

PLAY PEOPLE

JOY PLAY CHILDHOOD MAGIC NATURE

WINDOWS INTO THE WORLD OF PLAY



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Welcome to Play People, an occasional mini-magazine introducing inspirational people for you to meet in your adventure into play.

Each issue will feature a thinker, educator or parent who has given time to piece together their pedagogy and ideas for play and childhood. I hope we'll cover plenty of ground in the coming issues.

If what you read inspires you or presents questions then please get in touch, especially if you'd like to contribute to an issue!!

There are many great educators out there and you are one of them, when you turn the page you will meet another one.

Childhood needs all the advocates it can get its hands on.

It's time for play, it's time for Play People...



PLAY PEOPLE



Meet Fran...

Fran lives in Devon with her family and is incredibly passionate about childhood and its richness, both as a former educator and mother. She is someone that I've been waiting to introduce to you for some time and now here she is.

What follows is an honest and frank window into her world of play, her children and her vision for education in her own words.

I hope what you read resonates with you as much as it did with me,

Greg



Staring at a blank piece of paper knowing you need to fill it can invite a sense of excitement or dread. It is a place of opportunity or, for some, an invitation to fall into an abyss, depending on how much desire you have to write, how much value you place on the act of writing and how much you personally gain from the experience.

This is something all writers know, and something that all home-learning parents are beginning to understand on behalf of their children, as they sit to do battle with home learning. I have grappled long and hard with the idea of the 'battle' over the past few weeks as I read many distraught posts of parents struggling to keep the home 'liveable', cultivate mental well health, bolster partners with stressful work situations, navigate sourcing food safely, or care for vulnerable others.

These things on their own seem work enough without the huge pressure to be logging into online classrooms, suffocating under an avalanche of worksheets or trying to decipher how to teach the unwieldy content being set, often across multiple year groups.





What I am seeing is not home learning as such, but largely (not always), home failing. Do not take this to mean that I don't think learning is occurring, or that parents are not capable of supporting their children, just that it is not happening in the way school leaders are envisaging, and this is making parents and children feel like failures. Activities at best are asking too much sitting, too much writing and too much screen time and at worse inducing stress, fear, confrontation, frustration, tears and anxiety. In place of sitting nicely and doing nicely (as parents are lead to believe should be the scene- do not believe the narrative parents) there appears a performance of writhing agony more suited to the 'dying swan' than to the 'home classroom'. I joke because the gravity of the situation dictates some jest.

There are so many other physical, emotional and social 'loads' to carry, that it feels like a painful stab to the chest to carry yet another layer of guilt over how to raise or educate our children well and why we aren't accomplishing it effortlessly like 'good' parents should. So what can we legitimately let go of? Hopefully by the end of this blog you will realise that doing 'school in the home' is one of them.





Choice

When we sit our children down to follow a home-learning pack from school we are asking the same of our children as I have asked of myself in writing this post, but at the core is the issue of choice. I am compelled to write because my heart and mind are full of questions that I am curious to answer and I enjoy visiting and re-visiting thoughts through my reflections on paper.

If you like, writing is my 'play' but it has taken years for it to feel this way, as I have honed my craft and found joy in my subject matter. If your children are anything like mine, then writing in the context of school-based work in the home, feels so far removed from play that it is unrecognisable. This is the poisoned core of the apple. We seem to have separated, 'the head from the body' (as Loris Magaluzzi put it in his 'A Hundred Languages') and in doing so removed the joy in learning and therefore the desire.

If asked, a child will choose play, every time, over sitting and 'doing' (unless the 'doing' is self-initiated and not being prescribed by grown-ups). So that is exactly what they are trying to do, choose play (and boy is it difficult to challenge in a home full of toys). Meanwhile, we try in vain to teach fractions badly in an environment more suited to play than learning. So how can we prevent them and ourselves becoming emotionally distressed and drained, and what is actually important about learning right now? Are our children actually being failed by learning at home and do they lack desire (as both the Education Secretary and the Head of Ofsted would have us believe?).





