

## **Practice-Based Research in Children's Play**

Wendy Russell, Stuart Lester, and Hilary Smith, editors (2017)  
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This book is a compilation of 12 research studies that examine children's play, the places where they play and adults' relationship to children's play. The editors are researchers whose work focuses on children's right to play, the value of play, policy related to play and the places where play can occur, and play's relation to health and wellbeing. The contributing authors of the 12 studies come from a variety of backgrounds. Most, but not all, are not traditional (i.e., academic) researchers. They are play workers, managers of child-related organizations (i.e., zoo, museums, adventure playgrounds), and staff in local government organizations. All but two of the authors are from the UK; the remaining two are from the U.S.

Given the book title and the background of the chapter authors, the book's primary audience is those who work directly with children outside of formal educational institutions and those who are interested in policy related to children's play. Some traditional academics may also find the work helpful if they are interested in non-traditional and alternative approaches to research related to children and children's play. The editors are clear that the studies do not follow the traditional European-American empirical research tradition. In the introduction and the final chapter, the editors state that they believe this is not the only way to create new knowledge. The scientific method, anchored in theory, begins with a question to be answered in order to ultimately arrive at some cause and effect or truth. The research questions are driven by the interests of the researcher with little or no input from the "subjects" of the research. Whether quantitative or qualitative, the editors assert that research in this tradition relies on interpretation of the data from the perspective of the researcher's worldview. This, they maintain, is in spite of the claim of objectivity. The intention of this book is to present research, all of which is qualitative and uses small sample sizes, that does not necessarily produce universal truths but rather concentrates on singular findings from a variety of play situations. The editors' goals are to highlight practice-based research and to thereby encourage it.

The book is divided into three sections: historical perspectives, spatial and creative perspectives, and playfulness and wellbeing. The three chapters in the first section explore adults' memories and perspectives of play in their childhoods. The section includes a study that explored adults' memories of their East London childhood during World War Two (Becky Willans) and a study of a UK playworker's 40-year relationship with adventure playgrounds (Tom Williams). The studies used semi-structured interviews, oral histories, auto ethnography, and performative and narrative methods. The information collected from the participants is analyzed through the lens of loose parts, affordances, risk and nostalgia. All of these studies were conducted in the UK.

The second section has six chapters that examine the current spaces and places where children play including a children's museum and a zoo in the U.S. as well as an urban public square, an after-school program, and two adventure playgrounds in the UK. These studies make use of many non-traditional qualitative research methods. For example, the author (Hattie Coppard) of the urban public space study uses observation of children's play, but the observers were a dancer, a writer and a painter. The argument here is that instead of a goal of objectivity on the part of the observer, individuals from different perspectives will see different things as observers. The information gleaned from each observer will provide a more holistic and perhaps nuanced understanding of children's play and how they use this particular space.

Another interesting aspect of this section is the exploration of the tension between adults' intentions for children's play and children's own goals or needs. This tension is related to the definition of play in the Playwork Principles, a framework developed in the UK for professional and ethical principles to be used by playworkers. Play is sometimes seen by adults as a vehicle for children to develop skills that they will use as adults, and therefore adults should guide the play in order for it to be most productive. The Playwork Principles espouse play as something freely chosen by children without any particular goal or outcome. Playworkers are therefore obliged to make sure all children have the opportunity, resources, and spaces for play. The authors of the zoo study (Linda Kinney) and the after-school club (Rebekah Jackson) illustrate using interviews, observations, mind maps and questionnaires to determine how adults influence the play space and play opportunities through their habits, routines, and learning goals. These studies encourage playworkers to be aware of the ways in which they affect the play experiences of children in their care.

The third section contains three studies that look at how play and playfulness is related to wellbeing. Two of the studies are concerned with therapeutic play (Claire Hawkes) and enabling play for children with profound and multiple learning disabilities (Stephen Smith). Play for these populations is a challenge because of the Playwork Principles' requirement that play be freely chosen and self-directed by children. Using interviews, observations, and ethnography, the authors of these chapters illustrate how adults who work with these populations can fulfill the spirit of the Playwork Principles.

While the editors want to see research represented in this book influence policy on opportunities for children's play, a more likely outcome will be the use of this book as a stimulus and guide for those who want to evaluate the play spaces and play opportunities for children. Policy makers generally want to see large-scale studies that offer a level of comfort concerning outcomes given the investment of public funds. A clear value of this book is to encourage playworkers and managers of places for children's play to be purposeful about conducting practice-based research. Conducting practice-based research with non-traditional and traditional qualitative research methodologies and methods in multiple situations and settings can, in time, result in a body of work that plays a role in informing public policy.

Review by Lorraine E. Maxwell

**Lorraine E. Maxwell** is an environmental psychologist and an associate professor in the department of Design and Environmental Analysis at Cornell University. She received her Ph.D. in psychology from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and holds a Master's degree in city and regional planning from Rutgers University. Her research interests are children's environments including schools, childcare facilities, playgrounds, museums, and the home. She investigates attributes of the physical environment related to children's and adolescents' development of self-efficacy and competency.

### **Editors' Response**

The editors thank Lorraine Maxwell for her careful and thoughtful review of our book. She has succinctly captured the spirit of the collection in terms of its desire to offer an alternative perspective on researching children's play. We wanted to show the value of the small-scale, the example—not to deny the value of larger-scale studies, but to work with what universal headlines might obscure. Lorraine is correct in saying that policy makers currently are interested in "what works," wanting to find linear cause-and-effect between inputs (the allocation of scarce resources) and outcomes. These are powerful narratives that are themselves performative; they produce and continually reproduce particular understandings of what children lack and therefore need from professional adults. Many of the chapters in the book highlight children's capabilities as children, and it is this that often gets lost in moral panics about contemporary childhood.

The chapters in section two of the book explore not only environments where play takes place, but also the importance of bringing a spatial perspective, of interest to readers of this journal. Rather than seeing space as a neutral container for action and play as something that resides in the minds (and sometimes bodies) of children, as much psychological research assumes, these studies consider space as a relational achievement. From this perspective, play emerges from the entanglements of desires, bodies, material objects, histories, habits and so on—assemblages of whatever is to hand. This makes playing a matter of spatial justice for children.

The collection is indeed, as Lorraine says, intended to encourage more practice-based research, melting the binary distinctions between neat theory and messy practice, producing more and more examples that can then hopefully work with the growing dissatisfaction with contemporary policy narratives and New Public Management techniques of measuring everything. Accountability for children's right to play is much more than mere counting, and play is much more than a discrete time- and space-bound activity. We hope others take this message from this volume also.

The book is now available in more affordable paperback. The new edition carries a dedication to our friend and colleague, Dr. Stuart Lester, who sadly passed away suddenly in May 2017. His work was a great inspiration for many of the studies in the book, and he is sorely missed.