



Carolyne Chandler is currently the Co-ordinator of Children, Families and Youth Ministry (CFYM) at Croydon Uniting Church— a mid-sized congregation in a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Carolyne's working life began as a primary teacher during this time Carolyne married Paul – who is a lay preacher, secondary teacher and expert in teacher change. After just over 8 years of teaching, she took extended leave to begin a family, and became full time Mum to first David (now 10) and then to Jonathan (now 6) as well. She worked during this time (and still occasionally does) as an educational consultant specialising in maths education. This included writing for and editing a periodical for the Victorian Mathematics Association for a number of years and working with small and large groups of parents, teachers and children. Her move into lay ministry began when she began a playgroup when David was 18 months old – Carolyne has a keen interest in supporting children and families to grow in faith and know the unending love and grace of God, and in encouraging church communities to be “family-friendly” and welcoming to the “unchurched”. Her passions include her ministry, family and cooking, craft and bike riding (the last three when she gets the time!).

# Playing into Faith

*Children's Ministry isn't Play* .... began one article – but isn't it? The article went on to detail one perspective on the importance of taking Children's Ministry seriously, and that's an issue I won't argue with (although their particular perspective is probably not my own), but the title grabbed me, *Children's Ministry isn't Play*, because much of my musing of late has been that Children's Ministry SHOULD be play.

*Man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play.* Heraclitus

## **Where I am coming from...**

When I wear my “other work/career” hat (apart from the best hat of all - as a mum!) I am a primary teacher and educational consultant. I have a particular passion for the first years of school, and for a “hands-on” learning-through-play kind of learning. I am privileged to be one of the chosen replacement teachers at our sons' school – where in the team-taught Prep-One-Two they are implementing an exciting and innovative play-based developmental learning curriculum. I have worked with these teachers in “getting it going” and have been spending time revisiting familiar academic texts and encountering new ones on 'learning through play', talking, playing and exploring with them what this all means.

It is hard to separate my two hats – *Primary School Teacher* and *Children, Families and Youth Worker*. They are both about, in essence, providing opportunities for learning for children and young people, supporting families and making the most of educational opportunities – be they with quite different foci. So musing about play - what it is, why it is important and its role in learning - crosses over both areas.

## **Learnt... not Taught!**

In Children's Ministry I think we are only just discovering the role of play as a model for learning – we have often been too caught in “teaching” and “making it fun”, to see that learning happens through play. Play seems okay in crèche, playgroup or similar programs for young children, but its purpose is seen as “occupying” children whilst parents worship or participate in study or meetings, and with older children it has become what you do when the “real” learning is finished! We haven't seen that the play can act as a vehicle for developing understandings of faith, Bible stories, “doing church” and “being church”.

I'm not for a minute saying that “having fun” is not already part of the picture, or that “teaching” does not have a role in Christian education programs – but I believe strongly that we can learn much from play-based and developmental curriculum understandings – and that the role of play has been severely undervalued in Christian Education and Children's Ministry programs – and it is not just for young children.

We are all too aware that some models of Christian Education have done little to engage or educate those who experience the programs. We are more aware than ever that we are dealing now

with families where parents and children are “unchurched”, where not only the beliefs of our faith are unfamiliar, but also are the stories, symbols and traditions that underpin our faith. We are at a point where it is possible that Peter Rabbit is believed to be a Bible story, and the biblical literacy that has influenced many of our cultures and community is missing for many – including those who are part of the church community. Families often do not have a culture of faith sharing in the home, Bible stories and understandings are scarce and the symbols and traditions of our churches are unfamiliar and foreign. Over recent years programs such as “Seasons of the Spirit” have attempted to embrace understandings of different styles of learning (see “**Choice... for many reasons!**” below for further discussion of this), but we are still a little caught in “tell a story” “everyone do the same activity” models.

The approach suggested here allows for an immersion into tradition, symbols and stories. Where children can play with and explore these – and where families are also exposed to these. It inherently contains choices and selection by the learner, where the same story or experience is encountered time and again in different ways. It doesn’t, however, happen in a vacuum. I see play approaches as **part** of a church community’s life and Christian Education – as part of a faith community which values and includes families. It must be part of a facilitated environment – where worship, activities, conversation and resources are geared and developed to enhance understandings of faith, Bible stories, “doing church” and “being church”. Play must occur within a context of story sharing.

