

# Child's Play and Its Significance for Healthy Development

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Those who interact with children today have probably observed that their ability to play is disappearing. Children today can no longer play as children of earlier times did. Consequently, play as an primal phenomenon of child development is in danger of extinction. Either it mutates into some kind of wild, riotous acting-out or into apathy and a state of listlessness and passivity.

This phenomenon is an alarm bell going off that must be taken seriously because it causes a deep-seated, negative change in the constitution of the child. Children who can no longer play are sick in a certain sense. This may not have immediately apparent and clinically recognizable symptoms but is rather a disposition that leads to mental weaknesses and physical ailments later in life.

The incapacity of today's youth to play out of an overabundance of life energy, to immerse themselves body and soul into some play activity and imaginatively live in that activity, to transform themselves through their imagination, has to do with the fact that the physical body of the child is emancipated too early from the soul-spiritual aspect. In normal development the body, soul, and spirit should remain as a unit until puberty. The body, as one of the heavy, underlying elements should not become free from this unit before puberty, but should rather resonate along with mental soul-spiritual experience. Until physical maturity is reached, the child must be able to completely penetrate his physical body with its soul capacities. And, he remains only a "child" insofar as it is able to accomplish this. When we are not successful in supporting the childhood experience through insightful direction and strengthening the child's ability to experience so that mental stimuli can be perceived all the way into the physical body, then the child is weakened in the core of his being. When people grow up with a physical body that is poorly developed for mental-soul experience there is a worrisome increase in the numbers of people with neurotic illnesses, which phenomenon is especially noticeable in Western civilization. Whether people will have the ability, with increasing age, to cope with themselves and their destinies, or whether they will fall into dependency relationships with their bodies, as is the case today with most adults in the Western world, essentially depends upon how much inner, soul-spiritual strength and flexibility they have. However, how one finds the way and activates this mental aspect so that it is available as a real force, an ability to overcome the difficulties of life, has not been sufficiently penetrated or seen in its deeper connections.

## Enthusiasm as a life-enhancing force

One of the most important elements of building a strong personality core that can help human beings withstand the negative influences of life is enthusiasm. When a growing people are touched and moved in their hearts by that which meets them in the form of impressions, when they do and think with internal resonance, then their soul forces are exercised and strengthened. We know what it means for adults to be inspired by a great idea and to act on

their driving forces. For those in the grip of genuine enthusiasm, it is as if all hindrances and weaknesses are blown away because they have been penetrated by a higher principle that overcomes the physical body and its limits.

It is of little use to tell older people, "You must become mentally more active and flexible!" Most often the mental and physical organization is already so hardened that spiritual opposition can no longer be overcome. If we want to create the opportunity for our children to remain open to the rejuvenating energy of ideas and not prematurely fall into the aging and hardening processes, then we must see to it that they have a strong capability for experience that reaches clear into the physical organization. We must show them how one is able to be immersed in experience. During their childhood that is not really very difficult since every normal child is actually longing for, with every fiber of his being, to experience what he feels and perceives, in the youthful sense, to be enthusiastic.

### **Play in the elementary school years**

During the elementary school years not one day should go by without a certain experiential intensity being created in the child. The child will grow into a completely different youth if the parents and educators give the greatest attention to consciously strengthening the child's soul. During this early time of life everything should be done to avoid any idleness of the soul. That is not always easy because adults generally no longer have an accurate conception of what is essential in children's lives, more important than all the outer comforts.

Waldorf schools, as an example, try, through an artistic means of education, to impart a fullness of experience to the child which he needs for holistic development. Play activity takes on a significant role. In play lies the force, the will, of the child to harmonize. Every play activity involving movement is carried by a strong will impulse. During the childhood years however, this should not yet be activated but rather work in the background as inspiring force, maintained and carried by rhythm and imagination. Both these forces belong together and should be especially protected as a unit because they form the only entrance into the child's soul. One is easily inclined to say that imagination today is something unreal and in our age of objectivity it has no place. The truth is somewhat different: Imagination is the most important source of creative energy for the personality.

### **Imagination is important**

To understand this we must look at the human soul and try to picture that what we describe as soul forces reveals itself with a kind of graphic quality. There is a world of pictures within the soul of which the child is only unconsciously somewhat aware. When the child grows and changes from day to day, deep inside there is a process taking place that is outwardly recognizable, for example, through an observation that up to a certain age the child has a special relationship to the world of fairy tales and later to fables and adventure stories.

If we are successful in bringing the child closer, through imagery, to what he unconsciously feels in a similar way, then we can observe how the child quasi-awakens, how he blooms internally and is set in motion. There is a mystery hidden here that escapes every ostensible attempt at

definition. If we simply overlook this world of imagery or disallow it, then we cannot hope to understand the child, just as we would understand so little about the lives of earlier peoples apart from their relationship to myth and story.

