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Play and Playwork in the Prison:

past, present and future

Mike Wragg is a Senior Lecturer in Playwork at Leeds Beckett University.

Introduction

Playworkers often occupy nooks and niches overlooked or considered to be beyond the remit of the wider Children and Families' Workforce. Encountered in these spaces may be vulnerable or traumatised children, whose emotional and developmental needs are forgotten, ignored or trivialized. In response playworkers seek to enable children in such unsettling circumstances to exercise their autonomy through the intrinsically motivated behaviour of play, and in so doing regain agency and emotional equilibrium. One example of such a space is the prison in which children can be unaware of the nature and purpose of their visit and may be subjected to necessary yet emotionally destabilising controls, which have been observed to render them confused, worried and anxious. This paper summarises the key themes of a presentation delivered at the inaugural conference of the Prison Research Network, April 2015 at Leeds Beckett University. The presentation drew on experiences of playworkers, and children and parents visiting play facilities in a number of the country's prisons, and raised questions about future research and impact assessment of such provision.

Play, Play Deprivation and Playwork

In its most generic sense playwork is a term applied to occupations where the medium of play is used as the major mechanism for addressing aspects of developmental imbalance in childhood.¹ In an era in which opportunities for children to play freely are arguably more restricted than they have been since the mid-1800s and the introduction of the Factory Act,² the consequences of this developmental imbalance are implicated in a number of significant and growing

public health concerns including an increased prevalence of Type 2 diabetes; what has been termed as a childhood obesity epidemic; and rising rates of psychological disorders in children including ADHD, stress, anxiety and depression.³ Such is the extent of the restrictions on children's freedoms to play — brought about by a number of social and environmental factors including increased road traffic, parental anxiety for their children's safety and societal intolerance of children and young people — that in the course of a generation the distance children are permitted by their parents to travel unaccompanied from the home has decreased by 90 per cent, as has the number of children travelling to school independently. Furthermore, whilst the average age at which children were permitted to play out of sight of the home and without adult supervision was six years in the 1970s, recent studies suggest that that age has now increased to 11 or 12 years.⁴ Whilst causation is difficult to prove, this increasing play deficit correlates strongly with negative outcomes for children's health, happiness and wellbeing.

In respect of children's physical health the relationship between play, particularly active outdoor play, and fitness would seem fairly self-evident. This relationship was highlighted in 2008 by Professor Roger Mackett and James Paskins of Middlesex University who found that children who play out freely expend more energy over the course of a week than children spending the same amount of time engaged in adult-led team sports.⁵ In respect of children's psychological health play is associated with increased confidence and self-esteem, emotional resilience, emotion regulation, positive attachment and self-efficacy;⁶ the process of playing stimulates the production of endorphins, popularly referred to as 'happy hormones' which act on the reward centres of the brain promoting feelings of happiness and combatting the negative effects of stress.⁷ The trivial behaviour it is commonly mistaken for, is an evolutionarily imperative bio-psychological drive

1. Brown, F. (2008) 'Playwork Theory and Playwork Practice in the UK' in Brown, F. & Taylor, C. (eds.) *Foundations of Playwork* Maidenhead: Open University Press.
2. Hendrick, H. (1997) *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880 – 1990* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
3. Butland B, Jebb S, Kopelman P, et al. (2007) *Tackling obesity: future choices – project report (2nd Ed)*. London: Foresight Programme of the Government Office for Science.
4. Gill, T (2007) *No Fear: Growing up in a Risk Averse Society*. London: Calouste-Gulbenkian Foundation.
5. Mackett, R. & Paskins, J. (2008) Children's Physical Activity: the contribution of playing & walking. *Children and Society*. 2; 345-357.
6. Elkind, D (2007) *The power of play: how spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.
7. Brown, S (2009) *Play. How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination and Invigorates the Soul*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.

critical to the healthy development of individuals and social groups.⁸

Given the positive outcomes for children of expressing the play drive, it is reasonable to assume that any significant suppression or distortion to the expression of this drive – conditions referred to in the playwork field respectively as play deprivation and play bias — is likely to result in converse outcomes.⁹ Whilst sufficient play is critical to children’s development and the prevention of ill-health, so too does it have an ameliorative effect on the symptoms of physical and psychological disorders and helps maintain emotional equilibrium in the face of bereavement, trauma or loss.¹⁰ Significantly this is to a large part because it is only when playing that children are in complete control of the content and intent of their actions; as noted by Jens Qvortrupp, play offers us something that direct instruction does not: when we play we have agency.¹¹ Consequently one of the fundamental principles of playwork is to enable children to play in the ways that they need to without unnecessarily influencing, directing or intervening in that behaviour.

