Nottingham City Council

Playwork Impact Evaluation:Final Report

March 2005 - 2006

Reframing Playwork; Reframing Challenging Behaviour

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Playwork Impact Evaluation
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FINAL REPORT

REFRAMING PLAYWORK;

REFRAMING CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Playworker: You try everything in the book, you try everything, day in, day out, you try and move them, and nothing seems to work. And I think what's good about this process is I do believe it's going to help us in these sorts of situations. I really do think this will help all of us.

Researcher: When you say you've tried everything in the book, you've tried everything in the book that's been written by the people out there. I think what we're trying to do is write our own book.

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Abstract

The 12-month evaluation study aimed to explore play-focused and playwork-specific processes for evaluating the impact of playwork on the play and behaviour of children attending two play projects in the City of Nottingham. Drawing on a range of theories of children's play, specifically theories relating to power and identity (Sutton-Smith, 1997; Sturrock and Else, 1998; Winnicott, 1971) and emotional health (Sutton-Smith, 2003), the study explored the relationship between playing and behaviour and the role of the playworker.

The playworkers attended training in play and playwork theories and used tools from this (play types, Hughes, 2002; play cues and frames, Sturrock and Else, 1998) to draw up play profiles of seven children displaying challenging behaviour. In fifteen facilitated group meetings, this information was used to develop a discrete playwork analysis of the children's play and non-play behaviour and to explore ways in which playworkers could support the play of these children. Brawgs Continuum (Russell, 2005) was used as a model for playworkers to reflect on their own responses to the children. Developmental Work Research (Engeström, 2005) was drawn on for the methodological framework for the study, framing the tools for observation and reflection as new instruments.

Playworkers found the new tools to be both challenging and rewarding. Discussions were animated, in-depth and at times intense and emotional. Playworkers report a step change in the way they think about and discuss their work and in particular their relationships with the children. This allowed them to understand the behaviour that had been considered challenging in a new way, as part of a more holistic understanding of how each child plays. Overwhelmingly the playworkers felt more relaxed about the behaviour and more able to respond as playworkers.

Aims

The study aimed to explore play-focused and playwork-specific processes for evaluating the impact of playwork on the play and behaviour of children who were identified as displaying challenging behaviour. Through identifying ways of understanding the play of particular children and exploring how playworkers could support these children in their play, the study aimed to develop a discrete playwork analysis of children's play and non-play behaviour and of the role of the playworker.

Assumptions

It is acknowledged that the language of these aims is value-laden and rests on a number of assumptions that would benefit from clarification.

Impact:

Impact evaluation generally entails isolating the intervention in order to identify causation between the intervention and any change. Whilst the aim was to make some evaluation as to the effectiveness of a discrete playwork approach, such a systematic review, which would necessitate the identification of indicators, gathering of quantitative data and the use of control trials at least, was not the intention.

This qualitative study has developed organically and has been responsive to both the playworkers involved and the material being explored. As such, it has focused on developing a playwork-specific understanding of the way the children play, and on an evaluation of the impact of this on the playworkers' understanding, articulation and execution of their role.

Play:

It is not in the purview of this report to give a comprehensive review of theorising on play. However, the study is based on a certain understanding of play, drawn from a range of academic disciplines and play theorists. This is briefly introduced here.

Play is notoriously difficult to define, and there is a plethora of theories as to its function, many of them contradictory. There is not even agreement that play is always beneficial; however, there is a basic agreement on its fundamental importance, as Gordon Burghardt (2005:xii) says:

> *The problem of defining play and its role is one of the greatest challenges facing neuroscience, behavioural biology, psychology, education and the social sciences generally. Alas, it is rarely recognised as such… In a very real sense, only when we understand the nature of play will we be able to understand how to better shape the destinies of human societies in a mutually dependent world, the future of our species, and perhaps even the fate of the biosphere itself.*

A number of claims have been made for the function or benefits of children's play, and a few are listed here:

- Practising adaptive skills needed in adult life (Groos, 1901, in Frost *et al,* 2005)
- Cognitive development, problem solving (Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1972)
- Development of identity and self (Mead, 1934, in Frost *et al,* 2005; Winnicott, 1971)
- Exploration and curiosity (Fagen, 1975)
- Adaptive potentiation (Sutton-Smith, 1997)
- Brain potential and growth (Kotulak, 1996, in Sutton-Smith, 1997)

- Developing play skills and therefore social relations (Sutton-Smith, 1997)

- Developing children's folklore and cultures, including resistance, subversion and power games (Opie and Opie, 1969; Holloway and Valentine, 2000; Kehily and Swann, 2003; Sutton-Smith *et al,* 1999)

- Catharsis, wish fulfilment and other therapeutic benefits (Freud, 1965; Klein, 1955, both in Frost *et al,* 2005; Sturrock and Else, 1998)

- Emotional health and resilience (Mental Health Foundation, 1999; Sutton-Smith, 2003)

The dominant discourse on play focuses on its role in learning and development across a range of domains, including physical, social, emotional and cognitive. This is what Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the *progress rhetoric*. This is a compelling but incomplete view, predicated on a perception of children as immature and incompetent adults-in-waiting (James and Prout, 1997; Mayall, 2002) and can sometimes lead adults to take an over-directive role in an attempt to encourage particular areas of development in particular ways. This study aimed to explore the more immediate benefits of play, including its role in social relations, emotional health and well-being and the more therapeutic benefits of play, as well as supporting the development of play skills themselves, with a particular focus on what Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the rhetorics of identity and power.

Playwork:

Opportunities for children to play away from the eyes of adults are increasingly restricted across three domains:

Spatial: reduction in public space available for children and young people; increase in traffic and parked cars; less 'slack' space (Thomas and Thompson, 2004; Karpf, A., 2002);

Temporal: more structured programming in children's lives both throughout the school day and outside it (Smith and Barker, 2000; Sturrock, Russell and Else, 2004);

Psychological: through the fear culture (stranger danger, fear of bullying/racism etc.); through adult-directed structured activities outside school; through adult-initiated play narratives and fantasies on TV and other media, computer games, the toy industry and other commercialisation of play (Thomas and Thompson, 2004; Furedi, 2001; Kline, 1993).

Opinion varies as to quite how far these restrictions have had an influence on children's play, with some suggesting that children become adept at negotiating and creating space and time to play (Sutton-Smith *et al,* 1999; Kyttä, 2004). However, it has to be agreed that children's capacity to play out unsupervised has considerably reduced.

A primary function of play provision and of playwork, therefore, should be to compensate for the lack of opportunity for unsupervised free play. This

means that the primary role of the playworker is to support children's freely chosen, self-directed playing rather than other roles that might direct children's activities towards social or educational goals. This socialisation or education function can be carried out within other contexts; what is unique about playwork is that it supports playing. However, the playworker operates within a paradox: their very presence may well help to create places where children can play, but it also influences that play.

The role of the playworker can be summarised as (NPFA *et al*, 2000:16):

> *… to create an environment which will stimulate children's play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences. A skilled and experienced playworker is capable of enriching the child's play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting.*

Play is often described as being freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. Whilst this is a useful way of looking at play in terms of curbing over-zealous direction from adults, it is not always accurate: often children will allow other children to direct the play because it is more important for them to be able to participate than control.

Supporting children's play is not straightforward. Our natural tendency as adults is to protect, teach or socialise, and this construct of adult-child relations is deeply embedded in the current social policies relating to children and young people. In addition, children's play can elicit powerful feelings in us for a variety of reasons, which may in turn lead us to curb those play expressions that make us uncomfortable or anxious.

This gives rise to a number of tensions and contradictions that playworkers face in their work, especially when the funding requires particular outcomes (for example, a reduction in challenging behaviour). It is for this reason that it was felt that a closer exploration of the playwork approach and the way that this is articulated was needed.

Challenging Behaviour:

The term 'challenging behaviour' has its origins in the education sector and sits at the mild end of a continuum of Social, Education and Behavioural Difficulties, with severe mental disorder at the other extreme (Becker, 2004). Within an educational setting, it can include "persistent, low-level disruption of lessons that wears down staff and interrupts learning" (Ofsted, 2005:4), or "inappropriate, aggressive, bizarre or withdrawn behaviour" (Cooper *et al*, 1994, cited in Becker, 2004:49). It is often linked to communication difficulties. Much behaviour that might be challenging for children and teachers alike could be considered to be a normal part of childhood and adolescence, if unacceptable within a classroom or educational setting and "perception of poor behaviour is conditioned both by the context and by the observer's expectations." (Ofsted, 2005:5).

