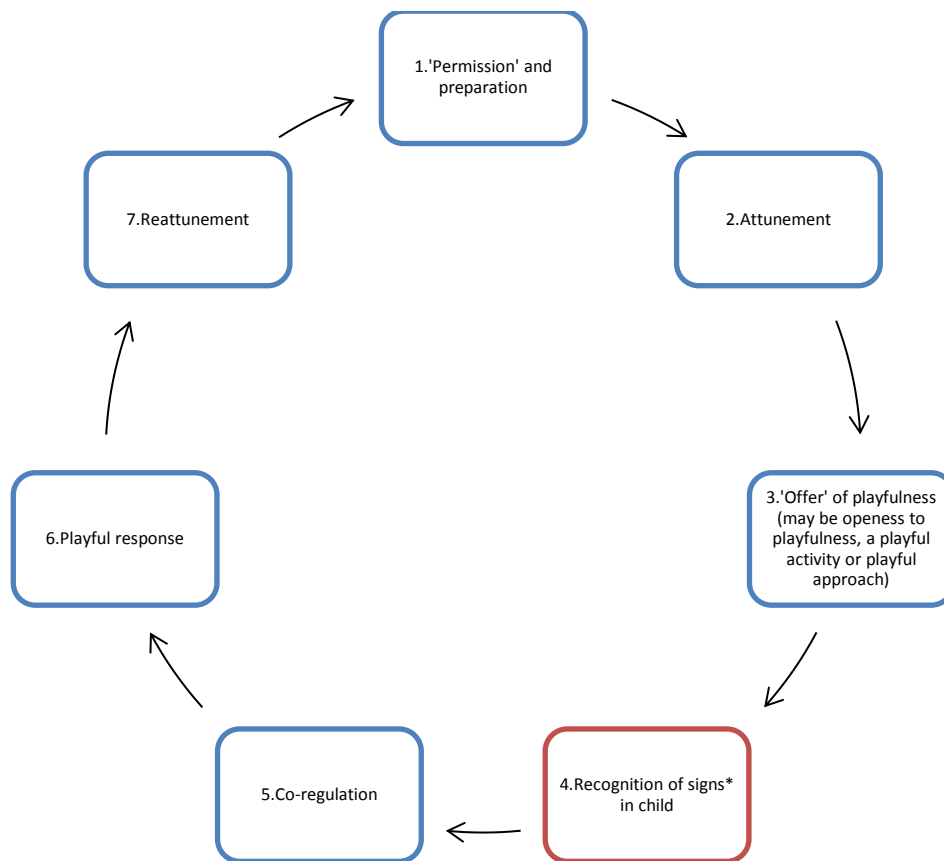


The Playfulness Cycle

By recognising the cyclical nature of playfulness, the notion of interdependency comes in, with a see-saw of reactions from the child and the person interacting with them determining whether the playfulness ebbs or flows. Alongside this ebb and flow is the need for mind-mindedness (Meins and Fernyhough 2012), the careful 'reading' of reactions from the child, which was demonstrated so often in the interactions that I observed. Together, they form what I have termed 'mindful interdependency', the tuning in of sensitive people to the cues that children with PMLD give out. This mindful interdependency is demonstrated in the playfulness cycle, described below but also has wider implications for paying attention to factors within, around and beyond the child in order to encourage playfulness in children with PMLD to flourish.

The idea that there is a 'play cycle' is not unique and has been mentioned by McConkey (2006) and Else (2006). The value in seeing playfulness as a cycle is that it involves seeing the child as playing an active part in the process. It is relevant that Goldbart and Caton (2010) recognised the importance of building communication on the child's initiation and Intensive Interaction also places an emphasis on the child's agency (Hewett 2012). What is not found elsewhere is to apply this idea specifically to playfulness and children with PMLD. Playfulness is a concept that is easily recognised and, as has been shown in the Passport to Play study, no special training or skills may be necessary in order to engage with children in this way. This makes playfulness an approach that is equally accessible to families and professionals and which can be engaged with at any time.

Due to the severity of the children's impairments, a more detailed examination than has been seen elsewhere of the cyclical nature of playfulness was needed. In a chapter for a book on severe and profound disability (Watson and Corke in Lacey et al 2015), a model for encouraging playfulness was created by myself and the play therapist and school practitioner who was a participant in this study. The model below has been slightly changed from the version included in the book, with 'observation' being replaced by 'permission and preparation'. This is because, on further analysis and reflection, the study has shown that playfulness is less likely to happen in an environment that does not 'permit' playfulness in an emotional and physical sense and that a number of things should happen to create an atmosphere that is conducive to playfulness. Caldwell (2007) urges that environmental factors are attended to when interacting with profoundly disabled people. It has been shown here that this includes ensuring that the child is physically and emotionally ready for play, with the play partner feeling comfortable about being playful and also making sure that the surroundings are the best they can possibly be for the particular child. This may mean being in a noisy, happy atmosphere with several other children around or in a quiet space with soft music. Preparation may include the need for careful observation, but also goes beyond it. The child needs to feel that they will not be judged and interactions are light-hearted and joyful, carried out for their intrinsic value rather than with a goal in mind. The interviews with arts-based practitioners usefully emphasised the value in playfulness being enjoyed for its own sake. This means that both child and adult need to be receptive, feeling comfortable and open to what might happen between them in a cyclical process.



