

From Childhood Lost
Where Do the Children Play?
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*Well I think it's fine building Jumbo planes,
or taking a ride on a cosmic train,
switch on summer from a slot machine,
yes get what you want to, if you want,
'cause you can get anything.
I know we've come a long way,
we're changing day to day.
But tell me,
where do the children play?*

Cat Stevens wrote these lyrics in 1970 for an eerily prescient song called *Where Do the Children Play*. The song predicted that as technologies transformed and infiltrated our lives, play would begin to disappear from the landscape of childhood. Indeed, creative, open-ended play is rapidly vanishing from our homes, outdoor spaces, and schools. Today instead, children consume forty hours of media each week (mostly on screens), surpassing the time given to every activity but sleep.¹ As media moguls compete for their market share, these entertainments are increasingly rapid-paced, violent, and sexualized, jolting children out of their age-appropriate activities and encroaching not only on the time available to play, but on their very capacity for deeply imaginative play. As economic and cultural constraints force parents to work longer days and weeks, the “block parents” who once kept neighborhood play within safe boundaries are relics of an earlier era. Whereas a generation ago, parents insisted that their children go *outside* to play, increasingly, parents rely on “electronic babysitters” to keep kids *inside*, or alternatively in structured after-school programs. With the intense escalation of standardized testing and curricula in the public school system, many preschools and most kindergartens are emphasizing structured academic work in lieu of play. While the current mantra among education reformers is *No Child Left Behind*, as Peter Sacks suggests in chapter nine, it may be more apt to rephrase it as *No Child Left*.

Upon rereading several classic children’s novels to my own children recently, I was struck by a common feature among them. The children who populate *Little Women*, *Secret Garden*, *All of a Kind Family*, *The Railway Children*, and *National Velvet*, to name a few, *play make-believe games well into mid-adolescence*. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary American play scene in which Barbies are passé by preschool, five-year-olds are playing with edgy, streetwise Bratz dolls while grooving to Britney, and pre-teens have long since moved on to electronic games, TV shows, movies, and music with ultra-violent and explicitly sexual content. Ironically, as children abandon their time-honored habits, many adults are enjoying a “second childhood.” Witness the mushrooming of mindless adult entertainment on TV and the Internet, the second coming of Las Vegas, and voter apathy during a time of

national and international turmoil. A survey released in July 2004 by the National Endowment for the Arts reported that the amount of time American adults across all socioeconomic and ethnic groups spent reading had plummeted.⁴

What, if any, are the consequences of the loss of play in children's lives? Is it really so problematic for children to adopt the outward trappings of adulthood in their dress, activities, and talk? Should we care about the loss of innocence and make-believe when so many dire matters—war, terrorism, environmental decay, poverty—weigh heavily on our collective consciousness? Perhaps—as those who have spearheaded the most recent set of educational reforms believe—it is wise to direct children's attention rapidly away from play and toward the body of facts deemed necessary to be competent citizens in our technologically advanced society.

In this chapter, I will argue that not only is the demise of play a cause for profound concern, but part and parcel of the myriad other stressors in children's lives discussed throughout this book.

Thousands of studies spanning four decades have established incontrovertibly that creative play is a catalyst for social, emotional, moral, motoric, perceptual, intellectual, linguistic, and neurological development. Many of our greatest thinkers locate their capacity for original and profound thought in their imaginative abilities, first developed through creative play in early childhood.⁵ Recollections of child Holocaust survivors reveal that even in the degraded and desperate circumstances of the concentration camps, play sustained them. Across socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural divides, play is a constant in childhood.⁶ It is a central feature in the lives of all young primates and most young mammals, underscoring its lengthy evolutionary history and adaptive value.⁷ Research has established a strong correlation between the period of greatest playfulness and the time when brain connections are most actively made.⁸

Academic Success Is Predicated on Play

According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial stages, the central challenge for young children is the development of *initiative* through fantasy play. Children the world over engage in vivid fantasy play between the ages of three and five. These activities are not mere diversions, but vital exercises that spark creative potential. When we force children to foreclose on the stage of initiative, and then prematurely push them into the stage of *industry*, we may indeed succeed in getting some children to read, write, and complete math equations precociously. But we may also be creating a cohort of children who lack spontaneity, creativity, and a love of learning.⁹ As Stanley Greenspan's compelling research demonstrates, emotional awareness is not merely a form of intelligence, but rather a cornerstone of *all* aspects of intellectual development.¹⁰ Children who are not emotionally engaged with the material they are learning and by the teachers who instruct them cannot grow intellectually. Teachers who facilitate healthy play in the early childhood classroom provide an ideal means of integrating social, emotional, and intellectual growth in a stage-appropriate way. In the wake of the No Child Left Behind Act, however, there is a growing disconnect between what education majors learn about optimal child development and what they are told to do in the classroom, which

increasingly, is to follow prescribed curricula and to sideline play in preparation for standardized testing.