So, what might be considered challenging behaviour within the context of a play setting? What might be a playworker's expectations of behaviour?

Given what we know about play, then much of children's playing might be understood as being challenging. Our modern tendency to idealise play means that we can forget just how nasty play can be: taunts, pranks, initiations, bullying, racism, excluding, obscenities, toilet humour, rhymes and songs, and games of power and resistance against adults, all these are a part of children's play repertoires but could easily be seen as unacceptable or challenging by adults. They have even been described in text books as 'bad' play (Scarlett *et al*, 2005:17). Children will test boundaries in their play (NPFA *et al,* 2000); if they are troubled, these troubles may well emerge in their play.

The challenging behaviour of the seven children identified for the research included aggression, violence, bullying, uncontrolled anger, disruption, mood swings and sexually explicit language and sexually symbolic behaviour. The term 'challenging behaviour' begs the question, "Challenging for whom?" The research explored this and the relationship of such behaviour to playing.

Background and context to the study

Local context:

The study employed a researcher to design the evaluation and to work with playwork teams from two play projects in Nottingham. Both projects were working with "Tier Two" children.[1]

One of the projects was a well-established full time play centre funded through the mainstream City Council budget, with additional short term funding from the Children's Fund to provide extra staffing and support "to help them work with the most difficultly behaved children who would otherwise be excluded and to improve the children's social skills and awareness." (Nottingham Children's Fund Strategic Plan, 2005-2008.)

The other project is funded through the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund to provide positive play opportunities in parks in one area of the city, working with the local community to develop these.

 There was a high level of commitment to the research and the playworkers participated with enthusiasm and openness.

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[1] Tier 2 children are those living in the community with a significant level of disadvantage which leads the local authority to believe they are at risk of under-achievement and poor transition into adult citizenship. This may be economic, social, physical or psychological disadvantage. Tier 2 children represent about 33% of Nottingham children because of the high rates of deprivation present in the City.

Social Policy context:

The study was mindful of a number of local and national policies that present specific understandings of children, children's services and the role of adults working within those services. Broadly speaking, it could be said that current policy initiatives relating to children and young people favour interventions by professional experts largely based on cognitive-behavioural approaches; this study explores a qualitatively different approach and as such could be seen to be at variance with the dominant current thinking on working with children and young people. It is hoped that this report can present a holistic, evidence-based argument for playwork as a valid and worthwhile approach that is based on an understanding of children's and young people's play and on the principle of supporting play.

The overarching policy context for play provision within the city of Nottingham is the Children and Young People's Plan (Nottingham Integrated Children's Services, 2006), which is in draft form at the time of writing. The draft plan states in its introduction (p. 2) that "Nottingham is a City that offers great opportunities for children and young people to learn, play, develop and achieve." The plan uses the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes (DfES, 2004: be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being) to outline key problems, aspirations, commitments and outcomes. Play and leisure opportunities are listed under the "enjoy and achieve" heading.

There is evidence to suggest that children's free play can make a significant contribution to both physical and mental health and so to the "be healthy" heading. The draft Children and Young People's Plan states (p. 16): "We will promote healthy and active lifestyles and emotional well-being for all children and young people." Research suggests (Centre for Transport Studies, 2004) that free play is the most effective way for children to achieve the sixty minutes of physical activity a day recommended by the Chief Medical Officer (2004) and that a range of health problems is associated with the decline in opportunities for free play. The Mental Health Foundation (1999) recognises the role that risk taking in unsupervised play can have in helping to build children's self-confidence and resilience, key protective factors for mental health; in recognising the decrease in opportunities to play out, the importance of playwork is highlighted in supporting children's mental health in this way.

The Children's Fund Strategic Plan (2005-2008) highlights emotional health as one of the key areas of work. This evaluation study shows how playwork can make a significant contribution to emotional health through providing an environment where children can express themselves through their play but which at the same time sets a clear frame for these expressions.

The Children's Fund Strategic Plan (2005-2008) also makes reference to the New Economics Foundation survey on the well-being of children and young people in Nottingham (NEF, 2004). The survey measured two aspects of well-

being: life satisfaction and personal development. This last encompasses "being curious, and engaging in challenging and absorbing activities … [which are] important for people's overall ability to cope well with life's challenges and is directly related to physical health in later life." (NEF, 2004:2). Play settings and the unique playwork approach are well placed to provide opportunities for this.

Methodology

The research approach was qualitative in nature using participant observation and facilitated group discussion.

It draws on aspects of Developmental Work Research (Engeström, 2005) which is itself based on an analytical tool known as Cultural Historical Activity Theory. Developed originally from concepts used by Vygotsky (1978) and other Russian psychologists, CHAT is founded on the idea of activity being object-oriented (i.e., carried out towards a certain end) and artefact-mediated (we use particular tools and instruments, either concrete or abstract, in our activities). In its simplest form, the model of activity can be presented thus:

Mediating artefacts

Subject   Object
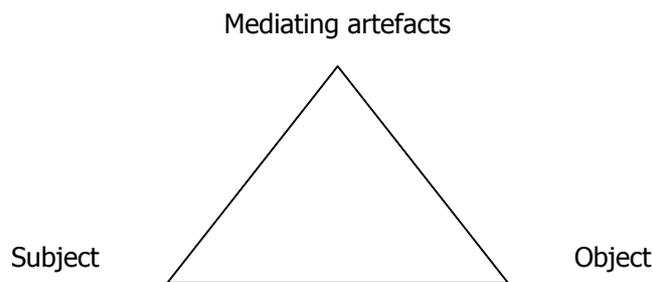
Developmental Work Research is dialectical in nature and recognises that contradictions can occur at points in the triangle. This makes it particularly useful for playwork: analysing playwork as an activity system with playworkers as the subject immediately shows where the contradictions can occur.

For example, what is the object of playwork in the context of this study? Is it to support children's play, or to reduce challenging behaviour? Depending on what is agreed as the object, then the mediating artefacts, or instruments, of the activity can also create contradictions. Some of the instruments currently used by playworkers and through which their activity is mediated, might include, for example, the National Occupational Standards for Playwork (SkillsActive, 2005); or the monitoring forms for the Children's Fund funding on the full time play centre; or the National Standards for the Inspection and Regulation of Day Care (Ofsted, 2001); or the outcomes focus of *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2004); or the current theorising on play and playwork. There is ample opportunity for tension and contradiction here. More complex models can be developed that recognise that playwork actions take place within a broader community of playworkers, with attendant rules and divisions of labour.

A more in-depth study would draw out the nature of the existing instruments, through a close look at what is in use now and how this has evolved historically. For this short term evaluation study, there was insufficient time

for this and so the new instruments were introduced from the start and their use evaluated and adjusted as the study progressed.

Through introducing possible new instruments (in the form of tools for drawing up play profiles and analysing playworkers' responses), the primary contradictions may move some way towards a resolution. However, the very introduction of new instruments itself creates a new, secondary set of contradictions: between the existing way of doing and seeing playwork and the new way.

Methods

Playworker training and induction:

All the participating playworkers attended a thirty-hour *New Thinking in Playwork* course facilitated by the researcher, which introduced the play and playwork theories to be used in the study, together with training on observational techniques.

Handbook and support materials:

Playworkers were given a handbook which outlined the aims and the kinds of information to be collected on how the children played. The initial focus in the handbook was on gathering baseline data; this notion was abandoned for a number of reasons including:

- the information gathered for many of the children could not be considered as 'baseline' as they had been attending the play settings for some time (in some cases several years) prior to being identified for this study;

- delays in getting the study off the ground meant that we were still trying to identify baseline data six months into the study.

After the summer break, the focus shifted slightly to with the introduction of the concept of play profiles. This seemingly small change of emphasis had a far-reaching effect in terms of generating rich material for discussion in the group meetings. Additional support materials were prepared ("First Steps"; "Next Steps") to support this.

