

Background paper : The ‘Right to play’ and its relevance for development programmes in support of children

1. Introduction

The entire world recognises the important role play has in a child’s wellbeing and development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) clearly acknowledges this in article 31:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

The “right to play” is thus enshrined in a UN Convention and has therefore become part of international law requiring concrete steps to towards its implementation by the countries who have ratified the Convention (all but the USA and Somalia).

The “African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child” makes exactly the same provisions as the CRC in its article 12 (Leisure, Recreation and Cultural Activities).

Although both documents assert very clearly that play is not an optional or luxury component in a child’s life, this does not translate into children’s experiences, especially if they come from a disadvantaged background. There is hardly any reference to this fundamental aspect of a child’s well-being in development activities or publications related to children’s needs. Usually the focus lies on issues perceived as more pressing, like safety, health and education. Yet if children are to grow up in a holistic way and to live to their full potential the ‘right to play’ - which is currently one of the most neglected of all children’s rights – needs to be promoted strongly, with play and meaningful recreation activities being acknowledged as powerful tools to build resilient, strong and happy individuals.

This concept document will make a case for a strong play movement, explaining the role of play for a child’s development and for becoming a social person, and indicating some of the key challenges for making play a reality in the Southern Africa region. It will also briefly outline some major advocacy initiatives that exist on a regional and international level and which provide a framework for further involvement.¹

2. The importance of play for a child’s development (and society at large)

Play is “nature’s training for life. It is crucial in children’s intellectual and physical growth, in

¹ This summary builds on experiences and findings provided and published by the following organisations: Active Learning Libraries South Africa (ALL-SA); Jo’burg Child Welfare; Wozòbona, terre des homes Germany and International Play Association (IPA)

their social and emotional development and it fosters flexibility and resilience. In a rapidly changing world, play is often the key to children's ability to cope and handle stress positively. Children develop holistically, i.e. using all their senses, physical and social skills, mental capacity and emotions together. The following list explains what is achieved through play on these various levels:

- Play provides a possibility for children to interact with other children and form relationships: They learn to adhere to rules and the "fairness of the game". Play is the medium through which relationships are formed, consolidated and worked through. Individuals (including adults) who can play together can also work together, study together, resolve conflict together. Partnerships are built which extend to school, work and beyond.
- Play allows for spending quality time with peers that is at least temporarily not burdened by other responsibilities or hardships faced in children's everyday lives. Children can be children, enjoy themselves and develop strength through these positive experiences: Children who have opportunities to play become more confident, energetic, focused and vocal about who they are and what they need.
- Play can have a healing effect on children. Children who have been traumatised by loss, grief and consequences of living in poverty also need play, and benefit greatly from it. Play therapy can be used to help them express their sorrows and worries in a safe secure environment, and this need not be done by professionals alone.
- Play keeps children active in a positive manner which is important in combating crime and anti-social activities.
- Children who are able to access safe recreation facilities are less at risk of opportunistic abuse (in all forms): A child who can confidently articulate himself is a child who will be more likely to resist intimidation and exploitation.
- Play fosters cognitive skills: Play activities stimulate children from an early age on and are key to develop their maths and literacy skills (problem-solving, learning to read and write).
Learners who have a chance to engage in play and sports return to the classroom energised and better able to focus on their academic tasks. Teachers and scientists testify to the correlation between physical activity and mental performance.
- Play is a key component in preserving community and culture in the broadest sense, it stimulates healthy interaction across generations and can help to preserve communities' cultural heritage (e.g. through indigenous games, traditional dancing, storytelling....).
- Children's physical development, muscle tone and gross motor co-ordination is enhanced through ball skills and other games.

- Playing children are healthier children: One of the causes of childhood obesity is a lack of opportunity for active play. Children in Johannesburg, especially those living in the derelict high-rise buildings of the CBD are increasingly being diagnosed with rickets, a Vitamin D deficiency caused by a lack of exposure to sunlight.
- Through positive outdoor play experiences, children also gain an appreciation of their natural environment and realize in a playful way that nature is a precious good.

3. The right to play and its implications from a development-oriented perspective

a) The rights-based approach

terre des hommes Germany is an organisation concerned with children's rights in the context of development policy. The most important governing and principal document is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Relevant aspects of its work and that of its partnering organisations include child developmental skills, competence, child rights, the best interest of the child, child participation, children as social subjects and agents of change, and the embedding of the child in its broader social, cultural, economic and political environment.

