Play types
Play can take many forms. It can be noisy, chaotic and social while it can also be quiet, focused and solitary. Because it is so varied many have attempted to categorise play behaviour into different types. Models range from just two types – free flow and structured – to those that identify 308 types\(^1\). In playwork, in the UK, we most commonly use a model with the 16 play types identified and outlined by Bob Hughes\(^2\).

Categorising play types can provide a useful model for playworkers, however these are not set in stone, there are more that can be identified. The various play types attempt to describe the full range of children’s play behaviours and how they might contribute to children’s physical, mental and emotional development.

As playworkers, adults who facilitate children’s play, it is our responsibility to create and provide a flexible environment. It compensates for the absence of play opportunities provided by the natural environment or restricted by factors such as parental fears arising from living in a highly populated area, high levels of traffic, anxieties of stranger danger and a perception that allowing children out unsupervised is disapproved of. It is one that children can modify to suit their own needs to engage in any or all of the play types.

Communication play

*Play that involves words, signals and body language – for example joke telling, name-calling and mime.*

Communication play uses the whole body. Facial expressions, gestures, particular ways of moving as well as words, songs, groans and grunts, are all used to convey expression and meaning.

Children (and good playworkers) will often know more about how a child is feeling from their body language than from what they say. In particular, we recognise the ‘play face’ (open mouthed, teeth bared, frequently smiling) that says ‘I want to play’ or alternatively, ‘we are still playing’\(^3\).

Playing with words, jokes, insults, nonsense, rhymes, impressions, songs, play acting, poetry and graffiti all enable children to experiment with and develop their understanding of language and meaning.

Children may experiment with swearing and what some might see as socially inappropriate or offensive language. This is an area where we as playworkers need to show tolerance without it becoming oppressive or intimidating to other children, staff or other adults. The play space exists mainly for the children’s benefit and we should try to avoid implementing ideas and policies that strictly prevent children from exploring their own values and behaviour\(^4\).

Creative play

*Play which involves experimenting and creating with a range of materials or tools where there is plenty of time and where getting messy is not a problem.*

Creative play is one of the most visible play types in most staffed play settings. It is more than simply allowing children access to art and craft materials and is not making something according to someone else’s template or instructions.

Creativity shares many characteristics with play. It often bends the rules and conventions of normal activity and combines unrelated ideas, perspectives and materials. It is frequently surprising. Creativity is closely linked with curiosity, problem solving and children’s urge to explore their environment.

Facilitating creative play needn’t be expensive. A range of basic props, scrap and loose parts offer
many more opportunities than most specialised and expensive materials and can be reused, recombined or discarded as necessary. As playworkers we are always on the look out for unusual or novel materials that can spark creative play and prevent the environment becoming mundane and overly routine.

Creative play can be expressed in multiple ways and is often combined with other play types. As with all play, it needs to be under the full control of the child. By unnecessarily limiting the experiences and opportunities available to the child we limit the child’s thinking and options to explore. It also requires an atmosphere of ‘permission’ where new ways of playing are acceptable without fear of ridicule, condemnation or embarrassment. Without opportunities children will remain imaginative but not creative.

Deep play

Play which enables children to encounter risk, challenge and dangerous experiences, for example balancing on a high wall, jumping over a stream and riding a bike with no hands.

Deep play is defined by play behaviour that is risky, often significantly so, for example climbing a tall tree, playing ‘chicken’ or ‘truth or dare’, or confronting a bully.

Deep play has important benefits for children. It allows them to experience, manage and overcome risk – this may be physical, mental or emotional. It also serves a deeper need to confront our own mortality and feel the thrill of being alive and having conquered our fears.

Deep play is more likely to be seen in older children but since some level of risk is present in almost all play, even quite young children might show some elements of deep play, such as playful fear. It’s important to remember that the level of risk in deep play is from the child’s perspective (not the adult’s) and will vary significantly with age and ability, from child to child and over time. For example, going down an aerial runway might be ‘old hat’ to an experienced older child but deeply scary to a younger child using it for the first time.

Deep play is probably the most challenging play type to consider as it intrudes on our instinctive, professional and legal duty to protect children. As playworkers we must be aware that deep play experiences should only be available to those who actively want them. The more risky the activity the more difficult the access to that activity should be. Making a tall tree easier to climb for example, risks injury to those children who otherwise wouldn’t have had the necessary skills and experience to climb it.

