

Podcast transcript: Understanding play

Arlene Welcome to this podcast on play. This is part of a series of NCCA podcasts on early childhood care and education. You can find more information and more podcasts at www.action.ncca.ie. Today I'm talking to Professor Elizabeth Wood about justifying play or perhaps put more simply, making a case for play for young children.

Welcome Elizabeth. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

Elizabeth Thank you Arlene. I originally trained as an early childhood teacher and I've worked with 6 and 7 year old children, as well as children in the pre-school. I have a long-standing interest in play. I find it fascinating and much of my research has focused on trying to understand how teachers use play in classrooms but also how children use play for their own purposes.

Arlene **As I said this podcast is about the value of play. Play is a key part of *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. The Framework highlights how play has the potential to support and nurture so much of children's learning and development. Elizabeth, why would you say play is important for young children?**

Elizabeth I think that's a very good question Arlene. And I think first of all we need to look at what are the distinguishing qualities and characteristics of play and playfulness that make them different from other activities. It's generally agreed that what distinguishes play from other activities is imagination, pretence, children's choices and control of the activity, children's motivation, imagination and symbolic activity. Symbolic activity means making one thing stand for something else. So a cardboard box can become a spaceship, or a cave, or a fire engine.

Play involves being in 'What if?' and 'As if' modes of activity, which means stepping out of the 'here and now' and entering into a playful mood state, or into playful behaviours. So play, imagination and pretence take us beyond everyday boundaries, and provide opportunities for imaginative and flexible ways of thinking and acting. Being playful means entering into the mood or spirit of play and infusing everyday activities with a sense of playfulness such as teasing,

joking, flirting, or just having fun.

So let's just go back for a minute to this idea of play involving the 'What if' and 'As if' modes of activity. If we look on the slide we can see that much of children's play actually takes place in the mind. This is because they have unique and creative ideas about transforming everyday materials and experiences into play events. They also enjoy using their knowledge to play with roles, rules and relationships. Children love playing games with rules, and inventing their own games. These cognitive transformations and symbolic activities may be especially helpful for children's learning and development.

Arlene **So in justifying play what would you see as being the greatest benefits for the children?**

Elizabeth Well, this is a very big question. I think we have to start with the key issue that it is not just play, but everything that happens in play activities that supports learning processes and learning outcomes. And play has many benefits for children which can be divided into these two aspects - the learning processes and the learning outcomes. So we have to remember that HOW they learn and WHAT they learn are equally important.

So the benefits to children.... Children's motivations to play are linked to their motivations to learn. They want to become more skilful, more knowledgeable, and especially to establish a sense of their own agency. Because play can be very flexible and open-ended children can gradually learn to control the processes and outcomes. They are constantly exploring, thinking, inventing, communicating, building knowledge and creating meaning. They use their everyday knowledge in play, and combine this with their imaginative interpretations. In their play, children are explorers, scientists, geographers, artists, designers and technologists, as well as being giants, wizards, fairies, wild animals, and anything they want to be.

So one of the most important aspects of play is that it creates spaces for children's meanings and children's intentions which they communicate in many different ways – through body movements, facial expressions, gestures, sign and verbal languages, drawings, layouts, and models. Play activities are especially important for developing children's well-being which is a key focus for *Aistear*. Playful relationships can contribute to their identity and belonging as they develop a sense of mastery of their playing, and of their learning.

Arlene **And are there particular benefits then for the practitioner?**

Elizabeth Yes I think practitioners can see a lot of benefits in using play in their classrooms. We know that children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates. We also know that their learning journeys are influenced by their wider social and cultural experiences – their gender, ethnicity, languages, their special or additional needs, family composition, social class, home cultures and child-rearing practices. So these are a lot of different things to take into account. But in play, children can reveal their cultural and individual ways of knowing and understanding, their patterns of development, their interests and their individual personalities. Because of the relative freedom and flexibility that play offers, practitioners can also get to know children intimately through their play. For example, by observing free play we can see the patterns of children’s choices – what and who they choose to play with, how they play, what they prefer, and sometimes what they avoid. By close observation we can also see that babies and toddlers communicate their interests through body language, vocalisations, showing excitement and responsiveness to stimuli. So play can provide opportunities for close observation, for developing intimate relationships and for planning curriculum provision around the needs and interests of all the children in the setting.

I think it’s important that we are enthusiastic and very knowledgeable about play and how we use it in our own settings. But, we do need to take a balanced view and remember that play is one of many ways in which children learn. It is not the ONLY way, and sometimes it’s not even the BEST way in all circumstances. Children’s activities are often transformed into play, but not everything they do can or should be classified as play. Having said this, children do need to be around playful and knowledgeable adults who can support their learning and development in many different ways.

Arlene **So given the many benefits of play which you’ve highlighted for both the children and the practitioners what are the links then between play and learning?**

Elizabeth Well, let’s go back to remembering that this key issue is, it isn’t just the play, but everything that happens in play activities that supports learning processes and outcomes. We know that from the moment children are born they are active,

curious and sociable. They're interested in people, their environments, tools and resources, and everyday events. They are highly motivated to learn – to know, to act, to understand, to belong and to connect. From birth, children learn cultural repertoires of knowledge, behaviours and beliefs - all of which contribute to their developing identities. Children are not passive learners. They are active agents in their own learning and development. They don't just wait for things to happen around them. They actively provoke events and responsive relationships. They make sense and create meaning through a wide range of activities and experiences, including play. Children are constantly exploring, thinking, inventing, communicating, building knowledge and creating meaning.

