



## The Importance of Play during COVID-19

*Children have a right to play*

Article 12, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child

*States Parties recognize the right of the child to play*

Article 31, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

### 1. Introduction

In many ways the needs of children have been overlooked during the pandemic. It is important to be mindful that children have had interrupted schooling; they have lost opportunities to play with friends; and have spent extended periods of time at home, often in difficult circumstances where they may have experienced financial hardship and hunger. They may also have been exposed to gender-based violence and corporal punishment. Many calls to helplines and emergency numbers have come from children. Furthermore, children have witnessed the harsh realities of illness and death.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. The Importance of Play

Play has been described as 'children's work', consisting of "activities performed for self-amusement that have behavioural, social, and psychomotor rewards. It is child-directed, and the rewards come from within the individual child; it is enjoyable and spontaneous."<sup>2</sup> Children have a natural urge to play, and playing fosters their ability for exploration, imagination and decision-making as well as learning and development. The German educator Friedrich Froebel believed that "play is the highest expression of human

development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul."<sup>3</sup> Given the benefits of play, it is clear that it is fundamentally linked to children's rights as a whole. Play is not an add-on to be considered after other rights. Rather, "it is an essential and integral component underpinning the four principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), namely non-discrimination, survival and development, the best interests of the child, and participation."<sup>4</sup> Dr Shaheda Omar stresses that "the objective is to bring awareness with regards to the importance of play as it is essential and contributes to the holistic being, for example physical, mental and social aspects."<sup>5</sup>

'Playlessness' on the other hand, compromises the well-being and development of children. Moreover, "children's ability to find time and space for play is affected by a range of social, cultural, economic and political factors. These include gender, socio-economic status and disability."<sup>6</sup> It is incumbent on the adults in the child's life to try as much as possible to address a child's right to provision for play. However, this is often difficult, and levels of inequality, poverty, lack of sanitation and the dearth of safe places to play all compromise the right to play.

### 3. The Impact of COVID-19

The advent of COVID-19 and the various lockdowns imposed to prevent its spread had an enormous impact on the children of South Africa, exacerbating their already high levels of stress. Early childhood development (ECD) centres and schools closed, and many children were unable to interact with their friends. Learning needed to take place at home and the success of this enterprise varied widely depending on the capacity of parents and caregivers, as well as access to technology and data. Children were frightened that either they or their caregivers would contract the disease. Many households experienced hunger and children did not receive their meal at school. The gross inequality of our society and escalating levels of gender-based violence placed enormous stress on children. Dr Omar emphasizes that it is very difficult for children to express their fears and that this can lead to self-harm and even suicide.

As the whole world has been thrust into the extreme COVID-19 crisis there is general confusion, disbelief, fear, the challenges of isolation and daily survival, and an unpredictable future. Children in marginalized communities still face their usual challenges, such as food scarcity, abuse, home and community instability, misinformation, and not enough good role models; all these are aggravated during lockdown periods. With insufficient space due to overcrowded, small houses, the need to socially distance is difficult to understand and to execute. The threat of illness and loss – spiritually and physically – may not be fully understood by the child, but the emotional trauma and insecurity is very real for them.<sup>7</sup>

The fear of loss and of orphanhood is not unfounded, as research has found that “South Africa recorded among the most caregiver deaths due to COVID-19 worldwide. On the continent, the country topped the list of children left orphaned by the pandemic (82 422) and of those who've lost a primary caregiver (94 625).”<sup>8</sup>

### 4. How Can Play Help?

Play and play therapy can do much to help children deal with emotional and mental health issues and to assist them in exploring, understanding and, very importantly, expressing their feelings. The importance of play and its use as a tool in helping children was first explored by

Dr Virginia Axline.<sup>9</sup> Play therapy is based on nondirective communication through play. It strives to facilitate healing, as well as psychological and behavioural changes in children under stress. The goal is to provide the child with the opportunity for self-development, growth, and social integration.