In all other professional contexts in which children and adults interact those interactions require the child to conform, to a lesser or greater extent, to the adult’s agenda. For example, whilst progressive pedagogy might advocate child-centredness in its approach, the relational power lies with the educator whose purpose is to teach the child. Similarly the role of the youth worker in their relationship with the child, however equitable, is ultimately to affect change in the child or their behaviour in accordance with a predetermined aspect of the adult-derived social agenda. So, in seeking fundamentally only to enable the expression of the play drive the power distribution in the relationship between playworker and child remains equal. Indeed, according

to internationally renowned children’s rights advocate, Roger Hart, playwork is the only profession to work horizontally or collaboratively with children, rather than from a position of power or control.¹²

Informing the playworker-child relationship are a number of assumptions which I discuss in the 2011 publication, *Children’s Rights in Practice*, edited by Jones and Walker.¹³ The first of these relates to the play drive itself and the way in which it is understood and articulated. As alluded to previously, in traditional Western societies at least, play tends typically to be misunderstood or trivialised by the adult population. On occasion when play is ascribed value that value tends to

be attached to its contribution to affecting an adult-desired change in the child. For example, play in school is acceptable providing that it contributes quantifiably to children’s increased academic attainment or improved behaviour in the classroom. The emphasis on these benefits instrumental to the development of individuals has given rise to an interpretation of play known as a utilitarian perspective.¹⁴ An alternative interpretation, which whilst acknowledging the wide-ranging developmental benefits of play, recognises its primary value as being for its own sake rather than for its content or potential outcome. That is to say that the purpose of playing is regarded as being simply to play, the natural consequences of which are a range of multi-sensory rewards and

developmental benefits. Crucially it is the child’s own initiation and direction of that behaviour which leads to those rewards and benefits being derived. Outcome-oriented adult manipulations of that process undermine the child’s autonomy, reducing the process and behaviour to something other than play. This understanding, often referred to as the intrinsic perspective¹⁵ informs the occupational standards and first two ethical principles of playwork. The second of

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8. Russ, S. (2004) *Play in Child Development and Psychotherapy*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

9. Hughes, B. (2001) *Evolutionary Playwork and Reflective Analytic Practice*. London: Routledge.

10. Russ, S. (2004) *Play in Child Development and Psychotherapy*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

11. Mouritsen, F. & Qvortrup, J. (2003) *Children and Children’s Culture* London: Routledge.

12. Hart, R. (2008) *Participation and Playwork Play for Wales* issue 24.

13. Jones, P. & Walker, G. (2011) *Children’s Rights in Practice*. London: Continuum.

14. Powell, S. & Wellard, I. (2008) *Policies and Play: The Impact of National Policies on Children’s Opportunities to Play*. London: Play England / National Children’s Bureau.

15. Hakarrainen, P. (1999) Play & Motivation, in Engestrom, Y, Miettinen, R. & Punamaki, R. L. (eds) *Perspectives in Activity Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

these principless states that: 'Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons.'¹⁶

The second assumption relates to the way in which playworkers conceive and value the child. Contrary to the dominant way in which children are valued and conceived in UK society: as future social and economic capital — a conceptualisation often referred to as the 'becoming' child — playworkers value children in the here-and-now, as competent, capable and autonomous social actors in their own right — a construct known as the 'being' child.^{17 18 19} Although playwork tends not to go so far as to concur with the view of some that children should be afforded equal *status* to adults, they do regard children as having equal value. That is to say that whilst playworkers recognise that children's biological immaturity renders them more vulnerable and therefore in need of greater rights of protection from themselves and others, it doesn't render them any less valuable. Children's views are considered to be of equal importance to those of adults, and in cases that affect matters of their play, more so.

Further assumptions underpinning playwork practice recognise children as a minority group who are disadvantaged by imbalanced power relations between themselves and adults. This assumption underpins an approach, which unlike many other areas of the Children and Families Workforce, seeks to challenge rather than reaffirm these relations.²⁰ This practice is referred to in another of the assumptions as anti-paternalistic in that it seeks to challenge the dominant view that adult needs and wishes should necessarily take precedence over those of children, and empowers children by facilitating a process by which they can genuinely make their own decisions.

It is this combination of play's positive affect²¹ and healing qualities, and the uniqueness of the playwork approach to not only facilitating play but also establishing supportive, trusting and equitable working relationships with children that results in playworkers working with disadvantaged, discriminated and marginalised children in contexts often neglected or overlooked by other disciplines within the wider Children's Workforce; one such context being the prison. Indeed, according to Sutcliffe (2013) '*children of prisoners are quite possibly one of the most discriminated against in our society, often treated as guilty on their parent's account, even at the schools that they attend*'.²²

Prison Playwork

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Time!!! The word echoes around the prison visits room and cascades into the play facility. A wide-eyed little girl, aged around four, runs to her inmate mother and wraps every part of her little body around her. Her screams of, 'No, I want my mummy with me!' are only audible through heavy sobs'²³ (Bedder, S. 2014).

