

**The Child:
Play & The Development of the Young Child**

By Joan Almon

Already in the 1990s we have seen a fresh wind blowing through old structures and bringing new and unexpected freedom into the world. The demise of communism is only the most spectacular example. In American education one hears on every front the cry for more choice and freedom. Even in the quiet world of early childhood education the winds of change are stirring. The drive to teach children to read as early as possible is giving way to an approach in which play, formerly almost banished from the public kindergarten, is making a comeback.

Healthy children want to play all the time and they learn a great deal from play. Despite this, in the '70s and '80s some leading educators became convinced that play is more or less a waste of time. Children have to learn to read and they have to learn as quickly as possible. There can be no time left for play.

The seriousness of the situation which resulted from this view struck me one evening after I had given a talk on play. Two public school kindergarten teachers approached me. "We agree with you about the importance of play," they said emphatically. Then they explained that their school district legislated every minute of the kindergarten program. For the children, ranging in age from four and a half to six, twenty minutes were to be spent on reading, another twenty on writing, twenty more on mathematics and so on. No time was scheduled for play. "You know," said one, looking over her shoulder to be sure no one was listening. "I break the law every day and let my children play for fifteen minutes." I was amazed. What country is this that outlaws play for young children?

Play dominates the lives of young children. The healthy child wants to play from morning to night. His play bubbles up from deep within and helps keep the life forces, so necessary for the tremendous growth taking place, flowing. If a child loses interest in play it is usually a sign of illness.

Keeping children from play is like putting them into a state of illness. Yet this is exactly what took place in the past two decades in public kindergartens throughout the United States and Canada. When I visited Head Start programs and kindergartens during those years, I was shocked to see classrooms full of learning materials and computers but devoid of toys. The very spirit of childhood was being buried in a frantic attempt to get children reading as early as possible.

Today many educators realize that this approach was a disaster for children. Concentrated early academics tended to produce youngsters who, by the age of nine or ten, were burnt out and showed no interest in schooling. As high school students many were unable to think. They could answer true/false or

multiple choice questions, but could not formulate answers to open-ended questions. As a headline in *USA Today* (September 13, 1989) expressed it: "Burnout Awaits Fast Track Preschoolers."

At a time when more creative thinking is needed to find solutions to complex problems, this decline in thinking ability is a great concern. Dr. Jane Healy, in her book *Endangered Minds*, surveys current research about the brain and its development in the growing child. She maintains that *early academics and television viewing are two key factors contributing to the deterioration of thinking among American students.*

In the '90s play is being discovered again, at least to some extent. Educators are looking to new approaches in early childhood education, and some of these approaches have put play back in the kindergarten. Unfortunately, most educators remain convinced that they must teach young children if they are to learn anything. They do not yet realize that conscious learning in the preschool years interferes with the dream-like state of consciousness needed in play. The new approach evolving in kindergarten education is to teach in a playful way, rather than through the workbooks and ditto sheets of the past. The emphasis is still on teaching however, since most modern educators still fail to see that children learn through self-directed creative play.

Surprisingly little research has been done in North America comparing children who learn through academics with those who learn through play. A study done in Germany though compared about 1,000 children who had played in kindergarten with the same number who had worked on academic subjects. By the fourth grade those who had played excelled significantly over those who had done academics. Their advantage was in physical development, emotional/social development, and in intellectual development. The results were so conclusive that the Germans, who had been moving towards academics in kindergarten, switched back to play. (*Der Spiegel No. 20, 1977. pp. 89-90.*)

Current research supportive of play has come from Sara Smilansky, an Israeli professor working in the United States and Israel. Smilansky has shown that children who play well in creative social situations show significant gains in many cognitive and emotional-social areas, including language development, intellectual competence, curiosity, innovation and imagination. The "good players" tend to have a longer attention span and greater concentration ability. They are less aggressive and get along better with their peers. They show more empathy, can more easily take the perspective of others, and can better predict

others' preferences and desires. In general the good players are emotionally and socially better adjusted.

