

# The Sacred Urge to Play

What if our main purpose as humans is to play?

## Deepening in Play - two sides to the story

In the weekend I overheard someone talking about the continuum of play. I pricked up my ears, only to find she wasn't talking about the **genetically encoded biological continuum of play** that is my passion. She was talking about the **'man made' ideological continuum of play**. The two are very different. The biological play continuum is a predictable sequence dictated by the unfolding of the child's biology. Here's just one obvious example: children are not going to be playing hopscotch if they haven't mastered balance on one leg.

## Biology Rulz OK

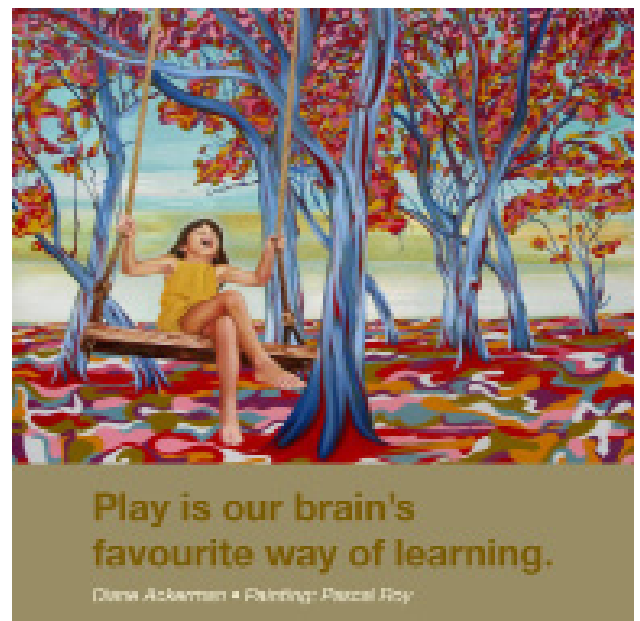
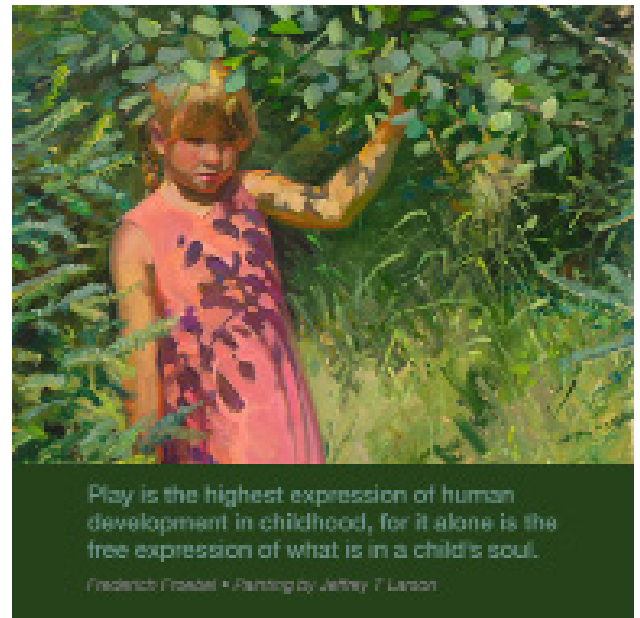
The **biology** of the child determines the **unfolding of the child**; and the predictable, sequential **order of unfolding** constitutes a **continuum**. So from conception, when the egg and the sperm begin their dance, there is a predictable continuum of physical unfolding. At no point does it go backwards, and at no point does the wee life-form change plans and become a horse or a rose bush.

## Timing is everything

'Human' is a genetically encoded pattern, suppress it or rush it at the baby's peril. Suppressing it is the equivalent of putting a garden seat over an oak seedling (duh); rushing it is the equivalent of pulling a child's teeth down with pliers to hurry them up, or propping a baby to sit before she can sit for herself (abuse). And yet both suppression and rushing are prevalent in early childhood - suppressing what is coming from *inside* the child, and rushing things from the *outside*. Neither aligns with all the fine words in our policy statements and philosophy folders. The ERO (state auditors) seem blind to the mismatch of what we *think* we do and what we *actually* do. Indeed, most auditors in the Education Revue Office actively encourage rushing from the outside. There is a huge push to get the primary curriculum fitted onto early childhood; rather like the ugly sister trying to shove her foot into the glass slipper.

