

# “I Just Can’t Help Myself”: Understanding the Links between Urges and Play

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**“A child isn’t getting ready to live, a child is living.”  
Anja Geelan**

When you arrange your shoes, do you line them up symmetrically? When you are passing a lamp post, do you ever swing around it, or want to swing around it? Or perhaps you are a person who has to hang the washing out in your own particular way? These are all subconscious urges, things that our practical logical brain tells us is entirely inappropriate for someone our age but yet we still go ahead and do it anyway because, well, we just have to!

In Pennie Brownlee’s article *The Sacred Urge to Play* she reminds us that we are biologically driven to play! At the very basic animal-human level we have physical play urges encoded into us, it’s just part of being human. In the past we have identified these play urges in our tamariki as ‘schemas’. This term was introduced by Jean Piaget in 1926.

Pennie asks us to think about how much more difficult it must it be for tamariki to resist urges coming through them, even when they are aware that actioning the urge is not such a great idea? They bust up a block construction built by others or throw the block and it hits another child on the head. They have that feeling that “something made me do it.” Rose Pere reminds us in ‘Te Wheke: A Celebration of Infinite Wisdom’ that ‘hinengaro (the mind) is very powerful and definitely influences the way a person acts and feels’.

I was fortunate to attend Kimberley Crisp’s workshop *This is URGE n’t*, which explored urges and how practitioners can be in tune with them and provide what’s needed for ‘self chosen, uninterrupted imaginative play.’ Kimberley reminded us that tamariki have a primal need, an unfolding urge to make sense of their world, develop their working theories with the tools they have at hand and that we need to take a closer look at what we are providing, in our curriculum, our resources and environments to allow them that freedom to truly BE!

Kimberley has set up a private kindergarten called ‘The Nest’ in Clive and this is the first centre in New Zealand specifically set up with the Pikler Approach underpinning all of its philosophy and practice. She believes that “by slightly changing the lens by which educators view tamariki, that it can totally transform our experience and the child’s experiences.” She believes that the way we see children is in direct relation to our beliefs.

Whether it’s the urge to rearrange the furniture for the second or third time this week or perhaps to line up or set out resources in your particular way, although your colleagues have already set them out, or to re-peg the washing when someone else has pegged it up, even though it will still dry the way they did it. Pennie Brownlee says, ‘you will know that it is not always easy to do the logical, when you know you’ll get a buzz in the pleasure centre of your brain doing the illogical.’

**“How we see, is how we will be”**

If we believe the child is an empty vessel, then we see our role as that of filling the child up. If we believe on the other hand that the child is a person and an equal partner then this would drive us differently and impacts on the environment, both physical and emotional that we create. If we see a child as being ‘obsessed’ with the same actions, it can create a harmful environment for the child’s development and learning but urges or schema theory prompts a new view, that of the child as an investigator, a constructor of meaning, persisting with meaningful actions. This might well prompt lessening of tension and conflict, an atmosphere in which the child can explore with more freedom and confidence, and with the affirmation and active interest of significant adults. So perhaps it is our belief systems that we need to examine.

Are you a teacher that is always actively involved with tamariki, constantly talking and questioning, orchestrating and directing? Is this driven to some extent, by your concern about how your colleagues, manager or parents might view you? If you stand back, quietly observing the play that is happening around you, are you afraid that they will think that you are not doing your job, not engaging with tamariki, not interested in teaching? This teaching practice can hinder the opportunities our tamariki have to become deeply engrossed in their play, in what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi describes as ‘a state of flow’; a state where they are completely focused, motivated and fully immersed; the play that is driven from their natural inner urges. If we maintain this view are we not encouraging a generation that is waiting to be stimulated, entertained, directed and organised and how does this sit alongside the notion of 21st Century learners?

Cathy Nutbrown, in her book *Threads of Thinking* says ‘Adults who teach young children must remain constantly aware that young children are capable of being patient observers, especially when given the space and time to do so. Young children cannot be taught effectively if

planned learning is always artificially divided into causally defined compartments...'

Kimberley shared, that when their team became consciously still and observant, they noticed that it was the child's urge that drove their play rather than a particular resource, or their input into the child's play. It's imperative that we lay great emphasis on the importance on the teacher observing the child closely to recognise these urges so that they can be planned for. By supporting children in their interests and passions, and letting them lead in their play, we empower them to learn and grow and is this not the principle Empowerment or Whakamana? When we encourage deep involvement in activities children are passionate about, they experience psychological and emotional wellbeing - is this not Wellbeing, or Mana Atua?

### So what are some of these urges?

Here is a list of some natural urges, they can come one at a time, in bunches, some are super strong and last for ages...each child is different.

**Orientation:** The urge to hang upside down, get the view from under the table or on top of the boxes.



**Positioning or ordering:** The urge to lining up things like cars, sorting by size or colour and into patterns, making sure the whale is next to the cow, or turning all the cups upside down. This is also sometimes called **lineal/grouping/sequencing**.

