Children Without Play

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- article for The Journal of Education February 2005

Introduction

We recently completed a small scale research study examining the impact of a playwork project on a group of abandoned children living in a Romanian paediatric hospital (Webb & Brown 2003). The children, ranging in age from one to ten years old, had suffered chronic neglect and abuse. They had previously spent most of their lives tied in the same cot in the same hospital ward. They were poorly fed and their nappies were rarely changed. Although able to see and hear other children, they experienced little in the way of social interaction. The focus of our study was the children's play development, which we assessed using an instrument developed for a previous study (Brown 2003a). During a period when nothing changed in their lives, other than their introduction to the playwork project, the children themselves changed dramatically. Their social interaction became more complex; physical activity showed a distinct move from gross to fine motor skills; the children's understanding of the world around them was improved; and they began to play in highly creative ways. They no longer sat rocking, staring vacantly into space. Instead they had become fully engaged active human beings.

It is our contention that playwork practice includes elements of both play and care, so we did not attempt to isolate the play elements from the care elements of the project. That would have been an impossible task, given the restrictions on our time and resources, quite apart from a number of ethical issues, and basic human sensitivity. We have subsequently been asked: was it playwork method itself, or the relationships that developed through the method, that benefited the children? That is not a useful distinction, since the development of relationships (both child-adult and child-child) is one of the basic aims of playwork. Our conclusion was straightforward, i.e. the children's developmental progress was clearly identifiable, and apparently made possible through their experience of the playwork project.

The following article attempts to identify some of the most significant therapeutic elements of playwork by making detailed analysis of the play behaviours of this unique group of children. We quote extensively from reflective diaries kept during the study

Background

The playwork project started in the summer of 1999 and continues today. It started as a result of the concern of the newly appointed Director of the Sighisoara Paediatric Hospital, Dr. Cornel Puscas. When confronted with a ward full of disturbed children sitting rocking in their own solitary worlds, he was reminded of one of the most powerful conclusions from Harlow's studies: "play is of utmost importance for the subsequent social well-being of the individual and those around him." (Suomi & Harlow 1971: 493) Hoping to help the children recover some sort of 'normality', he approached the White Rose Initiative for funding to employ someone to play with the children. They employed Edit Bus, the first Romanian playworker, and brought her to Leeds Metropolitan University for a specially designed training course. Upon her return to Romania, Edit worked with the children for four months, before being joined by Sophie Webb for an extended period, and later by Fraser Brown for briefer periods. During the first year of the WRI project, the two Leeds Met researchers spent more than 500 hours working with Edit, and studying this small group of children. At this point it is worth re-emphasising the distinction between the ongoing WRI Therapeutic Playwork Project, and the research study conducted during the first year of that project.

Methods

Our original intention was to help alleviate the suffering of the children, but it quickly became apparent that remarkable changes were occurring, and so we resolved to conduct a research study of the outcomes of the playwork project. Thus, the research project evolved out of the WRI

project. The aim of the research was to assess developmental change during the first year of the project. It was possible to observe the children each day, noting the details of their play behaviours and social interaction. Observations had to be unobtrusive, for two reasons: firstly to avoid disrupting what the children were achieving in their play, and secondly to enable the recording of detailed notes at close quarters. In the early stages of the study we used a form of participant observation where the participant's role is partially concealed (Steckler 1999). Although our dual role was understood by the Romanian playworker and the Director of the hospital, everyone else would have seen us as visiting playworkers from the UK. The ethical implications of this, especially in relation to 'informed consent' and privacy (Alderson 1995: 3-5), are not significant since the nurses had very little input into the children's lives, and the Director of the hospital had given permission for the study to take place. Although we had permission to use the children's medical records, their names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. In the later stages of the study we employed a slightly different observation technique, i.e. rotated peer observation, which saw us alternating tasks and roles - one hour working with the children, one hour non-participant observation, and visa versa.

