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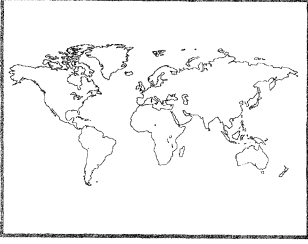
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I. INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER DESCRIBES the central role of play in children's learning - including motor skills and communication skills, problem solving and logical thinking, aesthetic and emotional development and social and socialized behaviour. It describes the characteristics of a good play space which is not one with expensive fixed equipment but one in which children can themselves create and develop their own environment and which can cope with their changing demands. Such play provision requires trained staff. The paper points out the inadequacies in provision for children's play in Europe (and virtually all other societies). It also discusses the impact on children (and on their later development as adults) of deprived or inadequate play experiences. The concluding section identified some general criteria to guide the setting up or improvement of play environments.

Most people would agree that all children have a fundamental right to receive a level of health care, nutrition and good housing sufficient to ensure a reasonable quality of life and life expectancy. Yet, another equally important and fundamental right is being almost totally overlooked by these same people, even though it is critical to realizing the objectives that these other rights seek to achieve. This forgotten right is the right of all children to have access to wide ranging and high quality opportunities to play, as enshrined in the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child, especially article 7, paragraph 3 which states "The child shall have full opportunity for play and recreation which should be directed to the same purpose as education; society and the public authorities shall endeavour to promote the enjoyment of this right".

Play is a process at the root of all learning, and it influences our capacity to survive and develop. Without the opportunity to play, one could be forgiven for asking, "Why bother with other basic developments, what are they for if not to make it more possible for a child to explore its world and to build relationships within it?" The word play describes a range of behaviours which are expressions of the child's desire to know and understand the surrounding world. Without play there is little understanding. Without access to stimulating experiences, there is little desire to know.

In the more urbanized nations, the understanding that play is fundamental to development and that provision should be made for children's play needs has formed the basis of a policy for play provision over the three past decades. Unfortunately, heightened awareness and an increasing level of expenditure has still done little to improve the quality or availability of play experiences for many children. Natural space is swallowed for building development, the "built" environment is car

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plagued by day and an often alienating "ghost" town by night. The provision made for play, intended to address these "problems", is often little more than swings and slides installed in concrete.

II. PLAY AND THE PLAY ENVIRONMENT

FOR MANY YEARS, play and its main exponents (children) have been viewed with little concern. Play has been variously described as a waste of time, as something you do when not working, and as frivolous and peripheral behaviour. Consequently, provision for play in schools, residential areas and workplaces has suffered, being seen as a waste of money, space and personnel.

Yet neither play nor play provision deserve these labels. Far from being a waste, play is probably the most effective, comprehensive and relevant learning process known to our species. For that reason alone, it is of great importance to us all, particularly those children who, because of poverty, overcrowding, pollution or family or cultural restrictions, get little or no opportunity to have access to adequate play environments.

Although provision for play in one form or another has existed in Europe for many years, it was probably during the German occupation of Denmark during the second world war that the need for such provision, based on a careful analysis and assessment of children's requirements became evident. As open space was acquired for agricultural production, so adults became concerned about the effect of this loss of space on the young. To address this concern a children's play space developed which allowed children access to other species and to the natural environment, and allowed for child empowerment. This was in 1943. This was the forerunner of the "adventure playground", to be described later.

Similar concerns were expressed for children living in high density accommodation in Europe in the postwar period. However, the response was often limited to the provision of traditional forms of equipment such as swings, slides and roundabouts. Instead of attempting to address the totality of play, providers and funders limited their vision primarily to the child's apparent need for motor exercise and diversion, perhaps unaware of the vital developmental role of play.

Play's influence on child development is considerable. It has been cited as having a vital role in the evolution of a wide range of basic indispensable skills including motor skills, communication, problem solving, creativity, logical thinking, aesthetic and emotional development, and social and socialized behaviour.

Two major factors influence the effectiveness of play as a learning experience. The first being HOW play takes place, the second WHERE it takes place.

Play is primarily a medium which children control. What they do, as well as how and why they do it, has, within reason, to be the choice of the child, rather than an adult. This is particularly the case where the adult is introducing competition, inducements or rigid organization into a play situation. It was Koestler who pointed out that "The more soiled the purpose of an activity becomes with other motives, the less likely that it is play."⁽¹⁾ Wherever possible, play should incorporate the criteria of "free choice, personal direction, intrinsic motivation and spontaneity".

