
Free Choice or Adaptable Choice

Self-Determination Theory and Play



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The authors explore the use of three basic tenets from Self-Determination Theory—competence, relatedness, and autonomy—for a definition of play that resists the current popular call for play to be freely chosen. They explore whether free play truly exists and whether complete choice constitutes an absolute requirement for children to consider themselves at play. In the course of doing so, they consider two subtheories—Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Organismic Integration Theory. Ultimately they propose substituting adaptable choice for free choice as a defining characteristic of play because it makes for more ready support of children’s play in various professional contexts. **Key words:** adaptable choice; Cognitive Evaluation Theory; free play; Organismic Integration Theory; Self-Determination Theory

Introduction

SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY (SDT) defines motivation as based on three, basic, psychological needs—competence, relatedness (the desire to feel connected to others), and autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000). Those interested in SDT consider choice important to motivation (Deci and Ryan 1985, Ryan and Deci, 2000; Deci and Ryan 2000; Gagné 2003), and they tend to characterize it in one of three ways—no choice, controlled choice, and autonomous choice. “It seems,” write Deci and Ryan (2000), “that when people are more able to satisfy all three of their basic psychological needs, the regulation of their behavior will be characterized by choice, volition, and autonomy rather than pressure, demand, and control, and the result will be higher quality behavior and greater psychological well-being” (243).

This approach comports with contemporary theories of play that suggest children benefit from playful activity because it frees them from the fear of failure

and makes them better able to try a fuller and more flexible range of behaviors (Bruner 1974; Sutton-Smith 1979; Howard and Miles 2008). These theories usefully explain robust empirical research that compares children's behavior at play and not at play, which often demonstrates how playing children are better at solving problems (e.g. McInnes et al. 2009, 2011) and offers increased evidence of their emotional well-being (e.g. Howard and McInnes 2013).

Researchers have looked at SDT from several perspectives such as sport (De Meester et al. 2014), health (Ng et al. 2012), and education (Eyal and Roth 2011). Some have also studied SDT and such topics as children's physical play (Sebire et al. 2013), the use of video games (Przybylski, Rigby, and Ryan 2010), and the relationship between play and some parenting styles (Joussemet, Landry, and Koestner 2008). Currently however, no research exists that has considered the relationship between SDT and the level of choice play provides (Garvey 1977). A discussion linking SDT and its role in children's play appears long overdue, particularly when we consider that the widely accepted definition of play as a freely chosen activity directly affects some policies and practices related to play.

Both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland's play policies officially define play as "freely chosen, intrinsically motivated and with no external goals" (Welsh Assembly Government [WAG] 2002; National Children's Office [NCO] 2004; Office for First Minister and Deputy First Minister [OFMDFM] 2008; Scottish Government [SG] 2013; and this is also reflected in a global statement of play (International Play Association [IPA] 2014).

Although choice is a strong feature of play (e.g. Bruce 1994), this definition of play depends on the adult perception of children's activities rather than on the views of children about their activities (King and Howard 2014a). Thus, how those who develop policy and how those who put that policy into practice look at play are often at odds, especially for early childhood education (Wood 2004, 2007). Part of this conflict revolves around adult-led and child-led play—whether to offer no-choice or controlled-choice (adult-led) or autonomous-choice (child-led) play. Bergen (1988) developed a definition for school activities based on the amount of choice, possibility, and opportunity children enjoy. When children enjoyed the greatest degree of choice, she termed the activity free play. As the level of choice moved from child to adult, the terms change to guided play, directed play, work disguised as play and, finally, work.

