

The Play Development Paradigm

A FRAMEWORK BY NADJA JULIA ROLLI (2026)

Play is not a childhood luxury. It is the primary process through which emotional regulation, identity, relationships, creativity, resilience, and psychological well-being are shaped — from infancy through adulthood. The Play Development Paradigm identifies five sequential stages of play, each linked to a level of human need and to specific neurobiological developments.

Maslow's Hierarchy of needs	Form of Play	Core Achievements of this Play stage	Brain system Necessary for this stage 
5 SELF-ACTUALISATION NEEDS	 COMPETITIVE PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of self-agency and goal-directed behaviour • Capacity to engage with rules, fairness and social negotiation • Integration of motivation, effort and achievement • Ability to tolerate success, failure and comparison • Persistence, resilience and integrity 	Prefrontal cortex integration <i>Advanced executive functions, planning, inhibition, flexibility, and future orientation.</i>
4 ESTEEM NEEDS	 FANTASY PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagination, creativity and symbolic thinking • Emergence of self-concept, self-worth and inner narrative • Expression and transformation of emotional experience • Expansion beyond immediate reality into possibility • Beginning of mentalisation and flexible perspective-taking 	Prefrontal-temporal networks <i>Symbolic thinking, imagination, language, narrative, and mentalization.</i>
3 BELONGING NEEDS	 CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role exploration • Identity development and belonging • Social skills • Cooperation and empathy • Problem solving • Planning and cognitive integration 	Parietal-frontal integration <i>Visuospatial processing, problem-solving, perspective-taking, and cognitive integration.</i>
2 SAFETY NEEDS	 ATTACHMENT PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional regulation and self-soothing • Trust in self and others • Secure attachment and relational safety • Co-regulation and attunement • Internalised sense of safety and predictability 	Limbic system integration <i>Emotional processing, attachment circuits, stress regulation, and relational memory.</i>
1 PHYSIOLOGICAL NEEDS	 SENSORY PLAY	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body awareness and interoception • Sensory processing and integration • Arousal regulation and nervous system stability • Meaning making • Foundation for all learning and behaviour 	Brainstem and primary sensory systems <i>Arousal regulation, sensory processing, motor integration, and foundational neural pathways</i>

What Happens When A Stage Is Missed?

This question is misleading because people do not typically miss stages of play development. Rather, they move through each stage, but the developmental needs associated with a particular stage may not be adequately met.

Play development is a self-organising, nonlinear dynamic process that may appear chaotic but moves towards increasing order and complexity. Each stage of play builds upon the one before it and is influenced by the age and abilities of the player, the play environments available, and the opportunities and limitations within their experiences.

When a stage is disrupted by trauma, deprivation, illness, adverse family circumstances, or the changing conditions of modern life, the developmental needs associated with that stage may remain unmet. This may later appear as difficulties with self-regulation, relational trust, creative confidence, narrative coherence, resilience, or tolerating competition and loss.

Understanding which stage was disrupted provides a powerful developmental lens for clinical practice, education, and conscious parenting.

About Nadja Julia Rolli	The Book
<p>Child and adolescent psychotherapist, trainer, and creator of the Play Development Paradigm. Founder of PASST Ltd (Play and Sensory Stimulation Therapy). Board Member of the Child Psychotherapy Council.</p> <p>Over 20 years of clinical experience with children, adolescents, adults, families, schools, and community organisations. Registered UKCP and BACP. EMDR Europe accredited.</p> <p>Lectures internationally.</p>	<p>Can We Play Now? The Meaning of Play throughout Lifetime Development</p> <p>Karnac Books, February 2026 £28.99</p> <p><i>Endorsed by Prof. Nick Midgley (UCL / Anna Freud), Dr Sue Jennings (University of Birmingham), Dr Graham Music (Tavistock), and Jon Blend (Gazebo School).</i></p>