Play profiles:

The profiles comprised three elements:

Play types: Hughes (2002) has identified, from the literature on play, sixteen different play types. Often these occur in combination, and since we cannot know what is going on in the mind of the playing child, some play types can only be surmised. The idea behind using play types as a part of the play profile was to find out which play types the children engaged in most frequently, and how.

Play cues: Sturrock and Else (1998) define play cues as "the lure or invitation from the child to the surrounding environment to join in play productions of one sort or another." Cues are not always positive, sometimes being overlaid with anxiety or aggression, and can at times be misunderstood. Playworkers were asked to observe play cues so that they could develop an understanding of the cuing behaviour of the children.

Play frames and narratives: Drawing on the work of Hughes and of Sturrock and Else, playworkers were asked to identify the common frames and narratives engaged in by the children: the nature of games they played, the rules and rituals, the storylines, and so on.

Reflection:

Playworkers were also asked to reflect on their own responses to the children's play, using critical incident analysis. Brawgs continuum (Russell, 2005) was used as a tool for plotting both internal, emotional responses and external, behavioural responses. The continuum places a play-centred response at the centre, dynamically poised between two extremes of a controlling response and a chaotic response. A brief explanation of the continuum is attached as Appendix One.

Selection of children:

Each project selected a small number of children identified as presenting challenging behaviour. For the play centre, four children were chosen who were already being monitored as part of the Children's Fund project. For the play-in-parks project, the team agreed on two children who were presenting particular challenges in one of the parks. One of the playworkers on this project also chose to look at other children, some of which she had contact with through other projects. At the outset of the study, some work was done on a larger number of children but it was agreed after the summer break to focus on seven children. Issues of voluntary informed consent were discussed with the playworkers and line managers and it was agreed that the observations were in line with normal playwork practice and therefore did not require separate consent or permission; in addition seeking such consent ran the risk of encouraging behaviour different from that normally manifest. Issues of confidentiality were also discussed; information on the children, who were given pseudonyms throughout the study, would be available only to key personnel and the body of the report would only discuss key themes emerging.

Group discussions:

Playworkers then brought their play profiles, observations and reflections to group meetings of both play projects, facilitated by the researcher, and shared the information. Meetings were recorded and transcribed. Discussions focused on how the children played, and also discussed the challenging

behaviour and the playworkers' responses to the children. In all fifteen group meetings were held, providing a particularly rich source of information, with the whole playwork team adding their perceptions on how the children played and on playworker responses. The discussions were in depth and on occasions intense and emotional.

> They're really refreshing and the only opportunity I've had to discuss behaviour and different types of play and ways of working with difficult children. I think they've been really interesting and they've made me really think as well about being more prepared for the ones that you know are going to be on site.

Analysis

This section is divided into three areas of exploration:

1. the behaviours of the children involved (both challenging behaviours and play behaviours and the relationship between the two);

2. the playwork 'offer' to the children (in terms of what is made available and playworker-child interactions); and

3. reflections on the impact of trying to use the 'new instruments'.

1.1: Challenging behaviour or play behaviour?

The children and young people studied were chosen because they all presented behaviours that have come to be known as 'challenging'. Behaviour was deemed to be challenging if it involved one or more of the following:

- some form of aggression or anger, either physical or verbal or both, including swearing, and often involving throwing of large objects and furniture;
- preventing others in the setting from playing;
- giving rise to feelings of concern or discomfort for the playworkers, particularly through sexualised language and symbolic play;
- challenging authority (in this case the playworkers).

At the outset of the study, playworkers tended to focus on the challenging behaviour. This led perhaps to an incomplete view of the child, compounded in some way by the monitoring that the full time play centre carried out which required them to record whether or not challenging behaviour had been displayed, whether the child interacted well with peers or staff, and whether there had been any warnings or bars.

The tools of the play profile were designed to help them broaden out their view of these children, to see a more holistic picture, looking at how the children played rather than how they (mis)behaved. Drawing up a play profile involved looking at how the children played both when they were and when

they were not being challenging. It helped the playworkers to see how the children played and which kinds of playing the children engaged in most, so that relationships came to be discussed more in terms of how to support play rather than manage challenging behaviour.

In some cases, the challenging behaviour itself came to be understood as a form of playing. This understanding operated on four levels:

1. an understanding that children test boundaries through their play (NPFA *et al,* 2000), and particularly the authority boundaries of adults, in this case, the playworkers;

2. an understanding that children play out themes that are more exciting, risky or extreme than in everyday life, because of the relative safety of the play frame and a perceived lack of consequences if the behaviour is understood as play (Sutton-Smith, 2003);

3. the understanding that play has a therapeutic or cathartic element, that children can play through issues that trouble them (Sturrock and Else, 1998);

4. the possibility that the children were not particularly skilled at playing: that their cuing behaviour or play signals were misunderstood, or they were not capable of establishing or maintaining play frames, leading to frustration. This is what Sturrock and Else (1998) term "dysplay".

It should be acknowledged here that just because behaviour could be understood as play does not necessarily make it acceptable in play settings. Play is not always 'nice' despite our adult idealising tendencies to wish this were so. We only have to return to some of the theorising on play to understand that, particularly the play rhetorics of power, identity and the imaginary (Sutton-Smith, 1997) can produce play behaviours that upset, frighten, hurt or disgust both the players themselves and others. This is, in some sense, their function.

Sutton-Smith (1997:157) argues that play is motivated "primarily by feelings and not just by images of reality." This idea is developed in later work (Sutton-Smith, 2003) where he draws on Burghardt's (1998) study of the evolution of play in mammals. It is worth summarising this thinking here, as it came to be drawn on frequently in the group discussions about the way these children played.

Evidence shows that play evolved at about the same time that mammals did. This was a period of evolution where brains grew and changed radically from the 'reptilian' brain capable only of reflexes and emotions aimed at immediate survival. It developed new structures (the limbic brain and the neo-cortex) and new capacities for more complex emotions and conscious thought. This gave rise to tensions between the ancient, primary emotions (anger, fear, happiness, sadness, shock and disgust) and the newer, more regulated and social secondary emotions such as pride, guilt, boredom, embarrassment, sympathy, and many more.

Sutton-Smith (2003) suggests that play evolved as a way of mediating these tensions, allowing the primary emotions to be experienced by using the secondary emotions to create the rules, rituals and play signals that allow us to recognise the behaviour as playing and therefore not real. He suggests that those who live only on their secondary emotions without the vitality that experiencing the primary emotions brings, may suffer from depression; whereas those who live only on their primary emotions without the regulation and tempering from the secondary emotions, may be psychotic.

What is striking about this is that the kinds of behaviour displayed by these children were, almost without exception, rooted in the primary emotions. Spontaneous displays of aggression and anger, overtly sexualised behaviour intended to shock or disgust, emotional outbursts, "over the top" screaming, being "hyper", bad language, are all examples of unmediated displays of primary emotions. Perhaps the role of the playworker here might be to help establish the frames for such emotions to be expressed more safely: to help set the rules, rituals and other means that allow the expression of these primary emotions without the cost that the raw, unmediated challenging behaviour brings.

Another striking commonality for many of the children in this study was the fact that they were going through, or about to enter, a major period of transition: the move from primary to secondary school. For some of the girls in the study, this was compounded by the onset of puberty.

Pratt and George (2005) highlight that although much of the school focus for such transfers is on administrative arrangements and academic success, for the children themselves the key issue is peer group relations and friendships. Concerns over this give rise to anxiety in the transition period. For the children in this study who were going through just such a transition period, the play project provided a continuity of peer group and friendships as well as an arena for expressing and working (or playing) through these anxieties.

Given this, it is not surprising that much of the playing observed falls under the rhetoric of *play as identity* (Sutton-Smith, 1997), and particularly sexual identity. Much of this rhetoric was manifested through challenging performances of one kind or another. Two of the boys in the study consistently played the role of 'gangsta', scheming together to disrupt sessions by throwing equipment, challenging the authority of the playworkers and provoking others to do the same, even 'happy-slapping' a playworker with his own phone. Another boy paraded his boyhood as a badge of honour, making fantastic claims for his sexual prowess; this same boy suddenly dropped his earlier passion for imaginative and symbolic play, dismissing it as childish. One girl would turn objects into phallic symbols and engage in explicit sexual banter; and another displayed extreme emotional mood swings particularly when her advances to boys were rebuffed.