Certain images have an extraordinarily quickening and inspiring effect on a child. A true educator must realize this and keep it in mind, especially when he is encouraging children to play games involving physical activity. It is a mistake to believe that movement for movement's sake is the main activity in children's play. The most important aspect is that all play starts on the inside and grows from there. First, the child must be addressed, especially his need for transformation, before he is stimulated to any activity. The child wishes to imaginatively transform himself into the images that the teacher brings near to him.

This can happen during a movement game in a most wonderful way. We have the cook, the ferryman, the bear, the fox in its hole, crocodiles or vultures, a robber or princess, fisherman or king, giants and gnomes. There is an entire world into which the child can – and will and must! – become immersed. All of these images actually do live in the child as soul forces and when the child is given the possibility to transform into all of these beings, then he gains inner fullness. The children work out the characteristics of their own images and learn to interact with the forces that otherwise mill around unconsciously on the inside and are dammed up by the physical, from there to escalate into unhealthy drives and appetites, as we experience today in countless cases.

### **Harmonizing the will**

In real, imaginative play a catharsis takes place, a clarification of the will, so to speak. A child contends with the driving force of his will and thereby gains mastery over it. Let us take, for example, the game known as the robber and the princess. Around the age of ten there is a certain duality in the soul of the child that can find expression in these two images of the robber and the princess. The child's increased bonding to his physicality has the effect that at this age strong egoistic characteristics appear, the robber. But that is just one side of what is going on. Likewise there is, like an opposing image, something on the inside which can be seen as the pure image of the soul-self, the princess. This duality lives in the soul of every healthy child and during play the children change into one or the other of these images and back again, thereby learning about themselves. They become aware of the breadth of their own soul in such a way that it becomes a kind of moral debate. And that is the salient point.

Under no circumstances can technology or mechanical concepts stimulate the child in the same way. Airplanes, trains, cars, or even atoms should never appear within lively play. Such images bring about the creation of a certain kind of motor activity and actually prevent the children from immersing themselves into life processes so that they may grow into something living.

### **Modern upbringing in regard to play**

In today's literature we find an expression that did not exist in earlier times: "play education," which means to teach children how to play again. The inability of children to know how to play was not known before now. Children simply played and when they had the opportunity that is

exactly what they did. But times have changed. Play was a lively expression of an animated child; today it is a pedagogical method.

Today, we see in play an important opportunity to bring our children up to be real “human beings.” What technology has taken away in terms of live-promoting forces, we must make available again. One of the most effective and important methods for bringing this about is imaginative play. Schiller says, “The human being plays only where he is a human being in the full sense of the word and he is only completely a human being where he plays.” Today, this humanity is constantly in the greatest danger. Our times are both the enemy of play and the drive to play. As will and intellect have become the driving forces of today’s civilization, between these two millstones, the human’s feeling life is quasi rubbed out. The life that most children of today are given to lead offers too little stimulation to bring forth the power of the “feeling life” of the person that is anchored in the rhythmic organization, the pulse and respiration. However during play, and through play one can accomplish that the child is reinforced, again and again, in its humanity.

### **Play as a balance between head and limbs**

What comes to expression during play in such a wonderful way is the balance between above and below. The head, which mirrors the life of the imagination, affects strong tendencies to form, which also hold the danger of torpidity. From the lower region, that of the will, the tendency to chaos is a constant threat. The balance between these two principles is found in the respiratory-circulatory system, that is, in the rhythmic organization. The world of feelings is physiologically carried by these central processes in our organism. We can experience this in the increased heart rate caused by happiness and in the way our breathing is affected by the expression of happiness and sadness – laughing, crying, or sobbing, for example. Play that is lit up with strong, inner experiences gives a person the possibility of perceiving and becoming active in this middle part of his or her being, and the child is still much more strongly rooted, through his perceptions, in the spheres of life than are adults. For this reason the child immediately feels if an impression from the outside world is “agreeable” or not. Rudolf Steiner said that the child in his/her elementary school years must “savor” the world. But that means that the child must be brought to a life which can have a positive influence on her constitution. The child should not learn only in terms of intellect, but also be healthily stimulated by that which is taken in down into the very life processes. This can happen only if we do not influence the child in a one-sided manner, that is, neither too much intellect nor too much will. We must address the child’s middle region, its rhythmic being, as the bearer of life. This happens in every genuinely artistic presentation of material to be learned and also, in a singular way, through an appropriate approach to play. The knowledge of this connection helps us find our way to caring for and strengthening the child’s forces of mind and harmonizing her entire constitution.