Risk taking in front of their peers can be an important element in maintaining social relationships for some children. Children sometimes use dares and engage in risky behaviour as a means of impressing friends and sustaining relationships. However, peer pressure, or even pressure from playworkers, can become excessive and interfere with normal risk assessing skills. As playworkers we maintain an atmosphere where children do not feel pressured to over-extend themselves. Children will engage in deep play gradually, occasionally and on their own terms.
**Dramatic play**

The playing of dramatic events that the child has not been a participant in, for example pretending to be a footballer or a pop star at a concert, presenting a television show or enacting a funeral.

Dramatic or thematic play involves recreating recognisable characters and plot lines drawn from the child’s wider social world rather than personal or domestic scenes. It is often structured or performed in front of an audience and is considered one of the most complex types of play.7

Make up and costumes can help children take on a role and express themselves and experiment with their own identity and what it feels like to be someone else. Basic props including costumes and face paint, music, a staging area and a willing audience can all help facilitate this play type.

Dramatic play differs from socio-dramatic play – the latter plays through the child’s current and immediate experiences, while dramatic play acts out and dramatises events (often with elements of fantasy and imaginative play) at least once removed from the child.

**Exploratory play**

Play which involves finding out information through manipulation of an object, for example handling or throwing clay, or taking a bicycle apart to see how it works and ‘fixing it’.

Exploratory play is characterised by children assessing the possibilities of a particular object or environment, for example building with Lego bricks, discovering how a new rope swing works, and hammering a nail into a piece of wood.

New situations and props promote playing with objects as this satisfies children’s natural curiosity and desire for stimulation. Exploratory play will usually become more complex for older children as their range increases. It can be facilitated by a varied and adaptable landscape. Trees, bushes, mounds and ditches, tunnels, structures, places to hide or get off ground, and unusual features all encourage children to explore and investigate.
Fantasy play

Play at pretend in ways that are unlikely to occur in real life, for example being a superhero or sitting on a cloud.

Fantasy play is characterised by unreal situations, characters and abilities, for example being chased by dinosaurs or being a wizard and doing magic. The child must direct fantasy play, although it may be negotiated with others.

Fantasy play helps children explore the boundaries between reality and unreality and provides an outlet for the unconscious, particularly dreams and the darker areas of the imagination. Fantasy and imagination allow children to explore the possibilities of ‘what if’ and try out different roles and identities. These are important ways that children express and regulate their emotions and deal with the anxieties and novelties of their environment.

Having too many adults present can inhibit children’s pretend play. Children view adults as authority figures who are likely to take over or stop all disagreements, which makes play less unpredictable and fun. Also, if children behave in ways that might be silly or unrealistic we must provide an environment where adults or other children do not tease or laugh at them.

Imaginative play

Play based on reality but not real, for example pretending to be a leopard, having a make-believe friend or being a plant.

Imaginative play allows children to play through and take control of their experiences, and achieve mental calmness and stability. In practice, it looks very similar to fantasy play and the two can easily be confused. However, whereas fantasy play deals with unreality, for example, pretending to fly like Superman or becoming a roaring dinosaur, imaginative play includes elements that are based on reality (although normal rules may not apply), for example, pretending to be a dog, driving a train, or scoring the winning goal with a non-existent ball.

Locomotor play

Movement for its own sake, for example playing chase, running, jumping, skipping and climbing trees.
Also known as physical activity play, locomotor play is characterised by movement for its own sake and in any possible direction. It includes leaping, swinging, hopping, cycling, ball games, gymnastics and dancing. Many children enjoy the exhilaration of a chase, or a game of tag, or touch off-ground.

Hughes suggests that locomotor play is a way of ‘increasing familiarity with the environment, learning which parts are safe and which must be avoided’12. Others emphasise the escape and pursuit behaviours so characteristic of locomotor play and suggest that it has evolved to provide survival training13 or stress the benefits to physical activity and fitness, including agility, balance, flexibility, strength and endurance.

As with rough and tumble play, there are differences between playful chasing and pursuit and ‘serious’ chasing behaviour including role reversal, self-handicapping, and warning calls (‘I’m coming to get you!’)14. Given modern concerns over children’s health and in particular the dramatic rise in obesity, facilitating locomotor play is more important than ever.