Play therapy can be used to treat children with several kinds of problems and in many contexts. It is particularly effective for children who have experienced physical or emotional trauma; experienced physical, emotional or sexual abuse; witnessed conflict or been bullied; been severely punished by authority figures; witnessed armed conflicts or natural disasters; experienced significant life changes or losses; expressed anxiety or sadness; and who have had trouble coping with their immediate environment.<sup>10</sup> All of these problems are experienced by the children of South Africa, and more especially during COVID-19.

Free play and guided play are two approaches to play-based engagement. While free play is child-directed, guided play is facilitated and supported by trained adults. “Play and play therapy are significant interventions in the lives of children. Just playing can also be cathartic for the child. By 'playing out' life experiences and exploring feelings through play, children can create a safe distance from their issues so that they can understand and come to terms with them, without feeling judged or being forced to change.”<sup>11</sup> Providing safe places for children to play is essential.

Dr Omar stresses that “during these strange and unprecedented times, where we are living with the unknown and the uncertainty of the horrible virus, play and playful interactions are one of the things that can help our children, but just as importantly they help us. Play is children’s natural way to communicate, work through their feelings, and connect with others and to find ways to understand what is happening.”<sup>12</sup> Play can help children to begin to process, understand and recover from trauma and in so doing dislodge its profound impact on their lives.

Play and play therapy give children catharsis by allowing them the freedom to express their feelings in a safe environment. Play may also allow for the expression of frustration and rage. It can help the child to learn decision-making and problem-solving skills; learn social skills; release excess energy; gain more confidence through self-

expression; enhance their imagination and creativity; and develop values and ethics.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, play releases endorphins, which are chemicals produced naturally by the nervous system to cope with pain or stress. They are often called 'feel-good' chemicals because they can decrease the stress chemicals in the brain and enhance a sense of well-being.<sup>14</sup> Research shows that "play is a natural tool for children to develop resilience by learning to co-operate, overcome challenges and negotiate with others."<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, free play can be an important opportunity for many children to release any built-up energy or stress. "The purpose of step-aside play – or free play – is to allow kids to experience the ability of directing their own activities. This unstructured playtime is a great learning tool for children to learn how to interact with new things, and develop an understanding of how things work on their own."<sup>16</sup> American television host and Presbyterian minister, Fred Rogers, insists that "play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning."<sup>17</sup>

Greater use of guided play or play therapy with a facilitator or therapist emphasises the importance of a practitioner being able to use a comprehensive range of play and expressive arts therapy skills. However, it is not necessary to have expensive toys and other props. Improvisation is key. Rev Dirk Coetsee from the Petra Institute for Children's Ministry works on equipping facilitators to support traumatized children in resource limited contexts.<sup>18</sup>

Everyday activities can be used as play and learning opportunities. Baking, sorting the laundry, or gardening can translate into fun activities depending on the age of the child. They provide opportunities for engagement with parents and caregivers. Reading to children is another such opportunity (though during much of the lockdown libraries were closed).

However, in our increasingly technological environment it is really important that parents and caregivers monitor the amount of screen time children have – TV, cellphones, video games, tablets. It is also very important that parents monitor the content of their internet engagement.

## **5. Examples**

### **5.1. The Butterfly Art Project**

The Director of the Butterfly Art Project (BAP), Angela Katschke, explains that BAP is an organisation with much understanding and experience in how to help children experiencing trauma. In October 2020 BAP celebrated ten years of community service through tried and tested artistic and art therapeutic programmes.

BAP trains, mentors and supports adults working with children in marginalised communities, bringing them psycho-social support through art. These direct beneficiaries are BAP's Community Art Facilitators (CAFs). They establish art groups, in which their learned psycho-social skills are utilised and the child's uniqueness is encouraged. BAP currently has 220 CAFs active in 64 communities, which have become a most valuable resource for the region and its future challenges. During lockdown the project reached out to at least 4 470 children through their CAFs in the Western Cape. The BAP implementation testing centre is based in the impoverished settlement of Vrygrond in the Western Cape. Here, healing weekly art classes have been provided to between 200 and 400 local community children and youth.<sup>19</sup>

BAP also provides training in art project design which provides students with eight session curricula and lesson plans to enable them to become Community Art Facilitators. These teaching guidelines have been developed by BAP for art therapeutic children's projects in disadvantaged communities. Each art project design is free and available for downloading.

