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# Playwork, Play Deprivation, and Play

## An Interview with Fraser Brown

Fraser Brown, Professor in playwork and Lecturer at Leeds Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom, has become best known in North America over the last decade for helping expose the plight of abandoned and abused Romanian orphans. Brown advocates for environmental design strategies that enrich children's play environments, and he is the author, editor, or coauthor of a number of works, including two that are forthcoming: *Playwork: Theory and Practice*; *Foundations of Playwork*; *The Venture: A Case Study of an Adventure Playground*; *Rethinking Children's Play* and *Play and Playwork: Reflections on Practice*. In the interview that follows, Brown discusses the development of playwork as a discipline, a child's inherent right to play (and the consequences of denying that right), the challenges of the noninterventionist approach, and the inventive, exuberant games he observed among Roma children in small villages in Transylvania. **Key words:** play among Roma children; play deprivation; playwork; Romanian orphans

**American Journal of Play:** Dr. Brown, what is playwork?

**Fraser Brown:** The essence of playwork is this: Children learn and develop while they play. The benefits of play are both immediate and for the future. In many modern Western societies, children are no longer free to play in the way that their parents' generation used to. This is potentially dangerous both for the individual child and for society in general. The role of the playworker is to create the conditions that make it possible for children to play freely.

**AJP:** How did you become interested in playwork?

**Brown:** During my final student vacation from college, I was sitting in a park in a seriously disadvantaged area of London watching some people in track suits trying to engage a small group of children in some informal games. The children clearly were not interested. I started chatting to a friend about how badly organized it all was, and then we rather arrogantly discussed how we could do much better. Within a week we were running our own play scheme in the same park with more than two hundred children and a lot

of scrounged materials, including giant puppets, cardboard boxes, and an enormous inflatable cube. I remember that on the first afternoon I became completely convinced this was something worth doing with my life. When I left college, I applied for the first suitable job I saw advertised—namely for an adventure-playground worker in Runcorn, near Liverpool. I was fortunate enough to get the appointment. That was back in the 1970s when the UK government was spending a lot of money on supervised play facilities.

**AJP:** How did playwork grow as a discipline? Who influenced it chiefly?

**Brown:** The early days of playwork, in the 1950s and 1960s, were characterized by playwork evangelists like Drummond Abernethy, the great proponent of adventure playgrounds, and Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who started the first adventure playground for disabled children. They were greatly influenced by the Danish architect Carl Theodor Sorensen, who had written about junk playgrounds where children could imagine, shape, and create their own reality. In the 1970s, people such as Joe Benjamin and Bob Hughes provided the germ of ideas that playworkers now take for granted—they thought children should be in control of their own play places and the value of enriched play environments.

In the 1980s, Hughes along with Hank Williams made the first attempt to develop some solid theoretical grounding for playwork practice. That period also saw playwork trainers and managers making widespread use of SPICE—social interaction, physical activity, intellectual stimulation, creative achievement, and emotional stability—although they usually misrepresented the original concept. Since then, a number of writers have advanced playwork theory, but most tend to focus on biological, psychological, and evolutionary models of play and playwork to the detriment of sociological and developmental models.

**AJP:** What is the nonintervention directive of playwork?

**Brown:** Nonintervention is a fundamental playwork idea that the playworker's role is to provide the sort of free play opportunities that have been taken away by an increasingly overprotective and suspicious society. Therefore, playworkers avoid interfering too readily in situations that might be perceived by some to be dangerous.

**AJP:** How do playworkers resist the urge to meddle?

**Brown:** Playworkers have to develop an approach of dynamic risk assessment—one that constantly assesses the level of risk against a child's natural inclination to explore and experiment. In that sense, safety and security are

not incompatible with free play. Once you have spent time with children sitting round a campfire, you realize that most of them are just as aware of the dangers as you. Of course, this approach carries its own risks but, in the words of Lady Allen of Hurtwood: “Better a broken arm than a broken spirit.”

**AJP:** Is it possible to separate enabling and empowering children from supervising or leading them?

**Brown:** Enabling and empowering are concepts that sit at the very heart of playwork. In the 1970s when I started in this field, we were called playleaders. At almost every meeting I attended in those days, someone complained about that label because they did not see themselves as people who took the lead, but rather more as people who followed the lead given by the children. We started calling ourselves playworkers because we wanted to retain the reference to play but at the same time emphasize the professional nature of the work.