### **Renewal does not just happen**

Enlivening, strengthening, and maintaining this ‘feeling realm’ requires constant encouragement. In earlier times people still received strong, enlivening forces from their home environment as well as the unspoiled natural environment. Today, we have a different situation: a radical poverty in all areas of life. In many areas, especially that of play and the

desire to play, renewal is no longer possible without direct intervention. The tendency of the times has such a paralyzing effect that genuine, imaginative play will become extinct if its primal elements are not recognized and encouraged. However, if they are recognized and encouraged, then it would mean an invaluable gain for our youth. There is no better method of overcoming the increasing torpidity of soul and mental coldness of children, who are often disinterested and isolated, than to reawaken in them the ability to play.

### **The task of adults**

Often it is very difficult to stimulate children to play since one usually meets considerable resistance from them. They have no initiative because they are too deeply embedded in physicality. But once they discover the energy radiating from some play activity, when the inner child begins to live, then the children who found it hardest to play will show themselves to be the most original and persistent in playing their best-loved games over and over again. As strange as it may sound the initiative must come from adults because, for many children, their inner driving force has been damaged. If an adult can become enthusiastic about some play activity because he or she sees it as being right and important, then the children will joyfully participate.

The lack of initiative in young people can be balanced by a heightened interest and the increased activity of older people. This knowledge puts a special responsibility on all those who have to do with children. Those who are of the opinion that in this age of technology young people have no need of imagination but should simply act out as they will on bicycles and roller blades, have a misconception about the being of a child. There has never been a generation for which it was more important that they be looked after in a humane way as the children of today who must live out their childhoods under today's conditions.

### **Old games and new games**

One often hears today: Our children do not like the old games. They want something more matter-of-fact and tangible. Even though that is often unfortunately true, this tendency should be counteracted. The old, imaginative games are not old-fashioned and superfluous, but are rather exactly most appropriate activities. One can easily compare them to the fairy tales in that the timeless value of the fairy tales, that has meant so much for the minds of children over the years, is also hidden in the old, traditional games. Of course, that does not mean that no new games should be played. The creative ideas that come up during group play are very enlivening. However, those trying to create something new should look at the qualities of the old games and try to find something that is likewise as "genuine," that is timeless and comes from the inner world of images.

### **Forms of play and their significance for the growing child**

How should our children play? The answer to this question must be: They should play in such a way that the whole person takes part. Since the different assets and abilities of children appear gradually, the character of play is constantly changing and there must be a constant influx of the new, provided it is appropriate to the particular stage of development.

### **The sandbox**

The sandbox is a very important element of play. The tactile, malleable forces can work here, the same forces that work in the child's body during his entire first seven years. At this age the whole person is more malleable and has the need to be active in that way. The hands wish to be used for tactile creation. For the child, it is of immense benefit when the same forces that are still working to form his or her whole being can be effective in the child's own activity. Playing in the sand allows the child to be original and creative in such a way that is not easily possible otherwise. One is actually planting the seed for something that will later mature into creativity. Parents and educators should therefore see to it, especially during the first four years, that children have the opportunity to play in sand.

### **Undirected play**

Up to approximately age eight it is relatively easy to stimulate a child to play. There is however one condition that must be fulfilled: There must be an environment that also encourages the child to want to play. During this time the child takes in the contents of his spatial environment with an unbelievable intensity. He does not experience things as inanimate, dead objects, but rather as animate beings. Later, the child will want to understand the world with his/her intellect, but right now the child wishes to understand with his/her hands and whole body. The child climbs, slides, crawls, holds himself up and lets go again. Behind all this activity is the inner desire to taste, feel, and experience the world and get as close to it as possible. These are the forces of purest sympathy expressing themselves. At this age, play is fundamentally nothing more than a love of the world.

The child loves the object he is climbing upon or crawling around and he deepens this love through constantly new encounters. The whole strength of an unspoiled mind streams into the world and it receives what it gives. A pile of dirt nine feet high is "his mountain." This is not merely a pile of dead material but something thoroughly alive. A child knows this being very well and interacts with it as if he or she was interacting with one of his own kind.

Children need such lively relationships because they build their own capabilities upon them. It is clear that this is better possible the more the environment in which the child is growing is differentiated and characterized. Rental units, asphalt streets, bare parking lots, and even empty green spaces do not offer much that can encourage children to play. Trees, bushes, a ditch, a "mountain," things to on which to climb can crawl through, fallen tree trunks, big rocks to walk around, climb upon, and jump off of, or perhaps even an old boat, all offer countless possibilities for play. These are examples of the kinds of environment that are desirable. Technical structures for play should not be brought in under any circumstances. They do not address the deeper forces active within the child. Rather a "miniature world" should be available to the child with a kind of primal-image character.

