

[INTRO MUSIC PLAYING]

KAREN FOLEY: Hello, and welcome back to the *Student Hub Live* Early Childhood event. Well, I'm joined by Natalie Canning. Sorry for those of you who just seen the heads of before. It's not Sue, it's Natalie, who's joining me here to talk about why play and creativity are so important. Natalie, it's one of the big themes in the module. How did you become interested in researching this area?

NATALIE CANNING: So a good few years ago now, I was involved with settings. Who were interested in developing their own play policies. And they would say to me that they have a play-based curriculum, and they're very child-centered.

And I'd say that's fantastic. Can I come and see and observe? And they'd invite me in, and I would go. And what I actually saw wasn't what I would perceive as being completely child-led and completely child-based play.

And that really got me thinking because those practitioners really believed that that's what they were doing. But, it was kind of that understanding of play. It's seen as a kind of a throwaway term almost, children are just playing, or we're just going to have play time. It's seen as a break.

It's not seen as something that's particularly really fundamental to children's development. And that was interesting how practitioners perceived what play was for children. And it wasn't that they didn't have the understanding, it was just that the way that the day was organised or the routine of the setting was organised that there wasn't that opportunity to really take a breath and to actually really observe what was happening when children were playing with other children or with different resources.

KAREN FOLEY: So is this almost the extent to which play is considered a learning potential. And it seems that they were saying, well, it's a lesser thing. It's something that happens in between the important things, like the learning, which we're leading.

So the child-led aspects of this, did they happen? What was the sort of play that you conceptualised? And how did they conceptualise this idea of play?

NATALIE So thinking about kind of a child-led play, that is all about the child and all about the children within that situation. And it's not really about the adults being involved in that. But that makes you as an adult feel, well, what am I doing then? What am I supposed to do?

KAREN FOLEY: If I can't be a Thundercat, I'm out!

NATALIE Yeah, so it was thinking about, just thinking about practise in a completely different way for them to really think about what children were doing, and how they were doing it, and how they were negotiating between themselves and other children, how they were using different resources that would perhaps be in a completely different way to perhaps what an adult might instruct a child to use or to think about the way a child might use something.

And by observing children in that way, actually gives adults a really different and exciting insight into what children are doing. And for me, that means that play needs to be at the top of the agenda in everything that's happening within a setting and within a home life as well.

KAREN FOLEY: Because you can see the obvious link between play and creativity. And you can see how that would nourish children. But I guess from a practitioner side, that must be quite challenging in the sense of how you manage to negotiate and hold a setting where children can have that freedom. And you're scaffolding it just enough for them to be able to be creative. How does that work, then, in terms of actually enabling these people to perhaps shift their perceptions slightly and then encourage child-centered play?

NATALIE Yeah. It is a challenge. And it is a different way of working with children. And it's thinking about standing back, taking that breath, and just allowing children to have the opportunity to play.

And then perhaps thinking about what you are observing in that situation, and how they could be brought in or weaved in to something a bit further on down the line. So if you see your child with a particular interest, then actually weaving that into some other kind of more perhaps formal activity that you have planned. So it's about having that balance between that child activity, that child-led activity, and also being mindful of what those children are actually teaching you as an adult, and how you can weave that into develop their learning and development.

KAREN FOLEY: So this links into what Sue was saying before about reflective practise and why that's so important.

NATALIE Yeah, throughout the module, we really try to encourage that idea of reflective practise, just

- CANNING:** about standing back and being able to see that child. So in that first block of study, it's all about the child's experience. What is it like to be a child playing and being creative? What does that really mean for that child? And what are they learning from that?
- KAREN FOLEY:** We've also asked the question, which I think is really interesting, and we spent quite a while constructing this question, do you recognise that you have strong values and beliefs about playing creativity? Now, 86% of our viewers have said, yes, they do recognise that. But tell us why the wording of that question is so important? And also how that relates to this whole idea of being reflective.
- NATALIE**
CANNING: Well, there's so many different connotations of what play is. It's almost easier to ask what isn't play because so many people have so many ideas about what it is, what it means, how it manifests itself for children. And your ideas about play and creativity actually come from something that you probably never really thought about before. It might be something that perhaps happened in your childhood, or perhaps something that you've gained from your parents, or your community. So it's something that you probably haven't really thought about or recognised, but your values and beliefs really do influence them, how you support children, what you think about play and creativity, and how that actually happens in reality.
- KAREN FOLEY:** Now, I wanted to ask you about children as meaning makers because this is a key theme within the module. But it also links very closely with this whole idea about what is happening within the play, and what that means, and to whom that means something, and therefore what value is associated with it. So this whole idea of children and meaning makers-- as meaning makers, how is that woven through the module? And why is, again, that idea so important at this point?
- NATALIE**
CANNING: So when children play, they're exploring some of the things that they know about, so that can be from their home life, from their family, from their friends, from their community. So they're bringing to that play situation, their own knowledge and understanding of something. And through playing, and exploring, and investigating, problem solving, they are kind of testing out those things that they know and pushing those boundaries a little bit further.
- And through doing that, they're actually creating meaning. They're thinking about, oh, if I can do that, then maybe I could do this. And it's developing that sense of learning through play and that meaning for them, which they can then take away and perhaps play, try out in different situations, in different environments and see if the same sort of thing happens again.

