



The Learning Institute

Play (Part 4): Dark play

Overview

The purpose of this CPD, part 4, is to continue to explore play in more depth and focus on the more unique aspects of 'dark' or 'cruel' play. This CPD is suitable for anyone working with or wanting to work with young children and/or anyone who simply has an interest in play. It has been separated into parts. You can undertake all of the parts in turn as they can build on each other, or you can just undertake the particular part that is of most interest to you.

Target audience

Early years workers/managers/key persons, those in or interested in working within nurseries and pre-schools or reception and Key Stage 1, TAs (particularly those who may work within the Early Years Foundation Stage)

Duration

Approximately 1-1½ hours – the completion time will depend how quickly you work and whether you undertake any of the extension activities.

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Introduction

Sutton-Smith (2000, pp.151-172), Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, p.8) and Smidt (2011, p.102) argue that when thinking about play most of us would imagine an activity that is safe, innocent and pleasurable. However, this does not reflect the lives of many children growing up even in our Western developed world. Although it is for many of us an uncomfortable thought, many children experience tragedy, trauma and cruelty in their lives, which not only impacts on their play but play becomes the vehicle they choose to work through and come to a place of understanding about what they have experienced. Growing up in abusive households, experiencing human cruelty through bullying or war situations, death and disease and natural disasters are all situations that adults find challenging to reconcile and children are no different. Furthermore, Smidt (2011, p.102) suggests even when children do not directly experience hardship or trauma themselves the images, feelings and experiences that are accessible to them through various forms of media (TV and films, social media, computer games) or even, as Smidt (2011, p.102) points out, “through overhearing disturbing comments” can have a similar impact. Moreover, Sutton-Smith (2001) explains that dark play it is not just a way to cope with trauma, children can become fascinated with gore and horror; generally the more gory and disgusting something is or can look or feel, the more come children love it. Sutton-Smith (2001, pp.151-172) labelled this kind of play as phantasmagoria.

Dark play can also tip into what Sutton-Smith’s (2001, p.112) describes as cruel play. Essentially, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, p.8) suggests that when children play they explore issues of “power, race, class, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, age, size, skin colour, sexuality” and so on. Play is not always fun, it can for some children mean engaging with feelings of rejection, discomfort and alienation and the ‘cost’ of belonging to a group can be high. Any play with practical jokes, ganging up, teasing or power-related play can be considered more in line with Sutton-Smith’s cruel play.

Furthermore, dark play themes can also appear when engaging in play that is considered unpopular or inappropriate, as explored in part 3 of this CPD. Children can be violent, aggressive and adopt combative roles and play themes while they jostle for social power and position within their friendship groups. Often this can be the result of stereotypical play, or come from books/comics and “popular and commercial culture” (Smidt, 2011, p.103). Holland (2003), Hyder (2005), Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) and Smidt (2011) identified certain types of play that are universally accepted as ‘good’ and ‘acceptable’, therefore allowed. Other types of play such as war, conflict, rough and tumble, weapon and even superhero play is often considered ‘bad’ or less ‘acceptable’ and either curtailed or prevented altogether. However, if this play is a child’s way of making sense of their experiences, then curtailing or enacting a zero tolerance policy for unpopular play themes may have long-term, unintended consequences for children’s social and emotional development.

Therefore, the purpose of this CPD part 4 is to begin to reflect on dark and/or cruel play in more depth and how this might be used as a way for children to engage with, and make sense of, ‘big themes’ in their world.

Objectives

- Begin to explore the idea of dark and/or cruel play.
- Begin to explore how this kind of play may support children's development.
- Begin to understand what dark play might look like within children's interactions

Resources

A means of recording your ideas, such as a note paper and pen.

Any notes from parts 1 – 3 of this series of CPD.