The issues of language and culture, and the pros and cons of these methods in terms of their specific application to this study, have been explored in some depth elsewhere (Webb and Brown 2003). However, it is worth restating our view that the role of the playworker is particularly appropriate with regard to participant observation. It is one of the guiding principles of playwork that the child's agenda should be regarded as the starting point for child-adult interactions (Hughes 1996a: 51). This means that playworkers naturally adopt Corsaro's 'reactive strategy' (1985: 28), which encourages researchers to avoid dominating the adult-child relationship. Corsaro suggested the adult's tendency to take control of the child's world often has a detrimental affect on research outcomes. Instead, Corsaro recommended adult researchers should be responsive to the child, and set aside their adult prejudices. This is reflected in a second guiding principle of playwork, namely 'negative capability' (Fisher 2002), which will be discussed later. An effective playworker expects to pick up on signals rather than instigate them, which means the playworker is adopting an approach similar to that of the classic Tavistock Model (Greig & Taylor 1999). This encourages researchers to interact with the subjects, and record the behaviours and feelings of all the participants, including themselves. In the Romanian context we made extensive use of reflective diaries, not simply as a memory aid, but also to provide raw data.

All this enabled us to complete independent assessments of the play development of the children. Assessments were made using a variation on a system developed during an earlier study of children's play behaviours (Brown 2003a). One hundred and fifty four assessment questions, largely derived from play and playwork theory, were grouped under eleven general headings covering the full range of children's play behaviours and/or characteristics of play:

- Freedom
- Flexibility
- Socialisation
- Physical Activity
- Intellectual stimulation
- Creativity & Problem solving
- Emotional equilibrium
- Self discovery
- Ethical stance
- Adult-child relationships
- General appeal

The children were assessed in February, April and August 2000, using the questions in the assessment tool. Three separate forms were completed for each child. There was evidence of change in all the children, albeit to differing degrees, presumably according to a combination of their individual genetic make-up and their life experience. A detailed breakdown of each child's progress has been provided previously (Webb and Brown 2003). This was extremely encouraging in terms of its implications for the recovery potential of abused and neglected children. It was also

slightly chilling, since the medical records described most of the children as 'retarded'. We were told informally, although this was not confirmed in the medical records, that most of them were waiting for places in a children's mental hospital. Thankfully their remarkable progress meant that fourteen of the original sixteen children were eventually either adopted or fostered. Sadly the other two were eventually transferred to a children's mental hospital. It has not been possible to conduct any longitudinal follow-up on the children. For the purposes of this article it is sufficient to restate our conclusion - namely that the children's developmental progress was clearly identifiable, and apparently made possible through their experience of the playwork project.

Ethological Parallels

The antecedents of the playwork project are interesting to explore, as they highlight some striking parallels with a well known series of ethological studies conducted by Harry Harlow during the 1950's and 1960's. Perhaps we should make it clear at the outset that we are not in any way condoning Harlow's experiments. However, he was conducting research on a primate species (monkeys) and it would be naive to ignore the lessons for our own primate species (human beings). Harlow's experiments were summarised in the article 'Monkeys Without Play' (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 491) - the conclusion being that 'monkey play is of overwhelming importance', and that the same must be true of human play. For this reason Harlow's experiments have generally been considered to have great significance for playworkers.

In Harlow's laboratory, infant monkeys were raised in a variety of ways. Some were left with the mother and allowed to play with peers. This group showed no developmental differences from monkeys raised in the wild. Others were raised by the mother, but given no peer interaction. These infants developed disturbing patterns of behaviour as they matured. Yet another group of infants were isolated from their mothers, but allowed to play with their peers. So long as they also experienced some form of 'contact comfort', this group developed normally. The tactile input might be something as simple as a piece of soft cloth, and the play input might be as little as half an hour a day. This led Leonard Rosenblum, one of Harlow's collaborators, to suggest 'there are three variables to love -- touch, motion, and play -- and if you can supply all of those, you are meeting a primate's needs.' (Slater 2004)

However, Harlow's experiments did not stop there. A further group of infant monkeys were raised in cages where they were able to see and hear other monkeys, but not able to play with them, or interact in any meaningful way. Not surprisingly in such circumstances, the monkeys developed clear signs of disturbed behaviour. Thus,

Having no mother or peers to cling to these monkeys embrace their own bodies in intensive self-clasping. Having no maternal nipple to suckle, they suck and chew their own digits..... Having no playmates to provide motor stimulation, wire-cage reared infants develop compulsive and stereotypic rocking behaviours, strikingly reminiscent of the human autistic child. (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 492)

