Starting with the ideas of Abernethy (1968), Benjamin (1974) and Hughes (1975), the playwork profession focused largely on adventure play. Most of its early thinking derived from the Danish architect Sorensen, who envisaged ‘junk playgrounds’ where children could imagine, shape and create their own reality. In Planning for Play Lady Allen of Hurtwood quotes correspondence between herself and Sorensen from 1947, which provides an interesting insight into his thinking:

The object must be to give the children of the city a substitute for the rich possibilities for play which children in the country possess ... It is opportune to warn against too much supervision ... children ought to be free and by themselves to the greatest possible extent ... one ought to be exceedingly careful when interfering in the lives and activities of children.

(1968: 55)

So already in 1947 it is possible to identify the germ of ideas we now take for granted: children being in control of their own play places (Hughes 1996); the value of providing enriched play environments (Brown 2003b); and the dangers of adulteration (Else and Sturrock 1998).

In the 1980s Hughes and Williams (1982) made the first attempt to develop some solid theoretical grounding for playwork practice. The decade also saw the widespread use of the SPICE acronym by playwork trainers and managers, usually misrepresenting the original concept (Brown 1989, 2003b). Playwork theory has developed substantially since then, led by writers such as Hughes (1996, 2001a, 2002a), Else and Sturrock (1998), Battram and Russell (2002), and Lester (2004). However, those writers have tended to focus on biological, psychological and evolutionary models of play and playwork to the detriment of sociological and developmental models. This chapter seeks to redress the balance, by proposing a slightly different focus.
In the book, *Playwork: Theory and Practice*, I described playwork as follows:

Playwork may be seen as a generalised description of work that includes adventure play, therapeutic play, out-of-school clubs, hospital play, environmental design, and much more i.e. all those approaches that use the medium of play as a mechanism for redressing aspects of developmental imbalance caused by a deficit of play opportunities.

(Brown 2003a: 52)

This has sometimes mistakenly been taken to mean that I see play solely as part of the child’s preparation for adulthood, which would of course be a ridiculous oversimplification. Play is also full of impact for the here and now. The following chapter is intended to outline the elements of play and playwork that I see as being fundamental underpinnings to our work.

**Children learn and develop both while they are playing and through their play: the child’s interactions with his/her environment are a fundamental part of development**

It is one of the most basic assumptions of the playwork profession that, given the right conditions, children will learn and develop both while they are playing, and through their play. In many modern communities, for a variety of reasons (including the increase in traffic, parental fears and poor housing design) that process is breaking down, with the result that children are not achieving their natural state of balance (homeostasis). It is the role of a playworker to create those ‘right’ conditions, so that the play process can be effective. Thus, the first aim of playwork is simply to create the sort of rich environment that enables play to take place. However, we should not lose sight of the idea that children are maturing at the same time as they are playing, and so the second aim of playwork should be to create the sort of environment that enables the child to grow towards self-fulfilment, referred to by Maslow (1973) as self-actualization.

**Many modern environments contain elements that act against the play process**

In most cases 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. For example, 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. In certain circumstances playworkers might even taken it upon themselves to feed hungry children. After all it’s not easy for a starving child to play. Such actions are crucial to the playwork role. This is not simply a matter of human sensitivity but also a practical necessity. If children are to benefit
fully from their play, then their playworkers have to address many of their non-play problems as well. In my view that is good playwork practice.

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 et al. 1976), or Vygotsky’s (1976) concept of the zone of proximal development. 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’ (1996: 51). Thus, enriching the play environment is not so much about aiding specific elements of learning, but rather adopting a holistic approach to development. There are a number of factors that playworkers have to take into account when considering how best to create such an environment. In Playwork: Theory and Practice I summarized these as: freedom; flexibility; socialisation and social interaction; physical activity; intellectual stimulation; creativity and problem solving; emotional equilibrium; self-discovery; ethical stance; adult–child relationships; and the general appeal of elements such as humour, colour and so on (Brown 2003b).