Mastery play

Control of the natural environment, for example making a dam in a stream, building a bonfire, digging holes and making mounds in earth and sand.

Mastery play describes the urge children have to control, manipulate and master their physical and affective environment. Building dens and fire and water play provide children with an understanding of what the environment allows.

Controlling the environment allows children to demonstrate their competence and feel confident about their abilities and comfortable in their environment. It allows them to engage with the natural world and so help establish an emotional connection and develop a respect for what it can do.

Mastery play can be encouraged by the provision of space and materials for den building and construction, planting and digging, barbecuing and fire-play. On a practical level, it is important that as playworkers we are confident and competent in the behaviour we are facilitating. Behaviour that carries appreciable levels of risk, such as lighting fires and digging deep holes should be accurately risk assessed and given dedicated areas of the play setting.

Object play

Hand-eye manipulations of objects, for example examining shells, looking in them and turning them over and around.

Children’s fascination with the objects around them goes much further than the toys or objects adults think of as being suitable for children to play with. Objects can represent a child’s feelings or interests. They can provide a means for communication with other children and adults. They also provide opportunities for exploration, discovery, understanding and further play15.

Object play allows children to gain an understanding of the possibilities of objects – ‘How does this work?’ and ‘What does it do?’ It also allows the development of hand-eye co-ordination and fine movement as children manipulate and
control objects. Balls, tools, paintbrushes and bubble wrap can all provide opportunities to explore the possibilities of what an object allows.

Children are attracted by novelty and by objects that are new or unusual. Objects that allow multiple uses and require a flexible response are more interesting than limited, inflexible ones. For example, a cardboard box can be used in thousands of different ways while a pebble has more limited uses.

While children are involved in working out how an object works it's important that as playworkers we resist the temptation to teach its ‘proper use’ so shortcutting the process of discovery and learning for the child. Of course, in practice this can result in broken and missing equipment but this is a good reason for using inexpensive and free sources of materials such as scrap and scrounged resources.

Recapitulative play

*Play which involves engaging in rituals, making and using weapons, building shelters, and creating mystical languages.*

Recapitulative play refers to the idea that some aspects of children’s play might recap our evolutionary history. Recapitulation suggests that certain key behaviours linked with survival are passed on genetically and that these behaviours are activated or made subconsciously available when children play in particular (recapitulative) ways. When children play, you will see reflected, some of what humans beings did in the ancient past.

Recapitulative play encompasses rituals, stories and songs and large group events such as mock battles, cooking and building fires, growing food, den building, and all aspects of deep play.

Since its inception there has been some debate about the existence of this play type. There remain serious questions about the idea of recapitulative play, including:

- Why should recapping our ancient human experiences be important?
- How exactly is this knowledge passed down and unconsciously accessed?
- Children play in many other ways beside those commonly thought of as recapitulative. Are these behaviours passed on too?

Despite the many unanswered questions and possibilities there is no doubt that many children want to play in ways that might be called recapitulative and draw considerable satisfaction from the behaviour.

**Role play**

*Play that explores trying out roles not normally experienced, for example driving a car or doing the washing.*

In role play children imitate others who they may be familiar with, such as family members, teachers or characters they see on television. Role play is not an accurate representation of another person – details may be changed or exaggerated to create a caricature or stereotyped version of that role. It is also constrained by the level of
understanding the child has of that character. Children create ‘typical’ versions of the characters they adopt, for example, the strict teacher or the over-stressed parent.

Playing with roles helps children explore and try out other roles around them and so gain some understanding of what is going on and why it might be happening\textsuperscript{18}. It allows children to go ‘outside’ themselves, to see themselves from another perspective. By doing so, they come to terms with the idea that they are separate from, but similar to other people.

Much like the other pretend based play types, role play can be encouraged through the provision of dressing up clothes, make-up and typical everyday accessories.

**Rough and tumble**

*Play that involves play fighting, tumbling, tickling, play with body contact, but no deliberate hurting where children involved are laughing and squealing and from their facial expressions obviously enjoying themselves.*

Of all the play types, rough and tumble play is arguably the most misunderstood, despite being widely studied in humans and animals. It usually consists of wrestling, hitting (with an open hand), pushing, splashing or dunking, and is frequently interspersed with (or can develop into) games of chase.