And it's the key thing through the module because we're looking at meaning making in lots of different kind of contexts, so within a formal situation, but also with home situations as well, so that you can see that play is not just an isolated thing. It's something that happens for every child in every situation. But it's just about as adults trying to recognise those really clear play moments and supporting those children in being able to negotiate, perhaps, those situations a little bit better.

KAREN FOLEY: Your using words like negotiate the situations. And all of that sort of is reminiscent of this whole idea of agency of children having some influence, and control, and decision, and perhaps, even, reflection in terms of what they're doing as they're playing.

NATALIE CANNING: Yes, something that we really strongly advocate in the module. We really want students to be able to think about what choices do children have? What kind of decisions are they making when they are playing and when they are playing with other children? And how do they kind of support each other in situations?

How are they showing offers of friendship towards other children? How are they helping other children out? How are they recognising that it would be a good thing to help that child perhaps, put a crate on another crate, and so on? So it's about thinking about those different relationships that children have, not only with other children, but also with the adults around them.

KAREN FOLEY: So they're not passive objects, these children. They're not just sitting there playing nicely, I think as you alluded to earlier. They're making active choices, and often very complex rules and negotiations, which as you say, can reflect in other areas and demonstrate other ways of viewing the world.

NATALIE CANNING: Yes, exactly. Yes. And all that leads into more formal learning. If you've had a very proactive play experience as a child, if you've had that opportunity to explore and problem solve, and had that freedom to make your own choices and make your own decisions, that's probably means that as you grow through adolescence and into adulthood, that you're going to carry some of those values with you, that you're going to be like that as an adult and make sure then that you will for those same opportunities for your own children or for the children that support.

KAREN FOLEY: Yeah. Going back to this idea, and just thinking about how maybe one has to stop playing as

you grow up, but again, thinking about how we conceptualise ideas of play, I'm just really reminded, especially thinking about Menna, and the mud play, and things, about how when I was a child, I used to spend hours making mud pies, I used to play in the garden, and now my daughter has a tablet and various forms of technology. And play is very different.

And I wondered if you could say something about how the early pioneers of play studies viewed play. And also how play is changing. And that, to some extent, is important in terms of recognising children's experiences at different moments in time, and thereby the value of play. Because, I guess, play as a concept is going to remain. But how children play, and with what tools, does change dramatically, particularly in the last century.

NATALIE

CANNING:

Yeah, and that's something that we explore through the module. First in the first block, you'll have-- students will get an overview of the different pioneers of play and where their beliefs came from, and how that then is reflected in the kind of values and beliefs that they put forward as pioneers. And they're called pioneers because they were the first people that did it.

And, of course, now we perhaps wouldn't think that giving children choice was such a radical new idea. But actually, those first people that did that that was something completely different. And I guess we're moving into that new age thinking about children's play in terms of technology and digital accessibility that is out there.

And that's something that we talk about towards the end of the module, in the third block of study. We look at the different types of research that are out there for children's play today, and how that actually effects play, and how that affects children's lives. Because most children now do have access to a screen of some sort to some sort of mobile technology. And do we really think that that is still play when children are perhaps have an educational app that they're using, is that really play for them, or is it something that perhaps an adult had suggested that they do, or an adult thinks that is a good thing for children to do?

KAREN FOLEY:

It's interesting, isn't it? We asked you to respond to this question about the extent to which you agree. The early pioneers in Early Years aimed to provide experiences that children were not getting in their own homes. And today, that means providing activities such as exploratory play. Let's see what you have to say. So a lot of you strongly agree with that sentence. So today, it means providing things like exploratory play.

