Engaging in Play

The Play Cycle Theory in Family Day Care Settings

Dr Kerry Smith

Artist- Jabaljarri of the Jawoyn tribe - Meeting Place

I respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay my respects to elders' past, present and emerging, including any indigenous person with us today, for they hold and share the culture, spirituality and connectedness of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

“As adults we make a lot of assumptions about children – about what they can do, what they can't do; about where they spend their free time and what they do there.

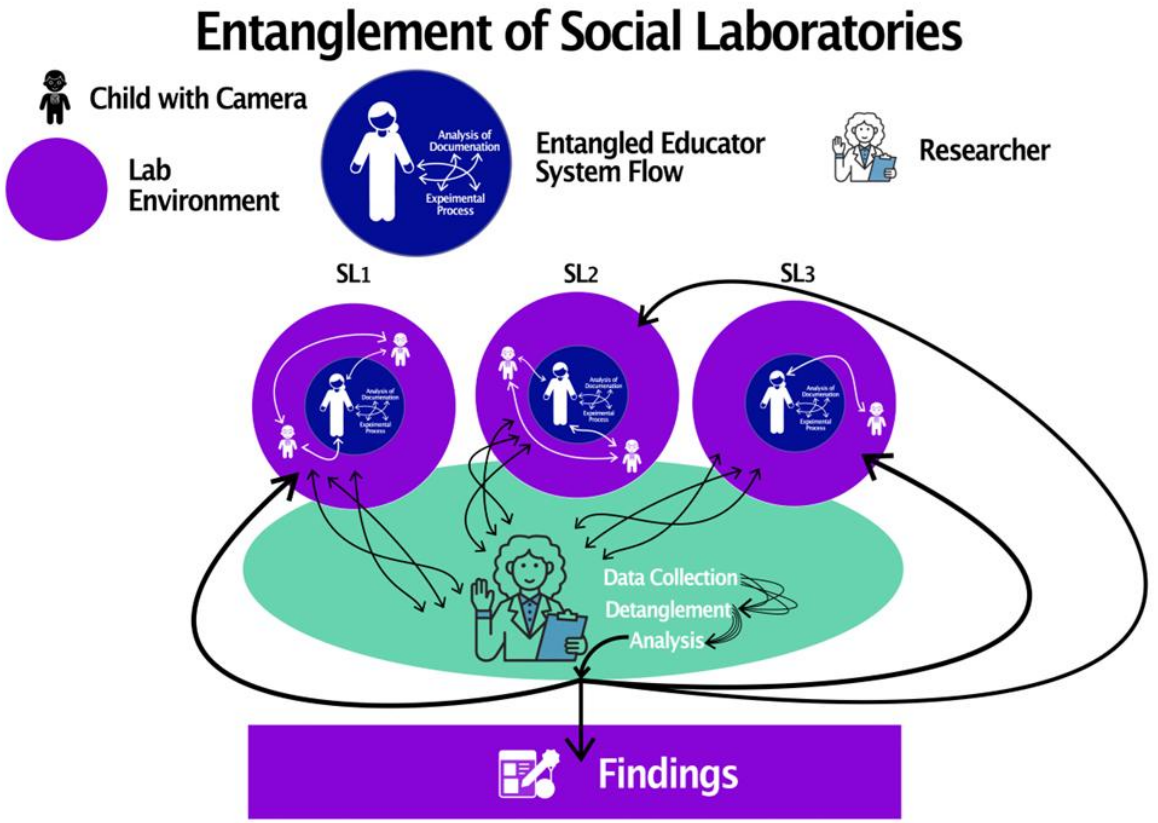
If we want to understand children and their wider social lives we need to know and understand what they 'do' - not what we think they do or what we would like them to do but what they actually do in those places and those times in which they have control over their own choices.

This can only be done by actively exploring children’s lives.....”

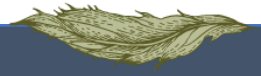
Marc Armitage n.d.

Family Day Care Educators' Use of the Play Cycle Theory When Observing Children's Play

My research explored how a focus on the play cycle process could contribute to quality programs in Family Day Care and examined the ways educators support child-focused play based on four types of adult involvement.