Internet access for the following reading:

- Colker, L. J. (2018) *Being a helper: supporting children to feel safe and secure after disasters*. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2018/being-helper-supporting-children-feel-safe-and-secure-after-disasters> (Accessed: 14th May 2020).
- Erdman, S. and Downing, M. (2015) *The Science of Superheroes*. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2015/science-superheroes> (Accessed: 14th May 2020).
- Hyson, M. (no date) *What's too scary?* Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/whats-too-scary> (Accessed: 14th May 2020).
- Taaffe, C. R. (2019) *Two's company, three's a crowd: peer interactions in a preschool social triangle (voices)*. Available at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/sept2019/peer-interaction-preschool-social-triangle> (Accessed: 14th May 2020).

Internet access for the following videos

- Play-based learning with Dr. Peter Gray, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJaAegok8L4> (Running time 4:48)
- UNICEF – How babies learn through play, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdeK4B3BbM4> (Running time 4:16)
- Firefighter play, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxR597JvYt0> (Running time 3:37)
- Hunt for the Big Bad Wolf, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jXjLEe0u4g> (Running time 3:19)
- Water gun fight with Vietnamese Preschool Children, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKY7lVAUxDw> (Running time 5:56)
- Afghan children playing with guns, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBFJrsmABQ> – (Running time 2:56)
- Why Play-Fighting Can be Good for Children?, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB-vNz9GGgg> (Running time 1:23)

Task 1: Exploring our own thoughts first

Over parts 1-3 of this series of CPD, you have been asked to reflect on different aspects of play. To remind ourselves of what play is and reflect again on why it is important within early years, please watch either of the videos detailed below (you can of course watch both). You can just watch or watch and make notes but the purpose is to reconnect with your ideas on play. Do remember while you are watching either video that play has many definitions, particularly depending on the age group you are interacting with; babies playing for example may look very different to the play of 3 and 4 year olds.

If you have not completed part 1 of this CPD you may wish to begin with this. If you have completed part 1 you may wish to pause and go back and briefly read your notes.

- Play-based learning with Dr. Peter Gray, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJaAegok8L4 (Running time 4:48)
- How babies learn through play, available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdeK4B3BbM4 (Running time 4:16). This video clip is by UNICEF and shows ideas and clips about play from around the world therefore it is subtitled.

In part 3 of this CPD you were asked to reflect on inappropriate play, and whether your views had changed once you had explored some of these play themes in more depth. You may wish to spend 5 minutes reading through your notes to remind yourself of what your thoughts were before you start this section of learning. If you have yet to complete part 3 of this CPD, you may wish to pause here and complete this first before continuing.

Task 2: Representing ‘the real’ in play

Vygotsky (1978) believed that children are mostly concerned with what they can see, hear and touch; so things that belong to the concrete world. However, in play children are able to move away from the concrete world and safely explore and try out possible roles in possible worlds. Building strong, trusting and respectful relationships with children, as suggested by Smidt (2011, p.108), ensures that children are more likely to accept adults; parent/carers/educators, as play partners in their play. It is within these interactions with children that adults can support their dealings with ‘big issues’ and encourage socially acceptable viewpoints, even without banning or discouraging unpopular play themes.

The following case study extracts have been taken from Smidt (2011, pp.104-105). Read each extract and think about the play being described. What would you think if you saw this play in your context? What do you think is happening, if anything? How does the play make you feel? How would you respond? Spend no more than 5 minutes recording your thoughts.

Extract 1: *“Edud repeatedly plays hospital using toy figures with missing limbs. These figures were often constructed out of lego and Edud would carefully remove one or more limbs before the play started”*

Extract 2: *“Julio at dinner time within his setting would use broccoli or other vegetables to be trees and pour gravy all over them, flooding the plate”.*

Extract 3: *“Marianna went to the doll’s house every morning moving the dolls to the windows and throwing them out. She was always silent throughout this play but as soon as she had completed her play, she moved on to more social activities during which she joined in with others and communicated”.*

Extract 4: *“The children started to play motorcycle. One child would drive around on a pretend motorcycle while the other would drive a pretend car. They’d crash. The motorcyclist would lie still on the ground. Other children would then try to lift (or drag) the motorcyclist around the playground, while sounding their pretend sirens”.*

As educators it is really important that we spend time getting to know as much about children’s lives as we can, both before they start with us in a setting and what their continued experiences might be while they are with us. Only when we have this knowledge can we hope to support children fully in play endeavours and the resulting emotional and social development that may be occurring.

