Children’s play – an everyday right

It is widely recognised that playing is vital to children’s wellbeing, development and quite simply to feeling happy. In 2013, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued an official statement, General Comment no. 17, which firmly states that play is:

‘fundamental to the quality of childhood, to children’s entitlement to optimum development, to the promotion of resilience and to the realization of other rights.’

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GC17 provides a new opportunity to strengthen Early Childhood policy by ensuring children’s play rights are built firmly into those foundations. It prompts us to ask how the conditions for play can be protected and promoted. Central to that question is the way in which play is framed. What meaning and value is ascribed to play? How does play fit into ECEC curricula? What pedagogical approaches influence the way institutional education and care is delivered? What political priorities have defined the services children spend their time in?

The subsequent outlook moulds the context for play in ways that children (particularly young children) have often little or no control over themselves – the kind of spaces they have access to, who they can play with, the degree of autonomy they have over their play, the depth of uninterrupted time for play. Play which is predominantly with peers or alone.

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Of course these frames are not rigid but flex according to interaction between the social and the political and the everyday interactions of adults and children. However, we should look critically (whether in the national policy arena, the local arrangements or the daily programming) to understand the extent to which they expand or diminish children’s day-to-day experiences of play.

At the heart will almost inevitably be the long-running discourse around the definition of play – where does play begin and end? At what point and why do adults choose to re-designate play as ‘playful learning’? Where is the balance found between planning for play and unnecessary interference in children’s control over their play?

GC17 has helped by providing a definition of play (and the other elements of article 31 – rest, leisure recreation, participation etc.) which serves as an anchor to the discourse.

While recognising and valuing that these elements overlap, it identifies the key characteristics of play: fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity.

Children’s play is any behaviour, activity or process initiated, controlled and structured by children themselves; it takes place whenever and wherever opportunities arise. Caregivers may contribute to the creation of environments in which play takes place, but play itself is non-compulsory, driven by intrinsic motivation and undertaken for its own sake, rather than as a means to an end. Play involves the exercise of autonomy, physical, mental or emotional activity, and has the potential to take infinite forms, either in groups or alone (GC17, para. 14c)

Play in daily life for children in Early Childhood Education and Care

When the right to play is valued fully it implies commensurate attention to:

- the environments in which children play;
- the organisation of children’s days (uninterrupted time to play, the social dimensions of play);
- the education and training of practitioners (navigating the tensions between adult organised and determined activities and children’s autonomous play, understanding of play as a right);
- investment and research into play in Early Childhood Education and Care.

The language within GC17 paints a picture of children as active agents – it describes children reproducing, creating, transforming and transmitting culture; children forging their own identities; discovering and experimenting; contributing and sustaining play. It elaborates the image of the child set out by the European Commission ECEC of the ‘curious, capable and intelligent individual’.

In their daily lives, these active, capable children need space, time and permission to play.

A rich environment for play includes: natural elements; opportunities for risk and challenge; places to express emotions; stimulation for the senses; chances for social

- BY: THERESA CASEY –

Research repeatedly shows us that play contributes to many significant aspects of human lives – social relationships and cooperation, health and rehabilitation, learning and overall wellbeing, connectedness and community. Playing contributes to developing effective systems for learning rather than particular learning outcomes.

Parents, caregivers and educators on the whole instinctively know this and answer the joyful playfulness of children with the playfulness they find within themselves. Sometimes playing is funny, sometimes chaotic, sometimes transformative. Children need good places to play, plenty of time and sometimes a supportive adult.

And yet, children’s right to play is under pressure – space for play is ever diminishins, pressures for academic achievement are ever increasing and the right to play is often overlooked or taken for granted. When we think about daily life for children in Early Childhood Education and Care, the right to play is therefore a primary consideration.

An everyday right and policy proposition

Playing is an everyday right of children (‘a life-enhancing daily experience for all our children and young people’) not something reserved for special occasions or to allocated slots of time but a mode or disposition intertwined within children’s everyday experience. Play can also be viewed as an everyday form of participation – the mode through which children engage with the world around them, its structures and concepts, both concrete and abstract.

General Comment no. 17, (GC17) on the play and cultural rights encompassed in Article 31, places play firmly within the context of the human rights of children. It sets out the ways in which the right to play can be found in the other rights in the Convention and contributes to their realisation. It strongly advocates legislation and planning for children’s Article 31 rights and recommends that Governments develop a dedicated plan, policy or framework for Article 31 or its incorporation into an overall national plan of action for the implementation of the Convention.
interactions; interesting and varied physical and human environment and sufficient space to do what is wanted. Children will play more in environments that afford opportunities for various types of play.

One of the ways – an extremely important way – of promoting children’s right to play in ECEC is to place a high priority on the design and care of spaces for play, particularly outdoor environments with access to nature. Local authorities and national governments have a role in ensuring investment in grounds so that all children have daily access to well designed and maintained spaces for play.

Practitioners have a hugely important role in the co-creation of these environments for play as they change along with children and a matching responsibility in ensuring children have plentiful access.

Children need autonomy in their decisions as to how they use those spaces, including time to fill as ‘actively or inactively as they choose’.

This phrase might well prompt us to ask ourselves how we ensure that rest, day dreaming, doing ‘nothing’ are as valued as an atmosphere of busy activity - time for children to be aimless, apparently without activity or purpose, so that body and mind are at rest.

The practitioner’s role in ECEC is a skilled one based on knowledge of play and play rights, sensitive support and light touch interventions. Closer examination of article 31 and the UN General Comment illuminates many of the dimensions of the role of practitioners and policy makers to ensure that the essence of play is alive within ECEC.

Included in this is the call from the UN Committee for training and capacity-building for all professionals working with or for children, or whose work impacts on children.

They should receive systematic and ongoing training on the human rights of children, including the article 31 rights.

Accessible and inclusive - a right for every child

The UNCRC of course applies to all children across the world; all children whoever they are and where ever they are have the right to play. This right applies equally to disabled children and children from marginalised groups and communities.

The rights under article 31 are of positive benefit to children’s educational development; inclusive education and inclusive play are mutually reinforcing and should be facilitated during the course of every day throughout early childhood education and care (preschool) as well as primary and secondary school (GC17, para. 17).

Early Childhood Education and Care can ensure children are included from the start. Article 23 of the Convention highlights disabled children’s rights to fullest participation in the community: while adults sometimes overlook its importance, the opportunity to make friends and simply play together with peers is crucial to our experience of childhood and a sense of being fully part of society.

The right to play, this everyday right, provokes questions about theory, practice and policy and General Comment no. 17, described as ‘the most urgent contribution to this complex field’, introduces a new depth of richness to understanding of article 31.

Article 31 reflects the core concern of the UN Convention … to respect the child as a human being whose best interest, well-being and development must be respected.

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