There are obviously elements of supervision in playwork because playworkers are under a legal obligation to make sure children do not hurt themselves. However, we rarely carry out that role in the didactic way that a teacher might. There is no sense of the playworker as legal arbiter or moral adviser. Playworkers feel obliged to split up a fight, but they do not see it as their role to lecture children about the rights and wrongs of fighting.

**AJP:** Does this help explain why playwork has not caught on in the United States the way it has in Great Britain?

**Brown:** That’s not for me to say. It is already the case that insurance claims have had an impact on playwork practice in the UK, and I have the impression that the United States is a far more litigious society than the UK. Ironically, when insurance companies actually defend cases in the UK, they tend to win. The problem is that it is easier and cheaper to settle out of court, with the result that we see newspaper reports of parents being awarded thousands of pounds for their child’s broken arm. That in turn encourages more parents to make a claim. It might well be that the situation would be even more extreme in the United States.

**AJP:** Are there dangers in this current trend toward risk aversion?

**Brown:** Yes—obvious ones such as the creation of boring playgrounds for children and the reduction of playtime in schools. However, I think there is one very fundamental consequence that outweighs all others. Children’s play is often chaotic and unpredictable. Educational and local authorities do not

like that, and instinctively they seek to control it—often under the guise of health and safety. In short, the child’s right to play is routinely ignored by local authorities, teachers, the police, and community associations who are overly adverse to risk.

**AJP:** When children miss the opportunity for free, outdoor play, what do they lose?

**Brown:** They lose a range of opportunities that have been available to children throughout history: social interaction, physical activity, cognitive interaction with the environment, and the availability of private space. The fact that they are not out there in the local environment has a double deficit: they have no sense of their own local geography, and they are not known in their local environment, which means people are less likely to help if they get into trouble. Bob Hughes suggests there may be even more fundamental problems, namely that children are not getting the sort of recapitulative opportunities that he feels children need in order to stave off neuroses in later life—opportunities to dig, to light fires, and the like.

**AJP:** You once undertook a play-value research project. How did that advance your playwork?

**Brown:** That project was my doctoral research. I attempted to find a way of assessing the play value of fixed equipment playgrounds. One of its outputs was a play-value assessment tool, which has subsequently been used in connection with research in schools and children’s museums. A variation of the tool was used in my research with chronically abandoned and abused children in a Romanian pediatric hospital.

**AJP:** How did you become involved in studying abandoned and abused children in Romania?

**Brown:** One of our playwork students, Wanda Smith, had worked with abandoned and abused children in Romania prior to enrolling at Leeds. For the experiential-learning element of her course, she went back to Romania, to an orphanage in Bucharest. My wife and I went out to visit her and were deeply moved by what we saw. We came back to the UK and got involved with a Leeds-based charity called White Rose Initiative. The group worked largely in the Transylvania area.

A couple of years later, Cornel Puskas, the director of hospitals in one of the larger towns there, approached White Rose Initiative after discovering a group of sixteen children who had been living in a pediatric hospital since they were abandoned as infants. They were tied to their cots and had almost certainly spent their whole lives in the same hospital ward. They

sat gently rocking and staring into space. All aspects of their development were chronically delayed.

*AJP:* What did Puskas propose?

**Brown:** Having read about Harry Harlow's classic work with isolate-reared baby monkeys, he hoped that employing someone to play with these children might help them recover some sort of equilibrium. He asked White Rose Initiative if they could employ someone to work with the children.

White Rose Initiative hired Edit Bus, the first Romanian playworker, and brought her to the UK, where she spent some of her time working in a hospital with a play specialist and some working in a nursery with a nursery teacher. At the end of each day, she spent at least an hour with me reflecting on that day's experiences and trying to figure out how she might apply her learning to working with the abandoned children back in the Sighisoara Pediatric Hospital. Edit returned to Transylvania and began working with the children in late 1999, and early the next year, Sophie Webb, one of our UK students, went out to work with Edit for the experiential-learning element of her Leeds course.

*AJP:* What did they do each day?

