

To Appreciate the Influence of Play

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As the grandfather of three preschool children I am reminded on a regular basis of the joy of play and imagination. I remember when my wife and I babysat for our oldest grandchild Maya last year when she was about 3 1/2 years old. We put her in for her afternoon nap. I could hear her gleefully talking to herself and it was obvious that falling sleep was the last item on her personal agenda.

After a while I knocked on her door and asked, "Is it hard to fall asleep?"

Maya smiled and answered, "Yes."

I noticed many of her stuffed animals around her bed and simply said, "It looks like you're having fun with all of your animals."

She said "yes" again and invited me to watch her as she told a story, sometimes including me in her play. It was a joy to observe the enthusiasm with which she engaged in her fantasy play, weaving a story that involved different characters.

Later that day she played a game with my wife that she has played on numerous occasions (basically just with my wife), involving a baby shark. Although we as adults might tire after repeating the seemingly same scenario time after time, Maya seemed to relish each and every re-enactment. I looked at Maya's younger sister Sophia observing the shark play. Sophia wasn't even two years old at the time, but she seemed ready to join in the fun.

A few days ago I watched as my 2 1/2-year-old grandson Teddy lined up toy trucks and other vehicles, placing them on the couch or in a play garage. He attempted to explain something to me and while I had trouble understanding all of his words, it was evident that he was having fun.

These descriptions of the play of young children are not unusual. Anyone who has interacted with young children can offer many examples of their rich imagination and their use of the simplest toy or object to transport them into a

wonderfully imaginative world filled with possibility. As educators and developmental and clinical psychologists have often reminded us, such imaginative play is not only fun but offers opportunities for the growth of cognitive, language, and emotional skills. In my role as a psychologist I have seen many children in therapy. I am well aware that play is an invaluable tool for not only understanding the inner world of children, but for assisting them to learn more effective ways of coping with challenges that they face.

I remember vividly one of the first children I saw in therapy many years ago. He was a seven-year-old boy who had been physically abused by his father. This child alternated between angry outbursts and withdrawal and, not surprisingly, did not seem interested in getting close to people. In our first session he sat in the corner of my office simply rolling a truck back and forth and not permitting me to enter his play. This continued for the next few sessions and as an inexperienced therapist I remember thinking with some humor, “I thought that children would love me to play with them in therapy.”

In the fifth session the script changed, perhaps as a consequence of his beginning to feel more comfortable with me. He brought in a tow truck and reported that a miniature car I had in my office was broken and needed help. He said that it had been hit by a bigger car and could not move forward. I perceived the broken car that had been hit by a bigger car as a representation of himself and the abuse he had encountered. His introduction of a tow truck signaled the possibility that he was beginning to entertain the belief that there were others who could help him.

Unfortunately, he was unable to attach the little car to the tow truck. I asked if I might be of help. Although he hesitated for a moment he eventually accepted my offer and I proceeded to attach the two vehicles. He smiled in delight, both of us sensing the attachment that was taking place between us but not intruding upon the mood or story by linking it directly to the abuse and lack of trust that permeated his world. I was amazed as a novice therapist to witness the

scene that unfolded in which the tow truck brought the damaged car to an auto collision shop where they “knew all about taking care of damaged cars.” Parallel to the happenings in this play, this boy’s relationship with me improved. Many other children in my clinical practice have taught me that this incident with the tow truck was not an isolated example, but rather a very common occurrence of play being used to communicate important messages and to enrich one’s relationships and emotional well-being.

I reflected upon these and other clinical vignettes as I read two thought-provoking articles. One appeared in the October 9, 2006 issue of *The Boston Globe*, titled “The Hidden Power of Play” authored by renowned child psychologist David Elkind of Tufts University. It is based upon his book *The Power of Play*, to be released this January. As many of you are aware, Elkind is the author of the bestselling book *The Hurried Child* that was released in the 1980s, a book that captured the push to have children grow up too quickly, often robbing them of their ability to “just play.” In *The Boston Globe* article Elkind extolled the benefits of play and lamented the loss of playtime in a child’s life.

Elkind begins the article, “At a time of great international turmoil, growing globalization, and exploding technological advances, making time for child play seems an unaffordable luxury. Yet, a study by the American Academy of Pediatrics—due out today—makes just the opposite case. It argues for the essential role of play in the healthy mental, physical, and social/emotional development of the child.”

Elkind then outlines the diminishing time and importance accorded play. He observes, “Today many elementary schools have eliminated recess in favor of more time for academics. Even kindergarten children now take tests and are assigned homework. After-school tutoring and organized sports have cut deeply into the time for spontaneous, self-initiated play. Even infancy is no longer seen as a time for play as an entire industry now markets a wide variety of computer programs, CDs, and ‘educational toys’ to the infant and toddler set. The not so

subtle message here is that play is superfluous; play is for slackers. But this reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of play in human life.”

