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The role of play in social work education, training, and practice

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the role of play within social work education, training, and practice. Thirty-nine social workers, ranging from current students to those with over five years of experience, participated in an anonymous online survey. The results found that over 90% of participants have or did not have any play-specific education or training although there was an overwhelming consensus that it was needed. A thematic analysis found that the benefits of play within social work practice included building relationships, communicating with children, reducing the power imbalance, and having a therapeutic role. The barriers to using play in professional practice related to the perceived professional role of social workers, time, resources, and the lack of training. This study provides one of the first research studies identifying from a social worker's perspective the need for up-to-date play theory to support education and training and applied to professional practice.

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Play; social work; education; training; practice; Play Cycle

Introduction

Play, as a concept, is difficult to define (Sutton-Smith, 1997); however, within the United Kingdom, key concepts that define play are freely chosen, intrinsically motivated with no external goal (Garvey, 1990). This definition of play also reflects published Government play policies in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, for example, 'The Welsh Play Policy' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). The importance of play is also recognised in Wales as part of the Children and Families (Wales) Measures 2010 (Legislation.gov, 2010), legislation produced to address child poverty. This definition also reflects how play is used and defined within areas of professional practice, for example, playwork (King & Newstead, 2022). Playwork focuses on the process of play, rather than outcomes (King & Newstead, 2021), supported by the theoretical approach used within the Play Cycle (King, 2025; King & Sturrock, 2019; Sturrock & Else, 1998), where play, and the space to play, is considered the natural therapeutic space for children (Sturrock, 2003).

In addition to playwork, professional practice that includes and uses play specifically includes teaching (Bennett et al., 1997; Pramling et al., 2019; Wood, 2013), play therapy (Axline, 1947), early years (Broadhead et al., 2010; Fleer, 2021), and childcare

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(Jackson & Forbes, 2014). In these different areas of professional practice (childcare, play therapy, etc.), play is grounded within education and training, both pre- and post-qualifying, however, when considering the professional practice of social work, play may not be included in social work education and training or used within professional practice.

Social work and social work practice are 'focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential' (British Association of Social Workers, 2014, p. 4). Social work has been defined as:

> a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.

Social workers 'support people in a variety of ways' (Social Work England, 2023, p. 10) and are 'concerned with attending to difference, in the guise of meeting individual needs' (Harris, 1998). The difference and individual needs cover the lifespan from infants to older age and can be focused within specific areas, for example, adults (McDonald et al., 2007) or children and families (Rogowski, 2012) and to 'balance the wishes of services uses with their needs and abilities' (Dickens, 2011, p. 36). When working with children and families, more specifically children, the use of play would seem to be an important concept to use to meet children's needs and abilities, as well as developing relationships (Daly, 2015; Roch, 2005).

This aspect of developing relationships relates to any context between adults and children, and play can be the mechanism, or catalyst, especially when focusing on the process of play (King & Newstead, 2021). For example, in playwork, the adult supports the process of play through the Play Cycle by being an observer or providing resources for children to engage in play, to being more active play partners (Howard & McInnes, 2013; Sturrock & Else, 1998). For Social Work practitioners working with children and families, engagement with children may involve the social worker providing resources (at their own expense) to develop the relationship with the child through play. Supporting the process of play, as in the theory of the Play Cycle, could be a beneficial inclusion into social work education and training, particularly as play is not important as an outcome, as in play therapy, for example. However, with the focus on the process of play, the social worker could consider the therapeutic benefits of play when working with children.

Aldgate and Simmonds (1988) refer to how social workers could adopt and use non-directive play developed by Axline (1947) based on Rogers's (1951) person-centred counselling. However, to use this approach a clear understanding of play, specifically child-led play (King, 2025) is required. Tait and Wosu (2013) emphasise this when they refer to non-directive play as free play, where:

> One of the best ways to develop a helping relationship with children is to support their free play. This, for some adults, is not as easy as it sounds, but like all skills, it can be learned. (p. 21)

For social workers to facilitate free play that could take place within the child's home or at a designated playroom, they need to have play resources and materials (Lefevre, 2010). The resources and materials need to be appropriate for the child's age and stage of development (Doyle, 1997) to use and engage with (Tait & Wosu, 2013). Non-directive

(free) play with sufficient resources can create a 'safe space' for children to communicate with social workers using both verbal and non-verbal communication (Lefevre, 2010).