**Brown:** The two playworkers had to untie the children every morning, bathe them, feed them, change their nappies, and then take them to our rudimentary playroom, where they worked with the children all day. When they left in the evening, the nurses went into the ward and tied the children up again. The children were not fed or bathed and their nappies were not changed until the next morning when Edit and Sophie returned.

*AJP:* Did the children change as a consequence of the playworkers' efforts?

**Brown:** I went to visit them after about six months and was truly amazed by what they had achieved in such a short space of time. The children were no longer sitting rocking, staring vacantly into space; they were playing together with lots of noise and laughter. Several children had learned to walk properly, and they were beginning to engage with their environment in creative and imaginative ways.

*AJP:* What did you make of the changes?

**Brown:** It immediately struck me that we might be witnessing something unique. Nothing changed in the children's daily routine other than their experience with the playwork project. For that reason, although it is not possible to state categorically that the children's play experiences caused the changes, I find it reasonable to say they were a direct result of the children's experience

in the playwork project itself. In terms of assessing the causes of development of individual children, this is extremely unusual—as I said, possibly even unique. In most cases, it is not remotely possible to link developmental change to any specific input into a child’s life because there are so many unpredictable and unrelated influences on most children’s lives. However, here we had a situation where there was a single and quite distinct change that could be identified as being the cause. Subsequently I recruited Sophie Webb to act as my colleague in studying and analyzing the developmental changes that occurred throughout the first year of the playwork project.

**AJP:** How did those responsible for the Romanian children receive you and your playworker colleagues?

**Brown:** Members of Cornel Puskas’s administrative staff generally respected my being a doctor from the West: they gave us widespread access, and nobody interfered with our approach at an official level. The nurses, however, placed obstacles in our way at every turn. They were especially unhelpful to Edit and Sophie. This continued for about eighteen months, until eventually the nurses began to be more respectful of the children. Then the nurses started cleaning the ward regularly, they no longer tied the children up at night, they began to properly feed and bathe them, and they even began to play with them after the playworkers had left for the night.

**AJP:** Did you observe negative effects from confinement and play deprivation other than those you have already mentioned?

**Brown:** The children were far too small for their ages, and they showed clear evidence of muscle wasting. Some showed signs of having developed rickets. They were chronically insecure, and they feared the sound of loud voices. We also witnessed their self-harming. In addition to those very fundamental problems, there were a wide range of slightly less shocking, but nonetheless significant revelations. For example, we worked with one ten-year-old child who had no speech and with six-year-olds who did not know what to do with a ball or a pencil, something we would take for granted in our own children.

**AJP:** Is it possible for children to recover from such long-term sensory and emotional deprivation?

**Brown:** As a result of this work, I feel thoroughly optimistic that it is possible for children to recover most of their normal development, given time and the right circumstances. I am convinced they can catch up with their age group in terms of their social, physical, cognitive, and creative abilities. I am

less certain about the possibility of a complete recovery of their emotional equilibrium. That is not to say such children would be unable to play an active and fulfilling role in society. However, I have reason to think they would remain emotionally fragile and more needy than most. Overall, the conclusions we have published from this work are generally positive and optimistic and challenge much of the received wisdom about ages and stages of development and the general hopelessness of the life chance of children who are abused in their early years.

**AJP:** You seem indebted to your students for this aspect of your career. Are you?

**Brown:** Absolutely. If it were not for Wanda Smith, I would not have become involved in Romania at all. Sophie Webb became a trusted colleague and coauthor of several articles. Her research diary, kept during the first three months of her time in Romania, is among the most moving things I have ever read, and I am including it in a forthcoming book, *Play and Playwork: Reflections on Practice*. These are not the only students who have inspired me during the last fifteen years. I can think of at least a dozen others who have had considerable impact on the way I teach and on the content of my writing.

**AJP:** How did your initial study of abandoned and abused Romanian children lead you to study the play of other Romanian children?

**Brown:** I have been working with disadvantaged groups in Romania for the past fifteen years. The therapeutic work in the pediatric hospital led to the establishment of the Aid for Romanian Children charitable trust in 2003. In recent years, we have worked extensively with Roma children and families, providing food, medicines, housing repairs, education programs, and summer camps run by students from Leeds Metropolitan University. The Roma, known locally as *tsigan* or gypsies, routinely face discrimination in jobs, housing, education, and even access to medical care, despite such discrimination being illegal within the European Union.

