

The Power of Play in Times of Crisis



Dr Margaret Rogers
Better Start National
Early Years Quality
Development

This article explores the importance of play in the lives of children experiencing adversity, particularly forced migration due to war, conflict, or disaster. The authors draw on recent literature in this area as well as first-hand experience of facilitating an open-access play space for children and their families fleeing conflict.

Birds fly, fish swim, children play (Landreth, 2002)



Laura Cleere
Better Start National
Early Years Quality
Development

Play is a voluntary, intrinsically motivated, child-directed activity involving flexibility of choice in determining how an item is used. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) recognises play as a fundamental right of childhood. In our professional and personal lives, we see children around us play every day. Children play at home, in their neighbourhoods, in their early learning care setting, and in school; they play indoors and outdoors, alone and with others. They play with toys, real-life and natural objects, or no materials at all (NCCA, 2009).

Play is the means through which children learn about and create their social world. Children create (rather than being taught) learning experiences through four different types of play: mastery play, through which children construct concepts and develop skills; innovative play, where children expand and vary the concepts and skills they have mastered; kinship play, through which children enter the world of peer relations; and therapeutic play, which gives children strategies for dealing with stressful life events.

Whatever the reason for play or the type of play, we know that play is a biological and social need, a right, and one of the most beneficial activities for a child's overall health. Landreth (2002, p.10) describes play as 'the singular central activity of childhood, occurring at all times and in all places'.

Children's right to play in times of crisis

But what happens when play is disrupted in times of crisis, such as when fleeing war, conflict, or natural or human-made disasters? When living spaces become unsafe, play becomes secondary to the needs for safety, shelter, food, and medicine, and so children's need and right to play are undermined (UNCRC, 2013; Feldman, 2019), despite the fact that play is known to be crucial to children's well-being, development, health, and survival in these circumstances (Chatterjee, 2017).

Exposure to violence or disaster, the loss of a sense of place and security of home and all the connected services and social networks, and deterioration in living conditions all have immediate as well as long-term consequences for the balance, development and fulfilment of children, families and communities. (ARC Resource Pack, 2009, cited in Chatterjee, 2017, p.13)

The impact of conflicts and their aftermath on children's play can last an entire childhood (Frey-Wouters, 1997, cited in Feldman, 2019). In many situations of crisis and armed conflict, children's play is one of the first things to be curtailed, both indoors and outdoors, as concerns about immediate or threatened safety take priority (Feldman, 2019).

Yet, for children fleeing conflict, war, or disaster, the provision of play can perform a 'significant therapeutic and rehabilitative role in helping children recover a sense of normality and joy after experiencing loss, dislocation and trauma' (Chatterjee, 2017, p.44). The UNCRC acknowledges, 'Children have a spontaneous urge to play and participate in recreational activities and will seek out opportunities to do so in the most unfavourable environments' (2013, p.10).

The war in Ukraine, and conflict and disaster in many other countries, have led to a huge increase in forced migration and displacement. As part of its emergency humanitarian response in March 2022, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth set up an emergency transit hub for refugees arriving to Ireland from Ukraine and other countries.

By the end of July, over 40,000 Ukrainian refugees had fled to Ireland, 30% of them under the age of 14 (CSO, 2022).

“ Play is a biological and social need, a right, and one of the most beneficial activities for a child's overall health.

A children's play space was considered an essential element of the wider set of food, shelter, health, child welfare, and accommodation services provided in the transit hub. Bürgin et al. (2002) tell us that for these children it is important to 'build back some normal in the abnormal', rebuilding daily structures and routines, to provide safe places for children

to play and to have the opportunity to regulate emotions.

The play area provides a reassuring space where children and their families could be welcomed, where children feel secure to play and their parents and carers can see a glimpse of 'normal in the abnormal'. It recognises the psychosocial value of play for children exposed to conflict and loss, while vindicating children's right to play. While acknowledging the very real struggles of refugee children, Ardelean (2021, p.355) argues:

They are first and foremost children, which means they have a lust to play, possess an incredible ability to adapt to new conditions, and the capacity to find beauty and playfulness in everyday life, regardless of what that might look like from the outside.

In the transit play space, children's urge to play was very evident. When they saw the space with its array of familiar materials, they immediately

took ownership and began to play. Sometimes even with their coat still on or with a bag in one hand, they started to explore, adapt, construct, collaborate, improvise, and create.

Freedom to play through free play

Research on access to play in crisis situations in six jurisdictions found that play allowed children to regain and retain normality under the most difficult and challenging living conditions (Chatterjee, 2017). It identified three key components that enabled children's access to and participation in play:

- supportive adults
- spaces with rich environmental affordances
- fewer restrictions on children's time.

Elkind (2007, p.218) notes that 'the memory of playful experiences, as well as the play experience itself, can reduce stress and provide comfort and reassurance'. Freely chosen play allows children to decide on and control their play, based on their interests, imagination, and initiative. These components informed the provision of an open-access, multi-age play space where children of all ages, from multiple countries and backgrounds, found a welcoming and recognisable 'children's place'.

Unstructured play is unplanned, imaginative, sometimes purposeless, and completely *child-led*, putting children in the driving seat and giving them control over what and who they play with (Lawlor, 2021). This is an important benefit of play for all children, even more so for children where so many aspects of their lives have been taken out of their control. Child-led play recognises children's essential agency. As they play, children rearrange their worlds to make them less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith, 1999).