The rhetoric of identity is closely linked to the rhetoric of power, and this can be seen in adult play of contests and carnivals. In children's play, it is usually to be found in the kinds of subversive play that adults have difficulty in accepting, for example teasing, bullying and winding up adults.

It is perhaps one of the paradoxes of playwork that effective support for play includes these kinds of play that could be seen as challenging. In one sense, the level of challenging play in evidence could be considered an indicator of the effectiveness of the play space.

Battram and Russell (2002) drew on concepts from complexity theory to suggest that effective playwork operates at the edge of chaos, in the zone of complexity, dynamically poised between order and chaos. An overly ordered play setting would offer little in the way of opportunity for the kinds of playing discussed here. A play setting operating in total chaos would equally offer little opportunity, since it would be difficult to establish and maintain frames within a chaotic environment.

1.2: How did the children play?

Each of the children in the study had their own play styles and preferences. This in itself helped the playworkers to understand each child from a "ludocentric" perspective. Some generalisations can be drawn from the information in the play profiles on play types, play cuing behaviour and play frames and narratives.

Play types:

Since both play settings offered outside space, it is not surprising that both locomotor play and social play (play with rules) featured prominently in the preferred play types. Some of the children had difficulty sticking to rules, or would become angry if they thought others were breaking the rules. Games would often break down because of this, which is when the behaviour seen as challenging would emerge. Others, however, were capable of playing games with more flexible, home-grown rules, particularly on the play structures of the full time play centre.

All of the boys and one of the girls often engaged in rough and tumble play. Play fighting has always been particularly problematic for playworkers, perhaps because it has been understood as aggression rather than social bonding. The playworkers' response to this kind of play is discussed in section 2 below.

Several of the children would engage in dramatic play, insofar as their behaviour could be understood as a performance or a display. For some, this was combined with communication play and entailed 'calling' other children or playworkers, sometimes coming close to verbal bullying.

Three of the boys would combine performance with role playing gangstas, complete with adapted clothing, swagger and attitude. Two of these boys also combined the performance with deep play and athletic prowess (running along a high wall at top speed, leaping off high platforms). For two other children, the display was about sexual knowledge, prowess or fantasy and could be graphic. For another girl it was a cue in itself, a way of attracting

attention with the tease of deep play (for example, taking a bicycle with no saddle or brakes up to the top of the slide and calling to the playworkers).

One of the boys had engaged frequently in creative, symbolic and fantasy play, for example, making a visor and using a cardboard tube as handlebars, then riding his 'motorbike' over the play structures with sound accompaniments. This same boy also enjoyed exploratory play, taking mechanical items apart to see how they worked. However, this kind of play had been diminishing and was publicly abandoned as childish, although at times he did still engage in this and socio-dramatic play when his newer friends were not on the site.

Symbolic and creative play were also combined in an evident interest in graffiti, tagging and body art. Coupled with the performances described above, this would suggest a strong identity and power narrative.

The process of observing play types led one team of playworkers to realise that one girl particularly enjoyed creative activities that involved close physical contact with adults, such as face painting and mod-roc.

For some of the children, their engagement in the range of pretend play types was severely limited. One of the girls would role play, but this would be restricted to the socio-dramatic kind, enacting everyday situations with concrete props and real children to populate her games. One of the other boys had never been seen engaging in any of the pretend play types.

Communication play featured highly, particularly in name calling, swearing and wind up banter. Two of the boys frequently spoke lyrics (free-styling or rapping) and told jokes as a part of their play performances.

> Little rude boy gangsta style. The way he walks on and he's limping, and he's a little hard man. Not aggressive, he's just like nyah, nyah like, you know. He wants people to think he's a little hard man sort of thing…
> It's because his peers do that sort of walk isn't it, it's the hand down the boxers, you know.

Cuing:

Some of the children had difficulty in issuing play cues that could be understood and returned. Sometimes, their behaviour was not recognised as play by the other children. Bateson (1972) coined the term 'metacommunication' to refer to the play signals and play faces

> The one thing that's always kept me from hating him is that he gets a glint in his eye. It's little telltale signs like that that make you pick up whether they are playing or whether they're actually really feeling something and really having a bad time. And I would say the more you get to know children the more time you spend with them that you pick up those things, little mannerisms or the way that they behave in different situations then that allows you to distinguish easier what they're actually going through, what they're actually doing, whether they are kind of freaking out or whether … because with him, I've seen him doing a shout, big shouty thing like that, acting all angry but then I've looked at him and noticed the glint and I'm thinking, "He's playing."

(for example, smiling, exaggerated movements, eyes sparkling) that denote behaviour as playing and therefore not 'for real'. The playworkers talked often of play breaking down through misreadings of metacommunications.

Many of the cues were verbal and direct; for two of the girls, often they would issue cues but not seem to expect a return, particularly with aggressive verbal cuing. Another girl would issue indirect, emotional cues (such as flouncing off when things did not go her way), and would become upset if these cues were not returned.

> A lot of times when he does that right in your face, he's laughing, and smiling, and he's playful. It's deliberate to see your reaction. And then he'll play it into a game if you start reacting.

Playworkers often described the boys as issuing "in your face, practically nose to nose, pushing button play cues". Whilst the playworkers understood this as a play cue, they found it uncomfortable and were concerned that other children may misunderstand it.

Frames:

This aspect provided the richest material for understanding the children and their play. Children's metacommunications (Bateson, 1972), the signals that send out the message "this is play," establish a frame within which the play can take place. The frame is largely psychological, and is essential for the players to understand that what is taking place within its boundaries is play and is therefore bounded by different rules, rituals and storylines from what takes place outside the frame. The frame sets the context for the play behaviour and separates it from what lies outside.

We can see parallels here with Sutton-Smith's (2003) idea of play being framed by the rules and rituals created through the secondary emotions in order to allow a relatively safe expression of the primary emotions, as discussed earlier.

In the playworkers' accounts of the ways that the children played, many children found it difficult to establish and maintain frames. Some would flit from one thing to another, often watching others playing rather than playing themselves. Others had difficulty recognising or respecting the frame, and would challenge the rules of the game, becoming angry if play did not go their way. There were links between this and problems with metacommunication described above.

Playworkers can play a particularly effective role in holding frames for children, as well as in helping to establish them in the first place or re-establish them when they rupture. This became a central tenet of the research leading to the conclusion that this was a significant aspect of the role of the playworker.

Narratives:

As already discussed, the key narratives that arose time and again were to do with power and identity. Some of this was to do with claiming territory, and positioning of individuals and crews within the local neighbourhood. These narratives would manifest themselves through oppositional behaviour (sometimes playful, sometimes not), wanting to control games with rules, throwing equipment, and tagging.

Two of the children were playing with ideas of sexual identity; interestingly, these were both from large families where they were the only child of their gender. For one child it was about his masculinity and sexual prowess, often displayed through misogynistic taunts. The other often engaged in phallic symbolic play and would goad the female staff with lesbian references. With this child, the sexualised play dissipated during the study, and the playworkers felt this was a clear example of resolution through playing out issues that were troubling her.

> Playworker: It's really good to have gone into this child like this because we didn't know how to deal with this at all when she first started with the whole lesbian stuff and we weren't sure if we were being too lenient or whether we should just let her have her time with it or how to deal with it.
>
> Researcher: The sex thing came up as the initial presenting characteristic when we first met her ages ago and that was the biggest thing about her and the more we talk about her the less important it is *(agreement)* and I kind of think that that's something she's sorting out through her play.

For one girl, her play often explored notions of her gender identity, including crushes on boys, and playing nurturing, caring and support roles in fantasy and role play games.

For two of the children who did not engage obviously in the range of pretend play types, it was more difficult to discern narratives. Themes of identity and power, sometimes expressed through anger, were evident with these children also.

2.1: The playwork offer

Given the above theorising on play and emotions and the rhetorics of power and identity, the role of the playworker becomes complex indeed.