In 1997 Barbara Tamminen, a graduate of the Playwork course at, what was then, Leeds Metropolitan University, founded the pioneering Wakefield Prison Visits Children's Play Facility. Although there was little empirical evidence available at the time to support her assertions, Tamminen's undergraduate dissertation theorised that not only was the prison visiting process immediately traumatising, children of incarcerated parents would also experience longer-term consequences of this form of separation including stigmatisation, poorer academic attainment, increased anti-social behaviour, and an increased likelihood of developing mental health problems.

It is important to note at this juncture the difference between the type of professionally facilitated

16. PPSG (2005) *Playwork Principles* held in trust as honest brokers for the profession by the Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group Available from: www.playwales.org.uk/page.asp?id=50
17. Mayall, B. (2005) *Values and Assumptions Underpinning Policy for Children and Young People in England* Children's Geographies 4 (1): — 17.
18. Hendrick, H. (1997) *Children, Childhood and English Society 1880 – 1990* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
19. James, A., Jenks, C., and Prout, A. (1998) *Theorising Childhood*. London: Polity.
20. Ibid.
21. Isen, A. and Reeve, J. (2006) *The Influence of Positive Affect on Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation: facilitating enjoyment of play, responsible work behaviour and self-control. Motivation and Emotion*, 29(4): 297-325.
22. <http://grumpysutcliffe.com/2013/11/09/howard-league-story-about-wakefield-prison/>
23. Bedder, S. (2014) *Reflective Diary*. Unpublished.

provision that Tamminen was developing and advocating for, and the existing traditional facilities for children in prisons' family visitors' centres, which might often amount to little more than a handful of well-used toys and a few books occupying a small corner of the room. It was in fact Tamminen's experiences of this type of poorly resourced facility, observations of the visiting children's behavioural responses to it, and knowledge and experience of the efficacy of play and playwork interventions which prompted her to develop the model of staffed prison play facility to provide more holistic support for visiting children. Co-founder of the Wakefield Prison Play Facility, Robin Sutcliffe, recounts in a piece for the Howard League for Penal Reform, his observations of a regular teenage visitor to the facility:

This particular girl was a regular at the Unit, outgoing, contributing and supporting younger members of the play facility. One day she came to the Unit and sat without speaking to anyone, clearly troubled and upset. Barbara approached her to find out what was wrong and she confessed that she was coming up to taking her GCSEs and was desperately anxious about her English. Her teachers had refused to help her and her parents were unable to and she didn't know what to do.

Barbara took her on one side and spent the whole of that session with her teaching her about how to take exams and how to do better with her English. A few months later we heard that she had passed. I found this incredibly moving, where else had she to go? It (sic) has made me passionate about the importance of these facilities in Prisons and I am always grateful when I read of the work that the Howard League do to help these children. It can never be enough!²⁴

By any measure children are demonstrably amongst the most vulnerable victims of such policies, and not only is this victimhood unwitting and undeserved, the costs are born both by the individual and wider society.

Sutcliffe's assertion that the children of prisoners are amongst the most discriminated against in society becomes all the more alarming when one considers that children as a social group are universally disadvantaged across socioeconomic strata and income distribution scales.²⁵ This is evident at an extreme end of the spectrum in the denial of basic human rights to children forced into labour in the developing world. A less severe, but still worrying example can be found in the concerns for the health impact on children of excessive exposure to advertising as expressed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.²⁶ Recently the Supreme Court ruled that the UK

government's reforms to welfare expenditure breach the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,²⁷ and forecasts predict that child poverty in the UK will increase by a third in the decade to 2020, to its highest level in a generation.²⁸ By any measure children are demonstrably amongst the most vulnerable victims of such policies, and not only is this victimhood unwitting and undeserved, the costs are born both by the individual and wider society. For a government committed to the best interests of the child in accordance with Article Three of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,²⁹ and to reducing public spending whilst increasing the Exchequer's revenue, prison play provision ought to be a

statutory and mandatory requirement. For since Tamminen and her colleagues founded the Wakefield Prison Play Facility more has been learned about the social costs and longer term consequences for children of having a parent in prison. For example, children of prisoners are about three times more at risk of anti-social or delinquent behaviour compared to their peers; they are more likely to experience higher levels of social disadvantage; are at greater risk of developing mental health problems such as depression; and, as Sutcliffe's piece for the Howard League suggests, are more likely

24. <http://grumpysutcliffe.com/2013/11/09/howard-league-story-about-wakefield-prison/>

25. Corsaro, W. (2011) *The Sociology of Childhood 3rd edition*. London: Sage Publications.

26. CRC (2013) *General Comment No. 16 (2013) on State obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children's rights*. United Nations.

