

The Significance of PLAY in the Normal Development of Children

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The Word “PLAY” in the English language is curiously rich in its meaning. It is used for games, for the theatre- ”let us now go and see a play” —for gambling, and for such expressions as “In the play of spears, Fell all the cavaliers.”

When the adult uses the word ”play” in his description of children or his thoughts about children, it is either with a tender and gentle meaning, or as an antithesis to work— “All work and no play. Makes Jack a dull boy.” When the Anglo-Saxon however, uses it for himself, it becomes a matter of weight and seriousness. “Who after all is playing for Surrey this year?” is a sentence which in a cricket or football community would arouse the hottest and most serious discussion. When used by an artist, whether an artist in words or an artist in colour, “the play of light and shadow” becomes a matter of serious professional thought.

Play and the emotions

It might seem upon first acquaintance. with all these meanings that each use of the word “play” carries a different significance. But if the varied uses of the word he pondered, it will be seen that two factors are common to them all. Freedom of movement is implied in all the meanings of the word and a certain connection with emotion. The person who “plays,” whether he plays tennis or a part in a drama on the stage, enjoys what he does, the doing of it satisfies an emotional need in him to do this very thing. This satisfaction is of a different kind from the satisfaction he gains from the accomplishment of a task or the solving of a problem. It is both deeper and less definite and touches the part of his being from which his impulses spring.

Play, whether for adults or children, it would then appear, has something to do with the emotions of the player, and is related in a very intimate way to his feelings and desires. It is an activity which is more loosely put together than the activity we call ”work” and has a less definite aim. Its shape cannot be exactly predicted beforehand and part of its essence is adaptation to circumstances.

In order, therefore, to discover the value of play to a child and the place it takes, or should take, in his normal development. our first point should be to consider the nature of emotion in children and whether it differs in any way from similar experience in adult life.

To an adult the self he knows best and the self upon which he relies is the ordinary everyday self; an emotional storm is an invasion of his normal state, an uncomfortable state of affairs, felt not as usual, but as unusual, and even as something of which he is slightly ashamed. In children the situation is reversed. The adult, when he feels happy or sad can say to himself or his fellows, "I feel happy," "I feel sad." and in so saying distinguishes his self which is feeling the emotion from the emotion itself, remembering as he does so the moments when he was not happy, and implicitly in the very awareness of his present happiness, looking forward to the moment when he will be no longer happy or sad. He knows of emotion as a transitory phase, as a mood which comes and goes, leaving his everyday self the same.

The nature of emotion in the child

A child can do none of these things. In childhood, when an emotion comes, it swamps the whole self. There is no capacity for distinction between the "I" and the emotion, no registered length of human experience which allows the child to know that this emotion will pass. To a child, himself and his emotions are one; he is his emotions, and while they are there, they take complete charge of him. He is unable to separate his self from the emotion; his short experience has not taught him that this emotion will end; to him it is eternal.

It is not known if the actual force of emotion, could such be quantitatively measured, varies greatly between childhood and age. But the adult has achieved through experience, a certain understanding of himself. A long succession of difficult situations have brought about a balance between himself and the outside world, so that certain means of side-tracking or of sublimating his emotions become open to him. He has learned certain techniques through which emotion can flow and from the use of which satisfaction can come back to him.

For the child none of these roads is open: his emotion is overpowering to him. In the very small child it is sometimes so such a strength that the very spirit itself seems to be in danger of disruption beneath the stress of it.

Not only is this. so, but we have to consider another factor also. The adult. as he faces his own self and the world in which he lives, has, as it were, a guide or text book for the understanding of his experiences. He has a universal passport to bring him into contact with his fellows, a universal reassurance upon which he can fall back in times of stress. He can talk to himself about his own experiences, and he can communicate in language with his fellow men.

A child has no such means of help or comfort. He is without names for any of his emotions, he is without language to talk about them; there are in his hands no

instruments by which he can represent his experiences to other people and understand their representation of their own and so judge the normality or abnormality of his own experiences. He is shut into a world of terrifying interior experience about which he is unable to talk to anyone.