**AJP:** What is life like for Roma children?

**Brown:** The Roma children in Transylvanian villages are the most materially deprived children in Europe. Most of them live in overcrowded homes made from wood and mud, with no running water, power, or sanitation. The children have no personal possessions at all. The only toys are those donated by charities or scrounged from rubbish in nearby towns. Whatever the children own, they must share with everyone else. This is not really a result of their spirit of community, but rather more because there is no

way of keeping anything private. This region is noted for the misery of its winters, when temperatures can fall as low as minus 13 degrees Fahrenheit, and children die from disease and malnutrition. Infant mortality hovers around 4 percent.

*AJP:* Does poverty at that level lead to play deprivation?

**Brown:** It might surprise people to hear me say I do not think so. My research during the summer of 2009 found that despite their material deprivation, these Roma children are not deprived of play. Indeed, their play is extremely social and highly creative, and these children are among the happiest you are ever likely to meet.

*AJP:* How do you account for this?

**Brown:** Maybe it has something to do with the strength of their common culture. Maybe it is the wonderful sunny weather in summer. Maybe it is because they are free to play wherever and with whatever they want. Maybe it is because they are playing with close friends and relations. Whatever the cause, the energy and the exuberant joy of the summer months are there for all to see.

*AJP:* What methodologies did you use in studying play with the Roma children?

**Brown:** My original intention was to use a mixed-methods approach—a combination of observations of children in the public arena and structured interviews through a local interpreter. In practice, the interviews proved extremely difficult to conduct, as the children had no understanding of the concept of an interview. They either interpreted the exchange as a sort of test or as a completely inexplicable event, with the result that there was very little variety in the answers. I also quickly became aware that some of the questions were inappropriate. For example, one of the questions asked for information about what the children played when they were alone. Most of the respondents looked confused about this, and it soon became apparent that these children are never alone. Another question asked about special places to play, but the children commonly play all over the village in a communal manner, so they had hardly any concept of personal space. After twelve unproductive interviews, I abandoned that approach and decided to concentrate on the naturalistic observation of the real-life social and emotional experiences of about 150 children.

*AJP:* Did your background in playwork help?

**Brown:** It is hard to be sure whether observed play behaviors are normal, everyday occurrences or merely evidence of the children responding to the influ-

ence of the adult. However, playworkers are less likely than most adults to fall into the trap of leading play. The playworker regards it as fundamental that the child's agenda should be taken as the starting point for any adult-child interaction. Playworkers wait to be approached; we avoid behaving like adults and try to set aside adult prejudices. We respond to children's cues rather than instigating activity. Therefore, I would certainly argue that my playwork background was helpful in enabling me to blend into the background.

*AJP:* What was your reception like in the Roma village? Did you rouse suspicion?

**Brown:** It was certainly necessary to take precautions. The Roma are justifiably suspicious of outsiders, so we took no video footage despite the magical moments we were witnessing. I conducted no observations after dark even though the children certainly do not stop playing after sunset. I also explained the project through an interpreter in simple language to anyone who questioned my presence in the village. I paid none of the participants and mentioned none by name. I thought about questions of informed consent and whether the questions unfairly detained the children. Researchers should always question whether children ever feel powerful enough to withdraw, but this is less of a problem for a playworker. I have worked with children for more than thirty years and have developed a strong awareness of when children have had enough.

*AJP:* What did you find?

**Brown:** First, I found that like almost all children, the Roma children will play everywhere and with anything. Their attitude toward property may be even more anarchistic than children elsewhere. They wander from yard to yard in a way that opens up all sorts of play opportunities that would not be available in cultures where fences enforce the concept of private property.

*AJP:* Can you give an example?

**Brown:** Yes. I witnessed an example on one of my last days in the village, when children acted out an elaborate role play in the front yard of the house next door. The Romanian version of rummy is played with a set of bones (plastic tablets with card symbols on one face) and involves making combinations similar to poker (numerical runs, three of the same number, collections of the same suit, and so on). Each player has fourteen bones, which they arrange on a wooden rack. The object is to collect sets of three or four bones until you have used all fourteen game pieces. Players take turns picking up bones from the stack and throwing away unwanted bones.

