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### Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgements The author would like to thank Dr Wendy Russell (University of Gloucestershire) for her time, consideration and knowledge as I wrote this paper and Associate Professor Jennifer Cartmel (Griffith University) for always encouraging my ramblings to find their way to paper.

## **A Playworker's Musings on the Perceptions and Importance of 'Mess' in a Play Space.**

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## **Abstract**

The aesthetics of any given play environment is often subject to immense scrutiny, often at the behest of adult agendas. This paper will, from a playwork practitioner's perspective, discuss how aspects of perceptive mess in a play space positively affect play, the physical opportunities for children, their wellbeing, sense of belonging and their ability to create a sense of order as they see it. This will be juxtaposed against the situations in which children find themselves, by adult design, that paradoxically have the opposite effect. The author has drawn heavily from aspects of playwork theory and practice in the development of and discussion of these ideas with the goal of giving motivation to adults to revise their perspectives and perceptions of space and opportunity.

**Keywords:** *Play; Playwork; Playground; Loose parts; Wellbeing; Physical environment*

## **A Playworker's Musings on the Perceptions and Importance of 'Mess' in a Play Space.**

A playwork practitioner has a role in supporting children in the creation of a space where they can play (PPSG, 2005). A comment I often hear when talking about the spaces in which I work, primarily adventure playgrounds richly resourced with loose parts, is "what's with the mess?" and even questions like "we like what you do, but can we do it without the mess?" Not an unreasonable question as, particularly without the context of children at play, these spaces can represent a junkyard (Gorrie, 2021). This raises some really interesting points about the seemingly most *unintentional* (yet always evident) element of a playwork-managed loose parts setting or adventure playground. In contrast to these perceptions, the author suggests that 'the mess' is one the most important and *intentional* aspects of the whole play space available to children. From a purely Playwork Principles (PPSG, 2005) perspective, one can easily default to principle 4: *For playworkers, the play process takes precedence and playworkers act as advocates for play when engaging with adult led agendas.* This principle allows a playwork provisioner to reflect and ask themselves, "whose agenda calls for a tidy setting?" and quickly deduce it is not the child's. Thus, a playwork practitioner can easily rationalise that the play process is the agenda, and if the play process is a messy process, so be it!

## The Child's Imprint

The child's imprint, in the context of a play setting, is a term we use to describe very obvious traces left behind in a space that indicate "this space is for and inhabited by children". These traces are easily homed in on by children feeding into the metaludic state and cause the space to be far more conducive to sparking play cues and receiving play returns (Sturrock & Else, 1998). Adults often try to replicate this ludic appeal for children with gawdy features, mainstay apparatuses (slide, swing, monkey bars) and loud primary colours, ironically the colours shown to be less favourable as play cues to school aged children (M. Armitage, personal communication, August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021). Through a playwork lens, I often see this imprint where children frequent and play in the relics of previous play frames, the left-over loose parts, the scrapings on the sand and dirt, the puddle of mud strewn with leaves and seeds, the obviously worn patch of dirt under a hedge. Juxtapose this with the obvious lack of feasible relics on fixed cold metal, rubber matting or asphalt and I get an insight into how a place, built for children, can be devoid of the child's imprint.

To articulate the idea behind 'the child's imprint', I consider the idea of *affordance theory* (Gibson, 1979) and its relation to play and play spaces. According to affordance theory, children perceive the properties of the environment in terms of its functionality and playability, subject to children's very unique and varied needs and preferences. How does one create a play space that meets the needs of a myriad of ages, interests, life

experiences, pleasures and anxieties of each child? In short, playwork practitioners make the space 'nothing', with tremendous potential, so that it might become anything. Nicholson (1971, p. 30) gives direct insight into this concept in his theory of loose parts...

"In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it"

Thus, what an untrained adult eye may perceive as a plethora of junk, strewn around at random, is actually an environment rich with potential, lacking limitations and, in short, offering affordances with which children can engage and create worlds. From a playwork perspective of prioritising play over adult agendas, it certainly helps when the affordance given by the physical space, and what it suggests to the children, is met by affordance in how the children are able to engage with and actualize within the physical space, without being over governed by adults (PPSG, 2005; Kytta, 2004). This is an issue of practice for adults working with children, especially if they see 'mess' as something needing to be ordered and controlled, because it diminishes the likelihood they will offer a space with genuine positive affordances due to its physical makeup and their own practice.

### **Fear of Failure**

It is easy as an adult to patronise childhood as a carefree, laid-back period of little responsibility. However, children, due to external attribution, are increasingly placing themselves in high stakes scenarios,

psychologically at least, and this situation is often unknowingly, or by well-meaning actions, exacerbated by adult influence. To use an Australian example, consider The National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) testing. On one hand, The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) assure us that this test is in the interest of data collection and is not predicated on the premise of naming and shaming schools (Howell, 2015). On the other hand, schools often use the data to promote academic success (sometimes even excluding low performing students from participation). On the MySchool website, where the data are openly displayed, it shows 'green' and 'red' schools indicating good and poor performance, respectively (Howell, 2015). Howell (2015) provides insights from children as to their feelings towards NAPLAN, such as stomach pain, fear of being 'below average', being judged as foolish, letting their families down, failing subjects and even being held back a year. There are even suggestions that children's fear of NAPLAN results will compromise their options of high school entry. Whether steeped in actuality or constructions of the children's making, the anxiety remains real. Regardless of thoughts, opinions or anecdotes on this matter, what we do know in regard to anxiety and learning is, "if pupils feel there is no room for error in their work, they are likely to become defensive or refuse to attempt things for fear of getting them wrong" (Hayes, 1999, p. 59).