Furthermore, a child is unable to understand the world in which he finds himself. He cannot distinguish between the mimetic and the inanimate, the "really alive" and the make-believe alive: he cannot understand the reasons for the actions of the people he sees around him: his scale of values, his choice of things which are desirable and undesirable, is far different from theirs. There is for every child a tremendous task to be undertaken in moving from a spontaneously acting, unthinking, instinctive being towards that reasonable, recognisable creature we can call a normal fourteen-year-old child. This is the task of understanding itself, of controlling its impulses, of gaining a rudimentary understanding of its environment and of learning satisfactorily to fit in with it.

For this task to be achieved at all, some bridge must be found, some way for the child out of the prison of his isolation out of the pressure of his insistent uncontrollable desires and the torment of his uncertainties about the world around him and the feelings of the people in it.

The Play bridge

To be effective, this bridge must have certain characteristics. It must be attractive to the child and give him delight. It must adapt itself to his needs and be infinitely variable: it must be suitable not only to help him to gain understanding of the world around him, but also to express for him his feelings towards that world. This bridge must give him the opportunity to get to know himself by being able to dramatise his feelings much as a playwright does in writing his plays, and to study them. To this point we will return later. It must be a spontaneous, lively activity, attractive to himself and to the grown-ups by whom he is surrounded. Such a bridge is play.

Play is to the child. therefore, work thought, art and relaxation, and cannot be pressed into any single formula. It expresses a child's relation to himself and, his environment, and, without adequate opportunity for play, normal and satisfactory emotional development is not possible. In the absence of proper opportunity for play, repressions must be formed in the child to shut off the force of his emotional life from himself, so as to enable him to deal with it in rigidly "real" ways, and thereby his character becomes robbed of its drive and spontaneity. Without play the child's imagination has no room to grow, his knowledge of himself becomes limited to what the adults can see in him and teach him, and his spontaneity and initiative become sadly damaged. Play is to a child not "play" in the sense that it would be used of an adult. but a vital and essential human need. A child who has no opportunity to play or not suitable circumstances for play, is a child who is robbed of opportunities essential to growth. Play for children is like

sunlight to plants: without it the whole plant is stunted and enfeebled, and true maturity becomes impossible of achievement.

Creative Play and experiment

What sort of play then is necessary? And for what ages of childhood? First, it must be creative and second, it must be adapted to the emotional needs of the stage at which the child at the moment finds himself. Let us consider these two requirements in turn.

To be satisfactory, an activity must allow full scope for the creative element in the child's own nature. A child wants to know what he can do with a thing; what is the nature of the thing itself and what changes in that nature he can bring about by his, action upon it. He wants to experiment with the thing itself, suck it, throw it about, drop other things on it, feel it, smell it, bite it—and so come, by such avenues of experience as are open to him, to a knowledge of its essential nature. He then wants to try what changes he can bring about in it; can he make it "write," can he scribble upon it, will it change when it goes into water or when he puts water upon it, can he bury it and bring it up again and will it be altered by so doing?

He does not want passively to learn what someone else in a factory decided an object could do, and then sit down and watch it doing it. He wants to take that toy to pieces and see what makes it behave like that; to compare it With the substances he already knows and see if it behaves as they do when brought into contact with water or sand.

He wants to, know what water is and how it behaves; not intellectually but by personal experiment with it. He is eager to understand what "hot" water and "cold" water mean and how they come together, why some things float and how they can be made to sink, why water, when it flows, is powerful, and how its behaviour can be altered, and what happens when you put your finger on the open end of a turned-on tap.

A little child is fascinated by the but that some things leave marks on other things, that there are all kinds of "fuels," and smells to be found in the outside world, that some things are hard and some soft and some crushable, and he wants to experiment with all of these.

Play Room equipment

Play rooms for younger children should therefore have walls and floor of some simple, washable material which easily cleans and can easily be dried. opportunities for play with water should he provided and a chance to experiment with substances, both wet and dry. Toys should be simple and of no very definite shape: bricks, slates, beads, pencils, chinks, paper, scissors, moulds and cups and jugs. A pupil of Charlotte Bühler published some years ago a list of favourite objects chosen by normal children in their own homes to play with; they worked out as follows:

Boxes 12 Tins 618

Stones, etc.	15
Pots	13
Wooden Sticks.	9
Water.	6
Sand.	5
Spoons.	5

The elaborate shop toy is out of place.