Consider the extracts above:

Eduard survived the Oklahoma City bombing, he may or may not have seen people without limbs but he did spend a lot of time in hospital (Smidt, 2011, p.104). Julio’s family were driven out of their mobile home in flash floods (Smidt, 2011, p.104). Marianna lost her father in the attack on the World Trade Centre and watched some of the scenes on TV (Smidt, 2011, p.104). The children from the setting had been playing outside when they witnessed an accident between a motorcyclist and a car. They watched the paramedics lift the unconscious motorcyclist on to the stretcher and into the ambulance (Smidt, 2011, p.105).

Look back at the extracts and your thoughts, do you want to add or change anything? Why?

Task 3: Dark play in practice

It is important that dark play is given proper consideration when engaging with young children and their play, and that the messages we send children are clear. For instance, imagine gun play was banned within your professional context but a child had a parent/carer that was a soldier or an armed police officer, what unintended messages might be sent?

Below are several video clips and some additional reading about dark and unpopular play themes, exploring what children may be learning from engaging with this kind of play. You are welcome to access as many of the resources as you wish, although you are expected to engage with a minimum of 1 from each group.

Group 1: video clips

- Firefighter play, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxR597JvYt0> (Running time 3:37).

This clip was originally included in part 2 of this CPD but please watch it again, and this

time look out for anything that may show children exploring darker themes within their play. Note down exactly what you see and hear. What are your thoughts about this?

- Hunt for the big bad wolf, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jXjLEe0u4g> (Running time 3:19)

In this clip the children are enacting a search for the big bad wolf. While you are watching consider if there are any play themes emerging that might link to darker, unpopular play. Note down what you see and hear. What are your thoughts? You may also like to consider this alongside the story of the three little pigs - does the story itself relate to phantasmagoria?

Group 2: video clips

The video clips within this group all focus on weapon, gun and fighting play.

- Water gun fight in a Vietnamese pre-school, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKY7IVAUXDw> (Running time 5:56)
This clip is from a Vietnamese preschool that spent the morning engaging in water gun play. What are your thoughts and feelings about this activity? Would you plan an activity like this? What do you think the children may learn, if anything? Are all the children happy and comfortable with this play? Justify your thoughts.
- Afghan children playing with guns, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBFJrsmABQ> (Running time 2:56).
This is a hard hitting film with slightly older children/young people who have grown up in war-torn Afghanistan. Here the children are naturally drawn to recreate scenes with guns they have probably witnessed on a regular basis. What are your feelings about this clip? Why? Are there any benefits here for the children/young people involved?
- Play-fighting, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB-vNz9GGgg> (Running time 1:23).
This clip is a short information video about the potential benefits of play fighting. What are your views on fighting? Is it ever appropriate and/or inappropriate? How would you respond to play fighting in your professional context?

Group 3: additional reading

Note down any thoughts or reflection points that occur from engaging with at least one of the short blogs. You may also like to return to resources on unpopular play considered in part 3 of this CPD to further add to your knowledge.

- A short blog by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), exploring the feelings of being scared and scary play, available at <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/whats-too-scary>
- A short blog by the NAEYC, exploring how to support children and their play to feel safe and secure after they have experienced or witnessed a disaster, available at <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2018/being-helper-supporting-children-feel-safe-and-secure-after-disasters>

- A short blog by the NAEYC exploring superhero play and how this could be redirected into science themes for planned learning experiences, available at <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/tyc/feb2015/science-superheroes>

Having now completed tasks 2 and 3, has your position on dark play been strengthened or changed? Why?

Task 4: Power exchanges in dark play

So, having considered dark play more broadly, what might it look like in a setting environment? Read the following two extracts from Grishaber and McArdle (2010); they depict scenes that could be enacted within any early years environment.

Consider each extract carefully and reflect and make notes on the following:

- How does each extract make you feel?
- How would you react in each situation? What would you do?
- Is learning occurring in each situation? What might each child be learning?

