



## Book Review

### **The essence of play: A practice companion for professionals working with children and young people by Justine Howard and Karen McInnes**

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This book is authored by Justine Howard, a developmental and therapeutic play specialist, and Karen McInnes, a psychology and early childhood lecturer and primary school teacher. The book gives ample evidence of not only the detailed research which has gone into the writing of this compilation but also the rich and relevant professional experience of the authors. This book is certainly a useful resource for all professionals engaged in children's learning and development through play.

The contents of the book are divided into eight chapters which flow easily from one to the other, covering topics from play theories, child development, concepts of playfulness, the role of adults in promoting play, the play environment, diversity in relation to play, observation and assessment of play and professional practice in relation to play.

Each chapter has a clear layout with the aims, introduction, sub headings of the topics, conclusion and questions or points/tasks for further reflection. The chapters are embellished with photos, diagrams, charts and tables, which complement the writing and aid understanding.

The first chapter examines the diverse theorists of play and theories which form the basis of play practices. Focusing on the aspects which separate play from playfulness, the authors emphasise the feelings which an activity evokes in a child being more important than the activity itself. The authors propose a pragmatic but powerful view of play, and reiterate throughout all the chapters, the need for practitioners to reflect on the research relating to play and develop a strong personal philosophy relating to the value of play.

Some of the main developmental milestones of children and their play behaviours from birth through to early adolescence are clearly explained in the second chapter through indicative and appealing photographs of children. The chapter explains the different ways in which children learn and how play fosters the different developmental domains. The authors emphasise that many of the questions raised relating to psychology in the past still continue and that no theory can adequately define play. They suggest practitioners optimise the strength of each theory and know the weaknesses to reflect further and move forward.

The chapter on playfulness focuses on the need for practitioners to move away from the 'conventional' adult view of playfulness and understand play from a child's perspective. The authors urge practitioners to concentrate on the aspect of playfulness by seeking the voices of children and basing play practices on children's definition of play. By the same token, they identify the 'power relations'



between adults and children which might come in the way of interview methodology while gathering responses from children.

The authors drive home a key point that children's perceptions of play are influenced by the experience of the context of different play settings. They also give a table summary of cues used by children to characterise play and decide if an activity is playful or not.

The fact that in some settings the presence and/or participation of an adult during play determines children's opinion if an activity was playful or not was a new and interesting revelation to me. The examples of two play scenarios where adult observers and children express views of what (scenario) they consider play, provides an interesting insight into the differences in the adults and children's responses and reiterates the importance of taking children's opinion about their perception of play seriously.

In the chapter on the role of adults in children's play, the authors draw on research to bring out the practitioner's understanding about play having a direct influence on their interactions with children, by either empowering them with freedom and choices or taking control of their play. The authors usefully provide tips for adults for effective and engaging opportunities with children to optimise their development. A graphic explanation of the play cycle based on children's perceptions of play and some key points of reflection for all practitioners (educational, therapeutic and recreational) to ensure greater playfulness add value to this chapter.

The types of play and the play environment itself is discussed quite exhaustively in a chapter which has many photos and illustrations to aid understanding. The chapter on inclusive play practice throws light on different aspects of diversity – disability, culture and gender. To begin with, it offers some clear indicators of play behaviours demonstrated by the children suffering from cerebral palsy, dyspraxia and autism. For example, the authors point out that children with cerebral palsy can show 'learned helplessness', not behaving in a way that reflects their true ability, and suggests play resources to build their self-confidence and foster the developmental domains. Further examples of play for children undergoing treatment in hospitals, highlight the importance of understanding the characteristics of play from a remedial perspective by all children's service professionals.

How play differs in the context of gender and culture is beautifully brought out by the discussions of the Barbie dolls in the West and Islamic countries. A play scenario is used as an example to highlight the influence of cultural norms in play. From observation and assessment of play, the authors give some key tips for educators who are in the process of observing children's play and caution educators to be mindful of the flaws in their interpretations. The apt example of a boy in a kindergarten always choosing black paint for his visual art drives home the judgemental errors caused by misinterpretation.

The last chapter of the book addresses a variety of issues concerned with play practices and discusses in depth how these professional issues impact on the different play practices. Going through this chapter would certainly help practitioners reflect on their own practice in relation to dealing with these issues and improve play opportunities for children.



This book offers excellent and exhaustive reference material in the area of play to all professionals – whether they are working in a therapeutic context, an educational context or in a hospital. Each chapter has some questions which aid understanding and offer opportunities for further reflection and engagement with the topic. The list readings provided at the end of each chapter provides scope for further involvement with each topic. In view of the novel angles of play discussed, and the comprehensive way in which the topics are addressed in this book, it is only fair to overlook the minor typos that appear in the text.

### **References**

Howard, J., & McInnes, K. (2013). *The essence of play: A practice companion for professionals working with children and young people*. New York, NY: Routledge.