We consider children's free play as their own time, often not linked to any educational outcome—for example, playing at home or on the school play-

ground. However, even when the practitioner aims to create free play within the classroom, we would often consider what occurs as directed play or work disguised as play to meet educational outcomes. According to Wood (2004b, 2007), in UK education policy for early childhood, practitioners found that play used for teaching followed learning outcomes and was often controlled, highlighting the difference between policy and practice in the interpretations of play. Practitioners found the assessment of early-learning outcomes in children's free play (which perceived children to have more choice) did not accurately reflect choice in early childhood. Practitioners use play in early childhood often to meet predetermined outcomes, which limits the amount of choice children enjoy. If instead of focusing on outcomes, we placed more emphasis on the process of the play we offer, children might more often perceive any activity they engage in to be play, even if they do not have complete freedom of choice (King and Howard 2014b).

How much choice children have in their lives clearly has important consequences for children in their play, which relates to the three psychological tenets of SDT (again: autonomy, relatedness, and competence). Lester and Russell (2008, 2010) emphasize the critical role of play for children's holistic development and how it supports the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (UNICEF 2009). When children play, the very social nature of the activity involves making choices, relating to other people (both children and adults), and developing skills that help them take some control of their lives. Adults affect the autonomy, relatedness, and competence of children and their impact may hinge on supporting children in making choices.

We aim to identify—based on findings from a relatively large-scale study of children's perception of choice in their play (King and Howard 2014a, 2014b)—key aspects of SDT in relation to children's play. We suggest that for play the notion of adaptable choice along a continuum is a more theoretically justified and useful defining characteristic than the widely accepted notion of free choice. With adaptable choice, children's perception of choice can fluctuate between having little (or no) choice to having full choice. We have based our choice continuum on the Cognitive Evaluation Theory and Organismic Integration Theory within SDT (Ryan and Deci 2000), Bergen's (1988) guided play, and Rogoff's (1993) guided participation, and we take into consideration the space, the resources, and the social aspects of children's play that may influence levels of choice across different contexts.

Children's Perception of Choice

Research on classrooms shows that primary school-aged children can differentiate play from work and learning (King 1979; Howard 2002; McInnes et al. 2009). Children often define play by the amount of choice they perceive themselves to enjoy, according to McInnes and her coauthors (2009, 2011), when the amount of choice in play decreased (for example, because of instructions about the use of play materials or the presence of an adult), children performed more poorly at problem solving, lost their motivation, and became less engaged in general, even though the tasks they completed remained constant. This finding proved consistent with King (1979), who wrote: "The activity was defined as play if the child was free to choose the activity, the materials, and the course of events and if the products or acts were individual and the teacher was not involved" (85).

King (1979) also raises the important point that choice involves not just the activity itself but the course of events. The course of events may include not only decisions about what to play but also where to play, what resources to make available, and how to involve others (King and Howard 2014b). The combination of play space, resources, and participation by other children and adults influences children's perceptions of choice when they play.

Children's Perceptions of Choice in their Play

Research has shown that structural, functional, and social factors influence children's perceptions of choice when they play at home, on school playgrounds, and in out-of-school clubs (King and Howard 2014b). Two studies of children aged six to eleven (King and Howard 2014a, 2014b) revealed that whether children played on their own or with other children or adults, the size and nature of the play space on offer, the resources available to them, and the proximity to them of others at play all influenced their perception of the choices they enjoyed.

In these studies, the participants explained that the play space limited their choice when it was too small or poorly defined. They felt their choices impinged on by other children playing games when the presence of these others became distracting, and they said that a lack of resources likewise had an inhibiting effect on their choices. They found that playing with unknown children and adults who tried to control their play by telling them what to do or by simply taking over their play negatively affected their sense of choice. The studies found that

children playing with others they knew at home and in out-of-school clubs felt positively about their ability to choose their play. When playing with children and adults they knew, children felt that their play enjoyed support or offered variety, both of which enhanced their sense of choice. They felt they could tell others what to do, which gave them a sense of control over their choices.

