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Play in Childhood

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Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. B 1966 **251**, 321-325
doi: 10.1098/rstb.1966.0016

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In spite of the huge volume of literature, philosophical, psychological and, more lately, sociological and perhaps ethological on children's play, we are still far from a comprehensive theory of play or a clear understanding of its function in human development. The main stumbling block to this understanding lies in the fact that, since the essence of play seems to be that it arises without external compulsion, the meaning of it must lie in the inner life of children, which they have few means of communicating and which can be, therefore, only indirectly inferred from overt behaviour. This behaviour, as we can see from the literature, tends to be interpreted in terms of a particular philosophy or theory and, while it is not difficult to reconcile these differing interpretations if we take the eclectic view that each shows part of the truth, there is a difficulty in building from these an integrated and comprehensive theory.

Perhaps a broad definition of the function of play could be that it is the means by which a child establishes the balance between his inner life and external 'reality'. It seems to consist of a continuous two-way contact between a child and his environment which arises from thoughts and feelings which determine what part of the external world he pays attention to. The external stimulus of, for instance, a piece of play material, is responded to only if it meets some emotional belief or intellectual hypothesis forming within the child and seems to offer some means of testing this. Indeed it seems that play is a continual exploration and testing of hypotheses, beliefs and assumptions and a building up of a personal picture of the world. A child can receive our 'teaching' only in so far as he can incorporate it into this picture.

When a child tests these assumptions, he inevitably discovers that many of them are false and from this he learns to discriminate and distinguish, to re-test and to examine evidence and to re-construct his beliefs as he goes along. This is clearly a highly personal affair: though the broad stages and discoveries may take place in a relatively constant sequence the means by which they are arrived at may well be unique to each individual. When we speak of *play* we are referring to the part of a child's life that is given over to this testing, building, process—the process indeed of self-construction.

The ritual that can be observed in this behaviour may be of two kinds—a repetition which is not really ritualistic in character but which consists in a constant re-testing to satisfy himself that something *is* so, and a more clearly ritualistic activity akin to some adult behaviour which consists of getting oneself 'in the mood', arranging the desk, the note-book, the light, etc., before writing a paper—or, at a higher level, in church ritual.

The main 'theories of play' both in their original form and in their modern developments are well known and will not be repeated here. The earlier theories continue to exert a hidden influence though their main theses have been superseded. For instance, it is difficult for many adults to get away from the idea that play is simply for the release of

surplus energy and that it is, therefore, amply provided for in organized games or an empty playground. Again some theories have left behind an attitude of indulgence towards play as a necessary working through of the history of the race and thus concerned only with the past or, by analogy with some observed animal play, as a rehearsing of skills of a relatively inflexible kind in anticipation of adult life. Piaget points out the inadequacy of any theory that considers play as an isolated function rather than as one of the aspects of any activity. 'The prevalence of play among children', he says, 'is therefore to be explained not by specific causes peculiar to the realm of play, but to the fact that the characteristics of all behaviour and all thought are less in equilibrium in the early stages of mental development than in the adult stage', and it is this equilibrium that a child is trying to establish in his play.

Through externalization and interaction with the environment the child in his play moves nearer to a 'real' integration with the material and human factors which surround him and over which he has a growing control. As facility in language increases, his play develops from being primarily egocentric and fantasy directed and incorporates more social and imaginative elements leading to structured games with rules.

It is important to distinguish between intrinsic and extrinsic ritualization. We have not, as yet, fully explored the intrinsic connexions between what a child seems impelled to do in his play and what the culture pattern of our place and time requires him to learn, but if play is indeed, as has been suggested, the main way in which a child builds up his picture of the world, we have everything to gain, on the most practical and realistic level, by joining what we wish to teach to this main structuring activity. A beginning only has been made in our knowledge of the structuring of our mental life, many areas remain relatively unexplored or studied only fragmentarily without a comprehensive frame of reference. The single cumulative process by which we learn to behave as human beings remains to be distinguished and described.

