



# Play - More than a Big Deal.

Many years ago, I worked as a Play Development Officer for a national charity. My role involved working at strategic level with Local Authorities to ensure that Play was recognised and prioritised as an important aspect of childhood. One of the more unusual aspects of my job was trying to persuade Local Authorities to remove “no ball games” signs from local green spaces so that children could play more. To justify this re-prioritising of play I read countless studies on play and having worked with children for many years, I knew first-hand that play was a big deal.

However, since then I have worked almost exclusively with vulnerable children. I now work with children who have had everything taken away from them and who have barely had a safe moment in their lives. I work with children who have been affected by the most adverse childhood experiences ranging from bereavement to systematic abuse. I now know my previous view on play was wrong.

## Giving back a childhood

For these children play is not merely a big deal, it is far more important than that. Play is a profoundly powerful therapeutic process and a unique opportunity to do one thing that their adverse childhood experiences have prevented. Simply to be children again. When children are playing, I see a significant improvement in their well-being, not just whilst they play but with a lasting impact. I see children smiling and even laughing whilst they play despite having experienced precious little happiness in their lives. In short through play, we support children to heal and ultimately to thrive. This is more than just a big deal; it is potentially the most important thing we ever do with our children.

## Adoption support

One of my projects is working with newly adopted children to help them bond with their new families. On these projects families are encouraged and supported to play together. They make dens together, play dressing up and climb trees together. Sharing play as a family strengthens those all-important attachments and helps the child to feel a sense of belonging in their new family. So once again I have been forced to reevaluate my views on play. I have always known that the adult's role in supporting play was an important one but now I see first hand how vital playful adults can be for their children. Playful adults can be utterly life changing for their children.

Neuroscience helps understand this....

It turns out there is a lot of neuroscience to support this view. We now know that when children are playing they produce a wide range of biochemicals. These are basically drugs that children produce when they play which are crucial for their mental health and emotional well-being. One such drug is Oxytocin. Oxytocin is a massively powerful anti-depressant and has been cited as one of three vital “happiness” hormones. This means that when children play, they produce a prescription grade anti-depressant which has a huge impact on their well-being. However, we also know that Oxytocin is closely linked to attachment. Children who have insecure attachments are likely to have lower levels of oxytocin. This is just one way in which play is incredibly beneficial for vulnerable children as it helps them top-up their oxytocin levels.

Where this gets interesting is that whilst we know that oxytocin is increased through play, we also know that, being part of the attachment system, it is similarly produced through positive interactions with nurturing adults. This means that play is amazing for producing oxytocin but the levels of this vital hormone are significantly increased if the adult plays too. Playful adults are producing a double dose of oxytocin in their children making those experiences utterly unique in supporting well-being. No other childhood experience comes even close to this, and I firmly believe that being a play partner for our children is one of the most important roles that any childcare professional or parent ever undertakes.

The sad truth

I work with children who have critically low levels of oxytocin because they have had an absence of secure attachments in their lives. I expect this and I am trained to support these children. The sad truth is that over the last thirty years the degree of play and nurturing in the home has markedly decreased. We simply don't spend enough time together as families anymore. The average screen time is now pushing seven hours a day for children, and this has replaced a significant amount of positive social experiences within families. This means that even the ordinary children you work with may have very low levels of oxytocin. Even children from loving families may not have enough oxytocin because they simply don't have enough positive real-life social experiences with their families.

Play is for all children

So, this means that play is not just profoundly important for our vulnerable children but is essential for the emotional well-being of all of our children. Playful adults who enhance, support and join in children's play are potentially life-changing for our children. This also means that it is no longer good enough to say that play is a big deal for children. What we actually need to be saying is that adults who support that play are the most important people in a child's life and play is profound, essential and life-changing and may just be the biggest deal of all.

*Ben Kingston-Hughes is an international keynote speaker, author and multi award-winning trainer. He works with vulnerable children across the UK and has appeared on television working on a variety of children's projects. He has now written two books for people who work 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".*