Elkind masterfully offers examples of the ways in which play helps children to adapt to the world and “create new learning experiences.” He contends that play, work, and love are three innate drives that are not at odds with each other, but rather “power human thought and action throughout the entire life cycle.” He expands upon these three concepts and argues that any endeavor, whether at home, in school, or in the workplace complement one another, noting that at school “when children have some input (play) into the curriculum, this creates positive motivation (love) and more effective and lasting learning (work).”

He then applies these concepts to the home and school environments, observing, “Parents who listen to their children and allow them to take part in some decisions (play) gain respect and attachment (love) as well as effectively instilling the rules of the household (work). In those workplaces where employee input (play) is welcomed and rewarded, workers have a positive attitude toward their job and their employers (love) and the result is a better product or service (work).”

Those who know my philosophy can understand why Elkind’s words resonated with my own beliefs about the experiences that help children to be more joyful and resilient.

The other article was published in the September 11, 2006 issue of *Newsweek*. It was authored by Peg Tyre and titled “The New First Grade: Too Much Too Soon?” Several of the people interviewed tended to minimize the importance of play while paying homage to more formal learning experiences.

Tyre writes, “In the last decade, the earliest years of schooling have become less like a trip to ‘Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood’ and more like SAT prep. Thirty years ago first grade was learning how to read. Now reading lessons start in kindergarten. . . . Instead of story time, finger painting, tracing letters, and snack, first graders are spending hours doing math work sheets and sounding out words

in reading groups. In some places, recess, music, art, and even social studies are being replaced by writing exercises and spelling quizzes. Kids as young as six are tested, and tested again to ensure they're making sufficient progress. After school there's homework, and for some, educational videos, more homework and tutoring, to help give them an edge."

Tyre observes that the number of young children being held back or retained is on the increase (please see my September, 2006 article about the issue of retention). Many parents wishing to give their children an advantage not only provide extra tutoring or argue for a more rigid academic curriculum in kindergarten or first grade, but some are resorting to a practice known in sports circles as red-shirting, namely, holding children back a year before beginning school so that they will have a greater advantage over other children in their classes. As an example, one family was told that their son, whose age made him eligible to begin kindergarten, would do just fine and they should send him. The parents held him back with the mother voicing her belief, "But we didn't want him to do fine, we wanted him to do great."

As I read this quote, all I could think about was "great for what?" For academic success, sports success, interpersonal success? I am an advocate of young children being prepared to learn basic academic skills and to receive assistance if they are having difficulties. But I am very concerned that as the focus in our schools shifts to high-stakes testing, we are wearing blinders, equating all learning with formal instruction and sticking facts into the heads of young children. In this scenario, play takes a back seat in the learning process.

Walter Gilliam, a child development expert at Yale University interviewed for the *Newsweek* article echoes my sentiments. He contends, "There comes a time when prudent people begin to wonder just how high we can raise our expectations for our littlest schoolkids." Gilliam says that education is not just about teaching letters but about turning curious kids into lifelong learners. He notes that while it is critical that we teach all kids to learn to read, that is only one

component of a child's education and cautions that we not push our children too far or too fast.

I recognize that children are very different in terms of when they are cognitively and emotionally ready to learn different concepts and information. I also believe that young children are prepared to absorb a great deal of information. However, I have significant misgivings when adults do not appreciate the many avenues through which children learn, including, as Elkind so eloquently highlights, play. I also have reservations of holding a child back who is ready for school so that he or she will have an advantage over classmates a year younger. While such a practice may seem beneficial for some children, does it create a greater sense of accomplishment and satisfaction? Does it predict success in our adult lives? I think not.

I am not proposing an either-or proposition, namely, all play or all formal education for kindergarten and first grade children. Instead, I am suggesting a balance that may differ from one child to another, a balance that incorporates all kinds of learning, that does not push children beyond their limits and consequently turn them off to learning, and that appreciates the impact of imaginative play as an influential source of teaching and learning.

At the end of his article Elkind emphasizes his belief in the power of play. "Play gives rise to new knowledge, skills, and artistic products. Viewed in this way, I believe play is vitally necessary to the world today, particularly in our schools. As a new school year begins, we need to reintroduce play in our schools and allow for child input and teacher innovation. Only then will we have an educational system whose aim is, as Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget put it, 'to have children who think for themselves and who do not accept the first idea that is presented to them.'"

I will continue to enjoy the play of my grandchildren and all children. While they will not be administered formal tests about their play, I know that what

they gain from their imaginative activities will be a source of new knowledge and, most importantly, will serve to reinforce the belief that learning can indeed be fun.

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