Before this complexity is explored further, two key points need to be made here. The first is that both the play projects in this study are open access; in other words, the children choose to attend them. The bottom line is that if they keep coming, then it can be assumed that the play spaces offer them something they want and enjoy. The second is that it is essential to hold on to the big picture, the totality of what is on offer at these projects, rather than focus in on how playworkers respond to challenging behaviour as and when it arises. This takes us back to the opening statements about the role of the playworker being to provide an environment where children can play.

In recent times, the principle of "low intervention, high response" (NPFA *et al*, 2000) has sometimes been understood as meaning "stand back and do nothing proactive." The task of providing an environment that supports play is highly proactive and varies according to the setting, but will involve some aspect of creating both a physical environment and a culture and atmosphere where children feel they can play.

For the full time play centre, this can be developed over a long period of time. The space is exclusively used as a play space and has been in existence for many years. There are elements of the play space, for example, the play structures outside, that have given rise to a number of games and ways of playing that the children have developed themselves. These require little adult initiation, although adults are often asked to be involved in the play. In addition, there are resources and props that the children know are there and can use or ask for. The playworkers will often set play ideas in motion, either activities or themes, that the children may pick up on and develop in their own way. Rules, rituals and rites have evolved over time and the culture of the setting is well established (if at times challenged).

For the play in parks project, however, the picture is very different. Sessions are weekly during term time and take place in public parks. This raises a number of challenges for how to create both the physical environment and the atmosphere that supports playing. It necessitates, in the early days at least, a high level of proactive direction on the part of the playworkers, to establish relationships and customs, including organising games and leading activities. Over time, expectations and customs evolve and the children can begin to initiate their own games and playing, although there will still need to be a higher level of direction than in a full time play centre. The principles are the same, the practice very different.

The place of the playworker is key in this. As well as the proactive provision of props (physical and human resources, ideas and activities) to stimulate playing, the playworkers' responses to children are instrumental in the development of a culture that supports play. It is perhaps here that the playwork approach is most unique.

In the playworkers' stories of how they work with the children, corroborated by visits to the projects by the researcher, the children make constant demands on their time and attention. These children use playworkers as resources for their play, in a number of ways. Sturrock and Else's (1998) hierarchy of intervention provides a useful framework for exploring this, and is consistent with the principle of "low intervention, high response" (NPFA *et al*, 2000).

In the *Best Play* (NPFA *et al*, 2000) context, intervention is understood to be an intervention aimed at terminating or redirecting play, and is used only to avoid harm or injury. This in itself requires a judgement made on an understanding of play and risk. However, the interventions described by Sturrock and Else (1998) correspond to the *Best Play* concept of "response", since they are always in response to cues (direct and indirect) from the

children and the interventions are aimed at supporting, protecting or amplifying the play rather than terminating or redirecting it.

The hierarchy ranges from play maintenance (being aware of the play frame and preventing its disruption by others), through simple intervention (providing resources to support particular play frames), medial intervention (becoming involved in the playing to help establish or re-establish the rules and rituals so that the game can continue), to complex intervention (a deep involvement in the frame).

These interventions can happen in a number of ways, and do not need to be limited to direct and literal interventions. For example, the provision of resources may be as subtle as leaving something close by for the children to discover. Medial and complex intervention can be 'played'. For one child who frequently lost his temper if sporting games did not go his way, the playworker would challenge him to kick the ball as hard as could into a goal that she was defending, thus establishing a frame within which he could express his anger without recrimination or breakdown of the game. This could be understood as 'reframing' the anger within a play frame.

Bringing this kind of play and playwork analysis to the children's playing can help to set what playworkers often do intuitively within a discourse that has some basis in academic research. Often, playworkers may feel that a particular response may be effective, but are reticent about using it, or telling others that they use it, because it does not fit with the dominant current discourse on professional relationships with children and young people.

> Like last night when he was in my face and all this lot, it was like, "I'll get my dad to beat you up," I just ended up play fighting with him and I went, "Come on then, you be all tough, come on, come on," fighting and stuff and he was enjoying it, just me and him just like pretending to be arguing with each other and stuff, it ended up being a game. We were play fighting and he was really into it, laughing and laughing.

The episode opposite took place after the boy had been involved in a series of aggressive posturings with other boys that had not quite turned into a fight. The male playworker's response was to engage the boy in play fighting; in effect, he set up a frame within which the boy could play out without losing face. Such an approach recognises the value of physical contact and rough and tumble play, yet may be considered in some circles as inappropriate. Lewis (cited in Fettes, 2003) suggests a number of benefits for boys from this kind of playing, including building social bonds and developing self control.

Another example of this is a child ("P") whose play fighting frequently ended up with other children getting hurt. Such a scenario is very familiar to playworkers and they often have a ground rule of "no play fighting" because they report that it does frequently end up with a real fight. Yet Smith *et al* (2003:187) state that observational research shows "for most children, only around 1 per cent of play fights turn into real fights." However, children who are frequently rejected by social groups often have difficulty understanding the play signals accompanying play fighting and confuse the playful with the

real; Pellegrini (1988, cited in Smith *et al*, 2002) found that for this group of children, about a quarter of play fighting episodes turned into real fighting. In adolescence, the incidence of play fighting turning into real fighting is also increased. Smith *et al* (2002:236) identify two main causes for the transition from play fighting to real fighting: "honest mistakes" (where signals are misunderstood) and "cheating" (where "a child deliberately misuses the play convention to inflict hurt on the partner").

Perhaps one of the key reasons for playworkers not tolerating playfighting is that, as Pellegrini (2002:223) states "until rather recently, developmental psychologists have confused and conflated play fighting with aggression." There is some benefit to be drawn from considering alternative academic views of play fighting that point, in early and middle childhood and predominantly amongst boys, to its role in social competence and co-operative interaction rather than dominance; in adolescence there is a shift into its purpose in establishing and maintaining social dominance (Pellegrini, 2002).

Bringing this knowledge together with a stated purpose of playwork being to support children's play expressions, then it may be assumed that supporting play fighting might be an effective approach. However, those children who tend to display 'challenging behaviour' (or, perhaps, 'dysplay' in a playwork analysis drawn from Sturrock and Else, 1998), are likely to be the very ones that Pellegrini (1988) cites as having difficulty in maintaining the playful rules and rituals that play fighting demand.

Given this, what might a playwork response be? If the principle is that play fighting has its uses, yet that it may end up as real fighting for those children unable to sustain the frame, how might we use the idea of playworkers' interventions (Sturrock and Else, 1998) to resolve this dichotomy?

As we have seen, in one incident, the playworker used complex intervention, starting a play fight with the child in order to establish a frame and avert a real fight. For P, the playworkers decided to introduce a game of pillow fighting. They provided the pillows, they set the contest area (a beam) and the rules (for example, no hitting on certain parts of the body). Responding to a persistent cue from P (frequent engagement in play fighting), they established a frame within which the emotions of play fighting could be experienced and the social benefits could accrue, yet they were holding that frame through the rules so that the play could continue. What happened in this instance is that the other children began to join in because they felt that they were less likely to be hurt because the playworker was holding the play frame.

If play is understood to take place within a frame, a physical and psychological boundary, it is the rules of the game that help establish that boundary. Playworkers play a crucial 'holding' role here (Winnicott, 1971): the children know that they can call on the playworkers to intervene at any of these levels, in the knowledge that their intervention will enable the play to continue. Ironically, it is this confidence that can sometimes lead to what might be thought of as challenging behaviour. It is as if the children allow

themselves to step over the boundaries because they know that the playworkers are there to bring them back. Frequently, playworkers find themselves in the rather strange position of 'playing' the adult authoritative role within a play frame in order to re-establish it.

Playworkers recognise this paradox and wrestle with how heavily they should respond to behaviour that could be considered unacceptable. The extract below highlights how the playworkers reflected on this. They are talking about a girl ("T") who went through a phase of saying that the younger female staff indulged in lesbian threesomes, often with some graphic detail. The playworkers were not sure how to respond.

Playworker 1: And I'd say it's more of a test, it's more of a game with her, it's what we said about boundaries, you know.

Playworker 2: It seems like, she's not just saying it to be insulting to you, you can see that she's looking for a reaction and looking for how you deal with it as well. … whereas other kids would just go "Oh, you bitch," she tends to be more intelligent about it, looking at the responses

Playworker 1: So I think she does respond better to perhaps the three of us because she knows that she can hop over these boundaries a bit with us.

