

Playing with power

A guide for educators
supporting anti-racist
and decolonial childhoods

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Contents

Introduction	3
How to use this guide	4
Colonial habits and their antidotes	5
Difference and togetherness	10
The power of free-flow play	11
The role of adults	12
Out in the open or hidden away?	15
Next steps	18
References	19

This is an interactive document

Click on the **highlighted** links to access
references and further information.



Introduction

This guide aims to help educators recognise and extend habits in children's free play which embrace diversity and inclusivity – and consequently strengthen everyone's learning and wellbeing.



It challenges all of us to neither accept easy illusions of harmony nor to enforce “model citizenship” (for example by automatically directing children to include others or share resources). Instead, it encourages educators to skilfully bring difference into the open, attending to the creative tensions children are typically and healthily exploring – without trying to “fix” them – as they develop and negotiate their understandings of friendship, identity, power and the wider world.

The guidance introduced here draws on **the work of anti-racist activists Tema Jones and Kenneth Okun**¹. They look at how organisations and communities everywhere (not excluding nursery schools and early years settings) are shaped by longstanding habits historically normalised by colonialism. **Even very young children mirror and play with these habits**².

However Jones and Okun also highlight other habits, ones of resistance – everyday “antidotes” to colonial ways of seeing and being. **Young children are experimenting with these too**³.

This guide and its reflexive activities help educators to recognise and transform these habits in children's play. In turn it provides opportunities to make links with, and to transform, adult factors (in environments, policies or routines) which either promote or restrict your own capacity to notice and value difference.

How to use this guide

Begin by using this guide collaboratively as a discussion starter with colleagues at an in-service or team day in your school or early years setting. It includes a number of reflective activities throughout. Use it to open up conversations and champion more inclusive pedagogies and policies.



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How not to use it

Living, working and playing across lines of difference is hard – **for everyone**. Behaviours which exclude or denigrate others stem from complex sets of histories, cultures and experiences. **We are all shaped by them** ⁴. This guide, then, is not about labelling, blaming or shaming children, families, colleagues... or ourselves. This only reproduces the problems we hope to change.

Embracing complexity

Every setting, child and interaction is different, and simply judging children's play as "good" or "bad", "inclusive" or "exclusive", is unhelpful for everyone. So this guide is not about providing easy formulas for interpreting and responding to particular situations.

The aim here is to support educators in attuning more readily to children's experiments with inclusion and exclusion and to respond with skill and patience based on their close knowledge of children's lives.

"The child who seems... ill-willed is often involved in an intense struggle to realise the good by his own effort"

Froebel, in Lilley (1967) ⁵

Family engagement

Once you have begun to use the guidance outlined here, you may want to share it with families as an indication of your commitment to equality and diversity. You could also sensitively invite families to share their own experiences – in private conversation... on your application forms... or in community learning about the diverse cultural histories everyone carries.

See page 18 for further guidance.

Colonial habits and their antidotes

This guidance was initially developed to address a gap in anti-racism resources for early childhood practice. **Current support is limited, and typically emphasises dealing with explicit acts of discrimination or diversifying play resources to reflect “world cultures”⁶.**

However, these interventions often come too late, missing significant **precursive habits** that are forming in nearly all children’s lives. This is why early years educators have such a critical role to play.

Habits are everyday tendencies or behaviours performed consciously

and unconsciously in visible and invisible ways. Children form habits in their play all the time. Some, however, can lead to ingrained prejudice and discrimination: for example, when a child routinely abandons play because they don’t want to compromise. As educators, we have an obligation to tune in **before** these habits become the norm, as well as keeping faith in children’s capacity for self-learning, rather than relying on didactic teaching or resources.

It is of course easier for them to have an answer given by someone else but it is far more valuable and stimulating for them to find it out for themselves... [so] we should rather put them in the way of finding answers...

