

The impact of children's perception of an activity as play rather than not play on emotional well-being

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Accepted for publication 2 April 2012

Abstract

Background As an important aspect of health and development, a number of policy and practice initiatives across education, health and social care are aimed at increasing children's emotional well-being. Links have been made between young children's emotional well-being and play although empirical evidence is limited. This paper demonstrates that when children perceive an activity as play, they show more signs of emotional well-being than when they perceive the same activity as not play.

Methods One hundred and twenty-nine children aged between 3 and 5 years participated in the study. The cues children use to differentiate play and not play were used to create an activity session that was 'like play' and an activity session that was 'not like play'. The activity itself remained constant. Children were allocated to either of the activity session types alternately and emotional well-being was measured using the Leuven Involvement Scale.

Results There was a significant difference in the level of emotional well-being displayed by children in the two activity session types. Children who undertook the 'like play' activity scored significantly higher than children who undertook the same activity but 'not like play'. Detailed observational analysis also showed increased behavioural indicators relating to emotional well-being among children participating in the 'like play' rather than 'not like play' activity session.

Conclusion Children demonstrate increased emotional well-being when they perceive an activity as play rather than not play. Findings support the proposition that play can be seen as an observable behaviour but also as a mental state. As well as providing important evidence as to the value of play for enhancing children's emotional well-being, findings are discussed in relation to professional practice in children's services. The paper highlights the training needs of practitioners to enable them to understand children's views about play and use this information to create playful situations which maximize the developmental potential of play.

Keywords

play and child development, play and emotional well-being, professional play practice

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Introduction

Well-being can be defined in different ways but is generally understood to encompass physical, social and emotional health (Statham & Chase 2010). Children's well-being is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 2009) and is considered to be important, not only in

its own right, but also in how it affects other aspects of children's development such as physical health. It is also stated that good emotional well-being can protect children against a variety of problems in the future including: emotional and behavioural problems, violence and crime and teenage pregnancy (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2008).

In recent years a number of reports have highlighted concerns regarding children's emotional well-being, especially in the UK. A UNICEF report noted high levels of unhappiness among children in the UK with only children from the USA faring worse (UNICEF 2007). Another report showed that children in the UK were the poorest in Europe in terms of subjective well-being which encompasses personal well-being, education and health (Bradshaw & Richardson 2009). Furthermore, a survey of mental health disorders identified that almost 10% of children aged 5–16 years in the UK had a clinically diagnosed mental disorder (Green *et al.* 2005).

These concerns have led to a range of play-based policy initiatives and programmes designed to increase children's emotional well-being such as the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) programme (Department for Education and Skills 2005a), the Healthy Schools Programme (Department for Education and Skills 2005b) and guidelines for increasing emotional well-being in schools (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2008). In addition, early years curricula have been designed to forefront play (Department for Education and Employment 2000; Welsh Assembly Government 2008). Recognition as to the importance of play in child development has been such that it has resulted in specific play policies to ensure access to appropriate play opportunities from a health, education and social care perspective right across the UK (Powell & Wellard 2008). The link between play and well-being is also evident in measures of well-being, for example, the Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Wellbeing (Ben-Ariah & Goerge 2007), which includes items detailing space, opportunity and access to play.

In the literature there are many claims for links between children's play and their emotional well-being (e.g. Lester & Russell 2008; House & Loewenthal 2009; Hughes 2010). However, empirical evidence linking play and emotional well-being is limited. Indeed, rigorous research evidence that links play and any area of development is relatively sparse. One reason for this has been that defining play for the purposes of isolation and measurement has proven problematic (Hughes 2010). While some studies of children who have suffered play deprivation have demonstrated an initial developmental delay followed by improvement after play-based interventions (e.g. Webb & Brown 2003), the extreme nature of these naturalistic case studies means it is difficult to separate the impact of basic human contact and the meeting of physical needs from the impact of play. Research has also tended to focus on what play looks like from an adult perspective, for example, in terms of what materials are being used or whether children look like they are having fun, rather than focusing on what characteristics

children themselves associate with play activity (Takhvar 1988; Howard *et al.* 2003). This is important if we view play as a way of approaching an activity, as an internal mental state. Lieberman (1977) argues that while play can be seen as an observable type of behaviour, what separates it from other types of behaviour (and offers it unique developmental potential) is that the activity is understood to be play by the player themselves.

