CHILDREN AND DEVELOPMENT: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

When we take care of children, we are also helping the human species find the truth and understand the world.

(Gopnik et al. 1999: 211)

This chapter begins by looking at what elements need to be in place to ensure that children develop to their full potential and have opportunities to explore and extend all their capacities and capabilities. It will further explore the generalized impact on children’s development of social breakdown because of war and conflict – looking in detail at the developmental processes of early childhood, and noting what happens when that progress is interrupted.

The major theories of play will be outlined, with the emphasis here on play not only as a necessary feature of childhood and essential component of development, but also as a means to regain ‘lost childhoods’.

The context for development

The starting point is an examination and exploration of the ideal conditions for development. This rests on the simple question: What do children need in order to develop?

What springs to mind if you pause for a moment to reflect on this? Clearly there are some basic components: love, security, food, shelter, a family and community, opportunities for play, self-expression and interaction, healthcare and other welfare support, and education in its broadest sense. These are just some of the elements that can contribute towards a positive early childhood. Research into
child development does indeed reveal that the achievement of full potential rests on the basic human requirements of food, shelter, protection, care and affection being met by children’s caregivers.

At the same time, opportunities to explore the physical environment, interaction with others and induction into the rituals and norms of their communities, through the structure of language, relationships, song, art and story, are also essential for all children.

It is through considering all these elements that we begin to appreciate the full meaning of child development – that is, the holistic growth and maturation of a child’s emotional, social, physical and intellectual capacities, equipping them to participate in their communities and cultures.

From their earliest days, children are also developing individual skills, competencies and interests that form the foundation for all that follows. What has been described above should not be an exceptional experience for some children but is the right of all children.

In peaceful, affluent societies it can be very easy to take these building blocks for development for granted. But even in communities that are relatively materially well off all these components are not always in place for children. To give just one example, the rates of child abuse in the UK point to the fact that, even within a society that is relatively wealthy, this material security alone does not guarantee a positive childhood. Nevertheless, material and practical support provides a framework within which it is easier to operate a functioning community and family network, in which positive child development can take place.

How war affects communities

In countries and communities where political, social and economic instability leads to civil conflict, or when there is war between countries, the material aspects of a community, its institutions and services, are disrupted and weakened. This in turn impacts on the abilities of families and individuals always to maintain the emotional focus on growing children, as attention instead has to be placed on securing food, healthcare and so on.

It is sometimes easy to see the impact of war just in terms of loss of life, injury and damage to the concrete environment, whether this is in the destruction of buildings or the loss of services such as power and water supplies. However, it is important to acknowledge that the impact of the chaos caused to the social fabric of families and communities can be as damaging for the development of the child as any concrete impact. For young children, it is the fact that their carers are
perhaps emotionally and physically exhausted, and unable to call on the usual support normally available at times of family crisis, which will have a profound impact.

From this perspective of social as well as physical damage, we will begin to build the case for the importance of play as a restorative and healing experience for young children. This is not just because play in itself is a formative experience for the individual child, but also because play is rooted in the experience and representation of events and objects within a family and a community.

It is important to consider the everyday life of the developing child in order to really appreciate and understand the ways that war, conflict and violence severely undermine and distort childhoods. Apart from the obvious and direct material impact of violence in a community and the subsequent dangers of injury and death, there are other, less visible, impacts on children.

These less visible pressures on children and children’s lives are often the consequence of the destruction of the social networks and mores that bind a community. This may be hard to imagine for those of us who have never lived in such circumstances, as there is much that we take for granted about acceptable behaviours in our daily lives.

In most communities there are unspoken and codified norms of behaviour and interaction that mediate all our daily experiences. These norms are underpinned by tradition and custom, and are further reinforced by stable political and social structures. Behavioural norms are, day in and day out, reflected back in popular culture, through television or in newspapers and magazines. These norms are also transmitted to children in other ways – for instance, through stories and religious and social practices.

When those norms are violated – for example in the UK today when parents are neglectful or when partners are abusive – such behaviours are condemned, and this process of social reinforcement (through civil and social structures, whether they are religious, political or social) can be seen in all communities worldwide.