It is this group that we are particularly interested in. The parallels between the two sets of primates (monkey and human) are obvious. Our Romanian children had also lived most of their lives trapped behind bars (in this case their cots), in a hospital ward where they could see and hear other infants, but could not play with them. At the beginning of the Playwork project, the children exhibited many similar behaviour patterns to those identified by Harlow. The following diary extract, which was written after Sophie's first visit to the hospital, illustrates the point:

> *The silence.* Every room was full of children in cots, but it was so quiet. Even when we entered the room there was no sound from the children. They just looked at us. The smell of urine in every room was almost unbearable. *The emptiness.* Each room had just the cots with plastic mattresses. The children were dirty and wearing clothes that were too big for them. Some were wearing jumpers as trousers, and none of them were wearing shoes. There were rags around their waists, which I later found out were

ripped up sheets tied to keep the nappies in place. These rags were also used to tie the children to the cots. Most children were sitting rocking and others were standing up banging the sides of their cots against the walls. Giving the children a cuddle was strange as they either held on too tightly, or they remained stiff and unfeeling.

(Reflective Diary, 6 February 2000)

Harlow found that when his infant monkeys were introduced to peers, they did not seem able to play. Rather, 'they avoid social interchange and continue in their self-directed, self-satisfying behaviours' (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 492). When untied, fed and bathed, and then taken to a playroom, the Romanian children exhibited very similar behaviour patterns. Hence:

When I observed the children in the playroom, they were unaware of each other, fixed on their own activities – barely communicating. Some just sat and seemed bewildered and vacant.

(Reflective Diary, 6 February 2000)

Harlow concluded 'no play makes for a very socially disturbed monkey (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 492). We might just as easily conclude that no play makes for a very socially disturbed child.

When Harlow's infants reached physiological maturity they were 'incompetent in virtually every aspect of monkey social activity' (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 492). For example, they showed little understanding of social rules or social hierarchy, often preferred to sit in a corner by themselves, and sometimes engaged in self-harm. In the early months of the playwork project, the Romanian children were showing signs of these disturbing behaviour patterns, as the following extracts illustrate:

Alexandru still can't keep focused for very long. He started to build bricks on his own today, but after a few moments he was throwing them around again, which is dangerous for the other children. He doesn't seem to be aware of that.

(Reflective Diary, 15 February 2000)

Elena... is aware for a few seconds and then looks away. She also smiles a lot but never at the other children. She seldom cries or makes any loud noises. She stares at things endlessly.

(Reflective Diary, 16 February 2000)

While dressing Carol, I noticed the bruises on his back from him banging the cot. It was awful and covered his whole back. What must these poor kids be thinking when they are tied to the cots each night? Quite a lot of them harm themselves physically.

(Reflective Diary, 28 February 2000)

In contrast to all the evidence of social and physical damage, Harlow found that total isolation had 'little apparent effect on the monkey's intellectual capabilities.' (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 493) This was also borne out in our experience of the Romanian children. For example, Virgil exhibited many disturbing behaviour patterns, such as clutching his feet and rocking at the slightest sign of tension, or refusing to eat unless he was standing up. Nevertheless, the following extract suggests his intellectual capacities remained unimpaired:

Virgil appears to have made improvements – or maybe he could do these things anyway, but just hasn't been encouraged. He sat with Edit for a few hours and learnt some colours and numbers. He can concentrate for a long time, so he really absorbs what he hears ... It's also excellent how fluent his vocabulary is, considering that last Dec/Jan he couldn't say a word.

(Reflective Diary, 15 February 2000)

As a general rule however, Harlow showed that isolation had a severely damaging impact on an infant monkey's chances of maturing into a stable functioning adult. 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 article is particularly relevant to our work:

> 'Then pity the monkeys who are not permitted to play, and pray that all children will always be allowed to play.' (Suomi and Harlow 1971: 495)

Thus far we have presented a fairly shocking picture of abuse and neglect and its appalling consequences. The Romanian children with whom we worked, had not been able to play. The results were clearly catastrophic, and apparently irreversible. However, our study showed that recovery was still possible even for these severely deprived children.

