



Play, playwork and food

Play and food both occupy positions of unique and extreme importance in the lives of our children. Maslow's hierarchy of need (1943) refers to the importance of physiological needs being met (for example the need for warmth, food, sleep, drink). Maslow says that if a person's physiological needs are not met then they concentrate on meeting them and ignore other needs – so a child who is hungry will be distracted by their hunger rather than engaging in play.

Both food and play are vitally important to the health, growth and wellbeing of children. Healthy children who are well fed and nourished have the resources to respond with enthusiasm and engagement to play opportunities and new experiences. Normally, when a child becomes ill, interest in both food and play disappear together, and, when the illness passes, return at the same time.

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrines the child's right to play. The Playwork Principles (SkillsActive, 2005) state that 'play is a biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and wellbeing of individuals and communities'. So, play is vital for healthy biological, psychological and social development and food is essential for physical survival and to provide energy for play. It is important to arrive at a balanced, considered judgement to food and play in playwork settings.

The health agenda

There are increasing concerns about children's health and wellbeing, especially their nutrition. Increasing obesity levels and falling activity levels among school age children at lower and lower ages have given rise to concerns from health and other professionals working with children and young people. Increasing obesity levels have an impact on long-term health and patterns of poor diet and lack of physical activity contribute to social and economic inequality within communities.

Changes in eating patterns have been explained variously by:

- Increased reliance on highly processed convenience foods which are high in sugar, salt and fat
- Less time spent preparing meals from scratch
- Family meal times not being given the priority they once had
- Advertisements for foods high in saturated fat, sugar and salt
- Families relying on inexpensive, yet unhealthy food, due to constraints on the household budget.

Changes in activity levels amongst children have been attributed to:

- Fewer outside places to play which parents consider safe
- Increased traffic in the streets that were once play spaces
- Parental perceptions leading to concerns and fears about strangers
- More traffic on the roads leading to parental concerns about children walking, cycling and playing in their neighbourhoods
- Fewer opportunities for physical activity in schools
- Increased access to electronic games that require limited physical exertion.

Play and health

Concerns about health both nationally and internationally have all led to a climate of increasingly prescriptive health recommendations in relation to food and exercise. For example, eating five portions of fruit and vegetables per day and children engaging in physical activity for at least 60 minutes and up to several hours a day. Children's health and wellbeing is an investment for all our futures so any safeguarding, as a general principle, is to be embraced and supported. Whilst there is an obvious link between physical activity level, food and health, playing can support health outcomes whilst still maintaining the ethos of the Playwork Principles – 'play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated' (SkillsActive, 2005).

It is well established that playing is 'critically important to human development and evolution. Playing takes place most effectively in a variable, enriched environment, in a context which although sometimes facilitated by human adults should not be contaminated or adulterated by a non-play agenda' (Hughes 2001a: xix). Playworkers remain aware of the notion of adulteration, recognising that 'it is essential that any direct playful engagement or organisational prescription of what children do is kept to a minimum and even then it should be justifiable' (Hughes, 2001b: 20).



Meriden Adventure Playground

Realising that many children might arrive to the playground without eating a meal yet, Meriden Adventure Playground realised that providing food is appreciated. Food is collected fortnightly from FareShare and staff and volunteers support children and young people to prepare food and meals.

Volunteers oversee an indoor kitchen/café with small appliances, selling snacks to adults to generate a small income. Meals for children are prepared outside and over fire.

Prior to establishing a partnership with the playground, FareShare visited and inspected the food preparation area, cooking facilities and eating area to ensure there are proper procedures for food safety and hygiene. All staff working with food must have an up to date food and hygiene qualification.

A unique aspect about FareShare is that recipient organisations never know what will be available for collection. This provides an opportunity for children and staff to try new food – it adds to the adaptable and flexible approach which playworkers strive to employ.

'Because we cook outside and over a fire, we don't collect raw meat. It's common sense; when working with kids to prepare food, you make sure everything is in place to help them to do this safely.'

