

Serenella Besio, Daniela Bulgarelli,
and Vaska Stancheva-Popkostadinova

Introduction

Why Play and Which Play for Children with Disabilities?

Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) grants the child the right to rest and leisure, be able to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child, and participate freely in cultural life and the arts.¹

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. This may result in further deprivation, given the importance of social sharing in peer play: in this sense, the inclusion of children with disabilities remains an unreach goal.

But these children have the right to play, and without it, they have limited chances for development. The Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) recognises this risk and dedicates Article 7 to the expression and protection of the rights of children with disabilities, emphasising the need to guarantee them proper educational process in an inclusive and life-long educational system (Art. 24), as well as the right to participate in recreational activities, sports, and entertainment, including those that take place in schools (Art. 30).

It can then be stated that play is widely recognised as the fundamental activity for the overall development of every child. It drives a major role in the acquisition of cognitive, socio-psychological, and relational skills, but it is also an innate 'engine' for curiosity, challenge, motivation towards action, and social relationships.

Play is spontaneous and voluntary, and it has no extrinsic goals: it is never lazy, while on the contrary, it requires concentration, intensity, and it produces enjoyment and fun.

¹ This paragraph of the *Introduction* and partially the second one are highly inspired to: 1) Besio, S., & Carnesecchi, M. (2011). *Memorandum of Understanding of the COST Action "LUDI. Play for Children with Disabilities"*. COST Association, Bruxelles, retrieved from: http://w3.cost.eu/fileadmin/domain_files/TDP/Action_TD1309/mou/TD1309-e.pdf; 2) Besio, S., Carnesecchi, M., & Encarnação, P. (2015). Introducing LUDI: a Research Network on Play for Children with Disabilities. *Studies in Health Technology and Informatics*. 217:689-95.

Children with disabilities may be deprived from playing as a direct consequence of their impairments and/or because the environment is not adequate enough or suitably accommodated, so that they can have access to forms and contexts of play in which they can take part.

The scientific core issue adopted by LUDI, as the following figure shows, lies at the crossroads of three autonomous research areas: disability (impairments' types, functioning characteristics), play (play characterisation and development, play assessment, right to play), and environmental factors (technology, contexts, play situations and scenarios).

These three areas also reflect the main domains of the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health promoted by the World Health Organisation in 2001,² which enables to describe the human functioning in relation to the activity and the participation and with respect to the contextual aspects of daily life, in particular, environmental and personal factors.

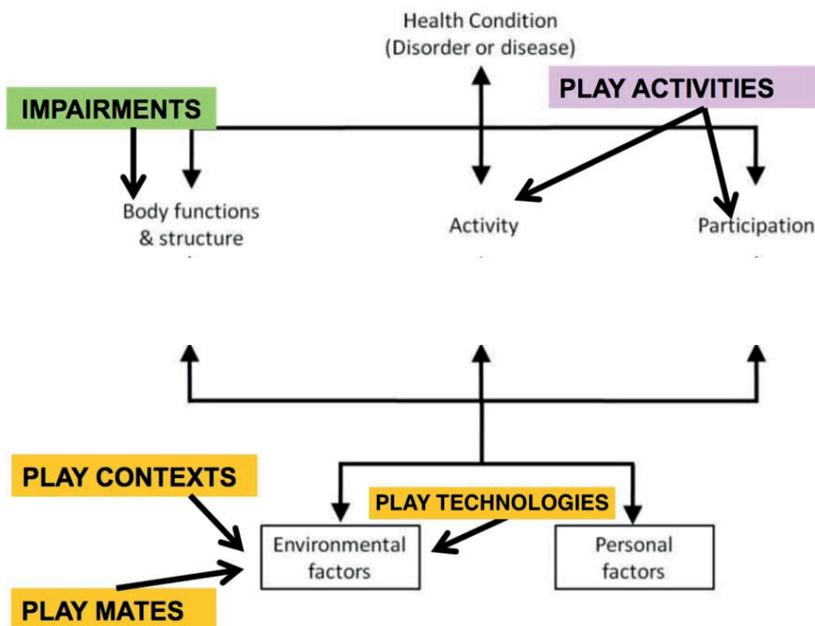


Figure 1. Factors involving children with disabilities' play activity (Besio, Carneseccchi, & Encarnaçãõ, 2015)

² *International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health—ICF* (WHO, 2001). The version for Children and Youth (ICF-CY) has been delivered in 2009.