So play may be especially valuable for the following purposes. First of all observing and imitating. Imitating doesn't just mean copying what they see. When children are imitating what's happening around them they are interpreting and learning about their everyday worlds. Play is also particularly valuable for being involved and participating with people who are more knowledgeable, or differently knowledgeable and can support children's learning in many different ways. We also know that children enjoy communicating and connecting with people in intimate ways through close, trusting relationships. This is also important for developing a sense of belonging and well-being.

When we're thinking about intellectual development or cognitive development we also know from research that play is very important for developing cognitive flexibility. That is the ability to think of new ideas and new combinations, and to be creative and inventive with what they're doing. Linked to this is imagination and pretence. We know that imagination and pretence are central to what distinguishes play from other activities. And imagination is the quality that takes play into other dimensions and other realms beyond children's everyday worlds. And this is why it's linked to cognitive flexibility and creativity.

These areas are all linked to the areas of development in *Aistear*. You can see that as children become more knowledgeable, more skilful, and more competent it also develops all areas of their well-being. So it may be that play is especially important for developing children's well-being, their sense of confidence and their sense of competence.

Another area that is very important in terms of linking play with children's learning is the development of positive learning dispositions. Positive dispositions are confidence, competence, perseverance, being playful, developing problem-solving capabilities, developing flexibility. Meta-cognition

means knowing how to learn, how to self-regulate and how to develop awareness of our own learning. We've already talked about the importance of play and well-being and developing a sense of identity and belonging. Play isn't just about helping children to become independent learners. They also learn to become inter-dependent. And finally, play contributes importantly to a sense of mastery. Those 'can do' feelings which are important not just in the immediate term for children but also in the longer-term as they progress into school.

Arlene **Having looked at why play is important and what it can do for children and practitioners what would you see, Elizabeth, as the most common misconceptions about play?**

Elizabeth Again I think that's quite a challenging question Arlene. The belief that play is THE way, or even the BEST way for children to learn is not actually accurate. We've already said that play is one of MANY ways in which children learn with peers, with adults and by themselves. Children experience many different ways of learning in their home, family and community settings. They also enjoy being involved in everyday activities such as gardening, cooking, helping around the house, and festivals and celebrations. They also use play to reproduce and imitate these activities, often introducing imaginative elements. It is the imaginative elements of play that help children to develop their own meanings, to construct knowledge, to rehearse skills, and to make sense in their own ways and in their own time.

We've also said that it isn't just play that has benefits for children's learning and development. Rather, it's the activities and processes that are involved in play that are beneficial. These activities and processes include the freedom to explore and investigate, developing close relationships with other people, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, using different forms of communication, and encountering risk and challenge.

We also know that play is common to all cultures and all communities. But, children may learn to play in different ways so it's really important that practitioners know about cultural variations so that play provision can be accessible and culturally responsive to all children in the setting.

Children who have special or additional learning needs may need particular forms of support to help them to learn how to play, and how to be playful. So ensuring access and inclusion in play activities means that practitioners have to

consider the environment, the resources, their own roles and intentions, and their everyday routines.

Another really interesting problem with play is that we have to take a long view. The benefits of play may not be immediately evident, but do become evident over time. Some of the benefits of play cannot be measured or assessed, such as concentration, engagement, involvement, memorisation, independence and interdependence, flexibility, emotional resilience, creativity, friendship and relationship skills. But we know that all of these are the skills and positive dispositions that we need to be successful and lifelong learners.

Another problem with play that often comes up when I am working with practitioners is that play can be chaotic, unpredictable, noisy, messy, anarchic, challenging to establish rules and authority. It can be revolutionary, exuberant, wild and many other things. It's often tempting when we are viewing this kind of exuberant play to get children to quieten down, to sit down, but actually if we look at this type of play over time we will start to understand that there may be order within the apparent chaos. And this idea of observing play, understanding play and respecting children's play is a really important part of good quality provision.

Arlene In talking about the importance of play and in justifying play it's also important to think about parents. Parents can sometimes be very worried that their children are not learning perhaps if they're playing. So what advice would you give to practitioners, Elizabeth, in helping parents to see the value of play for their young children?

Elizabeth Again I think this gives practitioners some interesting challenges. We know that parents and caregivers are usually children's first co-players. They teach children how to play, and engage with them in playful ways in many different activities. Playfulness usually begins from the very first games of *Peek-a-boo*, singing songs, engaging children's attention with toys and everyday resources. However, we may have two problems here. The first is that parents and caregivers may not always understand the important things they're teaching their children, or the ways in which they are modelling how people learn together in playful ways. Parents also may be less confident about their abilities to structure children's learning in what they might see as 'teacherly ways.' And this is maybe why they want to see more formal learning in early years settings, and

especially from around the age of four or five.

The opposite problem is that parents may see play as a way of engaging children in intentional and highly structured learning. This is a very instrumental view of play. Perhaps the most extreme examples are structured computer games, or over-organised activities that are aimed at accelerating children's learning.

So, as with all things I think it is a question of balance. Practitioners do have an important role in helping parents and caregivers to understand the ways in which different forms of play support children's learning and development. This can be done in many different ways. I've seen teachers successfully use open days, newsletters, posters or leaflets. Informing parents about topics and themes can be useful if practitioners indicate what activities are planned, and what are the learning intentions in those play activities. If the setting has a website this can be a very effective way of providing information about the role and value of play, and helping parents to understand the reasons for the activities and experiences that children will have. So as long as parents can see the connections themselves between children's play and their learning, then they're going to be more confident about what they're seeing happening in the setting.

Remember that there should be a two-way flow of information about play between the setting and the children's families. Practitioners need to learn about children's play choices and preferences at home for two reasons. First of all, they need to ensure consistency and familiarity of provision as children first come into the setting. But secondly, they also need to provide variety, extension and challenge so that children are developing that sense of mastery of playing and learning.

Arlene **Thank you very much Elizabeth for talking with me today.**