There are published books to support the use of play within social work practice which includes areas of communicating with children and young people (Lefevre, 2010; Tait & Wosu, 2013), working with abused children (Doyle, 1997), and direct work with children (Aldgate & Simmonds, 1988). However, there is scarce research evidence on how and where play is being used. Where social work and play have been researched, this has focused more on the use of role-play within training and education.

Role-play is used to cover areas of reflective learning (Jones & Conner, 2021), experiential learning (Askeland, 2003), simulation (Hargreaves & Hadlow, 1997), and shared interprofessional education (IPE) (Villadsen et al., 2012). The use of role-play enables social work students:

> 'An opportunity to "practice" and explore contentious and complex issues in a safe and containing environment allowing "mistakes" to be made without blame being apportioned'. (Villadsen et. al., 2012, p. 77)

Role-play has been defined as a 'spontaneous, dramatic, creative teaching strategy in which individuals overtly consciously assume the roles of others' (Sellers, 2002, p. 498) and is widely used in education and training across different professionals including social work to 'facilitate the development of professional skills' (Banach et al., 2020, p. 43). However, using role-play as a pedagogical approach (O'Sullivan, 2017) is one thing, but what is lacking in social work education and training is the inclusion, understanding, and potential application of play which could be applied to professional practice.

Whilst the research evidence on the use of play within professional practice in social work is lacking, there are examples within the published literature where play has been used. Ayling (2012) uses play to incorporate play-based skills within social work training. Play-based skills can support and develop social workers' communication skills when working with children and young people, by incorporating the use of drawing, small-world toys, storytelling (Ayling, 2012), and music (Lefevre, 2004).

Another aspect where play and social work have been considered is play therapy (Ceyhan, 2020; Solomon, 1938) particularly when working with children experiencing adversity (Dvarionas, 2002; Webb, 2011). However, using play therapy requires a specific skill set and understanding of play (Webb, 2011) that may not be within social work education and training (West, 1990). However, when focusing on non-directive play (Axline, 1947), play can be used in any context where the process of play is the focus, rather than an outcome that could apply to social work practice (King & Temple, 2018).

Social work involves communicating with children and young people and play has been used widely and consistently within both training and practice across other professions that include teaching, therapy, early years, childcare and playwork. Whilst the research evidence supports the use of play within training and education, for example in playwork (King & Newstead, 2020, 2022), the inclusion of play within social work education, training and practice is currently lacking. This exploratory study aims to find out if and how play is used within social work education, training and practice from

a social worker perspective. The research question for this study was 'Is There a Role for Play in Social Work Education, Training, and Practice'.

Method

This study used an online survey where both students and qualified social workers could participate. An online survey was used as social work students and qualified professionals would have access to the Internet (Van Selm & Jankowski, 2006). This study had ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of the College of Human and Health Science at Swansea University (Research Ethics Approval Number: 320,251,287,612,100). The online survey was divided into three sections:

- Section A: Demographic Data
- Section B: The inclusion of play within social work education and training
- Section C: The use of play within social work practice

Section A consisted of closed questions asking participants current social work role, where they are currently based within the United Kingdom (UK), length of time being involved in social work, and their specific area within social work. Section B focused on any play-related education and training, both pre-qualifying (e.g. lectures) and post-qualifying (e.g. workshops, continuous professional development). Section C asked open-ended questions focusing on the use of play in social work training and practice where participants were asked how is play used in their current role?, what are the perceived benefits of using play in their practice?, what are the barriers to using play in their practice?, and on a scale of 0–10, how important is play in their role as a social worker.

The survey was piloted with experienced social workers for relevance, clarity, and accuracy. Feedback from the pilot study was positive, and no amendments were required. The online survey was developed on the Qualtrics® platform and available from March 2025 to June 2025 by respondents clicking on an anonymous link. This meant that no information about the participants was collected, such as their names or IP addresses. A non-probability sampling method was undertaken using both convenience and snowballing sampling (Pace, 2021) where the survey was distributed through publicly available social work networks on Facebook® and through both local and national social work organisations, for example.

Sample

In total, 39 social workers from England ($n = 16$), Wales ($n = 22$), and Scotland ($n = 1$) participated in the study. The role of social workers who took part included students ($n = 17$), face-to-face practitioners ($n = 11$), non-face-to-face management ($n = 2$), and educators ($n = 9$).