**Connecting:** The urge to joining train tracks, clicking together pieces of lego, running a string from one thing to another. This can mean connecting and disconnecting, or building followed by destruction.

**Trajectory:** The urge to throw and drop (making it happen), climb up and jumping off (trajectory of ones own body), putting your hand under running water (interacting with things that are already moving). It can be diagonal, vertical or horizontal.

**Enclosing and containing:** The urge to fill up cups with water, build fences for the animals or to put all the animals inside the circular train track, put their thumb in

and out of their mouth, wear belts and bracelets, fill up and empty containers of all kinds, climb into cardboard boxes or kitchen draws, sit in the tunnel, build 'cages' with blocks.



**Transporting:** The urge to carry many things on your hands at one time, in jars, in buckets and baskets, or even better containers with wheels.

**Enveloping:** The urge to have a sheet over your head or cover themselves in a flannel when washing. They might wrap dolls and toys up in blankets, fabric or tape or cover their painting with one colour.

**Rotation:** The urge to interact with anything that goes around, anything that is circular or has curved lines - wheels, turning lids, watching the washing machine on spin cycle, drawing circles, spinning around on the spot, being swung around.



**Transforming:** This urge can come in many forms; holding all your food in your mouth for a long time to see what it turns into, mixing your juice with your fish pie, water with dirt, or cooking, it's about materials which change shape, colour, consistency.

Pennie and Kimberley would add the following urges to the list above:

**Gathering or collecting:** The urge to gather together objects that are similar.



**Distributing:** The urge to give things to others even though in their mind they are still theirs.

**Posting:** The urge to post objects into or through things such as cable reels, wine barrels, boxes, toilets.

**Family Making:** The urge to create families "this is the mother and this is the father and the big sister and the baby" and this list is nowhere near exhaustive.

**Grouping** The urge to create groups of different types of thing.



If we are going to support the natural urges of our tamariki then we need to look closely at the resources that we provide, that will support them. If a child has the urge to collect, then do we have enough core resources to provide for this urge and have we thought about what they can use to collect these resources in? If there are no containers then things tend to go in pockets! If the child has the urge to transport then do you have a variety of resources, such as shopping trundlers, suitcases and trolleys that they can use to transport?

Take time to reflect on roadblocks that may hamper an urge, for example, the imposed rules of a centre around inside and outside toys, or no climbing inside, can lead to conflict situations. Slow down so you can observe simple behaviours, such as children continually dropping things and then by engaging in pedagogical discussions, teachers can come up with some exciting and innovative ideas that provide opportunities for children to drop objects from various heights, to build using pulleys and chutes or to use tubes and guttering. This is all about teachers noticing, recognising and responding.

Pennie Brownlee talks about 'cultural blindness'. In *The Sacred Urge to Play*, she said that 'Ronald Lally opined

that the makers of so-called 'educational toys' start with the belief that children are empty vessels or blank slates, and that the 'educational toys' they provide will remedy the deficit.' Pennie believes that 'this deficit view can easily be repaired depending on 'how quickly we can 'fit new improved lenses into our glasses' with which to re-view education.' If we don't hold this deficit view then surely the resources we provide within our settings needs to reflect and support this. Open-ended resources, which are often cheaper, support the urges of tamariki to transform, arrange, enclose, order, imagine, group, throw or collect. If your costumes are Batman, Fireman or Fairy Princess; of which we often only have two or three, (which in its self restricts the number of participants in that play), then that is all they will be, however, if you have a variety of open-ended resources such as scarves, fabrics, belts, wings, capes, ties and shoes then they can be what ever they imagine themselves to be.

Do you wonder how different urges can be fulfilled within an early childhood environment when they are conflicting? If I have an urge for mess and you have an urge for order how do we coexist within the same environment without constant conflict? For this to happen teachers need to look at their environments and design with urges in mind. If you provide the space and resources and you observe enough to modify and adapt your environment, and your placement of things is such that it is conducive, then conflict is minimised.

Currently when centres engage in planned self-reviews, they are more often than not still based around curriculum areas. A centre could just as easily switch the focus to that of urges instead. For example teams could review constructing and deconstructing, rather than the block or carpentry areas. Asking questions such as, if constructing is the urge, what core resources do we have to support it? What resources do we have that supports constructing in differing scales, micro through to large? Are there opportunities for constructing both outdoors and indoors? What changes do we need to make to our environment so that the younger children, who are mainly into deconstructing, don't clash with the older children that are into constructing complex and intricate constructions? Do we have multiples of the same resources to help avoid conflict? How is our current programme impacting on our children's ability to follow their urge?

If you want to support the urges then teachers, tamariki and the environment need to all be in sync!

**"Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different from before."**

Malaguzzi (1993)

## References

*This article was inspired by professional development with Kimberley Crisp of The Nest. You can find more of Kimberley's work on her facebook page*  
<https://www.facebook.com/KimberleyCrisp.ProfessionalDevelopment>

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