Including play in the work with children the above mentioned aspects play all play a role, being guiding principles for a rights-based approach which also need careful observation when put into practice²:

Examples:

Best interests: It is in the best interests of the child to play as long as it is safe and appropriate to that child's stage of development, and meets that child's current needs and context. Children often need to fulfill responsibilities of school, home, work and family chores before they can have the freedom of play. It is not in the best interests of children that these duties become so burdensome they preclude play.

Inclusion and equity: For all children to realise their rights, all these rights apply to every child, equitably. For play, this means that facilitators of play must make sure that, as far as possible, there is inclusion and not discrimination on the basis of colour, class, age and gender and, in particular, that children with a disability are included.

Inclusion also refers to anti-bias attitudes and a celebration of the diversity of indigenous practices in play, art, music, dance, drama and stories.

Children with a special need for play provision include those in high-rise buildings, in informal settlements, those living in the care of grandmothers in town or country, and those in children's homes and in hospitals. This also includes working children whether they are labourers on farms or helping run the family business, or are burdened with childcare and domestic chores.

Participation

² Cf. 'A Chance to Play': A manual promoting play for children in South Africa, Johannesburg, November 2009 (ISBN: 978-0-9814271-2-6)

Children have the right to participate in decisions that affect them (Article 12 in the UNCRC). In play, this includes making choices about what kind of play they would like to be involved in, with whom, where, with what, and for how long they would like to play. Children can also give opinion on how they would like their play environments to be developed and be part of developing them. Even babies can indicate preferences for games and play things. From the time children are able to verbalise opinion, information can be shared with them to assist in meaningful decision making about play choices for themselves.

Adults also need to recognise that children can be agents and creators of play. It is important that children are free to choose activities that are most meaningful to them from the options available: a sad child might choose to play with sand and water; an angry child might choose to kick a ball around and so on. As with other rights, children's right to play is realised with the participation of and in partnership with adults. Adults may be part of the play, or may be on the sidelines keeping a watchful eye. Adults can support, stretch and develop children's understanding, values, creativity, imagination and skills. Participation also includes the right of freedom of association in children's clubs, sports clubs and other children's groups.

Fairness: A rights-based approach is very important as play experiences in childhood carry life-long consequences. If play experiences are positive and affirming, the child gains greater self-confidence and social skills. On the other hand, negative experiences such as bullying, exclusion and humiliation on the playground, make for lower self-esteem and resentment, which can have a negative impact on the rest of their lives.

When play goes wrong it is the responsibility of adults to intervene wisely. Those who facilitate play and train peer leaders for play should look at ways to establish an accepted code of conduct among the children that encourages fair play (the right to justice), inclusion (the right not to be discriminated against) and affirmation of each person's value to the group (the right to dignity). Because it affects the whole child ("head, heart and hand") play can be very powerful in changing attitudes and building good values.

b) The playing child: A change of perspective

There are serious challenges for children's well-being which need serious attention and intervention. These challenges, however, often overshadow the child's potential while emphasizing the need. In the case of anti-child trafficking and other child protection campaigns which focus on adults protecting children this leads to children sometimes only being portrayed as dependent, vulnerable and weak. Indeed, many children are made vulnerable, and certainly do need loving guidance and protection from adults. But just as important is the need to recognise that children need outlets for expressing themselves, and play is a very important one in this regard, helping him to present as actor not just as victim.

Focusing on the weak and vulnerable aspects is a deficit model approach. An affirmative approach would be a view which sees children as capable of participating in decisions affecting them, and more able to avoid difficulties and face them down. It affirms a child's ability to rise above, and perhaps prevent or resist negativity and abuse. Play is instrumental in this change of perspective towards a more constructive and hopeful image of children, without precluding attention to the negative and still existing needs.

4. The reality: Infringements on the right to play

There are a number of factors that compromise children's right to play. Though the list is not exhaustive it mentions some key infringements which have been cited by international play practitioners:

- Lack of play spaces (no recreational facilities available)
- Unsafe environments for play (inner cities, roadsides, dumpsites, abandoned buildings, unsupervised natural areas that are prone to accidents, e.g. rivers)

➤ Not prioritizing play for children – parents, government departments
(Parents or caregivers often did not have the chance to play during their own childhood, hence they often do not even know how to play with their sons and daughters or are ignorant of its relevance for their child's development.