Froebel, in Lilley (1967)⁷





Jones and Okun's framework

Kenneth Jones and Temur Okun argue that, **because of our colonial histories, we are all shaped (in part) by life-constricting habits of engaging with the world**⁸. In their framework we have labelled these “power **over**” (or colonial) habits. They are contrasted by “power **with**” (or decolonial) habits, also called “**antidotes**”⁹. Habitual antidotes keep the mind and body open to experience, enabling us to hold difference and uncertainty creatively.

Both sets of habits shape us from birth according to our circumstances (for example, cultural background, intergenerational trauma or having a large extended family can affect how children relate to the world around them). Crucially, though, we know that habits which do not support openness to difference and uncertainty restrict children's learning, growth, self-knowledge and ability to socialise. Instead they foster **isolation, anxiety and restrictive repetition**¹⁰. It is **our** duty as educators to cultivate environments, pedagogies and time for better habits to rise to the top.

Jones and Okun's framework (adapted)

Activity

Attuning to "power over" and "power with" habits¹¹

As you read Jones and Okun's framework, do you recognise how, where and when each habit might have shown up in children's free play? Or in your own or the setting's modelling, routines and priorities?

Working together, try to recall and discuss:

- Examples of "power over" and "power with" habits
- Any that fall in the middle?
- What happened?

Power-over / colonial habits

Supporting exclusion and discrimination

1. Perfectionism (mistakes/mess is feared/resisted)
2. Urgency (Now or never! Pushing ahead regardless)
3. Defensiveness (unnecessarily resisting relationship/new ideas etc.)
4. Individualism/competition (my need, idea, way is the best or most important)
5. Accumulation (grasping for a quantity of things over a quality of experience)
6. Correct words (at expense of communication)
7. Logic rules (experience/emotions marginalised)
8. Paternalism (I'm in charge / they're in charge)
9. "Black and white" thinking (things can only possibly be one way)
10. Power hoarding (alliances, materials, knowledge)
11. Progress equals "bigger/more"
12. Fear of open conflict / need for resolution

Power-with / decolonial habits (antidotes)

Promoting learning and inclusion

- Mistakes and different approaches valued/incorporated
- Slow, deferred gratification, process, attunement
- Fears named/opened out, creative vulnerability
- Emphasis on collective/collaboration
- Sharing and creating resources, process over product
- Non-verbal is valued, words played with
- Embraces diverse perspectives, comfort with feelings
- Recognising our limitations whilst valuing our contributions, refusing authority over others
- Both/and – different needs/play/ideas allowed to overlap
- Power actively distributed, open leadership
- Quality of experience, impact
- Staying with tension, creativity

“Power over” habits – some examples

- A child might seek an adult’s “ruling” as soon as different sets of needs come into conflict (**black and white thinking**). How do we typically respond?
- Feeling a lack of control, a child may be preoccupied with gathering and hoarding all the pieces of a train track – deconstructing (quietly or otherwise) the work of others around them (**accumulation**).
- A child may become disengaged, worried or angry if someone else’s building of a sandcastle does not exactly follow the castles he has seen in picture books (**perfectionism**).
- Staff in a setting insist that there is one right way to eat lunch – with cutlery. They do not value children’s diverse physiognomy or cultural approaches to eating. Children get the message that there is only one way to do things. The adult voice dominates – and children later mirror this as they play at “being in charge”.
- Conflict between children is quickly managed away by adults: “You need to share” etc. Children learn that people cannot safely have different needs (**fear of conflict**).



“Power with” habits – some examples

- Children subvert received order and rules in their play, demonstrating their capacity to imagine and embrace difference and alternatives. For example, one day they insist that daddies instead of babies go “wah wah wah” in the song *The Wheels On The Bus*. Adults embrace and celebrate this (**words played with**).
- Objects of power (for example a special stick, endowed with significance in the play) are proactively circulated between children – “It’s Saskia’s turn now” – as they willingly relinquish control and open themselves to different effects and possibilities (**emphasis on collective/ collaboration**).
- Educators are routinely heard to ask each other and children, “What do **you** think we could do here?”, “How about you?” – sharing power, opening up multiple perspectives and new ways of doing/being. They wonder aloud together (**different approaches valued**).
- Assessment of children’s development puts a greater value on open-ended play than fixed learning outcomes. Staff celebrate and extend process/space above product/timing (**quality of experience, attunement**).