The sample includes a range of students currently undertaking their social work qualifications to experienced social workers who are employed in higher education teaching on social work courses. The years involved in social work varied from

participants who were still social work students ($n = 17$), employed in social work for less than 1 year ($n = 1$), 1 year but less than 5 years ($n = 3$), and five years or more ($n = 6$).

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were undertaken for the closed questions within Section A. For the open-ended questions of the benefits of using play and the barriers of using play in professional practice, a separate Thematic Analysis was undertaken for each question using the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This is a six-stage process to construct narrative text into themes. When coding qualitative data, the aim is to reach a point where no new code, theme, or sub-theme is constructed. The process of constructing the themes from the initial coding is a process in qualitative research termed 'collapsing the data' (Elliott, 2018) to reach the point where no new theme is constructed. This is termed the 'saturation point' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Saunders et al. (2017) have identified four models of saturation, one being inductive thematic saturation which they explain where 'saturation focuses on the identification of new codes or themes and is based on the number of such codes or themes' (p. 1869). The rationale for undertaking two separate thematic analysis for the benefits and barriers of using play within professional practice has been considered in other play-related studies, for example playwork (King & Newstead, 2020).

Results

The 39 participants who took part in this study provided a good range from students currently studying for their social work qualification to those who have more than 5 years' experience, including Higher Education social work lecturers. Participants defined play as fun, creative, exploratory, and used with toys and activities. Whilst all these aspects do relate to play, the definitions provided did not reflect 'freely chosen', 'intrinsically motivated', and 'no external goal' as stated within government policies, for example, 'Welsh Play Policy' (Welsh Assembly Government, 2002).

When asked if their pre-qualifying education and training included play-related modules or lectures, 92% of participants stated 'No' ($n = 36$). This indicates that both students and experienced social workers have had no specific play content when training. Where specific play content was included, 1 respondent referred to this as role-play, and another explained how figurine toys were used to explain family members. Whilst both examples can be considered as play, the use of play within professional practice has, and still is not being included in social work education and training. This lack of play education and training is reflected in how social workers define play. Post-qualification play training was also very limited. There were examples of play being used in therapeutic-based training, for example, Theraplay (Booth & Jernberg, 2010), however, no specific play training post-qualification was evident.

Whilst there is a lack of pre- and post-qualification play education and training for social workers; play is being used within professional practice. The use of resources such

Table 1. Benefits of using play.

Theme	Key Points
Build Relationships	Trust
	Rapport
	Break Down Barriers
	With Children and Parents
Communication	Encourage Children to Talk
	Children Open Up
	Voice of the Child
	Children Discuss Issues
	Reveal Thoughts
	More Informal
Reduce Power Imbalance	Relaxes the Child
	Child-led and Child-Centred
	Reduce Anxiety
	Childs Level
	Seen as an Equal
Therapeutic Role	Children Regulate Emotions
	Support Adults
	Supports the Healing Process
	Children Share Worries and Experiences

as games and toys, art, and drawing materials were used in professional practice, although these are self-resourced. This was reflected in the following comments:

> '*I invite children to draw and colour with me. I use toy cars and figures, such as animals/ dinosaurs, and talk to children while we are playing*' (Participant 1, Social Work Practitioner, Wales)

> '*I use it in my direct work when working with younger children I will take little colour books or toys with me or we will go outside (if the weather is nice) and play football etc if they are interested*' (Participant 22, Social Work Practitioner, Wales)

Whilst most of the examples provided related to children, the use of play with adults, particularly when working with parents.

Benefits of using play in professional practice

The benefits of using play were analysed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis framework. Table 1 shows the four themes and sub-themes constructed from the responses when asked what the benefits of using play within professional practice:

The theme of building relationships is to build trust and a rapport with both children and adults. This was reflected in the comment below:

> '*It helps build relationships, and allows people to use activities to take the focus of the serious issues they might be addressing*' (Participant 1, Senior Lecturer, England)

To build relationships requires effective communication to encourage children to open up and play enables both verbal and non-verbal communication between the child and the social worker.

