

# Restorative play in refugee situations

Sophie Naudeau, PhD, Eliot Pearson Department of Child Development, Tufts University, USA

There is little literature devoted to how children who live in refugee camps perceive the reasons that led them into exile and react to their new environment.

This lack of literature is not surprising given the instability of this type of environment and the difficulty of following the same refugee children across extended periods of time. However, several relief organizations have been actively involved in a global effort to understand and to address the specific needs of refugee children. Throughout the past 20 years, an increasing awareness has progressively emerged that children in refugee camps have other important needs beyond the obvious material ones of food, shelter, and medicine. Play is one of these less obvious – but important – needs.

## Play as a means to assess and relieve stress

Carefulness and humility are essential when conducting assessments or intervening in cultures where the place and role of children in society and the meaning of play may be radically different than in Western cultures. However, play seems to hold a special role in stressful environments regardless of culture. When children are scared, when they do not understand what is happening to them, when they are unhappy and withdrawn, play can hold restorative powers (Scarlett et al 2005). It is therefore essential that play be preserved, protected and supported, especially in stressful environments.

### *Lack of play as a means to assess stress*

When the environment becomes too stressful, many children reach a breaking point where they are unable to cope (Henniger 1995). For young children especially, this breaking point can be observed in the play experience or, more often, in the lack of play. Lack of play, or what is also called ‘play disruption’, may be a signal of a child’s inability

to express thoughts and feelings related to their situation (Schaefer 1994). Erikson (1963) was first to describe ‘play disruption’ and its effects, defining it as “the sudden and complete or diffused and slowly spreading inability to play” (p. 223).

However, one should not always assume that a child’s not playing constitutes play disruption. Indeed, children might not play for a variety of reasons, one being the lack of opportunities to play. In refugee situations, there are clearly times when children do not get a chance to play – as when they are expected to work (e.g., by gathering wood, fetching water, caring for younger siblings). In addition, the lack of security in general, the lack of time to wander around, the presence of land mines and the lack of access to play materials or toys are among the many reasons why children, in such circumstances, might not engage in play.

### *Play as a mean to relieve stress*

Why should we be so concerned when a child does not play? After all, play is commonly referred to as ‘just’ play, a seemingly naïve and futile activity that children engage in when they have nothing better to do. In humanitarian crises and emergency situations such as those faced by refugee populations, play is often not viewed as a priority, and play programmes in refugee camps remain scarce. Furthermore, when financial possibilities are strangled and when strategic choices need to be made, play programmes are often the first ones to be considered ‘extra’ and to be removed from the overall assistance plan.

Play, however, is a powerful and effective means of reducing children’s stress. Psychoanalytic theorists (e.g., Bettelheim 1987; Erikson 1963; Freud 1920; Winnicott 1971) provide a good deal of insight into this matter. They speak of the cathartic effect of play and explain that play is a means for children to act



Photo: J.P. AMIGO

## The importance of play

For younger children particularly, play is central to healthy growth and development – in all its aspects. A holistic perspective on child development focuses on how children’s social and emotional well-being, physical growth, cognitive development and relationships to others are all clearly inter-linked. The defining activity underpinning the process and promoting optimal development is play. Babies and infants play with the caring adults around them, particularly mothers, from their earliest days. It is an essential means of communication. Play can be considered young children’s ‘work’. It is through play that young children’s learning is fostered and encouraged. Structured play opportunities are an essential component of the kind of rich learning environment in which children thrive and flourish, whether it be in family, domestic surroundings or in wider social and community settings. Opportunities for free, undirected play are also crucially important in enabling children to explore the wider world and to have the necessary space and time for reflection. Hence play, far from being a frivolous activity as it is sometimes depicted, is central to all children’s lives. For those whose lives are disrupted for whatever reasons, play is also an essential therapeutic activity which can help in the process of reducing stress and establishing normalcy. Of course play activities in themselves cannot change stressful circumstances. But they can and do provide the opportunity for children and indeed the adults around them, to engage in meaningful interactions and to shift the balance of social and environmental factors, as well as psychological ones, in a positive direction.

out unpleasant experiences and to release emotional tensions in a safe, progressive and non-damaging way (Freud 1920). This process, they say, leads to play satiation, a “play from which the child emerges as a sleeper from dreams which ‘worked’” (Erikson 1963, p. 229).

