

Child's Play Is Serious

Children learn by fooling around

BY JANE E. BRODY

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My brother and I never regretted that our parents' limited finances precluded a hefty dose of after-school lessons in this, that and the other activity. After school for us meant play time.

Alone, with each other and with friends on the block, we played with dolls, pets, marbles, stamps, Erector sets, trucks, puzzles, bikes, jump ropes and roller skates. Groups of us played street games like stickball and hide-and-seek. Way back in the 1940s, a fellow third-grader and I built a rock and studied the stars for possible destinations.

Even my mother, a teacher, agreed that after dark was time enough to do homework, a pattern I later passed on to my sons.

Overloading Kids

The richness of my own childhood had convinced me that cutting into children's time for spontaneous play by overloading them with activities scheduled by parents could impair, not foster, their development by interfering with their chance for self-discovery and enjoyment of life.

"All children play; they can't help but do it," says Dr. Jerome Kagan, a child development expert at Harvard University. The very universality of play should be a clue to its importance to human development. Play, as some experts put it only half in jest, is the work of childhood.

Play gives children a chance to explore their talents and interests, exercise physical and mental skills. It allows them to test ideas and practice activities in the safety of make-believe. It helps them learn to share and assert themselves and develop tolerance, persistence and patience.

Through various kinds of play, children can develop better hand-eye coordination, stronger bodies, improved problem-solving skills, a richer imagination and interests in a wide range of subjects, from astronomy to art.

Fostering Creativity

Dr. Brian Sutton-Smith, an expert on play at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote, "Research has shown that children who play often both solitarily and socially become more creative and imaginative than those whose exposure to play and toys is limited."

Sutton-Smith is the author of "Toys as Culture" and a forthcoming book, "The Search for Play" (Harvard University Press).

A recent study by Dr. Lawrence Newman at the University of North Carolina showed that playing with various objects enhanced children's memories. Children ages 4 and 5 were much more likely to remember objects they played with than the same items they studied as drawings.

Newman, now at St. Francis Medical Center in Pittsburgh, concluded, "There is an important role for play with three-dimensional objects such as toys as a vehicle through which preschoolers activate their memories."

Developing Concentration

Sutton-Smith says he believes that children who can become preoccupied for long periods with their toys are more likely to become adults who can concentrate on grown-up interests and obligations.

He also emphasizes the socialization value of play. "Children who play regularly with their peers are most likely to achieve the highest levels of adjustment as adults," he said.

He noted that most socialization is done by other children, and said he was encouraged by the fact that the many youngsters who now attend group day care and preschool are getting socialized much earlier than in decades past, when preschoolers spent most of their time with a parent and perhaps one or two siblings.

As he sees it, the various types of play help children better understand the world through imitating the acts of others, analyzing how things work, testing the effects of their own behavior and putting things together in their own way.

Perhaps most important is that the play of childhood helps to lay the groundwork for a life-enhancing ability to play throughout life.

Tobin Quereau and Tom Zimmermann, who conduct workshops to help people recover from addictions, believe that many people who succumb to life's stresses have forgotten (or never learned how) to play. Their book, "The New Game Plan for Recovery: Rediscovering the Positive Power of Play" (Ballantine), can help people put revitalizing play back into their lives.

Play, as Kagan defines it, is anything you do and enjoy free of coercion. "You can't tell if a person is a workaholic by how much he works," he said. "You have to ask, 'How much fun is it? Are you enjoying what you're doing?' If you have a great time at your work, you're playing."

Similarly, a person who "works at play," for example, a child playing marbles who struggles anxiously not to lose any or an adult who enjoys tennis only when he is winning, may look as if he is playing, but "he is really working," Kagan said.

Children are primed for play soon after they emerge from the womb. Parents and caretakers typically play with infants' hands and feet, make noises at them, sing to them, toss them about and play peek-a-boo, much to the babies' delight.

Dr. Michael W. Yogman, who has studied father-infant interactions at Harvard Medical School, found that fathers tend to play more with their babies than mothers do, even when the father is the baby's primary caretaker.

He also notes that fathers' play styles tend to be more arousing, more physically stimulating for the babies, while play by mothers is more verbal and cerebral, suggesting that parental play has complementary effects on an infant's development.

Toys are best seen as tools of play, and they need not be complex or expensive or "educational" to serve that function. As nearly every parent knows, pots and pans can be far more intriguing to a tod-

