

The Play cycle

The play cycle is both an ingeniously simple and yet deeply intriguing way of depicting the child's play process. It is like describing a universal expressive language that children use when they play and as with all languages we can learn the simpler aspects quite easily but it takes time and practice to become fluent and really understand its meanings.

We can use the play cycle to understand play better and understand how we can better support play

Metaludes: inner reverie or contemplation that precedes play. Do we have thoughtful, stimulating spaces, objects or images that will spark metaludes?

Cues: a lure or an invite to a person, to something in the environment, to another part of self. Play cues can be by a look, gesture, verbal invitation, provocation, testing out, facial or bodily display, presentation of an object or an action.

Return: the response by a child, by a playworker, by the environment, by oneself

Frames: initiated by the child to provide the context, the enclosure. It is the stage to contain and constrain the play and it is organic and can change in shape and size.

- Physical: mats, stones, rope, tyres, hedge, structure, designated area, fence etc.
- Narrative: storyline, music, rules and so forth
- Emotional: when play is exploring a particular feeling, so the props, the action, the place and the story can keep changing because it's the experience of the feeling that holds it all together.

Flow: when there's a response and a frame, flow occurs and can last seconds or weeks...

Annihilation: child chooses to end and move on.

Adulteration: we all do it in multiple ways. Wanting to rescue, educate, improve, make better, control, play ourselves (unplayed-out material) ...

Intervention

- Play maintenance: play is self-contained
- Simple involvement: adult acts as a resource for the play
- Medial involvement: playworker becomes involved (invited but temporary)
- Complex involvement: direct and extended overlap between child and playworker: need to keep frame intact
- Integrity: playworker may be involved in disputed or conflicting frames (witness position).

Dysplay: not to be confused with ordinary lack of return. The speedy misfiring of cues due to having got used to a pattern of non responses.

With reference to: Sturrock, G and Else, P. (1988) The Colorado Paper.

Play cycle examples

Boy (7) watched a new worker for a few minutes. Then he tore up a sheet of paper into pieces and went up to the worker and threw them at her (cue). The worker looked slightly annoyed, tried to recover herself and then said brightly, "what have I done to deserve that?!" (adulteration) The boy shook his head and stomped off outside (dysplay) Another worker patted the new worker on the shoulder and said "you missed your cue there pet!".

A boy (10) rolled a tyre into the fence (cue). He watched it settle (return), then with a flurry of activity, began to lug all the tyres out (cycle) one by one and started placing them carefully next to each other (frame). It was clearly hard work. A worker came over and stood nearby, but not too close and watched and waited. He ignored her and seeing that he was utterly absorbed (flow) she moved away. He carried on placing these tyres for over half an hour without stopping. Finally, he stood back and looked. He then rearranged one or two tyres and stood back again. Then he dusted himself off and went inside (annihilation) and was later completely unconcerned when some other child moved a couple of tyres elsewhere.

A boy (8) was sitting at the organ looking at the keys. He looked around and caught the eye of another boy and nodded (cue). The other boy (who was there for the first time that day), came shyly up to the organ and also sat down (return). They started pressing keys and got a background bass rhythm going (frame - rhythmical narrative). One of the playworkers started dancing across the room (serves as both a cue and a return). One of the boys looked round and laughed and several other children whooped and cheered (response to worker's cue). Within a couple of minutes, a line of children had formed doing the conga around the building which swelled and moved outside and back in through a different door. The boys on the organ were delighted and kept playing (flow). After about ten minutes, the line broke up and individual children danced back before involving themselves with something else. The boys on the organ petered out their playing but seemed happy to do so (annihilation). The playworker clapped and said "that was great!" and the two boys spontaneously stood up, bowed and both ran outside.

Three boys were on a large mat (**frame**) being dogs and playfighting. Two other boys joined them and it got louder and rougher. "Off my space" growled one 'dog' when some other child walked across the mat (most children walked around it). The 'dog' came out of role and complained to the playworker. "Don't tell me" she said, "talk to them". Everyone came out of role and the first boy made everyone in the vicinity sit on the mat. There ensued great debate over who had the right to which space - there were a number of conflicting spatial play frames here. After much negotiation, more mats were laid out separately on the floor and the various groups resumed play - each on their own mats. However, after a few minutes, one group dragged their mat to adjoin the 'dogs' mat (**cue**), followed by another and another and soon everyone was barking (**flow**). This in turn evolved naturally into a very organised game of tag-wrestling with two teams involving everyone who had been in the original space.

Two girls (7) were absorbed in a role-play (**narrative frame**) where one was an extremely bossy parent telling the other (their child) exactly what to do and how. ("stand here", "go back there", "do as I say now"....) They were wandering around the room as they did this, seemingly oblivious to anyone else (**flow**). Then they both spontaneously and simultaneously stopped as they saw other children laying down mats (**cue**) and practising handstands. Without a word to each other, they went and got their own mat (**return**) and then started dancing on it. Within a couple of minutes they had then made up the rules for a new game that all had to be played on the mat itself (**new frame**).

Five boys (6-10) were crowded round the new X-box - one of them was actually holding the controls and playing a one-player game but all of them were deeply involved, watching and commenting. The **frame** was both the narrative of the computer game and the semi-circle of chairs they were occupying. They have previously agreed a rota so that everyone got a change to physically play, but they are all glued to the screen and offering advice to the 'player' (not always gratefully received!). Some of them naturally annihilate and both move on and return later. Others are absolutely immersed (**flow**) for up to an hour when it is then time to go (**adulteration**).