At Croydon Uniting we have modified our Sunday morning Christian Education program – it is now known as Sunday STEPS (Stories Told Experienced Practised and Shared). It is based on the premise that stories told, experienced, practised and shared are stories remembered, and that it is through encountering the stories of our faith that faith develops. The idea is that the three level groups (Stepping Stones 3yr olds – year 2; Stepping Up years 3-5; Stepping Out years 6-8) immerse themselves in a Bible story over a longer period of time, perhaps only encountering two stories during a term. This story would usually be a key extended story from the lectionary. For instance, during second term in 2006 they explored the life of King David – rather than just looking at an episode or two. Each group immerses themselves in the story using different methods, Stepping Stones often use play and

Stepping Up and Stepping Out particularly focusing on different media – puppetry, construction, animation, video etc during the term finishing with a presentation during worship – with play also a component of these groups. Our hope is that the children learn through the stories, play and experiences – rather than expect we are teaching them.

### Sharing the story...

The other main “occupier” of my thoughts of late, therefore, has been the role of story in our lives and in Children’s Ministry – and I think play is intricately connected to story. Often when play is occurring, it is playing through a story – retelling and recreating a story so that it is a part of us.

*Christian education is not the communication of correct views about what the various works and words of Jesus might mean; rather it is the stocking of the imagination with the icons of those words and words themselves... by [telling] stories that hang the icons, understood or not, on the walls of the mind.”*  
Rev. Robert Capon

*In rare moments of deep play, we can lay aside our sense of self, shed time’s continuum, ignore pain, and sit quietly in the absolute present, watching the world’s ordinary miracles. No mind or heart hobbles. No analyzing or explaining. No questing for logic. No promises. No goals. No relationships. No worry. One is completely open to whatever drama may unfold.*  
Diane Ackerman in  
*Deep Play*

### In the big world...

If you google “Faith development through play” you find little. “Spiritual Play” finds you references to Beulah Enterprises<sup>5</sup> which is

<sup>5</sup> **Beulah Enterprises (USA) and I are talking the same language! They are suppliers of a range of materials – many of them to assist with, as they**

valuable, but then some very weird stuff which bears no relationship to this topic! With other googles you find out about “*Godly Play*” and although *Godly Play* is closely related to what I am suggesting – and an approach definitely worth exploring - there is a formality inherent in it (as is typical of a Montessori based approach) and a structure, which although extremely valuable is not the main essence of this discussion. (For further information about *Godly Play* read any of the resource books by its developer Dr Jerome Berryman, or visit <http://www.godlyplay.org/> or <http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/> for overviews and summaries.) I am also not talking about ‘Bible Knowledge’ games and the like, although they may play a part with older children; and I am definitely *not* talking about those games which ‘hijack’ a bible story – like a Noah’s Ark snakes and ladders!

### ***The box theory of play***

I am talking about a “free” type of play. Think back to watching a baby explore a peeled banana. Squashing, mashing, tasting. Discovering by experimenting about so much – discovering through play. Think now of the child playing cook with the kitchen pans – learning about sizes, materials, role-playing mum or dad in the kitchen: learning about life by playing life. And my list could go on.... I am talking about the play you see occurring when children are provided with the opportunity and time to explore, to experience – to play. The time when a child gets more enjoyment and exploring from the box the present came in than the present itself!

### **Choice... for many reasons!**

I am also talking about play where the child makes choices. The child(ren) gets the choice of *what* to play with – it is not “lets all dress-up”, or “lets all now make kites”. Play allows the opportunity to decide what you want to do, or not to do – if everyone HAS to do it, it becomes a task rather than play (it might be a GREAT task – and worthy of a place in your program – but it is not free play!) In play-based learning we can put out items, craft and ideas, and facilitate the type of play we hope for, but the choice belongs with the learner. That often means they will play in different ways than you imagine or plan: it will often be quite different, but they often will surprise you with how much they have explored, learnt, understood and processed and also surprised you with the understandings they have come to – and sometimes that learning is more profound

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**call it “Spiritual Play”. Although not all items would be my choice – but many are fabulous! A great source for ideas.**  
[www.beulahenterprises.org/](http://www.beulahenterprises.org/)

than we would expect. Choice also allows children to approach the learning in their own learning style. Many different models of defining learning styles exist, but whichever model you use, they all agree that we don’t all learn the same! Howard Gardener’s theory of multiple intelligences (a widely respected and accepted theory of intelligence) identifies eight different areas of intelligence (Linguistic, Musical, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Bodily-Kinaesthetic, Interpersonal, Intra-personal and Naturalist), and at least two other areas are under examination for inclusion. Play-based approaches provide a range of play experiences for children to select from – and they can then choose an experience that not only appeals to them, but also will most likely reflect their own learning style or intelligence profile.