School reforms did not just drop out of the sky. Over the past few decades, American children have not been performing well in international tests comparing children's math, reading, and science competency. I, too, believe that our public school system should undergo reform. However, the creation of *standards* and *accountability* must be grounded in principles of child development and humane pedagogy. If the mandate of the public school system is to support children's capacity to become thoughtful, caring, creative citizens capable of exercising independent judgment and free will, then treating age-appropriate, play-based curricula as expendable diversions in preschool and kindergarten is not the answer.

Perhaps, though, it is a quintessentially American answer, in a culture where "faster is better." There is a well-known anecdote about Jean Piaget—the famous Swiss cognitive psychologist—that he did not like to speak to American audiences because 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?"

Piaget taught us that development unfolded over time in recognizable stages that nonetheless allowed for considerable individual variation.¹¹ In each of these stages, a child's understanding of her world is qualitatively different, and in the preschool and kindergarten years, children think and learn optimally through play. We embrace stage theories that pertain to our children's physical development: they must be able to sit before they can stand, stand before they can walk, and so on. At the same time, we understand that the child who enters puberty at sixteen as opposed to twelve is nonetheless normal, and may tower over us five years hence. However, we have no such patience with respect to cognitive abilities. Woe to the American child who reads and writes at seven, rather than five! She will almost certainly be subject to at least one diagnostic label, even though seven is the normative age for beginning reading instruction in a majority of European countries. (More on this point below.)

If this seems to be an idealistic or romantic notion—that four-, five-, and six-year-olds should be learning through play, let's consider the following research, which gives us a window into the choices that countries whose children are faring particularly well in international comparisons are making. It was, after all, these international comparisons that catalyzed our most recent educational reforms. In a highly respected international survey conducted last year by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Finland came in first in literacy and placed in the top five in math and science among thirty-one industrialized nations. The rankings were based on reading, math, and science tests given to a sample of fifteen-year-olds attending both public and private schools. U.S. students placed in the middle of the pack.¹²

Finland's recipe for success? Children there start learning to read in grade one at seven years of age, on the theory that play is the most effective learning tool in the early years and that it sets the stage for a lifelong love of learning. Preschool for six-year-olds in Finland is optional. At first, the seven-year-olds lag behind their peers in other countries in reading, but they catch up almost immediately and then excel. Also, from grades one through nine, after every forty-five-minute lesson,

students are let loose outside for fifteen minutes so they can burn off steam with physical or musical activities. Art, music, physical education, woodwork, and crafts—subjects that are increasingly deemed expendable in U.S. public schools—are required subjects throughout the grades. (How much Ritalin might be spared if all American school children had the freedom to “burn off steam” every forty-five minutes and participate in physical education, art, music, and crafts on a regular basis?) Although there is a standard national curriculum, teachers in Finland are held in very high regard and have considerable authority to devise and revise curricula suitable to individual students.

While the United States continues to slash play from its preschool and kindergarten curricula, several European nations, including those in the United Kingdom, are reforming their school systems in ways that echo Finland’s choices: increasing the age at which children begin formal academic subjects, utilizing play-based curricula in the early years, and eliminating standardized testing in the early grades. The catalyst for these changes is a growing, research-based recognition of the success of developmentally appropriate curricula that do not arbitrarily divide children’s cognitive, social, and emotional needs.¹³

In December 2000, the British House of Commons Education Select Committee issued a report stating that there was “no conclusive evidence that children gained from being taught the 3Rs before the age of six.” Furthermore, creative play and small class size were deemed *essential* in early childhood education. The report expressed the following concerns about early academics:

The current focus on targets for older children in reading and writing inevitably tends to limit the vision and confidence of early childhood educators. Such downward pressure risks undermining children’s motivation and their disposition to learn, thus lowering rather than raising levels of achievement in the long term. . . . Inappropriate formalized assessment of children at an early age currently results in too many children being labeled as failures, when the failure in fact, lies with the system.¹⁴

Research submitted to the committee from the British Association for Early Childhood Education underscored this point of view:

Comparisons with other countries suggest there is no benefit in starting formal instruction before six. The majority of other European countries admit children to school at six or seven following a three year period of pre-school education which focuses on social and physical development. Yet standards in literacy and numeracy are generally higher in those countries than in the UK, despite our earlier starting age.¹⁵

It is unfathomable that the United States is moving its approach to education further and further away from that of the very countries whose academic achievements it

strives to emulate, and in a manner that ignores decades of child development research.