Context

I feel it necessary to reflect firstly on context. In a space we have ring-fenced for play and relaxation, joy and connection we have suddenly plonked 'work'. Home is a psychological reprieve for everyone, one in which children don't usually 'do' anything just for 'doing's sake' (even adults working from home struggle to differentiate) and activity is usually focussed on meeting needs. We are surrounded by toys and play things, multitudes of distractions and so many opportunities for physical and mental restoration it is hard to ignore the pull (even the biscuit tin has taken on a new allure, despite the contents being just as dull as before!).

The transition to 'school' activities, separating from absorbed and involved play to put down favourite play things, is inordinately difficult, because there is no physical leaving of them behind. In just the same way the home is a place of comfort and security in which it is rather too easy to find oneself having a nap (a luxury the busy parent rarely has opportunity for now sneaks in during the afternoon slump).

I have lost count of the amount of times, mid-learning, that my daughter has wandered off for a snuggle in her bed, or the boys have requested food because we are at the kitchen table- even in the midst of painting or play dough this phenomenon pervades! To add weight to this theory, even a cursory glance at the home learning pack sends shockwaves of panic, followed by scenes of remonstrations and fierce objections, palpable indignation circulating the room.





A simple question why? Was able to resolve my confusion 'but this is not school – the chairs are different, there are no desks, the windows are looking at trees not grass, there are interesting things to see everywhere and there's no head teacher to make us do it' as my son hit the nail squarely on the head. If I ever need a straight answer, he's the one for the job.

The physical space of home is very different to that of school, and it means something very different. In one online definition Home means a 'congenial environment' and further exploration of the word congenial describes it as 'agreeably suited to one's nature, tastes, or outlook'. In just considering this definition we can understand why a child sees home as THEIR sanctuary.

Their one place in which they get to follow their own desires and unconditionally be themselves. It's the place in which we can be who we wish and we will be loved regardless. In other words, this is their context for choosing and their place for 'being'. Why on earth would we want to take this sanctuary away? They've got a point.





Control

Despite the obviousness that home does not 'feel' like school and that therefore the children don't feel the way they do at school, it was the last line of my son's quote that hit home the hardest- the understanding that school relies on an element of control to encourage conformity. Of course I understood that there was compliance with rules, but the way he voiced it was so blunt.

All children are self-directed, self-motivated learners if they are following their passions, but at school, because they must follow a National Curriculum, there are times when our young children are only working because they are scared of the consequences if they don't. This is the hardest lesson to learn from my son, but perhaps it takes listening to the non-filtered observations of an 8-year-old autistic child who has no desire to comply for the sake of diplomacy, to tell us something important about learning and control. It is of course the heavy and unenviable burden of the outstanding school leadership to inspire conformity of children in large class sizes, with highly stressed staff and minimal resources, to work together to follow a deeply content-saturated and taxing curriculum.

Highly skilled teachers do this through learning that is skilfully differentiated, challenging, exciting and absorbing (although the task they face is unenviably difficult with the depth and breadth of topics they must cover in such short order) but there are times when behaviour systems are used to gain compliance.



