

How to Play with Your Children

have our children. The highest achievement of parenthood should be that as our children reach adulthood, they would choose to have us as parents. We have a better chance of this happening if for twenty-odd years we have all lived together in an atmosphere that has been full of playfulness and fun. By playing with your children, you as the parents can turn the roles of life around the other way. You or they can be the clowns, horses, babies, monsters, the ones who are "It," and the tricksters. Your children feel comfortable with you because you can change places with them and they can change with you. It is an optimistic and lighthearted way of life to be able to go back and forth from the way things really are to the way things might be.

But as we have said all along, there are times *not to play* with your children—not ever if you feel you are intruding (and you may be), or you feel it is a duty (for their "own good"), or you are too grumpy, preoccupied, or just plain exhausted to enjoy the fun you are supposed to be having together. By and large as children get older, we have to play with them less, but we have to understand them more. At an earlier age they are so dependent upon us that they come to us with their play. At these later ages they do not, and we have to have a wiser understanding of what they are about in order to be of occasional help.

Conclusion

THE SIGNIFICANCE
OF PLAY IN
PARENTING

Primarily we hope that we have made the world more fun or at least a less boring place for you and your children. We believe, however, that we have also contributed to your versatility, and to your children's versatility, because they will copy you, whatever you do.

ASSESSMENT

The appendix at the end of this book, which we call "Assessment," is divided into two parts. The first part contains a check list that you can use to review *your own progress* in these things. It asks you, in effect, how playful you have been and how playful you think that you can become. Is it too embarrassing to be this childish? Both religious leaders and psychologists have often indicated that the truly mature person has the capacity to be both childlike and playful when it is desirable. Creativity encompasses the ability to reproduce in play all the stages of one's life. Fortunately with young children a parent can approach this gradually. Children are enormously cooperative in such efforts. Fun beckons in its own way and shapes us all toward its mutual enjoyment, unless we are determined to withstand it.

The second part contains a check list that outlines the *children's progress* through the various forms of play that we have discussed in earlier chapters. This list serves as the *grammar* of their play and games. It outlines the building blocks through which children will normally proceed. Although it is only a primitive map, it is at least a starting point

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learning of emotional dynamics like surprise, anticipation, and climax. All of this learning comes about in a systematic way.

THEORY OF PLAY

But now we come to the very difficult question of what it is we are talking about. What is play? What is a game? Although we have dropped hints here and there on our thinking, by and large we have felt that, practically speaking, it is possible both to play and to see play's effects without necessarily knowing how it works. One can often carry something out very effectively without theoretical knowledge. Nevertheless, living intelligently requires at least an effort at understanding what it is we are about.

Play is a subject about which a great deal has been written, but on which there is as yet little science. After all, we all play to some extent and therefore imagine ourselves to be authorities. To discuss play adequately we have to say something about our *motives*, our *feelings*, and our *thoughts*.

The Motive for Play—a Reversal of Power

Play is one type of voluntary behavior—that is, a behavior undertaken because people want to do something, not because they must do it. They are motivated from within. Unlike other kinds of voluntary activity, where behavior is partly controlled by objects and other people, in play the players are even freer in their choices of action. Many theorists have written that people play because of the pleasure of being the cause of what is happening. This is the pleasure of being in power.

argue that in play or games the players reverse the way things usually are. They make things happen their way rather than the way they usually happen. Instead of being frightened by monsters, they become the monster themselves. In the game of "Moonlight, Starlight, Bogey Won't Come Out Tonight," played at twilight, the children who are "It" become themselves the frightening creatures. Even when they are running from the person who is "It," they control the circumstances because they can hide, they can run, or if they wish, they can simply call the game off.

They get to deal with the dangers and uncertainties in this situation in a way that is within their control, and if they feel they are losing control, then they stop playing the game. Either way they are safe, yet they can have the excitement of dealing with such real issues as being pursued by dangerous creatures. In most of our lives we do not have such control. If we are children, we have even less of it.

The activities of infants in their very first month of play—when they blow bubbles on their lips in a relaxed manner—suggest the first reversal of the flow of events. For the first time the human subjects have stepped away from those things that impel them (hunger, pain, sleep) and are taking charge themselves. Since this happens so early in the first two months and since it is the first example of such self-control, we can argue that one first discovers oneself through play. Here is the first awareness of the self as being able to initiate things, as being able to control the flow of circumstances. Of course, the control exercised in play is only a fiction of what it is like to control everyday circumstances. But it is at least an experience of what the whole pattern of being in control is like. How else could one ever get the opportunity when so young?

What enters into play are those matters that we cannot control. In the young these are usually issues having to do

of success and failure and life and death become the more persistent matters over which we may seek such a reversal of power.

