

## **Consultation, Participation and the Death of Play? Bob Hughes - 2011**

Unlike other contributions today, mine is not exclusively about safety. Rather it focuses on the impact of another of those adult neuroses that we inflict on our children's play, and which, like an over-emphasis on safety, has the effect – in my opinion - of undermining play's benefits, and the skills children need to adapt to change.

My focus is on a practice which is endemic in the UK, and which is becoming increasingly popular in other countries – it is the recent trend to Consult with children and invite them to participate in the development of playgrounds, You will see the parallels with safety

My question is: Is consulting with children and encouraging them to participate in the design of their play spaces a good thing, or might it be harmful and should it be discouraged?

The question may seem a little redundant, perhaps even irrelevant to today's children's play lives, given that it was Roger Hart's introduction to his Ladder of Participation, in his now seminal UNICEF Essay – Children's Participation, From Tokenism to Citizenship, published nearly 20 years ago - which began this debate for me.

In it, Hart called on its readers to review their approach to children's power relations and their struggle for equal rights, by increasing their involvement in decisions that affected them, particularly through their greater participation in community projects.

However, there was something about this essay that troubled me, as I wrote in my editorial in the IPJ when I read it.

My concern was not that what Hart was suggesting in general terms was somehow inappropriate, far from it. Like him I also believed that children should have a greater say in society as a whole, AND a greater role in community projects – I still do. However, whilst it made sense to me, for children to work with adults to achieve common social and community goals, he was also proposing children's involvement in play space development as a way of doing that, something which did not make the same sense, because it risked being misinterpreted by those who saw play primarily as a vehicle for community development and citizenship training, which could have resulted in the colonisation of the play space, AND could also have had the effect of making children feel responsible if the play space under development, failed.

In other words, at the time, I was worried that the process of consultation and participation he advocated, like the parallel emphasis on safety, could have the effect, of hijacking children's play, and polluting it with what I saw as yet another adult agenda to accompany the Health and Safety legislation, equal opportunities, anti-bullying, anti-racism and anti-sexism agendas, that were already being imposed on supervised play spaces in the UK, by that time.

My view of play and provision for play, is influenced heavily by my own childhood play experiences and those of my friends, it reflects a view that also resonates through the literature. It underlined my belief that play was what children did when adults were not around, and that the only time space, particularly supervised space like an adventure playground, should be provided, was when the built and local natural environment itself did not allow for children to engage in play. It followed that when spaces and supervision were provided, any

intervention in the play of the children attending that space – whatever the rationale – should be sensitive, minimal and in the children's best play interests. If as Hart wished, children were able to create much of their play space, that was good, but if that involvement was conditional on them adapting their play so that they satisfied the rigours of legislation and other adult agenda's, then that was a breach of play's privacy and integrity and was not good.

Over the intervening years a number of things have happened that have demonstrated to me that I was right to be worried. Firstly, over the eighteen years since the essay was published, in the UK there has been a wholesale adoption of consultation with children in play projects as a general practice. Children's consultation/participation is now a small industry there. It provides quite a few people with employment and involves a not insignificant amount of money. This development is a direct result of Hart's paper and people cite that paper as their justification for doing what they do. More seriously and also as a direct result of the same paper, children's consultation/participation have been made a condition for grant aid for the development of play spaces in the UK. Now most if not all Local Authorities, grant aiding Quangos, like Play England and the Big Lottery, and even Central Government itself, insist that children must be consulted about any play spaces that will affect them, before any money is handed over, and many thousands of children have now been involved. However, what is interesting, is that although these developments use Hart's paper as a justification for their intervention, at no time did Hart himself advocate involving children in the kind of formal consultations, that are currently undertaken in the UK – he wanted children to be more involved, sure, but he never suggested either this level or type of exploitation to achieve it – that came from individuals who appeared to hold the view that being politically correct, was more important than being play correct – that participation in the development of play spaces, was more important than playing itself.

In my opinion this was a hugely serious and retrograde development. Whatever its benefits, until recently, play has always belonged to children.

An additional concern is that asking children about play gives the asking adults a say in the child's play agenda. They can argue a case for the prohibition of certain behaviour, language, smoking, risky play and sexual interaction, in the interests of ..... society or community, certainly not in the interests of the playing child. A recent UK Central Government Strategic Document stated that from now on, children will be expected to treat one another with respect when they play. This is as biologically idiotic, as it is politically attractive. Is this the same play of which Bruner, Sylva, Gopnik, Huizinga and so many others have written about so eloquently?

