

The Child's Right to Play?!

Kornelija Mrnjauš

Department of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka

Abstract

In this paper the author elaborates the issue of the child's right to play through the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. As the three main challenges she puts forth the questions of recognition, respect and promotion of children's right to play. Referring to the studies which indicate that the time children spend playing is getting shorter, she points out the problem of the "subtle" violation of children's rights as well as the direct consequences of shorter time for play on the child's intellectual, social, emotional and physical development. The author also shortly elaborates the connection between play and decrease/increase in violence amongst children.

Key words: *child; importance of play; play; right to play; violation of the right to play.*

Introduction

Everyone will definitely agree that play is the most characteristic mode of behaviour of young children and one of the key features of childhood (Fromberg & Bergen, 2006; Kleine, 1993; Mayall, 2002; as cited in Kernan, 2007). Margaret Kernan (2007), in her research on the role of play in the context of early learning and development, referring to Schwartzman (1978) states that ethnographic studies have shown that young human beings play in all societies. But what is play? What makes it so specific and important that we devote to it so much attention and that it has been studied so extensively?

While doing research on the literature, the author came across some fascinating results of numerous studies. This says a lot about the importance of play for physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual development of the child in all aspects of their life during the process of growth and maturation and preparation for adulthood. The importance of play was also recognised by authors of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) where play is explicitly mentioned as one of the basic rights of the child.

This paper is the result of research into literature which deals with the issue of play, the right to play and the importance of play for the child's development. The collected data have been organised according to the questions to which the author searched the

answers. The starting point was the search for the definition of the term *play* which was followed by the elaboration of play as a right of the child in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. After that, presented are some answers on why play is important in early childhood, why play has to be the right of the child and what the possible consequences of play deprivation are. In conclusion, reflecting on play as a right, some examples of subtle violations of the child's right to play are mentioned.

While teaching about human rights and rights of the child, play is mentioned as only one of the child's rights. But a deeper research on play as the child's right, opens up a field of unsuspected width, depth and importance, not only for the child's personal development, but also for the development of the community. Through play children learn to participate in the community, they adopt rules and the system of values of the society in which they live and learn. When students ask how they are supposed to teach about human rights in early childhood, the answer is always the same – through play. In literature on human rights we find that the most important thing is to teach *for* human rights, and that means to develop the sense of self-respect and respect for others, acceptance, understanding for emotions and needs of others, flexibility..., and children develop all those features precisely through play, or, to be more specific, through spontaneous, unstructured play in early childhood.

And what is play? Different definitions of play can be found in literature, and that is understandable because to find a unique definition for something as complex as play is not easy at all. However, the authors of these definitions agree on some specific characteristics of play. Below are presented some of the definitions of play that drew most of the attention of the author of this paper.

Ozanne and Ozanne (2011, p. 264) say that play is often defined by comparing it with what it is not: “play does not involve work, it is not realistic, it is not serious, and it is not productive”. Margaret Kernan (2007, p. 5) draws on the definition of play given by the National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council from year 2000 that says: “Children's play is freely chosen personally directed behaviour, motivated from within by needs, wants and desires. Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community.”

Lester and Russell (2010, p. 7) suggest that “play is a behaviour that is distinguished by specific features that represent a unique way of being: a way of perceiving, feeling and acting in the world. The act of playing, where children appropriate time and space for their own needs and desires, has value for developing a range of flexible and adaptable responses to the environment”.

The above mentioned definitions suggest features of play, what play is, and what play is not. All of them pose the following question: what is so specific in play that it was necessary to define it as inalienable, indivisible and universal right of the child?

Before the presentation of answers to this complex question, the right to play through the Convention on the Rights of the Child will be presented.

Right to Play

Conceptualisation of play as the child's *right* is guaranteed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (in further text the Convention) from year 1989, Article 31:

- “1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.”

According to the special decision of the government, the Republic of Croatia, based on the notification of succession from the former state, is considered a party in the Convention on the Rights of the Child from the day of the proclamation of its independence, that is, from October 8, 1991. The Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legal document that has the legal force and binds the parties to abide by its provisions and includes the right to monitor its enforcement in the countries which have accepted and ratified the Convention. As a party to the Convention, the Republic of Croatia is obliged to guarantee to every child all universal standards contained in the Convention, which also includes the right to play.