The Feeling of Play—Viving

We have known for a long time that children do not generally play except in familiar situations with familiar people. For that matter, they do not play at unfamiliar things. Usually the actions in play reflect their own lives and those of people about them. There is enormous repetition of everyday themes—washing, eating, dressing, going to work. All of this means that they do not play unless they are quite secure. When life is too demanding, dangerous, or anxiety producing, there is no room for play. It is only when children can take the rest of life for granted and be somewhat relaxed about it that play can begin. Without such relaxation there cannot be the transition to play.

But as soon as play begins, its subject matter becomes vivid to all its participants. Even though the subject matter of play can be as diverse as playing house, chasing, or football, all players report being highly involved in their play. They also look as though they are highly engrossed. The feeling quality of play is that it is a vivid life experience. Unlike everyday affairs, which are often stressful, boring, or so-so, play is vivid. This is as true for children as it is for the spectators glued to their television sets watching their favorite forms of sport. All have in common this feeling of life's being made more vivid. We can call this vivification if we wish, but it is easier to refer to it more simply as having a *vive*.

We play and we practice sport because we want to *vive*, to live vividly. In those societies and historical times when peo-

had much less time for this. Life was vivid enough in its own stressful way. As children and adults have become more secure in their childhood and more affluent in their society, they have sought once again to restore such vividness, but under their own control, and play is the most universal way of doing so. The search for vivid living through play, games, and sports has become an obsession of modern man. It is almost as universal a phenomenon in all major countries as the church was in the Middle Ages. Sport is modern man's ritual of the chosen life.

We may ask how this vividness is produced. It is produced by centering all attention on those things that we can control. We are not forced to pay attention to many different things. We do not have to be self-conscious about our worldly selves and all the myriad passing events and irritations of everyday life. We focus on only a small area—the play area, the sports field, the checkers board. This gives us immediate feedback. Each of our actions is meaningful in this play area. Each action has a payoff. A good move leads to the advance of one's checkers, a poor move leads to a loss. It is all very clear, although it is excitingly uncertain from moment to moment.

The fear of loss, the hope for victory, and the struggle to boss the other players in order to carry out our fantasies keep us glued into the field of action. Our feelings and the objects outside ourselves are as one. Children turn wooden blocks into their feelings of an automobile; tennis players must *feel* the flight of the ball if they are to react adequately. Play obliterates detachment and all the forms of objectivity with which we mark the path to scientific wisdom. It asks people to put their whole ego into it. Within the rules they are expected to plunge in wholeheartedly. This state of mind produces the feeling of living vividly. After the game is over, we

Play as Thought—a Unique Abstraction

We do not play at everything. We only reproduce salient matters. Children playing house may run through a day's activity in ten minutes. They reproduce only certain salient characteristics of getting dressed, cleaning, eating, and going to bed. Their play is a summary, or an abstract, of their life, not its complete reproduction. The sportsmen engaged in a struggle for victory do not reproduce the struggles as they exist in life. On the contrary, in life success is seldom clear-cut. We go into business, we get married, we engage in war, and who can ever say when success or failure comes.

But in a game we have a capsule version of such a struggle. There is focus on just the struggle itself, and the outcome is clear-cut. The spatial arrangements of the playing field, the time limits under which the game takes place, and so forth, all contribute to condensing or clarifying the issue that is at stake. We speak of play as an abstract because it *removes* us from the original situation. It deals only with *general* characteristics and is a *summary* of events.

The speed at which play and games run through their reproductions of life has to remind us of the technique in films, with their capacity to sum up history or a life in an hour or two. Interestingly, the most common root meaning of the word "play" in many different languages is *rapid movement*. Play is likened to flickering like flames, fluttering like birds, leaping like animals, bobbing like a ship on the waves. Here perhaps also lies a part of the reason for the vividness of play—its quickness in action. Apparently throughout history players have always made their own action movies.

Just as the players show their first efforts at self-control in play, they likewise show their first efforts at abstraction.

removal of themselves from the usual flow of sucking, and it is a restatement of parts of that flow.

It also follows that because children are in charge of the circumstances, the more they repeat these play events, the more they will be likely to introduce novelty into their activity. Given that they originally intend to reverse the direction of power and to make their own imprint on nature and society, it follows that with repetition that uniqueness will become increasingly apparent; that is, the more children play (all other things being equal), the more playful they should become. If they do not become playful, this is because they are too obsessed with the difficulties in their life. Thus, we find that in therapy disturbed children repeat the same themes endlessly in their attempt to gain freedom from them. They smash the adult dolls a thousand times before they begin to feel some freedom. In due course, however, this play does lead to some feeling of such freedom.

But in normal children each attempt to deal with the irreversible problem of being powerless can only be enjoyable if the problem is stated in a novel way. In play there is the freedom for such novelty. Without novelty the play itself would become boring. Thus, there is an inherent drive toward statements about life that are unique.