Researcher: So how do you respond then? How do you let her know that she can hop over the boundaries with you?

Playworker 1: Well I don't know. I mean a couple of times with me, I've had to intervene and say "I think this is going too far," you know the whole reference to the threesomes and stuff like that, I had to say, "Look, you know, it was a joke but now it's got boring," and just leave it at that. …

Playworker 1: She likes to shock and impress people. And also with the combination like with the puppets thing, with the symbolic play [reference to phallic symbols]… they wouldn't tolerate that in school, would they?

Researcher: So, what's the difference then? What's your relationship with her that says that she can do ...

Playworker 1: I don't know, I think because she knows that she can hop over these boundaries with us.

Playworker 2: It's not in a taking advantage kind of way I don't think.

Researcher: Perhaps it's a recognising that it's play

Playworker 2: Yeh, I think she's got a kind of appreciation that she can, that we let her …

It is clear that the children in the study value the adults, even though they may at times give them grief. Frequently the playworkers would tell of times when the children had sought them out and chatted to them about their lives.

2.2: Bringing a play and playwork analysis to behaviour

One of the aims of this evaluation was to bring a play and playwork analysis to the behaviour of the identified children. This has been both taxing and rewarding. As one playworker said:

> Can I say something at this point that I think will be helpful? It's something I want to share with the group as well. It's very difficult to sit down here and go through his stuff, because (a) it makes you question yourself a lot, ... which is a good thing … and (b) because you do actually realise things from doing these [play profiles]. I mean when I first started doing these I was really struggling with it, but the penny's dropped a bit for me now and it does change the way you look at things and the way you think about children and it's very emotional, it makes me feel very emotional. I think that's something that we need to acknowledge in order to keep this deciphering through all of this, flowing, because, you know, I'm saying this sort of like for my benefit as well. It does make you think.

All the playworkers found the play profiles particularly useful, and the play centre has adapted their monitoring form for the Children's Fund to include play profiling.

> It gives you the whole picture. And it gives you a chance to reflect and go into it a bit more deeply as well. And it does make you look at play rather than … like you were saying. I remember at the start you said we were all talking about it in a behavioural management way and that kind of format [play profiles] makes you look purely at their play and then you forget about whether they're classed as a naughty one or whatever and you're actually just looking at them and the way they play. And I think that makes a massive difference in how you treat them and work with them in the session.

Looking at the ways in which the children played, both when they were and when they were not displaying challenging behaviour, had a number of consequences for the playworkers:

Insight into the themes and emotions exercising the children:

Issues of power and identity came up time and again, albeit through very different manifestations and ways of experiencing power and identity.

Teams found that themes would emerge through the process of drawing up play profiles. One example was the girl who would consistently look for background supportive roles to play within the games, from being the nurse in a warfare game to being the organiser of a gym club. Or yet another where it was realised that two boys, who were aggressively marking their patch and asserting their power, were both quite creative and artistic and this led to graffiti and tagging with chalks and the collective development of a bigger graffiti project on the park.

These boys would also throw equipment indiscriminately, and use it to hit other children. The playworkers made a game of this, complete with rules, so that the boys had a frame and the other children wanted to join in because

they knew the playworkers were holding the frame. The playworker described this as "changing just a smidge" of how they do things.

Playworker: These two, we would always start a session giving them the benefit of the doubt. Because they're characters, cheeky, and when they're on form they're great to work with, you can run some jokes with them, they're a laugh to be around. But through this project I think more of that side of them has come out through us understanding better how and what they're doing, why they're doing it, different tools we can use to control that, definitely.

Researcher: Tools to control?

Playworker: Probably the wrong choice of words – when we need to, not in general, not to mould them into the people we want to be working with. When it kicks off, we've got better response methods through aspects like identifying play types and cuing behaviour and setting up stuff around that which could take their mind off the destructiveness and plough it into something which could be equally as destructive but in a controlled play frame.

How the playworkers felt and spoke about the children:

Playworker: There's behavioural problems that he's got all the way through.
Researcher: The behavioural problem is what?
Playworker: His behaviour is out of order, he's a troublesome child.

Once these themes had been identified and the focus had shifted to looking at how they played, this had an interesting effect on the way that the playworkers spoke about the children in the group discussions. When they first introduced the children, they would describe them as if they were professional projects to be worked on, either with great detachment, or with exasperation. Gradually, as they built up play pictures of the children, they seemed to warm to them: they could admit to finding them both difficult and great fun. It also helped to explain, but not excuse, some of the excesses of behaviour.

Researcher: Do you like her?
Playworker 1: Do I like her? I do, yes.
Playworker 2: She's really good fun.
Playworker 1: But when she's in one of her strops, you really can't do much. There was one time, and I think it was the time when she was storming off because one of the boys had turned her down, and she was out there ages and it was raining and I was trying to get her to come inside and she let herself get soaked wet through before she came in and I gave her a hair brush to sort her hair out and got her a change of T-shirt, you know, so we do have quite nice, you know, I sit down with her and talk about the boys, there's some bonding that goes on there, I put my arm round her, and we have conversations about life and love. So yeah, that's quite nice, we've got a bit of a connection.

It was recognised, too, that this change in how the playworkers felt towards the children would be picked up by them:

> I'd imagine that has an impact on them in a way because if we've gone from seeing them, I'm not saying that we all do, but seeing them as the naughty child or the challenging child to a child that is how they are, like they play in that way, then it's kind of in a way accepting them. And that's got to have an effect on them cos they're very intuitive and I imagine that they pick up on that.

A feeling that they had something to work with:

Although very hard to pin down, there was definitely a feeling that this gave the playworkers something to work with other than responding to the challenging behaviour when it arose. Once they had an understanding of how the children played, they could focus on supporting that play rather than on correcting the challenging behaviour. Group meetings would discuss possible approaches to supporting the play, ways of helping to establish frames or ways of returning cues. This gave a constructive sense of purpose and again diverted attention away from the 'problems' towards a more holistic perspective.

> Before doing this we could have the opinion that this child was just being naughty, you know, "pack it in, pack it in, pack it in, if you don't, well, leave the project." It's made me think about different approaches through understanding cuing behaviour and identifying frames that you can work on and work with, adapting games to more suit the needs. I've found it quite helpful in curbing that behaviour that was happening, it's been good to, rather than just saying, "stop that", and it coming to a head and a point where it just gets out of control. It hasn't always worked, you know, there's never an absolute, but definitely on more than a few occasions it has helped us to frame it a lot better.

However, this realisation at times led to almost ecstatic responses. The playworkers would sometimes turn up for meetings feeling as if they had solved all the problems after a particularly good play session with the children.

> Playworker: It's working for us, for everybody. We keep feeling that we need to be having some negatives because there's so many positives within our sessions! … so I do feel in terms of being successful in changing his behaviour and recording, in terms of that it's been one of the most exciting things.

Of course, nothing is that simple, and they would just as often arrive at meetings with tales of woe, saying they were right back to where they started.

More relaxed atmosphere:

As a direct consequence of feeling that they could work on supporting play, the playworkers said that they felt more relaxed, less on edge. This feeling may also have been due to a different understanding of challenging behaviour, inasmuch as it was no longer seen as a failure on the part of the playworker.

> Playworker 1: It makes you less stressed as well – like you're dealing with play you're not dealing with bad behaviour or challenging behaviour.
>
> Playworker 2: That's what makes play so amazing and so different as well, you know. I mean in schools it's always about how good you are or how you're behaving. This is nothing like that, it's really refreshing.

This in turn led to a more relaxed atmosphere in general at the setting. Two playworkers who had changed jobs during the research, but who visited the play centre regularly and returned for the final evaluation meeting, commented on how much lighter and calmer the atmosphere was on site. This was put down to less stress on the part of the playworkers (for a number of reasons, but this research project had contributed).

Generally speaking, the playworkers felt that bringing a play and playwork analysis to the children in this way helped them to see the child holistically, and to give them as playworkers useful information and tools they could use to support their playing.

3.1: Reflecting on playworker responses

Whilst the play profiles gave rich material for looking at the children and for identifying ways that playworkers could support their play, discussions led less often to playworkers considering their own responses to the children, using the Brawgs Continuum (Russell, 2005).