Unstructured play is unplanned, imaginative, sometimes purposeless, and completely led, putting children in the driving seat and giving them control over what and who they play with.

The link between play and self-regulation is supported by neuroscience research. Child-led play produces dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with a sense of well-being that reduces levels of stress (Ziegler, 2021). Liu et al. (2017) identify five characteristics of playful experience: joyful, meaningful, actively engaging, iterative, and socially interactive. They found that each characteristic is associated with stress regulation.

In the transitory play space, children spend their time creating socio-dramatic scenarios, enacting familiar rituals such as making meals, and playing restaurant. They are seen using small-world play, constructing buildings and creating farmyards and elaborate railways. Some delight in the sensory comfort of play-dough and create artwork, often signifying a sense of belonging, with symbols, flags, and people. Some find a playmate (whether with a shared or different language) to challenge in a game of Ludo or Uno, while others get lost in The Floor is Lava or in universally ubiquitous ball games.

Whatever the play, the players know that 'this is play', hence providing a safe place where emotions can be experienced without the consequences they might bring in the 'real' world (Lester and Russell, 2010). Regardless of how they choose to spend their time, it is their choice and their time.

Conclusion

While the devastating effects of conflict and forced displacement on children can spread across generations, play has the potential to counteract those effects and support children's recovery and resilience (Feldman, 2019). Putting into perspective what we know about child development, children's rights to play (Article 31) and participate (Article 12), and the elements of quality provision of play, we can provide positive experiences for children coming to our country, our communities, schools, and ELC settings, giving them the opportunity, dignity, and joy they deserve.

By providing a playful environment, with supportive adults, and time for freely chosen, child-led play, and having meaningful consultation with children and families, we can provide environments where families feel supported and where children can be children, smile, make friends, and play anyway.

'The sky's awake so I'm awake and I have to play' —Princess Anna from Disney's *Frozen*

REFERENCES

- Ardelean, A. (2021) 'Play in a refugee camp: Disorder from chaos', *International Journal of Play*, 10(4), 355–360. DOI: 10.1080/21594937.2021.2005395
- Bürgin, D., Anagnostopoulos, D., Board and Policy Division of ESCAP, Vitiello, B., Sukale, T., Schmid, M., and Fegert, J.M. (2002) 'Impact of war and forced displacement on children's mental health—multilevel, needs-oriented, and trauma-informed approaches', *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 31(6), 845–853. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/35286450/>.
- Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2022) *Arrivals from Ukraine in Ireland – Series 4*. www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/FP/p-ai/arrivalsfromukraineinirelandseries4.
- Chatterjee, S. (2017) *Access to Play for Children in Situations of Crisis: Synthesis of Research in Six Countries*. International Play Association. <http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/IPA-APC-Research-Synthesis-Report-A4.pdf>.
- Elkind, D. (2007) *The Power of Play: Learning What Comes Naturally*. Pennsylvania: Da Capo Press.
- Feldman, D. (2019) 'Children's play in the shadow of war', *American Journal of Play*, 11(3), 288–307. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1220280.pdf>.
- International Play Association (2013) Summary – United Nations General Comment No. 17 on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (Article 31). http://ipaworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/IPA-Summary-of-UN-GC-article-31_FINAL1.pdf.
- Landreth, G. (2002) *Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship*. New York: Brunner-Routledge.
- Lawlor, I. (2021) 'The Power of Play: How free and unstructured play builds resilience in children to cope with adversity', *Findel blog*. www.findel-international.com/findel-international-blog/international-schools/
-

the-power-of-play-how-free-and-unstructured-play-builds-resilience-in-children-to-cope-with-adversity.

Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2010) 'Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide.' Bernard van Leer Foundation. Working Paper in Early Childhood Development no. 57. www.researchgate.net/publication/263087157_Children's_Right_to_Play_An_Examination_of_the_Importance_of_Play_in_the_Lives_of_Children_Worldwide.

Liu, C., Solis, L., Jensen, H., Hopkins, E., Neale, D., Zosh, J., Hirsh-Pasek, K., and Whitebread, D. (2017) 'Neuroscience and learning through play: A review of the evidence'. https://cms.learningthroughplay.com/media/zbcd21td/neuroscience-review_web.pdf.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: Stationery Office.

Sutton-Smith, B. (1999) 'Evolving a consilience of play definitions: playfully'. In: S. Reifel (Ed.) *Play Contexts Revisited*. Play and Culture Studies, Vol. 2. Stamford: Ablex Publishing.

UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (2013) General comment No. 17 (2013) on the right of the child to rest, leisure, play, recreational activities, cultural life and the arts (art. 31). www.refworld.org/docid/51ef9bcc4.html.

Van Oers, B. (2013) 'Is it play? Towards a reconceptualisation of role play from an activity theory perspective', *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 21(2), 185-198. www.researchgate.net/publication/263348144.

Ziegler, D. (2021) 'Childlike play is affected by traumatic experience'. Jasper Mountain. https://jaspermountain.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Article_childlike_play_traumatic_experience.pdf.

While the devastating effects of conflict and forced displacement on children can spread across generations, play has the potential to counteract those effects and support children's recovery and resilience.

(Feldman, 2019)