

# The Vital Role of Play in Childhood

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“The ability to play is one of the principal criteria of mental health.”

Ashley Montagu

Over thirty years of working with children, families, and teachers in Waldorf kindergartens all over the world, I have observed one overwhelming similarity: creative play is a central activity in the lives of healthy young children. It helps children weave together all the elements of life as they experience it. It allows them to digest life and make it their own. It is an outlet for the fullness of their creativity, and it is an absolutely critical part of their childhood. With creative play, children blossom and flourish; without it, they suffer a serious decline.

I am hardly the first to note this fact. The central importance of creative play in children’s healthy development is well supported by decades of research. And yet children’s play, in the creative, open-ended sense in which I use the term, is now seriously endangered. School children no longer have the freedom to explore woods and fields and find their own special places. Physical education and recess are being eliminated; new schools are built without playgrounds. Informal neighborhood ball games are a thing of the past, as children are herded into athletic leagues from age five on.

From all sides—parents, teachers, psychologists, and psychiatrists—one hears tales of young children who do not play. Some seem blocked and unable to play. Others long to play, but busy schedules outside school or an overemphasis on focused learning in school have driven play out of their lives. Add to this mixture the hours spent sitting still in front of screens—television, video game, and computer—while children absorb other people’s stories and imaginations but can’t act out their own, and the result is a steady decline in children’s play. This decline will certainly have serious consequences for children and for the future of childhood itself.

In this article I will focus on the play of children before first grade, especially from three to seven. During these years, when play should be flourishing, its development has been thwarted. We may not intend to drive play out of children’s lives, but our policies and practices in schools and at home discourage children from pursuing their own open-ended, self-directed play.

## The Nature of Play

If we are to save play we must first understand its nature. Creative play is like a spring that bubbles up from deep within a child. It is refreshing and enlivening and is a natural part of the make-up of every healthy child. It is so fundamental to the make-up of the child that it is often hard to separate play from learning. Whether children are working on new physical skills, social relations, or cognitive content, they approach life with a playful spirit. As a friend said of her eight-month-old recently, “It just seems that she’s working all the time.” But is it work or play? In childhood there is no distinction.

Adults are convinced that we need to “teach” young children. It is certainly true that we need to set an example in all kinds of activities. We also need to create appropriate spaces where children can play and learn, and we need to lend a helping hand—and at times even intervene when things are going wrong. But mostly we need to honor the innate capacity for learning that moves the limbs and fills the souls of every healthy young child. The child’s love of learning is intimately linked with a zest for play.

Nathan at one year came with his parents to the summer house we share as a family. He was delighted to find several staircases in this house, for in his own home there was only one step, and he had long since mastered it. Now he gave full vent to the young child's wish to climb stairs. Over and over he would climb up and down. We took turns standing guard, but he rarely needed our help. He was focused and concentrated and did not like to be taken away from this activity. He gave every sign of being a happy, playful child while climbing, yet he was also clearly exploring and mastering a new skill and one that was important for his long-term development. Most important, it was a task he set for himself. No one could have told this one-year-old to devote hours to climbing. And no one needed to. He did it himself, as will every healthy child whose sense of movement has not been disturbed.

Another example: Ivana at age four came to kindergarten one Monday morning and proudly announced that she could tie shoes. I must have looked skeptical, since most children at four can't tie a real bow. Ivana was determined to show me, and she sat down on the floor and untied her shoes. She then retied them into perfect bows, looked at my astonished face, and beamed. Later in the day I asked her mother how Ivana had learned to do this. Her mother laughed and described how over the weekend Ivana had pretended that she was going to a birthday party. She used all the scrap paper she could find and folded it into little birthday packages. She raided her mother's yarn basket and used scraps of yarn to tie the packages with bows. She probably tied 60 or 70 packages during the weekend until she had at last mastered the art of tying bows.

Again, no one could have assigned Ivana such a task. She clearly felt ready, and what was important was that she did her work in the spirit of play, pretending to go to a birthday party. Learning to tie was not a tedious task but something she enjoyed doing.

The simple truth is that young children are born with a most wonderful urge to grow and learn. They continually develop new skills and capacities, and if they are allowed to set the pace with a bit of help from the adult world they will work at all this in a playful and tireless way. Rather than respecting this innate drive to learn, however, we treat children as if they can learn only what we adults can teach them. We strip them of their innate confidence in directing their own learning, hurry them along, and often wear them out. It is no wonder that so many teachers complain that by age nine or ten children seem burned out and uninterested in learning. This is a great tragedy, for the love of learning that Nathan and Ivana displayed is meant to last a whole lifetime. Furthermore, it is intimately bound to our capacity to be creative and purposeful.

