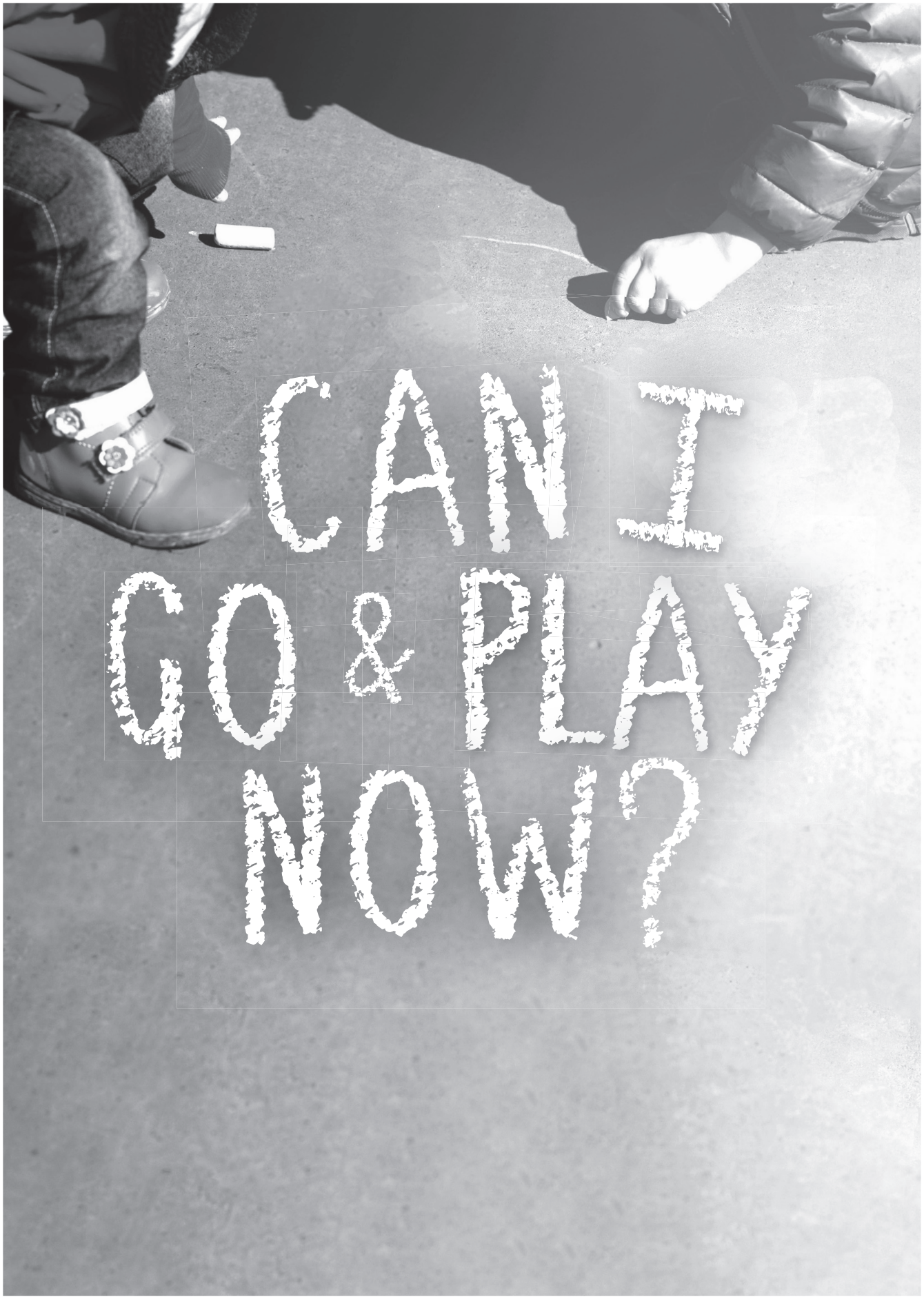

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