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What do children need from playwork in the time of COVID-19? A reflection on playwork practice in a pandemic.

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Due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak's effect on our world and its continuing kaleidoscopic effects on our lives, the world has changed and is set to change further still. As a playwork practitioner, the most important aspect of practice is the wellbeing of the children under my influence and never more so than during this time of COVID-19. Play is vital to a child's welfare, a basic right to which they are entitled (in reference to Article 31 from The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), 1989). However, play is also a fundamental part of human life. It enables the child's full potential and a sense of self and its form develops and changes (Brown, 2003; Huizinga, 1949). Children need playwork practice to facilitate and advocate this right to play (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group (PPSG), 2005; UNICEF, 1989).

Before the COVID-19 outbreak I worked for a charitable organisation's respite programme for children and young people who have special educational needs and/or disability as a play organiser and a volunteer play session worker for a domestic abuse support service. Due to the severity of the COVID-19 impact and its possible long-term implications to playwork practice, now is the time to start reflecting on what it means for the discipline. A possible starting point may be through re-evaluating and re-approaching playwork practice in line with the restrictions throughout the lockdown period.

I am particularly interested in the therapeutic aspect of play and the importance of the child's voice through play, as my playwork originated from direct work while working with children in children's protection. Brown & Webb (2005) described playwork on a basic level as being about the removal of barriers to play and enabling children to play by providing play environments and/or play opportunities. This can provide a therapeutic space and the playwork practice in this space can provide a form of therapeutic intervention (Sturrock & Else, 1998). This need for play in children's lives is especially important in a time of global uncertainty, as play provides children a way of understanding their context and has therapeutic aspects (Axline, 1964; Sturrock & Else, 1998). During crises such as war and in abused and traumatised children, playwork practice can be therapeutic and support children to have a positive change in their social skills, recovering some of their physical and intelligence faculties (Brown & Webb, 2005; Feldman, 2019). However, this definition of playwork provides a complex and problematic dichotomy on how to approach playwork during a crisis, where physical contact and personal interactions are restricted.

A central part of the playwork practitioner's philosophy is the child's agency. This is unlike many other professionals working with children, and is often the central point

to their playwork practice (Brown, 2003). This article will start here too by considering how the child's voice can be heard in this current pandemic. It will go on to reflect on how various aspects of playwork theory and practice can support the child through this pandemic.

Child's voice

Previous pandemics and epidemics can provide useful information on what is needed from playwork in COVID-19. Playwork practice can connect research, practice and policy previously used to meet the play needs of the children and young people (Whitebread et al, 2012). First and foremost is hearing and addressing the voice of the child in terms of their needs at the present time. A repeated number of failures are associated with the response to the previous pandemic; Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Whilst the authorities and experts ensured pandemic plans were followed, they on the whole overlooked children's viewpoints and needs. Children's emotional turmoil, communication challenges and psychosocial issues related to the isolation for children patients with SARS were often neglected (Koller et al, 2006a, 2006b).

Playwork practice is in a unique position here as an essential tool, as playwork provides a 'voice' of the child in the adult world (King & Newstead, 2018), along with means of enabling the child's self-awareness and self-expression (Axline, 1964). Specific research looking at the support playwork could provide for children now during this COVID-19 pandemic, avoiding the problems highlighted by Koller et al (2006a, 2006b), would provide us with comparable information on children's emotions, communication challenges and psychosocial issues through their experiences and perspective.

An equally significant aspect is the type of dialogue that is needed with our children and young people. It could be argued that historically adults have chosen to communicate with children in a way so as to mask the horrors, especially with regards to medical realities (Lantos, 1996). However, Koller and colleagues listened to such child (a 9-year-old patient with SARS) who requested "To not tell children any lies about SARS. Tell them straightforward what is going to happen, but be gentle on them" (Koller et al., 2010, Online version). Undoubtedly, we have to tell the truth. However, the skill in this dialogue is the approach and being gentle. Allowing these discussions to be held through play, in roleplays, told through play and using play to help children with their uncertainty. When giving children COVID-19 information, there is a balance needed between playfulness, being informative and honesty.

The role of playfulness in COVID-19

By the end of the first week of lockdown I had heard all three of my children learn the right pronunciation of the virus normally in a sing-song tone and acting out various COVID-19 role plays. The Atlantic (Cray, 2020) reflected on just this aspect, as children in the United States started to play 'social-distancing tag' and play CPR after hearing people's breathing was affected by the virus. So why is playfulness important? For children, play helps them make sense of a confusing or scary new reality, helps their understanding and ability to find some solace in this (Axline, 1964). Play gives children the space to explore these new feelings and subsequently to control them (Axline, 1964). For example, when a child first learns about the nature of death, he/she may start forming role play situations that include death within them.