Governments do not budget for play spaces or a broad supply of educational toys in government schools/pre-schools. Research shows that only 16 % of children aged 0 – 5 years in South Africa have access to ECD services and, of those services, only 18 % provide for children aged from birth – 3 years. Statistics show that in South Africa at least 84 % of children will start school without the necessary school-readiness, reading- or maths-readiness skills and that for every 100 pupils in Grade 1, only 52 will make it to Grade 12).

- Excluding children from play due to disability or race (lack of play opportunities for children with mental or physical challenges, unequal access to play and sports facilities or training opportunities, exclusion of marginalized communities)

5. International advocacy for play

This neglect of a child's right to play often has serious negative consequences for his or her development. Therefore a lot needs to be done to make people understand the importance of playing, while not only demanding the right to play to be realised but also practically supporting parents and caregivers in doing so.

It is important that government and other agencies understand that health is not merely the absence of disease, and the highest possible level of physical health and mental wellbeing for young people cannot be realized through the health sector alone. Play and recreation have profound long-term human benefits that go beyond providing for immediate needs such as food, shelter, family and school.

In essence comprehensive strategies need to be in place to ensure that resources are available and that caregivers and play leaders are being empowered as the immediate enablers of play for and with children.

The International Play Association (IPA) has initiated a Global Consultation process among its members and like-minded organisations aimed to raise awareness of the importance of

article 31 within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Consultations were held across the globe that led to a global report on the state of play internationally. Goals of the project were:

- a) to *mobilize a worldwide network* of article 31 advocates and to harness their expertise to raise awareness of the importance of play in child development.
- b) to *gather specific material* demonstrating the infringement of the child's right to play throughout the world which can inform a Day of Discussion and/or the development of a General Comment.
- c) to formulate practical recommendations for governments with regard to compliance with article 31.

A consultation meeting (November 2010) was also organised in South Africa. Participants from various, not only African countries contributed to the Global Report mentioned above. Partly due to this contribution from IPA the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have agreed at the beginning of 2011 to prepare a General Comment on article 31. It was published in March 2013.

This development can be regarded as a great success for the promotion of article 31 since in their General Comments the UN provide an authoritative interpretation and make concrete recommendations on how to best implement specific articles of the CRC.

The meeting in South Africa 2010 furthermore came up with the following messages to government:

- ◆ Play is integral to ALL government children's services
- ◆ Play spaces need a budget
- ◆ Include disabilities in your play provision
- ◆ Promote child participation
- ◆ Lead in promoting World Play Day (an internationally recognized day for play in the UN calendar)
- ◆ Disseminate information about the importance of play
- ◆ Facilitate in-service training about play for all staff who provide services to children
- ◆ Put child friendly spaces in government buildings e.g. magistrate's court
- ◆ There must be a representative from each government department on a play forum which we are planning to establish
- ◆ Encourage community support for a park watch
- ◆ Improve communication between the community, NGOs and the private sector
- ◆ Make UN CRC Article 31 and the African Charter Article 12 a reality

Participants agreed that a play advocacy network should be established that takes specific demands further on the national level. It would also serve as a platform to exchange information on developments in the field of play, and to share experiences and examples of best practices.

6. Taking action

The programme 'A chance to play' (ACTP):

ACTP was launched in 2008 with the intention to improve the lives of disadvantaged children and youth by linking opportunities for play and sports with learning and training programmes.

It was co-ordinated by German-based child rights organization terre des hommes (tdh) and realized in cooperation with nine South African NGOs in the provinces of Limpopo, Gauteng and the Eastern Cape. Funding was provided by the Volkswagen Group Workers Council.

This afforded the partnering organisations the opportunity to start or expand play initiatives in their areas. Capitalising on the positive publicity South Africa was receiving for hosting the soccer world cup, the resources mobilized for the programme also allowed the implementing organisations to meet two or three times yearly to discuss their challenges and opportunities as well as what they were learning from their work in the 'play' arena.

More than 35.000 children could be reached through A Chance to Play. Several publications for parents, caregivers and play practitioners are available as resource and training material. A website, newsletters and play days organized across South Africa (including World Play Day May 28) are other examples of how the issue of play was promoted.

Building on this foundation more organisations have decided to join forces to make the right to play a reality for children across Southern Africa.

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