

Working together for children: Stirling



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Introduction

This course explores a wide range of children's experiences, a number of different services, and interviews with a number of key practitioners. It features voluntary as well as statutory work with children, and tries to capture some of the details of everyday life for children, parents and practitioners.

The associated video material features children, practitioners and practice in the Plus organisation based in Stirling, Scotland. Looking at the overview of the Plus organisation in [Section 2](#) will give you an idea of the kinds of issues and debates that are examined in this course.

The second part of each video asks you to watch and study real world examples of work with children, focusing on a particular issue.

The video clips will enable you to develop an analytical approach to contexts of practice. We will be using them throughout the course to illustrate and explore ideas, issues and debates, and to stimulate discussion and reflection among students.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of level 3 study in [Health & Social Care](#)

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand and critically apply the research, analytical and evaluative skills needed for effective practice and the promotion of equality across universal and specialist services for children
- demonstrate a skilled, dynamic and ethical approach to working with children
- understand and analyse the contributions of different approaches to the study of children, childhood and families, and recognise the potential for uncertainty, ambiguity and limits to knowledge of the subject
- organise, synthesise and interrogate opinions and arguments associated with issues related to children and childhood.

1 Using a learning journal

Keeping a reflective journal (or learning journal) can help you while studying the material in this – or in fact any OpenLearn – course.

A journal is a tool for self discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror for the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas, a safety valve for the emotions, a training ground for the writer, and a good friend and confidant.

Activity 1

0 hour(s) 15 minutes(s)

If you were asked why you have chosen to study this course, what would you reply?

- What do you hope to get out of the course?
- You have seen the learning outcomes for this course – would you add any of your own aims to the list?
- Why?

Take some time to consider these questions and make some notes in your reflective journal.

You may already be familiar with keeping a reflective or learning diary or journal. A reflective journal can help embed your learning from the course, and material you place here could be a really useful resource for future work. You may wish to make entries after every section, or perhaps more, or less, frequently. Occasionally you could ask yourself how your learning is affecting your work with children. You could also discuss the value of a reflective journal in the Comments section below.

Using a reflective tool, such as a journal, has been shown to help students think about not only what they are learning, but how they are learning. This may lead to adjustments to your learning patterns; it could also help you stay motivated throughout your study of this course.

2 Exploring skills

The activity in this section focuses on the practice skills involved in work with children, their families and other practitioners – drawing on and consolidating the material that you may have read before studying this course. We will examine some of the different elements that can be argued are essential for practitioners to ‘connect with children’, and explore how good practice with children and families can be enhanced.

The first video clip in the activity introduces the voluntary organisation Plus, based in Stirling, Scotland, and the second clip gives you an opportunity to recognise some of the skills required by workers who work with disabled children.

Activity 2

1 hour(s) 30 minutes(s)

Plus, in Stirling, is a voluntary organisation that works in a variety of ways with disabled children and young people. There is an introductory video clip that shows the context of this setting.

The second clip you will watch in this activity focuses on the interaction between Scott, and a playworker, Jenni, who are reading a story together during a summer play scheme. You will be asked to observe and discuss the skills within this interaction. You will probably need to watch the clip more than once.

As you watch the second clip, ‘Communication’:

1. Make a note of any skills that you think the worker is demonstrating.
2. Taking a critical approach, note what issues you think would need to be given careful consideration in this sort of interaction to achieve best practice with disabled children.
3. Think about the issues around practitioners and appropriate physical contact with children. How does the interaction here, in a very different setting, fit with your conclusions about what is appropriate?

Click play to watch the introductory video clip (8 minutes).

Video content is not available in this format.

[Introductory video](#)

Click play to watch the 'Communication' video clip (5 minutes).

Video content is not available in this format.

[Communication](#)

1. Some examples of skills that were demonstrated by Jenni are:
 - Having been told that Scott likes to be out of his wheelchair and seated on the beanbags, she has been responsive to this information.