A large collection of studies of excellence has been devoted in the last decades, in different countries, to the topic of play for children with disabilities. Anyway, they have been mostly confined to specific niches, without exploring these areas of research from a fully interdisciplinary perspective; for example, they have included: development of social robotic tools, implementation of adapted toys, or creation of new accessible playgrounds; creation of new tools of evaluation for specific impairments; studies in the field of design.

Those initiatives, however, still lack a common systematisation, thus making play for children with disabilities a not yet recognised area of research; furthermore, in almost all these areas of study, these children's play is viewed only as the mean through which they can accomplish clinical and therapeutic goals. The extrinsic goal of these educational and rehabilitation projects is mainly the functional recovery of impairments; they should be considered more as 'play-like' activities, rather than truly play activities *per se*: in other words, children are not engaged purely for the sake of play.

To grant children with disabilities the full exercise of their right to play means to focus on the engagement connected with ludic activities as an end rather than as a mean. By taking into account 'play for play's sake' activities, the purpose of LUDI is to create general awareness on their impact in the quality of life of children with disabilities, and to initiate a process of cultural and social change that will break down the barriers that hinder the full exercise of their right to play and the realisation of a true social inclusion.

The COST Action 'LUDI—Play for Children with Disabilities' and its Challenges

'LUDI—Play for Children with Disabilities' is an Action (2014-2018) financed by COST (European Cooperation Science and Technology); it is a multidisciplinary network including now 32 countries and almost 100 researchers and practitioners belonging to the humanistic and technological fields, aimed at studying the topic of play for children with disabilities.³

The LUDI Action has the primary objective of spreading awareness of the importance of providing children with disabilities the opportunity to play. Given the importance of play for child development, the Action stems from the belief that it is necessary to ensure an equal right to play and to put play at the centre of both multidisciplinary research and intervention practices directed at children with disabilities. The LUDI network is organised into four Working Groups (WGs):

- WG1: Children's play in relation to the types of disabilities
- WG2: Technology for the play of children with disabilities

³ The Action websites are the following ones: www.cost.eu/TD1309; www.ludi-network.eu.

- WG3: Contexts for the play of children with disabilities
- WG4: Methods, technology, and frameworks for the development of the child with disabilities' play

WG1 provides the Action framework, including operational definitions of the main concepts around play and disability. WG2 compiles and distils the existing knowledge on technology to support play for children with disabilities. WG3 analyses the different contexts of play and identifies current barriers hindering children with disabilities the right to play. Finally, WG4 builds on the work of all the other WGs and proposes methods, technologies, and frameworks to support play for children with disabilities.

To accomplish its objectives, the LUDI Action will carry out three main tasks: a) collecting and systematising all existing competence and skills: educational research, clinical initiatives, and using the know-how of resources centres and users' associations; b) developing new knowledge related to settings, technology (devices, services, strategies, and practices) associated with the play of children with disabilities; and c) disseminating the best practices emerging from the joint effort of researchers, practitioners, and users.

The LUDI network is entrusted with a really ambitious and ground-breaking goal, branching into many prospects of exploration and susceptible to significant developments in several fields. New knowledge is expected in all the scientific-related areas, not only in the 'speciality' of disability, but as overall acquisitions about play (development, tools, relationships, activities, human rights, and so on) and child development.

This new knowledge will creatively nurture, in its turn, the fields of technological and tool development, clinical and engineering research, education and rehabilitation practice. A more stable and consistent awareness on the child's play development would give more suitable frameworks to professionals and researchers to make their interventions and proposals more effective. A more widespread sensibleness on the social aspects and value of play would result in disseminating inclusive contexts and methods.