Playworker

There is often an abundance of food. This enables staff to prepare food bags to be taken home with little stigma attached. Children and their families feel like they are helping to control food waste, which is exactly what they are doing.

Therefore, with this principle of a non-contamination by a non-play agenda held to the fore, the relationship between play and food needs some exploration and the arrival at a relatively clear position that is coherent for playworkers and play providers and allows children the opportunity to access and explore food in the way in which they want to, without adult criticism, stigma or sanction.

Providing food in a playwork setting

Food can be used in the play setting as refreshment and nourishment. To be respectful of the child's health and need for energy when playing actively, food can be accessible in the same way that water is, therefore used as and when the child determines they would like it, so that they can carry on playing without being hungry or thirsty.

Children have different nutritional needs to adults – an appropriate diet for a sedentary adult will not be suitable for an active growing child. When we offer refreshments, we need to offer a range of foods so that children can make their own choices and extend and enhance their sensory experience, and we need to take into account their energy needs.

To cook food in any setting, including the play setting, there is guidance regarding safe preparation. When they are followed, these minimise the risk of introducing harmful bacteria to the child or young person handling or eating food. There is a difference in risk from climbing a high tree (the height is visible and a concrete reality), to eating something that has been stored or prepared incorrectly and is therefore 'off', where the risk is invisible and the unwelcome reality appears later, usually with unpleasant consequences.

So, any food cooking needs to be done with consideration given to hygiene guidance to reduce hidden, possibly serious, health risks and consequences for children and young people.

Food can be accessed through FoodShare programmes and can also be grown and then cooked in a play setting – this may compensate for a lack of opportunity some children have to handle food, cook it and eat together with others.

Values and attitudes

In relation to food and play in the play setting there are key principles which may clash with deeply ingrained personally and culturally held beliefs about food, such as 'you must finish everything on your plate', 'you mustn't play with your food' and 'food is not to be wasted', to name a few of the phrases that we have all probably heard many times in our own childhood from parents, grandparents and other significant adults. However, for food to take its rightful place in the play setting it needs to be set free of these adult orientated values, and become a vehicle for sensory exploration or a shared experience, such as cooking and eating together, which is personally enriching.

It is important to recognise that younger children's diets and eating habits are very much a part of the family's diet and eating habits. The influence of advertising and peer pressure also effects children's eating habits. It would be unfair to assume that children are responsible for the quality of their food experience and the impact of that experience on them, whether that has resulted in poor concentration or excessive weight gain.

Conclusion

When set in the context of play, it is important to remember that 'the role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of the play space in which they can play' (SkillsActive, 2005). This means that the play the children choose is not determined by an adult led agenda, unlike the raft of healthy eating promotions. Difficult as this may be, it is crucially important to remember and reflect on the play of the child and not how to contaminate the play with an adult-led agenda. That said, we must recognise that adults within society have already



Wrexham: food deliveries in the summer holidays

Volunteers within a network of churches across Wrexham and Rhyl make and deliver packed lunches throughout school holidays to ensure children visiting play centres receive a healthy meal. The project is part of the Diocese of St Asaph's commitment, in partnership with local authority play teams, to help tackle holiday hunger. The delivery of lunches to existing provision means that children are able to continue attending community play provision that meets their play needs. Playworkers distribute the lunches which means that all children are offered food; however, those who need it most can be targeted in an informal way, with no stigma attached.

'There is an allotment on site which children help to tend and maintain – this has encouraged even the pickiest of eaters to try fresh vegetables, with peas being eaten straight off the shoots.'

'The introduction of fruit as part of the delivery was initially greeted with suspicion, extensive derision and outspoken collective comments of "I don't like fruit". However, over the course of the six weeks this position changed dramatically to the point that there were intense discussions about the values and benefits of different fruits and their benefit to a staple balanced diet. Due to popular demand, we have continued to try to introduce different fruits onto the playground every month.'