And I know as a busy mum who's working and juggling, sometimes it can be difficult to think about how we can get that sense of exploratory play. Is there this shift in terms of experiences

of play that has changed over the years, so now we're often viewing-- it's a case of getting the Play-Doh out, or getting this out or that out. Has some of that creativity gone because we've got so many more tools of various kinds?

NATALIE

CANNING:

We have got a lot more options within that. But I think actually keeping it simple is probably the best way of supporting children's creativity and imagination. I mean, there's nothing more simple than a room full of cardboard boxes, and a room full of children, and seeing what happens.

And you'll find that children will want to explore and want to play with those items. So it's having-- it's more about having flexible flexibility within the resources that you provide for children, so enabling a cardboard box to be absolutely anything they want that cardboard box to be and not, perhaps, giving fixed resources that only have one way of being used or one purpose.

And that enables children to use resources in more creative ways and also enables practitioners to perhaps think about resources in different ways as well, so that they're not trapped by the media and consumer lifestyle that we all lead now, but trying to take it back to basics and trying to ensure that we provide different opportunities for children to find what they're interested in and to show their preferences through flexibility.

KAREN FOLEY:

Something then, do you think there have been changes, like culturally, and the way that we encourage parents to interact with children in terms of play? There's a lot of emphasis on activities and doing things. Whereas a long time ago, children were just left with the cardboard boxes to play. They could do things-- it was quite fine to let so don't go down the road on their bicycles, et cetera.

Now, there's a lot more care being taken of where children are, and what they're doing, and, I guess, what learning outcomes may be attached to some of them. Do you think that our sociocultural perspective has changed? And has that then impacted on what we view as play?

NATALIE

CANNING:

Yeah, we certainly think more carefully, I think, about what our children are doing and where they are than perhaps they did. But then the world has changed. We don't live in that kind of community anymore so much where you know everybody's front doors are open, and children just went in and out of next door neighbours' houses and played in the streets.

But that doesn't mean to say that children are having any less opportunities. It's just about

thinking about it in different ways and providing those opportunities in slightly more open ways. So for example, I work closely with a Children's Centre that's right in the middle of a city centre, and yet they still have an outside woodland space which children are able to explore. So the children feel that sense of freedom, and yet it is actually within quite a small space. But it's the ability for them to have the opportunities to have choice, to make decisions about where they're going within that space and not being told, you can't do this or you can do that.

KAREN FOLEY: And you call this sort of position of viewing things in a context, the social cultural perspective. Can you tell us briefly about how that applies to the module, and what students might need to know about that term when they encounter it?

NATALIE CANNING: Yeah. So it's a position that we take within the module. So it's something that is within the module all the way through. And really, what it means is that we're not looking at a child in isolation. We're taking into consideration their background, their family, their extended family, their community that they live within, the kind of values and beliefs that they get from the people that look after them and care for them.

Alongside that, also looking at the social situations that they encounter. So who do they play with? What are the opportunities that they have for different types of play with different people? So it's that mix of the social and the values and beliefs of their culture coming together.

And that tells you a little bit about them as people and where their kind of values and beliefs are starting to come from. So it's thinking about the way that they make choices and decisions. And what does that mean for them as children? And that's something that we follow all the way through the module.

KAREN FOLEY: Natalie, that's a really, really interesting discussion. I hope you've enjoyed that as a sort of inspirational start to some of these key aspects. But before we go, HJ, how is everyone doing? You've been typing a lot. There have been lots going on. But I'm just aware that we've been covering an awful lot here, so how are we all?

HJ: I think we're all doing OK.

KAREN FOLEY: Has Garrett done his assignment?

HJ: I'm not sure yet. He's gone to pick up his nephews, I think he said. So hopefully we'll see him back later. He said he's going to try and pop back by.

But yes, we're just swapping links of different useful resources while studying and different things that we can use that help us. And some people are being sharing experiences of their own children and schools as well, which is really great to see. But If there's anything we missed, or if there's any questions you have after, remember, you can always email us, studenthub@open.ac.uk.

And these sessions will be available and Catch Up as well. So if there's anything you remember later on, and your studying, and you're like, ah, that was a helpful tip or a helpful story I heard, you could always come back to it as well. So that's important to remember.

KAREN FOLEY: In fact, the things are help from the chat room. They're competing in terms of who's having that, which is good, brilliant, excellent. Well, we're going to have a short break. And I'm going to show you the Cellar bar in this break, which is another lovely building on campus. Then we're going to come back and talk about mud play with Menna. So join us in a minute for that, grab yourself a refill on the old coffee, and we will see you very soon.

[OUTRO MUSIC PLAYING]