**The signs of playfulness will be very individual to each child but may be:*

- *physical – subtle changes in facial expression, stiffening, increased movement of body and eyes, finger flexing, relaxing, flapping, postural change*
- *emotional – twinkling eyes, open-wide eye gaze, smiling, laughing, raised eyebrows, open mouth, tongue out, increased expressive vocalisation, happy sounds*
- *social – moving nearer, reaching out, increased eye contact, leaning towards*

The signs suggested above may not in practice fit precisely into these categories but have been grouped in order to show the range of responses that are possible. Co-regulation refers to the overt, observable regulation of behaviour, or ‘reciprocity’ – whereas attunement is emotional (covert) and sometimes difficult to assess. It is more likely to be a ‘feeling’ that playfulness is happening. Going with the child’s ‘natural’ rhythm is important here, as it is seen in the literature (Trevarthen 2008, Liebermann 1977, Corke 2012 and MacDonald 2008) and in this study that musicality and rhythm can help to keep the ‘flow’ of playfulness going.

The model may make the process look complex and somewhat daunting but in practice may happen very rapidly and naturally. It may also be a lengthy sequence of events, with some or all stages often repeated or with some stages such as the playful response taking a considerable time to appear. The

model has encompassed some of the ways in which the study has shown playfulness can be encouraged.

In order to illustrate the playfulness cycle, two examples will be drawn from the observation sessions. The first will demonstrate 'active' playfulness, and the second will provide an example of 'passive' playfulness.

The first example involves Harry, with his mother and two support workers, in his home.

1. **Permission and preparation.** The session has been set up for me to observe playfulness, so in this way, playfulness is both expected and encouraged. Harry's mother is very keen to encourage Harry's active involvement in play and goes to great lengths to ensure that this happens. His support workers are both engaged, know Harry well and have a very positive attitude. On this occasion, Harry is seated between his mother's legs, on a swinging platform that has been specially made to swing from the ceiling in the living room. Harry is leaning in towards his mother's hands, which support him to sit
2. **Attunement.** The support worker is kneeling in front of Harry, making eye contact and holding a big, soft ball so that Harry can see it. Harry's mum talks gently to him, saying, 'get, set..' in a sing-song voice. There is an air of anticipation and Harry is engaged and alert
3. **Offer of playfulness.** The support worker throws the ball in the air and passes it to Harry to feel
4. **Recognition of signs in child.** Harry vocalises, makes happy sounds and smiles. His mouth is wide open and his eyebrows go up
5. **Co-regulation.** The support worker and Harry pass the ball between them
6. **Playful response.** Harry plays with the ball and lets go of it when his mother says 'let go Harry!' in a jokey voice
7. **Reattunement.** Harry becomes a bit less excited and mother gently says 'hello' to Harry. Mother rocks Harry gently on the platform. Harry is calm, smiling and quiet - ready for the next interaction

The second example involves Beth. She is at school, with two support workers and there are two other children in the room.

1. **Permission and preparation.** The class teacher has planned a massage session, in a sensory area, where oils, lights and music have been prepared. Beth's feet are well supported and she is comfortable on a bean bag on the floor. The teaching assistant (TA) and health support assistant (HSA) know Beth well.
2. **Attunement.** The TA gently massages Beth's hand. The massaging allows the TA to talk gently to Beth and Beth looks towards her as her hands are massaged, in turn
3. **Offer of playfulness.** The TA continues massaging and the lights are shown to Beth by the HSA
4. **Recognition of signs in child.** Beth looks happy and opens and closes her mouth
5. **Co-regulation.** Beth responds to TA when she asks her to smile if she wants more massaging.
6. **Playful response.** Looks towards TA when massaging stopped and smiled again in response to request to smile if she wanted more massaging. Smiling and opening and closing her mouth. A 'see-saw' interaction that happens rarely with Beth

7. **Reattunement.** Beth starts to look a little less alert. The TA notices this and says 'time to finish'. Beth is placed back into her 'work' chair, to indicate that the session is over

These examples indicate that playfulness can be either active or passive. The interactions are subtle, and could be easily missed if the play partners are not sensitively attuned to the children and if preparation did not occur. Attunement is likely to involve a trusting sense of 'letting go' for both partners. If two-way trust does not exist between the child and the play partner then a playful connection is unlikely. Playfulness is something that children can 'own' (Else 2009) and take the lead in (Corke 2012). What the study here has shown is that children with PMLD do have agency and that they are more likely to be playful if they have the right preparation, environment and play partner.

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