Mary Holwell:

I'm very interested, Anoo, in hearing your perspective on the role of play in supporting and extending children's development, and I guess particularly their motor development, because that's a bit of a focus for us tonight,

Anoo Bhopti:

Yes.

Mary Holwell:

But more generally in supporting children's development.

Anoo Bhopti:

Yes. And you know, I can talk about play till the cows come home because I'm an OT and we work through play. So we work through what children love the most, and if, if they don't engage, we cannot even go to the next step. So if you look at the brain and how motor learning occurs, there's a whole series of things that happen. But the first thing that happens is motivation. So if the child is not motivated, then the next stages don't even happen. So children learn through three phases. The first phase is they're learning how to... It's a cognitive phase, so they're learning the skill. Then it becomes a bit autonomous so that they... they're kind of refining the skill and then it becomes automatic. So then they, because they repeat, repeat and they learn.

Anoo Bhopti:

So that's how they learn movement. But the talk most is motivation. So, and how do you do that with children? It's through toys and play and peekaboo and all these games that you play. So one of the most essential experiences in shaping the architecture of the brain, and I love this, it's called serve and return, and I don't know if you've heard of it, I'm sure you would have, but it's something that we just need to talk about a little bit and this is the interaction that we can have as adults with children. So we call that serve and return because children naturally reach out to us with the interactions, so they'll babble, they'll use facial expressions, they use gestures and then adults respond. So some, not all of us are as animated. Some are more than others, but really to find an adult who won't smile back at a child when they go hoo hoo haha, and you have to go back and do something, or you cannot not respond.

Anoo Bhopti:

So that one serve is when they smile, then the return is when you smile back. One service when they reach out, the return is when you take that reach and give them a toy. So that is the back and forth is what's really building the brain. So it's really important to see how your play and your interactions are actually going to help them develop because that's what we take ahead. That's what we learn, and that's what we want you to just be mindful of that the child is... You know how you always talk about take the child's lead, right? So now that has a meaning, and there is a sense in doing that because they're telling you where the pathway is for you to take the next step. So it doesn't mean that you just have to play what they're playing, but it means that you can hook into that and take it further.

Anoo Bhopti:

And play is absolutely the vehicle for that to happen. So is the child looking or pointing at something? Is the sign child making a facial expression or moving their arms or legs? That kind of a serve? The key is you're paying attention to what the child is focused on, and you can't spend all your time doing this. So you can look for opportunities throughout the day, but, or you can have periods when you are working with that one. So if the other three are sleeping and there's one child, you can actually practise this with them a bit more, be quite mindful of what you're doing and then you... Or when you're changing them, nappy time, I love nappy time because that's when just you and the child and it's maybe just five minutes, but it is beautiful,

Anoo Bhopti:

those five minutes, you can do so much serve and return, and use the play. So I know you always have things hanging and you talk, and you sing, and you use books, so they're all play. But then I want to just stress on the stages of play a little bit. So I'm not sure how much you know about that, but as OTs, we do a lot of stages of play. And the first stage, like when they're babies, is the sensory motor play. So when they're born and when they start playing, they don't really know how to play with objects. So when I was telling you about swiping things, that's the sensory motor. So they want to touch and feel they want to put them in their mouth. So they're at that stage where they're mastering their own body, and they're learning about the effect of their own actions on objects and on people.

Anoo Bhopti:

So that's the sensory motor play, and it lasts untill 24 months. They engage in that pre-imaginative, in that sensory motor play because they are still not able to socialise or imagine things, but they are able to do a lot of understanding of this is my hand, and this is my body, and this is my head, and this, if I move it like this, and this is what's happening. So that's the first one. They tolerate sensory input, they explore and manipulate toys, and they show awareness of proprioceptive, of pressure, and kinesthetic sense, which is they start developing an understanding of how far my hand can reach, how heavy an object is. So they start learning that through that sensory motor phase. Then they're going to exploratory phase, which is they discover their environment. So now they're learning to crawl already.