Recommendations



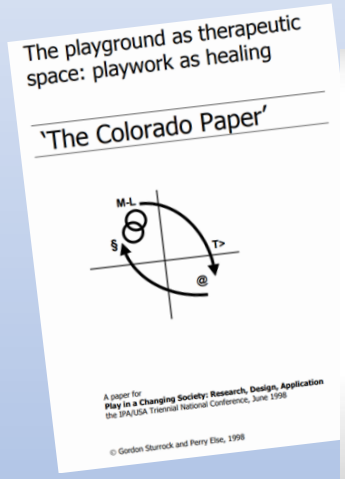
- The play cycle offers educators or any practitioners who work with young children an understanding of children's right to play freely rather than simply focusing on learning outcomes.
- Expand the play cycle theory's historical base by adding the play cycle theory to all ECEC theoretical texts.
- Develop an observation tool based on the PCOM (King, 2018) to observe the play process, with a component to include developmental analysis
- Build reflective practices that involve reflecting on both what has taken place and what is happening in the moment.

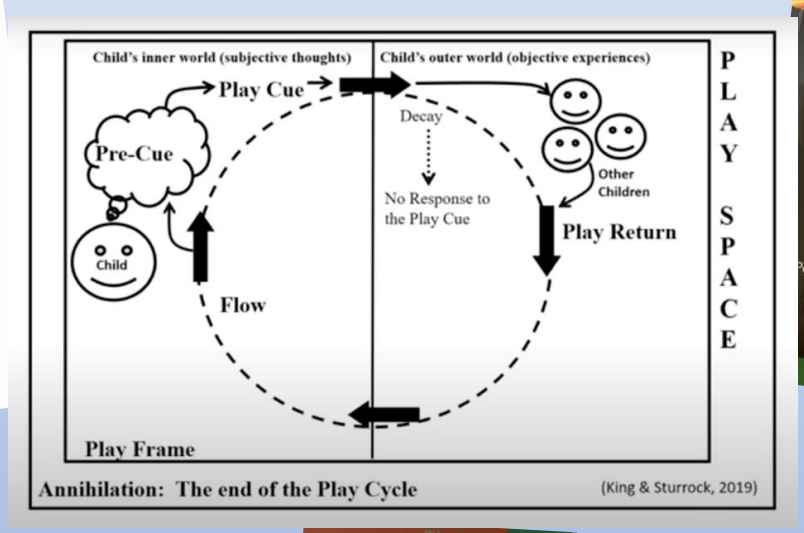
Overview

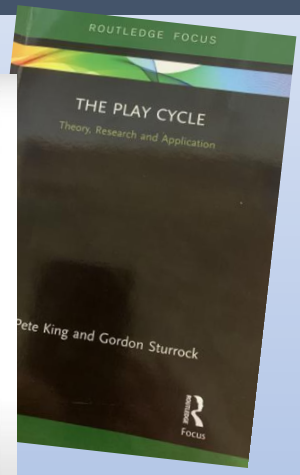
- Introduction to the play cycle theory
- The role of the Adult
- Creating Supportive Play Environments
- Reflection

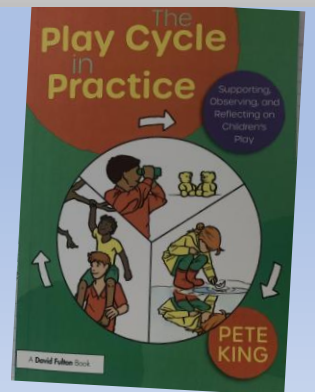
THE PLAY CYCLE - WHAT IS IT?

- The Colorado Paper (Sturrock & Else,1998).
- The play cycle describes play as a process, rather than focusing on it as an outcome (Howard & King, 2014; Neumann, 1971).
- The play cycle is a theoretical model of play that considers the interaction between adults and children (King & Temple, 2018).
- The adult role in the Play Cycle is to support the play process (King &Newstead, 2021a); King & Sturrock,2019; King& Newstead, 2020).