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I watched a group of men playing this game one evening sitting around a table in the yard next door to my usual observation point. Each time someone lost, he had a garland of leaves placed on his head. The more he lost, the more leaves were added to the garland. There was a lot of laughter and a great amount of arguing and shouting involving participants and audience alike.

The next afternoon, a group of children wandered into the same front yard, positioned themselves around the same table, and began to play a mock game of rummy. They role played exactly what I had witnessed the day before. They used old roofing tiles as a rack for their nonexistent bones. They did a lot of shouting and awarded penalties by making the losers wear a garland of leaves just like the adults. The game of rummy was not in any way real, but they played it for more than an hour. Even more amazing, they gathered an audience of young children who stood and watched for the last thirty minutes, joining in with the arguing and shouting.

**AJP:** Were these children less constrained than children in the UK and the United States might be?

**Brown:** In some ways, yes. The bones example illustrates children's imagination and creativity, but it also demonstrates the value of freedom in play. The children were free not only to come and go as they pleased but also to control the intent and content of their play. It is unlikely that the role play would have happened in my culture—where “an Englishman's home is his castle”—because people who come through the garden gate uninvited are regarded as intruders. Also we English tend, still, to believe that “children should be seen and not heard.” The fact that the children felt free to noisily occupy the same space that had been the scene of the original game made the role play that much more real for the players and their audience. These children learned that they are capable of controlling what Brian Sutton-Smith has called their own little microcosm of the world.

**AJP:** So is this type of play less likely to occur in the gardens and yards of Britain and America?

**Brown:** Yes. Interacting with the environment is fundamental to children's future development, and this needs to take place at a very basic, elemental level. For us in the playwork world, a healthy play environment contains lots of opportunities for children to dig holes, light fires, play with animals, and so on. In the Roma village, those opportunities exist in abundance,

and the children take full advantage of them. Most of our yards do not afford that type of play.

Here is another example: on one occasion a number of children came into the yard where I was sitting and began to dig into a pile of rubble, which had been stored in readiness for cementing a swing-set foundation. The children filled buckets, which they then transported about a meter away and tipped into another pile. Eventually, they transported the whole pile back again. This took nearly an hour and involved a great amount of discussion. Without question, this activity had physical and intellectual benefits, but it was clear that the most immediate outcome for the children was the social satisfaction of being part of a shared activity.

**AJP:** How about animals? Is relative scarcity a constraint for British and American children in much the same way?

**Brown:** It is, and here I think of the “Big Turkey Race” that the children staged. There is a woman in the village who keeps ducks, geese, cows, and other animals. The turkeys in particular roam around the top end of the village unhindered. Remember, these children play with anything and everything. On this occasion, two boys created a racetrack and invented turkey racing. The track was delineated with bits of wood, string, and rocks. Each child chose a turkey and held it at the starting line until one of the two boys gave the signal to begin the race. The children then encouraged their turkey to run along the track, sometimes merely by standing behind it clapping, sometimes by tapping it with a stick. Each race took about ten minutes because the turkeys were not especially cooperative. Later the same day, the boys tried a similar game with ducks only to find the ducks were even less enthusiastic than the turkeys.

**AJP:** Would you say that scarcity of toys does not constrain the Roma children?

**Brown:** I would; it really does not. The children find objects that afford them play in ways that enhance their inventiveness. Here I am thinking of Simon Nicholson’s theory of loose parts, which holds that the degree of creativity and the potential for discovery are directly proportionate to the number of variables and possibilities in the environment. In this village, the number and kind of variables is enormous in one way and miniscule in another. On the one hand, the children seem to regard anything left lying around as something that may be played with. On the other hand, they have no personal possessions such as toys or board games. The artifacts they play with are almost entirely recycled scrap. This may be slightly dangerous at

times because of the splinters and sharp edges. Clearly, rooting around in a garbage dumpster for your next plaything carries with it health and safety risks. However, it definitely encourages combinatorial flexibility—a process which Jerome Bruner long ago suggested is the initial building block for human creativity.

*AJP:* What other types of loose parts became playthings for the Roma children?