The results from both of these studies demonstrated that these children did not need complete freedom of choice when they played and that what choice they did need was adaptable. In some situations, then, children may lack the sense of having complete freedom of choice but still perceive themselves essentially to be playing. If full free choice is not always necessary for an activity to be considered play, children's perceptions of choice can be negotiated, compromised, and adapted, rather than always remaining fixed, and this in return demonstrates that choice can be influenced both positively and negatively by different environments and, in particular, by other children or adults. Thus we propose a choice-continuum model based on Self-Determination Theory.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Play, and Choice

Katz and Assor's (2007) evaluation of SDT and choice highlighted that choice must be meaningful to support the three basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Choice should focus on actions rather than options, differentiate between picking and choosing, avoid decision overload, match an individual's potential (i.e., the choice should be neither too easy or too hard), and comport with an individual's cultural situation and social position. These requirements may also be essential to choice in children's play, particularly in adult-led children's play, when children feel compelled to take part.

SDT includes two subtheories: cognitive evaluation theory (CET) and organismic integration theory (OIT) (Ryan and Deci 2000). CET concerns the impact of the social environment on intrinsic motivation: "Choice, acknowledgment of feelings, and opportunities for self-direction were found to enhance intrinsic motivation because they allow people a greater feeling of autonomy" (70). In other words, the social environment affects the psychological needs of individuals by supporting or hindering different types of motivation—those emanating from the self (intrinsic motivation) or those coming from others that become internalized and integrated (external motivation).

Deci and Ryan (1987) relate CET to children's autonomy (amount of choice), which can be supported or controlled, and they elaborate further by suggesting a second subtheory—organismic integration theory (OIT). OIT concerns the regulation of intentional behavior along a continuum from autonomous to controlled. "Some intentional behaviors," they suggest, "are initiated and regulated through choice as an expression of oneself, whereas other intentional behaviors are pressured and coerced by intrapsychic and environmental forces and thus do not represent true choice" (2).

The OIT continuum ranges from nonmotivation (amotivation) through different forms of external motivation to intrinsic motivation. The different forms of external motivation relate to the contextual factors that either promote or hinder internalization (the taking in of a value or regulation) and integration (transforming the value of regulation that will eventually emanate from the self) of the regulation for other people's behavior. They link the internalization of other people's behavior to the three basic motivational needs we have already mentioned—relatedness, competence, and autonomy. Autonomous motivation (amount of choice), they hold, can consist of both intrinsic motivation and specific types of extrinsic motivation. Those in which we are interested on the OIT continuum are external regulation, introjected regulation, identified regulation, and integrated regulation (Ryan and Connell 1989).

According to Ryan and Connell, these motivations for behavior indicate the following characteristics: external regulation refers to external authority, fear of punishment, or rule compliance; introjected regulations come from within the self but are the result of external factors, that is when an individual acts to avoid guilt or shame or reacts to worries about him- or herself or the approval of others; identified regulation refers to the conscious valuing a regulation that an individual accepts because it is personally important; and integrated regulation describes an individual's successful integration of external regulations (putting the self in harmony between the external regulations and internal needs).

Researchers have applied the OIT continuum to such topics as health and sport but not to children's play. And readers may find it surprising that we do so here since so many play theorists—not to mention UK government play policies—define play as a freely chosen activity, one intrinsically motivated and with no external goals. But the amount of choice children have in their play relates both to internal and external motivation and pressure, and the external motivation or pressure relates to the different aspects of external regulation.

The Choice Continuum Model

Based on Deci and Ryan's (2000) Organismic Integration Theory, our choice continuum model is shown in figure 1. It proposes that the lowest level of perceived choice in play occurs when children are compliant and their choices are controlled by others (children or adults), which means the play aims to satisfy an external regulation. Introjected regulation occurs when a child submits to outside control but does not view it as something he or she has generated, which requires a child to demonstrate some element of self-control in his or her choice. Children rank low the level of choice they perceive they enjoy in play governed by either external or introjected regulation. Their sense of choice increases when more support or variety enhances play. Thus play governed by identified regulation, in which external rules may be personally important, seems to children to offer more choice, and so too with play governed by integrated regulation, in which they feel in harmony with the external regulations and can direct the play of others by telling them what to do.

