

Understanding Children's Play

There is no definitive description of play that meets with everyone's agreement but the following themes emerge through the substantial literature on children's play.

Children seem to play regardless of cultural background, although play is not identical across cultures.

Circumstances can prevent or restrict play. Constraints may be placed by adults or the environment limiting children's experience. Alternatively developmental problems, disability or illness can shape the possibilities for children.

Children play for play's sake. The activity is an end in itself and is not undertaken for an end product, although children do sometimes make something in play.

Play is an activity involving children's own choices. It is motivated by children's feelings and internal thoughts and it can be hard sometimes for adults to fathom these motives.

Play is often episodic, with emerging and shifting goals developed by children themselves. However children return to favourite play themes and activities over time.

Play supports children's social understanding and play is in turn fed by their experiences. The roles and themes acted out during play both use and help children to understand social rules and conventions.

There is a subtle interplay between communication, social interaction and imagination in play. These features often become clear when you observe children who have difficulty in play, such as autistic children.

Play stems from children's own perceptions of the world and how it works. So it is a very personal creative activity. Within children's understanding their play is meaningful in its connection to the non-play reality.

Children mirror each other in play and so they reinforce, highlight and develop their own views and experiences. Play is usually rule governed, even when it looks thoroughly disorganised to adults. The rules may be understood by children but not spoken out loud. Rules are voiced clearly by children if someone breaks them.

Play provides a forum in which children step back for a while, experiment and try out scenarios. Children can make their play represent reality in their own way with an "as if" or "what if" quality.

Play is essentially a voluntary and pleasurable activity. It may be undertaken with great seriousness and attention and may give rise to significant learning. Children play because they want to and because it gives them enjoyment