Playwork

Some readers may be new to the concept of playwork, so we are including a few words of explanation. Playwork is rooted in an understanding that children learn and develop through their play. There are many instances in modern society where that process is interrupted or impaired. Playwork involves identifying and removing barriers to the play process, and enriching the child's play environment. Playwork is a generic term for a profession that encompasses those occupations where the medium of play is used as the major mechanism for redressing aspects of developmental imbalance (Brown and Webb 2002). This may be something as straightforward as providing an after-school club for children who would otherwise have nowhere to play.

On the other hand it might be something as complex as creating an environment to assist the recovery of children who have suffered severe play deprivation. Hughes (2003) suggests play deprivation is the result of either 'a chronic lack of sensory interaction with the world' or 'a neurotic, erratic interaction'. In other words the child's play experience is either 'so impoverished by lack of stimulation that she is forced to search within her own limited experience for the reality she needs', or it is 'so subject to changes outside of her control that her view of the world is one of instability or neurosis' (Hughes 2003: 68-69). Prior to the start of the playwork project the Romanian group appear to have experienced an unpredictable combination of both these forms of play deprivation. They were deprived as a result of being tied in their cots for most of the day, with virtually no social interaction, but they were also treated in an erratic way by nurses who might feed them properly one day, but forget to feed them the next.

The therapeutic form of playwork that is needed to address such problems is quite distinct from play therapy. It follows certain guiding principles, which form the subheadings for the remainder of this article. The accompanying diary extracts illustrate the way in which these principles were put into practice for the benefit of the Romanian children.

1. Children learn and develop though their play
It is one of the most basic assumptions of the playwork profession that given the right conditions, children will learn and develop through their play. It is the role of a playworker to create those conditions, so that the play process can be effective. Depending on local circumstances, that could mean anything from feeding hungry children and changing their nappies, to providing toys and craft materials in order for them to explore their own creativity. The project workers in Romania did all those things. Ultimately the aim of playwork is to provide an environment that enables the child to grow towards self-fulfilment, referred to by Maslow (1973) as self-actualisation. For example,

> Virgil is becoming more and more sociable and really enjoys drawing. He's started to develop his own ways. Two crayons at once for example ... Something else I've

noticed today ... the children are playing together more than they have done. I'm wondering if it's got something to do with them now eating together. We put the soft toys on the floor again and they just lay on them chilling out. It was lovely to watch.

(Reflective Diary 23 February 2000)

2. Many modern environments contain elements that act against the play process

The playworker's initial role is to analyse the child's environment in order to identify and remove any barriers to the play process. In most playwork projects there are elements of the work that have little to do with play, but which nevertheless have to be addressed, otherwise the quality of the child's play experience is likely to be restricted, e.g. checking the safety of play equipment on an adventure playground is not in itself a playful activity, but most playworkers regard it as part of their role. Given the extreme levels of neglect and deprivation in the Romanian setting, the issue of 'barriers to play' was far more significant than might be encountered in most UK settings. The Romanian project involved a range of elements, from basic human care to highly complex therapeutic play. We regard most of the tasks performed by the workers as crucial to the playwork role. This is not simply a matter of human sensitivity, but also a practical necessity. It is not possible for the play process to work effectively while children are malnourished, neglected and generally lacking social care. If the children were to benefit fully from their play, then the playworkers had to address many of their non-play problems as well. In our view that is good playwork practice.

3. An enriched play environment holds greater potential for child development

The playworker is also concerned with enriching the child's play environment in order to stimulate the play process. This might contain elements of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner and Ross 1976), or Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (1976: 552). However, both those concepts imply a level of intervention that would not be accepted in the playwork approach. Hughes suggests that playworkers should aim for 'a low adult to child approach ratio' (Hughes 1996a: 51). Thus, enriching the play environment is not so much about aiding specific elements of learning, but adopting an holistic approach to learning. There are a number of factors that playworkers have to take into account when considering how best to create such an environment. For the purposes of our research study we grouped them under the eleven subheadings mentioned previously, i.e. freedom; flexibility; socialisation & social interaction; physical activity; intellectual stimulation; creativity & problem solving; emotional equilibrium; self discovery; ethical stance; adult/child relationships; and general appeal (e.g. humour, colour, etc.). The following extracts illustrate the way in which the playworker's gentle interaction helped to stimulate the children and enable them to take control of their own environment::

I found some feathers in the cupboard today and went around tickling them ... Virgil was really afraid at first and threw his arms up shouting, but when I tickled my own arm and showed him it was okay – he was more curious. The look on his face when he felt comfortable to feel the feather was absolutely beautiful … so fresh and innocent.