The choice continuum model shown in figure 1 allows children to exercise choice in their play, taking in all aspects of the activity, its environment, and its social context. External regulation sounds the theme of control—of whom is told what to do and who takes over play. Introjected play involves both limitations to play—for example, too small a play space or too specific—and inhibitions to play, such as, for example, a lack of equipment or play materials or distractions from other activities or players. Play spaces are often imposed. Adults, for example, frequently define boundaries, dictating the area where play can take place and what types of play can occur there. Thus, the amount of choice children enjoy in their play reflects the amount of external social control they encounter. This can be mitigated by offering a wider variety of play and providing as much individual support as possible, which comes under the motivational heading of identified regulation. And finally, of course, integrated regulation, which lets children direct the play and allows those who do not want to be told what to do to refuse to participate, offers the children an external motivation approaching the freely chosen play to which theorists and practitioners often make reference.

Our choice continuum model in figure 1 uses a no-choice and choice dichotomy rather than the play-work dichotomy because children can perceive they are still playing even if their level of choice is very limited. Bergen's (1988) free play-work continuum placed the maximum amount of choice in what she described as free play: "The player chooses whether to play, what to play, how

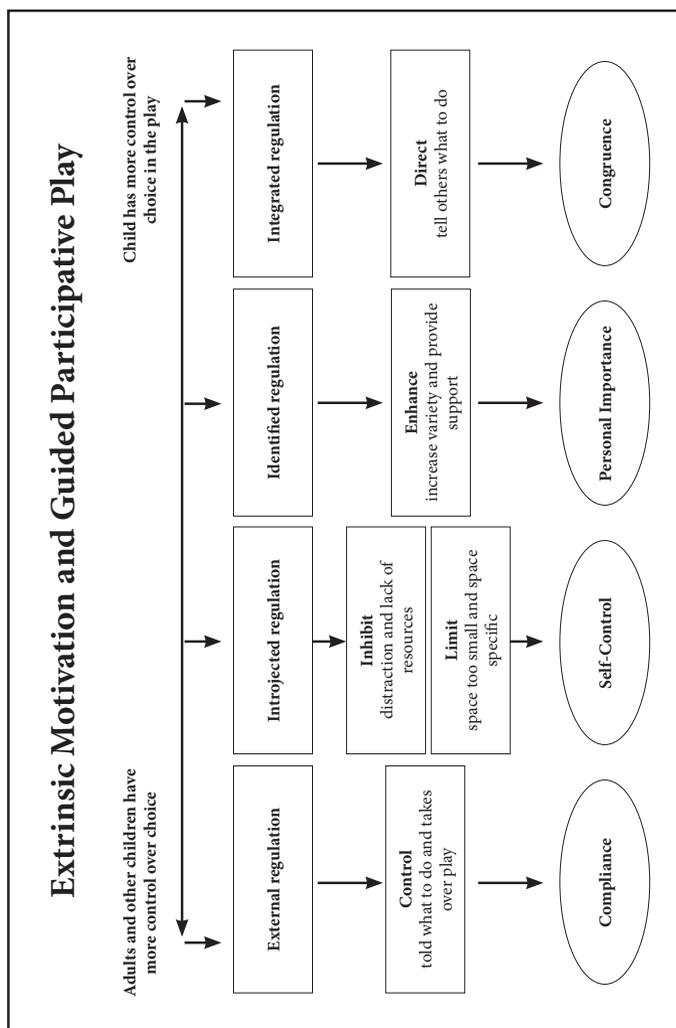


Figure 1. Proposed choice continuum (based on Deci and Ryan 2000; Bergen 1988)

to play, and when to play. The player also determines whether to play alone or with other players. The choice of which other players to play with is also freely determined” (171). Our description of free play takes into account the fact that although children ultimately choose what, how, where, and with whom they play, this decision may be influenced by the choices of others about what to play, the location, size, and boundary of the play space itself, and who else may also

use the play space (King and Howard 2014b). For example, a game of tag might involve individuals the child may not want to play with, but the decision to let them play may be made by other children. The choice to play tag may involve having to go along with the choices of others.