So, what does an adventure playground or a setting well-resourced with loose parts, affordances and a playwork approach offer? Education



reformist Ken Robinson suggested, among many things, that if children are scared of being wrong, they can never come up with anything original and that, to exacerbate the issue, being wrong has become hugely stigmatised in contemporary education settings (Robinson, 2009). What a playwork-managed setting allows is no judgement for making mistakes, what the late Carl Rogers (1961) might refer to as "unconditional positive regard", and loose parts offer plenty of opportunities to make those unjudged mistakes! Simon Nicholson (1971) suggested that children love interacting with variables and, in addition to loose parts, these variables could include sound, words, music, gravity and even other humans. This abundance of opportunity means children can manipulate and use resources in a multitude of ways to meet, as affordance would suggest, their specific needs and preferences. In tandem with this abundance, however, comes much unpredictability and, therefore, a high probability of making mistakes through trial and error. The benefit of having the loose parts presented as a 'mess' or 'junk pile' is the simple fact that the opportunities to create are greatly enhanced due to no specific start or end point being suggested for the children. The mess also ensures that children are far less likely to be fearful of making mistakes as they cannot exactly make the environment any messier! In fact, the entire premise of 'a mistake' is largely removed in an outcomes-free setting and is replaced with ideas such as "what should I try instead?", "why didn't that work?" and "ah, what if I did this instead?"

It must be noted that, as a playworker, I refer to 'mess' as more than an environmental concept. Mess can refer to the physical realm, the loose parts, the natural features, the relics of play. However, play itself can present itself as messy and lead to a prejudice applied to children's play by adults. Playwork practitioners often promote the 'neat' aspects of play in the ever-evident effort of play advocacy. This potentially leads to a bias towards the 'benefits' of play, such as problem-solving skills, creativity and independence (Gorrie & Udah, 2021; Spencer, et al., 2019). However, only promoting the neat aspects of play and not others, such as irrational, disgusting, destructive, risky and nonsensical play, is problematic. It suggests that these are not also legitimate play drives serving legitimate purposes for the child in that moment and may warrant adult intervention (Lester, 2018). Intervention without deeper consideration would be placing an adult agenda on the play and thus, in a playwork setting, an appreciation that the mess may go beyond the physical environment is required. Failing to recognise this creates a situation in which children have just another thing, their own play, they can get wrong.

## Ludocentric State

There is a premise in the field of playwork, the BRAWGS continuum (BRAWGS being an anagram of the authors' names; Arthur Battram, Gordon Sturrock and Wendy Russell) that indicates a state resting in the middle of a spectrum between, on the extreme left, the Didactic state and, on the extreme right, the Chaotic state (Sturrock, Russell, & Else, 2004). This realm, the Ludocentric realm (see Figure 1), is a space playwork practitioners seek to provide for children (or rather provide the environment and practice that supports this state), and children innately seek out, sometimes consciously, sometimes without realizing it (Sturrock, Russell, & Else, 2004). This is a space or realm playworkers cannot make



Figure 1. BRAWGS continuum (Sturrock, Russell, & Else (2004).

children go. Children take care of that themselves: however, playwork practitioners can facilitate an environment that is most conducive to supporting the Ludocentric realm. Consider the left to right nature of the spectrum – see Figure 1. The theory contends that, children, placed in a didactic environment, will pull away from this state towards the ludocentric. This may manifest to the adult eye or perception as pushing boundaries, being defiant, or resisting order. In contrast, the theory also suggests that when children are provided with a chaotic state, they will also pull away

from it towards the ludocentric. This to the adult eye appears as ordering the chaos. If the theory is borne out, playwork practitioners must consider what sort of environments best support the ability of children to pull away from the chaotic towards didactic by seeking the ludocentric.

A playground richly resourced with loose parts offers just this opportunity, especially when facilitated by adult working in a playwork way. Fraser Brown (2015) indicates the practice of the playwork practitioner is to remove barriers to play and to create flexible environments for children. Environments, boasting what Brown (2003, p. 60) would call “compound flexibility”, are environments where an interrelationship exists between a flexible and adaptable environment and the gradual development of flexibility and adaptability in the child. Loose parts, as flexible and adaptable materials, may look ‘chaotic’ and ‘messy’ to many adult eyes, but they are also the fundamental ingredients with which children engage, create, and move toward their ludocentric goal. Playwork practice, when executed well, exists on the edge of chaos (Battram, 2008). Although presenting a space as seemingly chaotic to children in order to promote their engagement, playwork practitioners, through risk assessment processes (e.g., risk benefit analysis and dynamic risk assessment in real time), mitigate potential hazards. However, playworkers ensure that there remains sufficient risk so that children of all ages are able to challenge themselves and reap the benefits connected to risk taking. This facilitation of a space that exists on the edge of chaos requires skill, experience, and knowledge. A playwork practitioner must operate in a balance between

being overly directive and unduly negligent, avoiding the application of play bias or their own unplayed experiences to the situation (Russell, 2008).

### **Conclusion**

It is easy to dismiss mess in a play space as haphazard, ill-conceived and even, in some cases, negligent. However, when facilitated with a playwork practitioner's intentionality, the mess can be a paradoxical delight, inspiring children to feel welcome, to take and learn from opportunities both successful and otherwise, and to pull out of chaos sense-making and ordering of their world through their play. For all these reasons, adults working with children should, at the very least, critically reflect on the agenda of the play space to ensure that, despite aesthetics, fear, or misunderstanding, the agenda is focused on the children, their play, and experiences. This reasoning not only supports a child's right to play in a seemingly messy environment, but also strengthens the need to recognise the complex profession that is playwork and its unique ability to teeter on the edge of chaos, which, conversely, also turns out to be the edge of order.

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