(Reflective Diary 17 February 2000)

Today I sat Elena on the car and she stayed there, so I showed Carol how to push her and then they were able to do it on their own! I think it was a real step for Elena, as she never 'plays' with the others she just touches them every so often. Until today this WAS her play … a beginning that needed nurturing?

(Reflective Diary 24 March 2000)

4. Compound flexibility, the theory of loose parts and the Portchmouth principle

There are a several ways in which the play environment may be enriched. For many playworkers the most important element in their work is *compound flexibility*, i.e. 'the interrelationship between

a flexible/adaptable environment and the gradual development of flexibility/adaptability in the child' (Brown 2003a: 53). According to Sutton-Smith the function of play is 'adaptive variability' (1997: 231). Taking these two concepts together we can infer that the role of the playworker is to create flexible environments which are substantially adaptable or controllable by the children. One way of doing this is to ensure there are lots of 'loose parts' in the play environment. When explaining his 'theory of loose parts', Nicholson suggests '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.' (1971: 30) Thus, a room full of cardboard boxes is more likely to stimulate creative play, than a fixed climbing frame. This concept links to Vygotsky's (1976) zone of proximal development, via the Portchmouth principle. Portchmouth (1969: 7) says 'It helps if someone, no matter how lightly, puts in our way the means of making use of what we find.' He gives the example of providing buckets and spades for children to play on the beach. There is no need to tell them what to do. The play environment contains its own play cues in such circumstances. The following extract illustrates the way in which children made use of the inherent flexibility of a box (actually a rubbish bin) to create two games of their own.

> 'Whilst Ion was sitting in a big yellow box Virgil started to play a game with him, involving an imaginary object. He pretended to receive something from Edit and then took it back to Ion in the box, who took it from him and put it in his lap. The spontaneous interaction between them both was fascinating to watch. Afterwards Virgil continued playing with the yellow plastic box, by putting it on his head and walking around the room ... He created a sort of obstacle course out of the cots and tables.'
> (Reflective Diary 25th February 2000)

5. Negative capability, the suspension of judgement and prejudice

Most adults who come into contact with children bring their own agenda to that relationship. For example, teachers have an obligation to teach the national curriculum (a set of adult priorities). Doctors, social workers, even parents, invariably have their own adult priorities. The playworker is unusual in as much as s/he attempts to suspend personal prejudice, and go along with the flow of the children's needs and tastes. This brings us back to the concept of 'negative capability' mentioned previously. The poet John Keats (1817) suggested this was a characteristic of all creative minds. He recommended the complete suspension of all prejudices and preconceptions as a prelude to opening up the creative flow of the mind. In the modern era this is reflected in the words of Miles Davis the jazz musician who was asked about his unique ability. His explanation was this: "You need to know your horn, know the chords, know all the tunes - then forget about all that, and just play." (Sanjek 1990: 411) The similarity between this approach to creativity, and one of the most fundamental aspects of the child-adult relationship in playwork, was identified by Fisher (2000: 25). She suggested that playworkers have to guard against entering the play environment with their own preconceptions and prejudices. Only then will they truly be there for the child. This approach requires a great sensitivity to the learning potential of the playwork setting, and means the playworker has to be prepared to stand back when others might be inclined to rush in:

> The children do fight a lot and I only intervene if it gets too violent or if I can see they won't work it out themselves. I think they learn more from their own reactions than from adults at times and it's good for them to work out their own disagreements.
> (Reflective Diary 22 March 2000)

Else and Sturrock (1998) take this one stage further highlighting the dangers of playworkers bringing their own childhood-based neuroses into the setting. It is often the case that those with whom we work are socially and economically disadvantaged or emotionally vulnerable in some way. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that the adult brings no 'baggage' to the relationship. If a child begins to share a problem with the playworker, and the worker finds herself saying "that happened to me too", then her value to that child is doubtful. In all probability she will do more harm than good. The playworker must be there entirely for the good of the child.