The nature of the play space is as important as the behaviour it serves to facilitate. If the environment where play takes place is not stimulating to the child's senses, conducive to conceptual or identity development, and does not give the child an increased appreciation of the elements of fire, water, air and earth, then it will only provide an impoverished

1. Koestler, A. (1964) *The Act of Creation*, Dell, New York.

The good "play" environment is adaptive in nature and able to cope with ever changing demands.

experience. In addition, a play space should contain those ingredients missing in the local environment, for example, social interaction, access to nature, involvement, privacy, and physical and mental calibration.

In many European cities, public provision for children's play has mainly taken the form of play areas containing "fixed" equipment such as swings, slides and, on occasion, expensive architect designed "play sculptures", many of which are set in concrete or asphalt. Such surfaces are hardly suited to children's play. It is also rare for these play facilities to be staffed. These play areas are often expensive but cannot realistically claim to address either the "environmental" or "experimental" deficits which need to be met. Play is a process in flux; it is always changing and its needs change accordingly. The good "play" environment is adaptive in nature and able to cope with ever changing demands. The "poor" environment is one which attempts to pre-empt demand rather than adapt to it - as shown with these "fixed" play areas. It is restrictive by nature and will be left standing empty once children tire of its novelty.

Play is made up of several quite different forms, including mastery, fantasy, social, rough and tumble, deep and dramatic play. To be effective, a play environment needs to cater for all of these because within the play process, children change rapidly from one form to another. A conceptually "good" example of a play environment which can do this,

Box 1: An Adventure Playground

An adventure playground is an area of land, surrounded by a barrier such as a fence or stockade. The space within this boundary belongs to the children who frequent the playground. The space is normally staffed by several "playworkers", adults trained in the operation of child based play areas who are committed to the principles of "free choice, personal direction and intrinsic motivation. Their function is to facilitate and enable the play process. This is achieved in three ways:

By *environment modification* i.e. continually changing the nature of the space by landscaping and rebuilding in order to create areas which are perceived as secret, enchanting, interesting and exciting by the children.

By *accessible ruralization* i.e. the provision of trees, wild flowers, grasses, streams, dirt banks, and allotments, all of which exist for the children's sole use and benefit. This encourages digging, building, cooking and growing. In addition, such spaces may include the keeping of livestock, which helps children understand their relationship with the wider environment. All these factors are particularly important in an alienating and "non-organic" inner city environment.

By *befriending* i.e. by the playworkers making time for children and by intervening only when judged to be appropriate and non-intrusive (playworkers are not play "organizers" - they may play with children but their main function is to create and sustain a friendly, stimulating, interesting and exciting environment which motivates children to explore and experiment).

is the adventure playground, described in Box 1.

Whilst the "concept" of adventure playgrounds has stood the test of time and become widely accepted, the level of provision has frequently been the subject of political and economic pressure. Used both as a

source of employment and child-care, the purpose and quality of adventure playgrounds have sometimes suffered. **Nevertheless, the idea of a totally child-based environment, staffed by playworkers and managed in partnership by the community and local government is still perhaps the most meaningful model to have emerged from years of experimentation with play provision.**

III. THE UNFRIENDLY ENVIRONMENT

SO FAR, THE right of children to have access to play experiences has only been expressed in educational and social terms. But this is only a part of what makes it so vital. Although individuals in their own right, children cannot avoid being born into certain circumstances, circumstances which can have a profound effect on how they view the world.

Wherever they are, children will always try to play. If they play in an environment which is sympathetic, friendly and interesting, then they will learn information and values which reflect this. It does not seem to matter whether the environment is their usual one or one which has been specially created for them. However, if they play in environments which contain selective information and which only allow the practice of selected values (stimulus biased) or if they play in environments which contain little information or values (stimulus deprived), then what they learn and how they use this knowledge will reflect this.

Many children are born into circumstances which reflect the result of "bad" planning, economic, design and engineering decisions. That is, "bad" from the perspective of their effect upon the child and on the strategies he or she has to adopt in later life. To a great extent, the urban environment is a cumulative manifestation of such decisions. The end result of a child's experience which empowers and shows respect and values may be an adult who is concerned, knowledgeable, practical and gregarious. The end result of "bad" urbanization may be desensitized or even worse, dehumanized adults.

