What the Research Shows

9 April 2015

Preamble

On 9 April 2015 the Centre for Science and Policy (CSaP) hosted a workshop to explore what is known about the benefits of play in middle childhood, which this report documents. The event was chaired by Dame Jane Roberts (Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist) and took place at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, and Homerton College, Cambridge. Prior to the workshop two reports were circulated to participants to stimulate discussion, one an evidence-informed scoping review written for the workshop by Professor Helen Roberts (Institute of Child Health, UCL), and the other a report on the importance of play written by Dr David Whitebread (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge). These reports are included as appendices to this document.

Aims

- To discuss the strength of available evidence, both from academic and non-academic sources, on the benefits of play in middle childhood;
- To examine whether any benefits derived from play change with the transition from early to middle childhood;
- To determine where the evidence is weak and where research could productively be focused.

Questions addressed during the workshop

- Given the existing research, what do we know about the benefits of play?
- What form do the benefits of play take and how can they best be assessed?
- Does the existing evidence base have anything to tell us about whether the benefits of play differ between different groups of children?
- Where do we need to focus research efforts to learn more about play and its benefits in middle childhood?

Speakers

- Professor Helen Roberts, UCL
- Dr David Whitebread, University of Cambridge

Discussion

Early in the workshop the importance of recognising that play can be a worthwhile activity for its own sake was raised. Although play may be effective as a method to achieve other ambitions, such as increased physical activity or improved parenting skills, it is important not to forget that play is an end in its own right¹.

The discussion resulted in a number of themes emerging, which are explored further here.

¹ Roberts H (2015) *Playtime: an evidence-informed scoping review on children's play with a focus on older children and middle childhood*, Appendix Two

What constitutes play in middle childhood?

- A definition of play
- The 'playground' has changed and expanded
- Transformation of play in middle childhood

It was remarked that producing a definition of play on which there was complete consensus would be unlikely, but there was broad agreement that play generally ought to follow the child's own agenda.

The discussion explored the notion that opportunities for play have changed in recent years and that a more complex understanding of play is required, incorporating for instance, social media and other digital interaction into the 'playground' which the child inhabits. This has implications for anyone hoping to measure, encourage or understand play in middle childhood, where this expanded playground is likely to have a larger role than in the early years.

It was noted that by middle childhood all five of the main types of play identified by some psychologists have been established and broadened in their scope to more sophisticated forms, such that physical play has moved on from the simple enjoyment of movement to more complex forms including gymnastics, ballet and competitive games; play with objects has moved on to construction and making; and symbolic play has transformed into the making of jokes and the expression of meaning through drawing and music. Similarly, pretence has developed to include the construction of complex narratives and the creation of fiction, whilst games with rules have grown from simple formats to more complex social games, both established games, such as chess and field sports, and those invented by and vigorously negotiated among children themselves.

The difficulties of gathering evidence on play

- Problems with recording play
- The need for longitudinal studies
- Play is not easily amenable to experimental studies

Some participants raised problems of using play as an intervention in experimental settings, since play cannot be simulated. This requirement for authenticity also poses problems for measuring and recording play, since this is likely to be intrusive and could stymie play that would otherwise have taken place, which raises concerns over the ethics of measurement.

When looking to measure the total benefits resulting from play, it was suggested by some that the researcher needs to look across the entire life course, from childhood to old age, making it hard to measure the long term benefits derived from play, and even harder to establish causality, possibly leading researchers to focus on gathering evidence for short term benefits. It was suggested that better use of existing cohort studies could be useful, although the range of variables and factors will always make it difficult to gather firm evidence of which benefits are primarily associated with opportunities for play.

There was an awareness that using a broad range of research methods is necessary to understand the benefits of play, with ethnographic, observational or neuroscientific research perhaps key to understanding the mechanics of successful play interventions, whereas longitudinal studies or randomised control trials would be better suited to measuring the scale of the benefits. It was also noted that play might be best measured and evaluated at a group or community level.

Scaling up play interventions

- Constraints and adaptability
- Feasibility

The difficulties associated with scaling up play interventions which have been shown to be successful on a small scale were familiar to participants, with concerns raised on the importance of context and the tension between fidelity to particular designs and responsiveness to local know how.^{2,3} Fidelity to an original intervention was seen as particularly problematic if an intervention is closely guarded as a piece of intellectual property, which limits the extent to which it can be adapted to fit different children and contexts. This was an area where it was felt that funders could have an influence on ensuring that publically funded research to develop interventions should be translated into freely available resources if shown to be effective.

One intervention which considered successful was the 'play streets' approach, in which a street is designated a play street and motor traffic halted for a period. The effect is to reclaim space for children to play, and for streets to become a social space. Bureaucratic barriers to starting up a play street were raised as an issue to be addressed, and it was evident that some councils had made progress on this.

What are the benefits?

- Long term benefits
- Benefits beyond the individual
- Socialisation

Play is thought to have benefits such as creativity, problem solving, flexibility, a willingness to tolerate uncertainty, take risks, collaborate and negotiate with others which develop over the life course.⁴ These characteristics are highly valued and often sought after in adults, but demonstrating a causal link was thought to be problematic. There was also discussion of the relationship between play and mental health, with some studies suggesting a link between play and good mental health in adulthood.⁵

A further point raised at the workshop was that the segregation of children and adults in our society may lead to a reduction in the amount of play that adults without children are exposed to, meaning that potentially positive effects which children playing can have on wider society cannot be realised.

Participants considered the extent to which childhood has become 'organised' with children often placed in age-segregated cohorts, reducing the extent to which children of different ages mix. Some participants suggested that keeping age cohorts apart in schools can reduce the extent to which younger children can learn from older ones, and limit the opportunities for, and varieties of, play.