Secondly the science has moved on significantly in the past eighteen years. Following Sutton-Smith, Beckoff, Byers and Burghardt's leads, I think it is fair to say now that there is a higher level of agreement than ever before, that it is play that is under the control of the child, which is responsible for the major play benefits published recently, including good health and neural growth and brain organisation.

My concern is whether the over enthusiastic application of ideas like consultation, or safety have the effect of undermining these benefits by disturbing children's play patterns, their memories, preferences and urges, and perhaps even the vital neural, psychic, cellular and muscular processes, that are the reported outcomes of playing, creating instead dissonance, depression or what *Grof (1975) calls "an agonising metaphysical crisis,* in the children involved. And what makes these potential outcomes tolerable? That we adults can feel more secure that the piece of land we have chosen for a play space, or the piece of equipment we want to

design and sell, is endorsed as appropriate by the children who are going to use it?

Whilst these changes are being applied, everything I observe or read about play leads me to conclude something else: that play and its outcomes are the result of a conversation with the unconscious, or as Sutton-Smith (2007) recently stated, "a consultation with deep seated evolutionary emotions". Play is a fundamental part of our evolutionary mechanism, and this is what consultation and other interventions like safety are tapping into. But like the BP oil pipeline fracture in the Gulf of Mexico, these things are far harder to stop than to start. Whether we refer to games, den building, or swinging, or non-specialisation, brain imaging, Theory construction or cortical map creation, these are not the results of activity which is conscious, and can be consulted on, or changed to suit society's whims - rather they are the products of evolutionary currents, of quantum changes at sub-atomic level, and ancient archetypal influences on what Jung called the collective unconscious.

My fear is that by engaging children in consultations about what they want from a play space, or getting them to accept constraints on their risk behaviour, that this will inevitably involve them in a conversation about play from an adult perspective. This in a situation where children are the experts and adults the novices, struggling to remember what play was like, trying to reconnecting with their own childhood.

It is also possible that play material which is biologically sensitive and unconscious, could be brought into the conscious realm, i.e. into a Winnecottian 'possibility space, where as well as re-acting to its impulses, children may also be driven to attempt to encode it in language, or even to understand and control it, My worry is that by doing that, they will change it, and thus make it impossible to return it to its unconscious location - the effect being that these children will be so conscious of playing - self-conscious if you like - that they may be unable ever to play again.

We have to remember that although our knowledge of play has increased considerably in the past decade and a half, we still know relatively little about what it is, what it does or how best to facilitate it.

Of course children are conscious of the game they are playing, or the den they're building or the tree they're climbing, but their awareness of what they are doing and their reasons for doing them are not adult in form, rather they are immersed in fantasy and imagination, and flooded with the emotions of new experience, not the language of legislation and quality criteria that we may rely on. The outcomes of calibration, flexibility and plasticity, so important to the play scholar, are unconscious to the child. The child is neither aware, nor does she need to be aware for them to occur. In fact it is my contention that the more the child is aware, the less these processes can happen, that awareness is an inhibiting, rather than facilitating factor.

That playing is essential for children, that it builds their brains, that it makes them more flexible and adaptable, may be important for we adults to know, but for the child, all that matters is the act of climbing the tree, lighting the fire, moving to the music or telling the joke.

Children know intuitively how to play, and what the best play spaces feel like. To them. it's obvious, but it is not conscious. What engaging playing children in an adult process like consultation does, is reduce their play to behaviour, and their spaces to provision, which might be fine for adults, but could have the effect of rendering the involved children not only conscious of their play, and perhaps embarrassed by its transparency to adults, but could act as a spoiler, in the same

way that someone who pre-empts the punch-line of a joke or reveals the plot of a film, can spoil those experiences. And that may actually stop them wanting to play.

The possible theoretical dangers not only of disturbing, but of uprooting aspects of the unconscious, through consultative probing should not be minimised, and neither should the impact of drastically altering the physical challenges anticipated by children, brought about by adult fears.

So is consultation harmful? One colleague reminded me that since most children get this kind of input in education through most of their childhood, they are very capable of adapting to it. I'm not convinced.

I think as children's play become an increasing focus for Governments, academics, and everyone else as it will, we must be vigilant that we do not treat children as consumers of our play narratives, as I think consultation, and an emphasis on safety can. We must continually remind ourselves that play is their right, it belongs to them, they own it. We are merely bystanders trying to help, because we know that play is vital to them. Anything we do, whether it is to do with Consultation or Safety has to be for their benefit first and foremost and not ours.

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