- She demonstrates warmth in her tone and enables close physical proximity.
- She engages with Scott, asking him questions as well as just reading the story. She also encourages him to help to turn the pages, displaying patience with his attempts.
- She has the right communication skills to enable her to help Scott to use the computer-assisted communication system.

2. The video clips used in this course are not designed to illustrate ideal practice, and you may feel that there are other ways in which Jenni could have enabled communication or participation. We can't tell from this clip, for example, how much Scott was asked about how he likes to sit or read. This 'checking out' beforehand is obviously important, as well as the skill of being open to signals from children as they interact.

The 'checking out' should also include whether Scott is happy with physical contact. Disabled children can often feel that they have less control over their own bodies, and less privacy, than non-disabled children. How this is managed can be a skills issue too, as [Activity 3](#) will demonstrate.

Briggs (2004) suggests that if children are dependent on aids (for example, a wheelchair for mobility), that these aids might be connected to body image and also need to be treated with respect.

3. School, for example, is a more formal environment where there has been a lot of focus on – and anxiety about – physical contact.

Here, the practitioner is in a very informal play situation that perhaps allows for a broader range of contact to be appropriate. Good practice principles still apply.

It is interesting to consider whether the relative 'professional' perspectives influence what we, or the workers, see as appropriate (the practitioners in the holiday scheme are paid but are not trained play workers). Also, as we will go on to discuss, disabled children may anyway require more physical contact from practitioners on a daily basis.

3 Identity

The activities in this section focus specifically on issues of wellbeing, such as self-esteem, resilience and sense of belonging. They consider how practitioners can support children as they understand and negotiate their identities, and those of other people, in the light of other people's perceptions and beliefs.

There are two activities to help you highlight some of these issues.

Activity 3

1 hour(s) 0 minutes(s)

Read the Introduction to the book *Promoting Children's Wellbeing*, linked below.

Click to open the [Introduction](#) (7 pages, 194KB)

The Introduction to the book *Promoting Children's Wellbeing* highlights the way in which children's wellbeing is used as a measure of the social and economic infrastructure of healthy and wealthy nations. Identity formation and negotiation are identified as aspects of children's emotional, psychological and social wellbeing. The relationship between identity and wellbeing is the focus of this learning guide.

Activity 4

1 hour(s) 30 minutes(s)

The video clip for this activity focuses on issues relating to children's sense of belonging. Based on the experiences of two children, Scott and Vanessa, we look specifically at what can be done to help children develop a sense of belonging.

As you watch:

1. List all the things that are done to help children experience a sense of belonging.
2. What are the key issues and dilemmas surrounding belonging for children with disabilities, their families, key workers and the wider community?

Click play to watch the 'Belonging' video clip (10 minutes).

Video content is not available in this format.

[Belonging](#)

One issue raised by this video clip is the negative attitudes which some adults might potentially show towards children with disabilities. Negative attitudes and an unwillingness to include children with disabilities may come from a lack of experience, fear or anxiety. Some Scout and Guide groups are reluctant to include disabled children, or will only include children if they attend with their parents.

Being able to spend time away from their parents helps children to develop relationships with peers, as well as a sense of independence. However, not all peers will be supportive, and practical issues, such as noise levels, may act as barriers to inclusion.

In the video, those who know the children ask that people look beyond the disability to see the child and to respond to all the ways children communicate. This may include reading a child's body language, learning Makaton and/or communicating through pictures.

4 Play

The activity in this section considers the importance of play as an expression of children's agency and as a contributory factor to children's wellbeing. You will be encouraged to reflect on how children's play intersects with your own role and relationships with children, and the level of opportunities children have for play beyond the gaze and influence of adults. You will critically analyse the extent to which some children are denied opportunities for play, and how play space itself is sometimes a site of inequality and power.

There is one activity for you to complete that recognises how adults still have a role in initiating and supporting play.

Activity 5

1 hour(s) 30 minutes(s)

The scrutiny of adults can, in some ways, impede or interfere with children's opportunities to play. In this activity we recognise that adults still have a role in initiating and supporting play to ensure that it is inclusive. You will consider what kinds of skill, knowledge and values are needed to achieve this.