Other scholars (e.g., Piaget 1962; Vygotsky 1978) also emphasize the restorative powers of play but they highlight the cognitive processes rather than the emotional ones. In their view, play is the medium that young children use to work through past stresses and to prepare for future ones. For instance, children may engage in play behaviours that modify real-life events to fit their wishes and turn a negative or stressful experience into a more pleasant and satisfying one – as when children pretend to be the aggressors in re-enacting situations where they were the victims or the powerless observers. Children may also engage in play behaviours that help neutralise strong and unpleasant emotions – as when a child engages in spanking a baby doll to release feelings of anger and frustration.

These scholars agree, then, that play can help most children cope with stressful experiences and environments. This is not to deny that some children may display such intense negative reactions – reactions that may be considered maladaptive or ‘pathological’ – that play is not enough. In such cases, appropriate and culturally sensitive therapeutic interventions should be considered, such as play therapy or more traditional ways of healing.

However, most children who experience war (or other disasters) and refuge react in developmentally adaptive ways; they react normally to an ‘abnormal’ experience (Scarlett et al 2005). For these children, play can hold a key function in restoring some level of normality in their lives – a preventive function rather than a therapeutic one.

### Four pillars for a good-quality play programme

What kind of play programme will best address the children’s needs in a specific environment? Through its many years of practice implementing play programmes for refugee children in various regions of the world, the French organisation Enfants Réfugiés du Monde (“Refugee Children of the World”) developed an empirical framework that consists of four dimensions or pillars: (1) a protected time and

space, (2) age-appropriate and culturally sensitive play material, (3) a carefully balanced adult presence and involvement, and (4) the presence and involvement of peers, family and community at large. These are the same pillars usually missing in environments such as refugee camps, the very components in the absence of which an environment becomes 'abnormal'.

#### *A protected time and space*

In refugee camp, children usually live in temporary shelters, and the fears associated with the reasons and conditions of their exile are usually still vivid in their minds. In some cases, the situation may remain unstable even within the host country or region. As a result, children and families might live in a permanent state of fear.

For play to occur in such instances, for the children to relax and engage in play, they need to be warmly reassured that nothing harmful or negative will happen to them. In most refugee situations, the level of general security is unfortunately beyond the control of the adults implementing play programmes. However, much can be done to convince children that play areas and times allocated for play are both special and protected. For instance, children usually do not have the fixed schedules that they used to have at home and that they need in order to regain control of their lives. The time devoted to play can therefore begin to hold this regulating function in their lives. When children know that they can go to the play area at a certain time every day, and when they begin to trust that caring adults will ensure their safety, then – and maybe only then – can they begin to play.

The most resilient children might not need this level of regularity to spontaneously engage in play. They might initiate play by themselves, grasping any opportunity they have and making use of what play material they have, compensating with their creativity and imagination for what is missing in their environments. They may, for instance, collect whatever they can recycle (e.g., metallic cans, banana leaves, bottle caps, shoe soles) and transform these little 'treasures' into the most creative toys. These children are usually those who first catch an observer's attention, because they remain active and playful in even the most stressful times. However, not all children are so creative, resourceful and

resilient. The quieter and sometimes withdrawn children often need encouragement to engage in quality play, the kind of play that leads to play satiation and leaves children refreshed (Erikson 1963). In fact, even those children who do play spontaneously can still greatly benefit from a more structured time and space.

#### *Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive play materials*

As summarized by Erikson, "children [...] choose for their dramatizations play materials which are available in their culture and manageable at their age" (1963, p. 218). A welcoming and operational playroom, then, includes a variety of age-appropriate and culturally sensitive play materials, materials that are familiar to the children or that hold special meanings for them.

Children who have experienced war may find it helpful to play and replay war scenes, where they become the hero characters instead of being the passive and helpless young victims that they often were in real life. Toys that encourage such play – however controversial they may be when the whole population is eager for peace – might nonetheless prove pertinent and useful. In fact, even when particular toys are not provided in that respect, children often engage in war play anyhow, with whatever object they can turn into a gun, soldier, or enemy outfit. By providing children with what they need to engage in war play, and by assuring them that this type of play is acceptable as long as it remains play, children can process the events in a supportive environment.

