

Experts put new method of analysing children's play to the test

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Swansea University's Dr Pete King has been researching how to study the stages children go through as they play together. Credit: Pixabay

How to study the stages children go through as they play together has been highlighted in new research by a Swansea University academic.

Play is a crucial part of a child's development. It is how children develop cognitive skills and learn new information as well as [social skills](#) and it is an important topic of research by social scientists.

Dr. Pete King, who specialises in play and childhood studies, devised a method of studying the process of children's play—the Play Cycle Observation Method (PCOM) - and has now published research which demonstrates how effective it is as an observational tool.

Working with collaborators Professor LaDonna Atkins and Dr. Brandon Burr, his latest study put the PCOM to the test in real time by watching three-year-olds at play using an observation booth at the University of Central Oklahoma's Child Study Centre.

Dr. King, senior lecturer at the College of Human and Health Sciences, said: "The PCOM focuses on the process of play and initially it was piloted using a video of children playing. We were able to show it could be used effectively in that situation, where the observer is able to pause or rewind to take a closer look at the children's activity.

"However, this is not an option when observing children in real time so how reliable would the PCOM be in those circumstances? This question formed the basis of our research paper."

He explained that the PCOM focuses on the process of play and the Play Cycle, the term used by play professionals to observe and understand play. The [cycle](#) can be broken down into several distinct phases—pre-cue, play cue, play return, play frame, flow and annihilation.

The play cue, either verbal or non-verbal, is an invitation to play from a child while the play return is another child's response. The play frame is the physical or imagined boundary that keeps the Play Cycle intact and annihilation is when play has finished.

For this study two members of the research team acted as the independent observers with no experience of using the PCOM. They watched play from the booth and used specifically designed observation

sheets to quantitatively record play cues, play returns and Play Cycles. These sheets also collected qualitative data of play frames, annihilation and the role played by adults in the Play Cycle.

The [observers](#) watched the same 'target child' at the same time, each carrying out their observation simultaneously, without any discussion or comparison. This was repeated for 11 separate observations of different children. The data was then collected and analysed by a third member of the team.

Their findings have just been published in the *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.

Dr. King said: "We proved that by focusing on the process of play, the PCOM is very child-centred and child-led observational tool. It is not restricted to a type of play such as pretend or social, so offers the opportunity to observe all types of play.

"The benefit of the PCOM is that it not only shows how we can support the various stages of [children's](#) play, but it can also be used by the student learning about play and the professional practitioner in respect of reflective practice. In addition, the PCOM is a useful training tool for trainers and lecturers teaching [play](#)."

More information: Pete King et al, Piloting the Play Cycle Observation Method in 'real time': Recording children's Play Cycles in pre-school provision, *Journal of Early Childhood Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1476718X20969851](https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X20969851)

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