### ***Play-based learning...***

*Research has shown us that children are thinking, observing and reasoning and building mental models of their world right from the beginning<sup>6</sup>. This is as true of faith as it is of other things. This also shows that creating play environments is as true for very young children as for older ones. As well as making sure that we must be aware of the implicit learning that occurs – without our planning. If a space and community is welcoming and child and family friendly – this will be learnt by those who encounter it – and it will say something of how we live our lives as communities of the followers of Christ.*

*Research also shares that children learn best in informal settings which recognise and work with children’s previous learning and experiences, with a mixture of child-directed and teacher-directed activities – and where they model appropriate language, values and practices. Research as applicable in faith formation environments as standard educational settings. Learning must also clearly be based on real-life shared experiences. So this implies that when a story is shared and encountered together the best opportunities for learning from that story are made.*

Recent studies (over a five year period) have revealed that young children can learn more if they are allowed to play in the sand at school, rather than sitting still in formal lessons. The USA National Foundation for Educational Research argues for more access to “play-based” learning and suggests that schools should “allocate resources to enable children to

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<sup>6</sup> David, Tricia, ‘*What do we know about teaching young children?*’ (A Professional User Review of UK (and other) Research, Canterbury Christ University College 2003

experience some play-based activities that give access to opportunities such as sand and water, role play, construction and outdoor learning".

*"Play is fun and important to young children's intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. Through play, children learn problem-solving, interpersonal skills, communication, and other skills integral to success in school and life."* So states a summarising brochure of the zerotothree organization (USA) which amongst other things collects and shares current research and best practice<sup>7</sup>.

### **How does it fit... and what can happen?**

So I ask – how do we make all this fit into approaches for children's faith and spiritual development? Listed are some ideas I have and am trying out - and that is it, I am still trying – there is no great research project, no assessment of its success per se – but the research that 'play is how children learn' is overwhelming, we just haven't really listened to this in the church before!

### **Some stories of playing into faith...**

Through playing houses children explore and try our ideas about how houses and homes work; the same occurs when playing schools, or doctors, or shops. So the same should be true about church and worship. You may have seen the child "leading" worship whilst their parents cleaned or worked around the church, I'm a little embarrassed to say our boys once played "church meeting" with their toys! I have purchased a lovely wooden set which has a simple church shape, communion table, lectern and baptismal font, with a minister and people to "play church" with. This set is occasionally set out in our worship space's family corner – where children can play quietly during worship. One Sunday the children (without any prompting or direction) took the pieces and played out a baptism. Appropriate words were said - the story of baptism was told. It was interesting to note that it was a group of eight years old, not the younger children I expected would play with the set. Whilst retelling the story in their own way, it could be observed that the children had a deep understanding of not only the process of baptism – but also the meaning. Words such as "welcoming you into our church family" and "we do this because God loves us" were used as they played out the baptism.

On Pentecost Sunday, rather than the normal Sunday STEPS program (outlined elsewhere) the children came into a space set out with a range of Pentecost play items. These included:

- Environmental items: red fabric cloths, red ribbons, red paper, birthday decorations, big kite
- Items to explore images/symbols of Pentecost: red playdough with candles (to make birthday cakes); flame wooden puzzles; balancing doves; bubbles and balloons; spinners and wind play; birthday card to the church to decorate; items to make flames and doves; stamping with kite and balloon stamps...
- Books to retell the story of Pentecost

The children played with the materials and craft, they talked of celebrations and birthdays, we talked and constructed and shared the symbols of fire and wind and of the Holy Spirit. We played into Pentecost.

A range of similar concept items have been used at Lent/Easter and Advent/Christmas. Items including dress-ups, construction, dolls, magnet sets, puzzles, puppets, books, blocks, sand trays and play sets help provide the props for playing into the different liturgical seasons.

Noah's Ark was played into with not only animals and an ark, but with rainbows and doves. Various retellings – particularly those who go beyond just lots of animals! – were shared in picture story books and finger puppet sets. We painted rainbows, and played under rainbow fabric. We remembered that the story is more about God's love and promise than just animals.

These items, and those like them have been used in our family corner (in our worship space), at Sunday STEPS, at Playgroup and Music Together (our pre-school mid-week programs). It has been fascinating to see not only the children playing and interacting, but also to hear the adult discussion: "The play cloth colour changes with the other colours in church – I see why it's green now!", "Why is a butterfly an Easter thing?" – so they also open up the opportunity for conversation.

### **Why wouldn't we?**

Research shows us clearly that children (and some contributors to this discussion would say all of us) learn through, and learn well through, play. Why would those who educate for faith ignore this? Take a chance – and play! - *You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.* Plato

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<sup>7</sup> [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)