27. Butler, P. (2015) UK benefits cap is lawful but breaches UN children's rights obligations *The Guardian* 18 March. p. 22.

28. Doward, J. & Helm, T. (2015) Child Poverty Rise Across Britain Halts 'Progress Made Since 1990s' *The Guardian* 20th June p. 17.

29. Unicef (n.d) Fact Sheet: *A summary of the rights under the convention on the rights of the child*. http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

to suffer lower academic attainment than the general population. Perhaps most concerning, they are more susceptible to entering custody themselves.³⁰ As for prisoners, developing close relationships with their children and maintaining family ties, in which prison playwork plays a significant role, can reduce their risk of re-offending by six times.³¹

Whilst there is very little empirical longitudinal data available to demonstrate the efficacy of prison play facilities in reversing these outcomes and their subsequent social and economic costs, anecdotal data from prison playworkers, students, parents and children suggests that such provision certainly has an impact in the immediate term. An extract of an anonymised letter from a parent of a visiting eleven-year-old girl, received and shared by a playworker working at a prison in the North of England, reads:

...thank you to the playworkers because without them I don't know what would happen to our family. Marcy would refuse to come, and God only knows what that would do to John...he might not never (sic) make it out...

A former student of the BA (Hons) Playwork course who was, at the time, running a prison play project at an institution in the South East of England recorded in her reflective diary a seven-year-old child who told her:

I like visiting daddy when we can play, cos when we're playing together he's happier and nicer to me.

Conclusion

Since Tamminen began her pioneering work the number of dedicated playwork-staffed play facilities in prisons has increased, often run either as small charitable organisations in their own right, as is the case of Newhall Kidz Play Facility at New Hall Women's prison near Wakefield, or as one of a range of services provided by larger charities such as Spurgeons, which

coordinates play facilities in a number of London's prisons. Several of these facilities are staffed and managed by graduates of the Playwork course, who are able to provide supervision to current students wishing to undertake their experiential learning placements in such settings. The following policy statement from HMP Thameside's Children and Families project articulates the function of the prison play facility:

During the visits play, the play area and the playworker help the children relax in the surroundings and give them a chance to be children in what can be very difficult and confusing circumstances — 90 per cent of the children believe that the male they are visiting is 'at work'. Play gives them a chance to bond with other children while also blurring the image of being in prison. Play is also extremely important for their concentration and stimulation levels. The male prisoner cannot move off their seats and the children become extremely bored and frustrated so the play area and play gives them the chance to come away from the visiting table and immerse themselves in play types including imaginary and socio-dramatic play. Socio-dramatic play, seen commonly in the play area, is extremely important as it can provide playworkers with crucial insights into the children and their home lives which informs social worker intervention outside of the prison. Giving children a chance to play out their fears, worries and questions is important in a prison as it allows for playworkers to understand and respond to these children's needs.³²

Unfortunately, however, since 2010 children's play has slipped further and further down the social and political agenda. Within months of coming to power in 2010 the Tory-led coalition government abandoned England's national play strategy,³³ froze the previous

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30. Murray, J. and Farrington, D. P. (2005) 'Effects of Parental Imprisonment on Children', In Tonry, M. (ed.), *Crime and Justice: A Review of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

31. Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing re-offending by ex-prisoners*. London: Social Exclusion Unit.

32. HMP Thameside: *children & families project play policy statement*.

33. Jozwiak, G. (2014) *Outdoor Play Under Threat From Funding Cull* Children and Young People Now 7-20 January 2014.

government's allotted fund for children's play³⁴ and withdrew support to the national play development agency Play England.³⁵ Furthermore, the government has continued to advance policy which further disadvantages the country's most marginalised and disadvantaged children, and has responded to a projected increase in national child poverty by doing little more than reconfiguring the way in which such disadvantage is measured.³⁶ Without any apparent political will for play *per se* it seems inconceivable that the already under-resourced specialism of prison playwork is likely to fare any better.

However, the future may not be as gloomy as the present might suggest. The newly elected Labour party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, looks set to appoint a Shadow

Cabinet Minister for Children's Play,³⁷ and professes a wish to be guided in the development of that portfolio by those working in the field. Perhaps now is the time for the playwork sector and other interested parties to develop a coordinated campaign for children's prison play provision. Qualitative analysis of observations contained in prison playworkers' field diaries and letters of parental gratitude are no doubt a source of data upon which such a campaign could be built, but there appears to be a distinct absence of insight into the benefits of such provision from prisoners' perspectives. Perhaps this information alongside the initiation of longitudinal studies of prison playwork and its wider benefits may gain political traction and see children's needs prioritised in the prison service.



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34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. www.cpag.org.uk/content/measuring-poverty

37. Nelson, N. (2015) *Jeremy Corbyn wants to create a minister for play time*. The Mirror <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/jeremy-corbyn-wants-create-minister-6389896>