The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi speaks about the creative state in adults he calls "flow." Referring to Csikszentmihalyi's work, Daniel Goleman and his co-authors in *Creative Spirit* describe flow as the time "when people are at their peak. Flow can happen in any domain or activity—while painting, playing chess, making love, anything. The one requirement is that your skills so perfectly match the demands of the moment that all self-consciousness disappears." (Goleman et al., p. 46) In just the same way, children's play is characterized by an absence of self-consciousness.

The depth of concentration that children display when they are immersed in play is astounding. I think of five-year-old Peter watching intently as two girls in the kindergarten were creating an especially beautiful play scene on a tabletop. They were deeply engrossed and so was he. It happened that on that day the fire department descended on us, for one of the teachers had called them after noticing an electrical smell in her room. Three fire engines roared up our driveway. Peter's friend Benjamin ran up to him, crying, "Peter, Peter, the fire engines are here!" But Peter was so intent on watching the play scene that he did not respond. Benjamin tried again with the same

result. He shrugged and rushed back to the window to watch the firemen arrive. Finally, Peter emerged from his concentration, saw the fire engines, and hurried to the window.

Peter's state of mind seems very close to that of a neurosurgeon described by Csikszentmihalyi. He was engrossed in a difficult operation. When the procedure was finished, the surgeon asked about a pile of debris in the corner of the operating room. He had not noticed it before. He then was told that part of the ceiling had caved in during the operation. He had been so engaged in the flow of his work that he had not heard a thing. (Goleman et al., pp. 46–47)

This state of flow experienced by scientists, physicians, artists, and others may seem a bit scary or intimidating to us. Do we want to enter so wholeheartedly into life and learning? It does not fit the contemporary picture of multi-tasking where one is doing many things at once, but usually none of them very deeply. Yet it is an important state of being if we want to flex our inner capacities to the fullest and offer our greatest gifts to the world. These are the skills children are prepared to develop, and even long to develop. In their education, however, children increasingly find classrooms filled with scripted teaching, computerized learning, and assessment through standardized testing. All of this trivializes children's real capacities for life and learning and leaves many with a deep sense of disappointment and frustration.

### The Development of Play

The secret to helping young children thrive is to keep the spirit of creativity and of playful learning alive and active. An important ingredient in this is our own work as adults, for children naturally imitate grown-ups. This inspires their play. Their learning is a combination of their own deep inner drive to grow and learn coupled with their imitation of the adults in their environment. These two elements interweave all through early childhood. They provide the underlying basis for play, yet their outer expression changes year by year as children develop.

One of the milestones in play is the development of make-believe play, also known as fantasy play, around age 2 1/2 or 3. Before that, children are more oriented to the real world: their own bodies, simple household objects like pots, pans, and wooden spoons, and simple toys like dolls, trucks, and balls. In their play, toddlers imitate what they see around them; common play themes include cooking, caring for baby, driving cars or trucks, and other everyday events. These themes continue and expand after age three but now children are less dependent on real objects and create what they need from anything that is at hand. Their ability to enter into make-believe allows them to transform

a simple object into a play prop. A bowl becomes a ship, a stick becomes a fishing pole, a rock becomes a baby, and much, much more.

It is fascinating to watch the force of fantasy enter the lives of children. The three-year-old becomes so engaged in make-believe play that objects seem to be in a constant state of transformation. No play episode is ever finished; it is always in the process of becoming something else. The playful three-year-old often leaves a trail of objects as her play evolves from one theme to the next. In contrast, four-year-olds are generally more stationary and thematic in their play. They like to have a "house" to play in, which might also be a ship or a shop, and many enter the "pack-rat" stage where they fill their houses with objects so that it seems they cannot freely move around. This does not bother

them at all, however. Like three-year-olds, they are inspired in the moment by the objects before them. They are quite spontaneous in their ideas for play.

It is always exciting to watch the change in play in the five-year-olds as they enter the kindergarten and announce what they want to play. Their mothers sometimes report that the children wake up in

the morning with an idea for play in mind. Sometimes they play out the same theme for days or even weeks on end, developing it differently each time. One can see them gain focus as they come in touch with their own ideas and have the will to carry them out in playful detail.