The ambiguity we allow the term “free play” takes into account the restrictions that will always be placed on its occurrence by the environment, the time, and the resources available. In fact, as soon as others get involved in the play, it may not be freely chosen (Lester and Russell 2008; King and Howard 2014b). Else (2009) points out that sometimes choice in play means limited choice. Bergen’s description of guided play (1988) seems more realistic because it allows the scope of choice to be adaptable, providing for variation in the amount of choice children may have in particular contexts: “Although the players continue to have a wide choice of play activities and the environment is still conducive to freely chosen play in which children can create their own challenge, more social rules regarding appropriateness of choices, safety, sharing, or motor constraints are present” (172).

Although Bergen limits her discussion to years of early education, her description of guided play, nevertheless, accurately reflects the reasons children may not enjoy absolute free choice in their play. Complete freely chosen play exists only in some free-play utopia. Everybody wants children to make their own choices and have their own motivations for play. But such a goal can rarely be achieved if every player gets his or her own way. Play is a social activity wherever it occurs. And regardless of the setting—educational, child care, or free time—totally free play more likely occurs when a child plays alone. Guided play requires negotiation, which is a social process during which children’s choices are not free but adaptable. Thus Rogoff and her colleagues (1993) say of the concept: “A process of guided participation that we regard as universal is that of bridging to make connections between the known and the new. We believe it to be universal because inherent to communication is a collaborative effort of partners to find a common ground of understanding on which to base their contributions so as to ensure mutual comprehension” (8).

The more adaptable a child’s choices, the more likely the child will think he or she is playing. (However, if we completely restrict a child’s choice, the child will eventually conclude he or she is not playing.) By identifying the level of choice children believe they enjoy, we can more likely ensure that they continue to consider what they are doing to be play, so this identification can benefit not just children’s play (and our understanding of it) in informal play settings but also in classrooms and in play-therapy sessions. Supporting children’s choices in their play keeps

the process meaningful and contributes to their basic psychological needs, that is (once again) of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Such identification helps us match choice to a child's skill level (by helping us, for example, not make their play too easy or too hard) and to a child's cultural situation and social position (Katz and Assor 2007), all of which may well be important for adult practitioners. If children feel others (adults or children) support their play and offer some variety in it, they may experience an increase in the level of choice they believe they enjoy, which helps maintain their engagement in their play. These others do not need to provide resources but merely to become actively involved in the children's play. If children feel others are supporting their play rather than taking it over or telling them what to do, they consequently feel they enjoy a higher level of choice in their play.

The role of choice in play will be most effective when children and adults can negotiate that role and the children feel they can learn to adapt to the choices they can make (Neumann 1971; Howard and King 2015). As long as children feel they have some choice, they will perceive the type of activity involved—in both educational and noneducational settings—still to be play (McInnes and Howard 2011; King and Howard 2014b). If we use play to initiate an activity, children may perceive the choice as limited to the selection of the activity (Katz and Assor 2007), but if children provide their own outcome for the play (based on, for example, a model or mosaic they are constructing), then the adults involved can better employ play as a vehicle for learning. Here focusing on the adaptability of choice rather than on whether play is freely chosen can be more beneficial.

Conclusion

We presented self-determination theory and some of the research it has engendered to help us get beyond the notion of play as necessarily a freely chosen activity. We wished to replace this free-choice limitation with three basic characteristics taken from SDT—competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Deci and Ryan 1985). There are clearly parallels between these tenets and children's play, especially in light of the two subtheories of SDT: cognitive evaluation theory and organismic integration theory. By focusing on adaptable choice rather than free choice, we have used CET and OIT to argue for the different aspects of external regulation that allow children to control the choices they make. We have found adaptable choice a more appropriate concept for professionals to use in a variety of contexts to support providing play for children.