We should find in play, therefore, unique syntheses of the way life might be. When children put a doll to bed at age eighteen months, they give us a forecast of many later events. It will be another year before they can talk about such things, however. Representation in play is much easier than is representation in speech. In play children just have to put the action elements of representation together (the doll, the bed, and the putting into bed). In speech children have to use the words "I put the baby to bed" (not just the actions), and they have to talk to other people and make them understand them. This is much more complex

When children get to be four, they will be able to put a real baby to bed, as four-year-olds often have to do in tribal living. But the play statement of this event comes first. It forecasts all the rest. Of course, this is not a very unique example. For children who play a lot, putting the baby to bed gets to be putting it under the bed, putting a teddy bear to bed, putting baby and teddy to bed, turning the bed upside down and making a house out of it, and using the bed as a boat or as an airplane. This is the way in which the uniqueness becomes increasingly manifest, although even the personal statement is unique at least for that individual.

Out of the uniqueness of the play abstraction comes children's capacity to be creative. It is because they have developed a repertoire of novel ideas that they can give novel responses to the usual creativity tests. This is the inherent connection between play and creativity.

GAMES

We can define play as that reversal of the direction of power that permits unique abstracts of life to be experienced in a vivid manner and subsequently recorded as fun. Games work within these limits but deal only with the problem of interactions between people. The play problem they have in mind is the character of relations between people. They attempt to digest into capsule form what we have called the fitting positions of chaser and escapee, acceptor and rejector, etc.

In our judgment each of these fitting sets of positions represents a learning of conflict. One must know how to accept and reject because without a lot of experience on any given occasion we may not know which to do. Life is full of acceptance and rejections and we must be ready for them. It seems

clear that games do not deal with all kinds of interaction. They deal primarily with interactions that involve oppositions. A game is an opposition between players.

The types of oppositions that games deal with are threefold. There is the opposition between order and disorder, which we dealt with in Chapter 8, and oppositions that have to do with approach and avoidance and with success and failure, which we have dealt with in subsequent chapters. Let us take approach and avoidance first. We have to learn how to relate to people. Shall we go toward them or shall we go away from them? If we go toward them, should it be as pursuit; if we go away, should it be as escape? Alternatively, should we simply accept them or reject them, be dominated by them or usurp their role, and more dangerously should we attack them or defend ourselves against them? It is possible to group together games of these types and show that there is a steady development through each type. This is what we have been doing in the previous pages.

Likewise, we have attempted to show that there are games in which the main opposition has to do with success and failure. We have mentioned the opposition between being correct and making mistakes. There is also the opposition between scoring or being outscored, as in most games of skill. We have not given much time to the other type of success or failure, that which occurs in games of chance. We see this as an opposition between accumulating goods or being deprived of them by virtue of lady luck or other external agencies over which we do not have control.

The original games of order and disorder often have the players combining together against anarchy or fate, so if we are to include them in a definition of games, we must talk of games as involving an opposition between forces (not always between players). This then covers solitaire and individual games. Without the cooperative behavior established

players could not take place, since all competition presupposes that the players can first cooperate on the meaning of the rules.

The way we visualize the hierarchy of games through which children develop is as follows:

- Games of order and disorder ("Ring around the Rosy")
- Games of approach and avoidance
- Chasing and escaping (tag)
- Acceptance and rejection ("The Farmer in the Dell")
- Dominance and usurpation (Mother may I)
- Attack and defense (football, chess)
- Games of success and failure
- Accumulation and deprivation (bingo)
- Correctness or mistakes (jump rope)
- Scoring or being outscored (marbles)

A game then becomes an opposition between forces with an uncertain outcome and with rules controlling the character of the events. As in play, in the game the players control the circumstances and have the power over their fate that they may not have outside of games; they are vividly absorbed into action and interaction; and the game is a unique abstract of the larger texture of social life. It presents to children a simple pattern of the way people manage opposition many years before they will be able to handle adroitly that opposition in the larger society.

It is interesting to realize that each type of game has a special flavor of life. Think of kissing in the ring, Monopoly, checkers, dodge ball, and Red Rover. One can think of things in life that are like these events. Nothing quite parallels them in life that are like these events. Nothing quite parallels them in life that are like these events. Nothing quite parallels them in life that are like these events.

other people. The images of these games become the basis for our less sophisticated expectations of other people.

Furthermore, when we play each game, it is different every time we play it, which is probably itself the best preparation for what is to come. Even within each theme each encounter has a different quality. As we proceed in games, we get unique strategies for managing them, so that although the content of the game opposition may be changed little by us, we do have latitude for our own particular style. In play novelty of ideas can affect content. In games it seems to have its main effect on style. Games are thus vehicles of the major culture in a way that play has a chance not to be, although, as we have seen, play's major contents are usually repetitive of everyday themes.