> 'I think many, I think it allows you to communicate tough things in an easier way. Play as a conduit for tough conversations' (Participant 35, Social Work Student, Scotland)

When children engage with social workers there is an immediate 'power balance' towards the social worker. Through using play, there is the potential to reduce this power balance where:

> '*Play allows a child to see you as an equal and not as another adult/professional. It also allows you to bring yourself down to the child's level (in my experience, play usually takes place on the floor) and to engage in more informal ways of communication*' (Participant 9, Social Work Student, Wales)

The final theme constructed indicates how play can be used within a therapeutic capacity where children are addressing emotions and conflict, as indicated in the comments below:

> Play can be used as a therapeutic approach for children to communicate (Participant 5, Social Work Student, Wales)

> 'It can help regulate emotions for the child, and help them feel safer' (Participant 2, Social Work Lecturer, England)

The four themes constructed on how beneficial play is in professional social work practice clearly overlap and are not considered isolated themes. Social workers must communicate to children at their level but allow children to be able to communicate at a time and pace they are ready to. Play enables this as children can take control of the play process and with sensitive adult intervention, the play can be supported. This enables communication and to build a relationship.

Barriers to using play in professional practice

The thematic analysis undertaken for the benefits of using play within professional practice is often outweighed by the barriers. In addition to the lack of play-related education and training, Table 2indicates the barriers to using play:

The four themes constructed that act as barriers to using play in professional practice were the Professional Role, Time, Resources, and Training. When considering the professional role, the use of play may be perceived to be as 'unprofessional' or 'too informal' and may not align to the assessment-focus practice of social workers:

> 'Can appear less professional' (Participant 13, Student Social Worker, Wales)

Table 2. Barriers to using play.

Theme	Key Points
Professional Role	Assessment Focused
	Unprofessional
	Too informal
Time	Workload
	Location
	Develop Relationships
Resources	Need for age-appropriate resources
	Interest the child
	Lack
Training	Lack of Play Knowledge and understanding
	Lack of confidence to use play
	Lack of training

The time to use and implement play was also perceived to be a barrier where a busy and heavy workload combined with the location of clients meant it was difficult to use play to develop relationships:

> 'Time is a major factor for reducing meaningful engagement with families of any nature. Social work is a heavily bureaucratic system which makes it difficult to fit in play' (Participant 9, Social Work Lecturer, England)

The lack of resources to use play as a barrier reflected the benefit of using play but relying on social work practitioners to supply their own resources. The age range of children also meant that supplying age-appropriate resources is a challenge, as well as keeping up to date with the latest technology to engage children in play:

> 'Resources, social workers are often required to bring their own items for play' (Participant 21, Social Work Manager, Wales)

> 'Children's worlds are much larger and more digital, or technology based. Social workers cannot carry consoles around or may not even be as tech savvy as the children being supported' (Participant 12, Student Social Worker, Wales)

The last theme of the Lack of Training reflected on the lack of play current students and more experienced social workers have not had, and continue not to have when undertaking their social work education and training:

> 'Lack of training in play-based approaches' (Participant 5, Social Work Student, Wales)

> 'Lack of training on the importance of play in relationship-based practice (for both children and adults)' (Participant 1, Lecturer, England)

There is a lack of play within social work education, training, and professional practice. However, when asked on a scale of 0–10 how important play is for social work practice (0 being not important at all to 10 being very important), the average score was 7.51 (SD 2.3). Social workers, both students and experienced practitioners do consider play to be an important aspect of social work, not just for children, but when working with adults as well, and summed up with the following comments:

> 'When used correctly, play can be a great tool, offering children a safe and creative way to express their emotions, communicate, and build relationships'. (Participant 5, Social Work Student, Wales)

> 'There needs to be much more training around this as well as an understanding of why it's so important, especially in relationship-based social work practice. And that play isn't just for children' (Participant 1, Social Work Lecturer, England)

Discussion

This current study reflects the lack of research on how play and the use of play exist within social work education, training, and professional practice. This is not to say play does not exist within social work (Aldgate & Simmonds, 1988); however, it appears to be a more 'ad-hoc' approach depending on the social workers' knowledge, experience, and how they self-resource to use play in their professional practice. The results from this study indicate that play is considered an activity to engage with children, young people,

and adults and important in developing relationships and having a therapeutic outlet. One aspect that could support and develop the use of play within social work practice is considering more the process of play (King & Newstead, 2022; King & Temple, 2018).