In other legal documents which, among other issues, discuss the rights and obligations of the child (the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, the Family Law, the Law on Pre-school Education, the Law on Primary Education, the Law on Education in Primary and Secondary School) play as a right of the child is nowhere mentioned explicitly. However, this should not discourage us because, as Jan van Gils in his presentation on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and evolution of child's play in Brno 2007 said, in order to properly interpret the Convention we should take into account other articles of the Convention, and, it could be added here, the Croatian legislation as well, because they indirectly indicate the pre-conditions for children's play.

Play is interconnected with all the articles of the Convention (Tugade et al., 2004; Booth-LaForce et al., 2005; Ratner et al., 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). In the context of the Convention, we can also analyze the right to play with respect to the types of rights to which 54 articles of the Convention can be classified: *Provision (Survival and Development) Rights, Protection Rights, and Participation Rights.*

Provision (Survival and Development) Rights

These are the rights to the resources, skills and contributions necessary for the survival and full development of the child. They include the right to life, to adequate living conditions, adequate food, shelter, clean water, formal education, primary health

care, leisure and recreation, cultural activities, freedom of thought and expression (of religion) and information about their rights.

Through play children develop mechanisms that enable the full development and survival. Play can help to reduce the effects of stress and injuries that it brings. When children's rights to survival, development and well-being are infringed, this has an impact on their capacity to play, just as children's capacity to play will have an impact on their health, well-being and development (Burghardt, 2005; McEwen, 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Protection Rights

These rights include those articles of the Convention which ensure children's protection from all forms of child abuse, neglect, exploitation and cruelty, prohibition of child labour, protection from drugs, alcohol, tobacco, protection of refugee children, including the right to special protection in times of war and protection from abuse in the criminal justice system.

Importance of play in the context of protection rights is also supported by evidence of play acting across a number of adaptive systems (pleasure and enjoyment, emotion regulation, stress response systems, attachment, learning and creativity) to contribute to the well-being and resilience and, as such, being a form of self-protection. Without play, health and development are likely to be impaired. Play can help children cope with infringements of other rights, such as abuse, conflict, displacement and poverty. All this makes play fundamental to survival, health, well-being and development (Lester & Russell, 2010).

Participation Rights

Participation rights include those articles which enable a child to actively participate in their surroundings, regional, national and global, which prepare them for active citizenship in the future. Children are entitled to freedom to express their opinions and to have a say in matters affecting their social, economic, religious, cultural and political life. Children have the right to express opinions and be heard, the right to information and freedom of association. Engaging these rights as they mature helps children bring about the realization of all their rights and prepares them for an active role in society (Lester & Russell, 2010).

Children's play represents a primary form of participation (Meire, 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Through play children learn the rules of social life, social norms and realize the connection with adults in their community (Lester & Russell, 2010).

Analysing the child's right to play through the Convention, Van Gils (2007) mentions several groups of rights directly and indirectly connected with play. In the first group of rights, those directly connected with play, Van Gils includes Article 12 (the child's right to express her/his own views freely in all matters affecting the child), Article 13 (the child's right to freedom of expression), Article 14 (the child's right to freedom of

thought, conscience and religion), Article 15 (the child's right to freedom of association and the freedom of peaceful assembly) and, of course, Article 31 which explicitly mentions the child's right to play together with the child's right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts. In this group of articles we should also add Article 2 (non-discrimination) and Article 6 (the right to life, maximum survival and development), because, as we will see later in this paper, play is closely connected with the child's development, and thus with survival.

Van Gils states that all those articles are related to 'participation' of the child (the child in social context and the way children participate in social life). Furthermore, all those articles have in common the word 'freely, freedom', and, while playing, children need a lot of freedom to organise their life, to dispose of their time, to use space, to have contact with other people. Within this context, says Van Gils (2007, p. 3), "playing is more than doing some playful activities. The right to play is more than the right to have some time for doing childish activities. Within the context of the whole convention, the right to play is the right to belong to a society which respects the approach of children as a very typical contribution to social life and to children's own development, even if this has characteristics (playfulness) that are unusual to adults".

Play is a defining feature of childhood (Oke et al., 1999; Geary & Bjorklund, 2000; Mayall, 2002; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). As such, it can be expected to relate to all aspects of children's lives included in the Convention. Within the second group of the Convention Articles are those that are indirectly linked or that could be linked with play. Van Gils places the right to play into a broader context.

Article 3 – "in all actions concerning children ... the best interest of the child shall be a primary consideration". In this context that would mean that adults should also take care of the best interest of the child when the spatial plans which influence the changes in the surroundings for play are developed.