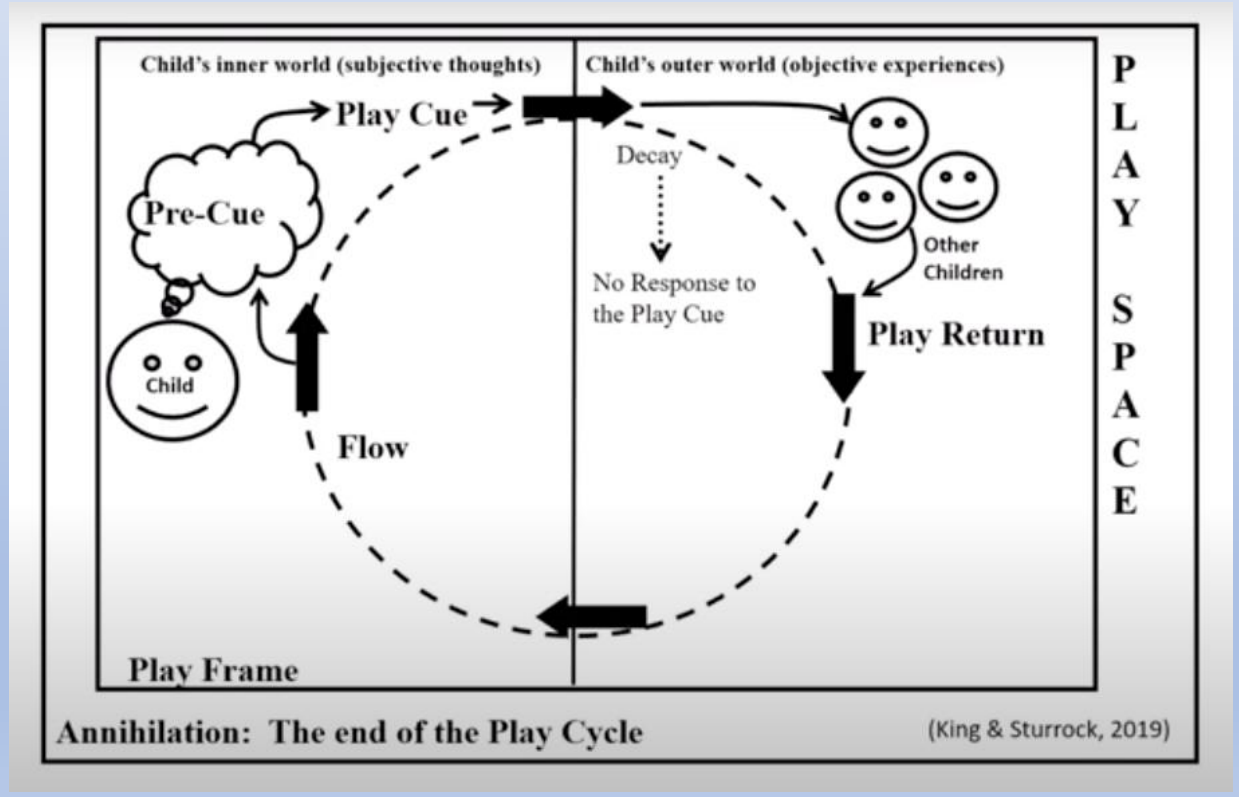




THE SIX ELEMENTS (Stages)

1.Pre- Cue

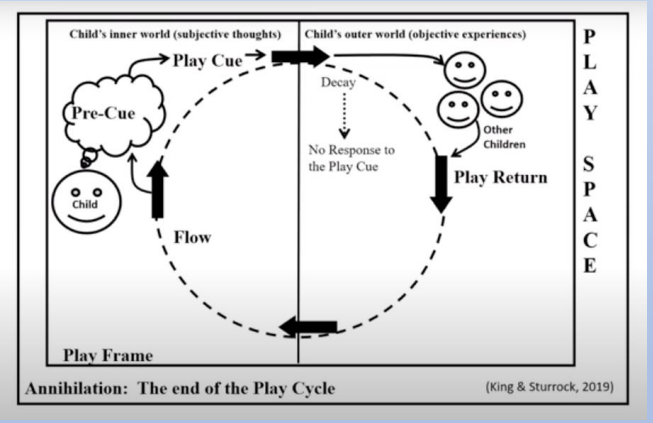
The Pre-Cue is the thought or idea in the child's head that will start the whole process. It is a very instinctive feeling, thought, fantasy or idea that sparks the desire to play.