A Child is a very little person. He is surrounded on all sides by creatures very much bigger and more powerful than himself; even the furniture, except in his own small furnitures, is made on a sale for giants. He is just coming to realise himself as an independent being, his growth and development depend upon the power and persistence of his determination to acquire mastery over his own physical frame to learn to stand, to walk, to climb stairs, to walk along curbs, and once this mastery is gained, his impulses turn towards extending this mastery towards the outside world. Here his toys must provide stepping stones for his growing powers. Pull-along toys. trains, animals on wheels in graduated sizes give him an exultant sense of control of objects outside himself. Household implements on a miniature scale, dustpans. brooms and brushes. give him the feeling of being powerful like the grown-ups around him, able to bring about changes in his environment, to "help Mummy." Work that is "work" to the grown-up is play-work to the child, it is intensely real and very important, and not to be looked upon as trivial because its objective results are absent. In this form of play he is bridging the gap between himself and his beloved parents. By identification with them in these actions, by carefully observing and imitating them, he is helping himself to understand the actions he are and to feel his way into the motives of the people who do them.

The life of the child's imagination

There is another side of a child's life which is of equal importance to him with these: the life of his imagination. A child lives in a world of "faerie". As he has no understanding of the forces and the arrangements behind his water taps and his lighting-buttons, they are all magic to him. He is far on his road before he learns to distinguish between life as it actually is in himself and the people and animals with whom he is surrounded, and the "life" with which he endows his rabbits, dolls and teddy-bears. In the years, before this stage is reached, adequate opportunity to play out his imaginations and ideas with suitable material is an indispensable condition for normal growth. A child is terrified by the force of his emotions, his experience is so short that he has no clue to their meaning; conditions of actual life in comparison with his small powers are so rigid that he cannot try out, in reality, the effect and the logical development of his own impulses. Miss Drummond has charmingly recorded how a small girl of her acquaintance played thus with her dolls:

“You’re a mischievous little thing, putting your legs in my pocket. . . . You naughty girl, you’re not putting on your clothes . . .” “She’s a naughty girl, she won’t dress herself. I tell her a hundred times. Don’t you think I’m bringing her up nicely, telling her so often and smacking her too? Everything I tell her just goes in at her left ear and out at her right ear.” “ (Squeaky voice)” ‘Cook. tidy the house, and mother’ll make the omelette, and I’ll sit very quiet till breakfast. You’re not beating that egg right; you’re not putting a pinch of salt in it.’“ *

An appropriate outlet for emotion

Children do not know the meaning of “die” and “dead”: they have no experience of pain by which they could tell the meaning to the sufferer of having an arm or a leg cut off. To them to “die” is to be extinguished for a time— a most satisfactory exercise of power— and shortly after the doll “comes alive” again. So in earlier times, as the seasons turned through their courses, the “god” “died” and “came alive” again as Spring followed after Winter. To express a temporary jealousy of a younger brother or sister, felt for a moment to be favoured by a parent, by a violent hammering of the head of a doll made for the moment into the image of that sister or brother, does the real brother or sister no harm, but allows of the escape of the hostile feeling by its discharge on an inanimate object and its replacement by the more permanent kindly feelings. To bottle up these feelings, before knowledge of the self and of life has come to modify their strength and to discipline their expression, is to poison the kindly feelings by an infusion of hatred. Emotion, before it can be understood and directed, needs to have an appropriate outlet; demands a possibility of discharge into harmless, neutral objects as a lightning conductor leads the lightning away into the earth, so that the spirit is left free for the feeling of the next emotion. Even physical illness can result in children, as indeed it can in adults also, by an over charge of unexpressed emotion. Play, with dolls, dolls’ house’s, shops, charades, Red Indians, gangsters and soldiers, is the child’s mimic stage upon which he tries out himself and his emotions, and by doing so finds for himself what is his real and his true self, and learns to know that self. Through play he learns gradually to master his hostile emotions and to enjoy his creative powers and so to move harmoniously from being a creature of impulse and undirected emotion to a happy, creative child, eager to address himself to work.