## Patterns and the Universe

In the Human Pattern, there are patterns within patterns within patterns.... For those of us who work alongside babies, toddlers and young children, it makes the world of difference *to the child* if we are aware of the human patterns, and of their sequence of unfolding. Here are just two examples of patterns so you get the idea: There's the continuum of the 'get your teeth pattern', starting with the lower central incisors, all the way up to the wisdom teeth. There's the 'gross motor physical development pattern'. On this continuum, the baby first works for stability with the muscles on her front (flexors) and her back (extensors). To do this she needs to be on her back on a firm surface during her 'play time', without anything hanging over her. She will respond to the impulses coming from within by moving her arms, legs, head, shoulders and hips until she achieves this balance in her core. Only then can she begin to unfold the next steps on the continuum: getting onto her side, then rolling, then creeping, then crawling, then sitting and so on.



### The brain itself unfolds in a pattern

The predictable-sequential unfolding pattern of the child's brain 'determines' all the possibilities of *all* of the patterns/continuums coded into that child. Besides the obvious physical patterns, there are heart-relationship patterns (involving electro-magnetic heart frequencies); patterns when different levels of consciousness come 'on stream' (electro-magnetic brain frequencies); language patterns, cognitive patterns, patterns of moral development... *and*, not least, **there are play patterns.**

### Play is the Tool of Co-creation

While play doesn't have much (if anything) to do with a child's teething patterns, it has *everything* to do with just about every other pattern within the human child. It is the power tool of creation and unfolding. Nature has coded play into the Human Pattern as *the process* by which to unfold the physical, the social, the psychological, the cognitive, the imaginative, the creative, and the spiritual patterns of the human child. The degree to which the child gets to play in all of her 'realms' is the degree to which she can unfold the potential within her and become (what Joseph Chilton Pearce terms) the 'Magical Child'. The Magical Child is dormant within every child, and play is the process by which the Magical Child unfolds and emerges - or not.



### The patterns are universal and predictable, not hit and miss

We need to **understand what the human play patterns are** so we can support the child's biological play continuum; that really is our role as teachers and parents. When we have no idea what the play patterns are, we cannot recognise them even when they are right under our noses; therefore we cannot support them, neither can we offer more loose parts so that the children themselves can extend their own play. Instead, with the best of intentions, we will get in their way with the 'scaffold, teachable moment, intend, extend, interest' mantras we've been taught, and we'll miss. Go to [penniebrownlee.weebly.com/blog](http://penniebrownlee.weebly.com/blog) - the Feb 2015 Blog, check out the links for the play patterns.

### Support or suppress? Hold or hurry?

In outstanding early childhood centres the teachers take their task of supporting the child seriously. Their understanding of 'child led' play includes - and goes far beyond - 'provocations' or 'inquiry' or 'teachable moments' or 'scaffolding' or 'intentional teaching'. Teachers in outstanding centres know that without a deeper understanding of the inherent human patterns, and knowledge of how those patterns unfold, those pedagogical approaches can be hollow, and even damaging.



### Child led?

Here's a common example: The adult reads a story about fairies (say), and wants the children to make a fairy. So she makes one for the children to copy. Her rationale when questioned is "I want to give them some ideas to get them started." It's hardly her fault, she has a student loan, and the people who trained her obviously weren't successful in transmitting understanding about how to support creativity - which *always* comes from the inside. Children don't

need ideas on how to do it. Ever. What they need are the materials with which to do it, with which to make their expression. BUT - and this is a big but - expression always follows impression; **whatever makes an impression** on that child **seeks expression**. So have the children had some stories about fairies? (One won't cut it - that hardly leaves an impression.) Have they played fairies, have they had more stories about fairies...? Because if they have, the impression will seek expression and they'll do their own expression about fairies. It may be a model, a painting, a fairy house in the bushes, a play that they sell you tickets for... but it won't be a copy of yours. That's activity based busy work, it is adult led, and there is no way you can dress it up otherwise. The defining human gift of imagination and creativity is meant for far greater things than activity based busy work.

