

Interview with Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen

To understand how theories of play can be translated into practice, Sonia Livingstone and Kate Cowan spoke to [Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen](#), from the LEGO Foundation, as part of our interview series on play in the digital world.

Kate Cowan: How would you define play? And what ideas do you bring to your definition?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: Over the past decades, we have refined our understanding of play based on most updated scientific evidence. In our publication *The Future of Play some years back*, we looked at different types of play for development, and recently we have refined what uniquely constitutes an experience of play using five characteristics. The first is about enjoyment, and it's not only about fun; we also enjoy overcoming difficulties. The second is about active engagement – being immersed and focused with our full body and senses. The third is about it being meaningful, something that we can relate to. Fourth, it's about iteration, testing and trying out things in new ways. For the fifth, it's about others: imitating, sharing with, or collaborating. If you present these to experts from the literature of learning, the literature of play, or the literature of creativity, they all resonate with these characteristics.

Sonia Livingstone: In Danish there are two words for play. Could you tell us what the difference is?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: It's like 'play' as a game, and 'playing' like an experience. 'Spille' is like gamification. You 'play' something as an activity with a particular outcome, and you try to figure out how to collaborate. 'Lege' is like 'playing'. It's a process of testing and trying things out, which we believe is most important. This occurs on a spectrum based on the agency of the child: from free play, to guidance, to games, to instruction. It's about the different ways that children can play and the ways adults can support them. It's not only about playing in childhood: if you want to learn something, you need to try different things, it needs to be meaningful, and you need to enjoy it.

Sonia Livingstone: Are we idolising the Nordic concept of childhood, and trying to spread it around the world, where it doesn't fit?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: The fundamental values of play are universal. But if we think about Danish culture, the security of the welfare system, the trust you have in others, that's critical, but not a given everywhere. I also think that's inherent in the safety and security of the LEGO system (LEGO meaning 'playing well'). You can keep combining and recombining ideas, like with LEGO elements, with the same material as a child and as an adult. There's something around Danish culture itself, where there's a focus on free play but in socially supportive environments.

Kate Cowan: You talk about having intentions or purpose behind play. Are there problematic aspects to that role?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: It depends on what the role and intentions are. The teacher role is usually moving between instruction and free play, and that's not very effective. Instead, if we should balance social, emotional and creative needs of children, we should think about a spectrum from free, guided and to playful instruction. Sometimes children need the playful instruction because they need a shared understanding of specific concepts. But often you can do small group work, or children can do things on their own. Teachers need to be able to adapt their practices right now.



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Sonia Livingstone: As you say, free play is intrinsically-motivated, but what about ‘bad’ or transgressive play?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: I don’t think there is necessarily ‘bad’ play, because children are trying to understand things around. If children are transgressive, it’s because they are trying to make sense of something that exists in their lives, – it’s something they derive from the culture and adults around them. Children use play to act out issues in their environment, explain ideas and regulate their emotions. So play is an opportunity to provide safety and structure, and to support children in achieving these goals.

Kate Cowan: How do you see digital technologies as changing the possibilities for play? What changes would you like to see in digital technologies?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: We need to be better in observing and discussing experiences with children. No matter if it’s digital, or physical, or in-between. Are they actually engaged? There are a few components that are essential. First is children’s agency. Children need to have meaningful choices. The second is they need social support and guidance in understanding how they use technology. Thirdly, the purpose with technology should be to create things. It’s not to be given content, it’s about expressing ideas and supporting creativity, critical thinking and collaboration.

Sonia Livingstone: What is emerging as bad design?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: If you flip things around, you can identify what it is bad. So, if you want engagement, do not look for things that pacify children; if you want experimentation, do not ask children to repeat the same thing over and over. Generally, our research shows that there is little diversity in the products and games. Children can choose the apps, technologies, platforms and devices, but they’re not setting their own goals; they’re not able to personalise experiences. So, even if they select one game or another, there’s a unified outcome.

Kate Cowan: What does the pandemic mean for children’s play and are there lessons for families and policymakers?

Bo Stjerne Thomsen: We recently explored this [in a new study](#), and with specific recommendations for all audiences. COVID-19 has benefited some children and families, and not others. I think a revolution could be in more blended forms of learning as a more natural extension of how children play. For instance, equipping teachers with new ways to engage children with technology and in parents understanding the value of technology for play and learning. That could be an opportunity to think about play across the home, the school, and the community.

Further reading:

Huizinga, J. (1938). *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Zosh, J. M., et al. (2018). [Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum](#). *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(1124). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01124

This blog is part of the play interview series. You can view the rest of the blog series [here](#).

Dr Bo Stjerne Thomsen is Vice-President and Chair of Learning Through Play at the LEGO Foundation. His background is in design, and he has built the organisation's research agenda and expertise on children's development, play and learning. He previously spent 10 years developing learning environments and technology across four continents.



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