

PLAY - A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE



WRITTEN BY
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A PLAY NERD

As a play specialist I am always banging on about the benefits of play. I write articles and books about Play and I am constantly trying to persuade people about the inestimable value of play in the development and well-being of our children. I can demonstrate unequivocally that play is a key criterion for healthy brain growth. I can talk at length about play being intrinsically linked to life expectancy and I can even prove without doubt that play is one of the most powerful therapeutic disciplines, helping even our most vulnerable children to thrive. OK so I might be a bit of a Play nerd.

ARTICLE 31 UNCRC

The one thing I don't often mention is that play is a fundamental human right. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNICEF, 2019) states clearly that "every child has a right to play". It may seem a cliché, but childhood is precious. One of the things that makes it precious is that you only get one childhood, one chance, one shot to get it right. Play is such an integral part of a healthy childhood that its absence is nothing short of catastrophic. More than that though, every child deserves to have a childhood filled with play.

A progressive society is founded on inalienable human rights. We are appalled if a human being in our country is deprived of food or water, or is tortured or held against their will. Yet every day adults take play away from children. Children have play withheld if they have misbehaved or in the name of academic pursuits or because of outdated health and safety views (tree climbing anyone?), or simply because it causes too much mess.

THE PROBLEM?

The problem is that we don't always seem to afford the same rights to children as we would to adults. This is dangerous territory though. If we do not provide children with the full range of human rights, then we debase them, and ultimately dehumanise them. When we take away play, when we hijack it for educational purposes, or when we restrict children's play because as adults it no longer has the same meaning to us, then we denigrate childhood itself, and we demonstrate that children are in some way less important than adults and ultimately less than human.

Play and childhood are so inextricably linked that the two should be utterly inseparable. Children play because they are children. It is as natural to children as eating, drinking and breathing. There is even some evidence that in the short term a child's brain prioritises play as even more important than food, which is why children will often forget to come in for dinner when they are caught up in the moment of play.



INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATED

There is a lovely quote from Play England (2024). They interviewed children to find a working definition of Play and arguably the best quote from a child was, and I am probably paraphrasing this, "Play is what I do when everyone else stops telling me what to do."

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We live in a society where adults are constantly telling children what to do, and when and how to do it. Children's lives are scrutinised, observed and controlled by the adults around them. I believe this makes play more precious than ever. Play is a child's own time, their own choices and their own special place. It is both a means of escape from adult expectations and a unique means of self-expression. It is one of the few intrinsically motivated and self-directed experiences left in children's lives and as such is utterly unique.

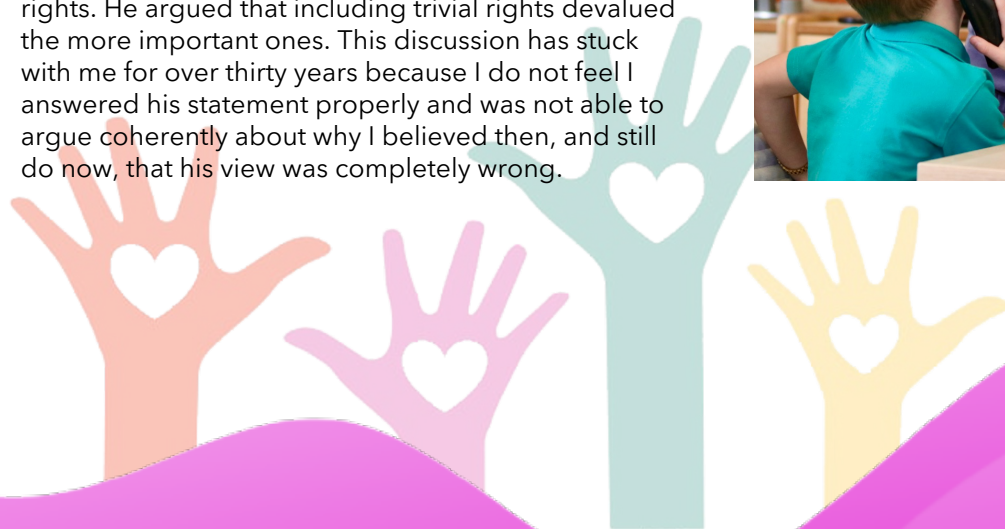


YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH!

Interestingly I met up with him recently for a gaming group reunion. Now I finally had my chance to say to him all the things that I was unable to say all those years ago. I casually brought up our previous discussion about play and told him how his words had frustrated me at the time. This time though I was ready for him. I had rehearsed multiple compelling arguments and a range of current research to blow his views completely out of the proverbial water. I had an argument so airtight and finely honed, after thirty years of thought, that even an American Lawyer played by Tom Cruise would not be able to argue against me. Unfortunately, not only had he completely forgotten the discussion which had been gnawing at me all this time (I mean it was only 30 years ago!) he had also completely changed his viewpoint. As you can imagine this was really annoying. He stated that as an autistic adult, dungeons and dragons had been a lifeline for him and one of the most powerful ways in which he combatted his own anxiety and felt a sense of belonging. He further stated that he now believed not only was play a fundamental human right for children, but it should be for adults too. As I said, really annoying, turns out he could "handle the truth!"