Nonetheless, there were several discussions on the continuum and much personal reflection of the playworkers' responses and place within the play frame.

The principle of aiming for a ludocentric response to the children, whilst recognising that at times responses would veer towards either didactic or chaotic, was accepted and the recognition of the range of responses as a continuum was felt to be helpful. Playworkers acknowledged that there were certain kinds of behaviours that would elicit strong emotional responses in them, and that these responses varied between team members.

Even if they are working from a didactic position, playworkers tried, when appropriate, to be playful.

> Playworker 1: On the park there's a high wall which looks over a few houses and drops down to a walkway. And on this side there's the park – there's a straight drop to mud, thorny bushes and the park. And they don't just walk along that, they bomb it like anything down that wall, they really really go.
> Playworker 2: They enjoy it
> Playworker 1: And they don't … we watch them sometimes, like for maybe a second or two, we watch them bomb along this wall and we think, "Oh, my god! Oh, my god!"
> Playworker 2: Mmm.
> Playworker 1: We don't shout out to them because then they're going to stop and fall, we wait until they stop themselves and then we go, "Oi, come on, if you're gonna fall, it's gonna hurt, we're not gonna catch you," and all that sort of playful

banter in a sense, cos if you make too much of a deal of it they're going do it even more. So it's like playful banter we use with them.
Researcher: Do they use the park when you're not there?
Playworker 1: Mmm
Researcher: And do you think they do it then?
Playworker 1: Possibly, yes
Playworker 2: Definitely
Researcher: Sounds like they're well practiced at it
Playworker 1: Yes, but when we see it
Researcher: It's your problem, not theirs! If they do it when you're not there, what's the difference for them when you are? But when you're there, somehow, suddenly, you're responsible, aren't you?
Playworker 1: Cos we're responsible for them on the park.

Playworkers do not enjoy the 'telling off' ritual they seem to have with some children:

Playworker 1: It's nice when every session during the month is awful apart from one, it's that one that lights up your month and you think, "Yeah, that was cool."
Researcher: Who is it awful for, though?
Playworker: For everybody. Man, it's just rubbish to be adults because the children, if we've got to shout, or if we pull P up once or twice, three, four, five or whatever, ten things per session, then the other children are going to think, "Oh, they're having a go at him a bit aren't they? Maybe if we kick off as well they'll have a go at us and then they'll get off his back."

Occasionally, some of the playworkers would recognise that their responses had perhaps veered towards the chaotic/ludic end of the continuum, with consequent problems. In one particular game of basketball with staff against the children, the way the playworkers talked about the game showed that, for one at least, winning was very important, although this was set against a balancing approach from the other members of the team and a justification of the approach. However, the fiercely competitive game gave rise to protestations of unfairness from the children who later reverted to their oppostional behaviour.

3.2: Talking playwork

Playworker: You try everything in the book, you try everything, day in, day out, you try and move them, and nothing seems to work, and I think what's good about this process is I do believe it's going to help us in these sorts of situations. I really do think this will help all of us.

Researcher: When you say you've tried everything in the book, you've tried everything in the book that's been written by the people out there. I think what we're trying to do is write our own book.

This extract from a transcript, towards the beginning of the study, encapsulates both their sense of exasperation and the aspirations for the study to find a particular, discrete playwork analysis of and response to challenging behaviour.

Feelings expressed at the start of the study also showed how some playworkers felt they were failing in some sense because they were unable to respond effectively to behaviour that disrupted the play of other children or threatened safety.

> I'm dealing with these children who I personally find incredibly challenging and at times I kind of go, "I don't know what to try next," but I should, because I'm a playworker. I should know how to do this!

This section addresses three key themes from the study regarding talking about playwork: the importance and value of talking to other playworkers, how we talk about our work to others and the development of a discrete language to describe what is unique about a playwork approach.

Talking to others:

All the playworkers appreciated the opportunity to talk about their work and to talk in such depth about individual children. The importance of this was acknowledged:

> Playworker: It's essential, cos it's the development of play, you know, everybody's experience is different. Remember, we don't have that much opportunity to chat with our colleagues. Like we were at New Thinking [the training course] and I was bouncing things off New Thinking to do with children in order to put into practice.
>
> Researcher: What you're saying is that playworkers have got to have time to talk to other playworkers about what's going on.
>
> Playworker: That's the case. And not even just the ones that we're around … sharing experiences do help... But it needs to be done more often and this is why I appreciate especially our work with the play centre team, cos it's good to hear some feedback.

There was a suggestion that the group discussions were therapeutic for the playworkers themselves, from helping them to understand and feel better about their work, through to encouraging critical analysis:

> It's a form of counselling. I used to look forward, from when we had our meetings, to going and putting it into practice and then reflecting on it, through my eyes and the team's eyes to see how I behaved and see if I could have done something different. I was critically analysing more than I was previously. It helped me a lot to change my ways. I stand back and observe a lot more, watching how they play.

In addition, both teams of playworkers felt that the process of participating in the research had had a significant and beneficial impact on the way they worked as a team. Team analyses of children and of reflecting on their own responses had led t a better understanding of how each playworker works, and who might be best positioned to respond to specific children. Benefit was also felt in terms of an awareness of what was happening during sessions.

> It can be a bonding thing as well for the team, I think. Cos you're looking at different children in a way …, then it sort of bonds you as a team, as in you know more about the strengths of your team and what, not what we can cope with but how they can deal with the situations.

> When you're actually doing your work, we're not doing it as a group of playworkers, you know, one of us will be up there with them, I might be in the craft room with one of them, somebody might be doing an activity in the main hall, and it's this process of continually coming back and analysing it and going through it with a fine toothcomb and sort of noticing what other people spotted when we weren't looking and things like that. It's definitely beneficial for the practicalities of working as a playworker, working as a team.

The play projects also valued working with each other. The projects had many differences and many similarities in the ways that they worked, and this allowed for an open sharing of thoughts and ideas about the children that were brought to the meetings.

Telling it how it is:

One of the aspects of their work that some of the playworkers found difficult was describing how they used playfulness and humour in their relationships with the children. It seemed almost as if some of the playworkers felt they had to describe their work in serious and worthy ways. In one meeting, we were talking about a boy who appeared himself to be very serious, struggling with anger management, asking for time out, desperately seeking adult approval through showing how he could control his anger and act with responsibility. It took much probing for the playworker to start to describe how she might "muck about" with this child:

> Researcher: And the way that you talk about it is terribly, terribly serious. But I know that you play with them.
>
> Playworker 1: I become a child, that's what I do
>
> Researcher: Yes, and a lot of that is mucking about, isn't it,
>
> Playworker: Yeah, I'm good at that
>
> Researcher: Because that's what I'm trying to get at. So if you muck about with this child, how do you muck about with him? What kind of mucking about do you know works with him?
>
> Playworker: Chatting, telling jokes that I'm no good at, forgetting the punchline, if we're cooking putting the stuff we're supposed to be making on his face, just stupid stuff. But that's fun. I love it and he quite likes it cos otherwise he wouldn't do it back to me.
>
> Researcher: You'd never know you do that from what you've written there
>
> Playworker: I know!

A discrete playwork language:

"If we spoke a different language,
we would perceive a somewhat different world."
(Wittgenstein)

The approaches used in the study required the playworkers not only to become familiar with new ways of seeing, but to achieve that through new ways of talking, through a new language.

This was not just to make things hard for them. The anti-jargon lobby will always clamour for plain language. However, if the words with which we are familiar are overladen with meaning from use in other areas of work with children and young people, then we need to develop our own.

The language provided a frame for us to discuss what a discrete playwork analysis and response might be. Although some of the playworkers did initially struggle with this, they appreciated its value and soon became familiar with the concepts. Once this happened, discussions moved on to a new level.

> The other thing I would say about what should come from this study is [it is] unbelievably relevant to your practice. And things like play types aren't just theory, they are present. And the things that help you deal with those behaviours and those types of play better is an understanding of them and being able to recognise them. So things like observations and knowing about the play types have made an enormous difference to the way that I look at play and the way that I practice. And the fact that everyone had been on the course made discussions more intelligent, on a much deeper level than they were before. I think it's made a massive difference.