What is acceptable and what is not acceptable will clearly vary over time and place. Nevertheless, although there are exceptions, it can be argued that there are universal norms, shared by most human communities. These include sanctions against killing, taboos against incest, respect for elders in a community and responsibility for the young.

As already noted, one of the less obvious impacts of war, civil conflict and continual violence in a community is the erosion of social and behavioural norms. The stress of having to cope with and adapt to ongoing violence causes people to behave and react in extreme
ways. For some people, a coping mechanism will be to flout normally agreed and acceptable forms of behaviour in an effort to regain control over an uncontrollable situation, or just because there is nothing to stop them. An alternative means of coping might be the attempt to regain control by exerting sway over those who have even less power.

This is why, again and again, one of the reported results of ongoing conflict, whether due to war or civil conflict, is that rates of violence towards women and children increase. This is the case within all communities, including those that are under attack and those that are the aggressors.

This may be manifest in increased levels of child rape and child abuse. The normal sanctions and protective mechanisms that maintain order in societies are removed at times of social upheaval, and vulnerable populations are therefore made even more vulnerable at times of crisis.

Bronfenbrenner’s model of ‘ecological development’ (1979) sets this out in a particularly clear way – describing four layers or concentric circles of society all of which impact on the child, and within which the child is an active agent (although it was only some time later that Bronfenbrenner acknowledged the agency of the child).

These layers start with the child in the centre surrounded by the immediate and extended family. Next there is the direct community, with friends and neighbours. Surrounding this are institutions such as schools or health services, religious and other leaders, and at the outside are the larger national institutions and services, government and media, all reinforcing values and beliefs.

Children are active participants in this model, caught in a dynamic process where their lives are shaped by all the influences around them and they in turn have an impact. Therefore, while it is important to see how unusual and traumatic events affect the individual directly, it is also important to realize that much of the impact on the individual is due to the dismantling of wider relationships, social networks and institutions. This chapter will go on to bring together thinking about individual development against the context of wider social, political and cultural connections, and look at the vital role of play in development and in healing.

**How children develop**

There are increasing strides being made in the field of child development. More is now known about the importance of the early years of life, and how later patterns of behaviour are shaped by early experiences, than ever before. This is demonstrated particularly by research
in the last ten years into the development of the brain in infancy. We will explore this research later in the chapter.

Child development is a continuous process, but there are distinct phases. The period from birth to the age of 3 sees children’s evolving capacities at their most active. Children are learning to walk and talk, to form relationships and to become part of a family and community. The natural world also provides an area of enormous fascination.

The safety to explore and to overcome challenges is one of the key features of this point in life – particularly through play. While this may be taken for granted, when safety and security do not surround a child and family the opportunities for children to test and extend their evolving capacities are not available, and this has a negative impact on the child’s development. Birth to 3, while being a key period of development, is a time when children are particularly vulnerable in terms of survival and damage if conditions are not conducive (Molteno 1996).

From 3 onwards children lay claim to their wishes for independence and autonomy versus their roles and responsibilities in relation to others. Children are testing their physical abilities and experimenting with their physical and social environments. Linguistic development is rapid at this stage. Friendships, treasured objects and interests are all part of the assertion of self. The adult and natural worlds provide endless opportunities for investigation and learning – and if this learning is supported and encouraged, children develop and gain confidence in themselves and their competencies.

Taking this as a snapshot of the process of child development, the academic focus in the past has typically been on the debate between those convinced about the influence of genetic inheritance versus those emphasizing environmental factors (nature vs. nurture). Evidence now points to an interactionist perspective as offering the most informed and accurate framework for child development at this point. This means that the biological characteristics of a child are in constant interplay with the child’s environment. One shapes and responds to the other.

An acknowledgement therefore of the complexity of the child’s social and environmental systems, as demonstrated in Bronfenbrenner’s model of ecological development, referred to above, is essential. This is because children develop through social interactions and social structures – all of which have an important influence on the child’s overall individual development.
Early brain development

In the past, it was believed that the structure of the brain was genetically predetermined and largely in place before birth. Scientists were not aware of the enormous and formative impact of an infant’s first experiences.