There is one more important aspect to the development of make-believe play that usually does not occur until children are six. At this age they still love fantasy play but often will play out a situation without the use of props. They may build a house or castle but leave it unfurnished, then sit inside it and talk through their play, for now they are able to see the images clearly in their minds' eyes. This stage can be described as imaginative play, for the children now have the capacity to form an inner image. It is around this time that a child will say something like "I can see Grandma whenever I want. I just have to close my eyes." Or she may set up a play scene with her toys but close her eyes and play it out "inside."

Dorothy and Jerome Singer, both psychologists at Yale University, have devoted their lives to the subject of children's play. They summarize their experiences in this way: Over many years of observing children in free play, we have found that those who engage in make-believe, what Piaget calls symbolic play, are more joyful, and smile and laugh more often than those who seem to be at odds with themselves—the children who wander aimlessly around the nursery school or daycare center looking for something to do, who play in a preservative way with a few blocks, or who annoy their peers by teasing them or interrupting their games. (Singer and Singer, p. 64)

### **The Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Benefits of Play**

When children are happily at play in a kindergarten there is a wonderful hum in the room. A deep sense of well being emanates from the children. This should be reason enough to foster and protect play, but research also points to a number of important gains linked to a child's ability to engage in healthy, creative play. Sara Smilansky, an Israeli researcher, studied children at play in Israel and the United States. She defines dramatic play as taking place when a child pretends to be someone else and sociodramatic play as those times when two or more children cooperate in such role-playing. She summarizes her research as follows: "The results point to dramatic and sociodramatic play as a strong medium for the development of cognitive and socioemotional skills."

Here is summary of the gains she found directly linked to a child's ability to engage in dramatic and sociodramatic play:

#### **Gains in Cognitive-Creative Activities**

- Better verbalization
- Richer vocabulary
- Higher language comprehension
- Higher language level
- Better problem-solving strategies
- More curiosity
- Better ability to take on the perspective of another
- Higher intellectual competence

#### **Gains in Socioemotional Activities**

- More playing with peers
- More group activity
- Better peer cooperation
- Reduced aggression
- Better ability to take on the perspective of others
- More empathy
- Better control of impulsive actions
- Better prediction of others' preferences and desires

Better emotional and social adjustment  
More innovation  
More imaginativeness  
Longer attention span  
Greater attention ability  
Performance of more conservation tasks  
(Smilansky, p. 35)

Smilansky concludes, “Sociodramatic play activates resources that stimulate emotional, social, and intellectual growth in the child, which in turn affects the child’s success in school. We saw many similarities between patterns of behavior bringing about successful sociodramatic play experiences and patterns of behavior required for successful integration into the school situation. For example, problem solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make-believe: visualizing how the Eskimos live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems, and determining what will come next. History, geography, and literature are all make-believe. All of these are conceptual constructions that are never directly experienced by the child.” (Smilansky, p. 25)

For the elementary-school child imagination is as important a medium for learning as make-believe play is for the pre-schooler. Through imagination and the art of storytelling every subject in the world can be taught, and elementary- school children become enthralled with learning. Without imagination learning is a dull affair for children. If a child has been allowed to engage in make-believe play during the nursery-school and kindergarten years and to develop inner imagination before entering first grade, she is then ripe and ready to learn. While one or another may have a learning difficulty, their enthusiasm for learning—and for overcoming difficulties—is enormous.

How do we help children enter into learning with imagination and enthusiasm? My own experience has been that the children who were the most active players in the kindergarten were also the most active learners in elementary school. This experience is supported by a study done in the 1970s in Germany, at a time when many kindergartens were being transformed into academic rather than play-oriented environments. The study compared 50 kindergartens where children played with 50 where the children focused on early academics. The children were followed until fourth grade, and at that point the children from the play-oriented kindergartens excelled over the others in every area measured—physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. The results were especially striking among lower-income children, who clearly benefited from the play-oriented approach. The overall results were so compelling that Germany switched all its kindergartens back to being play-oriented. (Der Spiegel) They have continued in this mode until the present time, although during recent visits to Germany I hear more of the rhetoric one hears in this country: that to prepare children for a globalized economy they must get a head start on literacy, numeracy, and other subjects.

