



Play deprivation: impact,
consequences and the potential
of playwork

*'The opposite of play - if redefined in terms which stress its reinforcing optimism and excitement - is not work, it is depression. Players come out of their ludic paradoxes ... with renewed belief in the worthwhileness of merely living.'*¹

Brian Sutton-Smith

If Sutton-Smith is correct then the absence of play from a child's life would indeed be a catastrophe not only for that child, but for their family, and for society as a whole. Clearly the absence of play opportunities, usually termed play deprivation, may take many forms on a spectrum of disadvantage (or neglect, depending on your viewpoint). At one extreme would be the chronic neglect and abuse of thousands of abandoned children in the state institutions of ex-communist countries²; while at the other end of the spectrum, we have children in modern Western societies who may simply be unable to play outdoors because of what Gill³ calls their 'risk averse society'.

The impact of play deprivation

Since the early 1970s, when Suomi and Harlow⁴ summarised their research into attachment and development in a paper entitled *Monkeys Without Play*, we have been aware of the impact of play deprivation. Today their research methods would be considered unacceptable (see *The Costs and Benefits of Animal Experiments*⁵ for a wide-ranging discussion of these issues), but that does not mean we should ignore their findings, which clearly indicate the value of play in the early development of infant monkeys. On the basis that monkeys are the closest to homo sapiens of all species on the phylogenetic scale, it is not unreasonable to suggest their conclusion that 'monkey play is of overwhelming importance'⁶ may also be applied to humans.

Harlow's monkeys were reared in total isolation from all other monkeys, including their own mother. This had severely damaging impact on the infant monkeys chances of maturing into stable functioning adults. In stark contrast, when these young monkeys were able to play with their peers for brief periods during their otherwise isolated existence, they developed into normal healthy well-balanced juveniles. Consequently, Harlow and his collaborators suggested that play, or the absence of play, was an absolutely critical factor in this process. A little play in the developing years and the ill effects of isolation appeared to be negated. The final sentence of their 1971 paper is particularly relevant here:

*'Then pity the monkeys who are not permitted to play, and pray that all children will always be allowed to play.'*⁷

The outcomes of these experiments have been instrumental in changing the way we rear children. Harlow proved the importance of love and close physical contact in the early years, with the result that it is now quite unusual to hear any child specialist recommending that mothers distance themselves from their baby. Harlow proved the importance of play in the development of infants, and this is a concept that now pervades most early years settings, albeit often with greater emphasis on the learning side than the play.

Can we say, as Harlow did, that his conclusions can be applied to humans? The general characteristics of children's play are so reminiscent of monkey play that there cannot be much doubt about this. More recent research by Brown and Webb⁸ with abandoned and abused children in a Romanian paediatric hospital appears to confirm the parallels.

Harlow speaks of the way in which, having no playmates to provide motor stimulation, wire-cage reared infant monkeys develop compulsive and stereotypical rocking behaviour. Brown and Webb identified an identical pattern of behaviour in the Romanian group. Clearly no play makes for a very socially disturbed child. Harlow suggests that damaged infant monkeys may be rescued by placing them in contact with baby monkeys. This is another finding that was confirmed in the Romanian study.

Interestingly, in contrast to all the evidence of social and physical damage, Harlow found that total isolation had 'little apparent impact on the monkey's intellectual capabilities'⁹. Once placed in an environment where they experienced cognitive challenge they proved equal to the task. On the face of it, that is surprising, and yet this is another finding confirmed by Brown and Webb's¹⁰ research.

Why would the cognitive processes remain intact when all other aspects of development were so severely affected? It has often been suggested that the cognitive aspects of the brain are not fully switched on until around the age of six or seven¹¹, and in recent years neuro-science has confirmed this¹². Perhaps the cognitive aspects of the brain didn't get badly damaged in these experiments because they were never substantially engaged. Is it possible that for a bodily function to be badly

damaged it has to be operational in the first place? For example, the growth function is operational from birth, but needs children to play in order for them to exercise their muscles. Without play, the normal functioning of the musculoskeletal system will be adversely affected. The brain's cognitive system on the other hand simply waits to be switched on by the right sort of stimulation.