Article 17 – "the states parties shall encourage the mass media to disseminate information and material of social and cultural benefit to the child..." Van Gils considers that information on how to play is of great social and cultural benefit to the child and that the mass media should disseminate such information.

Article 24 – "states parties shall take appropriate measures to develop preventive health care". Health care also includes mental health care with the emphasis placed on prevention. Van Gils refers to Greek scientists who consider play as very powerful preventive activity with regard to mental health (this will be explained in more detail in the section on the importance of play).

Article 27 – "states parties recognise the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development". When playing, children are developing physically, mentally, spiritually, morally and socially. Because of that we should provide the standards of living adequate for children, as well as space and time for play.

Article 29 – “states parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to the development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential”. This also includes the creation of more space and time for play directed by children themselves.

Article 19.1 – “states parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, ...” This article, according to Van Gils, discusses safety, which also includes traffic safety, safety of toys and play equipment, social safety etc.

Van Gils ends his analysis of the right to play through the Convention by saying that play is the existential characteristic of children’s lives, connected with all aspects of the child’s development and their health and social position; “the right to play is the child’s right to be a child”.

Importance of Play in Early Childhood – Why Play Has to Be the Child’s Right

There is a strong and conditional connection between play and the child’s complete physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual development. In the text below I will present only some of the important impacts of play supported by studies to which the authors of recent papers on the child’s right to play refer.

In the working paper on the child’s right to play and the importance of play in children’s lives across the world Lester and Russell (2010, p. 1) present arguments why it is important to *recognise* (to understand the nature and benefits of play), *respect* (adults should not deny children the right to play, i.e. they should be sensitive to the child’s tendency to play), and *promote* (ensuring conditions to play) play as a right. They say this is not an easy task, because the “attitudes towards children’s play range from dismissing it as a waste of time or something trivial, through restricting it as something dangerous or subversive, to appropriating it as a mechanism for learning or socialisation”.

Play is the vital part of children’s development (Ginsburg, 2006; as cited in Leave, 2009). Play acts across several adaptive systems to contribute to health, well-being and resilience. Through play children have a chance to experience and to learn to manage the whole range of various (positive and negative) emotions, such as jealousy, boredom and anger, but also happiness, pleasure and enjoyment (Casey, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010; Scarlett et al., 2005). Through play children have a chance to take risks, to have adventures and misadventures, to have contact with nature and the environment, to develop friendships, to negotiate relationships, they learn how to solve conflicts, to experience the loss of friendship, to fall out with friends, etc. On the playgrounds children learn about tolerance, valuing of differences, respect for others, but also about the current fashion trends (Casey, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010).

Through play children learn to draw upon their own resources, to deal with difficulties and conflicts, to be flexible problem-solvers, to respond to challenges

and opportunities to deal with disappointment, to develop resilience. Through play children develop self-confidence and their own sense of identity, because play is one of the fundamental ways of children's participation in the community life (and the right to the fullest participation of the children in the community is guaranteed by Article 23 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child) through which the children learn how social relations function (Casey, 2007).

As they play, children rearrange their worlds to make them either less scary or less boring (Sutton-Smith, 1999; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Game provides a safe place to experience the emotions without the consequences they might bring in the 'real' world and to develop a repertoire of flexible responses to the situations they create and encounter. The children's play can be seen as a rehearsal for adult life, but there is little empirical evidence to support this (Fagen, 1995; Burghardt, 2005; Sharpe, 2005; Pellis & Pellis, 2009; Spinka et al., 2001; Bateson, 2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Harker (2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010) views play as a liberating process through which children not only appropriate and transform the material and symbolic cultures of their worlds, but also the power structures. Through play children exercise power over less powerful children and the maintenance of cultural, gender and ethnic patterns and practices (Henricks, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Some authors state that there is important evidence which indicates that play is important for children's physical, psychological and social well-being. Proving a direct causal relationship between play, health, cognition and well-being is not an easy process, as there are many overlapping variables including the genetic or environmental conditions. However, there is a strong and growing body of evidence illustrating the link between these factors, and play evidently has a beneficial role in children's lives. Play helps children to master sensorimotor skills. The experience of play effects changes in the architecture of the brain, particularly in systems to do with emotion, motivation and reward (Burghardt, 2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Play offers a dynamic range of movements, and intermittent challenges with irregular and unpredictable patterns increase the heart rate variability and variation in dynamic blood flow (Yun et al., 2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Equally, Fjortoft's (2004; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010) study of children's play illustrates the benefits of improved physical fitness, coordination, balance and agility from playing and moving in landscapes that offer challenges and unpredictability. Different sources indicate a direct relationship between physical activity, which children primarily realize through play, and children's health. In early childhood physical exercise helps build strong bones, muscle strength and lung capacity (Hope et al., 2007; Lindon, 2007; as cited in Gleave, 2009).