The benefits of play-oriented programs were also documented in the research of the High/Scope early childhood programs based in Ypsilanti, Michigan. In one study, 69 low-income three- and four-year-old children, who were at high risk of school failure, were randomly assigned to one of three types of programs: the High/Scope program and a traditional nursery school both included child-initiated activities, while the Direct Instruction approach did not. I.Q. scores rose in all three programs, but various social indicators showed a large difference between children in the more academic, direct instruction program and those in the programs encouraging self-initiated activity, including play. The children were followed until age 23, and the following results were noted:

Initially, all three curriculum approaches improved young children's intellectual performance substantially, with the average IQs of children in all three groups rising 27 points. By age 15, however, students in the High/Scope group and the Nursery School group reported only half as much delinquent activity as the students in the Direct Instruction group. Findings at age 23 continue to support the conclusion that the High/Scope and Nursery School groups are better off than the Direct Instruction group in a variety of ways. Either the High/Scope group, the Nursery School group, or both, show statistically significant advantages over the Direct Instruction group on 17 variables. Most important, compared with the Direct Instruction Group, the High/Scope and Nursery School groups have had significantly fewer felony arrests of various kinds and fewer years of special education for emotional impairment. In addition, compared with the Direct Instruction group, the High/Scope group aspires to complete a higher level of schooling, and has more members living with their spouses. It thus appears that preschool programs that promote child-initiated activities (such as the High/Scope and Nursery School programs) seem to contribute to the development of an individual's sense of personal and social responsibility. (High/Scope, 2002)

### What Is Happening to Children's Play

Given the strong evidence of the importance of self-initiated creative play, it is alarming that play has lost so much ground in young children's lives during the past thirty years. Since the 1970s it has become common for public kindergartens in the United States to focus so strongly on academic achievement that there is little or no time devoted to self-directed play. Kindergarten teachers in Pennsylvania told me that in their school district the kindergarten curriculum had been prescribed by the state legislature. Each morning children were to spend 20 minutes each on reading, writing, arithmetic, social studies, science, and so on. One teacher looked nervously over her shoulder and whispered, "I break the law every day and let my children play for fifteen minutes." The other kindergarten teacher sadly admitted that she only managed to bring in play twice a week for short periods.

That was in the mid-1980s. Since then the situation has become more grim. The first-grade curriculum has become entrenched in the kindergarten. With standardized testing starting ever earlier—for five-year-olds in some districts— an atmosphere of hurry and pressure pervades the kindergarten. To ease the pressure a bit many states have raised the entrance age for kindergarten so that the youngest children are usually five when they enter rather than four years and nine months, as was the case when I was a child. On the other hand, there is such concern about five-year-olds learning enough that many school districts are switching to full-day kindergartens. One might hope that half the day would be devoted to play and the arts, but I have not heard any reports of that being the case.

In 'What Happened to Recess and Why Are Our Children Struggling in Kindergarten'? Susan Ohanian takes a hard look at what is happening to young children in school today. She mentions New York's Public School 9 where kindergarten children have at least some recess: "In a seven-hour day, they get 25 minutes free from academics." (Ohanian, p. 11) Anyone who knows five-year-olds will know that this will not work.

Ohanian also describes the situation in Chicago's public schools, referring to a report in the New York Times by Jacques Steinberg:

The teacher knows it's the 53d day because "Day:053" is printed at the top of the recommended lesson plan open on her desk, a thick white binder crammed with goals for each day and step-by-step questions given to her and the city's 26,000 other teachers by the school system's administrators at the start of the school year. The page also identifies the section of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills to

which that day's entry corresponds. Every teacher in Chicago gets this day-by-day outline of what should be taught in language arts, mathematics, science and social studies.

The New York Times reporter notes that some see this as the logical outcome of the standards movement, providing "an almost ironclad guarantee that all students will be exposed to the same material and that all teachers, regardless of qualification, will know exactly how to present it." (Steinberg 2000; also in Ohanian, p. 11–12)

In the face of such demands on five-year-olds and their teachers, to speak of play seems almost frivolous. Yet five-year-olds are young children. Where did we ever get the idea that they should be on the fast track to high scores and global careers? We are on a slippery slope heading downhill, and the pace is accelerating. Must we find our children broken on the rocks of our fears and ambitions before we call a halt?

We're not at the bottom yet. In the name of early literacy, plans are being developed to refocus nursery school children away from play and toward early reading. There are aspects of early literacy that young children need: a rich experience of language spoken by caring adults, nursery rhymes and verses, storytelling and puppetry, and books read aloud. All these lay a vital foundation for a lifetime love of language and reading. But the term "early literacy" is coming to imply something much narrower than that.