Playworker, Gwenfro Valley

'We had by far one of our least problematic summers when it came to dealing with challenging behaviour. Most families will know that when their young children become tired and hungry they become difficult to manage and unreasonable when trying to achieve something. The same can be said for older children and young people; however ... instances of bad behaviour were very much the exception rather than the norm and ... put this fact largely down to the food available during the course of the day.'

Playground Manager

significantly adulterated children's play by creating an environment that stifles play opportunities and restricts relatively safe movement in the community.

The single best way for the play agenda to engage with the health agenda is to declare that physical activity is a happy, healthy bi-product of play. It is a consequence that arrives without encouragement or ploy and is the single best way of ensuring that children's physical and mental health is enhanced.

Childhood has changed much over only a few generations. Children's play space has been eroded, their physical activity and communication have been re-defined by games using technology and their awareness of self has become ever more subject to the pressures of advertising. It is even more important that in this changing world play opportunities are enhanced and safeguarded by playworkers and play providers.

The health agenda is important in that a child who is unhealthy or ill does not play as freely or happily as a well-nourished child. Playworkers have a role to play by facilitating the play environment, where the children can play with all the unrestrained enthusiasm and physical exuberance that is natural. It is in this environment that playworkers and play providers have a supremely important part to play in enhancing the health of our children.

The very activity of play yields many health benefits, physical, physiological, emotional, social and psychological. Working with others to provide food and water for refreshment, other food opportunities with consideration for hygiene guidelines and opportunities for planting and growing can provide for the play needs of children, contributing to a healthy childhood.



Glamis Kitchen Table

Lottery funding has enabled Glamis Adventure Playground to establish a children's cafe and a community café, which will operate when the playground is not open to children.

Many of the children relied on cheap chicken and chips and fizzy drinks takeaways. Others had been identified as living in households where food poverty was an issue.

Prior to receiving the funding, Glamis did not have a satisfactory kitchen, so most cooking was done on the fire and until very recently there was no running hot water for washing up. A kitchen and three sink system has now been established and the installation of proper electricity means that children are now able to cook more freely. The playground receives food through FareShare which distributes supermarket surplus to partner organisations. The playground receives 50kg of food each week for a delivery charge of £25.00.

It operates as a vegetarian kitchen and the name (Glamis Kitchen Table) is designed to convey that the kitchen is a place of meeting and chatting and playing or making as well as eating.

'I have fairly stringent guidelines about behaviour: courtesy, no food throwing, asking before you take stuff from the fridges etcetera. I think these are just good food boundaries.'

Food playworker

Children are not charged for food, except for extra treats, such as home-made fruit juice ice poles, which are 20 pence for example. The children think this is reasonable and are supportive. They do have a sort of transitional economy at work.

'I ask the children to sign in or give me their names to record. This means conversation and a building of relationships which supports the whole ethos. The children have slightly different conversations while they are sharing food than they do at other times.'

The playground has made great moves in supporting children to eat well. Fruit is eaten not thrown. The children now try new things rather

than making sick noises and saying food is disgusting. They will try anything now – olives, salads, fruits, vegetables.

They drink water or fruit juice since a snazzy water cooler was purchased and a load of home-made ice put in it. Plastic baby plates and cups are not used anymore; they have been replaced with china and glasses in a variety of sizes including shot glasses. This makes it lots of fun and suits all ages too.

Children have become very used to looking after each other and staff where food and drink are concerned. Children who were challenging have found that they always have their immediate after school snack of choice. Behaviour has improved as they are no longer hungry. They can stay on the playground longer too. Numbers of chicken and chips boxes littering the site have plummeted and so have fizzy drinks bottles.

'I never mention healthy eating or condemn their food choices. All in all, I think the element of nurture which had been needed by the children and the quiet communicative and creative play types that they found difficulty accessing previously have added to the value of the play offer.'



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Author: Sue Bradshaw

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