But children affected by war do not only play at war themes. Like any other children, they play at representing what is happening in their daily lives. In refugee camps, they might pretend-play a variety of scenes such as family interactions, going to school and cooking food. In addition to knowing what these children have gone through, and what their life is like in the present, play facilitators should also be particularly sensitive to the cultural context surrounding the children. When children are healthy and happy, they might be willing to explore and discover new toys that do not really belong to their culture but that they are curious to integrate in their play. However, when the environment becomes highly

stressful, this capacity might be seriously impaired, and the play activity itself might be compromised if children cannot relate to more familiar objects. A plastic medieval castle, for instance, does not make much sense in African cultures...

*A carefully balanced adult presence and involvement*

When a specific time and space are set for play, when adequate toys and materials are provided, children have more opportunities to play. Yet, this is often not enough, and children who face 'abnormal' environments such as refugee camps often need more support in addition to those physical and material incentives. In this respect, the presence and guidance of supportive, consistent and trustful adults is essential.

Refugee children often hold a distorted view of adults because of the negative experiences they have had. They may have seen adults engage in acts of violence, for instance, and might remain mistrustful or even distressed when in the presence of a stranger. Therefore, adults who hold the function of play facilitators with refugee children need to be particularly engaging, warm and supportive. Ideally, play facilitators should be from the same cultural origin as the children. Because they have gone through the same events and currently live in the same refugee conditions, they can relate well to the children's fears and need for comfort; and because they are from the same culture, they are also better able to communicate with the children, both verbally and through play.

*The presence and involvement of peers, family, and community at large*

Finally, play facilitators should work with children not only at the individual level, but also at the family and community levels. Peers, family, and the community at large are traditional sources of support in times of turmoil. Yet, in the context of refuge, they are often severely affected and weakened by the experience, to the extent that they cannot be fully supportive of the children.

In such circumstances, play can help children reconnect with the meaningful persons and social structures in their environment. At the peer level, group play can help children maintain socialization practices and experience opportunities for multilateral relationships. In particular, children who

are quiet and fearful of their own feelings can benefit greatly from another child's expression through group play. At the family and community levels, play can also help children reconnect with their environment and culture. Inviting parents, family members, and the community at large to witness children's participation in playful activities, for instance, can be a powerful experience for all parties. Indeed, even when they are distressed by their own situation and not fully available to answer children's emotional needs, family and community members are often deeply concerned with children's well-being.

In sum, then, when children play with culturally appropriate toys and materials in a protected time and space, when they do so in the presence of sensitive adults who belong to their culture, and when their families and the whole community are involved, most children can be children once again. They can cope with their past and current experiences and develop positively into contributing members of their community.

**References**

- Bettelheim, B. 1987. *A good enough parent: A book on child rearing*. New York: Knopf
- Erikson, E.H. 1963. *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton
- Freud, S. 1920. *Beyond the pleasure principle*. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Work of Sigmund Freud* (SE). London: Hogarth Press
- Henniger, M.L. 1995. Play: Antidote for childhood stress. *Child Development and Care*, 105, 7-12
- Piaget, J. 1962. *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. New York: W.W. Norton
- Scarlett, W.G., Naudeau, S., Saloni-Pasternak, D., and Ponte, I. 2005. *Children's play*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Schaefer, C. 1994. Play therapy for psychic trauma in children. In O'Connor, K., and Schaefer, C. (Eds.), *Handbook of play therapy, volume 2: Advances and Innovations* (pp. 297-318). New York: John Wiley & Sons
- Vygotsky, L.S. 1978. *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Watson, M.W. 1994. The relation between anxiety and pretend play. In Slade, A., and Wolf, D.P. (Eds.), *Children at play: Clinical and developmental approaches to meaning and representation* (pp. 33-47). New York: Oxford University Press
- Winnicott, D.W. 1971. *Playing and reality*. New York: Basic Books