THE SIX ELEMENTS

2. Play Cue

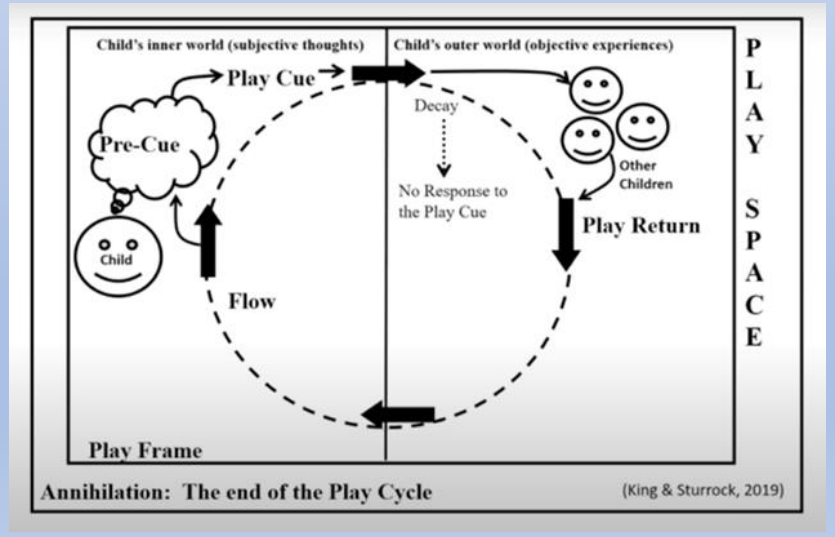
- The Play Cue is the process of the child transmitting their thought or ideas out into the world. It is an invitation, enticement, or action issued to others to create play.



THE SIX ELEMENTS

3. Play Return

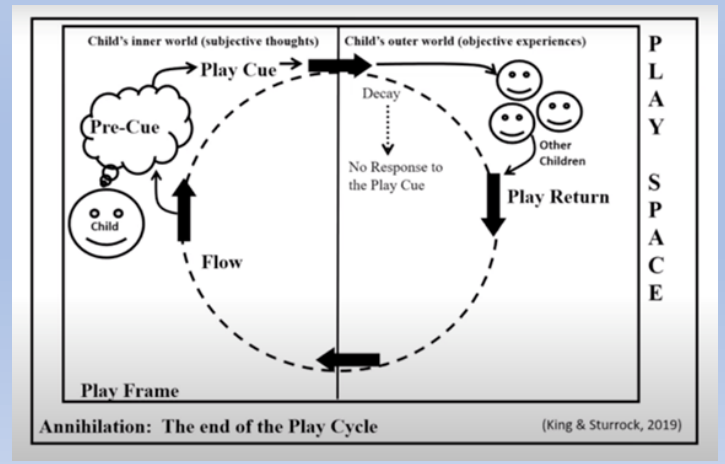
- The Play Return happens when the Play Cue of one child is picked up by another child or other children and they respond to it, activating play. A play return can also be an object (non-human)



THE SIX ELEMENTS

4. The Play Frame

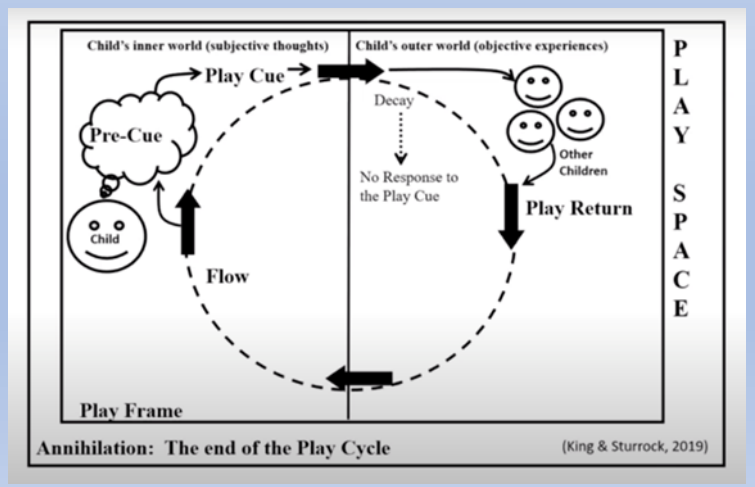
- The play frame refers to the boundaries, both physical and conceptual, that children establish around their play activities.
- It defines the "space" in which play occurs, guiding what is included in the play and what is not.
- This frame can be created by the children themselves through their interactions, rules, and the environment they are in. It helps maintain the integrity of the play, keeping the focus on the shared narrative or activity.