Difference and togetherness

From birth, children begin to play with different ways of relating to the world – as well as mirroring what they see and hear from adults and older children. In their earliest days everything is typically one, connected. Then, at least in societies where ‘individualism’ is favoured, communality gives way to the individual self. ‘We’ becomes ‘I’ and other ways of being with each other are forsaken. **Yet, with guidance, children can come to be in ways that value self and other, difference and togetherness**¹².

Free and joyful activity [in childhood] flows from the vision of the whole world as a unity; all life and activity are one... [We] should recognise Nature in her multiplicity of form and shape, and also... come to a realisation of her unity. So in his own development [the child] follows the course of Nature and imitates her modes of creation in his games.

Froebel, in Lilley (1967)¹³

Diversity is a profound source of stimulation for children. However if we emphasise difference as fixed and narrow (“e.g. “Elias lives in a house, but Chantel lives in a flat”, or “Hope’s family are from Jamaica so they eat different foods to us”), **we risk separating children’s identities in ways which echo the history of colonialism**¹⁴. To challenge colonial habits, educators need to help children to see everyone’s identities, needs and imaginaries as unique but also continually being enlarged and reshaped in relation to the community and world as a whole. Nowhere is this more true than in play.



The power of free-flow play

In free-flow play with rich open-ended resources children assemble and entangle diverse ideas, materials and bodies in ways that offer myriad ways of being, seeing, imagining and relating. With limited adult direction, but pertinent attention/curiosity, children can feel safely supported to sense for themselves fine variances of ideas, fairness, safety and growth. In so doing, they encounter their differences as well as the power and challenge of expressing them.



In play there is no necessity to conform or bow to the pressures of external rules, outcomes, targets or adult-led ideas. Rules [and identities] in play, can be broken, created, changed and challenged. This enables children to face life, deal with and face situations, work out alternatives, change how things are done and cope with their future

(Bruce, 2017; with our addition)¹⁵

Even when behaviours aren't immediately positive, Froebelian pedagogy emphasises learning through dialogue and discovery:

Education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting only; it should neither direct, not determine nor interfere [unduly]...

(Froebel, in Lilley, 1967) with our addition¹⁶



Activity

Two groups of children are making separate constructions in the block play area. One is a racing car, with one purpose and one child in the driver's seat. Another is a shop, with several shopkeepers serving each other and a free flow of toys, resources and events. A boy comes to join the shop play. Alice says "You're a boy so you have to be a customer". The boy looks over at the racing car instead.

Two distinct identities already exist here.

- Which of the colonial/decolonial habits might be at play?

- How might you gently acknowledge **and** complicate them, without requiring a resolution (e.g. simply telling Alice that "boys can be shopkeepers too")?
- Could you "wonder aloud", by questioning or instigating research with the children about co-racing drivers and female racers?
- Could you plan visits to meet local shopkeepers of different genders, to support children in finding out about their jobs?
- Might children want to incorporate diverse pictures/books in the space?
- How else might you provoke their thinking?

The role of adults



Skilled adults will support children to stay present to ideas, feelings and situations which are unfamiliar. When one child presents an idea or plays in a way that “troubles” the identity, emotional or sometimes physical safety of another, educators can bring both children’s attention to what is happening.

They will model a calm curiosity which promotes and enables verbal **and** non-verbal exchange/ dialogue – through sympathetic sound and movement.

“Serina, are you unsure about Jamie moving the dolls you were playing with...?”

- How might you communicate this only through gesture or sound, to support Serina and Jamie?

This can create a cognitive “pause” in the action, and open pathways for collaboration or mutual transformation of the play, idea or relationship. That transformation may happen in the moment (success) – but often may come later, when those children next meet each other or a similar situation (also success!).