A simple division of the 'tasks' undertaken in play could be: to come to terms with material, with people and with situations. Each will be dealt with briefly and examined for its ritualistic elements with an occasional teleonomic 'what for?'

The behaviour of children from their earliest days is much concerned with the investigation of the nature of the material world around them. This clearly does not arise from a cool scientific interest but from a desire to control or use the material world. This basic pleasure in 'being a cause' seems to permeate children's earliest contact with material. To destroy and to construct involves learning the properties of the material and, in the process, children build up their concepts of, for example, weight, height, size, volume, texture, etc. etc. etc. These concepts in their turn enable them to make judgements about future action. Indeed it may be said that, while physical survival in primitive societies depends on a knowledge of the properties of the relevant material in the environment, so, in more developed societies, we rely on this as a basis for psycho-social survival in building up our powers of learning.

The provision of primitive materials (sand, water, clay, wood etc.) for young children to investigate is now taken for granted. The strong attraction of these materials, the concentration and inventiveness they evoke has seemed to justify their use. It may be that they contribute in subtle ways to our use and understanding of the more sophisticated artifacts

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of a technological age. Certainly it seems, as society develops, that adults need to contrive more and more ways of returning to 'natural' experiences of gardening, sailing, carpentering, etc., in leisure time as if we cannot afford to stray too far from contact with natural material. (If there is any validity in the recapitulatory theory of play its function clearly does not end in childhood!) Children often seem to use these materials in a ritualistic way, returning to earlier forms of behaviour, often perfunctorily, as a rest perhaps from their forward movements and the strain of new achievements and learning, even perhaps as displacement activity or re-directed activity.

We have, too, a growing appreciation of the stimulus value of materials, natural or manufactured, of many shapes, colours, properties, etc. The children's imagination seizes on these 'clues' which lead them on to inventive as well as to creative work where all kinds of causal connexions are discovered, illustrated and used. Thus the children's urge to investigate the material and the power of stimulating material in itself to trigger off responses from the children provide the warp and woof of this area of children's learning.

Symbolism, both conscious and unconscious is an important element in this play, as in ritual. The symbol is always significantly related to the original by some kind of semblance. This may be a very personal connexion or concerned with one aspect, shape or function of the material. In play, children thus bring images and concrete symbols together on the way, as it were, to an abstract concept.

This has important connexions with the growth of language, the personal symbol providing a step between the thing and the more difficult and abstract sign involved in the use of a word. The less conscious symbolism may often be the means by which a child comes to terms with actions or thoughts that are not acceptable to the adult in their overt form (connected with excretory or sexual functions in particular and other behaviour which is subject to social sanctions) and often, moreover, unacceptable or too frightening to the child himself.

Play which is concerned with learning to understand people takes many forms. Its earliest form perhaps emerges from play with materials. A child playing with, for instance, a toy aeroplane can be seen to take the role of both the aeroplane and the pilot apparently simultaneously. All the important people of his world figure in this role play: he imitates, he becomes, he symbolizes. During this play he performs many rituals. He does not aim at verisimilitude: he abstracts certain activities or qualities which are significant to him and repeats them many times. A child playing at being mother will bath the baby, or prepare a lightning meal twenty times a day. He works off aggression or compensates himself for lack of love and so on by 'being' one or other of the people who impinge on his life and, by acting as he conceives they do, tries to understand them and make sense of his world. Moreover, at a deeper level, children tend to have inflexible roles thrust on them by adults and need opportunities to explore different roles and to make a freer choice of their own.

This early exploration of the actions, motives and feelings of themselves and of others which children undertake so constantly and readily is likely to be an important factor in the ability to form right relationships, which in its turn seems to be a crucial element in mental health.

