

## THE REALITY OF NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF MULTI AGE PLAY IN OSHC

### Background

Multi Age Play, something that was once a norm in childhood, has largely disappeared in many environments and in particular the neighbourhood. This has occurred for many reasons, namely an increase in parental fear resulting in children not being permitted to play without direct adult supervision in the neighbourhood and parks. (Nature Play Qld; 2019)

However, it is not just neighbourhoods where the multi age play has significantly declined. Increasing social stratification in a majority of educational institutions during both classroom time and play has minimised opportunities for multi age play. This is perhaps due to increased school sizes and the need to separate and organise children by grades or perceived stages of development.

Outside School Hours Care (OSHC), remains one for the few places, outside of family units, if siblings are present, that children can have regular unfettered access to many children of many ages and abilities in an authentic play based environment. During the 2016 Action Research Project on the Benefits Of Loose Parts In An OSHC Setting, undertaken by CHOSHC one of the key outcomes identified and documented was the benefits of multi age play in this setting. It was observed that multi aged play not only fostered children's creativity but also helps them to develop their capacity to teach, nurture and lead; including allowing children to play within their zone of proximal development (Gray, 2011). Due to the immensely beneficial outcomes of multi age play, and the apparent lack of multi age play in other play environments, Camp Hill OSHC decided to focus an entire project to analysing stakeholders' perceptions of multi age play. It was the researcher's view that many of the negative perceptions would be proven through both theory and observation to be unsubstantiated assumptions or opinions. Conversely it was also believed that many of the positive perceptions would be legitimised both theoretically and practically.

CHOSHC is multicultural community representative of a variety of cultures, although over 85% of the families identify as Anglo-Celtic Australians. Most children who attend come from an inner city suburb with relative socio-economic advantage (SEIFA, 2016). CHOSHC enrolls more than 350 students and has operated continuously since 2006 when the Camp Hill State Infants School and the Camp Hill State School merged.

### Research Questions

Our research question intended to test stakeholder perceptions through extensive observation and analysis of the multi age play phenomenon.

**What are the negative and positive perceptions of children's multi age play?**

Emerging questions included:

Are these perceptions able to be substantiated in both theory and practice?

What do we learn about children's multi age play?

What are the implications for educators and playworkers?

### Research Method and Data Collection

There were two distinct aspects to this research project. The first was to learn about perspectives of multi aged play from 3 identified stakeholder groups including: Teachers & Teacher Aides; OSHC Educators/Playworkers and Parents/ Guardians. This information was gathered and analysed through a survey which invited participants to share their views of multi aged play, including both their potential positive perceptions and negative perceptions.

Multi age play was defined for the purpose of the survey as: *play occurring directly between, or in parallel with, children of different age groups (our sample group of children ranges from Prep to Grade 6). The play referred to is play that is freely entered into, and freely exited if desired (not structured activities or organised sport).* Participants were asked to detail whether they thought that overall, multi age play had very positive, positive, neutral, negative or very negative potential outcomes.

The second aspect to the research involved a qualitative ethnographic approach where educators observed and documented children in multi age play situations. Educators and playworkers at CHOSHC are required to record detailed observations and reflections of the play and the interactions that occur during play, on a day to day basis. Data was collected by staff in a variety of ways including hand written journals, a dedicated multi age play observation book and a "secret" Facebook group created for staff to share documentation. Staff were not dissuaded from documenting as per normal what they saw occurring in the play space but were encouraged to identify anything they deemed as multi age to make it easier for the lead researcher to collate. All staff were important in this part of the research process to ensure a greater variety of observations were recorded which would better reflect the extremely diverse range of play occurring at any given time (Yin, 2014). In addition, encouraging staff to record field notes is valuable in ethnographic OSHC research as it encourages authenticity and flexibility and supports the rigor necessary to validate such research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Staff bring their own unconscious bias and points of view into their day to day work and multiple participants in research ensures the widest range of views are available for analysis.

It was the lead researcher's role to collate and pair observations made by staff, with the dominant themes that presented in the survey data. In this way validity was supported through the presence and correlation of these themes. A further benefit of incorporating the many observations by numerous CHOSHC educators and playworkers was to remove researcher bias in this process as all observations were considered.



