

# 56

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### Children without play: a research project

The following extract is taken from an article originally published in the *Journal of Education*, March 2005. It focuses largely on the background and methods employed in conducting a specific playwork research project. The detailed outcomes from the project are addressed elsewhere (Webb and Brown 2003).

#### 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 and Brown 2003). The children, ranging in age from 1 to 10 years, 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 2003c). 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, that is, the children's developmental progress was clearly identifiable, and apparently made possible through their experience of the playwork project.

## **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 and Harlow 1971: 493). Hoping to help the children recover some sort of 'normality', he approached the White Rose Initiative<sup>1</sup> 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-emphasizing the distinction between the ongoing WRI Therapeutic Playwork Project, which eventually employed four Romanian playworkers; 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: first to avoid disrupting what the children were achieving in their play, and second 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), are not significant since the nurses had very little input into the lives of the children, 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, in the subsequent write-up their names were 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 vice 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 1996: 51). This means that playworkers naturally adopt Corsaro's (1985: 28) *reactive strategy*, which encourages researchers to avoid dominating the adult–child relationship. Corsaro suggested that 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 is discussed in Chapter 35. 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 and 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 2003c). One hundred and fifty-four assessment questions, largely derived from play and playwork theory, were grouped under 11 general headings covering the full range of children's play behaviours and/or characteristics of play:

- Freedom
- Flexibility
- Socialization
- Physical activity
- Intellectual stimulation
- Creativity and 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.

## Outcomes

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 elsewhere (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 14 out of the original 16 children were eventually either adopted or fostered. Sadly, the other two were eventually transferred to a children's mental hospital.

Although it was not feasible to conduct a longitudinal follow-up study of all the children, it has nevertheless been possible to retain contact with those who were fostered through the Luminita Copiilor Foundation.<sup>2</sup> Six years later, most of the children were progressing well (always allowing for the extreme disadvantage of their start in life). One is receiving extra tuition to help him catch up with school work. One has sadly regressed for reasons too complex to explore here. However, overall, there is nothing in the present condition of the children to lead us to change our original conclusion, namely that the children's developmental progress was clearly identifiable, and apparently made possible through their experience of the playwork project.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For further details, contact White Rose Initiative, 1 Stonebridge Grove, Leeds LS12 5AW

<sup>2</sup> For further details see the Fundatia Luminita Copiilor Website:  
<http://www.luminitacopiilor.org/>