Promoting learning and development in the early years through play

Interview with Teresa González

Teresa González is the Director of Programme, Monitoring and Evaluation at Right to Play, which uses sport and play programmes to improve health, build life skills, and foster peace for children and communities affected by war, poverty and disease. Here she talks about Right to Play's philosophy and approach, and why it has recently begun to focus its efforts more strongly on very young children.

ECM: As you know, this issue of Early Childhood Matters is about the Foundation's issue area "Strengthening the care environment" for disadvantaged young children. To start with, can you talk a little bit about why recognising the right to play is so important for creating a better care environment for young children?

Teresa González: At Right to Play, we talk in terms of learning to play and playing to learn. If young children can be brought up in an environment that is not only loving but also creative, then that sets the foundation for their holistic development and lifelong learning. In particular, for parents in developing countries who are often under stress and facing difficult situations, our programs support them to create the opportunities to sit down with their children, to nurture and learn with them.

Many of your programs at Right to Play involve organised sports, which you say most children aren't ready to get involved in until about the age of 6. But you also have programs that involve younger children.

That's right. For about five years we've been running the 'Red Ball Child Play' program for children from kindergarten through to grade six or eight, depending on the country. We gradually came to realise it was important to concentrate even more on the 0–6 age group, and so beginning last October we introduced a new programme, Early Child Play, into 22 of our countries. This is aimed at even younger children, so now we deal with children all the way through from age zero to adolescence.

Let's talk first about the longer-running programme, which revolves around five different coloured balls. Talk us through the significance of those.

The five balls are in the colours of the Olympic rings, and they each represent a different aspect of the holistic development of children. The blue ball is about peace, social skills, working as a team and solving conflicts. The red ball is about intellectual and cognitive development, focusing on concentration and perception. The yellow ball is about the spirit, and the focus is on self esteem and character education, helping children to respect each other and manage their anger in positive ways. The green ball represents the environment and aspects of health such as immunisations, and the black ball is all about the body's physical development. The reason we concentrate on these five areas is that we see the child as a holistic human being and therefore have to ensure that they are healthy, happy, and socially, physically and mentally prepared to live in a difficult world. Right to Play is about children, youth and communities creating a world where they can look after themselves and one another.

And the idea here is these balls serve as a basis for a programme of lessons and activities that aim to help children to develop in these different ways?

Yes, we developed a whole programme with each lesson centred on one of the balls. For each lesson, resources are provided for the teacher and all the games are laid out, games which get progressively more challenging as the children progress through the program. I should mention here that we focus greatly on the issues of gender and disability, making certain that young girls are always equally involved and that disabled children can participate to the fullest possible extent. Our approach to learning is "reflect, connect and apply", so in every game we have inquiry questions that lead the child to reflect on how to connect things to their own life and then apply it to something larger.

Can you give us an example?

I recently was involved in playing a balancing game with very young kids. At one point we asked them "imagine this is a glass you're balancing – if you don't balance it, then what would happen?" It would break, came the reply. And what would that mean? There'd be glass lying around. And what would happen then? I'd end up in hospital, said a little girl, and I don't like hospitals. So we asked: what would you do if a glass broke? "Get someone else to come and pick it up," she said. It's an example of how a simple game can be extended to get children to think about real-world situations. Children have a lot of fun learning this way, and it helps them to develop their thinking skills.

This is a programme that's implemented primarily by teachers in schools or by community volunteers in extra-curricular time?

Both. We train teachers to adapt our programme into their everyday work in schools, and we also train community volunteers who run these activities after school or on weekends. When it comes to the Early Child Play programme for pre-school children, of course that's not implemented through formal schooling. Often the programme is integrated into community settings like early childhood centres, but basically it runs wherever there is a need expressed by the community.

So let's move on to talking about the Early Child Play programme. Why did your experience convince Right to Play that it was so important to bring even younger children into your activities?

One of the reasons is that children in developing countries often don't go to kindergarten or start school until later in life, because they have to work or because the walking distances to school are challenging. We wanted to create a programme where children could develop their language skills and thinking skills through games, giving them an opportunity to grow as healthy and curious human beings. We thought that if we could engage their minds with colours and shapes, engage their muscles by playing with balls and pushing things, and develop their social skills, this would help them to cope when they enter kindergarten or first grade. They will be better socialised and more used to playing and learning with others.