Defining play deprivation

Many writers have highlighted the complexity of play, and the array of different types of play. For example Sutton-Smith¹³ identified seven 'rhetorics' within which he grouped 308 different types of play. Hughes¹⁴ proposes a grouping of 16 play types. The significance of this is that, for Hughes¹⁵ children need to experience the full range of play types during their childhood in order to attain and maintain a state of wellbeing. Where children fail to do this they may be said to be suffering from a play deficit, and are likely to experience lasting damage. He suggests that the causes of this damage take two quite distinct forms, either play deprivation or play bias. Hughes¹⁶ explains these two concepts as follows:

- **play deprivation** is the result of either '*a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world*', or '*a neurotic, erratic interaction.*'
- **play bias** refers to '*a loading of play in one area of experience or another, having the effect of excluding the child from some parts of the total play experience.*'

Hughes suggests that deprivation and bias in children's play are far more widespread than society acknowledges, and far more damaging. This is the result of a number of factors, including fear of traffic, perceived stranger danger, parental fears of children engaging in risky activity.

Play deprivation in the life of today's child

In *No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society*, Gill¹⁷ speaks of the 'shrinking horizons of childhood'¹⁸. He reminds us of the findings of Hillman's¹⁹ study – namely that in 1971 eight out of ten children went to school unaccompanied; by 1990 that figure had fallen to one in ten. Hillman reported again in 1999 to the effect that the situation had now become worse. Gill²⁰ goes on to lay out a range of familiar changes that have taken place in the last 30 years, all of which have had a considerable impact on children's freedom to play. He also examines the culprits – the factors that have produced the 'risk averse society' of his title.

These include:

- a general lack of understanding that risks can be intrinsically beneficial
- a fear of litigation on the part of those who should be providing play facilities
- the disproportionate sums of money spent on safety surfacing for children's playgrounds, at the expense of more and better play equipment
- stories about anti-social behaviour exaggerated in the media
- the redefining of bullying to include teasing
- excessive child protection measures that have the effect of reducing the number of volunteers prepared to run after-school activities for children
- parental fear of strangers, exacerbated by media stories about paedophiles
- fear of the internet, exacerbated because children are so much more competent at using modern technology than their parents.

When all this is added to the very real increase in traffic on our streets, it is clear that the opportunities for children to explore their neighbourhood in free-ranging play activity are becoming more and more restricted.

As part of his study of children's play in urban Belfast during the period of 'The Troubles', Hughes conducted structured interviews with people between the ages of 9 and 54, living in inner-city Belfast. He asked about their early, middle and late (if appropriate) childhood experiences.

On the basis of those interviews Hughes concluded that play had been 'adulterated'. Adulteration is the term Hughes²¹ uses to describe the 'negative impact of adults on children's play.' He found four main effects on play:

1. deprivation and substitution of play types
2. saturation by adulterating images and events
3. range, choice and mastery deprivation
4. traumatic violation of the play process.

Hughes suggests four damaging outcomes from all this:

- the adulteration of social play fostered the continued propagation of sectarianism
- the militaristic nature of the child's environmental experience encouraged the adoption of limited range of stereotypical play narratives

- restrictions on children's range behaviour created mental mapping deficits
- the stress, trauma and play deprivation of everyday life resulted in neurochemical and neurophysiological mutation of the brain.

Hughes²² refers to the work of Harlow and Einon *et al.*²³ in suggesting that '*symptoms from play deprivation in other species can be significantly reduced when the subjects are given the opportunity to play again.*' He, therefore proposes a role for playworkers in alleviating the ill effects of play deprivation, but suggests they would need specialist training in the effects of conflict on play.

The consequences of complete deprivation of play, and the potential of playwork

In most countries it is unusual to find institutionalised abuse of children. Sadly there will always be cases where individual children are systematically abused by those responsible for their care. Such cases are well documented, and tend to fill the front pages of our newspapers for a while. A cynic might suggest that one of the reasons for the media's interest in such cases is their very rarity. However, in the early 1990s the Western world was faced with child abuse on a scale not seen before on our TV screens.

