

Why Play? This is Serious. by Sarah Huxley

Play isn't the opposite of work—it's vital for social transformation.

Materials used at the inception workshop for Toybox Mums in Nairobi, January 2017.
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It's fair to say that, like many other people, I've been a pin ball in the international development fruit machine for many years. Sometimes I've hit the jackpot by working with great people on programmes or advocacy that have truly benefitted young people; at other times I've fallen into the dark pit of skepticism and disappointment. For all the talk of 'breaking down silos,' some people seem inordinately invested in preserving them. We go up and we go down. The good news is that I can see another 'up' coming.

That's because I've spent the last year ruminating and exploring what to do next. There's no doubt that the creaking development sector requires new and better ways of operating, and that's where play comes in.

As I've ventured into the wilderness beyond the offices, taxis and conferences of the foreign aid world it feels like I'm an undergraduate again, though thankfully I haven't had to battle the cobbled streets of Oxford in a wheel chair as I did many years ago as part of a 'geography of disability' assignment that had a big impact on me. The harsh juxtaposition of playing around in a wheelchair, set against a glimpse of the stark reality of what life is like for the people who have to use them full-time in an all too often unaccommodating world, was striking. In fact the more I thought about it, the more play seemed to lie at the core of a rubix cube of social transformation.

So I started to read, watch and listen. I listened to musician and writer Pat Kane talk about creativity and his book *the Play Ethic*, which shows how play is fundamental to both society and the individual, and how the work ethic that has dominated the last three centuries is ill-equipped to deal with the modern world. Kane claims that "Play will be to the 21st century what work was to the industrial age—our dominant way of knowing, doing and creating value." That felt liberating and resonated with my core feelings.

I heard the writer Steven Johnson talk at the RSA about his new book that focuses on the "wonder and delight" of play, and how places of play have contributed to social change—for example, the explosion of coffee houses in London in the 1600s when "what seemed like leisure actually turned out to be exceptionally productive...the flowering of the British enlightenment was really based in the coffee house culture" that included magazines, Lloyds of London, and the RSA itself.

As someone who has studied and worked with children and young people throughout my career I've come to view girls and boys, young women and young men as engines of invention, creativity and deconstruction—the witches and wizards of Lego building in the world—but only if they are allowed to thrive in places of play.

But when I thought back to my time studying the anthropology of childhood, I was struck that—whilst the literature looked at ritual, ways of learning and apprenticeship—it never actually discussed the broader concept of play. It was as if play had been relegated to something that shouldn't be taken seriously. Yet as Stuart Brown and other biologists and psychologists have demonstrated, play is a vital element in the socialisation processes of all animals and humans.

It has only been in the last five years that there has been explicit and substantial research, reflection and interpretation on play in anthropology. You could argue that Clifford Geertz's famous studies of the 'Interpretation of Cultures' in the 1970s and the Balinese Cockfight he describes there was a playful form of analysis, but his emphasis was on the cockfight ritual as a solemn act rather than the art of delight that surrounded it. In most societies play has been side-lined as something subservient and superficial, regularly placed in opposition to the value and seriousness of work and labour that's imbued in dominant Christian western ideologies.

But societal narratives that see play 'as something only children do' are a myth. Play and games (with and without rules) enable us to learn about ourselves, who we want to be, and how we see ourselves in the world. Play has huge benefits for people of all ages, including how to solve problems, gain knowledge, learn to be in a group, and develop creativity and imagination. Play is what helps children to learn about how problems can be solved. Kacy Hughes from the Boston Children's Museum describes this perfectly:

"In the beginning, infants learn to use their bodies in a way that helps them manipulate objects. They may make accidental discoveries, such as hitting a button that makes a toy play music. However, over time they will learn that they themselves made the toy play music, and they become able to intentionally perform these actions. Children learn cause and effect relationships, how to manipulate objects, and develop critical thinking skills."

Research by Rachel Keen at the University of Virginia has found that the ability to use tools depends on children's previous experience with them, reflecting the importance of giving children the opportunity to manipulate tools in order to learn about how they work. But before children ever use tools, they play with toys. Playing with toys allows infants to understand how the different properties of objects such as texture, weight, and size affect how those objects will behave.

That's the key point: it's not just that what happens in childhood affects our capacity to deal with the rest of our lives, but that as adults we should also continue to be the explorers we are as children. Play plays a crucial role in developing the skills and capacities that are required to create better alternatives to our brutal and relentless world.

I've started to put these ideas into practice in my own life by starting a new initiative called the Toybox Mums Collective. Young mums bring up children. They embody what care, empathy and resilience mean. And they are true catalysts in society who can connect across generations and spread values related to a love of learning, play and creativity. Yet their power and potential often goes unnoticed. I've yet to hear of a culture that reveres young mums or places them in positions of power. Instead they're often seen

as a burden on society, and at worst they can be neglected and abused.

That was my starting point for setting up Toybox Mums as a playful space (both physical and online) where mums can develop their own skills and contribute to toy designs that will improve their children's capacities. Toys are tools that can connect people, generate new ideas, and nurture new ways of interacting with each-other.

The seeds of Toybox began a few years back, but it wasn't until 2016 that I developed the actual concept. I held the first inception workshop with ten other young mums and a business innovation specialist in Nairobi, Kenya in January 2017. We played around with three questions:

How can we create toys that facilitate inter-generational play?

How can we create gender neutral toys that encourage girls and boys to play together?

And how can we create hybrid toys with a cultural and modern twist?

The goal is for Toybox Mums to grow into a platform for young mothers to become inventors—co-designing toys and regaining a more valued position in society. We are not alone in exploring the power of play. At the end of March 2017, for example, the CounterPlay festival takes place in Denmark. It's a festival of play where people from all around the world will come together for three days of talking, thinking, dancing, making, learning and playing to explore key questions:

How can play facilitate a stronger sense of agency and become a catalyst of adaptability and change? In what ways can play inspire and encourage people to question the status quo and challenge the rules of current economic and political systems? How can our innate playfulness spark our imagination and curiosity, and will it enable us to see that the world can be transformed into something else?

In the same spirit, I want to extend a virtual hand and ear to anyone who is exploring the power of play in one form or another. Let's connect for some seriously useful playtime.