

The Values of Outdoor Play

by David Elkind

Childhood is moving indoors. Over the last two decades alone, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week, and eight of those lost hours were once spent

in unstructured play and outdoor activities. In contrast, the amount of time children spend in organized sports has doubled, and the number of minutes children devote to passive spectator leisure (not counting television, but including watching sports), has increased five fold — from 30 minutes to over three hours.¹ The public schools are not helping, and an increasing number of

elementary schools are eliminating recess or are considering doing so.² At least one rationale for cutting recess is to allow more time for academics. This negative attitude toward play reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of what children need for healthy mental, physical, and social/emotional growth.

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extensively and is perhaps best known for his popular books — *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, and *Miseducation*. Professor Elkind is a past president of NAEYC. He currently is the co-host of the Lifetime television series *Kids These Days*. David's newest book, *The Power of Play* (DaCapo Press), will be available in December.

Play, learning, and development

Freud was once asked what was required for a full, happy, and productive life.

He answered, “Lieben und Arbeiten” (loving and working). With all due respect to Freud, I would add “Spielen” (playing). Play, love, and work are the innate drives that power human thought and action throughout the life cycle. Play is the drive to transform the world to meet our personal needs. The infant, to illustrate, transforms every object he or she touches into an object to be sucked. Love is the drive to express our desires, feelings, and emotions. Infants begin early to express their feelings and emotions with their distinctive cries. Work is the drive to adapt to the demands of the physical and social world. Again, the infant readily adapts its lips to whatever it brings to its mouth.

Although play and work are often thought to be in opposition



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to one another, they are most effective when they, along with love, are all operative. When school children have a say in the topics they are to study (play) they are motivated to learn (love), and the outcome — skill or knowledge — is solid and long lasting. The same is true at home and in the workplace. If parents listen to their children and let them take part in the decision making (play), this increases the attachment (love) to parents; and the result — learned rules of the household — are securely established. In the workplace, employees whose input (play) is valued and rewarded develop respect and positive regard for their employer (love) and the end product or service (work) is of high quality.

When play, love, and work are separated, the result is less salutary. Play divorced from love and work amounts to little more than entertainment. Entertainment is important but should not take precedence over love and work. When work is separated from play and love, it becomes an obligation and a chore. Again, some chores are important, but they should not predominate working life. Finally, love in isolation from play and work is little more than narcissism. While a bit of narcissism is healthy and normal, too much can be a problem. We are all best served when play, love, and work are brought together in our thought and action.

While play, love, and work are ever present drives, their relative importance varies with age. During the first five years of life, play is the dominant and love and work are supportive. When children enter childhood proper (the elementary school years), work becomes the predominant drive and play and love serve as facilitators of that disposition. With adolescence and the arrival of puberty, love becomes the dominant drive and play and work assume secondary roles. In adulthood, play, love, and work become relatively separate

and are only reunited in those work environments where all three are operative. This happens most often in the professions and in the arts. It also characterizes our avocations such as gardening, sports, woodworking, pottery, weaving, and so on. These are activities that we undertake on our own initiative (love), endow with our personal expression (play), and have products (work) that are both original and useful to all. Outdoor play is one of the earliest vehicles for this type of self initiated activity.

Outdoor play

Outdoor play is important at all age levels but particularly in early childhood and the elementary years. Children are not born knowing about the world in which they will live. It is only through playful contact with that world that they create the learning experiences that allow them to make this world their own. In so doing, they not only develop new concepts, but also facilitate mental growth. Because play is the dominant drive during early childhood, most learning during this age period is self directed. No one teaches the child to crawl, turn over, stand up, and walk. No one teaches the infant to babble all the sounds of all possible languages or how to put words together. We may model this but it is the child who decides to follow that model.

That is why it is so important to follow the young child's lead, even though it may seem meaningless to us. A child playing in the sandbox may pour sand over a wheel to make it turn again, again, and again. It may be boring for us, but the child is creating new learning experiences through his or her actions. We may not see the value of this repetitive play, but the child does. In the out of doors world children learn about the elements: earth, air, water, and fire. In this natural world, children learn that plants grow in the earth, some things sail in the wind, whereas others fall

down. Some things float in water and some things sink; you can drink water and bathe in it, too. Through their self created learning experiences, children learn that both living things like plants and animals, and inert things like sand and water, can remain the same across changes in their appearance. Conservation, the understanding of continuity beneath apparent change, is a fundamental intellectual achievement aided and abetted by out of door experiences.