THE SIX ELEMENTS

5. Flow

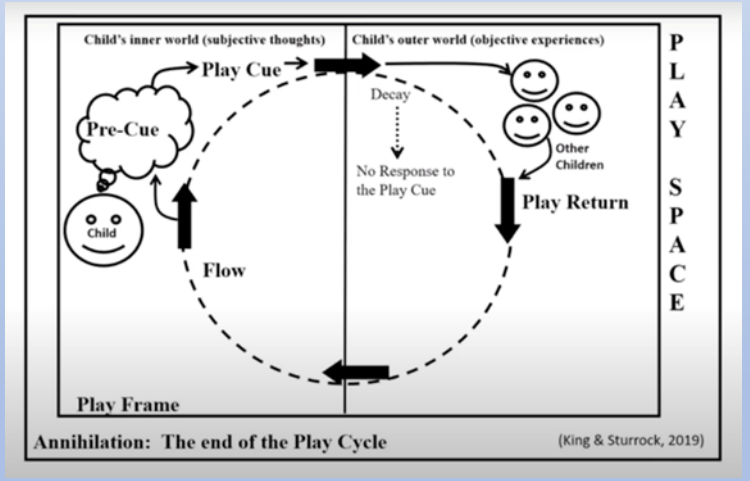
- Play flow refers to the uninterrupted, immersive state that occurs when a child is fully engaged in play.



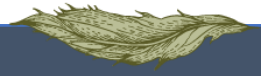
THE SIX ELEMENTS

6. Play Annihilation

Play Annihilation occurs when one child involved in the play, either the child who made the initial play cue or one of the others, ends the play. An adult interfering with the play can also cause annihilation.



Examples of Play Cycles



A boy (5) rolled a tyre into the fence (cue). He watched it settle (return), then with a flurry of activity, began to lug all the tyres out (cycle) one by one and started placing them carefully next to each other (frame). It was clearly hard work. An educator came over and stood nearby, but not too close, and watched and waited. He ignored her and seeing that he was utterly absorbed (flow) she moved away. He carried on placing these tyres for over half an hour without stopping. Finally, he stood back and looked. He then rearranged one or two tyres and stood back again. Then he dusted himself off and went inside (annihilation) and was later completely unconcerned when some other child moved a couple of tyres elsewhere.

Baking a Cake

Going Fishing

A boy (4) was sitting outside under a tree looking at some drums that some other children had put there earlier. He looked around and caught the eye of another boy and nodded ( ). The other boy (who was there for the first time that day), came shyly up to the tree and also sat down ( ). They started hitting the drums and got a rhythm going ( ). One educator started dancing around the tree (and). One boy looked round and laughed, and several other children whooped and cheered (response to educators ( ). Within a couple of minutes, a line of children had formed. Jumping around the tree, the number of children swelled and moved further into the play area and back around the tree. The boys banging the drums were delighted and kept drumming (). After about ten minutes, the line broke up and individual children ran off to play elsewhere. The boys on the drums petered out their playing but seemed happy to do so (). The educator clapped and said, “that was great!” and the two boys spontaneously stood up, and both ran to the climbing fort.

A boy (4) was sitting outside under a tree looking at some drums that some other children had put there earlier. He looked around and caught the eye of another boy and nodded (cue). The other boy (who was there for the first time that day), came shyly up to the tree and also sat down (return). They started hitting the drums and got a rhythm going (frame). One educator started dancing around the tree (cue and return). One boy looked round and laughed, and several other children whooped and cheered (response to the educator's cue). Within a couple of minutes, a line of children had formed. Jumping around the tree, the number of children swelled and moved further into the play area and back around the tree. The boys banging the drums were delighted and kept drumming (flow). After about ten minutes, the line broke up and individual children ran off to play elsewhere. The boys on the drums petered out their playing but seemed happy to do so (annihilation). The educator clapped and said, "that was great!" and the two boys spontaneously stood up, and both ran to the climbing fort.

The Educator's Role in the Play Cycle

When an adult becomes involved in the Play Cycle, it is usually in one of four ways; however, each way has the potential to disrupt the Play Cycle.

Play Maintenance

- The Play is self-contained–no intervention is necessary; the educator observes the children's play activity.

The Educator's Role in the Play Cycle

Simple Involvement

- The educator acts as a resource for the play–this may be subtle, as in making a tool available for use, or more overt responding to a request from children.

The Educator's Role in the Play Cycle

Medial Intervention

- At the request of the child, the educator becomes involved in the play – such as by offering alternatives from which the child chooses, or by initiating a play idea then withdrawing.