In addition to children's use of play to make sense of COVID-19, adults have created a wide variety of resources including handwashing songs, children's television programmes, weblinks and even an illustrated book courtesy of the Gruffalo's illustrator, Axel Scheffler, helping to inform children on COVID-19 (Scheffler, 2020). This has all helped to inform children about the virus and has allowed and maintained that playful approach. Playwork also has a very useful theoretical model which allows children to follow their own interests and play themes (even those that adults might consider macabre). Sturrock & Else's (1998) Play Cycle theory models the child's flow of play; starting with play cue (the child instigates play) and others' play return, developing into the full flow of play. The model demonstrates to the playwork practitioner that in such play, it is vital the adult involved does not take over the play. The child should play according to their own agenda and the playwork practitioner should respond to the child's play cue (if invited) in order to allow the child to follow that full flow of the play cycle (Sturrock & Else, 1998; King & Sturrock, 2019).

Response

The above reflections give us a building block for what children need from our playwork practice during COVID19; an open and gentle dialogue with a playful interactive approach. Nevertheless, there remains a problem. What means can playwork practice provide at a time of social distancing? Returning to the child's voice, this time a 14-year-old female patient with SARS, "we need to have a little kit... there is a little bit of colouring paper or a little craft to do like those bags that the school donated... You get bored of watching movies and playing with stuffed animals. They need a little kit" (Koller et al., 2010, Online version).

As the respite programme clubs sessions are temporarily closed along with the schools, staff at our setting started to discuss how work was going to proceed. One suggestion was to create an activity pack which could then be emailed to the families. Our activity pack became a fortnightly release, full of easy-to-reproduce art, craft, messy play, cooking, learning fun, music, exercise activities and ended with an information section with an approved (and approach consistent) list of resources explaining COVID-19. The activities all encouraged the use of easy to find equipment from the home, and many activities are based on the use of loose parts

(Nicholson, 1971) at home, such as making musical instruments and art with recycled materials in their design such as dens and obstacle courses.

The regularity of the fortnightly activity pack deliveries gave us the means to explore a range of different activities from a playwork perspective. Playwork practice often gives great importance to the child's compound flexibility, where the flexibility and adaptability of the play environment enables the child to develop their own flexibility/adaptability (Brown, 2003). These activities help provide the playwork practitioner with the means to support the child through an activity within a space for this to happen. Compound flexibility could be argued to have even more importance at a time when everyone is having to adapt and be flexible to life in lockdown or even return to normal afterwards. Playwork can support compound flexibility within its practice even at a distance.

Supporting children's rights

The playwork approach has the means to support children's rights, specifically; the right to give your opinion (article 12), the right to get information important to your well-being (article 17), and the right to develop our own talents and abilities (article 29 from UNICEF, 1989). These rights and values are especially pertinent during social distancing as they are difficult to address when direct contact is restricted. A range of different activities gives us a resource which could support different abilities and interests. Through the staff's extensive knowledge of the children's interests, along with the family's feedback, we were able to compile a comprehensive list of individual topics to be covered in our chosen activities. These activities also needed to encourage the child's voice and their creative outlay through our playwork practice by the means of interactive activities, such as artwork submissions, and hearing their voices through COVID-19 time capsule activities that advocate their sense of self. Children's voices could also be heard through specific activities that examine important social issues such as diversity and how to get your opinion heard through awareness activities, and to get information and resources important for their well-being to them.

Interaction

It could be argued that at a time of social isolation that maintaining this sense of community is fundamental to an individual's wellbeing and to providing a play environment and opportunities (Algren, et al, 2020; Brown & Webb, 2005; UNICEF, 1989). Play projects can provide a significant increase in "a sense of community ownership" and "promot[ing] social interaction" for a child and their neighbours (Barracough, Bennington and Green, 2004, p.2). Interaction through play promotes a sense of ownership and being part of a community in line with a child's right to have an active participation in their community, namely here their play-space community (article 23 from UNICEF, 1989).

To make this environment, share the children's voices and their creative outlay we asked the children and young people at home to interact with us as their play-space community in a wide range of ways; for example, designing the artwork for the activity pack's covers, competitions, asking them to send in their time capsule for displays in the clubs after the lockdown, along with hand painted rainbows, and numerous other artworks creations. One activity was to make their own lockdown playlist to share with their friends and family, to promote self-identity and friendships and play return within the group. All these contributions were to be included in future activity packs and to be viewed by their play-space community, further facilitating this sense of community at a time of distance (Rovai, 2002).