It has been demonstrated that children use cues such as: location of an activity, adult presence and choice to determine whether or not they perceive an activity as play (e.g. Karrby 1989; Wing 1995; Howard 2002). Experimental studies have manipulated these cues to create practice conditions that children will perceive as play (i.e. adult proximal, activity occurs on the floor, children are given choice over participation) and practice conditions that children will perceive as not like play (i.e. adult present, activity occurs at a table, child is instructed to participate). Utilizing a pre-test/post-test design, these studies have repeatedly demonstrated the value of approaching a task as play for enhancing children's cognitive ability on a variety of problem-solving tasks. Crucially, in these studies, despite the type of activity children were engaged in remaining constant (e.g. completing a jigsaw puzzle), when children practised the task in a situation they felt was play their performance was significantly improved (Thomas *et al.* 2006; McInnes *et al.* 2009).

Based on these findings, the current paper considers whether children approaching an activity as if it were play rather than not play leads to greater emotional well-being. Emotional well-being during activity sessions defined by children as play or not play is compared using the Leuven Involvement Scale, a measure designed to be used with young children (Laevers *et al.* 1994). Involvement is based on flow states and increased involvement in an activity is reported to indicate greater emotional well-being. Indicators of involvement include: deep concentration, strong motivation, satisfaction and positive energy (Laevers 2008). These indicators overlap with indicators used in older children's self-reports of well-being, supporting its use for this purpose (Fattore *et al.* 2007). Crucially, the paper describes a between-participants design where children in two groups engage in the same activity but under conditions designed to be 'like play' or 'not like play'.

Method

Design

The research adopted a between-participants design to compare signs of emotional well-being exhibited by two groups of chil-

dren. Based on previous research that has elicited children's own perceptions of what characterizes an activity as play or not play, one group of children participated in an activity under conditions designed to be seen as 'like play'. A second group of children participated in the same activity under conditions designed to be seen as 'not like play'. The characteristics associated with the 'like play' and 'not like play' activity sessions are described in the procedure section. Emotional well-being was measured using the Leuven Involvement Scale (Laevers *et al.* 1994).

Participants

The participants were 129 children from three educational settings; a nursery school with three nursery classes, an infant school with a nursery class and two reception classes and a primary school with two reception classes. British Psychological Society (BPS) and British Educational Research Association (BERA) guidelines were followed and the research was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Glamorgan. Informed consent was obtained from the head teacher of all the settings involved and from the teachers in whose classrooms the research was conducted. Informed written consent was obtained from parents and carers for their child to participate in the studies and separate written consent was obtained from parents and carers for their child to be video-recorded. Parents were advised that they could withdraw their child at any point during the research. Verbal consent was obtained from children prior to the start of the research and they were told that they could withdraw from the research at any time. Their permission was also obtained to video-record them and again they were told that the video recorder could be switched off at any time.

The sample comprised 56 male and 73 female children. The age range of the children was 46 to 69 months ($M = 60$ months). Children were allocated to each session alternately by the teacher following the alphabetical class register, but on occasion this order was disrupted due to absence or because a child was required to complete a different classroom task. The class teacher was situated in a room that was separate to that in which the procedure was taking place and was therefore not aware of the condition to which each child would be allocated. A total of 132 children originally took part in the study but three did not complete the activity session fully (due to the constraints of the daily school routine) and so could not be included in the data set. This resulted in an eventual sample of 129 and meant that 66 children participated in the activity designed to be 'like play' and 63 children in the activity session designed to be 'not like play'.

Materials

This study combines data from a larger project on play and problem solving; therefore, two different activities were used in the procedure; bead threading and a jigsaw puzzle. Both activities were familiar to children and had been used successfully in studies employing a similar design and participant age range (Thomas *et al.* 2006; Radcliffe 2007). The same number of children participated in activity sessions designed to be 'like play' and 'not like play' with both beads and jigsaws, which allowed the data to be combined for comparative analysis.

