



## Understanding Play using Psycholudic Play Theory

*Play is part of our basic human development.*

The **play drive** is as much part of us as the urge to breathe. From the earliest days as children, the play drive is what helps us learn the key skills essential for our survival. We cannot see this play drive, though we can see the effects it produces. The process of playing & the full **play cycle** is the basis for a psycholudic understanding of the play process.

The need to play first begins in a kind of internal contemplation, a reverie, that psycholudoc play theory terms **the metalude**. From this state, the child produces an action, which may be very obvious or very subtle. This action is called the **play cue**. The play cue comes from the thoughts of the child, their internal world, into the physical world in the expectation of getting a response. A play cue may be a facial expression, body language, vocalised sound or physical action that communicates the child or young person's wish to invite others to play. For instance, in very young children, the play cue may be to drop an object from the hand for someone else to pick up and pass back. Still later it may be a spoken request.

The answer to a play cue (in psycholudic play theory terms) is called a **play return**. From the external containing world, a response or return is taken in and incorporated by the child. The child will reply to this response in a number of ways. They may react to it and continue the play. They



may react and change the play. Or they may ignore it altogether. The return can come from another person, though as many people know, children can play alone and get a lot of stimulation from their own play. In that situation, psycholudics says that the return comes from the environment, though it should be understood that it is the child's play drive that is completing the play cycle, not the environment that is playing with the child! Put simply, the child may see something

interesting in the environment and think, that looks fun and start playing with it. This playing intention is held by the creation of a **play frame**. The frame is a material or non-material boundary that keeps the play intact. The child may then change the frame by including others, moving objects or adapting it in some other way to create a varied response that maintains the **play flow**. Once entered into, this play flow can absorb the child or children for minutes to days at a time. When the play meaning of the frame is extinguished, when the flow is terminated, psycholudics says that the play is **annihilated**. These elements constitute the full play cycle as psycholudic play theory perceives it.

The **play cycle** consists of the full flow of play from the child's first play cue, the perceived return from the outside world, the child's response to the return, and the further development of play to the point where the play is complete.

Seeing play as a drive that creates cues and responds to the environment has implications for our work practice with children at play. The drive within the child is what starts the play cycle.

Psycholudics recognise this when it states that play is about choice for the child. Children denied choice, will be inhibited in their play, the cycle will be incomplete. The play drive will try to compensate with cues that are more urgent or aberrant, perhaps causing conflict with the environment around the child (these urgent cues are called **dysplay**).

Psycholudic play theory recognises that play is done for its own sake and not for some external reward. The play drive is seeking to play with the world around the child and those things and people in it. When it gets a meaningful response, when the frame and the content are spent, it is complete and can begin all over again. Play is therefore incremental and developmental; anyone who tries to lead or force it will be denying the play drive purpose and **adulterating** the child play.

The play drive, its expression and enjoyment, are closely linked to an ecological well-being and are the basis for our therapeutic way of working with children.

This is an edited extract from: Gordon Sturrock and Perry Else (1998) *The playground as therapeutic space: playwork as healing* - also known as 'The Colorado Paper'.

### Psycholudic Play Theory underpins Therapeutic Play with children.



**The Euphelia Clinic** is dedicated to supporting the individual needs of children, adolescents and their families through **Clinical Play Therapy**. We provide specialist training opportunities, at degree and postgraduate level, in partnership with UK universities.

Practitioners trained in **Clinical Play Therapy** enable children to learn positive behaviour patterns, build their self esteem & self-concept, work through negative emotional issues, and develop healthy, positive relationships.