Wondering (and wandering) out loud

Skilled adults will also notice, support and amplify the ways that even very young children are **already** attempting to stay present to difference and its emotional risks – and validate them. For example;

Marta, 2, is nervously standing at the edge of some noisy, physical activity by the mud kitchen, uncertain about entering. Rather than interfere to make the

space immediately “inclusive”, an educator might come down alongside Marta, look into the space with her, ask what she is seeing, or name what they see themselves.

“It’s really interesting what Josie and Mo are doing, isn’t it, Marta?”

or

“Wow, there’s a lot going on here, hey Marta?”

Those playing in the mud kitchen may be encouraged to notice this new visitor, and reflect on this external presence and perspective. Questions may be asked, or stories shared. The younger child feels that their choice in risking coming close to the play has been witnessed, and gradually feel safe enough to move towards it – or make a choice to move away, for the time being. Over time, this may open into opportunities and invitations to find their place in the play naturally, rather than being forced.

We must escape the delusion that insight [into things] is denied to the child and that they lack judgement. True, they may not have the adult's power of deductive thought, yet they have a certain spontaneous insight and judgement, an immediate response, which is for that very reason all the more likely to be right.

Froebel, in Lilley (1967) ¹⁷



Activity

A new child, Esme, goes to join a group of friends playing in the sandpit and picks up a spade to start digging. "That's my spade!" says another child. Josh adds, "We're playing here, there's no room for you!" (an example of **power-hoarding**, in Jones and Okun's framework).

On seeing these competing needs come to the surface, a skilled educator, with close knowledge of the children, will judge if they can (ideally) hold back a while, rather than immediately step in.

Discuss:

- How might this situation develop?
- How might the excluded child respond?
- Will any children adjust their choices and open up the play?
- If they don't, how can you bring attention to what is happening, without shaming or forcing children to act in a way that fails to recognise their motivations?

Supporting autonomous learners

Intrinsic (child-led) openings to “otherness” are more valuable than adult-directed “inclusion”, because they enable deep, transformational reflection within children that is more likely to take root – rather than be resented. Again, this can take time, perhaps more than one encounter. As with the previous example, a skilled educator will give space (unless children’s excluding actions are unsafe, glorified or habitual), but they may also wonder aloud about the competing needs:

“Josh, are you worried that we don’t have enough spades...?”

or

“I can see you really wanted to join in with the digging, Esme. Hmm, I wonder what we could do?”

This wondering aloud – which can also be done non-verbally (including with babies) through the use of questioning gestures or expressions – is powerful in and of itself. It does not need to lead to a “fix” in that moment. Josh may suggest a way forward, or Esme might.

Or Esme might move away, in which case the educator can continue to bring attention to the difference.

“Oh, I wonder how Esme’s feeling about not being able to join in with digging?”

The educator might follow Esme and ensure she feels seen and included in other ways, but also trust that Josh is processing this experience, as is Esme. If necessary, an educator may proactively support more sustained reflection, but taking care to avoid shame. Next time Josh is seen to make an effort to include someone in their play, this gives the opportunity to feed back: “I loved watching you help Esme with that den today, Josh.”

Continuous difference – and connection

Difference and its felt effects on young children are not exceptional – they will be continuously visible when the play is free and open-ended. At the mark-making table, two children are drawing side by side. Skilled adults create opportunities for difference to occur, and celebrate and draw attention to it – as well as to connections. There is no “follow the steps” pedagogy (“Why don’t we all make a hedgehog with these items, like this?”). Rather, adults may say: “Can you tell me about what you’re doing?” “How about you?” If this modelling is consistent then over time children will begin asking these questions of each other.



Out in the open or hidden away?

In settings where diversity is manifest and embraced, creative tensions will inevitably rise to the surface. The “work” of playing with uncertainty and valuing difference is happening.



Educators can then often stand back, watch, and allow children’s negotiations and learning to take their course – whilst supporting “power with” habits to become the norm over time.

