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Let the Children Play – Children’s Rights and our Responsibilities

By: **Dr Emer Ring and Dr Lisha O’Sullivan**

As early childhood educators, we have a strong belief in the value of play for children’s learning and development. This belief is based on national and international research, which repeatedly highlights the significant contribution of play to enriching children’s well-being, cognitive, social-emotional and physical development and for children’s success in school and beyond. For children with additional needs, the value of play is even more pronounced. A sentiment which is consistently reinforced throughout the multi award-winning LINC programme.

However, despite what we know and what research is repeatedly telling us, play opportunities for children in early years and primary school continue to be under threat from a perception that school readiness can be equated solely with academic readiness. This was recently reinforced by research conducted in Ireland where young children expressed the view that in ‘big school’, there would be no play but lots of work! Only four parents interviewed for this research, referred to the importance of play for children’s learning and development and early years’ educators reported pressure to ‘prepare’ children ‘academically’ for school.



A pre-school child’s drawing of ‘Big School’ (Ring et al., 2016)

Recent research published in Ireland by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on the Transition to Primary Education further highlights the challenges in ensuring play is central to young children’s experiences in the early years. Increasingly, children are in danger

Adapted from: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/blog/let-children-play-childrens-rights-responsibilities/>

of being afforded less time for unstructured, constructive and freely chosen play opportunities.

A key challenge for all of us invested in children's play, is to align the purposes for which we cultivate play with children's needs and rights. While the empirical evidence supports a role for play in many areas of learning and development we must avoid a trajectory in which play becomes nothing more than a context for progressing adult-imposed outcomes.



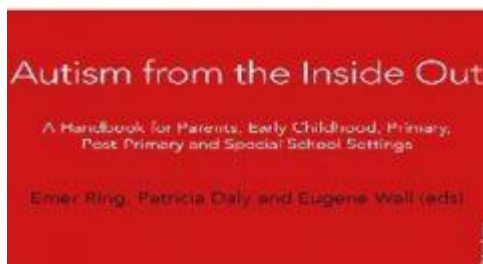
Children need us to provide opportunities which allow them to benefit from play and which do not erode the very features of play which make it such a powerful propeller for well-being, development and creativity. While play in educational contexts will always be aligned with curriculum learning goals to an extent, children also need regular opportunities to 'just play'.

The conference '**Revolutionising Play: Perspectives, Possibilities and Promise**' co-hosted by Mary Immaculate College and the Children's Research Network is committed to providing a platform for everyone concerned with ensuring children are provided with enriched opportunities to play throughout their childhood. As we come near the end of the Decade for Childhood 2012-2022, this conference is aimed at highlighting children's right to play and our responsibility in making play happen.

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Professor Peter Gray, Boston College, world renowned expert on play and author of the blog, Freedom to Learn, for Psychology Today, will present the Opening Keynote Address asking 'What Exactly is Play and Why is it Such a Powerful Vehicle for Learning'. Participants will also have the opportunity to attend an afternoon workshop with Professor Gray entitled: 'Play Deficit Disorder: A Worldwide Crisis and How to Solve it Locally'. Academics and practitioners will present on outdoor play; children in the early years, cultivating play in primary school contexts, play promoting wellbeing, play in literature and the arts, the intersection between play and sport, play in the early years and primary curriculum and the profound power of play.

Adam Harris, CEO, AsIAM, will present the afternoon Keynote Address on 'Play I did it My Way' and he will also launch one of the key texts underpinning the LINC programme, the long-awaited Peter Lang publication 'Autism from the Inside Out: A Handbook for Parents, Early Childhood, Primary, Post-Primary and Special School Settings' co-edited by Emer Ring, Patricia Daly and Eugene Wall with contributions from experts in autism at Mary Immaculate College.



The conference is sponsored by the LINC programme; AsIAM; the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment; the Irish National Teachers' Organisation; ABC Start Right, Limerick; the National Childhood Network and Early Childhood Ireland.

Early Bird Booking available at <http://bit.ly/RevolutionisingPlayTickets>.

Book now to avoid disappointment! The early bird booking ends this **Friday July 6th!**

We look forward to welcoming you to Mary Immaculate College and joining the revolution to ensure children's **#Right2Play!**

Bio:

Dr. Emer Ring is Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Course Leader for the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education Level 8 degree programme and a member of the

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Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme Steering Committee/Consortium with Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University.

Dr. Lisha O’Sullivan is Acting Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Lisha is a qualified play therapist and has extensive experience and expertise in the area of Play.

Emer and Lisha are members of the Steering Committee for the upcoming International Play Conference: Revolutionising Play: Perspectives: Possibilities and Promise, co-hosted by Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and the Children’s Research Network, to be held at MIC on September 15th