**Brown:** In one example, they bowled an old bicycle tire along like a hoop and then used it as a Hula Hoop. Eventually when they discarded it, two children claimed the hoop and twisted it into a figure of eight around each other. Then they hopped down a hill and ultimately tumbled into a heap at the bottom. Despite cuts and bruises, they repeated this at least a dozen times. In another instance, children used a piece of corrugated iron roofing as a channel to convey water from one bucket to another and back again; an upturned dish doubled as a hat. They used fertilizer sacks to create a contest, not as you might think by hopping along in the sack like a traditional sack race, but with the sacks covering their heads while they negotiated an obstacle course. Some children found a long length of bright blue string and used it first to delineate a playing area and then as an improvised net for a game of football tennis. They tied up grass in a sheaf, with one narrow end that made a kind of spear or arrow when tossed into the air. They also used this as a tag wand in a game of chase—the sheaf being thrown by the chaser.

*AJP:* They made multiple uses of just about anything then?

**Brown:** Usually, yes. They used a large piece of polystyrene foam as a goalpost, but it blew away when the wind rose. They chased it down, then used it to model a face. A plastic bottle with a string tied around the neck made a musical noise when swung round. Alternatively, they held the string in one hand while kicking the bottle from each other. On another occasion, the children tied the string fairly tightly round a telegraph pole and hammered flat nails in a circle around the pole to stop the string from slipping down. Then the bottle became a kind of swing ball kicked with feet rather than swatted with racquets. This did not work very well, but it certainly illustrated the creativity of the players.

*AJP:* Did you also observe games that provided intellectual stimulation?

**Brown:** Not in an obvious way, like playing a game of chess or Scrabble, but most of what I have just described has elements of cognitive stimulation, inasmuch as the children are learning to calibrate size, weight, and the like.

*AJP:* Did you observe rough-and-tumble games?

**Brown:** One of the main characteristics of play in the village is the very physical nature of the interactions. There was a lot of falling down, because of the rough terrain, and lots of shouting and tears. But these are pretty hardy children, and they get back to playing as soon as the tears stop. Very often they return to playing the same game as the one that resulted in the accident in the first place. I witnessed small children playing a game that involved trying to slap each other's face while at the same time dodging out of the way. Canadian anthropologist Michael Salter calls this type of activity a "terminal game," a game with an inevitable outcome that is not intended but nevertheless predictable.

*AJP:* Did you find other examples of less than gentle games?

**Brown:** The forfeits involved in the children's games were unusual. For example, as I have noted, losers sometimes have to wear a garland of leaves on their head. More often, a stripe of toothpaste is smeared onto the loser's face. Sometimes the children's games have quite scary outcomes. For example, games of cops and robbers are generally played at nighttime. Any robber who gets caught is likely to be tied up and left all alone for a while. I heard of one game during which the robber was taken to a nearby field where he was tied to a tree and left there for hours, and I was assured that was not unusual.

*AJP:* Do you see a danger in romanticizing play or glossing over its occasionally strenuous character?

**Brown:** That aspect of play theorizing is now commonplace, and I feel it is quite dangerous because it paints a completely unrealistic picture of what it means to play. This in turn means that adults are shocked when they witness children engaging in types of play that are totally natural. This is at the heart of school rules that ban play fighting and exhort children to "play nicely."

*AJP:* Can playing rough games actually teach children fair play?

**Brown:** I am not suggesting that rough games should be encouraged, but they should not be discouraged, as children can benefit so much from that sort of play. They learn about boundaries, hierarchies, and the role of status. Furthermore, rough games often provide opportunities for close physical contact, which we know is important for our emotional equilibrium.

*AJP:* Did any of the games you observed look familiar?

**Brown:** Some games, such as football—soccer in the United States—and tennis

are the same as elsewhere in the world, albeit they are not always played with the standard equipment. Some other games are essentially local variations on well-known games. For example *baldog*, which is played with five tin cans, a bucket, and lots of old tights made into a soft ball, is a complicated variation on dodge ball. A game that has similarities to hopscotch involves a chalked grid of two rows of three boxes. Starting on the left-hand side, the boxes are numbered upwards: 1, 2, 3; then back down the right-hand side: 4, 5, 6. A stone is thrown into the square marked 1. The player then tries to move the stone from 1 through to 6 while hopping on one leg. The aim is to work around the grid, starting at square 1, then starting at square 2, and so on round all six squares.