In the aftermath of the overthrow of Ceausescu in Romania it became apparent that there were more than one hundred thousand children living in children's homes in the country. Large numbers of these children were suffering from horrendous neglect, and in many cases were enduring institutionalised abuse. This was play deprivation on a grand scale.

Brown and Webb's²⁴ research study was conducted right in the middle of this horror. Their research focused on the impact of a playwork project on a group of abandoned children living in a ward of a Romanian paediatric hospital. Their research study, which contains numerous parallels with the Harlow studies focused on the children's subsequent play development. The children, ranging in age from one to ten years old, had suffered chronic neglect and abuse. They had spent most of their lives tied in a cot; they were poorly fed and their nappies were rarely changed. Although able to see and hear other children, they were unable to leave their cots, and therefore experienced little in the way of social interaction.

The therapeutic playwork project began in the summer of 1999 and continues today, albeit in a much reduced form. In the early days of the project the playworkers had to untie the children in the morning, bathe them, change their nappies and feed them properly, before taking them to the playroom. They then worked with the children all day, bathing, changing and feeding them as and when necessary, and enabling them to begin the long road to recovery through play.

When children are deprived of play, the consequences are catastrophic. The emotions of this group of children were in turmoil. When the project started they just stared vacantly into space, rocking to and fro in that rolling motion so familiar to anyone who has worked in a mental institution. They generally looked several years younger than their actual age. For example, the team worked with a ten year old boy (complete with nappy) who could have passed for a toddler in any UK nursery. The children's gross motor skills were poorly developed, and they possessed hardly any fine motor skills at all. They were incapable of meaningful social interaction, and showed few signs of cognitive functioning. In the first few months the slightest disturbance was deeply frightening, and resulted in a return to the rocking motion.

In the early stages of this project, the parallels between the children in this study and the monkeys in Harlow's study were clear:

- Both lived their lives behind bars (caged monkeys; children tied in their cots)
- Both were raised in conditions where they could see their peers, but were not able to play with them, or interact in any meaningful way
- Both exhibited compulsive and stereotypic rocking and weaving behaviours, as well as an avoidance of eye contact, and staring into the distance
- Both engaged in self-harm
- Both appeared to have unimpaired cognitive abilities, except where there was other evidence of birth defects
- When first in a playroom, both rejected close contact with their peers
- In the playroom both showed a lack of understanding of social rules
- In the playroom both exhibited erratic unpredictable behaviour.



However, it is not clear whether the connection between play deprivation and other forms of disadvantage is really that significant. There may be some truth in the idea that wealthier parents are more likely to take their children to after-school activities, but that doesn't necessarily address the full complexity of play, and only amounts to a couple of hours per week in most cases. What of the child's need to engage with nature as part of their play; to explore their environment; to experiment with their own creativity; to experience freedom from parental supervision – in short, all the things that make up a well-rounded play experience? There have been very few studies that address this issue.

However one of the few such studies focuses on some of the poorest, most seriously disadvantaged children in Europe, namely the Roma children of Transylvania. The focus of this study was to examine in depth the phenomenon of play within one of these small communities. The study by Brown²⁵ opens with a quotation from his research diary, which neatly sums up the themes of the research.

'Here I am, in a Transylvanian Roma village, wondering whether the poverty of the environment affects the play behaviour of the children. These are the most materially deprived children in Europe ... Why then, are these children the happiest you're ever likely to meet? (Diary Extract 5 August 2009)'

Brown's study revealed a number of themes, which were then used to bring some coherence to the findings. The themes identified included:

- The children played everywhere and with anything
- There was widespread engagement with the environment
- There were a great many examples of the children's creativity
- The theory of loose parts²⁶ was much in evidence
- The children engaged in a great deal of boisterous physical activity
- Semi-organised games were a regular feature
- The girls in particular spent a lot of time engaged in chanting games.