Research in infant neuroscience (see Gopnik et al. 1999) reveals that from birth, and before, the infant’s brain is full of cells that trigger in response to their interactions and experiences of the world.

The nerve cells in the brain are called neurons, and they are in place before birth. At the time of birth infants have approximately a thousand billion brain cells. Each neuron has a long fibre (axon) that sends information in the form of electrical impulses to other cells. Information is also received from other cells through short fibres (dendrites).

At birth, the neurons are not connected. As children grow and an increasing amount of information is received in the brain, the dendrites branch out, forming tree-like structures as they receive signals from many neurons. Early brain development is about the formation and reinforcement of such connections. The point at which neurons connect and exchange information is called the synapse: ‘Connections among neurons are formed as the growing child experiences the surrounding world and forms attachments to parents, family members, and other caregivers’ (Shore 1997: 17). Therefore, an infant’s early experiences create neural activity and subsequent neural connections, that can be in place for life (Gopnik et al. 1999).

New technologies, such as MRI (magnetic resonance imaging – showing the brain structure) and PET (positron emission tomography – measuring brain activity) scans and other brain imaging technologies have revealed that the brain, from before birth and onwards, is affected by environmental factors. And it is during the first three years of life that the majority of developmental neural and synaptic activity takes place – setting out the networks for later life.

From birth onwards there is a rapid and enormous growth in synaptic activity that peaks at about the age of 3. At 3 children have more neural pathways than adults, and children’s brains are two and a half times more active that the brains of adults (Shore 1997: 21). This synaptic density remains in place until about the age of 10, when unused synaptic connections fall away.

Clearly, these research findings indicate that early experiences are even more important than once believed. The neural pathways that become established are those that are in repeated use. In this way, early experiences have a decisive impact on how the brain becomes wired. (Gopnik et al. 1999). What this means is that early experiences
have an overall effect on children’s abilities to relate to others and to the external world, to learn, to express their feelings and to take forward their overall development.

Of enormous importance appears to be the fact that an infant’s early experiences are mediated by their primary caregiver. What this means is that the quality of the infant-carer relationship is of crucial significance for early brain development. Therefore, as Shore (1997: 26) notes: ‘Neuroscientists are finding that a strong, secure attachment to a nurturing caregiver can have a protective biological function, helping a child withstand (and indeed, learn from) the ordinary stresses of daily life. There is no single “right” way to create this capacity; warm, responsive care can take many forms’.

It is also important to bear in mind that the brain can change in response to new stimuli, so later experiences will also have an impact. There are also critical periods in children’s developmental progress that are crucial for certain parts of brain functioning. For instance, those areas of the brain that regulate stress (the limbic system) are wired early in life, perhaps before the age of 6 months (Shore 1997).

Negative experiences such as maternal depression can also impact on the infant. It has been demonstrated, while not true in all cases, that maternal depression can adversely affect healthy brain development, particularly affecting the area of the brain associated with emotions. There are other risk factors such as alcohol and drug abuse that can be seen to have a long-lasting effect on the developing child and are now demonstrated to influence cognitive functioning in a negative way.

The predictability of the physical environment, access to health services, family stress and continuity of care are all now seen to have not just an emotional but also a biological impact on the young child. It is also important to note that researchers such as Greenspan and Wider, 1997 cited in Shore 1997, believe that interventions can mediate and compensate for negative early experiences.

Research (see Shore 1997; Gopnik et al. 1999) also makes a link between early brain development and stress and the development of the endocrine and immune systems. This means that if a child is exposed to continual stress and trauma when an infant, and the caregivers are unable to mitigate this impact, the child will become over-sensitized to stress and will be on constant guard, responding to threats and stresses even when such threats are not great.

It is important to pause for a moment here and consider in more detail what we mean by ‘stress’ in relation to very young infants. When we are adults, stressful situations are those when we feel we have lost control, or when we are doing something for the first time.
Often what is helpful is that there is some part of the experience that we are familiar with, that we can build on for reassurance. For instance, if we are taking an examination, previous experience of tests and examinations will help us determine what strategies we need to put in place to reduce stress.