### Theoretical Framework

Playwork practice and principles provides the theoretical framework used to frame this research project. It is important to note from the outset that CHOSHC incorporates playwork practice and principles into its OSHC program, acknowledging the intrinsic desire of children to play, first and foremost in all aspects of their time at CHOSHC. Playworker's recognise in scientific terms that the desire of play is innate and its function necessary for healthy childhood development (Lester & Russell, 2010). Play is recognised by playworkers as freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated (Brown, Long, & Wragg, 2018) (Wilson, 2009). This means we are not referring to adult led games or activities such as art lessons or sporting matches, but rather occurrences that are derived by play cues issued from other children or the environment as the catalyst for true free play. As playworkers the staff at CHOSHC also recognises the 16 play types outlined in "A Playworker's Taxonomy of Play Types" (Hughes, 2006) and use this language as the predominant terminology throughout staff observations and reflections. It is important to note the playwork approach embedded at CHOSHC for the purpose of this research as it heavily underpins how the staff view play and even more importantly, how they view what is play.

### Findings

Due to the abundance of data, only one theme was able to be used to report on for the purpose of this project, however it is noted that other themes are equally worthy of discussion and consideration.

Rough and tumble play was initially identified as a negative aspect (and thus perception) of multi age play. However, our research indicated that many of the beliefs and views expressed about multi age play were in fact inaccurate assumptions of what 'might' occur when multi age play is purposefully enabled.

The research indicated that many stakeholders misunderstood the intent of rough and tumble play and placed restrictions on children's participation in multi age play opportunities reactively.

There is a very clear need to differentiate between rough and tumble play, a play type identified by Bob Hughes (2006) and actual aggression. Many teachers and parents are challenged when it comes to identifying the differences which is why rough and tumble play is often outlawed along with actual aggressive interactions (Bokony & Patrick, 2009). This is actually quite disappointing from a playwork perspective as rough and tumble play is not only culturally universal and an incredibly inclusive form of play, but it has remarkable developmental benefits that assist children to learn to read and respond to social cues (Carlson, 2009). It is important to point out that this ability to respond appropriately to social cues is ultimately the very skill one needs to avoid aggressive encounters of which social incompetence was the catalyst for. From a multi age play relevance, one of the fundamental differences identified between rough and tumble play and actual aggression is that older, stronger children will often go easy, and even let younger, weaker children dominate the play (Bokony & Patrick, 2009). The motivation to do this is simply to ensure the play continues.

The flow of rough and tumble games seems actually aided by the presence of younger children. As opposed to the negative perception recorded in the survey that older children would be too rough with younger ones. Our research found that older children moderate their behaviours to allow younger children to take part.

Gray (2011), based on research from an evolutionary perspective, refers to older boys who regularly engage in activity with younger children as being on average kinder, and less aggressive than those that do not. Thus it is fair to surmise that in regards to "roughness", not only is a multi age scenario possible, it is most likely preferable to promoting appropriate play versus actual aggression.

### Conclusion

The evidence and science promoted the merits of this play type including:

**Bonding & empathy:** In rough and tumble behaviour, the brain releases the chemical oxytocin which ironically assists in forming bonds (Jarvis, 2007).

**Social Competency:** Rough and tumble play is a valuable tool for young mammals to learn to deal with ambiguous social scenarios later in their life. (Pellis & Pellis, 2010).

**Impulse control:** Rough and tumble play throughout all mammals is an evolutionary tool which guides young mammals to understand, and thus control their impulses (Bokony & Patrick, 2009).

**Increased intelligence:** During rough and tumble play neurons are firing, particularly in the hippocampus, the part of the brain responsible for things like logic, learning and memory. (Borchard, 2018). Considering that, we are also referring to social and emotional intelligence.

### Recommendations

- Understand rough and tumble play and its benefits
- Ensure your team also understand the benefits and are equipped and comfortable to support it
- Celebrate the concept of risk benefit analysis
- Keep stakeholders informed
- Keep the information respectful, informative and objective
- Facilitate natural play frames

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- (Every effort is made to ensure a comprehensive list of references has been provided for this presentation, acknowledging this summary alone is not an academic publication.)

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