From early childhood until six years of age, children engage in pretend games in which they develop the ability to think symbolically, while in late childhood children engage in games with the rules to guide fair play, which is based on the ability to see

other people's point of view (Dockett, 2001; Piaget, 1975; as cited in Ozanne & Ozanne, 2011). Play is related to overcoming fears in everyday situations, decision making, discovering interests, brain development and enhancing academic learning (Lester & Russell, 2008; Jenkinson, 2001; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Also, play can increase cognitive function, improve academic achievement and accelerate neurocognitive processing. In addition, it appears that active children are also less likely to smoke, to abuse alcohol or take illegal drugs as they grow up (BHF, 2009; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). The evidence base that examines the cognitive implications of playing is complex and not entirely consistent. However, there is substantial overall evidence to suggest that play is a natural way of building cognitive processes, assisting learning and can even help with more complex mental health issues (Lester & Russell, 2008; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Both Piaget and Vygotsky, two of the most influential 20th century theorists of cognitive development, emphasised the essential role of play in children's development. Others claim that playing contributes to the development of children's vocabulary, their understanding of different concepts, their ability to solve problems, their self-confidence and motivation and to the awareness of the needs of others (Zigler, 2009; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Play involving arts, craft and design gives children the opportunity to develop the fine motor skills of hand and finger control, required for handwriting (Lindon, 2007; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

In early childhood it is important to support and encourage self-directed play activities, even if these appear meaningless to adults, because such games increase children's satisfaction and their ability to concentrate (Elkind, 2007; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Elardo et al. (1975; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012) found that access to a variety of toys during infancy was associated with higher IQ levels at the age of three, irrelevant of ethnicity, gender or social class. Play in school settings can allow children to connect with their surroundings and create the opportunities for interactive learning (Ginsburg, 2007; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Children benefit from being able to take risks and create challenges (Gill, 2007; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Aggressive behaviour has been linked with a lack of interesting and engaging environment and destructive behaviour is more common in boring surroundings without trees, bushes or other natural boundaries. Gleave (2009) points out the benefits of play in nature ('in green spaces') in creating a sense of belonging and identity, which in turn improves mental health, according to Bird (2007), and as the effective means of reducing the symptoms of ADHD, according to Panksepp (2008).

Pellis and Pellis (2009, as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010) demonstrate from their studies of animal play fighting that play may pave the way for producing subtle and nuanced responses to the novel and unpredictable environment, which can be helpful in development, maintaining resilience and the ability to deal with disturbance.

One thing that play scholars acknowledge is that play is a pleasurable experience (Turnbull & Jenvey, 2004; Burghardt, 2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Research into the effects of pleasure on biological and social systems indicates that it is highly beneficial for human functioning, leading to broadened repertoires of thought and action. Being in a positive emotional state increases the ability to maintain attention and to be alert to a wide range of environmental cues (Strauss & Allen, 2006; Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2006; Cohn & Frederickson, 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Through play children experience a range of positive emotions. Feelings of joy and pleasure are associated with more flexible and open responses to situations and with effective problem-solving, self-control, forward-looking thinking and caution in dangerous situations (Isen & Reeve, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). The display of positive emotions is also likely to build enduring resources, in particular through developing strong social relationships (Holder & Coleman, 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Studies into children's expression of spontaneous laughter suggest that it both broadens interactions and builds increasing social attachments and bonds (Gervais & Wilson, 2005; Martin, 2007; Cohn & Frederickson, 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Laughter activates the pleasure regions of the brain and induces positive states in those laughing, and also arouses positive emotions in those watching (Pellis & Pellis, 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Research suggests that experience of pleasurable situations may have benefits for dealing with stress and negative experiences (Silk et al., 2007; Cohn & Frederickson, 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Through play children develop creativity, imagination, they find their own solutions to problems, they develop ways of reacting to a wide range of situations and they develop the ability to cope with difficult situations and to recover from them (Lester & Russell, 2008; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Empathy and imaginary play allow children to learn about the feelings of others and imagine themselves in different situations. Boys with imaginary friends have been found to have lower levels of aggression, and girls are less likely to be angry, fearful and sad in their play (Singer and Singer, 1992; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Playing with other children affects the ways in which children relate to each other, form groups and feel a part of the group or part of their local community. When children play they use their own language, rules and values and play helps them to develop their own identities (Casey, 2010; Ginsburg, 2007; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Children who are able to play freely with their peers develop skills for seeing things from another person's point of view, for cooperating, helping, sharing and solving problems (Open University, 2011; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Traumatised children, who lose their ability for creative play, do not have the full access to their problem-solving capabilities, which can make social situations difficult for them (Lovett, 2009; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012).