From the perspective of a very young infant, the world is full of new experiences. This is why the routines and connections established in the early days between the infant and the caregiver are so important. The smallest interactions, whether in response to crying and being held, being fed or changed, or tone of voice, are potentially life-changing events for an infant, especially if the quality of that interaction is harsh or uncaring, or undertaken by adults whose own lives are disrupted and insecure.

Trauma and neglect will impact in other ways on the development of the young child. For instance, a child’s ability to form secure attachments will be influenced by the quality of the caregiving that they have had themselves.

It is also the case that the security of the attachment experienced by young children will affect their capacity to form relationships, to be empathetic and to express emotions and control behaviour. Gunnar’s research, reported in Shore (1997: 28), suggests that ‘babies who receive sensitive and nurturing care in their first year of life are less likely than other children to respond to minor stress’.

At the same time, under-stimulation, emotional neglect and social deprivation will also impact on children. Researchers in the USA (see Perry 1996) suggest that a combination of experiences may affect the brain’s development. Stress or under-stimulation result in a lack of development of higher brain functions related to abstract thinking and behaviours; instead, lower brain functions associated with immediate survival responses are over-developed. This can lead to over-aggressive behaviours in response to ordinary occurrences, such as when someone raises their voice.

What then is the role of play in early brain development? Crucially, it would appear that play can actually shape and structure the brain, as researchers who have investigated the role of play in supporting synaptic development have found (see Jambor 2000).

Not all types of play do this; the function is most apparent in imaginative play characterized by engagement and interest. This play includes those fantasies and dramas that children initiate themselves and then choose to pursue and elaborate. It has elements of repetition and is fun. It activates and encourages neural pathways, and because it is often replayed, it promotes memory skills.

In conclusion, the current debate regarding brain development has highlighted the importance of the first three years of life. Nevertheless,
researchers (e.g. Meade 2003) are now exploring the perception that, notwithstanding the importance of these first three years for children’s development, later childhood and adulthood also provide opportunities for learning and development. Consequently, interventions such as daycare and early years services can be seen to be of benefit for children who have not necessarily had the best start.

The implications of this for those children and communities affected by war, conflict and violence are serious. Given what may be a crisis situation in early infancy, if children are to reach their full potential they need opportunities for secure and stable relationships with early caregivers in an environment that fosters the development of close and responsive relationships and opportunities for self-expression. Play can be a key way in which childhood can be restored.

The role of play in early childhood development

Play has been notoriously hard to define and research, and there are numerous theories about its purpose and form. This section will begin with a brief outline of the major theories of play. This will provide a backdrop upon which to reflect on what happens when opportunities to play are denied to young children whose lives have been disrupted by conflict. The section will then trace the impact of conflict on play as well as the role of play in restoring childhood.

The development of theories of play

Ancient children played and, in a haphazard way, authors mentioned it. But no one wrote on play. Plato, who described how clumsy children were called donkeys, did not think that his philosopher-kings had to play.

(Cohen 1993: 19)

Cohen’s useful review of the academic literature on play notes the substantial absence of significant reflection on the subject until the nineteenth century, and recalls the words of Johan Huizinga, who in his pioneering text *Homo Ludens* (1949) criticized earlier writers on play: all their theories, he said, ‘have one thing in common; they all start from the assumption that play must serve something that is not play, that it must serve some kind of biological purpose’ (Cohen 1993: 19). According to Cohen, Huizinga goes on to assert that play is at the heart of all human development and is the basis for the development of human communities.
Huizinga’s history of play reveals that interpretations of play are very much subject to their time. Trends in investigations into play tend to reflect wider cultural, political and scientific concerns. For instance, students of child development are familiar with the views of the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) who was perhaps one of the first people to argue the merits and importance of play. His views were very much a product of the Age of Enlightenment, and reflected concerns about the beginnings of technological development and investigation and man’s autonomy in relation to nature and God.

