



WHAT DO WE REALLY MEAN BY PLAY?

by Felicity Dewsbery

When I started digging into the literature for my review, I thought I had a fair idea of what “play” was. But very quickly I realised—it’s not that simple. The word “play” is everywhere and means so many different things. We go to see a play at the theatre. Children play games like Cluedo or Minecraft on a PlayStation.

Footballers play football, musicians play music. Practitioners in early years settings talk about water play, rough and tumble play, pretend play, manipulative play, guided play... and now, digital play. And then there’s therapeutic play, recognised by child psychotherapists such as Klein, Anna Freud, and Lowenfeld, where play is not just fun but a tool for healing.

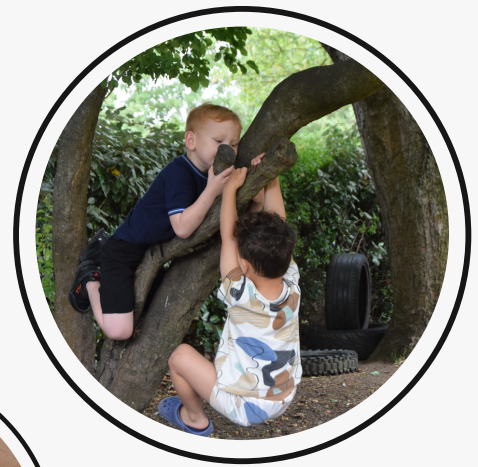
So where do we even begin with a definition?

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PLAY FROM THE VERY BEGINNING

Some argue that play starts even before birth. Bustato (2014) describes play as beginning in the womb, through the dialogue between mother and child. Reddy (2008) noticed that babies as young as twelve weeks show playfulness—teasing, laughing, and engaging in little “dances” of delight with their caregiver. Stern (1985) puts it beautifully: play can only happen when we feel safe, relaxed, and free from pressing needs.



MORE THAN JUST FUN—A CULTURAL FORCE

Play is often dismissed as frivolous, but historically it's been seen as the very foundation of culture. Baldwin (1906) called it the root of culture, while Turner (1982) reminded us that “the future of childhood is the present” when speaking of the seriousness of play. Music (2017) suggests we may never fully understand the function of play, but what we do know is this: animals and children deprived of play are disadvantaged. Gopnik (2016) adds that play only emerges when basic needs are met—highlighting how essential it is, but also how fragile. And the benefits? Research has linked play to emotional regulation (Berk et al, 2013), self-regulation (Panksepp's work with rats, 2003; 2011), and even brain organisation (Schoore, 1994).

PLAY AS SYMBOL AND EXPRESSION

For Klein (1926), children's play is never just play. It symbolically expresses their wishes, anxieties, and experiences. Winnicott (1971) agreed, linking play with symbolising and creativity—ways in which children explore the gap between inner and outer reality. Segal (1957) went further, describing symbol formation as a lifelong process of “bringing together and integrating” past and present, inner and outer worlds.

Freud's famous cotton reel observation illustrates this well. His grandson, just 18 months old, invented a game of throwing and retrieving a reel. Freud believed the game helped the child process his mother's absence: staging his own little drama of loss and return. Alvarez (1992) later reflected that while Freud's ideas help us understand play as a way of coping with painful reality, some children might use play in the opposite way—to create experiences of pleasure, security, and hope when those are otherwise missing.

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PLAY, LOSS, AND GROWTH

Segal argued that symbols in play help children tolerate and overcome loss. Freud's grandson may have been rehearsing the painful absence of his mother, but the act of repeating it allowed him to endure and slowly integrate the experience. In this sense, play requires children to flirt with anxiety, pain, and curiosity in order to learn.

Fonagy and Target (1996) showed that even very young children know that play is different from reality—they can hold that distinction. Bustato (2014) described play as a child's way of telling the story of their internal relationships. And Music (2017) reminds us that play can reveal much about a child's state of mind.

But what happens when play isn't possible? Repacholi et al (2014) found that children who are anxious or under stress struggle to play. Charles (2019) echoed this: stress, deprivation, and trauma interfere not only with play but with the ability to learn.

SO... WHAT IS PLAY?

The more I read, the more I realised that play is not one thing—it's a spectrum, a process, a language, and a coping mechanism. It's cultural, relational, biological, and symbolic. It helps us learn, connect, heal, and grow.

Perhaps that's why play resists easy definition. Its meaning changes depending on whether we're looking through the eyes of a psychologist, a neuroscientist, a parent, or a child. But what seems constant is this: play matters. Whether we see it as culture, therapy, or survival, play is at the heart of what it means to be human.