Coalter and Taylor (2001; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012) suggest that the benefits of play are both immediate and long-term, and contribute to all aspects

of children's health and development, including their physical and mental well-being, their educational development, brain development, and opportunities for language development, spatial and mathematical learning, creativity, and identity formation. Play provides a place to "experiment with the acquisition of new skills, the complexity of relationships, taking risks, and thinking about complicated ideas" (Hubbuck, 2009; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012, p. 20).

Play is an important medium for establishing peer friendships, learning about social dynamics and the rules of engagement (Fantuzzo et al., 2004, Panksepp 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Children who have the freedom and opportunities to play have stronger friendship ties, are more joyful, secure and cooperative than those who do not (BTHA, 2011b; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). Play in early childhood allows children to give voice to their experiences and to have a safe place to express confusing and painful feelings, and to find ways of overcoming emotional traumas (Hirschland, 2009; as cited in Gleave & Cole-Hamilton, 2012). High quality friendship ties represent strong attachments, which in turn buffer children from anxiety and stress (Booth-LaForce et al., 2005; Abou-ezzedine et al., 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010) and form one of the most important contexts for supporting mental health and social and psychological development (Guroglu et al., 2008; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). In some circumstances, the experience of moderate stress or adversity can strengthen resistance to later stress, or 'stress inoculation' (Panksepp, 2001; Rutter, 2006; Haglund et al., 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Such play influences the enhancement of immune system and emotional and cognitive function (Flinn, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

Through play children also adopt gender identities (Oke et al., 1999; O'Brien et al., 2000; Karsten, 2003; Robson, 2004; Gosso et al., 2005; Swain, 2005; Chatterjee, 2006; Morrow, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010; Wohlwend, 2010). The general trend that emerges from these studies is that boys have greater opportunities to play outside and to range further within their local communities. Girls tend to have restrictions placed on their opportunities to play outside, more indirectly, through girls' greater responsibility to perform domestic tasks; parents prohibit this, for reasons associated with cultural expectations and safety concerns. However, this is not a uniform and static pattern. Boys' and girls' freedom to move independently varies according to other variables (Katz & Monk, 1993; Skelton, 2000; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010) and children develop idiosyncratic strategies to negotiate access in their everyday practices and routines (Punch, 2003; Valentine, 2004; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

"In the street, particularly in the nooks and crannies of public space not under the watchful gaze of adults, children may thus begin forming a public identity and establish their own selfhood and independence." (Spilsbury, 2005; as cited in Gleave, 2009, p. 13). It is now widely believed that play is important for children to maintain a sense of community. For adults too, children's play can help to build good social networks, as it provides them with opportunities to interact with one another at

places where children play (Worpole & Knox, 2007; as cited in Gleave, 2009). The importance of play in the community has also been identified in Australia (Edwards & Bromfield, 2009), where the results of the national representative survey illustrated the 'undesirable' behavioural patterns, such as lying, fighting and temper tantrums, which can be associated with children who lack a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood. Working in Italy, Prezza & Pacilli (2007; as cited in Gleave, 2009, p. 13) suggest that developing relationships with adults in the local neighbourhood is vital for children and young people. The authors state that "autonomy and play in public areas during childhood influences more intense neighbourhood relations, a strong sense of community and less fear of crime and, in turn, these later variables consequently reduce the feeling of loneliness during adolescence".