Also, when it comes to identifying issues with language or sight or hearing, it's generally a case of the younger the better. We've developed an early intervention template to help identify issues that need to be taken to the healthcare centres. Often, we found that not intervening at an early age means it's too late to do anything about it.

There's another reason. We realised that very young children are a great way of getting communities to come together. We can talk to parents about things like the importance of nutrition, we can encourage them to play with their children at home, encourage and support them to sing to their children and nurture them. There are such significant opportunities to lay good foundations in a child's very earliest years.

You use "play" as an entry point for interventions with much broader aims, such as health, community development, and conflict resolution. Can you explain the thinking behind that?

What we tend to do is start by talking to parents about how play and sport are part of the development process of the child. We get them to think about how their children first start to perceive sounds, and then to explore and manipulate space and we relate this to learning strategies. We find that

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when you take parents through whole process of conceptualising how their children learn, then it all becomes much easier to talk to them about things like health and safety and self-esteem. Sport for development is a magnificent tool to motivate others to participate fully in this complex world.

We work in a lot of very challenging situations, such as refugee camps, where children are especially in need of a lot of care and love and emotional understanding. But whenever we start in a new place, we always start with engaging the community, particularly the mothers. They appreciate the workshops we do with them because it's not only about them learning new things but also reinforcing what they already know deep down, like how good it is for them to touch and talk to their children.

In many places, play is not valued – either because traditional cultural norms value other attributes in a child, such as quiet obedience, or because life is so challenging that making time to play with young children is seen as an unnecessary luxury. If caregivers in such circumstances think of play at all, they tend to think more of entertainments that will keep their children occupied. How do you go about convincing people in such situations that play is important for deeper reasons of education and development?

And it's not just caregivers, it's teachers too. They often see play as kids misbehaving instead of sitting quietly in class. Most cultures, in fact, tend to see play as being simply about children having fun and that's it. What we try to do is show parents and teachers that playing games and sports can actually lead to very good learning outcomes, and that all games and sports are about learning and development.

That's why the first thing we do is hold workshops, to help parents and teachers to understand the significant role that play and sport play in the development of the child. We engage them in Right to Play activities and they see how they themselves are learning and enjoying the games. They begin to

see how games and sports can be used to enhance thinking skills, imagination and creativity, and development of both small and large muscles, and they end up valuing the activities. We help parents to understand what kinds of play are helpful for children of different ages, from birth up to school age.

After the programme, we often observe that teachers, volunteers or caregivers who participated tend to change their attitudes towards teaching and their style of teaching, once they notice how well kids are learning when they're having fun rather than sitting quietly and being bored.

The right to play is, of course, enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The idea of universal rights doesn't always fit with cultural traditions, though. How helpful is it in your work to be able to talk in terms of rights?

Rights are absolutely central to everything we do. But we do need to get away from our tendency to define rights in what I would see as a static concept that we impose on others. It's very important to be able to take a cultural perspective, to see rights in the context of the environment where we work. We have to look at what we understand by child rights and what the local community understands to be good ways of treating children, identify where the gaps are, and figure out pragmatically the best ways of bridging them. We have a shared responsibility to protect children.

That might mean, for example, that when we encounter families who believe child labour is a normal and acceptable way to support the family, we don't directly take up the rights argument but instead try to explain how education creates opportunities for the future that in the long term will help the family even more economically. Of course, I am horrified by child labour, but I have to engage people to be able to convince them.

We do a tremendous amount of background work studying what rights children have in practice and how people see these issues, and how we can approach the gaps we identify in ways that aren't going to be seen as unwanted interference. It's not easy. But ultimately, regardless of how well others' sense of child rights meshes with ours, we have to remember that every human being in this world is responsible for the future of all children. Children are our hope, our future, and our conscience. Children permeate all Right to Play policies, programs, and future direction.

Finally, how do you evaluate your programmes, and what are the results you see?

We usually use external evaluators, and qualitative assessment methods. The kind of results we see are that children who've participated in our programmes tend to concentrate more and not to be absent as much because they've come to love learning through games. Their self-esteem and their sense of who they are seem to be better.

The Red Ball Programme has been running for only five years so it's early to look at long-term effects. But we certainly are doing what we do with the intention that when children grow into adults, the kind of effects we see in children – and indeed our overall philosophy as an organisation, to look after yourself and look after others – will translate into helping to create societies that are healthier, more able to cope with stresses, and perhaps above all more full of hope. People who have lived through the most appalling circumstances always say that hope is the most important thing.