In turn, Rousseau’s views influenced other early educational thinkers such as Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and others, all of whom saw play as a means by which children investigate and come to understand nature and the spiritual and material worlds, therefore emphasizing the notion of play with purpose.

Overall, these theories can be seen to resonate with the wider cultural and political themes of their times – and what this tells us is that writers are influenced not only by what has gone before but also by what is current. Hence, definitions of play, investigations into its function and purpose, and discussion of detail (e.g. the role of adults in guiding, shaping and extending play) have been and continue to be a source of debate, reflecting the wider debates of the age.

What is play?

There is great difficulty in using the umbrella term ‘play’. The focus needs to be refined so we can establish what is meant by this word. Many things called ‘play’ by those of us working with children are not so.

(Bruce 1997: i)

It is useful to be aware of the main arguments and theories of play, as all of them have continuing influence on the way in which we conceptualize play today. This section will outline some of the major theories of play.

Theories of play can be said to fall into five main categories:

• play as a means of ridding the body of surplus energy or as an evolutionary phase;
• play as a means to understand the social world;
• play as a means of developing cognitive skills including language;
• play as means to come to terms with emotional and inner states;
• formal taxonomies of play.
What distinguishes play from other forms of human activity are its qualities of spontaneity and self-initiation. Across human cultures all children, in normal circumstances, have an intrinsic desire to play. The features of play include the symbolic use of objects, its pretend ‘as if’ nature, the construction of rules, and the fact that play is more often than not fun and risk-free, and does not have to have an end purpose.

Play enables children to explore the customs and roles of their direct community, to reflect upon their inner selves and their emotions, to encounter abstract thinking and to develop communication skills. Play is also often said to provide a vehicle for children to create meaning from their experiences (Bruce 1997).

We will now briefly review a range of theoretical perspectives on play. We can see that biologists, psychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and others have all attempted to define play from their particular theoretical standpoint.

Early theories tended to concentrate on global evolutionary explanations with a focus on the physical features of play. Later theorists have, in the main, focused on the internal, emotional functions of play. The cognitive role of play came to the fore in the mid-twentieth century, and has been a key feature of later approaches to play, influencing the development of services for young children.

More recently, there has been a consolidation of play theory, providing an overall holistic framework for child development within a social context. The significance of play within the developmental context has been increasingly recognized. Today, from a developmental perspective, we draw on a rich range of theories and ideas from a variety of academic disciplines, enabling us to value play as a vital way of being in early childhood.

**Historical views of play**

Herbert Spencer, in 1878, drew links between children’s play and that of animals. He noted that play occurred because of excess energy. He also drew parallels between play and art, viewing art as a product of surplus energy after basic human needs had been met.

Spencer’s ideas can be traced to those of Schiller (1845), who also saw play as a means for children to use up surplus energy. He suggested that it was because children did not have to work to survive, as adults did, that they therefore had amounts of energy that were not used. Play was important for adults too as it was linked to creativity
and beauty. Other writers of the time thought that play in fact restored and did not deplete energy. These theories were known as ‘recreation’ or ‘relaxation’ theories.

Another interesting theory from the turn of the twentieth century was that of Hall (1908), who proposed that in play humans progress through all the stages of evolutionary development, and children’s play is the evidence of this. For instance, the animal stage of human development is repeated in children’s desire to climb and swing. Hall’s ‘recapitulation theory’ rests on the notion that play provides an outlet for instinctive behaviours, and that play lessens instinctual urges.

Groos (1901), in The Play of Man, saw play as a preparation for adulthood, with children acting out and pretending to take on adult roles. He also began to elaborate the role of play as a means by which children develop consciousness. Later on Bruner (1983: 43 quoted in Bruce 1997: 31) extended this definition by describing play as ‘preparation for the technical and social life that constitutes human culture’.

Similarly, Maria Montessori (1870–1952) placed importance on children learning about reality. She viewed pretend play as primitive and felt that children benefit from adult guidance to enable them to explore the properties of the real world through specially constructed play materials.

