

Reconceptualising child rights

Guest author series



Supporting children's rights through a reconsideration of the way relations form: Playing in the in-between

by Dr Cynthia à Beckett

In my research, I reflect on the preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and explore the notions underpinning the statement “recognising that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding” and what that might look like for both the child and the adults who are with them.

Today there are many ways to approach our daily interactions with children and this work is supported by theory and research from diverse areas of study including sociology, psychology, and anthropology. The current focus on social aspects of interactions has implications for research and practice regarding children's rights. This paper explains interactions firstly in terms of social exchange and then provides a contrasting explanation to explain the way relations form. The comparison of these explanations encourages us to rethink our daily interactions in ways that can enhance the lives of young children. These understandings are especially important for those who support children and young people who are at risk.

Playing in the in-between

Currently, the analysis of daily life has an emphasis on social exchange. These are times where individuals respond to each other and the surrounding social and physical circumstances. Social exchange is an important part of daily life and may include many collaborative actions, and it is often a time where adults take the lead. Andrew Metcalfe and Ann Game (2015) refer to these interactions as identity logic where certain expected actions take place, and each will behave according to set understandings of self and others. Behaviour is contained and understood while each plays their part. Each needs the other, and this is explained in terms of exchanges between entities. We all understand this as a necessary part of daily social life. This is, however, only part of the story as there are also times when a social exchange is not evident, and these are the times when relations form. Such times are explained through the theory of ‘Playing in the In-between’ (àBeckett; 2007, 2010, 2017a, 2017b).

While it is valuable to understand social exchange and the logic of identity, this analysis does not account for other times when identity logic is not evident. Metcalfe and Game (2015) refer to these interactions as relational logic, and I refer to them as Playing in the In-between. These are times that are free of a set agenda, although it might start that way. No-one is in a dominant role, and both adult and child respond in an open, relaxed manner. This is when relations form. I observed these times in my research with parents and their two-year-old children interacting in their home settings. The families were first-time parents, and my expectations were that most interactions would be about social exchange however this was not the case. Most case study examples were about the relational logic.

Preamble of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child:

Recognising that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love, and understanding.

Article 31: All children have the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Research examples that led to my understanding of the difference between social exchange and relational logic show how these two forms of parent-child interactions differ. (a'Beckett; 2007, 2010, 2017a, 2017b). The analysis of this work resulted in core ideas for the theory of Playing in the In-Between. It is explained through three elements: being fully present, un-knowing, and mutuality through love (à Beckett, 2007).

Understanding the differences between social exchange and times when relations form has the potential to support the challenges presented by UNICEF (2007, p.1) especially with their reference to the way we should attend to children in terms of '... their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they were born.' A continual focus on social exchange and identity logic with associated set expectations and demands may make it difficult for children to have a sense of being loved, valued, and included.

How to play in the in-between

Playing in the in-between is different as all are involved. There is a sense of calm and an authentic way of being. Things are relaxed, effortless, but at the same time, it is not chaotic. These are simple but profound moments, and for this reason, they can be missed. For staff who support children and young people who are at risk, an appreciation of times of Playing in the In-between will encourage staff to take extra time to be fully involved, and yet both will feel relaxed, safe and free of pressure. These times are about warmth and mutuality while at the same time, there is a sense of un-knowing as no one is in a role of domination. These times are also free of opposition, so things flow and change easily. Events may change and become part of a routine that involves social exchange where one will take the lead. However, both maintain a sense of what has just transpired through Playing in the In-between. Both may well feel energised, transformed.

An appreciation of how relational logic works in contrast to identity logic encourages adults to provide a more authentic learning environment, achieved through a recognition of the vital contribution of spontaneous, unexpected moments. The examination of the case study examples noted in the listed publications, for example, *Joey in the Pouch*, help to explain in more detail how these times unfold. This understanding can encourage adults to take time to explore these moments that may result in a sense of calm that may be wordless and yet quite profound. These ideas have implications for those working with children who have suffered times of stress. These children may not have had the opportunity to be part of Playing in the In-between in the same way that it was experienced by children such as those in the examples in my research.

Joey in the Pouch: This fieldwork example was observed between Tamara, her mother Jill and her father Peter. The observations took place in the family living room on a Sunday afternoon. Peter was present as an observer until the end of the event. Jill was sitting in an armchair, her daughter approached. They instantly smiled at one another and Tamara reached out and patted the material in her mother's long soft cotton skirt. Jill then stretched out her legs and the fabric pulled tightly. Tamara smiled as she felt the fabric and clambered up into her mother's lap. As she did this the skirt wrapped around her and they both laughed softly. Jill said in an excited voice, "You're like a Joey in a pouch." They both laughed and Jill pulled the material around Tamara's shoulders, to enhance the kangaroo pouch quality of the skirt. She cuddled Tamara as she did this and Tamara laughed and made small bouncing movements responding to the idea of being a Joey in a pouch. The playing became more exuberant and boisterous. Jill then said, "Are you ready to hop out now?" Tamara smiled and looked at her mother and said in an excited, breathless voice, "Yes, Joey hops." Her mother helped her down out of her lap and they cuddled and laughed as they did this. Tamara jumped around on the floor her arms up like a kangaroo and bounced towards her father. He was standing, smiling. She bounced towards him; he bent down and lifted her high into the air. She called out and laughed excitedly. They smiled and laughed together as he then put her back on the floor. She bounced a little more then went out of the living room bouncing and laughing. The parents smiled as she left and then continued with their own activities.

Understanding the difference between the more obvious times of collaboration evident in social exchange and the times when relations form will support staff in their vital work to enhance the life and rights of all children, especially those who are at risk.



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Dr àBeckett is an experienced early childhood teacher who has worked with young children and their families in several different early childhood settings. She also worked as an advisor for early childhood teachers and for the past twenty years as an academic in early childhood education programs at the Queensland University of Technology, the University of New England and now at the University of Notre Dame.

Her research interests explore connections between the sociology of childhood, young children and families and early childhood education, and the topic of play. Her thesis entitled *Playing in the In-between: implications for early childhood education of new views of social relations*, explores these ideas in a more detailed way. She has presented her work both nationally and internationally.

Further readings

à Beckett, C. (2007). *Playing in the In-between: implications for early childhood education of new views of social relations*. [Ph.D. thesis]. University of New South Wales, Kensington, NSW, Australia.

à Beckett, C. (2010). *Imaginative education explored through the concept of Playing in the In-between*, in *Imagination in Educational Theory and Practice, a Many-sided Vision*. Nielsen, T., Fitzgerald, R. & Fettes, M. (Eds). Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

à Beckett C. (2017). *Making life worth living: Theories of play enlivened through the work of Donald Winnicott*. In Lynch S., D. Pike, & C. à Beckett (Eds.), (2017) *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Play from Birth and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer.

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