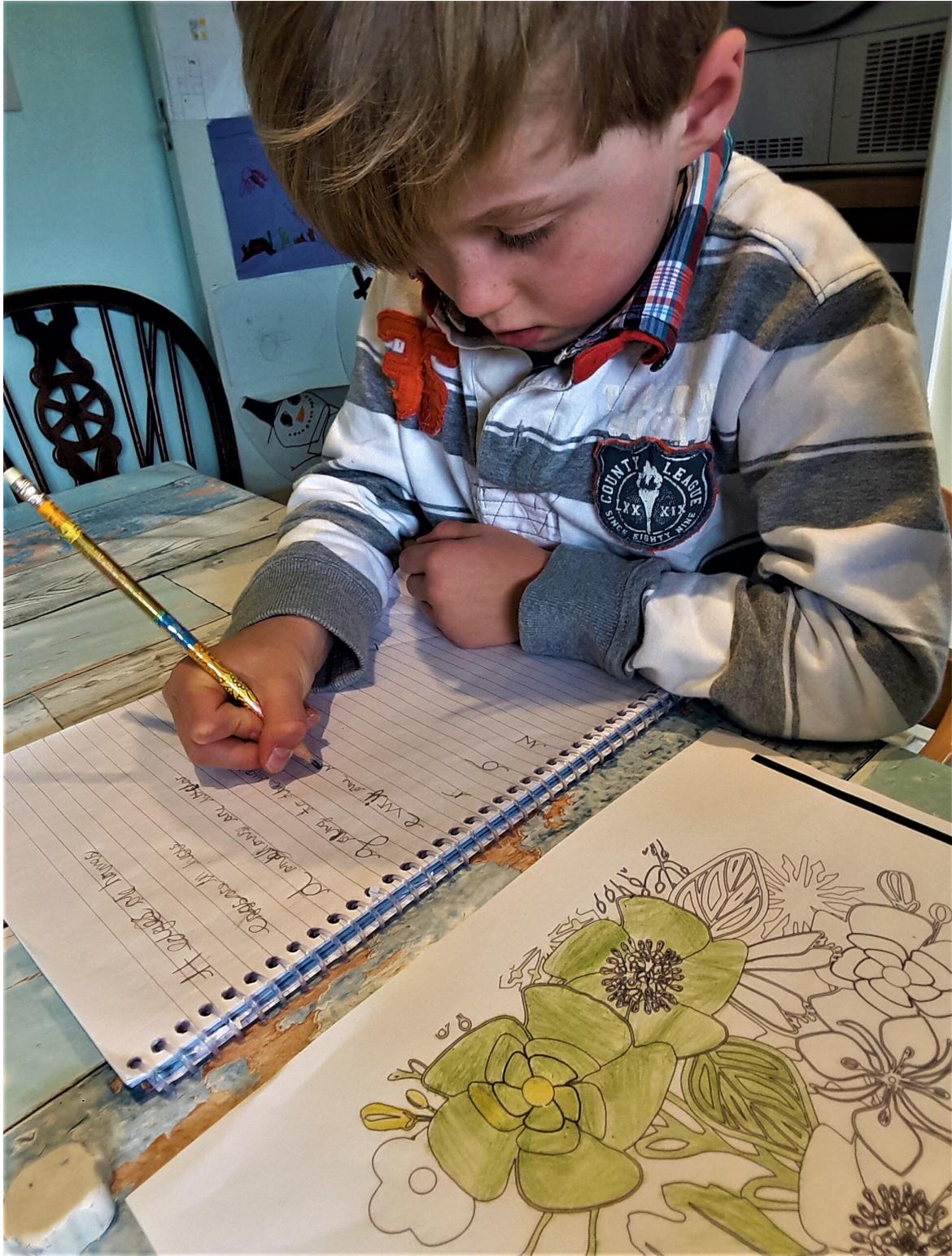


Worksheets cannot replicate this unfettered engagement in the home and neither can parental behaviour. If home is not school, then a parent is not a teacher. Most of us want to nurture our children and work together as a family towards growing children who participate because they want to, are supported by strong boundaries that keep them safe while meeting their needs and have their basis in love and fulfilment.

We don't want to be enforcing compliance with activity for 'activity's sake' because we are being told by someone else that this Curriculum is too important to let go, at a time when lives and livelihoods are being lost. It feels such a triviality to be so focussed on the compliance of children to grammar, reading comprehension or hand-writing practise, at a time of deep uncertainty and crisis.

There seems to be a huge incongruence between the messages we are receiving from schools, the media and the government and the life we are living on the ground. Above all else surely happiness and joy, wellbeing and love must come above enforcement of curriculum aims in our homes?