The Leuven Involvement Scale was used to assess emotional well-being (Laevers *et al.* 1994; Laevers 2008). This scale has two components. The first is a list of 10 signals: concentration, energy, complexity/creativity, facial expression, posture, persistence, precision, reaction time, language and satisfaction. Statements relating to the signals are used to direct the observer's awareness to make an overall judgement of the child's involvement. Using the signals, the level of involvement is then measured on a five-part scale from level one (no activity) to level five (sustained intense activity). Ratings are made at 2-min intervals and then an average involvement level is calculated.

Every activity session was video-recorded and analysed via the Video-Observer Pro package (Noldus Information Technology 2003). The rater was blind to which type of activity condition children had participated in, reducing any potential for bias. Video recording also meant that inter-rater reliability could be established. Ten per cent of the activity conditions were independently and blindly rated using the Leuven Scale with a reliability level of 91%.

Procedure

Consistent with previous studies where play or non-play conditions have been manipulated (e.g. Thomas *et al.* 2006; McInnes *et al.* 2009), the cues used to operationalize the different types of activity sessions for measurement of well-being were: adult presence (either present or proximal), location (activity occurring either at a table or on the floor) and choice (child asked to participate or given a choice). Children engaged with the jigsaw puzzle or bead threading activity in a session designed to be either 'like play' or 'not like play':

- 'Like play' (adult was proximal, activity occurred on the floor and child had a choice about participation).
- 'Not like play' (adult directly present, activity occurred at a table and child was asked to take part).

As previously described, children were alternately allocated to either the 'like play' or 'not like play' activity and the same standardized instructions were given to each child. To verify that children perceived the activity session in the predicted way, on completion of the session, children were asked to describe if what they had done was 'play' or 'not play'. There was a significant association between the type of activity session and children's rating of the session ($\chi^2 = 24.04$, d.f. = 1, $P = 0.00$). Children in the 'like play' sessions were more likely to rate the session as play compared with children in the 'not like play' sessions.

Results

The overall mean level of involvement was 3.81 (SD 1.00). Figure 1 demonstrates the mean levels of involvement for each type of activity session. The mean level of involvement for children who took part in the activity designed to be 'like play' was 4.32 (SD 0.75), and in the session with the same materials designed to be 'not like play' this was 3.37 (SD 1.00). This difference was found to be significant [$t(127) = 6.13$, $P < 0.05$, $d = 1.09$ with CI 0.65 to 1.26].

Detailed analysis of each session was conducted using the Video-Observer Pro package (Noldus Information Technology 2003) to explore the presence of any behavioural differences exhibited by children in each of the two type of activity session. This analysis focused on behaviours associated with emotional well-being including: direction of gaze, facial expression, language used and body position. This analysis indicated that children who participated in the activity session designed to be 'like play' smiled more during the session and were attentive and focused on the activity. In addition, they appeared more moti-

vated as they leant towards the activity and moved freely. They were also less distracted. In comparison, children who used the same materials but in a session designed to be 'not like play' displayed more negative behaviours, were easily distracted and engaged in more off-task language. They did not lean towards the materials being used but were upright and made infrequent body movements.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer support for the proposition that play as an approach to task is distinct from play as observable behaviour (Lieberman 1977). Despite utilizing the same materials, children in the current study demonstrated behaviours associated with increased emotional well-being during activities they perceived as 'like play' rather than 'not like play', as measured by the Leuven Involvement Scale (Laevens *et al.* 1994). Children who participated in an activity session designed to be 'like play' were more deeply engaged than children who used the same materials but in a session designed to be 'not like play'. Behavioural analysis also demonstrated that the children in the 'like play' sessions were more focused on the activity, smiled more and moved freely. All of these indicators are congruent with older children's subjective reports of their emotional well-being (Fattore *et al.* 2007; Layard & Dunn 2009). In contrast, children in the 'not like play' sessions were easily distracted, made more negative vocalizations and although they were able to move their body position they tended to stay very still in their chair.

These findings are consistent with those that have manipulated the cues children use to define play and not play in experimental learning conditions, repeatedly demonstrating the benefits of children perceiving an activity as play in relation to problem solving, meta-cognition and self-regulation (Thomas *et al.* 2006; McInnes *et al.* 2009; Whitebread 2010). It has been suggested that children perceiving an activity as play leads to superior developmental effect because children are able to try out a wide range of behaviours with minimal risk of failure. When approaching an activity as play, children control the direction and outcome of their actions, and this autonomy and independence increases confidence and esteem (Brown 2003; Howard 2010a). These suggestions are congruent with characteristics seen to promote well-being, including: feeling happy, secure and having autonomy and choice (Fattore *et al.* 2007; Layard & Dunn 2009).