Adults frequently misunderstand rough and tumble and try to ban or prevent it as aggressive behaviour. Children, on the other hand, clearly seem to know the difference. Although rough and tumble may superficially look like serious hostile behaviour there are several key differences. Opponents of rough and tumble often claim that it will inevitably escalate into real fighting. This is unlikely if the rough and tumble play is genuinely consensual.

Rough and tumble allows children to calibrate their strength and agility and to begin to develop a physical awareness of themselves and others. There are some gender differences – boys tend to engage in more rough and tumble than girls, and boys’ play appears more aggressive. This difference is consistent across different cultures.

**Social play**

*Playing with others where the rules for social engagement can be explored, for example conversations, making things together or creating a club.*
Social play is likely to be the most commonly observed play type in a play setting. It involves interaction with others, and that is one of the main reasons why children choose to visit a play setting.

Play is one of the most important aspects of social development, because learning during social play occurs on several levels. As well as knowledge, information, and processing skills, children acquire an understanding of customs, rules and power relationships. Childhood play experiences also enable children to learn the crucial social skills of sympathy and empathy.

In many ways social play throws the most doubt on the validity of this categorisation of play types. Perhaps, social play is such a dominant form of play that it would be more helpful to identify the various types of social play, than to focus on the subtle differences between dramatic and socio-dramatic play, or between fantasy and imaginative play.

Socio-dramatic play

The recreation of scenes from children’s lives for example playing at mothers and fathers or house.

Socio-dramatic play is concerned with the everyday personal and social experiences of children’s lives such as going to school, going shopping, having dinner, or going to bed. It allows children to experience or rehearse typical situations from their lives. Socio-dramatic play often requires at least two children, although some can and do play this way alone.

Unfortunately, for some children the ‘everyday’ may not be so ‘normal’ and socio-dramatic play can allow them to work through frightening, painful or confusing emotions such as witnessing domestic violence or bullying at school. In socio-dramatic play children imitate real world experiences but add elements of make believe. Their play becomes a therapeutic tool for dealing with unconscious emotions and fears, and fulfilling wishes. Socio-dramatic play provides children with the means to explore how others feel, to negotiate or compromise but also to stand firm for their own intentions. It has been linked with many other areas of development including language and literacy, creativity and problem-solving.

While both boys and girls use stories as part of socio-dramatic play, there are some differences between the genders. Girls seem more likely to include domestic scenes characterised by order or overcoming dangers while boys’ stories are more violent and unpredictable. There also appears to be differences in the way the two negotiate with play partners. Girls appear more likely to use a strategy that combines their own interests with those of others while boys offer fewer options and demand a one-sided approach.

The ‘real life’ nature of socio-dramatic play and the re-enactment of events can make it emotionally charged. It is essential that we as playworkers maintain our non-judgmental approach and give children the time and space to play out their experiences.

Symbolic play

The use of objects or signs to represent other things, for example a stick to represent a sword or a piece of fabric to represent a room.

Symbolic play is the ability to represent objects, actions, ideas or feelings with symbols. Children may initially use one object for another, for example, using a stick for a gun. Later they may use symbols to represent objects, for example, using a squiggle to represent the ocean or use symbols to represent abstract ideas such as a flag to represent a country or membership of a gang. The essential point about symbolic play is not the actual object or prop chosen by the child but rather the meaning they choose to give it. It is this meaning that determines the play.

Symbolic play has been linked with the development of the ability to use signs and the written word. As with other play types that have a strong element of pretend, symbolic play requires a supportive, non-judgemental environment where children feel relaxed and confident that they will not be ridiculed.
Conclusion
Facilitating the play types in practice to ensure children experience a range of opportunities and experiences requires space, permission and variety.

Outdoor space is a critical component of a play setting. Where space is insufficient for children’s needs, for example too small or lacking outdoor space, we are likely to observe the absence of a full range of play behaviours expressed by children.

Permission is arguably the most significant influence when facilitating play types. In practice, it means to enable children to feel ‘we are allowed to be here and do what we do’ without being judged. It requires tolerance, approval and empowerment. Without permission children will not feel ownership of the play space nor freedom within it.

All play types benefit from a varied environment supported by a range of basic materials and props. They need to offer flexibility and novelty, and they can and should be provided with little expense.

References
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15 Play.

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.