In other contexts skilled adults are sensitive to situations when “power over” habits are being masked. Everything might seem to be “in total harmony”, but are some habits operating below the radar and subtly dictating the rules? Are we noticing or helping children give voice to their diversity? **Crucially, are educators being proactive in surfacing difference when it is not routinely being noticed or negotiated by children?**¹⁸.

This is especially important in communities which seem on the surface to be culturally homogeneous. Assumptions of “We’re all playing the same game here”, or “we all feel the same” about something can give children a false sense of uniformity which makes it much harder for them first to notice and then be responsive to diversity throughout their lives. **They are more likely to either minimise the effects of race, gender or socio-economic difference or exaggerate them in stereotypical ways**¹⁹.

Activity

A group of children are peacefully playing at making hot chocolate in the mud kitchen. Suddenly Henri declares "You've got to do it like this, not that!". He is ignored and the play carries on undisturbed. Henri continues as if nothing has happened.

- What potential learning has been missed in this encounter?
- What are the effects of children routinely homogenising their play?
- Might Henri's declaration have revealed an "unmet need"?
- Is Henri's insistence on "perfectionism" (see Jones and Okun's framework) a way of signalling that difference matters and needs to be seen?
- What might a skilled educator do to bring curious attention to any differences hidden beneath the surface of the game?



The difficulty in decoding habits in children's play

Sometimes it is obvious when a particular “power over” or “power with” habit is dominating, restricting or opening up children's play. Often, however, children are playing with both sides at once. That's another good reason to hang back and attune more before stepping in – to observe patterns over time, as well as how environments might be shaping things.



Activity

Two four year old boys are playing Star Wars. A three year old girl approaches. “Don't let her near us, she's on the Dark Side!” shouts one boy. At first glance, it seems like the girl is being excluded. An educator might quickly step in and foreclose the interaction by encouraging inclusion. Choosing to observe a while longer, the educator notices that – to some extent – the boys' actions are an attempt to invite the girl into their play, albeit on their terms. She is being offered an important role: the baddie. They shift in their play between including and

excluding her. It is almost collaborative, but **also** disempowering and potentially hurtful. The girl stays present but is unsure if she feels safe and welcome, or the opposite. The girl in question is Black British. The boys are White European.

Consider:

- What might a skilled educator do/ask next – or later – as this situation develops?
- To what extent might the children's social or racial characteristics influence whether or how you step in?

Auditing our practice and environment

Inclusion is fundamentally never about children or adults including “them” in “our” play, setting or curriculum. It is about enabling everyone's full participation in **co-creating** play, setting and curriculum afresh, from moment to moment, day to day and year to year.

Educators and managers reading this guide may find it useful to download the tools [From Froebelian Values to Froebelian Setting](#) ²⁰ or [Children's Participation: A Froebelian Toolkit](#) ²¹.

Next steps

- Could you keep a notebook in the setting, including a copy of Jones and Okun's framework ([see page 6](#)), to encourage, to encourage educators to jot down any observations of children's play that may relate to them? Schedule a time a few weeks from now to reflect together on what you've noticed – and what strategies of support you were able to try out.
- Could you make a set of word-picture signs that name / indicate the **antidotes** ("power with" habits) in Jones and Okun's framework, to remind your team – including children and families – of what you are working towards?
- Could you incorporate "Celebrating difference" into your setting's overarching pedagogical principles or core values?

Family engagement

- Could you follow your team learning with some family engagement around the theme of "unity and diversity"?
- For example, could you create a children's "name tree" on the wall that invites families to share why they chose their child's name?
- Or a world map (or national map) that displays where children in your setting have family connections, with different cultural heritage?
- How would you include everyone? How could you extend what you learn together into your play resources/ environments?
- When settling new children, could you routinely ask parents and carers about their cultural background – including foods, festivals or traditions that are special to them?



References and further reading

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Statutory guidance

This guide supports The Equality Act (United Kingdom, 2010). Educators have a legal duty of care to ensure that all children and families feel included in their services and to challenge explicit or covert discrimination. We hope this tool supports you to do that work proactively, not reactively.

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The Froebel Trust funds research into children's learning from birth to eight years and champions early childhood education.

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