Anoo Bhopti:

So they're learning to roll and crawl, so their environment has suddenly grown. They're able to move more. So then they start exploring and then they start learning about cause and effect. So this is where you plan things. So they press a button and it makes a sound, and you go moo cow, and the pig says, oink, oink, and the cow says... And that's all part of exploration. So you press this button and the pig says oink, and so that's what they learn. So that's when you can start, instead of asking them what questions, what colour is this? It's good to ask, what does a pig say? Instead of just saying, oh, it's red. So we, instead of just labelling, you ask them for what can we do? I am hungry, what should we do, rather than where is the plate?

Anoo Bhopti:

Where is the cup? So again, as they're growing, you will learn that you can change that exploratory play, and then the next thing that's coming is symbolic and pretend play, which is absolutely the most magnificent time of a life for children, and for adults around them. Because now they start, at the end of first year, they start developing that. So it's quite early, we used to think before that until two and three years, they're not actually engaging in that symbolic pretend play, but they are, they are doing it early. So they learn, they learn about peekaboo, and they learn about that if you give them a brush, they'll brush their hair. If you give them a mirror, they look at themselves. So, if you give them a cup, they'll put it to their mouth, so that's quite early, that it happens. So that's the beginning of symbolic and pretend play.

Anoo Bhopti:

And at the end of five years, from three to four is, again, the magic time for symbolic and pretend play. But the four year olds, if you do four year old kinder, you will know this, and if you're a teacher, you would know this better than me. How much... So what we look for is sequences and scripts in the play. So a sequence is, the first sequence is drinking from a cup, but a cup complicated sequences is, take the baby, put the baby on the bed, and put a blanket on the baby, and pack the baby to sleep. So that's got three or four sequences. So we want to go from simple sequences to more complex sequences. So when they're two and three, they're doing quite simple, when they're three and four, and between four and five, it gets more and more complex.

Anoo Bhopti:

And again, these are all important to look out for because if you have children with good motor skills, they will explore more. So then their pretend play is all about, there's a dinosaur, and there's a box there, and there's a cave, and the snake is, and so they'll move and they'll run. But then children who don't have those movement experiences, their play gets very restricted. So you can see how it's connected, so the less they move, or if they have behavioural issues, or if they have autism, for example, and they're very restricted, then they don't progress these play activities, and you can see that it impacts on their movement because they don't move around that much. So they don't have the need to explore, but play becomes a vehicle for them to explore. So when you're playing and setting up your rooms and say, for example, I don't know if they do it anymore,

Anoo Bhopti:

but we used to have days when we had, we used to set up a restaurant in the kinder, and then they had to go and buy food, and do a menu, and it was very highly complex scripts, or it was a dinosaur cave and it was the times of the dinosaurs, or it was... You know something? All the hospital children love being doctors. So these are rich experiences that really tie in well with movement, but also tie in well with cognition, and as I was saying, problem solving skills, communication. So there's not a single thing that you can't do through play. It's just having that understanding this child is, right now, I feel like they're at the exploratory stage. What can I do to extend that to the next symbolic play stage or manipulation of things? So if they're just exploring, can they build? Can they start putting things into containers?

Anoo Bhopti:

Can they post items? So if they're doing that, what's next? Well, can they add a little script? Can they say, oh, the block now becomes a train and it goes choo-choo, so it's changing and making them think, and if you have very literal children, they'll say "That's not a train, that's a pen!" And then you go, "No, no, but right now the pen is a train." So you're kind of teaching them those skills through play, and again, you can see how it is all connected. So yeah, for me, I think very important, very, very important, and you do this beautifully. I'm just making you see how it's so rich that experience that you give them.

Mary Holwell:

It really helps us understand that integrated nature of development. I think when you

Anoo Bhopti:

Yes.

Mary Holwell:

talk about play like that and help us see the connections between play, and movement, and cognition, and perhaps speech, and building more complex scripts that we begin to think about things a little bit differently, or we get reminders to think about things a little bit differently. So I think that's really useful to know.

[Copyright Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Footer/Pages/Copyright.aspx) 2020