Conclusions

It is clear from the discussions and the playworkers' evaluations that they have valued the study and that they feel it has had a significant impact on their practice. The concept of framing became such a central tenet to the study that it provides itself the frame for these final conclusions.

What the study achieved, in a sense, was a three-fold reframing:

- reframing challenging behaviour;
- reframing playwork;
- reframing play.

Reframing challenging behaviour

In their feedback, the playworkers said that looking at the whole child, understanding how they played, allowed them to reframe their perception of challenging behaviour. It also allowed them to find ways to support that child to play. Overall, this led to less stress for the playworkers and a more relaxed atmosphere during sessions. It also enabled them to prepare for particular children and to respond in a way that supported play. For many of the children (not all), this did also lead to a reduction in the extremes and frequency of behaviour that did require a corrective intervention.

Reframing playwork

The playworkers felt that the concepts and language used were difficult, but over time they did become more familiar with them and found that they enabled them to discuss their work in terms of supporting play rather than managing behaviour. They felt that the concepts validated the ways that they were already working, providing a theoretical foundation for a playwork approach. This gave them more confidence in the value of their work. Both teams of playworkers now reflect more on their playwork, both before and after sessions, discussing how to support particular children, and are confident that this change will continue. The approach is applicable to all children, indeed is perhaps easier to apply to those not presenting such extremes of challenging behaviour.

Reframing play

Sometimes, the power and identity narratives the children were trying to express in ways that prevented others from playing or threatened safety could actually be reframed by the playworkers. It did not always work, but often enough to add it to the repertoire of playwork responses.

Playwork as a complementary service

Returning to the aspirations laid out in Nottingham's Children and Young People's Plan (Nottingham Integrated Children's Services, 2006, draft), it is possible to show that the kind of playwork described in this study can contribute significantly to the health, both emotional and physical, of the children attending.

Whilst it is important to recognise that children have a right "to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child" (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989) and that this should rightly sit under a heading of enjoyment, recognition of the potential therapeutic benefits of the approach described here is also due.

A recent report into therapeutic approaches used for children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Nottingham's Learning Support Units (Becker, 2004) places play therapy in the top five valued approaches by LSU managers. The approach described in this research project is not play therapy; however, it could be regarded as therapeutic. In this way, play settings can contribute to and complement therapeutic services for these children in non-specialist, non-stigmatised settings that the children choose to attend.

Finally, the external evaluation of Nottingham Children's Fund (Dearden *et al*, 2004:12) identifies the characteristics of projects that are of therapeutic value, and these characteristics can be seen in abundance in the play projects:

> *Evidence from elsewhere suggests that there are shared characteristics of all these projects that are likely to have*

produced the beneficial aspects experienced by children, parents and other stakeholders (and, thus, which contribute to making the projects 'work'). These are: time and space; the building of relationships and trust between children and project workers who care and who are supportive; a 'safe' environment with its own boundaries and sometimes rules; activities that motivate and engage children, and some parents; children's direct involvement and engagement with projects; and respect for the views of children and parents (Becker, 2004). These shared characteristics are known to have 'therapeutic' value and will contribute to the way that projects are positively perceived by all parties.

Next steps

The recommendations arising from this small scale study were drawn up in discussions with Nottingham City Council's Play Service and focus on the ways in which this approach can be rolled out across the whole play service and potentially beyond. Further research on playwork approaches is also planned.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Brawgs continuum

External	**Didactic**	**Ludocentric**	**Chaotic**
Internal	**Non-Ludic**	**Paraludic**	**Ludic**
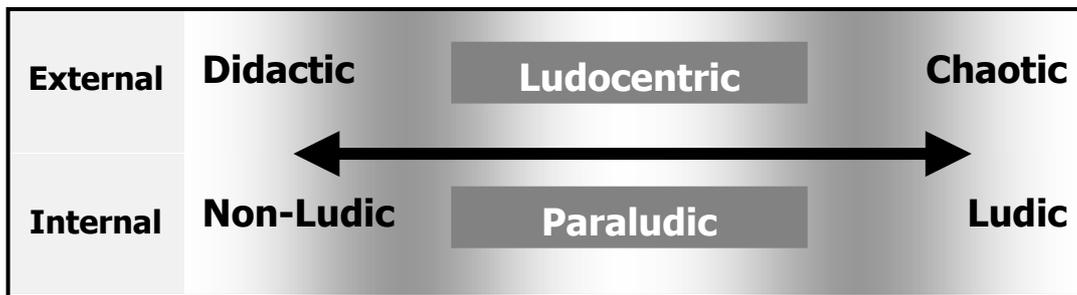
This continuum provides a way of considering our responses to children at play. Playworkers will operate at different points along the continuum depending on a number of variables including context, personal beliefs and values, their relationship with individual children, their perception of the expectations of others, etc. There is an assumption that playworkers should aim for the middle of the continuum as often as possible, recognising there will be times when they veer towards either end.

External: This upper dimension of the continuum represents the external behaviour of the playworker towards the child. This can be at any point along the continuum from didactic, through ludocentric to chaotic.

Didactic: This approach to playwork rests on the belief that playworker interventions can help children to learn specific things. For example, that playing football helps children to develop physical skill, co-ordination and prowess, or playing in the home corner helps practice skills needed later in adult life. This approach also expects the playworker to intervene in situations where the child's behaviour is considered too risky or unacceptable in other ways, to teach children how to behave. This is an 'outcomes' approach, assuming that particular inputs (activities, guidance and teaching on the part of the playworker) leads to specific outcomes (developing skills and understanding, behaviour improvement, etc.). There are times when such an approach is appropriate, but this should not be the dominant position.

Ludocentric: This approach recognises that play is a process by which children can gain an understanding of who they are and how they relate to their worlds. It recognises that play behaviour is not 'real' behaviour, and that the symbolic frame of playing allows for playing through issues that the child wishes to understand or come to terms with. Adult 'teaching' in this context reduces the benefit from the adaptive and symbolic process of playing when it is under the control of the child.

Chaotic: If the didactic extreme of the continuum represents order and predictability, this end represents unpredictability, neglect and unprofessional behaviour on the part of the playworker. The play setting may have erratic

opening times, equipment may be in poor repair, resources limited, and playworker responses will be unpredictable and based on how the playworker feels that day.

Internal: This lower dimension of the continuum represents the internal, emotional response of the playworker towards the child. In order to understand (and perhaps manage) our behavioural responses, we need to recognise that we have emotional responses to children's play, which stem from our own childhood experiences and our current values and beliefs. These can vary depending on context and can be at any point along the continuum from non-ludic, through paraludic to ludic.

Non-ludic: Our emotional response here is to feel that our adult role is to teach and guide young children. It is usually a response to reading children's playing literally rather than symbolically. There are times, of course, when such a response is appropriate, as with a didactic external response.

Paraludic: Our emotional response here is to recognise the play expressions of the children as symbolic (i.e. not to read the behaviour literally) and, if we are directly involved, to enter into this play frame with the children in order to support the expression of the symbolic material. This point of the continuum also requires the playworker to be able to stand apart from their own involvement in the play frame, so that there own playing does not dominate that of the child/ren.

Ludic: Here, the emotional response of the playworker focuses on their own needs rather than those of the child/ren. They may have a strong emotional reaction to the child/ren and respond emotionally and unpredictably. They may become so involved in the play frame that their own play needs dominate.

Alignment: The external and internal dimensions can be perfectly aligned (that is, didactic and non-ludic, ludocentric and paraludic, or chaotic and ludic), or they may be unaligned (for example, the emotional response may be chaotic but the behavioural one didactic, bringing the power of the adult to bear on a situation that is uncomfortable for the adult; or non-ludic and ludocentric, where the playworker recognises they need to perhaps trust more in the child rather than always be in control).

The final thing to stress here is that there will be times when a non-ludic/didactic response is appropriate: I am not saying that playworkers always operate in the middle. We need to recognise that the relationship between children and playworkers is complex and will vary, it is in constant dynamic movement along points on the continuum. Generally speaking, however, the uniqueness of playwork is that playworkers aim to be towards the centre of the continuum as often as possible.

Wendy Russell
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