Behaviourist perspectives on play such as that of Skinner (1938) conceptualize play as a learnt response to a set of stimuli – for example, toys. Play was also seen as a set of problem-solving behaviours, because of its complex and investigative features.

More recently Bateson (1972), considered play as a means of developing children’s communication skills. This theory is based on his observations of the shared ‘scripts’ that children create as they play together. Children will often talk about what a character will say and do, and then go on, in character, to act this out. This ability to reflect on communication, as Bateson observes, provides children with ‘metacommunication skills’ – that is, the ability to reflect upon and consider the functions and forms of communication.

In 1962, Jean Piaget was one of the first to shift the focus on play away from social and emotional development and towards cognitive development. Piaget argued that play contributes to intellectual development through the processes of ‘accommodation’ and ‘assimilation’. Assimilation is the dominant mode in play, with children achieving it through play by taking an idea and making it fit with what they know and understand. With the emergence of symbolic play and abstract thinking, evidenced through a child’s ability to represent the world, we see the basis for the development of later
symbolic behaviours. The symbolic nature of play can be seen as a necessary precursor for other symbolic behaviours such as writing or formal dance.

The theories of Lev Vygotsky (1978) stress the mental representation of symbolic actions and objects as one of the key features of play. He went as far as to say that play is the leading activity of childhood, as it supports all aspects of a child’s development. The ability to mentally represent experience, as happens during play, leads to the ability to think in abstract terms, one of the most important facets of human behaviour.

Added to this, Vygotsky stressed the importance of social and cultural factors in the development of play. He noted that make-believe play is socially and culturally determined, and as children explore this type of play they are deepening their understanding of the social life and rules of their communities.

Many others have written about play, and as well as proposing explanations of its function, attempts have been made to categorize play in all its forms. For instance, Mildred Parten, writing in the 1930s, categorized play into the following types: children as onlookers; solitary play as a child plays alone; parallel play, when children play alongside but not with each other; and group play, when children play together.

Corinne Hutt (1979) created a taxonomy of play—attempting to categorize play into different types. According to Hutt, broadly speaking, the three main categories of play are:

- **epistemic play** – within which children learn and explore the world and its properties;
- **ludic play** – when children are using their imaginations but are not learning;
- **games with rules** – structured activities.

The notion of some types of play being of higher value as more is learnt is not an uncommon feature in theories of play. Many theorists describe play when children are engaged in imaginative exploration and creation as lacking in structure and depth. It could be argued that this ascription of lack of value is more about the fact that researchers find, or have found until recently, it very hard to follow, understand and encapsulate children’s imaginative free play. Adults, by their very presence, will affect children’s play and the introduction of film and video as research tools has provided an additional dimension of investigation into play.

More recently, Tina Bruce (1997) draws on chaos theory as a model for play. When play is at its most fruitful, it is in ‘free-flow’, she argues.
What this means is that children are solving problems, and symbolically representing their experiences, in ways that are highly creative and spontaneous and of high intellectual order. This requires space, opportunity and safety.

Bruce also offers a critique of the way many other theorists place value on structured play and games with rules, without full appreciation of the value of free-flow play. For Bruce, (1997, 2001) free-flow play:

- is an active process without a product;
- is intrinsically motivated;
- exerts no external pressure to conform to rules, pressures, goals, tasks or definite directions;
- is about possible alternative worlds which involve ‘supposing’ and ‘as if’, involving being imaginative, original, innovative and creative;
- is about participants wallowing in ideas, feelings and relationships, involving reflecting on and becoming aware of what we know or ‘metacognition’;
- actively uses previous first-hand experiences, including struggle, manipulation, exploration, discovery and practice;
- is sustained, and when in full flow, helps us to function in advance of what we can actually do in our real lives;
- requires the use of technical prowess and competencies we have previously developed, allowing us to be in control;
- can be initiated by a child or an adult;
- can be solitary;
- can be in partnership, or groups of adults and/or children, who will be sensitive to each other;
- is an integrating mechanism, which brings together everything we learn, know, feel and understand.