### **5.2. Heart for Art**

The Heart for Art programme offers safe learning spaces and opportunities for children to explore, experience and develop creativity, to acknowledge and find appropriate ways of dealing with emotional hurt and pain, and to heal. The aim is to provide an opportunity for children to release and express their feelings around lockdown. The children are provided with scientific, microscopic images of actual viruses, cells and bacteria for close observation, which gives them information and makes the unseen threat tangible. The children will create their own visualizations of the invisible 'enemy', and of recovery and potential cures. This art project aims to empower them

using creative processes, and incorporates the design elements of colour, abstract forms, shapes, rhythm, and repetition.

The children are provided with paper, crayons and water colours for painting. Each child's working area is clearly set out so that they have a sense of their own space. This is very important as many of them live in very confined spaces. Children also have the opportunity to work with clay which is very tactile and therapeutic.

## 6. Conclusion

COVID-19 has had a very profound impact on children, a full understanding of which will take time. What is clear is that their needs were not

adequately taken into account when decisions regarding the lockdown were made. Ongoing decisions regarding the opening and closing of schools and ECD centres have been confusing. Such policies have separated children from their friends and interrupted their education. The increasing impoverishment of most South Africans has certainly worsened the living circumstances of children, and many children have had few opportunities to play. However, children have a right to play and COVID-19 has highlighted the need for safe places for children to play and for well-funded projects enabling traumatized children to heal through play. As Virginia Axline observes: "Enter into children's play, and you will find the place where their minds, hearts, and souls meet."<sup>20</sup>

---

**Lois Law**  
**Project Co-ordinator**  
[Lois@cplo.org.za](mailto:Lois@cplo.org.za)

<sup>1</sup>On Tuesday, 7th September 2021 the CPLO hosted a Webinar on 'The Importance of Play during COVID-19'. The Webinar was addressed by Dr Shaheda Omar, Director of the Teddy Bear Clinic for Abused Children and Ms Angela Katschke, Managing Director of the Butterfly Art Project.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.healthofchildren.com/P/Play.html>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.startingblocks.gov.au/other-resources/factsheets/the-importance-of-play-in-children-s-learning-and-development/>

<sup>4</sup><https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522537.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> See Endnote 1 above

<sup>6</sup><https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED522537.pdf>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.butterflyartproject.org/artprojectdesigns>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2021-10-15-theyre-really-going-to-struggle-how-children-orphaned/>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.goodtherapy.org/famous-psychologists/virginia-axline.html>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org/mental-health-matters/understanding-mental-health/playing-to-heal-how-does-play->

<sup>11</sup><https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org/mental-health-matters/understanding-mental-health/playing-to-heal-how-does-play->

<sup>12</sup> See Endnote 1 above

<sup>13</sup><https://www.whiteswanfoundation.org/mental-health-matters/understanding-mental-health/playing-to-heal-how-does-play-therapy-work>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/320839>

<sup>15</sup><https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0149763418305116>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.cmosc.org/playtime-reduces-stress-in-children/>

<sup>17</sup> Fred McFeely Rogers, also known as Mister Rogers, was the creator and host of a US preschool television programme.

<sup>18</sup><https://www.petra.co.za/>

<sup>19</sup><https://www.changemakershub.org/listing/the-butterfly-art-project/>

<sup>20</sup><https://www.google.com/search?q=virginia+axline+quotes&oq=Virginia+Axline&aqs=chrome>

This Briefing Paper, or parts thereof, may be reproduced with acknowledgement.