Compile a list of practitioner skills, knowledge and values that appear to be important to this experience.

Click play to watch the 'Play' video clip (6 minutes).

Video content is not available in this format.

[Play](#)

It is widely acknowledged that disabled children (perhaps more so than other children) have lives that are constantly under the scrutiny and influence of parents or carers. One consequence of this can be that disabled children are marginalised from mainstream play opportunities and environments, and all of the benefits that these can provide. Therefore, practitioners need to have a commitment towards inclusive opportunities for all children, as well as sensitivity towards the realities and associated feelings of children, parents and carers.

Sometimes the overbearing attitudes of adults towards children emerge from a desire to protect them from potential discrimination, from their own feelings of isolation, or a lack of awareness of what support services are available in their neighbourhood. Some children also need and desire close adult contact to maintain their own emotional or physical safety.

In the video clip, Paul Dumbleton reminds us that both children and their families sometimes need a break from each other, and projects like Play Plus have evolved in response to this. Practitioners consequently need skills to be able to work sensitively in partnership with families, and to provide them with information and flexible choices geared towards their differing positions and lifestyles.

It is evident from watching the video clip that practitioners need to work as a team and communicate knowledge about children with each other. Providing inclusive play opportunities may mean attending to children's specific requirements and desires

(even to the extent of providing one-to-one support), yet this can only be achieved where practitioners are fully aware and consistent in their approach.

Children with behaviours associated with the autistic spectrum may benefit more than others from differing levels of structure and certainty within the play environment. Skill is needed to facilitate these children's participation in group play settings, striking a balance between structure and the integral uncertainties associated with free flow play.

The video clip provides many examples of practitioners working to ensure that their support for children is as unobtrusive as possible. In reality, and with well-planned and adequately resourced support, most disabled children can have positive and inclusive play experiences.

5 Staying safe, anxieties and risk

In the activity in this section we will initially consider the ways in which children and adults assess and deal with risks. A particular emphasis will be on exploring the degree to which anxieties and perception of risk affect children's lives – the promotion of life skills as well as their healthy development and wellbeing.

After a discussion of what is meant by risk in today's society, we will consider the practice principles underpinning the broad concept of 'staying safe'. You will be asked to reflect on what we mean by 'safety' in terms of both being safe and feeling safe.

From an understanding of the potential difference between being and feeling safe, you will consider how to challenge the assumptions and values that prevent children from being protected from harm. You will also have the opportunity to reflect on how children, parents/carers and practitioners can make considered judgments about how to act to keep children safe.

Activity 6

3 hour(s) 30 minutes(s)

Read the article 'Encounters with Forest School and Foucault: A Risky Business?' (Maynard, 2007).

This paper tells the story of an encounter between two early years teachers and two Forest School workers, the growing tensions in their relationships, and how these tensions were resolved. When analysed through a Foucauldian (poststructuralist) lens, the story can be read as a battle between dominant discourses – a battle exacerbated by the outdoor context in which it took place. Exploring the consistency and contradictions between these discourses enabled the teachers to make changes to their practice and to reconstruct their professional subjectivities in a way that more closely addressed their current interests and the requirements of the proposed Foundation Phase for Wales.

Maynard concludes the article by saying that she reads the encounter between the teachers and the Forest School workers not as a personal conflict, but as a battle between two dominant discourses. Identify the key elements of the different discourses discussed.

As you watch the following video clip, consider and make notes on these questions:

1. What are the benefits to the children taking part in this activity?
2. What do the adults do to help the children assess and manage risk?
3. How do the adults' instructions and support differ according to the confidence and abilities of the children?
4. How would you describe the discourse of the workers in Stirling?

Click play to watch the 'Risk' video clip (7 minutes).

Video content is not available in this format.

