

8 Discussion and Conclusion

The last three decades have seen unprecedented levels of international acknowledgement, from a human rights perspective, of the rights of children and young persons (UNCRC, 1989) and all persons with disabilities (UNCRPD, 2008). For the first time in world history, all children under the UNCRC have a right to play, enshrined in international law. This was reinforced by General Comment 17 (2013) where children and young persons with disabilities were identified as a group ‘vulnerable’ in relation to the realisation of their play rights. Despite this acknowledgement, however, there remains much to be done at national levels, not least for EU member states in relation to the development, implementation and evaluation of national play policies.

With regard to the play and recreational barriers affecting children and young persons with disabilities, the characteristics of specific impairments/disabilities significantly contribute to the limitations and the barriers experience in their play (Tonkin, 2014) and can contribute to certain play preferences. For example, children with physical impairments/disabilities may have movement challenges (Law et al., 2004), children with autism spectrum disorders may experience difficulties participating in social play (Ben-Sasson et al. 2009) and children with socio-emotional disabilities may have difficulty initiating and/or maintaining social interaction with their peers (Hestenes and Carroll, 2000). These ‘impairment effects’ as they might be termed should not be ignored. Because the range of ‘disabilities’ albeit grouped within certain categorical terms, for example, physical, communicative and cognitive disabilities is broad, so too is the range of ‘barriers’ children and young people with disabilities encounter when engaging in play and recreation. Many of these barriers are unique to individual children. We suggest that further research, policy development and Universal Design implementation must keep this reality at the forefront of their work. Researching with children is central to this work to ensure their ‘voice’ is heard and that they are participating in matters that are important to them. Our review of existing research suggests that the ‘voice’ of children with disabilities is all too often absent within research. Of course, quite what is meant by ‘voice’ in this regard is a complex question, as is how to enable and ‘capture’ their ‘voice’ in meaningful ways. As yet there are no universally agreed answers to either question or ‘universal solutions’ or ‘ideal methodology’, which addresses these issues completely (Lewis and Porter, 2007). We need to continuously develop innovative approaches.

It is further evidenced within the literature reviewed that there is an imbalance in the examination of play and recreation for children and young persons who have different impairments/disabilities. There are more studies focusing on physical disabilities (Clark and MacArthur, 2008; Cook and Melvyn, 1999; Cooper et al., 2004; Kalyvas and Reid, 2003; Newacheck et al., 2004; Newacheck and Halfon, 1998; Rubin et al., 2014; Schreuer et al., 2014; Shikako-Thomas et al., 2013) and autism spectrum disorder (Anderson et al., 2004; Barton and Wolery, 2008; Cook and Melvyn, 1999; Machalicek et al., 2008) than any other impairment/disability ‘category’.

Evidence-based studies or key findings on other impairments such as cognitive disabilities, communication disabilities, hearing disabilities, visual disabilities or multiple disabilities are scarce (Cook and Melvyn, 1999). We suggest, therefore, that this imbalance needs to be addressed at national policy levels and by research funders. Further research is required that identifies and understands the barriers to play for children and young persons with cognitive and communication difficulties in particular.

Many of us live in a risk-averse society (Barron, 2014) with ‘risk reduction’ being viewed as a positive goal. This ‘risk reduction’ rhetoric appears to be interwoven within much of the research and literature reviewed relating to play and recreation for children and young persons with disabilities. The issue is not dissimilar vis-à-vis children without disabilities, but more acute for children with disabilities. Livingstone (2002) argues that children and young people need opportunities to interact with the world in their play and recreation and to assist in the development of personal autonomy and independence. We support the need to balance risk in children and young people’s play worlds and endorse the views expressed in General Comment 17 in this regard:

While children must not be exposed to harm in the realization of their rights under article 31, some degree of risk and challenge is integral to play and recreational activities and is a necessary component of the benefits of these activities. (General Comment 17, pp. 12)

Because the reality of ‘risk-averse’ societies is a relatively new phenomenon and is not universal, the ramifications for children’s development, independence and loss of benefits from activities are not yet known (Barron, 2014). Rather than viewing society as ‘risk averse’, we suggest viewing the play and recreation for children and young people from a ‘benefits’ perspective, that is, the benefits of play and recreation for children and young persons with disabilities far exceed the potential risks in most instances.

We also note that there is, of course, a much broader range of ‘barriers’ that impact on the play experiences of children with disabilities. Socio-economic factors are known to impact on the lives of children with disabilities more broadly and in relation to their play experiences (Bedell, 2011). This is, however, another under-researched issue warranting further investigation. The lack of accessible and affordable transport is also known to be a barrier to children with disabilities and their families engaging in leisure activities (Bedell et al., 2013). Finally, little research has examined how social class or socio-economic factors, gender, ethnicity and geographical location intersect with diverse impairments/disabilities, resulting in quite different experiences for children. Research is needed that recognises and explores the heterogeneity of children with disabilities experiences and the different barriers that they may face.

8.1 Barriers in Home, Educational, Built and Natural Settings

The following is the summary of main barriers to play and recreation for children and young persons with disabilities and gaps in existing research in this area:

- Too few studies of children’s own play preferences or play forms
- Existing studies focus on the needs of children with a physical impairment/disability. Need to understand barriers to play of children with a range of impairments/disabilities
- In some countries, there is a lack of clear legislation and policy in relation to built environments and accessible and usable spaces for play
- In some countries, there is a lack of clear legislation and policy in relation to including nature and important natural features in built play environments and playgrounds and support for nature play for all
- Insufficient consultation with stakeholders (children and young people with disabilities and their families and friends), and lack of disability equality training in key professionals who lead on planning, design and policy can hamper the development of inclusive play
- Lack of information on specific strategies to address barriers to participation in home, school and community activities again can hamper inclusive play