Wellbeing

Recognising the need to support home-schooling children, resources have become widely distributed by the government, schools, childcare services, YouTube, charity organisations and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) via social media. COVID-19-time capsules were the latest activity to be sent to the children often as part of schools' curriculum subject Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). This activity gave the children and young people time to reflect, along with being mindful that it was a period of time with an end date, and also looking to the future, with activities asking them to imagine themselves in the future reflecting back on this time. Many of the time capsules had colour-in sections and playful designs to make them approachable and to work for a wide age range, using playfulness to aid positive wellbeing. This need for positive emotional wellbeing can be addressed through similar playwork activities promoting resilience, mindfulness, emotional recognition and positive thinking activities and approaches. Activities ranged from asking the child how they could be kind to themselves, creating a body map comprised of their emotions and making worry dolls. Through such playful activities, children can be introduced to their own management of their emotional wellbeing (Siegal, 2020; Siegal & Bryson, 2011).

As a result, we are incorporating these facets of play into the activity packs too. Given that many parents are receiving work from their schools, it was important to make the playwork activities centred around introducing the process of play through suggested role plays and craft instructions, being playful with messy play activities and staying clear of being yet another thing that a parent feels they need to do. As a playwork practitioner and the makers of the activity pack we must 'support and facilitate the play process' in line with the Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005). Therefore it has to be fun and it is play: even though the adult may need to set it up it is then child-led and free flowing, complementing the Playwork Principles with the child's stage in the process of play.

Next steps

Given the changes to playwork practice since the outbreak of COVID-19, it is quite predictable that there will be a number of possible physical and practical long-term

consequences of this pandemic on playwork; such as additional risk assessments on logistics for social distancing, self-care and hygiene, restrictions on the numbers allowed for play sessions and the sharing of physical resources between children. There may also be potential safeguarding issues arising from long-term self-isolation, with domestic violence and child protection incidences on the rise (Bradbury-Jones, 2020; Usher et al., 2020). Subsequently, there are likely implications for direct play; with the restrictions on messy play or/and sensory play, discussions and role-play about COVID-19, play processes and a promotion of remote wellbeing learning/activities. There is a need to develop a robust approach to playwork practice that works at a distance. To know what technology works, how it works and if it has the right positive outcomes for the children and young people. This would have implications not only for possible playwork settings during the COVID-19 pandemic but for supporting children in environments that are difficult to reach whether through disease or war.

After the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD), UNICEF trained survivors in structuring play activities to work with children in communities along with psychological first aid and basic counselling skills (Bissell, 2016). UNICEF worked with the government in Liberia to come up with these strategies and promote the importance of psychosocial and mental health support. After COVID-19 we will have to listen to our children and young people we are working with to gauge their physical and emotional wellbeing. Playwork practice can support children in this area by enabling the child's voice to be heard. At the same time, we will need gauge their satisfaction from and their ability to undertake the process of play, for although play is a natural activity, it has been shown that trauma can have an adverse impact on the child's play drive (Obradovic et al, 1993; Malchiodi, 2015). Therefore, there might be a need to engage children, particularly those who are vulnerable, with more purposeful play activities as shown in Liberia as a result of the EVD after normal playwork practice resumes. Playwork practice will have to be flexible and open in order to support the child's individual needs during and after this pandemic. However, as this article has discussed, the playwork philosophy is one that lends itself perfectly to this kind of support for the child.

Although we are able to examine how playwork practice has been changed by previous epidemics and pandemics and what children needed as a result of these, we still have a lack of clarity on what the exact consequences of COVID-19 will be. Experts have already come out to push for more focus on play when children return to school in order to support their emotional wellbeing and the impact of self-isolation (Weale, 2020). There is research starting to track the specific impact on COVID-19 on children and young people's mental health through this pandemic, such as the University of Oxford's (2020) survey called Co-SPACE (COVID-19) (Supporting Parents, Adolescent, and Children in Epidemics). This will hopefully provide evidence-based research on how to support the children and young people we work with. Playwork practice could use this evidence-based research to gain a greater insight into the areas that might be raised or need support with the children in the play environment, in a similar vein to how Koller et al's (2006a, 2006b) study was used to support their children in the SARS epidemic by gaining the children's

perspectives. Specific research looking at children's needs that can be met with the support of playwork practice would provide vital information in order to support our young people.

Moreover, playwork practice in the time of COVID-19 can remove barriers to play and enable children with play environments and/or opportunities. This is obviously more difficult at a distance, but through practice, reflection, flexibility and creativity, playwork can help support families and communities to create this at home and within the child's own compound flexibility (Brown, 2003). Playwork practitioners can also provide advocacy for children's right and need to play, and to facilitate their voices to be heard. When returning to direct contact, the playwork practitioner must have an awareness of the process of play and its therapeutic benefits for maintaining wellbeing for all.

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