[Risk](#)

The Maynard article draws on the work of Foucault, who argued that power is not owned by individuals but, rather, flows through a network of social practices and relationships. Within this definition of power, children and adults are not only governed by others, but also govern themselves and, to a greater or lesser extent, others. Thus, children may be advised what to do by adults, but the degree to which they conform will depend on decisions made by individual children, and will also be influenced by group dynamics.

In the work of Foucault, disciplinary power is seen as related to the use of time and space, as well as to a 'visible authoritative gaze' in which individuals are subject to hierarchical observations. Pupils are watched by teachers who are, in turn, watched by head teachers, inspectors (on behalf of the government) and parents.

For Foucault, knowledge is inseparable from power, and is closely related to discourse, or communication, and truth. How we talk shows how we give meaning to the world and what counts as truth. In schools, as in other communities, what counts as truth is constantly changing, and some ways of talking, some discourses, are valued, whilst others are marginalised or silenced. Typically, in school the discourse of the teacher is sanctioned and normalised. Teachers talk more than their pupils and they determine the nature and content of discourse in the classroom. Teachers gain and maintain their authority in the classroom, in part, by controlling aspects of the pupils' discourse; for example, who speaks, when they speak and, to some extent, the subject of the discourse.

In part because of the pressure they feel from higher authorities, the teachers in this research reported that 'they needed to keep the children safe and to meet curriculum targets' by setting 'tight boundaries' and ensuring a 'high level of control' (Maynard, 2007, p.385). By comparison, the Forest School staff felt that their role was to facilitate rather than direct, and to stand back and allow the children to stand on their own feet. A tension existed between the discourses of the two groups of staff.

The teachers, who prioritised curriculum content and child safety, assumed authority over children who they assumed needed to be guided and protected. By comparison, the Forest School workers, who prioritised children's individual independence and freedom, were more likely to position children as strong and able to look after themselves. Teachers emphasised the negative aspects of risk, whilst the Forest School staff stressed the positive benefits to be gained through participating in risky activities.

As in the Forest School, the children in the DVD clip are given some responsibility for the assessment and management of risk. The clip begins with the children being given specialist clothing to wear, including wet suits and buoyancy aids. While this clothing was required, one boy was allowed to opt out of wearing a cagoule. The adults held him responsible for his own wellbeing to the extent that he was given the responsibility of telling the workers if he got cold. The children were told that two blasts on the whistle was a sign to get out of the water. A smaller group were told what to do if their kayak rolled over, but that they 'would work out the rest as you go on'.

A number of factors may have contributed to the way in which these adults talked with the children, including:

- the nature of the activity – fun, not coaching or teaching;
- the experience and training of the adults;
- the adult to child ratio;

- a belief that children would choose activities relevant to their confidence and abilities.

6 Conclusion

This course has presented a series of themed video clips that demonstrate how the Plus organisation in Stirling, Scotland, has worked in a variety of ways with children and young people.

Activities in this course have focused on communication, identity, play and risk. These have helped you explore and identify the various skills necessary to work effectively with children, young people and other practitioners.

7 Useful web links

[**Children in Scotland's Policy Info Service**](#), accessed 16 July 2008.

This website contains accessible, comprehensive and up-to-date policy information relating to children and young people in Scotland.

[**Department for Education**](#), accessed 16 July 2008.

Information about the aims and objectives of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (previously DfES) in the UK. It is aimed at a wide range of users, from parents and teachers to jobseekers. It links to information on the National Curriculum, equal opportunities, consultation papers and performance tables. The site includes a search facility.

[**Every Child Matters**](#), accessed 16 July 2008.

A Green Paper setting out for consultation a framework for improving outcomes for all children and their families; to protect, promote their wellbeing, and support them to develop their full potential. Downloadable sections are available as pdf or Word files.

[**Every Disabled Child Matters**](#), accessed 16 July 2008.

Every Disabled Child Matters (EDCM) is the campaign to get rights and justice for every disabled child.

[**The Scottish Government**](#), accessed 16 July 2008.

The devolved Government for Scotland is responsible for most of the issues of day-to-day concern to the people of Scotland, including health, education, justice, rural affairs and transport.

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