**Play and healing**

From these perspectives, play can be seen as integral to the process of child development. But what role can it have where development has been interrupted through war, conflict or violence? In this context it is to the psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic theories of play that we turn.

The theories of the founder of psychoanalytic theory and practice, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939), have been well documented. His view of play was that it allows children to express negative emotions and to reconcile inner anxieties within the unconscious. The notion of
‘catharsis’ is central to Freud’s theories of play. Catharsis is the reconciliation of instinctive urges with the demands and rules of society as internalized by the individual. Play offers an opportunity for children to reach catharsis and so come to terms with traumatic experiences and events by providing a safe way to express difficult feelings. In this way children gain control over their feelings and are able to deal with situations that are stressful or traumatic. Repetitive play is a particularly important part of this process; playing out a situation again and again can lead to resolution of a problem or feeling.

These approaches focus on the internal and emotional worlds of children, and can therefore be seen as particularly relevant when working with children who have been affected by the disruption and disorder of war and civil conflict. Nevertheless, according to Cohen (1993: 150), this focus again works against play being seen holistically, as play is not valued in itself but is seen as a means to an end.

Within the psychoanalytic approach, Susan Isaacs (1926) is an influential figure in child development. Her interest in Freudian analysis stemmed from an early focus on biological psychology. Isaacs trained as an analyst herself. She ran the Malting House School in Cambridge from 1924 until 1927, working with children between the ages of 2 and 8. She meticulously observed the children in her care and captured her observations in her publications. She went on to found the Department of Child Development at the Institute of Education, University of London, and exercised enormous influence on the development of thinking about early childhood in the UK.

Isaacs saw play as means of expressing the total personality but also noted its healing properties as well as its cognitive potential: ‘For Isaacs, play was “a bridge”, both in the child’s emotional development and in his intellectual development’ (Cohen 1993: 152).

Anna Freud (1896–1982), the youngest daughter of Sigmund, pioneered the field of child analysis. Having previously run a nursery in Vienna where children were encouraged to play, she moved at the beginning of the Second World War to London, where she founded the Hampstead War Nursery and further developed her theories. Anna Freud’s theories were based upon the fact that play reveals the unconscious mind.

Before Anna Freud’s arrival in London, Melanie Klein (1882–1960) had been developing work on child analysis, and her interpretation of the therapeutic process differed from Freud’s. Freud’s arrival led to a split in the British psychoanalytic movement which was resolved when Freud and Klein established separate training courses.
Anna Freud and Melanie Klein both wrote about the therapeutic nature of play and can be seen to be the leading influences in the development of child psychotherapy. Klein developed Freud’s work by stating that there is symbolic meaning in all aspects of play. The main point in the work of both Freud and Klein is that play reveals tensions but is also the means by which such tensions are resolved.

The work of both Freud and Klein heralded the creation of the child psychotherapy movement and associated play, creative and art therapies. The play therapy movement, as described by Victoria Axline in the classic book, *Dibs: In Search of Self* (1990), which looks in detail at the therapeutic process, can be seen to derive more directly from the work of Klein.

Winnicott (1971), a paediatrician who later became a psycho-analyst, was a colleague of Klein. He interpreted play as the intermediary experience between the child’s inner world and the outer world. He stressed that play is a normal occupation of childhood which offers a safe space within which inner tensions can be explored in the outer world.

In Winnicott’s thinking, play therapy sees play as a healing experience, within which children can solve their problems and resolve inner tensions, hence coming to terms with difficult or overwhelming feelings. Importantly, he noted: ‘It is good to remember always that playing is itself a therapy. To arrange for children to be able to play is itself a psychotherapy that has immediate and universal application’ (1971: 50).

From the work of Freud, Klein and Winnicott the play therapy movement has developed. The approach stresses the benefits of a dedicated time and space for children to play within the emotional structure created by the play therapist. Many of the concepts and methods of play therapy are now in wide general use in early years and school settings.

