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The Challenge of a Research Network on Play for Children with Disabilities

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Abstract

LUDI network aims at the creation of a novel and autonomous field of research and intervention on play for children with disabilities.

Play for disabilities is the object of a fragmented set of studies and it has given rise, in different countries and at different times, to niche projects (i.e. social robotics for autistic children, adapted toys for children with cognitive and motor disabilities, accessible playground areas).

This theme is not yet a recognized area of research because of two main factors: a) disability represents a set of heterogeneous functioning frames; b) play is not leading the educational and rehabilitation contexts.

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1. Play: as a means of growth and a right for every child

Play is an instinctive need for both humans and other species. It is not possible to force play, but neither can one grow healthily without playing.

Play development and play types – use of objects, symbolic, rule play – are determined by the incremental necessity of children to satisfy their evolving needs. Pedagogy and psychology recognized, since their initial

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studies, play as the privileged way of learning and models have been proposed to describe the relationship between play and child development.

Piaget [1] focused on the importance of play for cognitive development: human beings know reality through experience, that is, acting on reality. Play promotes both mental and symbolic activity and has two basic functions: to strengthen the subject's skills and abilities and to reinforce his/her ability to act effectively on reality.

Vygotskij [2] a socio cultural theorist highlighted the social nature of children's play and its role in enabling the social development of the child. Play activates the zone of proximal development (ZPD) becoming crucial for the growth of an individual. Even if the growth occurs in a social context, the child's progress is felt far beyond this context. Play is also used, in formal and non-formal educational settings, to build appropriate situations for adequate experiences. To be effective, these activities, called structured play-like activities, must lose their educational intent, or the child involved will not be interested.

1.1. Play as a fundamental right for every child

Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratification and accession by the General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989, United Nations) [3] grants the right of the child to rest and leisure, to be able to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Play is the main cultural right of the child, a means of freedom, of expression, of exploration, transgression and relaxation. Caillois [4] categorizes these concepts in: agon (competition), alea (risk), mimicry, and ilinx (the thrill). Huizinga, [5] who was not the first to discover the value of play in explaining human behavior, believed that play precedes chronologically human society and culture.

In those terms play is also the main means of contact with other people, it allows the sharing of proposals, making experimentation and learning: play itself is communication and inclusion.

The same Convention also pursues the right to social inclusion, intended as a general framework for democratic societies and as a model of intervention that promotes everyone's participation, respecting possibilities and constraints, cultural stories and differences. Every nation is currently involved in the efforts towards general inclusion in societies, particularly with regards to education and training institutions and to legislative systems.

Play, as a major and irreplaceable activity in childhood, becomes necessarily the main vehicle for inclusion. IPA – International Play Association – is actively engaged in supporting the General Comment of the article 31: recommendations will include the lack of awareness of adults of play importance, inadequate provision of space, pressure for educational achievement, increase in structured and programmed leisure time, negative effects of technology, and the fact that children are rarely involved in planning for play (UNCRC article 12).

Even the World Health Organisation (WHO), with its most recent definition of health and disability – the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health ICF (2001) [6] – provides a reference model and a standard language for professionals and does not neglect the areas dedicated to fun and recreation (code d9200).

ICF-CY (2007) [7], the version of the Classification for children and adolescents, dedicates special attention to play, which is placed amongst the child's major life areas (d880) and is a fundamental component of well-being and development of his/her health.

2. Play and disability

In children with disabilities, depending on the type of functional limitation, the spontaneity of play is lost and the activity becomes problematic.

- Children with cognitive and intellectual impairment, especially those moderate to severe, have difficulties in communication, social interaction, and the development of imagination. They hardly interact through play with their peers, preferring younger children, tend to propose repetitive tasks and rarely transfer the

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