The Nature of Play

Having established that play is advantageous to development in the early years, we will now turn our attention to *how* creative play translates into developmental and academic gain. While many kinds of play and many play experts compete for our attention, I will focus on *make-believe* play—also referred to as dramatic, sociodramatic, creative, and imaginative play—as seen through the theoretical lenses of Lev Vygotsky and Jeffrey Kane.

Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist whose work on cognitive development from the twenties finally found its way to the United States in the seventies with an immediate and profound impact on the disciplines of child development and education. According to Vygotsky, “In play it is as though [the child] is a head taller than himself” as he learns to symbolize objects and events, delay gratification, practice self-regulation, assimilate adult roles, exercise imagination, practice motor skills, and develop emotional, social and verbal literacy.”¹⁶

Vygotsky’s observations are most relevant to sociodramatic play—when two or more children construct and act out play scenes together. In contrast to the relative freedom of solitary play, in social play, children must work out a shared set of rules and symbols. They must come to an agreement that the blanket represents their home, the block structure is a stove and that Sally will be the “daddy.” They must work out a shared understanding about what a “daddy” or a “mommy” is and does, and how the actors embodying these roles may or may not interact with one another. In order to remain welcome in the play group, they must subordinate their ideas and impulses to the shared ideas of the group. Paradoxically, while we idealize make-believe play as a liberation from the constraints of reality, in fact, social play leads the child to discover through direct experience why rules of conduct exist, why impulse control is necessary, and what the functions and roles of the different adults who populate their world are. In playing out their scenarios, children must “abstract” the defining features of “mommies” and “babies” and “bakers” and “husbands,” as well as the rules that guide social discourse. Children do not always utilize roles that exist in reality. Their play might just as easily be about superheroes and fairies. In these instances, children are likely exploring and developing their emotional lives, their fears, anger, love, and longing.¹⁷

The work of Jeffrey Kane, an educational philosopher at Long Island University, has special relevance to what play experts have termed “dramatic play,” meaning solitary make-believe play.¹⁸ Our media-drenched culture rarely provides children with quiet, unscheduled time, alone, in natural settings. As we explore Kane’s ideas, we will come to see that this is a profound loss indeed. In a chapter that he contributed to the anthology *All Work and No Play...: How Educational Reforms are Harming Our Preschoolers*, he questions the value of disembodied facts that are learned rather than discovered: what we term “abstract knowledge.” He reminds us that when children play at being mother, a kitten, or the wind for that matter, they do not merely mimic their role models, but they *become* them in their

play. Through the exercise of their imaginative capacities, and the full use of their bodies and senses, they experience directly what it feels like, and means, to be a mother or a kitten or the wind. This type of play provides young children with lessons that are infinitely deeper and more age-appropriate than the fact sheets or Internet “field trips” they might encounter in an academic preschool.

While preschool children who formally study the properties of, say, butterflies, might spout an impressive array of scientific facts, the child who has the gift of time to observe the dance of a butterfly in its natural environment, and to imagine herself as that butterfly in her play, will have a much richer learning experience. How might this close encounter with a single butterfly in its natural habitat be a superior lesson to an hour spent in a classroom memorizing the names and identifying features of twenty different butterflies? Or observing the same twenty butterflies mounted on a wall at a museum? The child, left alone to gaze and wonder at and then embody the butterfly in her play, trusts the discoveries of her senses and her bodily experiences. She begins to understand what it means to be a butterfly in relationship to other natural delights in her environment, and in the process acquires a deep empathy with her subject. Also, she is acquiring the potential to make new scientific or artistic discoveries by developing her imaginative capacities, as opposed to memorizing other people’s decontextualized discoveries whose meaning and relevance may elude her.

When asked how she came to discover properties of genes through her research with maize that her colleagues failed to discover, Nobel prize-winning scientist Barbara McClintock spoke of her capacity to imagine herself into the chromosomes she was studying in much the same way that Einstein spoke of his discoveries about time and space. When we have never played in natural settings, when we have never imaginatively lived as a tiger or a rabbit, but have only been taught atomistic facts about mammals in school, or when “Disney” versions of these creatures override our own imaginings, then like Plato’s cave dwellers, our knowledge of the animal world will be a shadow knowledge handed to us by others, as opposed to knowledge gained firsthand that is deeply experienced and trusted. Is it any wonder then that so many students forget what they have learned in physics and history the moment their exams have ended? Most likely their knowledge was a surface knowledge, not richly experienced, understood, appreciated, or assimilated into the broader context of life. While conventional lessons may build upon our earlier free-form discoveries, they cannot replace them. I would venture to say that we never outgrow the need for education that is experiential and contextualized. In the absence of a deep empathy for and understanding of our place in nature, we feel no qualms about using science and technological discoveries as vehicles for dominating and mining nature for resources, and for destroying our ecosystem and our health in the process.