A number of stages exist in the therapeutic play process that it may be helpful for early childhood practitioners to note. The stages are:

- **sensory play** – within this type of play, children use a tactile medium such as clay to explore the world through their senses; they can dribble or shape or smear according to their needs;
- **projective play** – is where children use toys and props to tell a story that will indicate their inner concerns and fears;
- **symbolic play** – is where children negotiate roles and stories, clearly indicating when the play is stopping and starting; children can explore difficult feelings, traumas and experiences through this type of play (Cattanach 1994).
The relationship between the therapist and the child is crucial – it has to be based on an empathy that is not intrusive, and a real connection with the child must be present. The child’s concerns must be paramount and the therapist must allow space for the child to express themselves.

Cross-cultural theories of play

Finally – and particularly in the context of work with refugee children – it is important to consider whether children’s play is a universal phenomenon.

The majority of theorists would argue that it is – all children in all societies appear to engage in activities that would fulfil some of the criteria of play, as described above. That is, children explore and pretend as a way of engaging with the world. More importantly, play everywhere is an ‘enculturing’ process – that is, a means through which children learn about their cultures: ‘Play, a dominant activity of children in all cultures, is viewed to be both a cause and an effect of culture. Play is an expression of a particular culture; play is an important context or vehicle for cultural learning/transmission’ (Roopnarine et al. 1994: 5).

However, children’s play differs in its details in different cultural groups (Roopnarine et al. 1994). Researchers into play have attempted to identify those aspects that are universal and those that may be culturally specific. For instance, Haight et al. (1999) claim that the universal dimensions of play include the way objects are used, and pretend play. More culturally specific dimensions of play include specific play themes, the extent to which children initiate play with caregivers and the choice of play partners. Haight et al. carry on to argue that these differences in play will lead to different developmental pathways for children.

Another important factor when considering cross-cultural dimensions of play is the importance that parents will attribute to the role of play in child development. Hyun (1998) describes how families from European and North American backgrounds tend to emphasize the cognitive importance of play, with an individual perspective on play that is very object- and toy-focused. Meanwhile, families from other backgrounds (although all those researched by Hyun were at that time living in the USA), tend to focus on the social dimensions of play. Therefore, the interactions within play, and the emotional significance of play, are of greater importance.

In Hyun’s study, families not originating from a North American background may also see play and learning as very separate activities.
This is in contrast with prevailing northern European and North American perspectives on play as a tool for learning. Roopnarine et al. (1994) provide a further perspective on the cross-cultural approach, arguing that increasing numbers of researchers are now beginning to question the commonly understood developmental theories of play, especially in terms of children’s play as a means to come to explore self in relation to others, with the individual at the centre of development. Instead, Roopnarine and colleagues suggest that in some cultural contexts children are so integrated within a family and community that they may come to understand the family and its web of social relationships before realizing self. What they then argue for in relation to early years services is a sensitivity to and integration of features of the play of children from diverse cultural groups into the early years setting (such as play themes and stories). This they see as an enriching experience for all.

Finally, as Bruce (2001: 15) notes, ‘Play looks different in different cultural contexts’. Notable differences include:

- whether or not adults play with children and especially whether they initiate play;
- the point at which children are expected not to play any more – ages will vary across cultures;
- the giving of toys – in some cultures toys are seen as essential props for successful play and so are seen as a central feature of childhood;
- play in mixed age groups away from adults.

Conclusion

We have traced the conditions for optimal development for the child and noted how war and conflict destroy the conditions for child development and erode children’s rights, including the right to play.

The importance of the early years has been emphasized via a review of research on early brain development, wherein the earliest relationships help shape children’s responses and ability to interact with the world.

So what do these multiple perspectives on play tell us about the role and importance of play in children’s lives? We can draw the following conclusions.

First, play is a universal feature of child development and happens in all communities which enjoy safety and security, although attitudes to play and its details will vary.
Second, play is both the way that children express themselves and the means through which they resolve issues. Moreover, play is a means by which children learn and hypothesize about the world. Cultural, social, emotional, cognitive and other areas of developmental progress cannot be disentangled in this process.

We will focus in greater detail on how lessons from play theorists can inform the ways that early childhood practitioners can support young asylum-seeking and refugee children later in the book.