Extract from Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, p.28)

“Lulu was watching three girls play out the story of Cinderella in the home corner. Fiona, the teacher, noticed that Lulu was at the edge of the game, it appeared the other girls were excluding her. Fiona, taking Lulu by the hand walked over to the other girls and asked if Lulu could join in. Fiona noticed over the next 45 minutes that Lulu remained in the game. At the end of the session Fiona asked what role each girl had played, all main roles were listed Prince, Cinderella, Fairy Godmother and so on, Lulu remained silent and not named as a role. Fiona asked Lulu what role she had taken and one of the girls explained, while the others looked at the floor, “Lulu was the piece of paper that was in front of the fire place, collecting the cinders” Lulu nodded”.

Extract from Grieshaber and McArdle (2010, p.82)

“Rachel 3 years 7 months and Michael 3 years 6 months were playing with puzzles, David 3 years 5 months was nearby playing with dinosaurs. Rachel having finished her puzzle watched David with the dinosaur then reached over and used physical force to overpower him and take the dinosaur, no words were exchanged. Everyone looked at the researcher, David making strong eye contact potentially appealing for help, no words were exchanged. Rachel did not play with the dinosaur just held it. A short time later David had another dinosaur and played a distance away from Rachel and Michael. He was set upon from behind by Jeremy a much taller boy. Jeremy wrapped his arms around David and pulled him away, Rachel assisted by pushing from the front, until behind a screen Jeremy took the dinosaur away. A short time later David had the original dinosaur back again, this time Michael tried to take it from David. David moved the dinosaur quickly out of reach.”

Reflect on whether you have witnessed any situations like this within your context with children. What exactly did this look like? What was said and done by children and by adults? What were the impacts of this? Record your responses.

It can be challenging to know how to cope with dark play even when its benefits are clearly understood. This article, available at <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/sept2019/peer-interaction-preschool-social-triangle>, may provide some pointers on how to manage dark play within your own context. .

However, if you are particularly interested in finding out more about play and/or dark play you may like to undertake one of our early years courses (details at the end of this CPD), where play, and strategies to support various different types of play, are discussed in more depth and detail.

Task 5: Reflection on learning

Write a final reflection on dark play. Consider the following questions and note your thoughts:

- Do you remember ever having engaged in dark play? What were your experiences?
- Have you noticed children engaging in dark and/or unpopular play in your context? What did this look like?
- Is there anything you would change with regard to dark and unpopular play within your context? Why?
- If there is something to change what would your role in this change be?
- What now?

Sources

These sources have informed this CPD module although they are not all freely available online. You do not need to read these sources to complete the CPD; however, you may wish to look out for them for further study after completing the CPD module. They are particularly useful for existing Foundation Degree students.

Charlycheer (2017) *Water gun fight with Vietnamese Preschool Kids*. 3 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKY7IVAUXDw> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Department for Education (2011) *Early Years Foundation Stage: Children play firefighters*. 14 September. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uxR597JvYt0> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Department for Education (2011) *Early Years Foundation Stage: Children hunt for the big bad wolf*. 14 September. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jXjLEe0u4g> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

ECETP (2018) *Play-based learning with Dr. Peter Gray*. 8 June. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJaAegok8L4> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development (2014) *Why play-fighting can be good for children?* 29 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB-vNz9GGgg> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Grieshaber, S. and McArdle, F. (2010) *The trouble with play*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Holland, P. (2003) *We don't play with guns here*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Hyder, T. (2005) *War, conflict and play*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Ruptly (2018) *Afghanistan: Kids play with toy guns as child soldiers remain reality*. 22 August. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=POBFJrsmABQ> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Smidt, S. (2011) *Playing to learn: the role of play in the early years*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Sutton-Smith, B. (2001). *The ambiguity of play*. London: Harvard University Press.

UNICEF (2017) *How babies learn through play*. 5 January. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdeK4B3BbM4> (Accessed: 14 May 2020)

Vygotsky, L (1978) *Mind in society*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

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