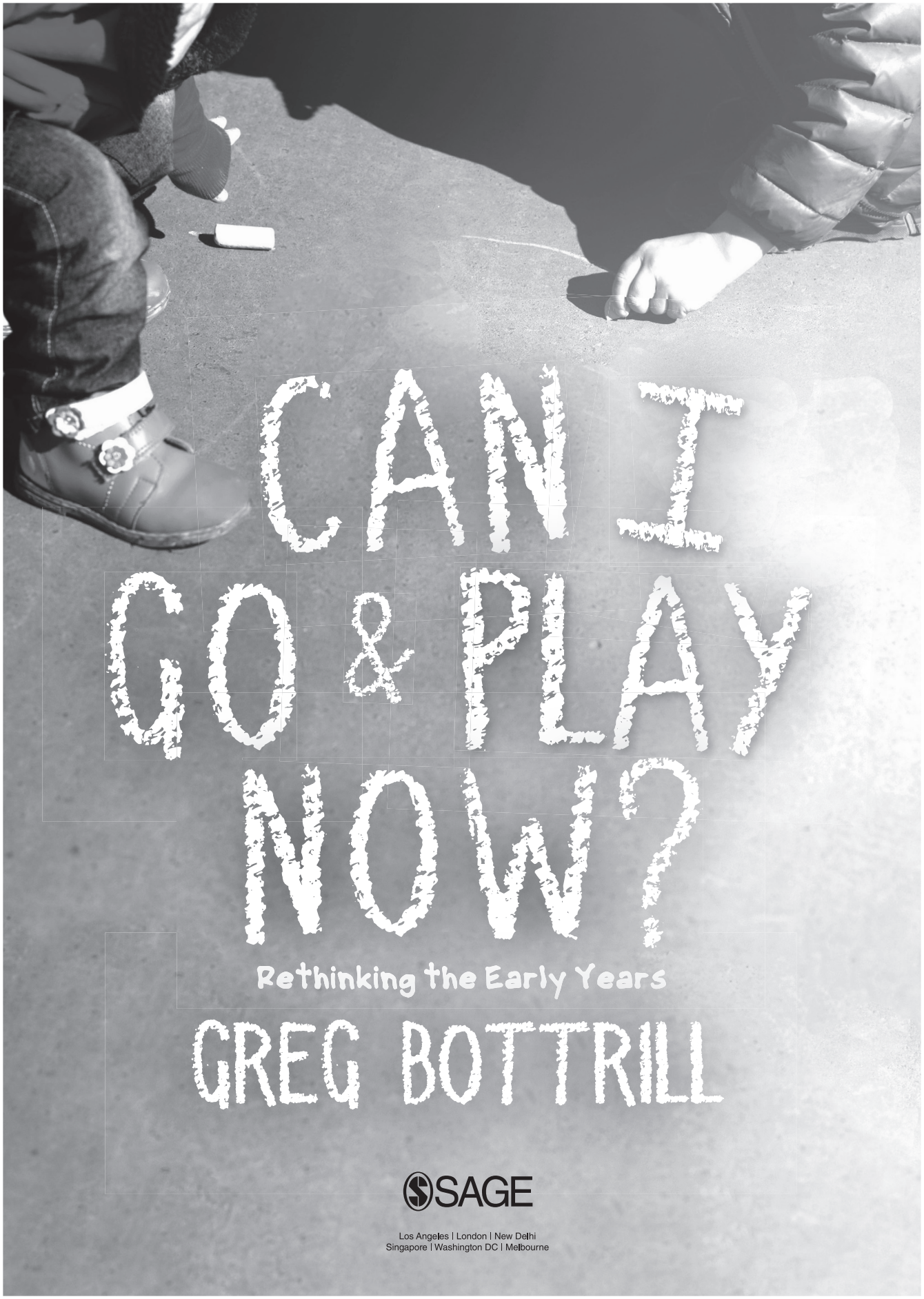

CAN I GO & PLAY NOW?