RELATIONSHIP OF PLAY TO SOCIETY

We play for power, for our own "abstract" and vivid statement. But what relationship does all this have to the rest of society? All the evidence shows that play *reproduces that society*. Children's play is full of the content of their lives. Eskimos constantly play at turn-taking skill games without competition because they must both know each other's skills and yet collaborate together. When they are on the ice floe with a polar bear working as a team, it must be one-for-all and all-for-one, but with a keen sense of each other's competence.

Aboriginal play imitates tracking and hunting. Games of strategy arise in human history at the same time as does class stratification, including the formation of military specialists. In societies where monarchical rule is the form of social order children and adults play games in which one person tries to be king over all the others. An example from Afghanistan

The king of Afghanistan sat on a brocade-covered sofa and sipped tea as he watched some of the fiercest, most agile horsemen in Central Asia play a form of mounted football with the carcass of a beheaded calf.

This gentle pastime is played here every year at this time in honor of the birthday of the king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who has now turned 54.

To score in the game—known as *buzkashi*—all a rider has to do is snatch the carcass from the ground, gallop with it a quarter of a mile down the field, then gallop back and throw it in a chalked circle near the point where he started.

Grabbing the carcass can be a bit tricky, however, for it weighs 75 to 100 pounds. Also, at the moment the rider leans from his saddle to hoist this weight, several of his opponents' powerful horses are likely to come slamming into his in an attempt to knock the carcass loose.

For a moment the men and animals shove and heave like a wave on the verge of breaking. Then with shouts and a cracking of whips, one of the horsemen breaks loose from the pack at a hard gallop, somehow throwing a leg over the heavy carcass to hold it to the side of his mount.

At that instant *buzkashi* has more than a touch of epic beauty as the horsemen stretch out across the landscape in thunderous pursuit.

Often, when the lead rider is caught, a tug-of-war results with the carcass stretched between two galloping horses, their riders leaning away at angles of 45 degrees or more to break the opponent's hold.

That's how *buzkashi* gets its name. *Kashi* means pull and *buz* means goat, calves being only one of

The buzkashi matches sponsored here by the National Olympic Federation for His Majesty's pleasure are as rugged and dangerous a sport spectacle as can be seen anywhere—except on the far side of the mountain barrier called the Hindu Kush, near the Soviet border, where Turkmen and Uzbek horsemen play it without any reference to the rule book the Olympic Federation has attempted to write.

Here there are ten men on a side playing on a field with marked boundaries under the supervision of a referee who is supposed to call a foul if one of the players uses such traditional buzkashi tactics as whipping an opponent across the face or pulling him from his horse.

In the north, there can be 100 men on a side or, so it is said, there can even be no sides at all—each man pitted against the rest. That sounds like certain death, but apparently it isn't for the best horsemen, called chapandaz, survive to play for the King on his birthday.

One of today's stars, Hakim Pahlavon, has only half of one ear, a minor example of the kinds of injuries a chapandaz can sustain.¹

This is "monarchical" play at its richest. This play remains with us only in the diminished form of king of the mountain. A new pattern of games has taken its place.

In twentieth-century American society, with its greater emphasis on individual achievement, we play games in which all the players score and record their achievements in complicated statistics of batting, pitching, and errors. In more-recent

corporate America we play games that reflect the massive powers and strategies of large organizations, as in American football.

Just as play and games reproduce aspects of the societies in which they take place, so also do they tend to reflect the character of their players. We know from research that chess players tend to be disputatious, solitary individuals; that some types of bridge players tend to be gregarious people who prefer not to discuss serious issues; that people attracted to team sports tend to be more aggressive than are those attracted to individual athletic endeavors; and that even winning child tic-tac-toe players tend to be strategic-thinking individuals, and those who prefer to draw in tic tac toe are more cautious and less risk-taking in character.

So what does society get? This research implies that in play or games the individual or the group takes one of society's themes and reproduces it either uniquely or with their own style of play. Reproducing the theme in this way, under one's own control and with the vivid engrossment involved, means that one restates the main themes of personal and cultural life without the usual irritations and harassments that surround them. What this leads to is a *regeneration of cultural purposes*, a revival. The players or gamers return from their episodes more confident and optimistic about their usual lives. Play and games recharge the batteries of their customary selves.

Furthermore, because this has been an exercise in novelty with respect to these purposes, it is possible that they may also gain new insight into the way things might be. At least life has been restated in personal terms without all the other problems it contains, and that in itself sometimes leads to a shift in perspective and an easing of the original problems. Typically, the participants in play therapy or psychodrama work with their original problem with a new self-conscious-