In their work with children playworkers should to take account of the concept of compound flexibility, the theory of loose parts, and the Portchmouth principle

There are several ways in which the play environment may be enriched. For many playworkers the most important element in their work is compound flexibility, that is ‘the interrelationship between a flexible/adaptable environment and the gradual development of flexibility/adaptability in the child’ (Brown 2003b: 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 that ‘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 (1933/1976) 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.
Playworkers need to suspend their prejudices and be non-judgemental in all their dealings with the children, that is they need to adopt an attitude of ‘negative capability’

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 to the concept of ‘negative capability’.

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 the jazz musician Miles Davis, who, when asked to reflect on his unique ability, explained it thus: ‘You need to know your horn, know the chords, know all the tunes – then forget about all that, and just play’ (in Sanjek 1990/1998: 411). The similarity between this approach to creativity, and one of the most fundamental aspects of the child–adult relationship in playwork, is explored by Fisher towards the end of chapter 35. She suggests 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.

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.

Intervention is sometimes necessary but the child’s agenda has to be taken as the starting point for the playworkers’ interventions

Hughes suggests that both the ‘content and the intent’ of play should be determined by the child, and that playwork should be ‘child-empowering’ (1996: 22–3). 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). For the
playworker in a therapeutic setting it is especially important to take the child’s agenda as the starting point for interactions. Even in the case of the abandoned children in Romania, where the children required a stronger presence over a more extended period, it nevertheless remained the case that most of our interventions were a response to the specific play behaviours of each child (see Chapter 56).

Our own experience of play enables us to develop the human attributes of sympathy, empathy, affective attunement and mimesis, and so make appropriate responses to children’s play cues

Adam Smith (1759/1976) suggested that human beings are innately sympathetic to each other, and that 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 almost anything. For example we all know what it means if a child is running round the playground yelling ‘brooom, brooom’, and we can easily interpret the accompanying actions. To quote Donald:

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.

(1991: 168–9)

Human beings are probably the only animals able to symbolize meaning in their actions in this way. For Trevarthen (1996) mimesis is a talent which gradually develops, and 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).

Similarly Daniel Stern’s (1985) concept of affective attunement may be something that we learn through our play. Stern did not suggest that. He focused instead 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 the work in Romania that affective attunement can easily be achieved by an empathetic adult working with a severely disturbed child (Brown and Webb 2005).

Indeed it is my 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. They are all skills that are essential to the playworker.

**Playwork is about 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 raising their self-esteem generally. Roberts (1995) has attempted to apply some of Piaget’s thinking about schemas 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 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 be sensitive to 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 and so on. Roberts goes on to suggest that by responding to these favoured schemas we are giving the child a powerful message; in effect ‘I respect the things that matter to you’. By so doing the playworker can help to build the child’s self-esteem.

**Playworkers need to develop their own cultural awareness: macro and micro**

Else (2001) suggests that, ‘with knowledge based on child development’ therapeutic playworkers need to have ‘cultural competence’ – of their own and others’ cultures. This is no less true of any playworker in any setting. Else 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, an after-school club in a big city is likely to be influenced by several cultures: the culture of the nation, the city, the local estate, the venue, the children who use that venue and so on.

**Conclusion**

Clearly the children’s learning and development derive substantially from the playworkers’ ability to create an enriched play environment that is 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, helps to create a good quality playwork environment: in other words, an environment that offers adaptability to the children, and so encourages the compound flexibility process. Through their empathy, and their ability to interpret the children’s play cues effectively, playworkers are able to create strong trusting relationships, which in turn help to enhance the children’s self-esteem. If such approaches were applied in a typical playwork setting in the UK, I would expect children to cope well with their immediate world, and also to develop naturally. I have seen this straightforward playwork approach work very effectively in settings as diverse as adventure playgrounds, after-school clubs, hospitals and prisons – even in Romania, with some of the most play-deprived children in the world.