At the same time, a shared belief on the importance of play—for the sake of play—for children with disabilities as for any other child, as well as on the role of inclusion for the upcoming human societies, will demand changes in many aspects of cultural and social life: to make only some examples, the accessibility of the mainstream play sites and tools, the concrete application of the right to play for every child, the adoption of a new mindset on disability, less focused on recovery and more interested in childhood's fundamentals.

The main challenge is already inside the network, which is both international and multi-disciplinary. Researchers and professionals who belong to LUDI come, in fact, from many European countries, bringing with them their social and cultural beliefs and experiences, which should be explored and compared, and are expert

in different fields, which should be merged together through deep and patent discussion. The purpose of this massive mediation activity is to reach reciprocal understanding and to develop new common, collective wisdom, in the light of the basic statements shared since the beginning of the work.

But this is an extensive process, as shifting to new paradigms always requires a long time and a lot of determination.⁴ This means, for example, that at the initial life of LUDI, in its first publications—as this one is—some incoherence still exists between authors and proposed approaches, and that the debate is currently open and active. Any product of LUDI is then a part of a recursive process, whose results should be considered, until its end, as partial steps of a long road.

The Purpose of this Book

This book is the first deliverable of the WG1 ‘Children’s play in relation to the types of disabilities’, part of the LUDI network. As already said, WG1 is devoted to the topics of definition of play, classification of impairments accordingly to DSM-5 and ICD-10, and classifications of types of play with respect to the cognitive complexity, and the degree and type of social interaction. This book is the result of the first two-year of activities of WG1.

The main objective of this book is to bring the LUDI contribution to the important topic of play and children with disabilities, because an international consensus on these two areas is still lacking in the related literature and also in the overall practice. In particular, there is not a shared and general agreement on a clear definition of play and play activities, especially when they are related to children with some kind of impairments, and/or when ludic contexts accessible for these children are drawn up.

Three steps should be achieved to support the right to play of children with disabilities, ensure equity in its exercise, and spread awareness on the importance of giving them the opportunity to play: first, adopt a ‘common language’, at least all over Europe; second, to put play at the centre of the multidisciplinary research and intervention regarding the children with disabilities; third, to grant this topic the status of a scientific and social theme of full visibility and recognised authority.

In fact, children with disabilities face several limitations in play: they might not be able to play; might not want to play; might not know how to play; might not recognise a situation or a object for their ludic characteristics; they can isolate themselves from the others’ play; might be scared by a play situation; might prefer to repeat the same play, in the same way, in the same site.

⁴ We thank Dr. Ute Navidi, who served as first reviewer for the LUDI activities, commissioned by COST, for this very encouraging statement, that we immediately incorporated in our vision.

These limitations can be due to several reasons: impairments to body functions and structures can impede or make some actions and activities very difficult; playgrounds, toys, and other play tools can prove not to be accessible and usable; social and built environments and contexts may be neither accessible nor inclusive. Furthermore, the world of the adults around these children might show several lacks: in educational awareness and intentionality; in specific psycho-pedagogical and rehabilitative competence; in effective intervention methodologies. Moreover, these children's lives are dominated by medical and rehabilitative practices, in which play is always considered as an ancillary but very fruitful activity able to reach an instrumental objective or to pursue an improvement.

Play for the sake of play is considered, mainly for children with disabilities, a waste of time.

The concept of play for the sake of play strongly refers to the distinction between 'play' and 'play-like' activities. Play activities are initiated and carried out by the player (alone, with peers, with adults, and so on) only for the purpose of play itself (fun and joy, interest and challenge, love of race and competition, ilinx and dizziness, and so on). They have of course consequences on growth and development, but these consequences are not intentionally pursued. Play-like activities are initiated and conducted by an adult (with one or more children), in educational, clinical, social contexts; they are playful and pleasant, but their main objective is other than play: for example, cognitive learning, social learning, functional rehabilitation, child's observation and assessment, psychological support, psychotherapy. This book would intend to contribute to make a clear distinction between play and play-like activities that, hopefully, will bring to new developments in play studies.

