Older children play too

When simply asked to think of a child (any child), most people have in their mind's eye the image of a very young person, usually well under the age of 10. Rarely do people envisage a teenager. However, the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines children as being anyone under the age of 18. Article 31 of the Convention states that every child has the right to play.

In the UK, children over the age of 10 are commonly referred to as something other than children. For example we often call them young people, perhaps in an attempt to improve their social status beyond that of children and separate them from the perceived innocence and dependency of childhood. This presents two problems, firstly it suggests that younger children are not yet people (they are something 'other') and secondly it overlooks that teenagers are still experiencing their childhoods.

Playing, particularly in terms of children's development, tends to receive much greater attention in the early years of children's lives (up to the age of seven) than in later childhood. Playing is mostly associated with the behavior of very young children, again overlooking and potentially dismissing its value for older children.

This emphasis on the role and value of play for younger children could lead adults to thinking that people grow out of playing around the age of 10, just when they move to secondary school. However, by only spending a short time in the company of teenagers it's evident that this is clearly not true.

This information sheet explores the play of older children, particularly those in early and middle adolescence (around the ages of 11 to 16). For consistency, we will refer throughout to older children.

Avoiding assumptions based on age alone

When working with children it helps to have an understanding of how they develop and when various changes are likely to happen.

However, it's also important to recognise that people are unique, with their own personalities, life experiences and ways in which their bodies and brains work. As Stuart Lester and Wendy Russell[1] point out, development is a lifelong process involving ever-changing relationships between our minds, bodies and environments.

Assuming that all children develop in exactly the same way at exactly the same age can lead to adults imposing specific age limits on different services, spaces and opportunities thereby separating children by age alone, for example signs on play areas stating that the space is for 'under 12s only'.

When playing, there is great value in children of different ages mixing and working out how to get along (that's how communities work). Whilst adults may have concerns about the influence of older children, in reality most older children are caring towards younger ones and can provide them with important life lessons[2]. This doesn't mean everyone has to play together all the time but simply that different aged children are capable of co-existing alongside each other.

Some older children, due to a lack of previous experiences or some form of impairment, may still need to play in ways usually associated with younger children. Bob Hughes[3] and Fraser Brown[4] suggest children who have been deprived of play or not had the opportunity to experience particular types of play, may have been unable to develop the play skills needed to cooperate with other people of a similar age. When providing opportunities for play it's therefore important to try and avoid assumptions about what is developmentally appropriate for children based on age alone.

Understanding the adolescent brain

To understand how and why older children might play in the way they do, it's useful to consider what's going on in their heads and with their bodies during adolescence. Human brains go through a period of accelerated growth during the early years of life and much has been made of the stages of development and play children experience or express during this period. However, research from the field of neuroscience has shown that our brains continue to develop well beyond the first decade of life[5].

David Bainbridge[6], suggests we need our teenage years so that we can '*configure and perfect the huge sprawling brain we develop when we're children*' and notes that adolescence is a period of brain change rather than growth (in size). Some of these changes help to explain the way we act as teenagers.

For example, the 'prefrontal cortex', the bit at the front of our brains that gives instructions to other areas of the brain and guides how we think and learn, is more developed in older children than in earlier childhood. This means that older children have great potential for learning and creativity. However, there are other systems in the brain associated with emotion regulation, enjoyment and motivation that are controlled by the chemical dopamine.

The brain releases dopamine when something makes us feel good. Dopamine levels appear to be at their highest during adolescence, with the reward area of the brain (the bit that drives us to repeat behaviours we find pleasurable) being particularly active during this period[7]. The result is that although older children are capable of making logical decisions their behavior may often be driven by the reward region of the brain. This urges older children to seek out the pleasure that comes from being with friends and experiencing the excitement of uncertainty.

Science journalist Amanda Leigh Mascarelli[8] suggests that this is no mistake and that the adolescent brain may have evolved to respond to these 'rewards' so that older children are motivated to explore the world beyond the protection provided by their parents.

Adolescence can also be a highly creative time of life where children will be exploring their identity in relation to other people around them and choosing who they want to spend their time with[9, 10]. At the same time that all this is going on, children will be experiencing puberty, leading to dramatic changes in their bodies and increasing their sexual attraction to other people.

Hormones released in children's bodies during puberty also shift their body clocks meaning they have a tendency to stay up later but still require a good long sleep.

As a result it seems reasonable to expect older children to want to be with their friends, to flirt with each other, to be impulsive, to express their identity (in the form of different fashions, musical tastes and hobbies), to be emotional, to engage in risk taking behaviours and to sleep in late.

Play behaviours of older children and their benefits

Play has behavioural characteristics that set it apart from other more normative forms of behaviour. Children pretend in their play and create situations where they can experience uncertainty. The ways in which children play are also highly variable, often unpredictable and involve flexible responses and behaviours. In play there is a focus on the process of playing over the end result – play is intrinsically motivated, children play for the pleasure they get from playing[11, 12].

When the play behaviours of older children do receive attention the emphasis is often placed on their interest in competitive and organised sports or other recreational activities. However, as Professor of Human Geography Peter Kraftl highlights[13], a common feature of research with children is often the mundane and everyday ways in which they make use of their environments. This 'other stuff' older children do when left to their own devices might be summarised as 'hanging out with friends', 'having banter' or 'messing about'. Whilst they may not always call it play, it shares many of the characteristics commonly associated with playing.

For example, the spontaneous game of 'tell your mum I saved your life' (usually performed between friends) involves pretending to push someone off a wall (the point is that the person never actually falls). This creates a situation of uncertainty (but without the consequences of someone actually falling) resulting in a sense of pleasure for the mischief-maker and the relieved 'victim'. Playing and the pleasure associated with it is central to children forming strong attachments to other people and the places where they play.