### Teachers see that there is rich content in the rich environment - and the children process it

Remember, impression - expression. Too many teachers ask children (students) to make an expression (draw a picture, write a story...) when there is no impression deep enough to warrant an expression. It's not real. It's busy work and it has no relevance whatsoever to the inner life of the child. So it is our task to choose carefully because everything makes an impression. It is up to us to locate stunningly beautiful story books ("The Waterhole", "Ten Little Fingers, Ten Little Toes" - not the fart and bum variety); to tell great stories (How Maui found his Mother, or the time Nana swallowed a gobstopper...); to play great music, world music (not the bus-wheel variety); to have live music; provide lots of interesting things (wind-up gramophones, alarm clocks, saddles...); to provide real work (making the bread each day for morning tea, cleaning up after making the bread...) etc. Lucky are the children who have adults who understand how to pass on the highs of human culture - instead of sinking to the lows. Pop culture will deliver children enough lows in just one evening in front of a screen, so it is up to us to offer a balance.

### On the same page

Outstanding centres are centres where staff have worked hard to come to a shared philosophy. Every member of the team needs to be on the same page philosophically, because it is the philosophy that holds the practice in harmony. I cannot emphasise this enough. When you are all on the same page you generate the harmony that characterises an outstanding centre.

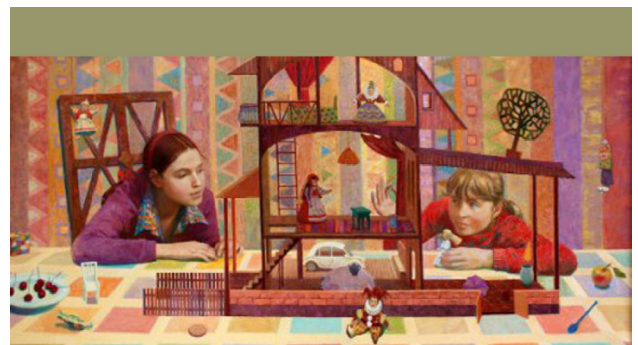
### Let ideology serve biology

Philosophy is the point where the second play continuum comes in, the **ideological play continuum**. At one end of this continuum there are the teachers who have structured the children's day into 20 minute periods rather like a secondary school timetable. At the other end of this continuum are the teachers who give the whole of the day for children to follow their own interests in child-led play-learning - and there are all sorts of combinations in between. How would we judge one from another? The question to ask is, **"Does this support what is coming from the inside the child, does this support the biological play continuum?"** Or is this an imposition of what I think a child should



**Play is a state of mind rather than an activity.**

Stuart Brown & Christopher Vaughan • Painting by Dorothea Sharp



**Play isn't the enemy of learning,  
it's learning's partner.**

**Play is like fertiliser for brain growth.  
It's crazy not to use it.**

Stuart Brown & Christopher Vaughan  
Painting by Elena Proudnikhova

'know' from the outside?" If you can answer in all honesty that what is on offer supports the child's biology, then you and your team can unite in your philosophy, knowing that together, your practice supports child-led learning.

### The Greats

All the 'greats on the behalf of children' worked out approaches to match two things: who they believed the child to be, and how they believed the human child learned: Friedrich Fröbel, Rudolf Steiner, Margaret and Rachel McMillan, Emmi Pikler, Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget, Loris Malaguzzi, Urie Bronfenbrenner, Lev Vygotsky, John Holt et al - they all came up with approaches to match the unfolding of the child. In the end, it isn't about the approaches being 'better than', it is more about 'different from' - and the differences suit different people. No matter who is the greatest influence on a teacher's practice, or where they fit on the ideological play continuum, as long each practitioner resides in their own heart, with the intention to honour and serve the Human Patern of the child *first*, (and not criteria drafted out of political-economic considerations), our children are in safe hands.

Pennie Brownlee, February 2015.

