Chapter 1

Perspectives on play
Introduction

Play has a lasting effect, as illustrated by this play memory from Ella:

Memories of being 6

I grew up on a farm. We had at our disposal in the paddock large fallen-down trees, which had been pushed together. These fallen trees, with their rough bark, broken branches and exposed roots, became our ships. Groups of boys and girls would congregate around these trees, naming their ships and collectively creating their adventures. These were genderless ships. We would jump from ship to ship, totally engrossed in our latest imaginary adventure. We imagined violent seas, storms encroaching upon our fleet, stealing each other’s ships, being pirates and saving people from drowning. We created our imaginary world of ships. We controlled our imaginary world. We felt powerful. (Ella, 15 years)

Memories of childhood are often about fantasy or social play. In early childhood education, play has been seen as the central concept that underpins this area of teaching, regardless of how it is named or defined. In most European heritage communities around the world, play is valued both pedagogically in the teaching community and conceptually in the academic community, and it is also valued for its own sake by most families. Why is play so highly valued in these communities, and why do so many people remember the play of their childhood? This book looks at these central questions from the perspectives of children, families, educators and academics. This chapter begins our conceptual journey by asking you to examine your own memories of play, with a view to understanding the diversity of perspectives on the word play.

We hope you will begin to reflect upon the following issues, among others:

• Why is play important to children?
• What does play look like across the generations?
• Has it changed?
• Is play enacted differently across the diverse range of settings where children live?
• Does the setting in which children play matter?

As you read this chapter, consider these important questions in relation to what meaning the child makes of their world through play.

This chapter has been designed to give you the following experience and understandings:

• Through making explicit your own views on play (this chapter), you will move from an intuitive to a conscious understanding of the social, psychological and critical value of play (the remainder of the book).
Chapter 1 Perspectives on play

- Gaining insights into the multiple perspectives on what play is (this chapter) will lay the foundations for being able to critique different theoretical perspectives on play (later in the book).

- Examining the range of definitions of play in psychology and early childhood education is important for understanding that there are three dominant conceptions of play: (1) a developmental view of play; (2) a critical or feminist poststructuralist view of play; and (3) a cultural-historical view of play. All three conceptions of play are needed to work effectively within the field of early childhood education.

Play memories

Researching play 1.1

What play memories do you have from your childhood? Think back and document one memory that feels significant to you.

When we spoke to practising teachers in Australia about their play memories, they mentioned that their play:

- captured an important feeling state – it felt ‘good’, ‘happy’, ‘safe’ or ‘risky’
- was often unsupervised – playing from dawn until dusk, just needing to be home before dark
- featured groups of children – usually of different ages, living within the neighbourhood, converging like gangs and roaming streets or paddocks/vacant land
- involved nature – trees, rocks, long grass, dirt, etc.
- did not include adults
- often involved high levels of risk, jumping from unstable structures, climbing old trees, wading through creeks, using broken glass, etc.

The play memories of the Australian teachers we interviewed were different from the play experiences of the children they taught. These teachers identified that play for the children in their centres was about using manufactured toys, being supervised by adults, having organised play spaces (e.g. a playroom) and playtimes (e.g. play dates organised by the parents, driving children to another child’s home), use of safe equipment (playgrounds carefully policed), age-appropriate toys (with infants, toddlers and preschoolers having different kinds of safe toys) and non-messy activities.

Reflect upon why you think the teachers’ play memories were so different from the play experiences they set up for the children in their centres. Have our policies and regulations for safe environments reduced children’s opportunities
Play in the Early Years

to play, to take risks and to simply experience the world for themselves? Are we over-regulating children? Do we create learned helplessness? From the child’s perspective, what might be the challenges for them in their play?

In Sweden, Sandberg (2003) has investigated the play memories of 478 university student teachers between the ages of 20 and 62 years, finding that their play was connected with physical environments (e.g. private home, country, garden, farm, natural settings, the woods, water, trees, outdoor areas), focused around social contexts (e.g. parents, siblings, friends, animals, relatives) and cultural environments (e.g. cinema, disco). These environments were highly significant because the place of play held a creative dimension for the student teachers. She looked closely into the play memories in relation to age:

- **Ages 3 to 6 years**: Play mostly featured natural settings, such as playing with a cat, family play, playing with pegs, fantasy play – such as pretending to cook – or being on a hobby horse. However, the play also featured a diverse range of play contexts, such as the sandbox, playhouse, playground and preschool.

- **Ages 7 to 12 years**: Playing in natural contexts also featured for this age group, such as playing ‘hide and seek with friends’, cycling on tracks, building secret places, playing horse and stable, family play and store play. Other kinds of play also featured, such as playing school, charades, play in the schoolyard, sports (basketball, football), sandbox play and building a playhouse.

- **Ages 13 to 18 years**: Places that were identified by this age group as affording what might be deemed leisure or play spaces included restaurants, department stores, the cinema and the disco. Only some featured secret places, clubs and youth centres.