Rethinking the Early Years

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CHAPTER 3

WHAT PLAY IS AND WHAT PLAY ISN'T

'Play for today …' – The Cure

Play is one of the most misunderstood concepts. In today's educational world it is also one of the most underrated. And yet it is the most vital component for development – the gift of play is the greatest thing we can ever possibly give a child. Unfortunately, the incessant clamour for measurability and adult world-dominated thinking overshadows the truly rich potential of play and replaces it instead with a stale and stagnant regimen of worksheets, structure and the treadmill of 'factory-setting' tick-box activities.

I make no apologies for saying this. We seem to offer our young children an educational experience that has emerged from the Upside Down. If you've never watched the Netflix series, *Stranger Things*, then go do it. The Upside Down is like a shadow world that echoes our own but is lifeless and haunted by the unknown. There are various portals to this other world

through which they can entwine. In our educational version we somehow need to close the portal.

The Upside Down emanates from Key Stages 1 and 2, and from the traditionalist typeset idea of what education actually is and how it should be delivered. We have already explored how children's languages need to be heard and there is no better vehicle for this than play. Real Play should be from the child and for the child. It should be open ended, give opportunities for self-chosen challenges, offer limitless possibilities and endless interpretations. Real play enables children – it lights them up.

We can only offer this kind of play, however, if we are willing to breathe a different ether. I like to see children as people who breathe a different air from us that makes them behave, feel, think and dream in a totally different way from the adults around them. The ether that they breathe in is at a lower height than ours. As adults, we need to breathe this ether too. In order to do this, we need to literally get on our knees and not pray, but *play.*

Real play is owned by the child

It is not necessarily planned. It has a more reactive element that has wildness and spontaneity at heart. It can't be confined. It shouldn't have restraints. It is choice, it is vitality. Real Play is not created by the Red Group, Blue Group or Green Group. It isn't enabled by round robin activities or by a factory-style rotation of children with a TA taking it in turns to add coloured tissue paper to an adult-drawn design. Play is creativity, it is abandon. It is risk, collaboration, interpretation and reinterpretation. Its meaning is infinite and its importance cannot and must not be ignored. If your children are not engaged in Real Play, then they are not truly learning – they are merely copying and being shaped into mini Stepford Wives-type beings who lose their own identity and self-purpose.

Ask yourself – what should children be doing?

If I truly want to answer this question, do I not need to detach myself from the demands of a curriculum or state-driven expectations? Very few of us would deny that children need to play, so if that is the case, why is play being squeezed from our children's lives and from their school day? Why are we enforcing a way of being that is the antithesis of what they actually need? We need to ask ourselves what kind of children we want to nurture. Our society of tomorrow will be shaped by the 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds of today. What natures do we want these children to have? Do we not want creative, caring citizens who have dreams and ambitions, who have a spark within them, who are able to collaborate and make

decisions for themselves? These 'soft skills' will define our culture through the years – respect, thoughtfulness, kindness, application, self-drive, creativity. Play and playfulness enable these in bucketloads. Yet we seem determined to crush this, to belittle it somehow. Our adult world has demands that we think play cannot meet. It's as though the only way for children to succeed is for them to put out their own spark and adopt our adult version of what a child should do and be.

As an Early Years teacher you must see this. You must. Surely it is impossible to work with young children and deny that play is integral to their development. And yet time and time again we put our adult footprint on this and drown out the languages of the child. Play is not some Mobilo chucked in a Tuff Spot. It is not thirty Mother's Day cards all looking identical with a yellow daffodil and a copied inscription in the inside. And play is certainly not enabled with coloured sashes to put on the twenty children lucky enough to get to the door first to go out in the garden or outside space. We need to throw off our preconceptions of what play is. Play is freedom, so let it be free.