What does all this tell us about the connection, or otherwise, between poverty and play deprivation? The children were clearly free to explore and experiment, and the resulting creativity was often impressive. Whether or not their problem solving

However, both showed benefit from the interaction with an infant going through the early stages of development. In less than a year, these chronically abused and neglected children made the sort of progress on the road to recovery, that many experts assumed would be impossible. During the period of the research study the only change in the children's life experience was the playwork project. Therefore, it is sensible to ask what it is about playwork that has contributed to these changes. Apart from some very specific work focusing on each child's personal agenda, the most fundamental causal factor was undoubtedly the fact that these children now had play-mates – that, and the example provided by the White Rose Initiative playworkers who were encouraged to treat the children with love and respect at all times.

Play deprivation and other forms of disadvantage

It is generally assumed by well-meaning play providers that poverty and play deprivation go hand in hand. As a result, large sums of money have been spent by both local authorities and voluntary groups installing play equipment in the most disadvantaged areas of the country.

skills were enhanced is unclear, and would probably justify further study. The breadth and depth of their social networks was expanded during their playing. There was a great deal of physical activity, with its attendant benefits in terms of motor skills development. This amount of freely chosen interaction with the environment must inevitably lead to cognitive stimulation. The children, through their interaction with a range of playmates, and their imaginative use of the variety of loose parts available in the village, were very obviously engaged in elements of self discovery.

These are among the poorest, most disadvantaged children in Europe, and yet their play is rich in many of the most fundamental aspects of a healthy play experience, albeit there are health and safety issues associated for children who play on rubbish tips and get most of their play artefacts out of builder's skips. On the basis of this study alone it is only possible to draw tentative conclusions, but it certainly seems that the link between poverty and play deprivation is not as strong as we generally assume.

Play deprivation: the implications for society

Since the early days of psychoanalysis, and subsequent attachment theory, a link has been made between childhood experiences and the later disturbed behaviour patterns of adults.

Brown and Lomax²⁷, in their study of young murderers, looked at the link between play and neuroses in a different way – namely, play as a causal factor. Their study was prompted by Brown's earlier involvement in the case of the notorious murderer, Charles Whitman. In 1966 Whitman, an apparently 'normal' person, went into the tower overlooking the campus of the University of Texas, Austin, from where he shot and killed 17 people, wounding a further 41. Stuart Brown compiled the behavioural data for the team charged with the task of searching for the causes in Whitman's life. That team of experts came from a number of different specialist fields, and the idea was for them to reach a consensus view on the reasons for Whitman's actions. Their conclusions were stark, but nevertheless significant for any study of play deprivation:

'A lifelong lack of play deprived him of opportunities to view life with optimism, test alternatives, or learn the social skills that, as part of spontaneous play, prepare individuals to cope with life stress. The committee concluded that lack of play was a key factor in Whitman's homicidal actions – if he had experienced regular moments of spontaneous

*play during his life, they believed he would have developed the skill, flexibility, and strength to cope with the stressful situations without violence.'*²⁸

Subsequently Brown has studied people from all walks of life, from murderers to Nobel Prize winners, mapping their 'play histories'. In the case of the murderers in Texas prisons he found 'the absence of play in their childhood was as important as any other single factor in predicting their crimes.'²⁹ On the more positive side he also found that abused children, with a tendency towards anti-social behaviour could have that behaviour modified through play.

Clearly many of Brown's studies are of extremely disturbed people, and we are certainly not suggesting here that every child who has their play restricted will develop into a mass murderer. Nevertheless, these studies should definitely encourage us to think deeply about the potential impact of play deprivation on individuals, and on wider society. The widespread play deprivation identified by Hughes³⁰ is a relatively recent phenomenon. As yet, we don't really know what the long term effects will be. However, we have plenty of evidence of the effect of extreme play deprivation on individuals, and it is not unreasonable to think that slightly milder forms of play deprivation will nevertheless have a negative impact on the general social psyche of Western societies.



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