IV. DESENSITIZATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

DESENSITIZATION MEANS TWO things:

a. It means the child is the subject of a biased environment which gives it an unbalanced input of either positive (enriched) or negative (impoverished) experiences. Because the experience is not balanced by an opposite, the child has to assume that it is the norm and adapt to it by, for example, learning to live with poverty or affluence. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of this strategy of "cultural absorption" is that the bias tends to become worse. If the person who is hard of hearing turns up the radio to hear better, the volume will make the problem of deafness worse, requiring a further increase in volume. So it is with "cultural absorption". A child who adapts to loneliness cannot socially interact and gets lonelier. A child who adapts to violence either attracts or exhibits more violence.

b. Like the deaf person turning up the radio, it also means that those affected become less sensitive to those around them and may behave in a non- or anti- social manner. This impacts on an increasing number of people, which acts to aggravate the problem.

Children can be viewed as particular social entities, perhaps belonging to a specific religion, but this perception limits what they are. Play says that each child is a "new" person and should not be made to fit in with

any adult preconception. We should not work to make children become like us but we should allow and encourage them to be themselves. This is what play does; it facilitates the development of the individual. Of course, as individuals, children may adopt particular political or religious perspectives, but he or she will have decided for themselves and their identities will not have been manipulated by environmental constraints.

Play provision, in the context of stimulus bias, needs to address the nature of that bias and attempt to counter it, to allow the child to have the maximum opportunity of growing up with the widest possible range of knowledge and experiences. In the case of children who are already desensitized, the problem is more complex and cannot effectively be addressed here. It is far better that the situation is not created in the first place.

To have any chance of retaining and developing a human perspective on life, children need a wide and rich variety of experiences. Even most children subjected to conditions of stimulus bias will still be able to retain and develop much of what makes us human. In the more extreme corners of the "built" environment, children may be playing under particularly crippling conditions.

All human beings need a given level of external stimulation to continue to attend to and function within the reality which surrounds them. If the level of stimulation within their environment frequently falls below the required level, then they are vulnerable to forms of mental disorder and breakdown. Isolation, noise, loneliness, no peers or siblings, malnutrition, abuse, poverty and even wealth are all factors which can contribute to an unacceptably low level of stimulation and which may help to create bizarre and violent behaviour. People who have been the subject of sensory deprivation are reported to become psycho- and sociopathic, suffering hallucinations and becoming neurotic.

Children who play, or try to play, in these conditions are particularly vulnerable. Being forced by such conditions to draw from a tiny reservoir of experience, they cannot avoid fantasy and imagination. In time, if these conditions continue, they will have increasing difficulties in distinguishing what is real from what is imagined. Unlike those who suffer stimulus bias and whose experiences come directly from reality, albeit a biased reality, these children have no reaction to offer reality except that which they can imagine and the problem can only increase.

Available, accessible and stimulating play provision which can counter the effects of isolation and loneliness, *must* be a right for these children. Without it, they are in danger of losing their identity altogether.

V. CONCLUSION

EVERY PLAY ENVIRONMENT, like every play experience, is unique. There can be no absolute guidelines. However, some general criteria can be identified. Play environments should:

- *be child orientated
- *be play orientated
- *have a playwork input
- *encourage environmental modification and accessible ruralization
- *encourage an understanding of the elements
- *facilitate the exploration of identity
- *help conceptual development
- *stimulate *all* the senses
- *encourage exploration and experimentation

*address environmental and experience deficits

*address stimulus bias deprivation

On a positive note, in the United Kingdom, in recent years, a re-evaluation of our perception of children has begun to take place. There is an increasing recognition of children's rights, and the right to play is prominent amongst them. Government has responded positively to requests for a national agency with responsibility for increasing public awareness and understanding of the importance of play in a child's development and evolution. But this has yet to be realized in political changes in relation to education, housing and planning policy. In the meantime, many children and young people only have a biased and impoverished view of life's choices and opportunities.

A colleague writing from India on the first day of the rainy season said recently "The street kids, although living in terrible conditions still smile, fend and survive". Contrasting this with the sullen and violent behaviour of our comparatively affluent football supporters, perhaps one should ask whether the price for progress and industrialization has been to distance us from that which makes us gregarious and human.

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