'Child is father of the man/The Mother and the Wife/The child enjoys the longest days/And the longest life ...' – Father, Mother, Wife and Child, *The Lilac Time*

At some point in our lives play seems to stop

It's as though there's a day for all of us when imagination and wonder get put away in a suitcase and stored in a wardrobe. Responsibility, relationships, self-image, bills, the news, fear: our growth seems to rely on this day arriving. It's like going to the opticians, putting on your new glasses and discovering that there is a real world out there with focus and clear edges. As soon as we see this world, it's as though we begin to emerge out of the cocoon of childhood. I'm not sure it falls on one particular day, but the process of things from the past seeming 'childish' does appear to happen quickly for most of us. A child's eyes see the wonder and space behind and in everything – our teenage selves learn to blind ourselves to this and refocus on a different reality.

Therefore, as adults we need to keep children in their world of wonder for as long as possible, or at least not drag them out of it before they are ready. Responsibility to varying degrees comes to us all eventually, as do the attraction of boys or girls. Hormones kick in. So do spots. These changes bring about a seismic shift in our identities as we enter a phase that moves us away from our parents and their world and into a world of independence and decision-making. We are clearly talking about our teenage years here – the space of music, love, lust, self-discovery and preparation for the adult world.

Again, as an adult, you must be able to recognise this. You yourself went on this journey. You left childhood and entered your teenage years. If they were anything like mine, then it was a time of great confusion, ever-changing moods, crying over girls and locking yourself in your bedroom listening to The Smiths to find at least some solace in the angst-pop of Morrissey, Marr, Joyce and Rourke.

Ultimately, it was a time of life in which you most probably felt very out of control and hugely unsure. I yearned to be a child again, threw myself in to reading *Winnie The Pooh* and even making models with Lego but to no avail. Kicking and screaming (sometimes literally), I was dragged by my own body and societal expectations through a mental and bodily landscape that I didn't recognise or have a map for.

And yet now on the other side, I do have some kind of map, some awareness of what it was I went through. I'm watching my own daughter at the age of 15 now beginning this very journey. Now no teenage girl particularly wants to hear the sage wisdom of her middle-aged dad, so I try not to be Advice Man as best I can. Perhaps we're meant to go through this phase of our lives by ourselves and literally make up our own minds. I don't know. What I do know is that every adult alive today has gone through the journey. Every adult has gone through the struggle, the resentment, the ups and downs, the loves and heartbreak. We've all been on the adventure and are still going on it now that we're adults whether that involves travel, holding down a 9 to 5 job or emptying the kitchen bin.

The point is that you know the journey that you went through. You know deep down that childhood doesn't last. You know just how challenging and hard the adult world can be. Yes, you can drink, stay out for as long as you want, Tinder to your heart's content, but you also know that the adult world has a paradoxical complexity and regimentation that makes it pretty messed up at times. So if you know it, then shouldn't you be considering the wonder of childhood and how your children are enabled to experience this when you are in the classroom with them? Does it not pain you that we are stifling childhood and in turn potentially inhibiting the next generation of would-be dreamers, explorers, doers and makers?

We need to ensure that children get enough childhood ahead of the teen phase

We need to give children significant opportunity to engage with one another, express themselves and grow the skills that they will need prior to teenagehood. And what is the one key component of this pre-teenage phase? Play. We cannot just give a nod to it while pressing the photocopier button to unleash the next series of worksheets. We cannot just tip Lego in a tray while sitting Red Group at a table to fill out missing words in a

cloze sentence. If the child is truly the father of the man and we want to enable this person to be well rounded, loving, able to control him- or herself, collaborate with others, have ambition and, dare I say it, have dreams, then we must embrace the power of play.

Play creates the conditions for children to test the world, to make sense of it, to grow the skills needed to communicate, to negotiate and express their inner selves. And, of course, we're talking here about Real Play – Real Play that has been enabled by your effective environment and your considered skill-driven continuous provision; Real Play that is accepting of children's voices and need for freedom to make them heard; and Real Play that is not encumbered by the adult world.

If you know what awaits beyond childhood and if you understand the value of Real Play, then shouldn't you be exploring every avenue to make this happen? Is it not time to put play at the heart of all you do? Life is too short, dear reader, to do anything else.