Play which is concerned with an understanding and mastery over situations, is, of course,

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closely linked with the foregoing. Children's need to play over and over the important happenings of their lives is clearly analogous to the universal habit in adult life of re-living experience in thought or words. The repetition in children, or in adults, is seldom an exact one: each 'performance' is modified, usually in the directness of greater personal satisfaction (though in morbid states of mind it may lead away from it). Children who re-enact a painful scene over and over again are not doing it to preserve the pain but to make it bearable by assimilating it into the whole activity of the ego. This seems to take place by incorporating just those parts of the difficult situation that are bearable to them and progressively adding others as their courage and confidence grow. Thus they deal with the many feelings of frustration which must of necessity be experienced by immature beings who are dependent on the will and love of adults. One of the functions of this kind of play may well be to preserve the self-esteem by reducing the experience, if it is a bad one, to size, as it were, or by re-enforcing confidence by dwelling on success. Doubtless frequency and intensity are important here.

Children's play is 'culturally' based as opposed to the 'natural' play of animals, from the beginning and needs adult participation particularly for the communication of cultural facts. The introduction, for instance, of objects for hospital play, provides opportunities for coming to terms with one of the commonest forms of fear in childhood expressed in contemporary terms. Similarly, the arrival of a new baby in the family, the loss of a person important to the child, the invention of space rockets or new weapons will all call for appropriate material provision if we wish to help children externalize their feelings as a preliminary to understanding and controlling them. This calls for sensitivity and observation rather than intervention. The knowledge of the children gained from what might be called 'active' observation is invaluable to the adult. It gives common ground for conversation and exchange of ideas which it is a most important duty of the adult to initiate and foster.

It may well be that satisfactory play experience in these three areas is a necessary condition for that liberation of the intelligence from dependence on or distortion by the emotional life which leads to the ability to deal objectively with experiences which is the basis of much later learning.

Thus the basic learning abilities to be developed in play might be summed up as follows:

(1) The power to deal more and more objectively and imaginatively with experience.

(2) The ability to co-operate. The essence of co-operation is willingness on both sides and this arises most naturally in play, in the first instance with the mother and in the family and later with other children and adults. It is bound up with fostering the growth of language in which the adult supplies the words for new experiences and thus helps the children both to crystallize and to consolidate the experience in such a way as to be able to build on it later.

(3) The development of concentration. This involves using involuntary attention to develop the power of voluntary attention. By the provision of material which fixes the involuntary attention and by ensuring that children have experience of the satisfaction that comes from a successfully completed activity we encourage the habit of persisting and other techniques (e.g. exclusion of irrelevant stimuli) of concentration. Teachers and others often make the mistake of trying to impose this externally.

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(4) The development of specific thinking abilities. It is through play that children gradually develop a concept of causal relationships, the power to discriminate, to make judgements, to analyse and synthesize, to imagine and to formulate. The material for this should be such as will provoke but not dictate this thinking. In other words, problem solving abilities should be exercised on situations which contain problems of genuine concern to children. Too early ritualization or stereotyping of this may well interfere with the main task. Didactic material can be more usefully employed in summing up, ordering and formulating what has been learned than in teaching the required facts. The practice of giving children specifically didactic material has been responsible for much unsound learning, since children with good powers of memorizing can assimilate much material as dogma which only later breaks down when non-routine application or generalization is required. This shallow word-learning can obscure gaps in development which may later be responsible for unexpected and apparently inexplicable failure. The form of ritualization that under stimulated or over directed children adopt can prove an effective bar to further development.

(5) The development of creative abilities. Unless sufficient opportunity and material for creative play is provided these can remain at a very meagre level. This is perhaps especially true of verbally gifted children who tend to get moved on too soon to abstract work. They are then using symbols for which the reality is insufficiently experienced and the creative side of their personality lacks richness. There must be a sufficient basis of first-hand experience to permit an intellectually sound use of second-hand sources.

The main difficulty I have had in this paper, as doubtless has been observed, is in speaking of the ritual elements in the play of the young children apart from the whole activity. The one meagre hypothesis I should like to put forward is that such ritualistic elements as are intrinsic to the play have some clear functions to perform (though we certainly have not isolated them all) but that too early structuring of learning by external means may well fix immature patterns of thinking and prevent full development.

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