- **Adults**: Mostly the places that afforded leisure or pleasurable memories named by 487 of the university students included natural settings, restaurants, department stores and cinemas, as well as play with children in school (e.g. hunting games, sandbox play).

In the play memories discussed above, did you notice similarities across ages? What were the differences you noticed? Why do we say that children play and adults work? Do you think adults play in the same way as children? Does age matter? Reflect upon your own play across a range of ages. What do you notice about your own play development over time?

It is interesting to note the play memories that were important in the Swedish context. We can see similarities with the Australian teachers in terms of mentioning ‘nature’ as an important place to play for children, but also somewhere to enjoy as adults. Research shows that children’s early experiences of nature have a positive and lasting effect (see Payne 2005, 2010; Reid & Payne 2011). Further to this research, another study was undertaken in Sweden, of 111 adults aged from 22 to 63 years (half of
whom were experienced preschool teachers, with the others studying a degree in early childhood education) who were interviewed about their play experiences as children (Sandberg & Vuorinen 2008). The types of toys with which these teachers and student teachers recall playing tended to feature six categories:

- toys for playing house (e.g. dolls, household utensils)
- outdoor toys (e.g. skipping ropes and natural materials, such as stones)
- doll play focused on fashion, such as Barbie dolls, make-up dolls and paper-dolls
- creative resources (e.g. watercolours, paper and pencils)
- collections (e.g. posters or collectable items about movie stars)
- other toys (e.g. My Little Pony, Lego, weapons, cars, board games).

The toys that dominated the play of school-aged children tended to be skipping ropes, balls and natural materials. However, the most popular game was doll play. The favourite memories of playing as a preschool-aged child tended to be doll play and soft toys.

It is interesting to notice that the most popular play activity in this Swedish study of mostly female early childhood teachers and student teachers was play with dolls. However, the play memories suggest that the school-aged children played with the dolls in different ways than the preschool-aged children. Fashion and other adult representation of play featured for the older children, while for the younger children the play was about families, feeding and looking after babies and soft toys.

Reflect upon what might be seen as progression in play development. In playing with dolls in the ways described in the Swedish study, do you think this represents some form of progression in play? How would you decide? What might be evidence of more mature or complex forms of play? How would children decide whether the play was more mature or complex? What might be the criteria they would use? We will discuss these ideas further in Chapter 7. Perhaps age does not matter, but opportunities and time to play do.

What is interesting about Sandberg and Vuorinen’s (2008) study is the perception by the participants that the play of children in the past (the teachers’ memories of their own play) was different from the play of children today (their observations of children at play). The teachers and student teachers ‘perceived deficiencies in the imaginative and creative abilities of children, as well as in children’s ability to initiate and start play’ (2008, p. 140). The older participants suggested that ‘children no longer can, or need to use their imagination in play’ because many toys are ‘ready-made and made for a specific use’; these were viewed as limiting the children’s abilities to use the toys in a range of creative ways. For example, ‘children today have “trouble” playing, and children were not seen as being as capable of initiating play’ (2008, p. 140), as the following comment suggests:
Play in the Early Years

[They’re not self-sufficient either … you almost have to tell them that – ‘There is a skipping rope over there, you could skip rope’. Instead of them just automatically taking the skipping rope and going outside.’
(Sandberg & Vuorinen 2008, p. 140).

Sandberg and Vuorinen’s (2008) study also notes that participants believed that children’s opportunities for playing with a range of age groups had diminished, and that children also had fewer children to play with, while at the same time children had access to an increased number of toys (compared with previous generations). The teachers felt that children’s parents were thought to be interrupting and controlling children’s play, and even limiting the amount of free time available to children at home. This comment is consistent with research by Wong (2012) into Hong Kong-Australian family home practices. Wong also noted that parents closely scheduled children’s time, thus reducing opportunities for free play. In addition, it was felt that children were passive consumers of media, and this meant fewer opportunities for initiating and extending play in the home. Changes to society were blamed for the children’s changed play practices, such as:

- new technologies
- a better economy
- urbanisation
- women’s entry into working life, and
- children’s time being over-organised by parents.

Bodrova’s (2008) research in the United States reveals that children in that country only play with packaged toys and not natural materials. She argues that if a child wishes to play doctors and nurses, then the child simply uses a Doctor Barbie, where the clothing and role are already assigned. Miniature objects are provided, and the child simply uses the toys as presented. Her argument is that children have lost the ability to use natural or non-specified materials to enrich their own play, such as when a child takes a stick and pretends they are riding a horse. Bodrova notes that more and more children who are entering kindergarten have difficulties creating imaginary situations, and engage in a practice called ‘dump and run’, where they pick up an object in a preschool, study it momentarily, drop it and then move on to another object somewhere else in the kindergarten. One could liken this behaviour to that often observed in museums, where children flit from display to display, never staying long enough to become engaged in the experience.