Language and Literacy

I would like to focus briefly on how play facilitates language and literacy in light of the intensity of the current focus on early reading in preschool and kindergarten settings. It is a sad irony that make-believe play, which has so much to contribute to

language development and literacy, is viewed as a hindrance rather than a tool. The building blocks of literacy are so much more than letter recognition and phonics. Children must also acquire a rich vocabulary, the ability to understand and follow a narrative, the capacity to empathize with the characters they encounter so as to imagine themselves into the circumstances of their lives, diverse experiences that help them relate to what they are reading, the ability to “see” the characters in their minds’ eyes, and the patience and desire to read.

Make-believe play facilitates many of these building blocks. First, sociodramatic play requires children to articulate their ideas to the group, while at the same time they are introduced to new modes of expression and vocabulary that are quickly assimilated because the children are learning in such an engaging context. Second, make-believe play is an exercise in empathy, as children learn what it feels like to be different characters and what those characters’ needs and motives are. Third, make-believe requires children to visualize the characters and scenarios that populate their play. The capacity to empathize with and visualize the characters and scenarios in a book, whether it be a work of fiction, history, or biology, is the difference between a reading experience that lies flat on the page and one that is deeply experienced, understood, and assimilated by the reader. Finally, make-believe play teaches children to create and follow a narrative, just as they must do when reading or writing a story. Without these foundational experiences, some children may suffer from a condition that Jane Healy terms “alliteracy.” They read fluently but cannot understand or make use of the material they have read, and they take no pleasure in reading.¹⁹

Recently, while I was walking in the woods with my seven-year-old daughter, she stopped and pointed to some sun-dappled leaves. “Do you see the sparkles in the leaves?” she asked. “Each sparkle is something good that will happen to me when I grow up.”

“What a wonderful thought,” I replied. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Children think these things all the time,” she explained. “We just don’t tell grown-ups too often because we think they’ll tell us that it’s silly or that it isn’t true.”

I would like to add to this already impressive list of benefits that play confers on childhood that when children are given the time and space to “make believe” without being rushed prematurely into the logic of adult thought, it helps them to acquire the optimism that wonderful possibilities, as yet unknown, await them, as well as the confidence to pursue them.

Reinventing the Wheel

It strikes me that every few years, developmental psychologists and early childhood educators must “reinvent the wheel” and launch yet another campaign to prove the importance of play in early childhood and to reinstate it in the educational curriculum. Why is play such an embattled element in children’s lives? Why do we not have a more intuitive grasp of the import of an activity that is a universal of childhood and that we share with all of our primate cousins?

Descartes' Legacy

Part of the answer can be located in Descartes's legacy to contemporary western thought. As Stuart Shanker and Jeffrey Kane propose in *All Work and No Play*, "with respect to our current conception of human knowledge, we are the intellectual heirs of the great 17th century philosopher, Rene Descartes."²⁰ Descartes believed that emotions were no more than base instincts and that reason was the opposite of emotional and bodily experience. For Descartes, "[t]he cognitive universe is composed of unquestionable bits of information, absolute and fixed, that are tied together by strict and logical laws."²¹

These schizoid tendencies to split thought from emotion, mind from body, and fact from context, continue to shape twenty-first-century attitudes, undergirding our blind faith in technological innovation and our attraction to mechanistic models of the mind. Indeed, the information processing model of thinking, with the computer as its guiding metaphor, has become the backbone of American educational philosophy.²² According to the information processing model, thinking involves processing, storing, and downloading information, in much the same fashion as a computer. Within this framework, fact sheets, computer drills, and multiple choice tests are eminently reasonable vehicles for learning and for testing what has been learned. This also explains why so many school districts feel that cutting art, music, and physical education, and increasing class sizes so that they can devote more funds toward wiring their classrooms, are worthwhile trade-offs. Play, direct experience, and mentoring do not have a valued place in this worldview. This may also explain why we are not more fearful of and outraged by the proliferation of screens and screen time in children's lives, and the de facto absence of regulations to guide their content. The fact that children are spending more time viewing screens than doing any other activity but sleeping (and that we haven't made it a national policy to investigate their impact and regulate their content) is deeply disconcerting.

