

‘The Play Cycle really helped me to understand children’s play as a practitioner. It outlines how play begins, develops, and ends, whilst highlighting the complexity of each stage. In my placement, I use it to respond appropriately in order to sustain interactions rather than overrule them, waiting a few extra minutes before asking children who were making a tower of blocks to tidy up, enabling them to stay focused for longer.’

Grace, a Second Year BSc Early Childhood Studies Student whom I teach, who made this contribution, is noticing play as it happens, using this concept called The Play Cycle.

Introduced by the late Gordon Sturrock and the late Professor Perry Else in 1998, the Play Cycle was a response to fears from researchers that child-centred play was under threat. They were concerned that the importance of allowing children to direct their own play was not properly observed and understood. Their seminal paper “The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing” was delivered at the 1998 International Play Association (IPA) conference in Colorado, USA, and is now affectionally called ‘The Colorado Paper’. The Play Cycle focuses on the process of play, rather than using play for a predetermined outcome set by an adult. The adult support, or what is termed the adult intervention style (AIS), may be passive as an observer (play maintenance) or acting as a resource (simple involvement) to more active players in the Play Cycle (medial intervention and complex intervention). Here adults act as play partner and (in the case of complex intervention) give play cues of their own.

Breaking it down

The Play Cycle has subsequently been researched by Dr. Pete King and Dr. Shelly Newstead, which resulted in the revision of the six elements of the Play Cycle. The Play Cycle thus consists of a pre-cue (idea to play), play cue (signal to play), play return (response to the play

cue), play frame (bounded physical or psychological space), flow (absorption in the play), and annihilation (the end of the Play Cycle). Research by Pete King has enabled the visible elements of the Play Cycle (play cue, play return, play frame, and annihilation) along with the length of time of any Play Cycle to be recorded quantitatively using the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM). The recording of Play Cycles can take place anywhere where children play and has been tested in 'real-time' within a pre-school in America.

Emerging play

Whilst the theory of the Play Cycle was first developed in a playwork context, Sturrock and Else were keen to stress that the theory could be applied and supported by adults in any play-based context. This includes the early years, schools, and home. One of the first types of play adults engage in with babies is 'peek-a-boo'. Whilst it is the adult that issues the play cue (and often also practitioners who work with neurodiverse children), covering the eyes and then uncovering them with a loud exclamation of 'peek-a-boo', the baby often responds (play return) with a laugh. This, in essence, is a Play Cycle. When babies grow and develop into toddlers, they begin to consciously or unconsciously emit play cues, and this is continuously observed in pre-school and playgroup settings.

Into pre school

As children move from pre-school and playgroup to early years provision, often the play 'moves' from child-led (freely chosen) play to more adult-led play. This is often structured to meet an educational target or outcome; for example, children may be provided resources that require the use of their fingers to meet outcomes concerning fine motor skills. When children are provided with resources, a play cue issued by the children may be verbal to the adult ("Can I play with that?"), or non-verbal, where the child picks up an object. The more play

objects, or what we often call ‘loose parts’ (which also includes, in this context, both objects and people to play with), the more likely children are to start the process of play.

Child-led and adult-led play are at the two ends of a continuum, and in the middle is collaborative play, where the child and adult are engaged in play together. Irrespective of play having an educational adult-led outcome, or the adult ‘guiding’ the play in collaborative play, there is still a process in the play, there are still play cues and play returns forming Play Cycles. I have put forward the idea that in child-led (free play), the adult is more passive and can support the child’s play in the two AIS (adult intervention styles) of play maintenance and simple involvement. In collaborative play, the child and adult are often engaged in some type of play together, where the adult is more active in the AIS of medial intervention and complex intervention. The important aspect of the adult role in the Play Cycle is not to control or take over the play process, or what Sturrock and Else termed ‘adulteration’.

Many years ago, I worked in a pre-school playgroup in Oxford in the 1990’s and reflect on this episode with a girl around 3-4 years of age:

“The young girl went to the area with stickle bricks and issued a play cue to pick up two shaped stickly bricks (objects can provide a play return). The two stickle bricks consisted of a rectangular or cuboid shape and one that was the size of a thin, short pencil. The girl placed the thin piece onto the top of the short side of the rectangle piece to make a gun, saying ‘bang’ as they pointed it at other children in the playground. As the playground had, as with many settings at the time, a ‘no weapons policy’, my attempt to stop this was thwarted when the child changed the noise to a buzzing sound, and informed me they had made a ‘drill’. As I walked away, the noise changed back from a buzzing sound to a ‘bang’.

When I reflect on this story, there are many things to consider. The 'no weapons policy' was an adult agenda (see Penny Holland's book 'We Don't Play Guns Here' which provides a clear historical account of play and weapons in the 1990s), and my attempt to stop the Play Cycle, or what Sturrock and Else would term 'adulterate' it, was based on the shape of the object made by the girl and the noise they were making. What the child did, with quick and clever thinking, was to change the play cue so the object became a drill. It demonstrated how, when children are in control of play cycles, they can modify them to maintain their own interest in how they want to play. If I knew then what I know now (hindsight is such a powerful argument), I would not have intervened, as the child's Play Cycle was not 'hurting' anybody.

As this story shows, it is very important to be reflective: what role are you playing as an adult in any given process of play, and what type of intervention style? How often does your intervention lead to adulteration? Reflective practice can be both in action (whilst children are playing) and on action (evaluation and appraising, after the event).

Student reflections

I currently teach the 'Play Throughout the Early Years' module for the BSc Early Childhood Studies with Practitioner Status at Swansea University. The Play Cycle is embedded throughout the module, and students can put into practice what they learn in the classroom, as reflected in the comment below:

“I used to observe one boy engaging in a similar play cycle every day. Upon his arrival in the playroom, he would pick up the same two toy cars in the toy box, and then also invite me with a play cue. I would always maintain a role involving complex intervention - him representing one car while I had the other car in pretend play. These toy cars maintained his play frame, and he would reach flow state for at least 15 minutes or more. If I talked to another child, he would invite me with another play cue. If he realised he misplaced his toy car due to distractions from other toys, this ultimately resulted in an annihilation of his play cycle. He would then act on his pre-cue, looking for his toy car, and this play cycle would then repeat once he found it” (Hannah, a Second Year BSc Early Childhood Studies Student).

The Play Cycle can apply to anywhere children play, as this account shows:

“During outdoor play, the children in the nursery are taken to the park, which is full of loose parts. A stick, for example, is an external perceptual cue and has stimulated an idea for play in one child. The child picked up a stick and began pretending to be a witch flying on a make-believe broomstick. The child then picked up another wooden stick and handed it to me, inviting me into their play cycle through a play cue. I took the stick and copied the child’s action of pretending to be a witch, providing a play return. As we spent some time “flying” around, the child appeared to be engaged, reaching a flow state. My role as the adult in this specific Play Cycle involved complex intervention, considering I was issuing both play returns and play cues, extending the play with the same child and other children. After around 10 minutes, the child was drawn into a new play opportunity, which led to the annihilation of this original Play Cycle” (Layla, a Second Year BSc Early Childhood Studies student)

Further information

- Dr Pete King is author of ‘The Play Cycle in Practice: Supporting, Observing, and Reflecting on Children’s Play’
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781003594819/play-cycle-practice-pete-king>
- Free animated videos of the Play Cycle (in English, Welsh, Arabic, and Cantonese) available on my YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/@drpeteking1751>.
- Contact p.f.king@swansea.ac.uk.