The process of play is outlined in the Play Cycle (King & Newstead, 2020; King & Sturrock, 2019; Sturrock & Else, 1998) where the adult supports the child leading the play. This approach to play, focusing on the process rather than an outcome is firmly engrained within professional playwork practice (King & Newstead, 2022) and is an approach that can support the benefits outlined within this study of the themes of developing relationships, communication, power imbalance (children lead the process of play, the social worker supports this), and having a therapeutic role. Play is considered as a natural therapeutic process (Sturrock & Else, 1998) and using the Play Cycle (King & Newstead, 2020; Sturrock & Else, 1998) can support non-directive play in social work practice (King, 2025; Tait & Wosu, 2013).

The social worker can provide the resources to play; however, they can wait and be invited to play, what is termed within the Play Cycle theory as a play cue (King & Newstead, 2020; Sturrock & Else, 1998). When invited to play, the play cue could be a verbal signal (but not always, play cues can be non-verbal) that may develop into a conversation and build relationships. The importance of adults and children playing together is thought to be of importance in developing attachments (Booth & Jernberg, 2010). The need for play to be included in education and training and supported within professional practice was identified in this study, and the Play Cycle can address these two aspects from a theoretical position (education and training), and a practical side (practice) (King, 2025).

However, for the benefits of play to be recognised within social work education, training, and practice, the barriers identified within this study need to be considered for social work to be for children, where a:

> practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people.

Social work university courses within the area of human development need to include play theory and practice that relates to both development and the therapeutic potential of play. Whilst social workers are not play therapists, how play can support children should be part of social work education and training, particularly when working in specific areas such as children and families. In addition, resources to engage children in play on visits, etc., should not be just down to individual social workers buying and supplying their materials. Investment into resources by local authorities would support social work professional practice help develop those relationships and support communication with children, and their families. Whilst resources such as digital consoles would not be supported with limited budgets, paper and drawing materials could be made available for social workers to have as resources (Lefevre, 2010), and include play within the workload, rather than excluded by it.

This study has shown that both student and more experienced social workers, including those who work in Higher Education, see the potential and benefits of play being included with social work training. This could be individual lectures within existing modules to having an entire play module demonstrating both the developmental and therapeutic potential of play to support professional social work

practice (King & Temple, 2018). The incorporation of play needs to go beyond role-play (Banach et al., 2020; O'Sullivan, 2017; Sellers, 2002) (where in this study, only 1 participant referred to role-play) and focus more on the child to support professional practice. The inclusion of play would provide up-to-date theory as well as implications for practice concerning government policy and legislation, for example in Wales (Legislation.gov, 2010; Welsh Assembly Government, 2002). There is a need for the importance and role of play to be included within the social work higher education curriculum. When comparing other play-related professions where play is embedded in the educational curriculum, for example, in early childhood studies, there is the opportunity for students to link theory to practice where they undertake a placement as part of the course. This could be developed within social work education and training when students undertake their placements that involve children and families.

There are limitations to the study. One limitation would appear to be the sample size of 39 to a professional that is estimated to have nearly 130,000 employed social workers (Statista, 2025). However, the constructed themes for both the benefits and the barriers reached a saturation point before the 39th participant where no new themes were constructed for each question. Another limitation was the lack of responses from Scotland and Northern Ireland indicating the findings are more England and Wales-focused. The lack of play within social work education and training is not unique to England and Wales, and the results from this study may also apply to social work across Scotland and Northern Ireland, and more globally as well. The study could be replicated at a more local level, both nationally and internationally to potentially build up a wider picture. In addition, the themes constructed from the benefits and barriers to using play in professional practice could be explored further.

Conclusion

This exploratory study has identified a gap in social work education and training concerning play, both in respect of theory and application. Whilst both student and experienced social workers acknowledge the importance of play and the role it can have in supporting children, this study confirms play is still a rarely covered topic, reflected in the lack of play-based social work research. This gap could be filled with a focus on the process of play that provides current play theory in the Play Cycle, and how it can be used and applied in professional practice. The Play Cycle can support the identified benefits of building relationships, and communication and reducing the power balance between the child and the social worker. However, there needs to be more play-specific content in social work qualifications, and the practitioner needs the time and resources to put it into practice.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Pete King is the programme director for the MA Developmental and Therapeutic Play course at Swansea University. Their research focuses on the theory of the Play Cycle and recently how playwork has coped during Covid–19. Pete's research on play has been published both nationally in the UK and internationally.

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