This impressive list of attributes confirms the view in Waldorf education that play in the kindergarten years is an essential seed which bears fruit for the whole lifetime. We need to protect and nurture the play of children as much as possible so that they can grow up to be creative, lively thinkers. We need though to understand play more fully. We cannot use ourselves for a model for we have lost the child's ability to play. Young children have two unique capacities essential for successful play. One is the ability to learn about the world through imitation. The other is the capacity to use "make believe" or fantasy to make the world their own.

Except in Waldorf circles one seldom hears that young children learn through imitation. A friend once told me that she raised her first three children without ever having heard about imitation as a means of learning. Though she had a master's degree in early childhood education and taught young children, she simply did not see that young children imitate. She thought that they can learn about life only by being "taught." By the time her fourth child was born she had encountered Waldorf education and the idea of imitation. It was as if blinders had fallen from her eyes. She was amazed at how much her child was learning through imitation. She realized she did not need to "teach" her child anything. She only needed to be a loving, active mother and to let the imitation of example take over.

The young child is like a sponge and absorbs nearly everything in her environment. Of greatest interest are grownups. A child wants nothing so much as to grow up and become fully human. She looks to parents, teachers, and other adults to see how children go about living on this earth and making it their own. The child wants to imitate everything she sees grownups do. The power of imitation though goes even deeper. The child can slip inside our skins and imitate our moods and our thoughts about life. Thus we have a huge responsibility. We must strive to be worthy of the child's imitation. Fortunately children do not expect us to be perfect- They do long, though, for us to be inwardly growing so that they can imitate this striving,

In the kindergarten, imitation is at work on many levels. Whatever the teacher is doing, be it baking, cooking, painting, sewing or another activity, the children flock to her and say, "What are you doing? Can I do it too?" The teacher is always ready for the children to help, and usually there is a table full of

children gathered around her, sewing or cooking with her. A more subtle imitation is when some children take in what the teacher is doing and recreate it in their play situations. In the playhouse the children may pretend to bake or sew as their teacher is doing.

When children absorb the mood of concentration and the adult's love of the work being done a yet more subtle, but perhaps more important, imitation takes place. If one is inwardly grumpy or tense in one's work, children will not gather round to help. Moreover they will absorb our tension or our dislike for the work and a tension will fill the room. In such a moment if the teacher can take herself in hand and relax, it is as if the whole class takes a deep breath, and their play relaxes.

Children play best if the adults around them work with the concentration and focus that a good craftsman brings to her work. The love of the materials, the mastery of the movements involved, the sense of the purpose and beauty inherent in the task, all are communicated to the children. They bring these qualities into their own activity and one sees a new depth in their play.

The most "advanced" play I have seen in a Waldorf kindergarten was in Reutlingen, Germany in the kindergarten of Freya Jaffke. This gifted teacher carried out her work projects not for a day or two, but for weeks or months. She would work on a sewing project that would take a month or more to complete. Or she would carve wooden toys for the kindergarten, being busy carving several days a week for several months. As she worked she was always attuned to the children and their needs. Day after day there was a steady, quiet hum for the ninety minutes the teacher worked and the children played. And the quality of the children's play was astonishing.

In today's homes and kindergartens children see very little concentrated work. Adults dash from one task to another, and a sense of hurry permeates life. When children imitate hurrying adults, a nervousness enters them and their play suffers considerably. Uncorrected, this nervousness may appear later as a superficial quality in the young person's thinking. A child's ability to imitate goes through a metamorphosis, appearing later in life as the ability to form independent judgments. As the child approaches first grade he loses confidence that he can, through imitation, do whatever we do. The child begins to see us as teachers who can teach him to do things. The child is ready to learn and looks for a loving authority. This is his mood as he approaches the class teacher. The same mood affects the child's relationship with parents and other adults.

In adolescence learning changes again, emerging as a capacity for independent judgment. The teenager's thinking begins to take form and becomes individualized. This is especially true if the child's development has not been damaged during the ages of imitation and authority.