Consequences of Play Deprivation

According to the presented data we can only conclude that there is no segment of life and child's development that is not connected with child's play. The benefits of play are numerous, as well as the consequences of play deprivation. The association between playfulness, adaptive behaviour and well-being means it can be assumed that an absence of play is harmful (Siviy et al., 2003; Bateson, 2005; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Numerous authors (Hughes, 2003; Louv, 2005; Pellegrini, 2005; as cited in Kernan, 2007) point at the increase of 'play deprivation', particularly in the early childhood. Persistent play deprivation during the period between birth and seven years of age has been linked to impaired brain development, lack of social skills, depression and aggression (Hughes, 2003, as cited in Kernan, 2007). It may disrupt emotion-regulation systems, which in turn will diminish children's physical, social and cognitive competences (Pellis & Pellis, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

There is a limited body of research that establishes the direct link between depriving young children of play and any resulting consequences. Much of the research on play deprivation comes from studies on rats, the findings of which point to disastrous effects in terms of inability to regulate emotions, to interact socially with others or to mate successfully (Pellis & Pellis, 2006, 2007; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Spinka et al. (2001; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010, p. 42) conclude that the findings from animal research indicate that "play deprivation results in increased fear and uncertainty in novel environments, and more escalated aggressive behaviour towards other animals in serious conflicts".

Lester and Russel (2010) mention Stuart Brown's (1998) studies of criminally violent young men that consistently found childhood and adult play deficits as a common feature across other variables, while Brown's studies of gifted and creative people found high levels of playfulness. Although Brown carefully states that it is not possible to make absolute causal conclusions regarding play deprivation, he does conclude that we may pay a high price for neglecting the importance of play and its role in the "development of empathy, social altruism, and the possession of a repertoire of

social behaviours enabling the player to handle stress, particularly humiliation and powerlessness" (Brown, 1998; as cited in Lester & Russel, 2010, p. 42).

Many research findings indicate the value and importance of community play for children's well-being (Mead, 1966; Mathews, 2003; as cited in Gleave, 2009). Evidence suggests that limiting children's freedom in the local area can restrict their opportunities to create social networks and hinder their ability to build strong, trusting relationships (Groves, 1997; as cited in Gleave, 2009) and learn the rules of social life. Findings presented by Irwin et al. (2007; as cited in Gleave, 2009) suggest that children with poor play opportunities were less likely to have friends in their community and that this had an impact upon their social well-being and sense of the self.

(Subtle) Violation of the Right to Play

"The right to play is a child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the minds and bodies of its citizens." (David Lloyd George; as cited in Ozanne & Ozanne, 2011, p. 263).

In the analysis of literature on children's time for play Gleave (2009) found a range of interesting data on subtle violation of the child's right to play. Gleave presented the research conducted by Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) who had examined the evolution of play in the USA. The findings indicate that children's free play has declined by more than seven hours from 1981 to 1997 and by a further two hours to 2003. The researchers conclude that children in the US are have nine hours less free time a week than 25 years ago. Further studies also indicate a decline in time children spend playing. Research conducted in year 2002 revealed that children have 12 hours less free time every week than they did 20 years ago (Gleave, 2009).

Play experts have expressed concern that children's free time has become associated only with learning, rather than the enjoyment in the play itself. Children's play has become institutionalized and increasingly takes place in specialized centres rather than in public places and nature. Children's lives are over-scheduled, which reflects on school achievement of some students, and in some children stress and depression have been noticed, amongst other mental health issues (Van Gils, 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010; Gleave, 2009).

Studies also point out a decrease in free time and time to play in school. Gleave (2009) states that since the 1970s playtime may have decreased by as much as 50%. Free time for play in school offers children a unique opportunity to advance their interacting skills and social cognitive recourses. Reducing break times could have an impact on children's anxiety levels. Children spend time on their way to school mostly in spontaneous play. Gleave (2009) refers to studies that suggest that in the mid-eighties, approximately 21% of children travelled to school without an adult while by 2005 this number had dropped to 6%.

In her paper on the state of play Beed Davey (2012) refers to a study conducted in Australia that revealed that a considerable number of primary schools impose

new restrictions on children's play, largely due to the fears of injuries, arguments and parental litigation, despite the fact that the latter is almost non-existent. Some of the 'forbiddings' in individual schools are bizarre, says Beed Davey: no marbles, no playing in the garden area, no throwing balls, no climbing, no water play, no play with sticks, no digging in the dirt, no holding stones in your hand (even to admire them), and, in some extraordinary cases, 'no running'.