Content

The concept of happiness brings me neatly onto my next point. Education is about the child first and foremost, and what is a necessary understanding of the world in order to grow into an adult that can be happy, accomplished and independent. What we are talking about is the development of skills and wisdom that will help children to unlock their own opportunities, be successful in their chosen fields and become lifelong learners that are able to, and inspired to, follow their own passions (which will likely transfer and change as they grow).

In his work on education, the influential Swiss Psychologist Jean Piaget is quoted as saying: "Education, for most people, means trying to lead the child to resemble the typical adult of his society ... but for me and no one else, education means making creators... You have to make inventors, innovators—not conformists" (1980, source Wikipedia). Are we sure that the Curriculum actually achieves this? Reading some of the sheets of home learning being sent home and the culture of sit and work that this creates, I am not. In the place where naturally inquisitive and enquiring minds should be seeking out answers to their curious questions through interaction and exploration, the National Curriculum has placed repetitive cursive writing practise for the reception child, grammar so complex I don't even understand it (and spent the whole of my successful adult life not knowing) for the year 3-6 child and Maths so detailed that it is taught in year 3 and not returned to until year 9 in secondary school.





Much of this serves as a cutting lesson to parents that they don't know how to teach their own children, and reminds them of days spent silently sweating over algebraic equations that they were too scared to ask their shouting teacher for help with. Perhaps it's because it isn't largely relevant to the population that we don't remember how to do it (not in itself a reason not to teach it but maybe a pertinent reminder of the age of the children we are teaching it to?).

Google analytics are evidence of this bewilderment in the sharp-rise in searches about Grammar and Mathematical concepts being reported. In addition to re-visiting concepts in the home that most adults have long since disregarded, exists copious amounts of information. So much information that it is bewildering to my own adult brain as I pick up the weighty, weekly home-learning packs for two different school-aged children (thank heaven my littlest is still in preschool as digesting a third pack would have undoubtedly finished me off) and try not to notice the rising panic in my throat.

Reader, I only looked at one week, about three weeks into lockdown (it took me this long to overcome my own overwhelm in order to look). Wonderful, generous, inspiring, conscientious, caring and dedicated teachers have toiled over the creation of these packs and in doing so physically and mentally compromised their own wellbeing, and I have only looked at one week of 7 (and not even fully did I read it, before I replaced it carefully in a stack under the coffee table to wait until I could look a little more). This is not for lack of respect- I know the work that goes into being a teacher in the current climate- but I am physically, mentally, and emotionally unable to manage to digest the complexities inside each pack in enough detail to be able to the coordinate delivery to three excitable and spirited children.



At best I haven't got time, at worst I haven't got the will to do this battle, and in the only oasis of calm we have to protect us from the drama of the world outside, I really haven't got the scope. To those professionals who have toiled, I am sorry- this is by no means your fault. School leaders take note: grateful as we are, home learning in its current format, for the majority, is an unachievable and thankless task. Nor am I sure that it is actually learning that is being pursued, but the generation of 'mini-desk-bound-adults' that look like their work-from-home parents.

We have forgotten simply that children will grow out of play, but they will continue to grow into work for the rest of their lives. And this is such a travesty. I cannot help but ask my confused self why? Why are we making so much stress for so many people in pursuit of stressing out children? It all seems just a little bit futile and highly displaced from the reality of life at the moment. For learning to stick, it has to be relevant and there is so much relevant learning to be found if we could look at what the children ARE actually doing, instead of focussing on what they are not.





Children are already curious and highly motivated to learn in this way as these are all skills and attributes developed through every day play experiences, so why have we stopped noticing this and why have we instead started pushing them through academic learning channels earlier and earlier?

Sadly this is down to the culture of learning that has been created by the ever-expanding National Curriculum. A culture that values objective measurement so blindly that it is completely unable to acknowledge the rapid growth in subjective areas of child development which occur through play (that are also simultaneously harder to measure- and therein lies the rub). This culture has seen the decline in opportunity for free play in schools simply because the outcomes are not easily recorded, tracked, monitored or repeatable on whim to an Ofsted inspector.