As this is being written in the fall of 2002, Head Start is scheduled for reauthorization by Congress next year. Many Head Start teachers are already feeling considerable pressure to give up play time and focus on early literacy. Ohanian describes the current situation:

With all good intentions the current Bush administration is advocating a rigorous skill model for Head Start preschool programs across the country. Three- and four-year olds are drilled about letters, dividing words into syllables and spelling. The plan is that this will prepare poor children to learn to read when they go to kindergarten. The Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees Head Start, is developing a curriculum that every Head Start teacher will be expected to follow. (Ohanian, p. 10)

Head Start serves about one million children, but there are millions more whose programs are unfunded by the federal government. This will change if federal legislation that is currently in Congress passes. It will provide much-needed funding for states to support early childhood programs for children from birth to five. On one hand it will emphasize physical, social, and emotional development. But with the other it will stress early literacy. What might well tip the scale toward the latter is a plan to give bonuses to states that can show gains in children's school preparedness as measured in kindergarten. In practice, this will mean a sharpened focus on early literacy activities for three- and four-year-olds. Much more time will be spent on learning the alphabet, breaking words into parts, basic reading skills, and the like. We have seen this pattern before: soon there will be no time left for play.

Children are not machines. You cannot simply add more fuel and speed them up. They are governed by internal processes that are sometimes called the laws of child development. These processes cannot be sped up without doing serious harm to children. This harm touches many areas of their lives—physical, emotional, social, and mental.

The Alliance for Childhood, of which I am the U.S. coordinator, submitted a position statement to the Senate committee that was drafting the new birth-to-five legislation. The statement was endorsed by some of the leading experts on child development in the U.S., including Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, David Elkind, Jane Healy, Dr. Stanley Greenspan, and Dr. Alvin Poussaint. It read, in part:

The key to developing literacy—and all other skills—is to pace the learning so that it is consistent with the child’s development, enabling him or her to succeed at the early stages. Ensure this initial success and the child’s natural love of learning blooms. Doom him to failure in the beginning by making inappropriate demands and he may well be unable to overcome the resulting sense of inadequacy. This is especially true of children whose families are already under social and economic stress. (Alliance for Childhood)

There are many individuals and organizations committed to restoring play to young children’s lives. One reason it is difficult to make progress, however, is that many parents misguidedly prefer that their children focus on early academics. Their concern about their children’s future easily turns to fear. They then place considerable pressure on teachers.

When parents and kindergarten teachers were asked what five-year-olds should know when they enter kindergarten, the parents had very different expectations than did the teachers. An October 1995 report by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) entitled *Readiness for Kindergarten: Parent and Teacher Beliefs*.

Parents of a majority of preschoolers believe that knowing the letters of the alphabet, being able to count to 20 or more, and using pencils and paint brushes are very important or essential for a child to be ready for kindergarten, while few kindergarten teachers share these beliefs. Compared with teachers, parents place greater importance on academic skills (e.g., counting, writing, and reading) and prefer classroom practices that are more academically oriented. One reason for this may be that parents perceive that there are specific activities they can do to teach their children school-related basic skills, whereas ways of changing the social maturity or temperamental characteristics of their children are less apparent. (NCES)

If there is one piece of advice I would offer parents regarding play and early academics, it would be to relax and stop hurrying their children. Children have such deep resources for growth and learning that with good nurture and reasonable help most will succeed wonderfully. Some will need special help and can be given it. This is a hard message to convey, however, especially in America, where we are committed to growing our children faster and better than anyone else.

There is a story that Piaget, the great Swiss psychologist, did not like to speak to American audiences. After he had described the natural pattern of children’s development, Americans would invariably ask, “Yes, but how can we get them to do things faster?”

An important quality of being human is that it takes quite a long time for children to grow up and develop all the capacities that are part of human nature. Compared to the young of other mammals, our children take much longer to mature. Our children deserve the right to grow and ripen at a human pace. A major part of this is allowing time for play.

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*Joan’s article is an excerpt from her chapter in an anthology called 'A Crisis in Early Childhood Education: The Rise of Technologies and the Demise of Play' published in 2003 by Greenwood (a division of Praeger) as part of their Child Psychology and Mental Health series. Other contributors include Frank Wilson, Jeff Kane, Stanley Greenspan, Jane Healy and Christopher Clouder*



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