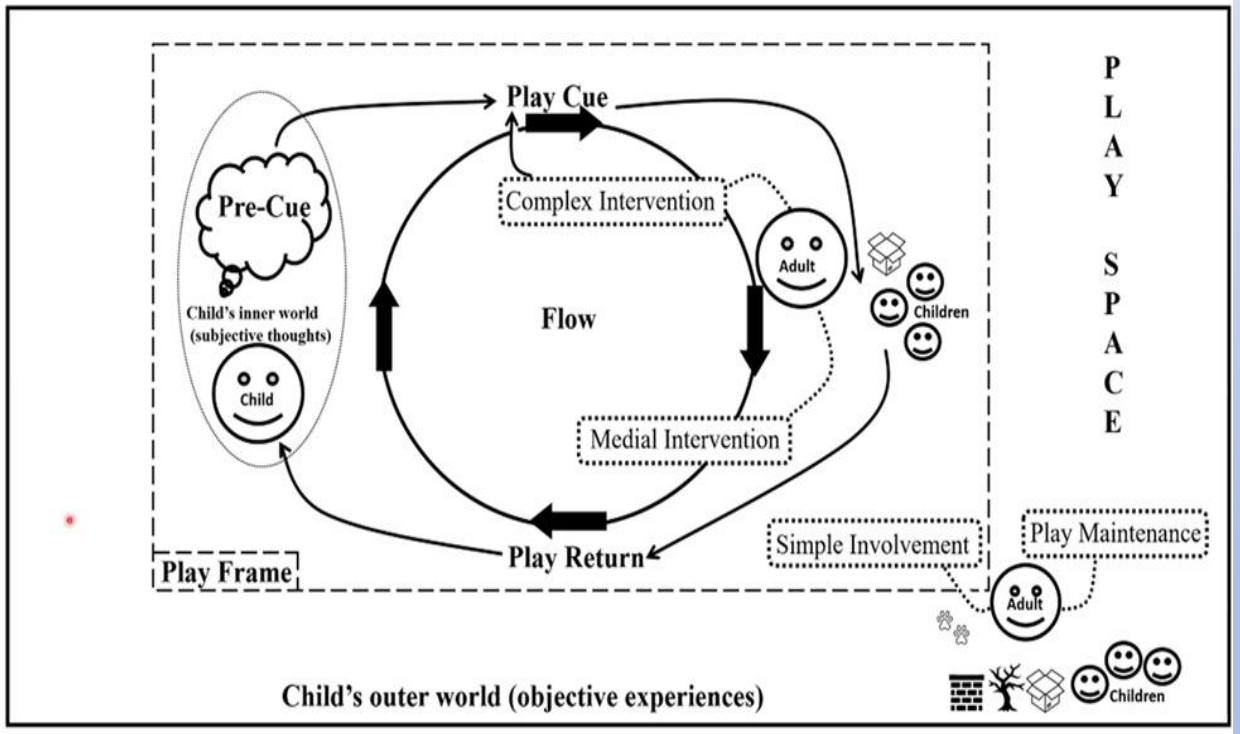
The Educator's Role in the Play Cycle

Complex Intervention

- There is a direct and extended overlap between playing children and the educator– the educator may need to take on a role in the play, or act as a partner to the playing child.

https://www.acecqa.gov.au/book/export/html/1088261

What Role is the Adult Taking In the Play Cycle?



The Play Cycle **Annihilation** – The End of the Play Cycle

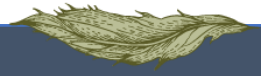
Is the adult taking on an observational role (play maintenance)?

Is the adult providing a resource but not an active participant in the play cycle (simple intervention)?

Is the adult cued in by the target child and is an active participant in the play cycle (medial intervention)?

Are the adult and target child both issuing play cues and play returns in a play cycle (complex intervention)?