Casey (2007) looks with concern at the increasingly tight children's schedules, which resemble those of a chief executive; at adult interference in children's world and less and less space for children's play and spontaneity, children's chance to fall back on their own resources, to be bored, to hang about apparently aimlessly with friends, to be unsupervised, to behave childishly and to mess about on the way home from school. Adjusting the children's needs to adult agendas largely, argues Casey, excludes spontaneity, imagination, unpredictability, flexibility – all the qualities we associate with free play. Over-scheduling children's time could have implications for their health. Research from the late 1990s indicates that hectic schedules disrupt sleeping patterns (Carlskadon; as cited in Gleave, 2009) and that pressures of homework and household chores have led to increased stress levels in adolescents (Shaw et al.; as cited in Gleave, 2009).

Play is a primary form of children's participation in the community. Lester and Russell (2010) state that most adults tend to see play as a process of socialization. In moments when play is not that, adults begin to experience play as disruptive, threatening or without value, which leads to sanctions and prohibitions. Although they say that unstructured play is important, more parents are enrolling very young children in lessons and other structured activities. For example, between 1999 and 2003, the percentage of Canadian 4- and 5-year-olds who participated in organized lessons (e.g., gymnastics, martial arts, etc.) increased from 23% to 30% and the percentage participating in coached sports increased from 36% to 41% (Hewes, 2007; as cited in Van Gils, 2007).

Over the latter part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century the children's access to space and time for play has dramatically altered; children's needs for space and time to play are often misunderstood or ignored in broad development policy, plans and practice (Bartlett, 1999; Chawla, 2002b; Churchman, 2003; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). Many of the concerns that relate to environment for play are indicative of the general global trends – a loss of space, the adult management encroachment on children's free time, fears about children's use of the outdoor space (because of traffic, 'stranger danger', bullying). Many of these change the children's health, well-being and happiness (Casey, 2007).

There are equally worrying trends of over-protection and risk aversion. Fear of traffic accidents leads adults to restrict children from playing outside (Grayling et al., 2002; Hillman, 2006; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010). There are several reports on the disappearance of children playing in the streets and the decrease in children

playing outside in general (Gill, 2007b; Kinoshita 2008; Van Gils et al., 2009; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010), because of parental anxieties of strangers that could kidnap their children (Beed Davey, 2012) and because of fear of violence and street crime, or of discrimination and harassment, which is, state the authors, global (Bartlett, 2002; Chawla, 2002b; as cited in Lester & Russell, 2010).

It is evident that European society offers less public space for children's play and less tolerance for play in the neighbourhood (Van Gils, 2007). There is no doubt about the increase of cars and the space they have been occupying since the fifties (of the twentieth century) and at the same time children are not allowed to play in public spaces. A Dutch research project (Van Gils and Bosscher, 1997; as cited in Van Gils, 2007) showed that the reason for the decrease of traffic accidents involving children was not due to a better safety, but to the fact that fewer children were allowed to be on public space. Also the study of Hillman et al. (1990; as cited in Van Gils, 2007) about children's mobility in England and Germany concluded that "the increase in the personal freedom and choice arising from car ownership has been gained at the cost of a loss of freedom for children". Belgian research project (Van den Bergh, 1997; as cited in Van Gils, 2007) showed that almost half of the children seldom or never play in their neighbourhood, and an English survey of The Children's Society (in Van Gils, 2007) concluded that 79% of the parents apply the rule that the fence of the garden is the limit of the play space while in 1997 the limit was situated at 280 m from home and in 1970 at 840 m.

Conclusion

Through play children prepare for the adult world, they practice their role of life, although already on the stage of life. Through play children develop exactly those competencies they will need in adulthood, and especially in the business surroundings which search for creative, imaginative, flexible, adaptable employees who know how to deal with stress, solve more problems at the same time, who know how to communicate, make presentations, solve conflicts, work in teams..., and exactly all those competencies children develop through free, unstructured play.

Literature suggests that it is not enough to provide children with excellent opportunities for play. Adults must adopt a culture of tolerance towards children's play, and children must be given the time they need to engage in free play in which they follow their own rules, which is instinctive, self-directed and which they enjoy (Lester & Russell, 2010, p. 46): "Adults should be aware of the importance of play and take action to promote and protect the conditions that support it. The guiding principle is that any intervention to promote play acknowledges its characteristics and allows sufficient flexibility, unpredictability and security for children to play freely."

Play brings easiness, fun, lightness, relaxation and it is easy to understand it as frivolous. But its importance for the child's overall development and well-being is too big and we should not take it for granted. Out of fear that their children will not

grow up into responsible and successful adult persons, parents often consider play as meaningless and useless activity, unaffordable luxury and they think that play should be a structured activity with clear goals and purpose. Such attitudes, as we have seen, can have tremendous and irreparable negative consequences not only for the child, but for the whole community.

