

The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children

David Elkind

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The real power of David Elkind's new book *The Power of Play* lies in the fact that it takes us inside the mind of one of the greatest developmental thinkers of our time. A disciple of Jean Piaget, Elkind was a key figure in the resurgence of the Swiss psychologist's work in America in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s and 1990s, Elkind turned his explorations toward social critique, indicting our modern, fast-paced, technological society for pushing children out of childhood too quickly. The hurried-child syndrome is his legacy from that period. Now, in *The Power of Play*, Elkind brings these two facets of his work together—along with his experience as a Freudian-influenced clinician, a teacher, a father, and a grandfather—to give us a rich and varied perspective on the value of play for our postmodern era.

Taking a cue from Freud's prescription for a fulfilled life (to love and to work), Elkind adds a third element to this formula: to play. It is the balance of these three elements that makes for a harmonious life, Elkind believes, and all through the book he builds a case for how effective parents, as well as successful educators, manage to weave play, work, and love through their interactions with children. Guiding the reader through the development stages, Elkind explains how play should be the focus of early childhood, work the central

objective of middle childhood, and love the chief concern of adolescence, even as play needs to underpin them all.

In addition, when supporting play experiences in children, adults need to keep in mind the specific Piagetian stages of kids at different ages, as well as their individual differences within each stage. Thus Elkind is harshly critical (rightly, in my view) of many current societal products and practices for children. These include infant software, TV for tots, formal reading and math instruction for preschoolers, and a narrowly focused, test-based curriculum for school-aged children and adolescents. Virtually all infant software programs, according to Elkind, fail to recognize that babies do not possess critical-thinking capacities, and preschool reading and math programs ignore the fact that young children cannot conceive of letters or numbers as possessing "set like" characteristics until they reach what Piaget called the stage of concrete operations between five and seven years of age, at which point, for example, an *e* for them may be both a letter of the alphabet and a sound that can change depending upon its relationship to other letters. Elkind contrasts the childhood toys and activities of yesteryear—from blocks and model airplanes to sand play and simple dolls—with the toys and childhood pursuits of today, which leave nothing to the imagination and lead children passively to watch TV or play video games as they grow ever more obese.

Much of *The Power of Play* is taken up with describing different kinds of play experiences across ages and stages. These include the playful experimentation with hands, feet, and senses of the infant; the repetitive mastery play of the toddler who wants to go down the stairs

again and again; the innovative play of the slightly older child who has learned to go down the slide and now wants to walk up the slide; the kinship play of two three-year-olds who are complete strangers; the therapeutic play of the four-year-old who develops an imaginary companion to cope with stress; the rule-governed ball games, strength games, and chasing games of the eight-year-old; and the fort-building games of the ten- and eleven-year-old. Elkind describes these varieties of playful experience by citing clinical literature and children's literature, by referring to his own clinical experiences (we learn for example, that he evaluated the original Bubble Boy), and by drawing upon his own rich experiences with his children, grandchildren, and grandnieces. For example, Elkind emphasizes the importance of using humor as a part of "light-hearted parenting," and illustrates this by the story of how his two-year-old niece kept trying to feed their dog with bits of lunch. Elkind writes: "Using my roughest voice and making an ogre face, I said, 'The ogre says don't feed the dog.' She made a funny face and stopped. When we visited her at Christmas, she made a stern face and said, in her own ogre voice, 'The ogre says don't feed the dog,' and giggled" (p. 174).

Throughout the first part of the book, Elkind uses a friendly anecdotal voice to share his thoughts and experiences. Toward the end of the book, the voice becomes more academic, as Elkind writes about those progressive educators who employed play as a significant component of their schooling approaches, including John Dewey, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner. In addition, he reflects upon schooling practices that have traditionally worked against play. I was fascinated, for example, to learn that

steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie created the Carnegie unit used in high schools, based on his belief that an hour provides an objective measure of labor as employed in his factories.

Elkind concludes by citing a number of studies linking play to academic achievement (most of these were two decades old; I would have liked to see some that were more current) and by providing a few playful activities for breaking the cycle of boredom that is all too prevalent in schools today (including a game called *The Dumb Books Caper*, where children try to find all the mistakes made in a typical school textbook!). All in all, readers will find this book a cornucopia of ideas about play, leading to new thoughts and questions. For example, I was wondering by the end of the book whether children have created lore incorporating elements of the high-tech world—is there an iPod jump rope rhyme out there? Whether you are an educator, parent, psychologist, therapist, sociologist, or museum professional, there is something in this book for you and much to be learned from an individual who has been a major advocate over the past half century for the developmental needs of all children.

—Thomas Armstrong, *author of The Human Odyssey: Navigating the Twelve Stages of Life (2007)*