6. The child's agenda has to be taken as the starting point

For the playworker in a therapeutic setting it is especially important to take the child's agenda as the starting point for interactions. Hughes suggests that both the 'content and the intent' of play should be determined by the child, and that playwork should be 'child-empowering' (1996a: 22-23). In the child's daily life, play is his/her only experience of being in control of events. If playworkers are not to 'adulterate' that experience, they have to ensure that wherever possible they are following the child's agenda (Else and Sturrock 1998). It follows that in most circumstances the playworker would expect to adopt an approach of 'preparation followed by withdrawal' (Hughes 1996: 23). However, the Romanian children required a stronger presence over a more extended period. Nevertheless, it remained the case that most of our interventions were a response to the specific play behaviours of each child. The following example refers to a ten year old child who was too frightened to walk independently. He was obsessed with shoes, and the playworker was able to work with that with dramatic results:

> I have played 'shoes' with Nicolae for the past two weeks and that appears to have led him to trust me. Today, after playing 'shoes' yet again, I stood him in the middle of the room, about four steps away from me. Usually he just sits down, but this time he walked towards me with his arms stretched out for a hug. I think these may have been his first independent steps (after 10 years!).
>
> (Reflective Diary 24th February 2000)

7. Sympathy, empathy, affective attunement, mimesis and making appropriate responses to children's play cues

Until recently most theorists assumed social interaction was a skill developed by toddlers. Now Trevarthen (1996) has shown that babies are in fact 'coherent' as soon as they are born. They immediately show interest in their environment, especially other human beings. Very young babies are actually more interested in human beings than objects (a distinction not made by Piaget). Thus, babies are social actors, not passive beings, as had generally been assumed. Trevarthen has also shown it is possible to interpret the meaning of a baby's actions simply by observing vocalisations and gestures. He agrees with Adam Smith's (1759) idea that human beings are innately sympathetic to each other, and suggests it is the human capacity for 'mimesis' that makes this interpretation possible. Through fantasy, invention and symbolic play humans are able to use parts of the body to describe anything. For example we all know what it means if a child is running round the playground yelling 'broooom. . .broooom...', and we can easily interpret the accompanying actions. To quote Donald (1991, p.168-9):

> "Mimesis rests on the ability to produce conscious, self-initiated, representational acts ..... Thus, mimesis is fundamentally different from imitation and mimicry in that it involves the *invention* of intentional representations. When there is an audience to interpret the action, mimesis also serves the purpose of social communication."

Human beings are probably the only animals able to substitute behaviour for action in this way. Trevarthen (1996) suggests that mimesis is a talent which gradually develops, and that play is the catalyst. In other words, we learn how to interpret other people's play cues while we are playing. This is a skill that is fundamental to effective playwork practice (Else and Sturrock 1998).

> 'Today I was sitting on the floor tossing a ball gently into the air. Carol was watching me intently. First he came close. Then he backed away, all the time keeping eye contact. This was a clear play cue ('throw it to me'). I flicked the ball to him. The thrill of having someone respond to his play cue was immense. He became so excited he crammed the ball into his mouth, before returning it to me for another go.'
>
> (Reflective Diary 4th August 2000)

Similarly Daniel Stern's concept of affective attunement (1985) may be something that we learn through our play. Stern did not suggest that. He focused on the mother-baby relationship, and was interested in the way mothers attune with their babies rhythms. That makes it possible to

demonstrate to the baby ways in which its actions might be further developed. For example, if an object is just out of reach, a baby may have to make a double movement in order to grasp it. The mother is likely to clap her hands twice, or make a sound "ah - ah", in exactly the same rhythm as the baby's grasping action. This apparently simple interaction contains some very complex subtexts. The obvious message is, "I am in tune with you", but there is a more subtle and far more powerful message, "I can help you translate your actions into a different form". Stern linked most of his ideas to the mother-baby interaction. However, we have evidence from our work in Romania that affective attunement can easily be achieved by an empathetic adult working with a severely disturbed child. Indeed it is our view that sympathy, empathy, mimesis, affective attunement and the sensitive interpretation of play cues, are skills and abilities that are easily absorbed and developed during play. It is doubtful whether they could be learnt in the classroom.