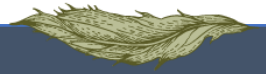
Containment & Adulteration

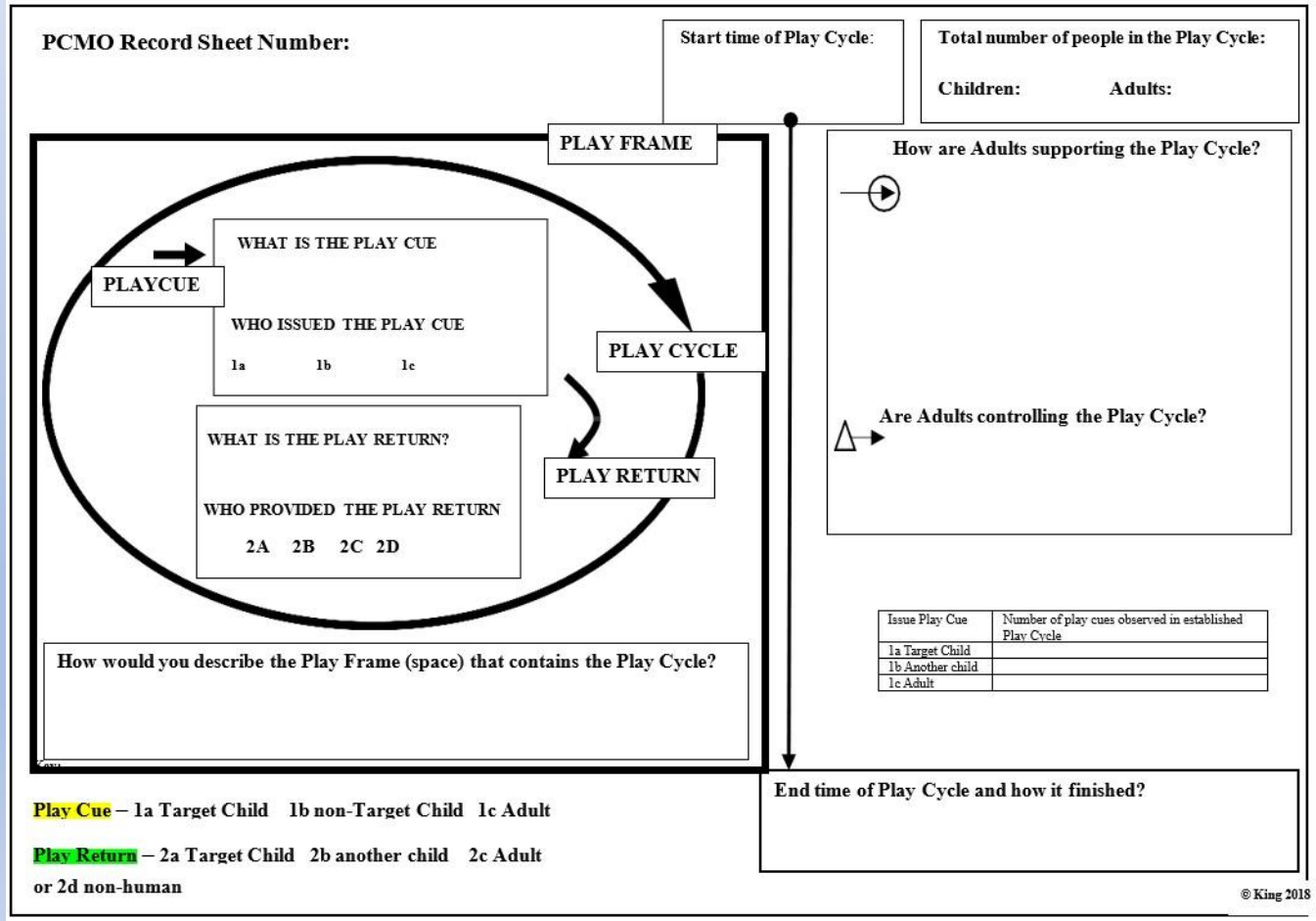


The last aspect of the adult role.

- Containment: where the adult has a “holding function” of the play frame. (Sturrock & Else, 1998, p.86).
- Adulteration: the play cycle theory explains this as “ a danger that the play aims and objects of the children become disrupted by the educator, either to intentionally teach something or to dominate the play.” (King & Sturrock, 2019).