Children report that being able to play contributes to their happiness and well-being (Fattore *et al.* 2007) and accordingly, space and opportunity to play has been included as an item in

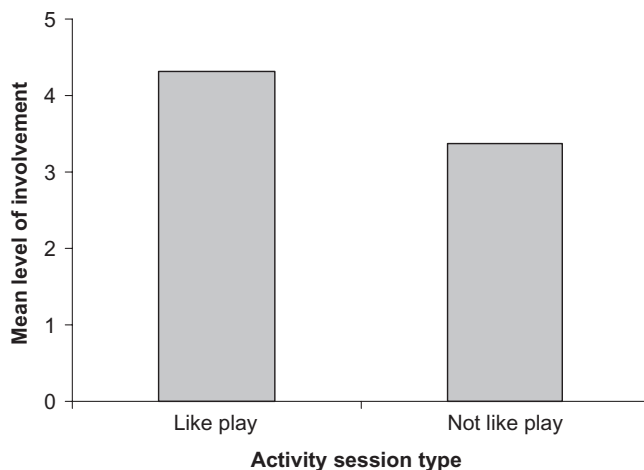


Figure 1. Mean level of involvement according to activity session type.

scales designed to measure levels of well-being in the younger population, for example, the Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Wellbeing (Ben-Ariah & Goerge 2007). Findings presented here, however, suggest that an adult's observation of space and opportunity to play may not necessarily be indicative of well-being if these opportunities are not perceived as play by the children themselves. A more reliable and valid approach might be to incorporate a technique into child well-being scales that also measures the playfulness of children's environments. This could involve asking children to reflect on their play experiences or ensuring that items relating to play experiences encourage observers to note characteristics that have been found to increase children's perceptions of playfulness in their environments.

Similarly, practitioners working with younger children who utilize play could increase feelings of well-being and enhance development across domains, by working towards the provision of experiences that children understand to be play. Many policies and programmes aimed at developing children's emotional well-being involve practitioners from health, education and social services (Department for Education and Skills 2005a,b; Stephen 2006; National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence 2008). Training and continuing professional development for all of these children's service professionals must focus on developing practitioners' own knowledge and understanding of play, to ensure a shared consensus about what play is and what it means for children. Often, texts and training in play for children's service providers take a superficial approach that is largely based on observable types of play activity and what kinds of activities or materials practitioners should provide; however, children perceive subtle differences between the types of activities in which they engage and of importance is not what materials or opportunities are being provided but rather how that activity is understood by children. In addition, research has also demonstrated that practitioners can find it difficult to establish what they should do during play, often adopting a management or supervisory role, or intervening in play to direct the activity towards their own ideas about an activities' potential outcome (Garrick *et al.* 2010; Howard 2010b).

Consistent with the principles which form the basis of training in the playwork profession (SkillsActive 2004) and non-directive play therapy practice (Axline 1979), the findings reported here suggest it would be beneficial for play training across all children's services to emphasize the process of play and the important role practitioners have in facilitating and maintaining a playful environment. Research has demonstrated, however, that children can be encouraged to take a playful approach to their activities by becoming familiar with adults

participating with them on equal terms as a play partner, using open rather than closed questions, allowing children to initiate or lead activities and offering authentic choices about whether to participate in an activity or when they would like the activity to end (Canning 2007; Payler 2007; McInnes *et al.* 2011).

Practitioners who understand the importance of children's own perceptions of play and have techniques for reflecting on the playfulness of the experiences they are providing will be well placed to create environments for working with the children in their care that allow them to feel playful, facilitating optimum levels of emotional well-being and maximizing opportunities for development across domains.

Key messages

- When children approach an activity as though it were play rather than not play, they show more signs of emotional well-being.
- When planning play opportunities, it is important to consider whether or not children will see the activity as playful.
- Creating playful environments requires us to consider children's views about their experiences.
- Training and continuing professional development for children's service professionals should emphasize the importance of play as an approach to task and the process of play, as well as equipping practitioners with the skills needed to reflect on the experiences of the children in their care.

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