8. Creating relationships and building the child's self-esteem

One of the most significant elements of the playwork role is the way in which relationships are made with the children. If the child-adult relationship is effective, there is a good chance of not only helping children with their problems, but also of raising their self esteem generally. Roberts (1995) has attempted to apply some of Piaget's thinking about schemata to this subject. Although she focuses on the world of pre-school practice, her ideas have merit for playwork in general. She suggests that small children will develop a set of cognitive structures that favour one schema. They may be 'enclosers, transporters, connectors, etc. This has implications for the way we approach specific children. For example, a child who spends most of the time throwing stones around, may simply be a 'trajectory' child who has been offered no other way of connecting with his/her basic schema. A playworker who provides a set of skittles, or a game of cricket, may be able to address the situation effectively, without recourse to disciplinary controls. Roberts (1995) makes it clear that children do not favour one schema to the exclusion of all others. Nevertheless her approach highlights the need for provision to match the requirements of the client. In the playground setting an 'enclosing' child might be stimulated by opportunities to build dens; a 'rotater' might like the roundabout, etc. Roberts (1995) goes on to suggest that by responding to these favoured schemata we are giving the child a powerful message, i.e. "I respect the things that matter to you". By so doing the playworker can help to build the child's self esteem. For example:

> Virgil was happy about playing with the crayons, he was laughing about taking them out of the box and putting them in again. He likes doing this more than using them to colour in! He does it with other toys he plays with, always has to tidy!
>
> (Reflective Diary 22 February 2000)

9. Cultural Awareness - macro and micro

Among other things, Else (2001) suggests that, 'with knowledge based on child development' therapeutic playworkers need to have 'cultural competence' - of their own and others cultures. He is not simply referring to the need to understand and respect the culture of a different race or religion. He is also talking about cultures within cultures. Thus, in the Romanian example, it was not only important to develop an understanding of national characteristics, but also the culture of the local town, and the paediatric hospital. Even the nurses on the abandoned children's ward had their own culture, which had to be respected otherwise life could be made very difficult. Here is an extreme example of the lengths that we had to go to, in order to be allowed to stay and work with these children.

> I think the hardest part of the day for me is having to put them back in their cots again, but it will create even more aggravation if I don't, and that could ruin everything. People would probably think I'm awful for doing it, but I've had to accept that this is part of their system whether I like it or not. I know the nurses will tie them back in after we leave.
>
> (Reflective Diary 25th February 2000)

Clearly, this raises an issue about the ethics of conducting a research study where children continue to be abused. Unfortunately there was nothing we could have done to stop the nurses tying the children to their cots. Nor was there anything in our approach that added to the abuse. We were not present while the children were tied to their cots. We just had to deal with the consequences. On a positive note, the longer term impact of the WRI project has been considerable. The nurses stopped tying the children to their cots during the second year of the project. The children are now well fed, and their nappies are changed regularly. The hospital has recently adopted a policy of finding abandoned children foster placements within six months.

Conclusions

The following extract was written towards the end of Sophie's first period of working at the hospital. Considering these were the same children who had been tied to their cots, rocking and staring into space only a few months previously, it illustrates the vast change that had taken place in a very short period of time.

> The thing I'm going to miss most of all is coming into the room in the morning. Sometimes Carol or Ion are still sleeping, and it's lovely to be there when they open their eyes. When we open the door there are lots of shouts of happiness and excitement, jumping up and down in their cots. The noise only starts when we open the door, or when they see us through the window – they are so quiet before that. The first thing I do is go around saying good morning to each one and untie them from their cots and get them on the floor. There are lots of morning cuddles.
>
> (Reflective Diary 29th March 2000)

In less than a year, these chronically abused and neglected children made the sort of progress 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.

Clearly the children's learning and development resulted substantially from the playworkers' ability to create an enriched play environment that was substantially supportive of the play process. The playworkers' use of negative capability, their suspension of judgement and prejudice, coupled with a determination to take each child's agenda as his/her own starting point, helped to create a good quality playwork environment - in other words, an environment that offered adaptability to the children, and so encouraged the compound flexibility process. Through their empathy, and their ability to interpret the children's play cues effectively, the playworkers were able to create strong trusting relationships, which in turn helped to enhance the children's self-esteem. If such approaches were applied in a typical playwork setting in the UK, we would expect children to learn and develop naturally. The remarkable thing about our experience in Romania was that this straightforward playwork approach appeared to work just as effectively with some of the most play-deprived children in the world.

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