Observing the play cycle process





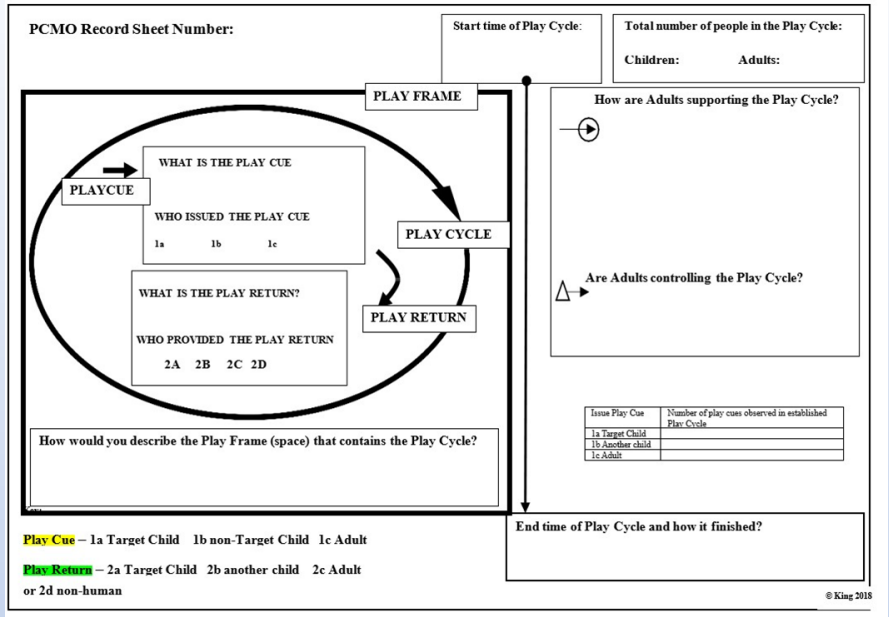
Observation Setting:

Location: Indoor preschool classroom

Participants: 4-year-old child, Jamie

Observer: Early childhood educator

Play Cycle Duration:10 minutes



Play Cue Jamie was sitting quietly on the carpeted area, exploring a small box of building blocks. She picked up a block and gently tapped it against another, her eyes scanning the room with curiosity.

Play Return The rhythmic sound caught the attention of Alex, who came over and sat beside her. Without words, he picked up a block and mirrored Jamie's tapping. Jamie smiled in response, tapping her block again—this time with more emphasis—and watched Alex closely.

Play Frame Both children begin to stack blocks together, silently coordinating their actions. The play becomes more elaborate as they build a structure, occasionally glancing at each other.

Annihilation of the Play Cycle After several minutes, a third child accidentally bumped into their creation, causing it to collapse. Jamie looked momentarily surprised, then laughed. Turning to Alex, she said, "Let's build a bigger one!"—a joyful invitation to begin anew, thus signalling the potential of a new play cycle. demonstrating resilience and a strong sense of agency.

Reflection/ Analysis/ Interpretation on the Observed Play Cycle

In this observation, the play cycle includes a logical sequence of play cues, play returns, the establishment of a play frame and annihilation.

Learning and Development

- This moment highlighted several key areas of learning:
- **Social and Emotional Development:** Jamie and Alex engaged in non-verbal communication, demonstrating empathy, cooperation, and shared joy. Jamie's response to the collapse showed emotional resilience and leadership in re-initiating play.
- **Language and Communication:** While minimal verbal language was used, the children's expressive gestures and eye contact conveyed rich communication. Jamie's final statement marked a shift from solitary to collaborative play.
- **Cognitive Development:** The children planned and constructed a shared structure, experimenting with balance, symmetry, and spatial awareness.
- **Physical Development:** Fine motor skills were evident in the careful stacking and manipulation of blocks.

The play cycle ends with the destruction of their building, but Jamie's response indicates her readiness to begin a new cycle.

Key Takeaways

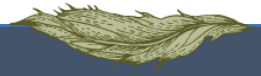
For the professional practitioner, the recording of children's play cues and mapping their play cycles has the potential for them to focus more on child-led play, supported by the adult rather than directed by the adult where the process of play is central to play observations.

Adults should adopt a non-intrusive stance, watching closely to understand the intent behind a child's play before deciding how, or even if, to intervene.

Educators should avoid intervening in the play cycle unnecessarily. Respect the child's play space and time, stepping in only when there is a clear need for support or when the child invites interaction.

Complex Intervention
Medial Intervention
Simple Intervention
Play Maintenance

Reflection



What is one key idea that stood out for you ?

What excites you about it? What challenges you?

How does it link to what you already know ?

Could you use the play cycle theory in your work ? Who will benefit?

Thank you

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References

King, P.(2025). *The Play Cycle in practice: Supporting, Observing, and Reflecting on Children's Play*. Routledgr.

King, P., & Newstead, S. (2020). Re-defining the Play Cycle: An empirical study of playworkers' understanding of playwork theory. *Journal of Early Childhood Research. 18*(1) 99– 111. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X19885991

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Sturrock, G., & Else, P. (2007) 'The Colorado paper'—the playground as therapeutic space: Playwork as healing. In *Therapeutic playwork reader one 1995–2000* (pp. 73–104). Common Threads Publications Ltd.

Resource:

Video: The Play Cycle in a Nutshell
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSacWWtto4E