Perhaps Descartes's legacy has become a self-fulfilling prophecy because in our race to embrace and emulate our machines, we appear to have lost sight of our *human* potential. In sharp contrast to a computer, a child possesses a *self*, which imbues her with the desire to give her life meaning, purpose, and a moral compass. A child is motivated to learn by the desire to be grounded in her family, in her community, and in the natural order, and yet at the same time to express herself and place her own personal stamp on the world. Her thinking is infused with emotion, sensory, and bodily-kinesthetic experience, artistry, imagination, and soulfulness. It is through this uniquely *human* prism, in the service of uniquely *human* needs, that she "processes information." It is thus a tragic irony that we idealize the disembodied, emotionless computer and try to teach our children to think according to its operating principles. Unfortunately, however, when mere information is what we seek to instill in or elicit from our students, the content and context of the information at issue become completely secondary to one's ability to access and manipulate it. Real psychological growth ceases, and the educational system encourages a growing cynicism and despair.

Screen Nation

The inordinate amount of time children spend consuming media not only robs them of valuable opportunities that could be devoted to quiet contemplative play and to social play, *it also undermines their ability to play*. In the absence of effective government regulations of the media, corporations vie for children's attention by upping the levels of sexual and violent content (often linking the two), and by constantly increasing the pace of the action. In her book *Failure to Connect*, Jane Healy articulates how both the content and process of watching and interacting with screens "short circuits" brain development, in ways that undermine the acquisition of impulse control, imagination, higher-order thinking, and the ability to generate visual imagery.²³ A vicious cycle is set in motion. The capacities needed to initiate play are undermined by screen culture, and the subsequent loss of playtime undermines these same capacities even further.

Preschool and kindergarten teachers are reporting that for the first time, they are witnessing a generation of children, many of whom literally don't know how to "make-believe," who have to be *taught* to play. Grade school teachers are finding that some of their students don't spontaneously visualize the characters they are reading about—and so reading becomes a colossal bore.²⁴ Increasingly, the "play" that children are bringing to the preschool and kindergarten classroom is a repetitive mimicry of violent sequences that aired on their televisions or video game screens the night before, not tempered by the impulse control and judgment necessary to avoid inflicting injury or pain on other "players." If this is what is now construed as play, then small wonder that parents and educators sometimes lose sight of the value of play.

Time Crunch

Healthy play is facilitated by adults, not so much to serve as "play partners," but rather as models of emotionally centered human beings engaged in activities that become the raw materials for play. Whether mother or father is raking the lawn, cooking a meal, or doing a craft, these activities are woven into healthy play.²⁵ But increasingly, parents aren't home much with their children. In the wake of "welfare reform," our government has failed to provide women re-entering the work force with regulated, high-quality, affordable childcare. As the minimum wage continues to stagnate, the ranks of "working poor" parents continue to swell. Wage freezes are becoming ubiquitous among the working and middle classes even as their workweeks lengthen, and so parents are burning out. When we add the cult of individualism and the rampant consumerism in the United States, which prompt us to place our own needs first, the results are fairly predictable. Already-exhausted parents may elect to abandon their children to screens, structured activities, or the streets, while they tune in and "tune out" with the aid of their own screen entertainments.

When my daughter was five, she told me after visiting a conservatory that "flower fairies" had brushed against her legs. "Did the leaves of the plants touch your legs?" I offered. "No, Mommy, they were flower fairies," she reiterated with quiet resolve before drifting off to sleep. What would my daughter's inner life be like

if she had never been visited by “flower fairies”? Despite decades of empirical research on play, there is much that we still do not understand—that we may never fully understand—and yet must respect and honor. Perhaps in children’s imaginative play lie the seeds of the wonder that we feel when we gaze at a sunset, or a starry sky whose secrets will never fully be revealed to us, filling us with a deep reverence for the splendors and mysteries of the universe, and our place within it.

Having begun this chapter with a reference to a singer whose lyrics predicted that play might be under threat in the 21st century, I will end by giving thanks to Raffi, whose body of work is a gift to the imaginative play of children everywhere and reminds us that we are not alone in our desire to restore play to the forefront of children’s lives. His deceptively simple lyrics to the song *Let’s Play* invoke the deep evolutionary imperative of child’s play.

*Lion cubs and bear cubs,
pups and kittens do it,
baby belugas do it too.
Baby chimps and elephants and sea otters do it.
Play’s the thing, a magic ring,
won’t you play with me?
Raffi, 2001*