Organisation of the Contents

This book sets itself as the basis for the further work of the COST Action 'LUDI—Play for Children with Disabilities', by establishing some important cornerstones, after a careful overview of the literature existing in the related fields. Its contents are organised as follows:

- Chapter 1 presents the theme of children's play in its countless facets, with special reference to 'The need of play for the sake of play' (Serenella Besio).
- Chapter 2 deals with one of its special characteristics, the fact that play should be considered a child's right, also in the case of disability: 'The right of Children with Disabilities to play' (Keith Towler, from the International Play Association—IPA).
- Chapters 3 and 4 are, respectively, focused on the 'Conceptual review of play' and 'Conceptual review of disabilities'; they take into account the existing definitions of these two crucial constructs as well as the major scientific classifications existing in the international literature, and finally, propose the

LUDI Classifications of play and of disability to be adopted (Nicole Bianquin and Daniela Bulgarelli).

- Chapters 5 to 11 deepen the characteristics that play might assume in case of different types of impairments, according to the LUDI Classification; the authors of each chapters tried to take into account the aspects of play for the sake of play, as far as possible with reference to the existing literature. In particular, they are the following ones:
 - Play in children with intellectual disabilities (Daniela Bulgarelli and Vaska Stancheva-Popkostadinova)
 - Play in children with hearing impairments (Anna Andreeva, Pietro Celso, Nicole Vian)
 - Play in children with visual impairments (Mira Tzvetkova-Arsova and Tamara Zappaterra)
 - Play in children with communication disorders (Vardit Kindler and Natalia Amelina)
 - Play in children with physical impairments (Serenella Besio and Natalia Amelina)
 - Play in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (Sylvie Ray-Kaesler, Evelyne Thommen, Laetitia Baggioni, and Miodrag Stanković)
 - Play in children with multiple disabilities (Francesca Caprino and Vittoria Stucci)
- Then, three chapters follow, which discuss about the contributions of different fields of research and clinical intervention to the promotion of play for the sake of play.
 - Chapter 12 reports the experiences from occupational therapy: The contribution of occupational therapy perspective to the promotion of play for the sake of play (Sylvie Ray-Kaesler and Helen Lynch).
 - Chapter 13 concerns the special pedagogy perspective: The contribution of special education to the promotion of play for the sake of play (Michele Mainardi).
 - Chapter 14 faces the theme of early intervention: Play for Early Intervention for children with disabilities (Vaska Stancheva-Popkostadinova and Tatjana Zorcec).
- Chapter 15—Mainstream toys for play—is related to an overview of mainstream toys, accompanied by some hints to single out their characteristics with respect to the different types of impairments, but also to the different types of toys (Odile Perino and Serenella Besio). It is not intended to be exhaustive of the issue ‘tools for playing’, but it wants to propose a first framework to interpret the world of commercial toys and to learn how to navigate inside, from the perspective of a generic adult, like, for example, a parent.
- The final and last Chapter 16 devises some reflections about the environmental barriers that can be found in the environment to establish interesting and

playful activities for children with disabilities—Influence of Environmental Factors on Play for Children with Disabilities—an overview. As this chapter is contemporarily an excerpt and a reworking of a publication that has been completed by members of LUDI WG3, the authors of this chapter are the same of that publication (Angharad Beckett, Carol Barron, Nan Cannon Jones, Marieke Coussens, Annemie Desoete, Helen Lynch, Maria Prellwitz, Deborah Fenney Salkeld).⁵

⁵ Barron, C., Beckett, A. E., Cannon-Jones, N., Coussens, M., Desoete, A., Fenney, D., Lynch, H., & Prellwitz, M. (Forthcoming). *Barriers to play and recreation for children with disabilities*. Berlin, D: De Gruyter.