What these examples of play memories highlight is that the term ‘play’ should not be thought of as a static, unchanging concept for explaining ‘what is’ and ‘what is not’ play – this contrasts with what is often presented in books on play, where the view is put that play is natural (see critique by Göncü, Jain & Tuermer 2007). How we define play has evolved over time, with strong arguments being put forward for play being dynamic and culturally defined (see Gaskins, Haight & Lancy 2007; Pellegrini 2011; Roopnarine 2011).
This becomes more evident when we go beyond one cultural community. When we have spoken to practising teachers in Singapore about their play memories, they often mentioned that in their play:

- a lot of time was used for play, and as a result the play was quite expansive (but now there is no time)
- nature was an important feature (but now children are given ready-made toys)
- children needed to use their creativity and imagination because they didn’t have toys – often they had to make their own toys (for example, by cutting out magazine pictures as paper dolls and designing their own paper clothes)
- they spent a lot of time doing messy things, like playing with mud
- they regularly played with groups of children of all ages, usually in their local kampong (community or village)
- they took great risks, not necessarily playing in a ‘safe manner’, and no one worried about the ‘risky play’ in which they engaged (unlike today).

Reflect on how play might look in different contexts, in different countries, within different communities or even across families. Is play universal, or might it be culturally constructed?

We can see great variation in how people think about play and the ways they value play across communities. Wong (2012) shows how families value organised academic activity rather than free play for the Hong Kong-Australian families she studied (Wong & Fleer 2012). In Wong’s study, all the families timetabled activities (e.g. music lessons, music practice, swimming instruction, table tennis practice, homework) for
children for seven days of the week, with only brief periods of play allowed (perhaps one hour of play with computer games).

Reflect upon these family practices. Do you know families who do this too? What might be the reasons why parents value scheduling experiences for their children rather than allowing the children to decide how they will use their time? What might be the positive outcomes? What might be the negative outcomes? Why do you think the Singaporean teachers mentioned this difference? What loss were they reflecting upon? What is your view?

In another example of research into the play practices of families across cultures, Tudge (2008) also notes great variability. He studied families at play across Greensboro in North Carolina, Obninsk in Russia, Tartu in Estonia, Oulu in Finland, Suwon in South Korea, Kisumu in Kenya, Porto Aegre in Brazil and Kisumu in Japan. Tudge observes that although all his families – except those from Kisumu – had objects for play that were designed for children, he found ‘clear differences in children’s play, particularly in the extent to which they have different types of objects available to them’ (2008, p. 182). For example, Tudge found that between 15 and 35 per cent of the observations he made were of children playing with toys, but the types of play were quite different. He notes that working-class children in Kisumu (Japan) played
with objects found in their environment (natural or discarded adult objects), while middle-class children from Suwon (South Korea) were more likely to be playing with toys designed to support academic achievement.

Reflect upon these differences in play environments across cultures noted by Tudge (2008). Do you think it matters what toys children can access? Will it make a difference? Is it the toys that matter, or do you think how children and families give meaning to play is more important?

Figure 1.3: What objects do children play with?

Figure 1.4: What play is afforded?
Göncü, Jain and Tuemer suggest that ‘we need to learn to look at children of different cultures, their points of view, to make sense of the occurrences and meanings of their play’ (2007, p. 156). This is a significant point. How do we find out how children create sense and meaning through their play? Göncü (1999) and Göncü, Jain and Tuemer (2007) argue that play should be viewed as a form of cultural expression, and that people’s participation in play will vary across cultures as a result of their responsibilities rather than their abilities. As early childhood professionals, our role is to find out what meaning children make through their play and to determine the nature of their cultural expressions of play so that we can take a broader view of what play is, and how it is defined and enacted within families and cultures.

If play is a form of cultural expression, then what might we find within families over time? Do families across generations value play in the same way, and do family play practices change over time?

Intergenerational play memories
The cultural communities within which children are born are also not static. They continue to change over time, and this has an effect on how children play and how it is remembered. Below are three play memories from the same family. As with many countries around the world, childhood and adulthood are experienced differently across generations. We begin with Oma, a grandmother who immigrated to Australia as a young woman, raising her family in a different country from where she spent her own childhood.

Memories of being 8
I grew up in a small township in Germany. When I was 23 years old, I immigrated to Australia on the ship Anna Salen. Our township was clustered around the external walls of a huge castle that is still lived in by a family today. The castle is perched on top of a hill. As children, we would run up to the external walls of the castle, trudging through snow, navigating around cobblestones and sandstone statues, leaving an army of footprints as we walked. We took with us to the top of the hill where the castle stood thin pliable planks of wood that our fathers had fashioned into toboggans. We would toboggan down the hillside, dangerously missing the army of other children making their way up to the summit of the best tobogganing part of the castle hill. We played dangerously, but that was what made it so much fun. (Oma, 80 years)

Play for Oma was a risky activity. The risks increased the level of excitement. Oma had grown up during World War II. She had witnessed the atrocities of war, observing her sister die from shrapnel flying through her family home, hiding in the gutters when the sirens sounded a warning of bombers that were flying overhead. Taking risks was a normal part of everyday life.