In their place has been positioned the worksheet, the test, the assessment cycle, the squeeze of Arts and PE, the shortening of lunch breaks and the written evidence of learning which sees a child sitting at a desk copying, practising, learning alien words and cursive writing instead of playing freely in the sand, clambering over play equipment, visiting the woods or exploring the tuff trays. The purpose of this is simply to assess the competence of a teacher against these measurements and thus to hold schools accountable to data, and not, in fact, to ensure that children get what they really need out of their education (a highly controversial blog post all of its own and definitely not for lockdown reading!).

In the march towards measurability, accountability and quantitative assessment, we have lost the opportunity for children to develop, practise and experience all of the qualitative skills that make them human because qualitative 'soft skills' don't fit into a tick box. Sadly, the tick boxing continues throughout schooling as education attempts to squeeze the evolution of 'child into person' into a robotic assessment criteria checklist (and further on into employability issues and the problems of 'no-exact-level-2-in-the-exact-field' rejection of applications).





Culture

In our own homes we are in the unique position of being able to choose, just for now, what our own culture of learning should look like. What I am seeing in the home packs being sent home and how my children respond to them is telling me everything I need to know about their learning: my highly engaged, inquisitive, self-driven and innovative children are reduced to tears and often frustrated into refusal. Quite frankly, they are overwhelmed and so am I.

Choosing instead, a curriculum that starts with play and is interest-led by the children, has been the best decision I could ever have made. Learning joyfully and purposefully together in this way has brought about stress free opportunity to write, opportunity for mathematical awareness and opportunity to read or notice scientific or artistic principles through a variety of child-initiated, play-led or interest-driven projects that feel so much more relevant to us right now.

The world, to a child, has become an isolated and hostile place, to regard with fear and from which to retreat behind windows and doors, but learning this way is bringing us all joy and opening us up from within the confines of lockdown. Instead of tears we have palpable excitement and laughter over raps written about daddy at his desk and the designing of a new set of Pokémon cards from a collection of 'evolving stones' found on a walk! Where battles may have lain, cooperation resides. Of course there are still times when it is excruciatingly hard (no family living in close proximity, particularly with additional needs, and one partner chained to his desk, can live a life without challenge) but that's when we stop to review how far we have stepped off the path that the children have chosen for us. They will always sharpen the lens if I look more closely.



If I was going to break our learning culture down into mini statements of intent it would read: wellness above work; no doing for doing's sake; start with play; notice the small things; don't be afraid to change tack; let the child lead; read a little, write a little, look a little, talk a little, think a little and laugh a lot.

Your learning culture may look very different, but as long as it is rooted in your own family's needs you won't go far wrong. At this moment in time we have the unique opportunity to re-design the curriculum we follow, taking snippets from the learning packs to re-work for our own purpose, and redefining the learning culture that suits our family, even if just in the short term.





It is the glorious preserve of the parent and child to become masters of their own destiny, even if it only lasts for a few weeks more. If we do this we will have taken one more step towards preserving our children's childhood for a bit longer and restoring our own sanity at a time when there are many other pressing stressors demanding our attention.

This journey starts by considering ourselves an educator instead of a teacher, rooted in the concept of home and not school, with the distinction being that we co-create a learning journey together with our children, rather than imposing it. In this way we stand a better chance of gaining our children's trust, engendering participation and giving them autonomy to lead us a little.

If we are brave, our children will show us everything there is to know about how they learn best, and we will see them in all their self-driven glory for the outstanding teachers and learners that they truly are. If we don't hear them utter 'can I go and play now?' we can be sure that we are on the right track! From one educator to another, it's time to let the children lead.

If you're interested to learn more about how I provide challenge, develop connection, promote wellbeing, follow my children and manage the many trials of raising small children with a variety of needs then I would love a follow or a like on my IG or Facebook account @ahundredjoys - because it all begins with joy.

Take care and stay safe, Fran x



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