In the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland, each country—with the exception of England which has no play policy or strategy—bases its current play policies on the premise that play must be a freely chosen activity, intrinsically motivated, and without external goals. These policies consider play essential for children’s education, health, and well-being, making play a fundamental right under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Lester and Russell 2008, 2010; UNICEF 2009). Howard and King (2015)—adopting Neumann’s (1971) description of play as either a beginning, a process, or an outcome—discuss the challenges that early-childhood practitioners, child-care givers, and playworkers face in implementing play in each of their practices. Child-care workers focus on play as the beginning for meeting day-care standards. Playworkers consider it a process that supports a child’s play cycle (Sturrock and Else 1998). And early-childhood educators treat play more as an outcome (Wood 2007). Hence, children’s motivations to play will depend on how play is viewed and used by those introducing the play, how they engage the child in such play, and how they control or support the children in the choices the youngsters make about play. In short, the amount of choice in children’s play is not fixed; it is adaptable (King and Howard 2014b).

The adaptability of choice may result in others (children or adults) controlling, limiting, or inhibiting play, but as long as the children who participate perceive they enjoy some element of choice in the matter, they can feel (to a greater or lesser extent) that they are still playing. We consider choice something the children negotiate. Bruce (1994) states that within the features of her free-flow play, play can be “initiated by a child or an adult,” but adults have to be sensitive to a child’s needs (193). In child care and playwork, this sensitivity involves supporting the child’s play cycle (Sturrock and Else 1998). For professional practice, the category of identified regulation within our choice continuum indicates that, when an adult supports children’s play, the children perceive more choice, which increases both their feelings of having an internal choice and their personal interest (and hence their motivation to keep playing). King and Howard (2014a) found that the presence of an adult playworker actually increased the child’s perception of choice in their play, and this could obviously have relevance for more formal environments such as the classroom.

As the Developmentally Appropriate Practice report from the National Association for the Education of Young Children states, “Teachers present children with opportunities to make meaningful choices, especially in child-choice activity periods. They assist and guide children who are not yet able to enjoy

and make good use of such periods” (NAEYC 2009, n.p.). The teacher, if he or she focuses on the adaptability of choice, can assist and guide children through play by varying the amount of external motivation from the teacher and internal motivation from the child. This would allow teachers to work both to a child’s actual and potential level (Vygotsky 1978), because—as research shows—when children perceive they have more choice, they can set and amend their goals, which leads to superior developmental outcomes (McInnes et al. 2011).

Wood (2007) has called the continuum between being controlled and being in control in early-childhood education as the difference between adult-led and child-led play. Our proposed choice continuum takes into account both adult-child and child-child interactions and allows observation and reflection about whether children’s choice in their play is inhibited or limited (controlled), enhanced (supported), or the result of children directing the play space. Wood argued that adults in early-childhood education should use both their flexibility and expertise to integrate adult-led and child-led learning through play. Our choice continuum focuses on adaptable choice rather than on no free choice or complete free choice. For some children, too much choice can be more a stumbling block than a motivation, or it can lead to trying to control others. If adult practitioners focus on choice as adaptable, they can offer children the appropriate kinds of choice, that is, those with which they can cope. For some children, adult practitioners may need to reduce the level of choice to aid the children’s learning and development; for others, they may need to increase the level of choice. The adult practitioner must address the social aspects of choice, the environment in which it occurs (which, for example, may be inhibiting), and the resources available to support it.

Our focus on adaptable choice rather than free choice in both policy matters and professional practice could help connect different professions involved in children’s play. Freely chosen play does not exist in actual practice because children’s levels of choice must to be adapted to the changing structural, functional, and social elements of the play space. In professional practice, it is more realistic to make children’s choices in play adaptable and for adults to support this adaptability.

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