NERD OVERLOAD

I used to play dungeons and dragons with a small group of friends (see I told you I was a nerd). Many years ago, we got into a discussion about the nature of play and why it was so important. One of my friends stated that he did not believe play should be classed as a human right for children because it was much less important than other more prominent rights. He argued that including trivial rights devalued the more important ones. This discussion has stuck with me for over thirty years because I do not feel I answered his statement properly and was not able to argue coherently about why I believed then, and still do now, that his view was completely wrong.



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IF NOT US THEN WHO ELSE?

The other important thing to remember about human rights, is that the individual having those rights restricted is often unable through circumstance to stand up for the very rights they are entitled to. A starving person does not have the strength to fight for their right for food and an imprisoned person is powerless to change their situation. It is therefore incumbent on those who do have their rights upheld to campaign, resist and speak out for those less fortunate than themselves.

Children are unable to advocate for their right to play and so we as adults must do it for them. We must stand up for a child's right to play and argue with all of the adults who would devalue and restrict it. (Even if that argument takes thirty years!) The simple truth is that if we don't do it then who will?



I asked if she had a question, but she shook her head and said, "Not a question more of a statement. You delivered training for our school six years ago and as a result of your comment about children rolling down hills, we got a landscape architect to add some hills to our field for children to roll down. They absolutely love it!"

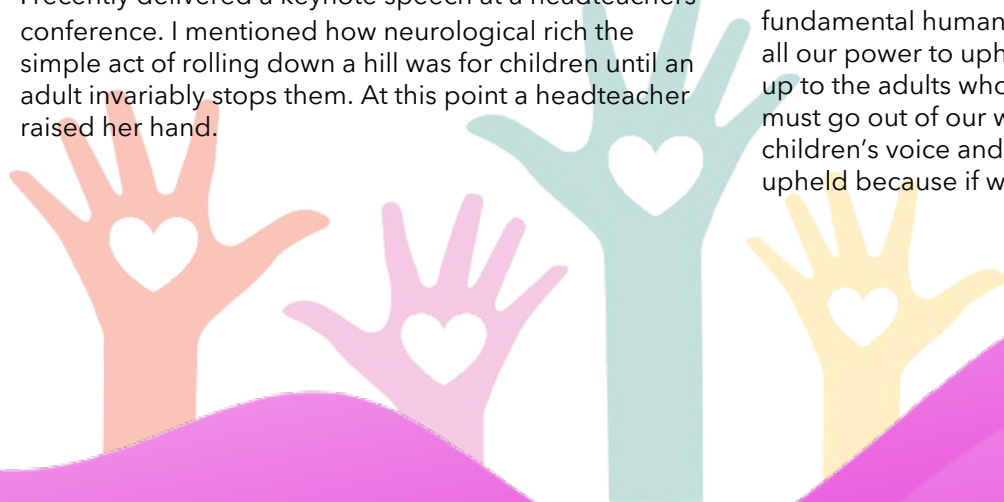
THE TAKEAWAY

So, what is the takeaway from all this? Well firstly, dwelling on a conversation for thirty years is maybe not entirely healthy (Alexa play "Let it Go"). Secondly, we need to acknowledge Play as an inalienable human right and we must fight to protect it. Yes, it is essential for development, for creative problem solving, brain growth, mental health, self-regulation and even life expectancy. Yes, play is utterly unique in its therapeutic potential to help vulnerable children. Of course, we should celebrate Play's benefits and use this to improve and enrich children's play, but we must always remember that underneath all the research and fascinating neuroscience, play is a fundamental human right which we should fight with all our power to uphold and protect. We must stand up to the adults who take play away from children, we must go out of our way to speak up, to be our children's voice and demand that their rights be upheld because if we don't do it who will?



YOU'VE GOTTA ROLL WITH IT

I recently delivered a keynote speech at a headteachers conference. I mentioned how neurological rich the simple act of rolling down a hill was for children until an adult invariably stops them. At this point a headteacher raised her hand.



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Never forget that Play is both a hill worth dying on and a hill worth rolling down in joy, and if we deny play, we deny childhood itself.



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Ben Kingston-Hughes is an international keynote speaker, author and multi award-winning trainer. He is also the Managing Director of Inspired Children and has worked with vulnerable children across the UK for over 35 years. His distinctive blend of humour, neuroscience and real-life practical experiences have made his training invaluable for anyone working with children. His game-changing book about play, "A Very Unusual Journey into Play" has gained widespread acclaim and his new book, "Why Children Need Joy" was a finalist for a Nursery World Award for best professional book 2024, where it was awarded "highly commended".

"A life changing book, I can't recommend it enough. Everyone in Early Years should read it. The author is an inspiration!" R Taylor (Verified Amazon Purchase).

Amazon Author Page:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/stores/Ben-Kingston-Hughes/author/B09MV3FMWX>

This blog supports Ben's series of webinars on the 'Power of Play' hosted by REACHout Early Years Stronger Practice Hub.

[Click here](#) to watch the first video in the series

[Click here](#) to register for Ben's second webinar in his series 'The Power of Play'

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