Playing also provides children with opportunities to try out and test different roles and identities where the 'real life' consequences of making mistakes are reduced because those involved know that this is just playing. For example, older children may play fight, perhaps as a way of working out who is stronger or as a way of flirting[14] but can save face if it goes too far or if their advances are rejected because it was 'just playing'.

Play is also a cathartic process, enabling children to express strong emotions within the relatively safe context of playing. In doing so play supports the development of emotional intelligence and children's ability to control their emotions, which is essential to maintaining good mental health and a sense of wellbeing.

This will be particularly important for children coping with the challenges of adolescence and the added pressures adults may impose on them.

Where older children play and why

Social geographer, Peter Hopkins[15] suggests that homes, schools, residential streets, city or town centres and cyberspace are all key environments in the everyday lives of older children and that these spaces have a profound effect on their sense of belonging, levels of self-esteem and their social and emotional wellbeing.

Older children's desire for social interaction, to be with friends and part of a crowd, is a strong motivator for their use of places like city, town and shopping centres. For those not yet old enough or unable to venture further afield, residential streets and other places like shops in and around local neighbourhoods also provide important environments for gathering together.

Charlotte Clark and David Uzzell[16], drawing on the work of Mats Leiburg, suggest that these types of places act as a 'front stage' for older children where they can show themselves off and try out different behaviours.

However, older children also need access to more familiar and secure places where they can retreat and recuperate from these high intensity environments – places like the home or local parks where they may have a greater sense of freedom and privacy.

Research also suggests that older children value environments for the range of behaviours (rather than the specific behaviours) they support and that the richest opportunities for play are provided in environments which include other people[17].

This suggests older children will seek out places where they can meet and adapt the environment to their own interests and desires – something that can be provided by both staffed play provision and youth clubs.

Engaging with cyberspace is also an everyday experience for many older children with social media acting as an alternative to more traditional forms of communication, for example phone calls – this may be particularly important for children who live further away from friends[18]. So, it's not surprising that access to WiFi has been identified as a key consideration in the design of spaces for teenagers[19].

Although, interestingly, at this age, the same children who may be perceived as a threat when hanging out on residential streets can be seen as vulnerable to the risks presented by the internet.

Barriers to play and the potential consequences

Adolescence is an exciting but challenging period of life when children are seeking greater independence from adults but also still reliant on them. For example, given that they are not yet allowed to drive, older children's mobility is still largely dependent on adults making allowances for it. The way in which adults think about them will therefore have a significant impact on older children's ability to find time and space for playing with their friends.

In General Comment 17[20], the United Nations Committee of the Rights of the Child raises concerns about decreasing tolerance towards children's presence in public spaces. It emphasises that this is a particular problem for older children who, largely as a consequence of negative media coverage, are perceived as a threat and therefore discouraged from using public spaces. However, as Peter Kraftl suggests '*it is the treatment of and attitudes toward young people… which matters, fundamentally, to their self-esteem*'[21].

Older children are likely to withdraw from public spaces if they feel threatened or unwelcome, leading to a sense of disconnection from society[22]. Also, as Professor of Psychology Peter Grey argues[23], a decline in children's time, space and permission for play may be responsible for dramatic increases in adolescent mental health problems.

Providing for play

As Claire Edwards concludes in her discussion about the provision of public space for older children in the UK, there is an urgent need for: '*spaces that allow young people to develop their own, and contribute to shared culture. The adoption of a nurturing and civil attitude towards them from institutions, the media and public should be an imperative, as is the need to increase participation rates in the design and development of space*'[24].

Research carried out in Wales to inform local authority play sufficiency assessments identifies that older children need time and space where they can hang out, be themselves and do the things that older children do, without fear of

reprisal or intrusive adult controls. Securing sufficient opportunities for play for all children must therefore include addressing the requirements of this older age group alongside those of younger children. Younger children and parents identify that improved provision for older children would help create more space for younger ones[25].

Older children are likely to want and need access to spaces where they have some privacy and can avoid being supervised directly whilst also having the sense of security that comes from being in close proximity to other people. But, this doesn't necessarily mean creating separate spaces for specific age groups. If there are enough spaces to share children are often capable of working out who gets to use which spaces and when.

This might include older children temporarily taking over a space and younger children having to find somewhere else to play but perhaps that is just the natural order – as long as there's somewhere else younger children can go then it may not be an issue. The problems arise when there aren't enough spaces or when older children have nowhere to make their own or if they are made to feel unwelcome.

Adults can therefore help by advocating for older children's right to play, reminding people that teenagers are children and that the ways in which they play are likely to be influenced by significant developmental changes in their bodies and brains. By developing a better understanding of what may be going on in the adolescent brain, we might better understand and be more tolerant of older children's playful behavior.

There is also a need for a more balanced approach to intervening in the lives of older children. Risk taking by older children is often used to refer to behaviours adults deem to be dangerous but older children also take all kinds of risks throughout their everyday lives that are highly beneficial to them.

For example, they risk rejection when asking somebody out, they risk injury when skateboarding, they risk the anger of parents when they stay out too long.

Risk taking in the adolescent years is inevitable and whilst children should be protected from serious and long-term physical or emotional harm, they also need permission and understanding to try things out, get things wrong and make mistakes.

Finally the ways in which older children play will also depend on how they experience and feel about the places where they spend their time and the people they come into contact with in those spaces. When it comes to the playful behavior of older children, adults should avoid jumping to conclusions based on negative stereotypes and assumptions about what is developmentally appropriate and try to give a similar level of consideration as is offered to the play of younger children.

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Play Wales is the national organisation for children's play, an independent charity supported by the Welsh Government to uphold children's right to play and to provide advice and guidance on play-related matters.