Roma kids use coins in a two-player game very much like marbles. The players agree on a target line in the mud, sand, or grass. Player 1 throws the coin, aiming to get as near to the target line as possible without going over. Player 2 does the same. They continue throwing until one player thinks she has thrown her coin close enough to the other coin to be able to touch both coins with the span of her hand. If she can do so, she wins both coins. If not, the other player wins both coins.

**AJP:** Did the children invent games with complex rules?

**Brown:** Yes. *Cik*, like *baldog*, uses balls made of old tights. Its players stand with one foot in a hole in the ground before they bat the ball away and run the game course. There are a number of quite detailed rules, and the object for both teams is to get to their feet into the holes.

The most complicated game I came across was *picka*, which translates as pick. The game is played with two sticks, one around twenty-four inches long with a point at one end and one around five inches long with two pointed ends. Any number can play in two teams. The teams take turns; one team hits, the other tries to catch. The smaller stick is laid over a small hole in the ground and the position is marked clearly. The larger stick is pushed under it by the first player, who uses it to flick the smaller stick as far as possible. If an opposition player manages to catch it, then the hitter is out, and the next person is in—rather like baseball, or what we in the UK call rounders. If the stick is not caught, then the second move is to use the larger stick to flick the smaller stick in the air and hit it as far as possible. That is done by hitting one end of the small stick downwards with the larger stick, which makes it spring upwards and allows it to be hit again, sometimes a long way by a skilled player. The player gets three attempts at

this. Wherever the stick finally lands, the player then estimates how many stick lengths there are between that point and the starting point. If there is no challenge to his claim, the player is awarded that many points. If the other players think he is overestimating, they can challenge and measure the distance. If the player has overestimated, he is awarded no points and is out. If he has not overestimated, he is then awarded double points. If while attempting to strike the stick he has missed, one of the other players can put the stick on his foot and flick it back towards the starting point, doing this as many times as there were misses. The hitter then lays the big stick down on the starting point, and the thrower gets one chance to hit it with the small stick. If he fails, the hitter gets another turn from the start. The game continues until all the teams are out. A note is made of the total points, and the other team then takes their turn, trying to amass more points.

**AJP:** In our two countries, might individuals and groups concerned about risk in play consider this game dangerous?

**Brown:** Yes. With sticks flying through the air, this can be quite a dangerous game.

**AJP:** Are the rules in *picka* open to flexible interpretation or negotiation?

**Brown:** In my experience, the children argued long and loud about the rules until a respected adult walked by. That person was then asked to adjudicate, which always seemed to be done with absolute certainty. In other words, by the time the children reach their teenage years, they seem to know the rules inside out, so I suppose I am saying there does not appear to be much flexibility in the rules.

**AJP:** Did you find examples of games specific to girls?

**Brown:** Roma girls do a lot of skipping, like children everywhere, except that the skipping rope is either a piece of discarded electric cable or several pairs of tights tightly wound together lengthwise. The skipping is often aligned with rhythmic chanting, not unlike the game of jump rope in America. Some of the chants are associated with complex clapping routines. Curiously, in most cases the chants don't make much sense. For example, one of the chants goes like this:

Angela, Miss Angela  
 Viva, Come fa  
 Angela, Angela, Miss Angela  
 Viva, Come fa  
 Istanbul, Istanbul

Cheeky, Cheeky, Boom Boom  
I Love You!

The last line is usually accompanied by a finger being pointed at someone.

**AJP:** Does the unusual mixture of languages have any particular significance in this chant?

**Brown:** I don't think so. The strange blend of Italian and English does not seem to mean very much to these Hungarian-speaking Roma children. But it also does not dampen their enthusiasm. Three seven-year-old girls taught me this one, and it clearly is not the preserve of the girls alone. When I mentioned it to some teenage boys, they started chanting it immediately with the same eagerness as the little girls.

**AJP:** Besides finger pointing in the skipping game, did you see other gestures or movements that accompany chants?

**Brown:** Sometimes the chants are aligned with complicated actions, which the children know so well they make the routine look simple. It is only when they try to teach it to someone else that the complexity becomes obvious. For example, the following chant is usually accompanied by a mixture of clapping and dancing, mainly in the form of hopping from one position to the next.

