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Conclusion

This book is the first systematisation of the theme of play for children with disabilities, within the specific frame of ‘play for the sake of play’.

It was meant to reflect the state of the art about play and children with disabilities up to 2015, to become a useful tool for professionals and researchers in all the related fields, and mainly to establish a point of reference for building up new knowledge on this theme, trying to address the collective scientific discussion towards this new framework.

The International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health is undoubtedly the most authoritative framing of impairment and disability, describing the human functioning as a complex result of a system of interrelations between the persons’ body, the environment in which they live, the personal determinants, and the continuous necessary tension towards activity and participation.

This book wants to lay the groundwork for an overall exploration of the theme of play for children with disabilities. After an overview of children’s play in the literature, in search of firm and shared points of reference, it proposes—through comparison with the existing proposals—its two main classifications, the first concerning the types of play that occur along the child’s development (variously intertwined) and the second relating to the types of disabilities that will be included in the study.

These introductory parts lead to discuss, in more depth, the characteristics that play can assume for children with various types of impairments, according to the studies published at the international level. Then, the text completes the background, thanks to some final chapters that explore the contribution of some disciplines deeply involved in the theme—occupational therapy, special education, early intervention—propose a professional perspective on the assessment and choice of toys, and finally, deal with the main environmental factors that can create barriers to the full deployment of the child’s play.

The chapters’ authors—coming from various countries and different disciplines—were then given a not easy task, mainly due to the fact that they have been requested to treat the theme according to the particular constraints given by the described framework.

The most important challenges they had to face were: a) the existing studies usually treat the concept of play as a well-known and universal one, without adopting a specific definition; b) in particular, the awareness about the difference between play and play-like activities is not represented at all in the literature of play for children with disabilities; and c) a variety of proliferating types of play are presented and explored, but not rooted on precise descriptions, and this contributes to create misconceptions, thus lowering the possibility to open plain debates at a scientific level, to compare the

results of different experimentations, to build new knowledge and new professional practice on the possible new shared findings.

But the main novelty of this text is to stress the concept of ‘play for the sake of play’ and to introduce a specific attention to this interpretation of play in the case of children with disabilities.

In fact, misconceptions of play create some overlapping in the literature between the two constructs of ‘play for the sake of play’ and ‘play-like activities’: and this is even more true when it comes to the case of children with disabilities, where play is almost uniquely considered as a technique to obtain educational improvements or as a clinical evidence to assess the child’s development.

It is only the case to remind here that this creates, in turn, additional theoretical problems, where it happens that ‘play for the sake of play’ starts to be described in the literature as ‘free play’, thus loosing its specific and multifaceted characteristics at an alarming extent, which cannot be confused in a sole shapeless pot. When play is free—that means it is made only for the sake of itself—it might belong to very different types and these ones should be very carefully explored.

Moreover, it is exactly play for the sake of play that is a right for all children and should be claimed for, as testified by the most important international conventions, and should be guaranteed to all children, including those who have some impairments: play activities should be then accessible and inclusive with respect to contexts, tools (toys, playgrounds, and other instruments), support methodologies (if they occur within educational contexts), and relationships. And, this requires a radical change in the societal attitudes and scientific approaches, a specific training for educational, health, and social professionals, but also new directions in the overall policies, including the investment of economic resources.

Play in children with disabilities is a new scientific topic and this book reflects this novelty. It still suffers from some heterogeneity, because a comprehensive theoretical framework is far to be reached in the general literature and it is the first product of a brand-new scientific community, which is at the same time, international and interdisciplinary, thus representing different experiences and cultural climates as well as different scientific fields, which needs to find the most productive way to encounter and create their own language and establish their fundamentals.

As editors of this publication and members of the network ‘LUDI—Play for Children with Disabilities’, we consider this as a first step of the Action’s contribution to the scientific community. Further products will come, developed by the other Working Groups in which the Action is built upon, and the overall LUDI framework will result, at the end, as a sort of construction made of Lego bricks that fit perfectly one with the other to create the final perfect shape.

Many aspects should be further deepened, and we would like to remark here the most important ones.

- The voice of children with disabilities and of their parents should be carefully collected and included, to the point of questioning the findings already reached.

- The role, the type, the characteristics of tools and of technologies should be investigated with respect to the various types of play described, and this will hopefully bring many important suggestions to the field of technology development as well as to the professional practice.
- The various possible roles that adults can assume within and in favour of the children's play activities will be more explored in the next studies: they can be as competent play companions, can use suitable methods for assessment, and can act as supporters of this new scientific topic.
- The inclusive aspects of play should be deeply examined and treated as the only, unavoidable, context to express play for the sake of play: this means to lead the way towards big changes, in attitudes, procedures, and methodologies of intervention; societies at large should become more accessible, more flexible, more open to diversity.

Finally, a natural outcome of the LUDI's work will be to clearly locate play as one of the areas to establish and measure the Quality of Life (QoL) in children with disabilities.

QoL is related to the possibility of being autonomous and to the possibility of inclusively taking part to everyday-life contexts. In children's life, play is crucial to actively experience autonomy and inclusiveness: during play, children can take autonomous decisions and freely organise their activities, they can experience the social dimension of life while interacting with other play companions, peers, or adults.

But autonomy might be often reduced or even precluded to children with disabilities: whenever their functional limitations face environmental factors, which prevent them from making the right and effective experiences, they cannot access play activities in a fruitful and proactive way. In terms of ICF, they can show a disability, due to the physical impairments and/or to wrong, excluding, not usable or not accessible environmental factors: the human field—methods, relationships, social attitudes, and so on—and in the concrete world—objects, architecture, structures, and so on—can, in fact, create barriers that prevent them from participation.

Building up research, knowledge, and societal attention around the topic of play in children with disabilities is one of the fundamental steps towards the possibility to support every child's QoL.