The playground equipment such as swings, slides, and jungle gyms should contain as little metal as possible. Children need a certain quality of warmth that is present in wood. It makes a difference if a swing set is made from solid oak logs or metal pipes, which is often the case today. In one case the play equipment has a "face," that is absolutely significant for the soul of

the child, and in the other case it does not.

### **Rhythmic rhyming games**

Rhythmic rhyming games and undirected play belong together like sleeping and waking. During undirected play the children can follow their own directions, and during rhythmic rhyming games they are organized. We know of these two natures in the human being. With children these opposing natures have not yet become clearly delineated but they are germinally present and must therefore be taken into consideration. Children do not desire to merely let off steam during play. They also want to give themselves over to something. Their desire for organized rhythmic games comes out of unimaginable depths. They take in the simple contents during the repetition, and one gets the impression that the activity has a healing effect and does the children much good.

All of the traditional rhythmic rhyming games contain a mysterious echo. It may be very simple words or nonsensical verses without much meaning. Together with the simple melody, they are often nothing more than a kind of spoken song. No matter, they always have a magical effect on the child's soul. It is an act of real soul hygiene when we give the child the possibility to immerse himself in this element from time to time. Children of today, especially, need this because they are already so awake. The over stimulation of the senses, always on the increase, makes our children overly alert and nervous. Constantly changing impressions weakens the will but rhythmic repetitions strengthen it. A rhythmic rhyming game with its calm repetitions means more to them than we realize. Those who interact with children on a regular basis should know this and observe it.

### **The old-time games**

Up to about age nine games such as jump rope, marbles, tops, hopscotch, and so forth, should be available. Today one may think that mechanical toys like roller skates and bicycles can replace everything. However, that is certainly not the case; the traditional toys awaken forces that bicycles and roller skates actually block.

### **Spinning tops**

To keep a top spinning one must keep it going with a stick, and that calls the child into activity, not in a robot-like way but by adjusting himself to the present dynamic conditions. The spinning top is something alive; it has the dynamic of ascending force that is very significant for the child. The ebb and flow of this dynamic stimulates the child's blood and circulation forces and, in a subtle way, penetrates into the feelings. Today's children have a difficult time with this game because usually they are lacking the necessary capability to transform. It is our duty to stimulate this capability and the spinning top is a good method to do so.

### **Hopscotch**

Girls have always felt very drawn to this game. Below is Hell, above is Heaven which can be reached if one successfully completes all the levels that increase in difficulty. The rock or piece of glass must be moved through the different squares.

There is no question that such a game has hidden within it aspects that indicate the old

mysteries. The person should ascend through level after level until finally the level is reached that represents Paradise or Heaven. In some areas of the world this game is even called "Heaven and Hell."

### **Marbles**

These kinds of games give off an atmosphere of peace and contemplation. It is clear that, fundamentally, the modern child does not want to live only with the motor dynamics of our age as many would have us believe. The tendency of the child to again and again withdraw from all haste and become immersed and sort of magically enmeshed in a quiet and mysterious world is the child's unconscious, deep desire for soul hygiene.

### **Jump rope**

For many children who are disturbed in their rhythmic processes (which may have various causes), jump rope is extraordinarily good medicine. When they jump into the swinging rope they must align themselves with the rhythm and by doing this they come out of themselves, so to speak. They become freer and happier. The physical exertion is sometimes considerable but the rhythm carries the movement and happiness comes along with it. It should always be so. At first, something is fun and then because it is fun to practice, physical strengthening follows.

### **From ages nine to twelve**

Age nine is an important stage in the life of a child. At this age the child discovers its own world of imagination colored by its personal perceptions. The child's soul longs for images. One can observe over and over that the children are seized by a kind of hunger for images. It has already been said that a child wishes to transform himself into all of these figures that he feels drawn to and that the child tries to live out that which he is moved by clear images into the movement of the limbs. The subject matter that will stimulate the child's imagination is now largely dependent upon the child's environment, his parents and teachers, and whether the child will find the possibility of expressing again what he has taken in. Both aspects are important and can be compared to breathing in and out.

Our children must feel stimulated on the inside in a healthy and encouraging way (not comics, which are a brutalization of the feeling life). They must also be given the opportunity of living out the impulse taken in from appropriate images. We must not look at play from an isolated point of view as merely being the expression of the mechanics of movement. Rather, we must see it in connection with the whole human being. In the important stage between the ninth and tenth years of life soul-mental aspects are unquestionably at the forefront of the child's development. If one reaches the soul of the child, one also reaches his body. If the soul of the child goes along in harmony with all of the physical acts, strength and coordination will then follow as a matter of course. Rudolf Steiner illuminates: "In order to make the child physically strong, robust, and without inhibitions, during the childhood years one must seek the physical body by way of a detour through the soul and the spirit."