A climate of risk aversion may constrain opportunities for play particularly more open-ended, unstructured and adventurous play outdoors, and concerns about this climate's impact on

² Barnett, WS, Jung, K, Yarosz, DJ, Thomas, J, Hornbeck, A, Stechuk, R & Burns, S (2008) 'Educational effects of the Tools of the Mind curriculum: A randomized trial', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 23(3): 299-313

³ Wilson, SJ & Farran, DC (2012) *Experimental Evaluation of the Tools of the Mind Preschool Curriculum*, Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness

⁴ Robson, S (2015) 'Whose activity is it? The role of child- and adult-initiated activity in young children's creative thinking' In Robson, S & Quinn, SF *The Routledge International Handbook of Children's Thinking and Understanding*. London: Routledge

⁵ Jarvis P, Newman S & Swiniarski L (2013) 'On 'becoming social': the importance of collaborative free play in childhood'', *International Journal of Play*, 3(1): 53-68

emotional resilience, wellbeing and opportunities for learning have been well documented.⁶ Yet in middle childhood children often want to push boundaries, seek out a degree of risk, and test their own limits. Connections between adventurous play and adventurous thinking offer potential for research.⁷

Is play under-valued?

- The 'trivial' nature of play
- The legal right of the child to play
- Increasingly structured childhood
- Middle childhood and the state
- Is the evidence for play being used?

A perception of play as 'trivial' was considered, prompting the suggestion that 'playfulness' would be a better term to use in order to convey a more enduring quality which play develops. Participants discussed this perception and that play opportunities may suffer when services supporting it are reduced.

Article 31 of *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* states 'that every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. That member governments shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic recreational and leisure activity.'⁸ It was noted that since this original declaration the position had been reiterated to explicitly state that governments have obligations to 'promote, protect and fulfil' children's right to play, meaning that play is not undervalued in theory even if policy commitments may sometimes seem lacking.

It was the general view of the participants that childhood has become increasingly structured and that this has tended to result in focused activity at the expense of opportunities for unstructured play.⁹ This highlighted the requirement for robust evidence of the benefits of play, and in particular to ensure that opportunities for play in middle childhood are recognised as important in the same way that they increasingly are in early childhood. Participants discussed protecting children's opportunities and spaces to play, and allowing children more autonomous play.

It was noted that in comparison with the early years and adolescence, there is less research, policy and practice influence in the middle years. There is a case to be made that middle childhood requires support including the creation of play opportunities. Increasing opportunities for inclusive play for disabled children and young people was seen as an important area.

There was some debate on the role of research evidence in policymaking and the relative value of universal or targeted interventions. Academic research evidence is only one of the influences on policy and practice. It is clear that in order to maximise use of research evidence, better alliances need to be formed to ensure that the research findings are translated into new approaches.

⁶ Gill, T (2012) *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*, London: Calouse Gulbenkian Foundation

⁷ Tovey, H (2014) 'Adventurous Play Outdoors' In Moyles, J (ed) *The Excellence of Play (4th Edition)*, Maidenhead: Open University Press

⁸ United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, Treaty Series, vol. 1577: 3

⁹ See section 3.4 in Whitebread, D (2012) *The Importance of Play*, Appendix 3; also Gray, P (2011) 'The decline of play and the rise of psychopathology', *American Journal of Play*, 3 (4): 443-463

Conclusion

Overall, the workshop found that although the evidence on measurable benefits for play in middle childhood may not be categorical, there is circumstantial evidence, underpinned by a strong values base, that play is key to human wellbeing. As such, there is significant work to be done to increase the visibility of the importance of play.

There is a relative paucity of published research on whether and how the benefits of play change with the transition to middle childhood. But gaps in the published research literature do not necessarily mean that the knowledge does not exist, albeit tacit knowledge and lay expertise. The benefits of play may well be understood and appreciated in practice without always drawing on published research.

Given the gaps and the limitations on some of the research in this field, it is important to consider how meaningful progress might be made to develop the evidence base. On the one hand there is a lack of robust evidence examining the immediate and longer term benefits of play; whilst on the other, fine grained ethnographic research has much to teach us about play. Finally, it is clear that play is not simply about behaviours. It is also about opportunities and the environment in which play can take place. The UK has had a leading role in looking at the social determinants of health; research examining the ways in which housing, the environment, transport, the streets, and the employment and other opportunities for children can influence play as youngsters mature into middle childhood remains a fruitful field for further exploration.

Appendix One: Participants

Dame Jane Roberts (Chair)	Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist
Dr Marisol Basilio	Research Associate, University of Cambridge
Dr Sara Baker	University Lecturer in Psychology and Education, University of Cambridge
Naomi Beaumont	Senior Portfolio Manager, Economic and Social Research Council
Dr Emma Bertenshaw	Research Manager, Unilever
Nicola Butler	Chair, Play England
Dr Robert Doubleday	Executive Director, Centre for Science and Policy
Rebecca Fairbairn	Head of Knowledge Exchange, Economic and Social Research Council
Dr Jenny Gibson	Lecturer in Psychology and Education, University of Cambridge
Ciarán Hayes	Senior Strategy Adviser, Department of Health
Dr Pam Jarvis	Senior Lecturer, Leeds Trinity University
Rod Parker-Rees	Associate Professor (Senior Lecturer) in Early Childhood Studies, Plymouth University
Professor Helen Roberts	Professor of Child Health Research, University College London
Dr Jane Rycroft	Unilever R&D
Michael Soper	Research & Performance Team Manager, Cambridgeshire County Council
Helen Tovey	Principal Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies, Roehampton University
Dr David Whitebread	University Senior Lecturer in Psychology of Education, University of Cambridge
Nick Jones (note taker)	Policy Intern, Centre for Science and Policy