Children's play draws also on fantasy, which makes all things alive. A simple basket can turn into a doll's bed, a boat, a bowl for eating or another item needed for play. Fantasy usually appears between ages two and three. Before this children love the practical objects of the household, the pots and pans, wooden spoons, waste baskets and the wonders contained in drawers. And they take things literally. If you give a two-year-old a bowl of sand and tell him it is a birthday cake, watch out. He is apt to eat it. Young three-year-olds are often in a transition stage. Fantasy is just taking hold, and they are not yet sure of the boundaries between what is make-believe and what is real. I have had young three-year-olds eye my sand offering with a puzzled look and say. "It's make-believe, right?" The four-year-old, however, knows what to do and puts twigs in the dish of sand for candles, decorates it with leaves and flowers, and has a make-believe birthday party.

Modern adults tend to downplay the importance of fantasy. Fantasy seems to contradict the accepted value of being rational, logical and scientific in one's thinking. Reason and logic are an important part of human thinking, but only a part. The human mind is capable of many types of thought, including creative, imaginative thought. Ashley Montagu, the well-known anthropologist, says in his book *Growing Young* (McGraw-Hill, 1983) that the child's fantasy play is in the direct line of ascent to the scientist's thinking in the laboratory. Both child and scientist try out new ideas in the spirit of "what if I do it this way." The play of the child is the basis for the creative thinking of the adult, Montagu says. He adds that a scientist wants to be thought of as a person of imagination, not a "fact grubber."

Fantasy begins around the same time the child formulates her first thoughts. The three-year-old's mind awakens and fills with questions such as "Why is the sky blue?" or "Why is the sun yellow?" We educated adults think, "Oh good, now the child is three and it is time to start teaching him." But the more we teach, the more we destroy the child's budding power of fantasy, and without it, thinking can become dry and lifeless. If we allow fantasy to fructify thinking, then an imaginative and creative form of thinking begins to flourish and grow.

The playful fantasy of early childhood seems to disappear around age six or seven. Actually though it goes through a metamorphosis and appears as the inward imagination of the school child. The child can now see pictures or images within her own mind's eye. These are as alive to the child as her play situations were a few years before. Imagination grows and develops all through the elementary school years. But in puberty it seems to disappear. It is metamorphosed again, however, and emerges as the creative thinking of the adolescent and adult. The imaginative adult will be able to play with ideas as easily as he once was able to engage in fantasy play.

There are many ways to foster a healthy fantasy life in the young child. One is to offer simple play materials from nature. A child with logs, stones, shells, and some pieces of cotton cloth can create anything in the world. And he will never tire of these materials since his fantasy continually sees new possibilities in them. Creative play with these natural objects greatly strengthens the child's fantasy. Conversely, the more defined a toy is, the less it will engage and foster a child's fantasy.

You can give a young child a head start in life by enhancing all those aspects of life which further creative play and avoiding those which interfere with it. For example, offer lots of loving warmth and a protective environment, a variety of simple play materials and the opportunity to see adults doing meaningful physical work. Keep exposure to the media, i.e. television, movies, videos, to a minimum so that the child's fantasy is not overwhelmed by someone else's images, and so that the child's will is not deadened by hours of passive watching. Finally, bite your tongue every time you want to explain something to a young child. Allow them the joy of discovering their own answers - through play.

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Originally from Wilmington, Delaware, **Joan Aimon** began working with young children in 1971. A year later she discovered Waldorf education. "What convinced me of the Waldorf approach," she recalls, "was the reaction of the children to it. When I tried it, it worked." Joan taught for five years in what was to become the Waldorf School of Baltimore. Then she was for ten years at Acorn Hill Children's Center, a large and thriving Waldorf kindergarten in Silver Spring, Maryland. Joan presently is chairperson of the Waldorf Kindergarten Association. She travels widely giving courses at kindergarten teacher training

programs, and talks and consultations at kindergartens.

Suggested Reading:

Heidi Britz-Crecelius, *Children at Play*, Floris Books, 1979

Jane Healy, *Endangered Minds*, Touchstone, 1990

Freya Jaffke, *Toymaking with Children* Floris Books, 1988

Edgar Klugman and Sara Smilansky, *Children's Play and Learning* Teachers'
College Press, 1990