And it is only out of doors that children begin to understand the cosmos. The sun, the moon, the stars, and the planets intrigue young children and are the focus of much of their curiosity. Preschool children tend to think that the moon follows them when they go out for a walk. And they are curious about the sun and the stars as well. Here are some remarks made by some Russian preschool children:

"Oh, the moon flew along when we went on the trolley and on the train. She, too, wanted to see the Caucasus." "I know how the stars are made; they make them from whatever is left over from the moon."

I knew a little boy who would often question his mother about where the night went in the morning. Once, coming across a deep ditch whose bottom was dark, he whispered, "Now I know where the night hides itself."

And here is a reason for spring: "The winter got so cold it ran away, somewhere."³

Certainly there is a place for television watching and computer use. Yet these seem so barren and empty compared to what the out of doors offers to young children.

Once children reach school-age, work becomes the dominant drive as learning the tool skills of the culture takes front

and center. But such learning is most effective when it introduces play and love as well. The most effective instruction involves discovery learning, humor, narrative anecdotes, rhyme and rhythm. The elementary years are also crucial for learning social skills, and play is the central vehicle for such learning. When children play their own games, they make and break their own rules, as in the games of Hide and Seek, or Kick the Can. In so doing, children learn that rules are not fixed and immutable but man-made and refutable. They also learn to take the other child's perspective as they take turns in making and following the rules. Again, this learning occurs because in free, spontaneous outdoor play, children create learning experiences they could not have in any other way.

And young people create their own rules even within the constraints of organized sports. One of the child-made rules is that you don't criticize another player who is older than you even if he is on the other team. The following is from the field notes of Gary Alan Fine, who studied little league players:

"Tim, a ten-year-old utility outfielder for the Rangers, calls out to the opposing catcher, a 12 year old: 'There's a monkey behind the plate.' One of his older team mates (chastising him) shouts back, 'He is a better player than you.' Later in the game several of the older Rangers verbally attack Bruce, a low status 11 year old, for criticizing their opponents."⁴

What is particularly interesting here is that even within the context of this

adult organized and coached game, pre-adolescent boys are still able to set their own rules and social hierarchies. While participating in an organized team sport may inhibit these boys' ability to make and break the rules of the game, it does not stop them from making their own rules about the use of verbal aggression. Rule making and breaking is just one of the creative outcomes of outdoor play.

Another facet of outdoor play is fort building, which children in all societies engage in. These are usually built by elementary school children and are often sex segregated. In the north children build forts out of snow, whereas in the south they may be made of stones and brush, but they all serve similar purposes.

David Sobel interviewed and talked with children about their fort building in both England and the Caribbean. On the basis of his interviews and talks with children, Sobel concluded that these structures fulfilled a need felt by this age group for privacy, independence, and self sufficiency. It was the need to carve out a place for themselves in the world, either individually or in their peer group. Separation from family and teachers seemed important to these children; it gave them the space they needed to develop a sense of self. Sobel inferred that these special places were like shelters for egos about to be born, an oasis before the turbulent years of adolescence with its painful, self focused examinations. For Sobel, when children build forts, they experience themselves as shapers and makers of small worlds, which contributes to

making them shapers of the larger world as adults.⁵

Put simply then, play, is the answer to the question, "How does anything new come about?" Learning allows us to acquire what is already known. Play enables us to create new knowledge, skills, and artistic creations. Children's outdoor play is not a luxury. It is critical in children's ability to learn about the world, others, and themselves. To be sure, televisions, computers, cell phones, and more are here to stay. They have created a new virtual world that requires a new form of adaptation. But that adaptation is strongest and healthiest when it is built on a firm foundation of knowledge about the real world. And that solid foundation of knowledge about the real world can only be acquired through spontaneous, self initiated, outdoor play.

References

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