

The Power of Pretend

Free play is a sacred rite of childhood, and kids need plenty of unstructured time to indulge their imaginations.

Two boys up in a tree playing space shuttle. A bunch of kids racing around a playhouse cleaning make-believe spiders off the walls. Three girls fleeing the ghost who lives in an abandoned barn. What could be more typical of childhood than these scenes of kids casually engaged in fantasy play? Yet this most natural and spontaneous activity seems to be on the decline in our culture, as unstructured, child-directed play gives way to more regimented forms of leisure. And as children lose touch with their instinctive creativity in using free time, their social, emotional, and intellectual lives may suffer.

Play takes many forms, from games, sports, and art activities to interaction with toys, dramatic improvisation, and other imaginative explorations. But while children may be playing as much as they ever have, they are doing it in ways that are far more structured, frequently involving formal games and technological recreation. In a recent

study of children's home play conducted by researchers at the University of Kansas, parents of children in kindergarten through second grade reported that their youngsters' primary recreation was centered around television-based or electronic games, as well as preparation for organized sports. According to E. Peter Johnsen, a professor of educational psychology and research who conducted the Kansas study, play tends to fit into activities organized by adults; it has fixed rules and is fairly competitive. "We're not talking about a game of red rover or hide-and-seek, but rather about practicing for swimming, soccer, or Little League," says Johnsen. "And even here, we found children expressing themselves very little. We didn't find a lot of pretend play, where children use their imaginations."

As psychologist Bruno Bettelheim, author of *The Uses of Enchantment*, points out, "The days of most middle-class children are filled with scheduled activities—boy or girl scout meetings, music and dance lessons, organized sports—which leave them hardly any time simply to be themselves." Yet unstructured, imaginative play may benefit a child's development more than formal types of recreation do. Pretend play allows children to test and modify their own hypotheses about the world. The toddler who revels in playing peekaboo may very well be confirming that an object that has disappeared from view can continue to exist, while the five-year-old busily forming and reforming a soggy mud pie may be unconsciously experimenting with what child researcher Jean Piaget of Switzerland termed the law of the conservation of mass: the understanding that changing the shape of an object will not affect its quantity.

Imaginative play also allows



Writing their own rules: Informal play may benefit kids more than formal types of recreation.

kids to work through emotional conflicts in creative ways. Bettelheim suggests that “the most normal and competent child encounters what seem like insurmountable problems in living. But by playing them out in the way he chooses, he may become able to cope with them in a step-by-step process.” Playing monster, for example, allows children to experience a sense of power and control over what seem to be threatening forces in their lives.

Equally important, play sets up a microcosm of society, allowing children to investigate social roles in preparation for their full-fledged participation in family and community activities. Children get to experience what it feels like to be a mommy, a daddy, a sibling, a teacher, or a police officer, and can thus begin to see the world from another perspective. This kind of learning represents an important prerequisite to mature social behavior. Research also suggests that free play contributes to children’s language development and their ability to focus attention on a task.

The Child in You

While much of the charm of childhood play stems from its being a refuge from the world of “bossy adults,” parents can take a role in the land of make-believe so long as they’re sensitive to the delicate nature of pretend activities in the lives of their children. The first thing parents can do is to develop their own sense of playfulness. Don’t be afraid to get down on your hands and knees and moo like a cow or scamper across the floor fire-engine style. These impromptu activities will likely bring back memories of your own childhood, while increasing your understanding of your child’s experiences. You may remember games and play episodes you engaged in as a youngster that you’ll want to pass along to the next generation.

Children have a lot to share, too, in the way of dramatic-play themes that they’ve borrowed from their friends at school and from books, television, and movies. Take time to observe kids’ play, discover what the ground rules are, and quietly enter their imaginative world, making sure that

you are welcome. Then use your voice, gestures, and facial expressions to bring to life whatever role you are assigned to play. Take care, however, not to overwhelm the children with your exuberance or to try to control the flow of events. A case in point: I recently played a game with a child, and he took great umbrage at my introduction of a magic carpet into his Ghostbuster fantasy. Also, unless real harm is being done, relax your usual restrictions about aggressiveness, messiness, noise, and other parental bugaboos. Play is a chance to let down your own hair and give your kids permission to get a little rowdy.

Playtime Is Anytime

Although free play tends to be associated with the preschool and early elementary-school years, parents can—and should—play with their kids from infancy on. When your three-month-old baby gurgles and you gurgle back, you’ve initiated a play activity. When you find your eight-month-old handing you her favorite toy, then yanking it back, and repeating this process over and over again, you’ve become party to her own version of free play. At the other end of the spectrum, when your teenager does an imitation of his favorite rock star and you plug your ears in mock horror, you’ve engaged in a bit of mutual improvisation. While older kids tend to prefer more structured games and activities, they still enjoy the chance to be spontaneous in a little family skit or a game of charades.

Parents need to resist the temptation to turn play into an educational experience. Play should be engaged in for its own sake—because just by doing it kids will develop and grow—and not because it teaches specific objectives. Play with a purpose is not really play at all, but rather a hidden agenda for sugarcoating instructional goals. Johan Huizinga, in his landmark study, *Homo Ludens*, suggested that children’s play shares certain commonalities with the religious rites of ancient people. We’d do well to consider play as a sacred activity for kids and not meddle with it too much. Above all, let’s remember the dictum of one expert on children’s play, who advises: “If it isn’t fun, forget it!” □

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