The role of play during a global pandemic

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Summary

In times of uncertainty, play can serve as an important outlet for people of all ages and abilities, but especially children and youth.
In September 2019, I put my PhD studies on hold to join the team of The Steadward Centre for Personal & Physical Achievement (TSC) at the University of Alberta and dedicated my energy to the project, Promoting Inclusive Play in Alberta (PIPA). It is a multi-year, collaborative initiative between TSC and Canadian Tire Jumpstart Charities. The goal of PIPA is to get more Albertans, more active, by fostering inclusive play at Canadian Tire Jumpstart playgrounds across the province.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have been spending much of my time at home and working remotely for a few weeks. During this time, I have had the opportunity to think deeply about the ideas shared by PIPA stakeholders, the concept of play, and the role of play in each of our lives. In times of uncertainty, play can serve as an important outlet for people of all ages and abilities, but especially children and youth.

**Play**

There are many different, even contradictory, definitions for play. For Scott Eberle, play possesses 5 key qualities:

- Play exists for its own sake—play is purposeless.
- Players play for their own accord—players are intrinsically motivated to play.
- Play is special and set apart—players determine the setting and boundaries (or lack thereof).
- Play is fun—fun is judged by the players themselves.
- Players play by rules—rules keep games going and keep them interesting.

The right to play, for children of all abilities, is protected within the United Nations Convention on the Rights on the Child. Regardless of their views on play, theorists "concur that play occupies a central role in children's lives".

Globally, as we witness a decline in children's play, there has been an increase in advocates for play and a recognition of children's need for play.
Play during a global pandemic

Themes of play

It is common for children's current or recent experiences, like the COVID-19 pandemic, to inform the themes of their play. Children may process current events and information through play, and engaging in play enables them to work through and express their feelings. One PIPA stakeholder provided an example of having seen children recreate a funeral in their play, after having experienced the loss of a loved one.

With strict social and physical distancing protocols in place, children have experienced several disruptions to their day-to-day lives:

- children are doing schoolwork in their homes; recreation centres and playgrounds are closed;
- kids are told that they cannot gather with their friends;
- and sports and other organized group activities are cancelled for the foreseeable future.
Sheena Hill, a responsive parenting coach in Baltimore, Maryland, explained that it should not come as a surprise to adults if children’s play begins to adopt themes related to:

- Separation
- Death/ dying
- Illness
- Medical care
- Being “stuck”
- Losing or missing things
- Being in control
- Superheroes and saving
- Scary things or being scared

**Benefits of play**

Engaging in play during times of uncertainty, stress, and perhaps fear, can be helpful for children in a variety of ways. It is important that kids are encouraged to engage in active, screen-free play! Each day, kids should have the opportunity to: *make up a new game with their own rules*, negotiate roles with siblings, wear a costume, *use materials or spaces in the house differently*, and make a mess.

Sometimes play should be centered on *being* as opposed to *becoming*. Play does not always need to revolve around learning, rehabilitation, or other external goals. Kids should be encouraged and supported to play, just for the sake of playing.

Taking some time to play each day can allow children to:

- **cope with changes to routine and feelings of uncertainty.** Play enables children to reorganize and restructure their worlds to make them less scary and less boring. Engaging in play enables children to develop flexibility and an ability to adapt to their environments.⁷
- **experience feelings of control.** "[C]hildren are in control and can seek out uncertainty in order to triumph over it – or, if not, no matter, it is only a game".⁷
- **foster empathy and relieve tension.** "During play, we entertain fantasies, break down preconceived notions, and become more socially and physically flexible. This
enables us to navigate unfamiliar territory with greater finesse and ease. By playing, we foster empathy and relieve tension.\(^8\)

- **promote well-being and resilience.** Engaging in play can lead to increased feelings of pleasure and enjoyment, and support emotion regulation, learning, and creativity.\(^7\)

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### What adults can do

Given all of the positive outcomes that accompany play, it is important to support children to engage in play during times of high stress and uncertainty.

**Children’s play should be child-driven as much as possible.** For the PIPA stakeholders, the role of the adult is to provide fun and safe play environments for children to foster curiosity and creativity, rather than inform the type of play. One parent of a child experiencing disability specifically noted how adult support is often critical to making a play experience happen for her child. It is also important that adults recognize when the support is needed and when to fade into the background and let the child take over.
Children's play belongs to children, not adults. Another PIPA stakeholder, a rehabilitation professional, emphasized the need to remind adults that they can be, and often are, barriers to children's play. Adults become barriers to children's play when they dismiss their games and activities as trivial and attempt to take over and reshape the play experience. When possible, adults should avoid attempts to restrict, dismiss, or control children's play through "insensitive planning or the pursuit of other adult agendas". Rather, adults should simply ensure that children's play is supported, both socially and physically.\(^7\)

Sometimes the most helpful thing you can do is stay silent and let the mess happen. Taking a moment to step back and listen to children planning and engaging in play is an incredible thing to witness. It is a privilege to be granted access to this part of a child’s world and it is our responsibility to foster and nurture it and ensure it is accessible to all children.

Play is an important means of communication in childhood.\(^9\) As such, adults should work to respect, accept, and value children's play, in all forms. We need to provide children with a safe and inviting environment in which to let them take the lead.\(^3\)

It is important to pay attention to the ways in which the children in your life play. If they invite you in, I would encourage you to play with them.

Additional resources
For anyone looking for some resources to support play at home, please check out the following:

- COVID-19: Supporting the physical and mental health of families of children with disabilities, Canadian Disability Participation Project
- Active at Home, Edmonton Sport Council
- Active At Home, Be Fit For Life

About PIPA
The Canadian Tire Jumpstart playgrounds in Alberta will serve as a unique platform to promote inclusive play for kids of all abilities and includes intentional programming opportunities designed by TSC.
PIPA stakeholders have provided ideas and insights into the design and development of inclusive play initiatives that will be offered at the Canadian Tire Jumpstart playgrounds in Calgary and Edmonton. The PIPA stakeholders include Adapted Physical Education consultants, parents of children that experience disability, rehabilitation clinicians and students, City of Calgary staff, team members of Ever Active Schools, and academics whose work intersects with play, childhood, disability, or a combination of the three.

For more information about PIPA, check out our website and follow us on social media:

- Twitter: @steadwardcentre
- Instagram: @thesteadwardcentre
- Facebook: @TheSteadwardCentre

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About the Authors

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References