ROMANIAN:	ENGLISH TRANSLATION:
<i>O Rus asa</i>	Like a Russian
<i>În Castela</i>	In a castle
<i>Cu Gulliverul</i>	With Gulliver
<i>Se dansează</i>	Is dancing
<i>Un danse model</i>	A model dance
<i>Stânga stânga</i>	Left, left
<i>Dreaptă, dreaptă</i>	Right, right
<i>Față, față</i>	Face to face
<i>Stânga, dreaptă</i>	Left, right
<i>Si pe un piciorul</i>	And on one leg
<i>Stop</i>	Stop

This chant makes slightly more sense than the previous one, but again it is in a foreign language—in this case Romanian, as these children usually speak Hungarian. Thus, once again, it is unlikely that the chanters under-

stand the words, and so, presumably, the words and actions are transmitted from one generation to the next without the need for translation.

**AJP:** You mentioned the harsh winters in this corner of Romania. Do children still manage to play in the cold?

**Brown:** Life is very different for these children in the winter when temperatures can drop to as low as minus 20 degrees Fahrenheit. Informal conversations with children and adults suggest that the healthier children still spend a lot of their time outside during those months. Indeed, in past winters, I have witnessed children, in their determination to play, cutting two-litre coke bottles in half lengthways and using them for sledding down a frozen hill. Nevertheless, we should not ignore that the majority of these children live in abject poverty, in overcrowded houses made from wood and mud, as I noted earlier, with no running water, no sanitation, and a poor diet. During one of our charity's hot-food sessions, when the temperature stood at 3 degrees Fahrenheit, one little boy arrived wearing nothing but a vest.

**AJP:** What principal lessons did you draw from studying the play of Roma children?

**Brown:** These children are clearly free to explore and experiment, and the resulting creativity is often impressive. The breadth and depth of their social networks is expanded during their playing. There is a great deal of physical activity with its attendant benefits in terms of motor-skills development. This amount of freely chosen interaction with the environment will inevitably lead to cognitive stimulation. We found it hard to ignore the health and safety challenges of playing on rubbish piles, but it is clear that these children, through their interaction with a range of playmates and their imaginative use of the variety of loose parts available in the village, are very obviously engaged in elements of self-discovery.

**AJP:** So based on your study of Roma children, would you say that material deprivation does not lead to play deprivation?

**Brown:** These are among the poorest, most disadvantaged children in Europe, and yet their play is rich in many of the most fundamental aspects of a healthy play experience. On the basis of this study alone, it would be reasonable to conclude that the link between poverty and play deprivation is tenuous at best.

**AJP:** Before we conclude, could you tell us more about play rangers and their relationship to playwork?

**Brown:** The play-ranger concept began to have an impact around four years

ago, when the British government made large sums of money available for innovative approaches to play provision. The idea was a response to the fact that many children live in areas with no play provision at all and have nowhere safe to play. The play ranger arrived at a piece of wasteland, or perhaps a local park, and unloaded a lot of scrap materials from the back of a van (ropes, tires, balls, craft gear, and so on). Her arrival encouraged children to gather and use the space and materials, and it gave the parents a sense of security while their children played outside.

The concept became very popular and was beginning to have a widespread impact; but in 2010 a new government came to power on the back of the banking crisis determined to reduce public spending. This has had a catastrophic impact on play provision in the UK.

**AJP:** Given where playwork has been and where it is now, where is it headed next? And where do you expect your research to take you?

**Brown:** As a result of the recent change of government, playwork is in a state of flux, and it is difficult at this moment to predict where the profession will be in five years' time. We have been through ten years of positive growth, but now we are entering a period of austerity. However, we have been in similar circumstances before. I believe that these things tend to go in cycles, which means there is reason to be optimistic for the long term. As for the playwork degree program at Leeds Metropolitan University, it goes from strength to strength. We have just recruited a full cohort for the twenty-second year running, and, shortly, we will be starting a masters in play therapy with playwork, so there are exciting times ahead.

My own research is likely to take me into more collaborative work with colleagues in other countries. I have already talked with colleagues in the United States about a project focusing on the value of free play in relation to obesity. I am also interested in persuading the designers of UK teaching qualifications to include a play and playwork element in their courses.

**AJP:** One last question: what does a playworker do for fun?

**Brown:** Playworkers come from such a wide variety of backgrounds, so I could not begin to answer that. However, if your question is really about me, I have three grandchildren who give me all the fun I need.