Our task is to ensure all preconditions for a child to develop into a complete person, psychologically and physically. Therefore, one of our goals should be to change the parents' beliefs about play and to educate parents about the importance of play in order to ensure the total respect and implementation of the child's right to play in practice. The world that understands and supports children's play is the world that will probably be healthier, more vital, more alive and happier than the world without play.

"Children tell us most, if not all, of what we need to know in order to help them grow and learn. What we must learn to do is to follow them – to follow them to where they want to go, and quietly observe them when they get there. And what will we find? Often we will find that they are playing – and their play will speak volumes about who they are, how they feel, what they can do, and who they would like to be. In fact, if we see that children are not playing, then we know something is terribly amiss and we must act. Our role as adults and carers of these children is to provide for their needs and to respect their rights, including the important right to play" (Prest Talbot & Thornton, 2010, p. 7).

References

- Beed Davey, G. (2012). What is the state of play? *International Journal of Play*, 1 (2), 115-116 /online/. Retrieved on February 25, 2013 from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21594937.2012.696483>
- Casey, Th. (2007). *Environments for Outdoor Play: A Practical Guide to Making Space for Children*. London, Thousand Oaks, CA, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Gleave, J. (2009). *Children's time to play. A literature review*. London: NCB /online/. Retrieved on February 3, 2013 from <http://www.playday.org.uk>
- Gleave, J., & Cole-Hamilton, I. (2012). *A world without play: A literature review. A literature review on the effects of a lack of play on children's lives*. London: Play England.
- Kernan, M. (2007). *Play as a context for Early Learning and Development. A research paper*. Dublin: NCCA.
- Lester, S., & Russell, W. *Children's right to play: An examination of the importance of play in the lives of children worldwide*. Working Paper No. 57 The Hague, The Netherlands: Bernard van Leer Foundation.

- Ozanne, L. K., & Ozanne, J. L. (2011). A Child's Right to Play: The Social Construction of Civic Virtues in Toy Libraries. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 30(2), 263-276.
- Prest Talbot, J., & Thornton, L. (2010). *A Chance To Play. A manual promoting play for children in South Africa*. Braamfontein: A Chance to Play /online/. Retrieved on February 12, 2013 from http://www.a-chance-to-play.org/fileadmin/user_upload/a-chance-to-play/07-Manual/Intro_and_Children__s_Right_to_Play_01.pdf
- Šagud, M. (2002). *Odgajatelj u dječjoj igri*. Zagreb: Školske novine.
- Sandberg, J. F., & Hofferth, S. L. (2001). *Changes in Children's Time with Parents, U.S. 1981-1997*. University of Michigan: PSC Research Report, Report No. 01-475 /online/. Retrieved on December 5, 2012 from <http://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/pdf/rr01-475.pdf>
- United Nations Human Rights (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child* /online/. Retrieved on February 12, 2013 from <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>
- Van Gils, J. (2007). *The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Evolution of Children's Play*. ICCP Conference in Brno /online/. Retrieved on February 15, 2013 from http://www.iccp-play.org/documents/brno/van_gils.pdf.
- Wohlwend, K. E. (2012). 'Are You Guys Girls?': Boys, Identity Texts, and Disney Princess Play. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 12(1), 3-23 /online/. Retrieved on November 10, 2012 from <http://ecl.sagepub.com/content/12/1/3>.
- Zagorac, I. (2006). Igra kao cjeloživotna aktivnost. *Metodički ogleđi*, 13(1), 69-80.

Kornelija Mrnjajus

Department of Education, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Rijeka
Sveučilišna avenija 4, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia
kmrnjajus@ffri.hr

Pravo djeteta na igru?!

Sažetak

Autorica u ovom radu obrađuje temu prava djece na igru kroz Konvenciju o pravima djeteta i kao tri ključna izazova navodi pitanje prepoznavanja, poštivanja i promicanja prava djece na igru. Referirajući se na istraživanja koja pokazuju da se vrijeme koje djeca provode u igri sve više smanjuje, ukazuje na problem "suptilnog" kršenja prava djeteta, kao i na izravne posljedice sve kraćeg vremena igranja na djetetov intelektualni, društveni, emocionalni i fizički razvoj. Autorica se u radu također kratko bavi povezanošću igre i smanjenja/povećanja nasilja među djecom.

Ključne riječi: *dijete; igra; kršenje prava na igru; pravo na igru; važnost igre.*