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Barbara Biber

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The Bank Street Thinkers

Foundational Knowledge to
Support our Roots and Wings



Play as a Growth Process

Barbara Biber (1951)

What do we have in mind when we think of play? What do children do when they play? Children's play has the quality of intense, absorbing experience, a bit of life lived richly and fully. There is zest and wonder and drama and a special kind of immediacy that is without thought for the passing of time. There is nothing to be accomplished, no sense of what is right or wrong to check the flow of spontaneity, no direction to follow. Whatever is at hand can become the suitable materials for play. The essence of the play experience is subjective, something within the child that may not necessarily become obvious to the one who observes the course or the form of his activity.

Play as an activity may take any one of numberless forms. It may be just physical activity, an overflow of energy, of exuberance. Besides running, skipping, hopping, children like to slide, see-saw and swing. Although these play experiences require a degree of patterning in coordination, they belong among the natural playful uses which a child makes of his body. If his play is as free as his energy is boundless, he is likely to embroider the basic patterns: he soon finds it more fun to hop on one foot, to slide down on his belly instead of his bottom, to swing standing up.

Playing may be something quite different from the lively expression of physical energies. It may take quiet, delicate forms such as playing with sounds and words. The chanting of younger children, the nonsense rhyming of the older ones are play forms.

The child is playing when, with his hands, he impresses himself on things around him. He

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pounds the clay and smears the paint. He creates with blocks even when he is only stacking them high or lining them up low. He makes the mud take shape. He fits things together and takes them apart. There is pleasure and satisfaction in what one's hands can make of the physical world and the child, in his playful re-making of the world around him, lays the cornerstone of his feeling about himself in relation to that world.

Now we come to the world of play that is most challenging and enticing: dramatic play. Here the child can take flight. He needs no longer be a child. He can make himself over and be a wolf or an engineer or a mother or a baby who is crying. He can re-create the world not only as he really experiences it but even in the strange aspects that symbolize some of his deepest wishes and fears. It is this kind of play—or rather the values that it has for growth—that I would like to talk about most today.

What do play experiences do for child growth? If a child can have a really full wholesome experience with play, he will be having the most wholesome kind of fun that a child can have. For a child to have fun is basic to his future happiness. His early childhood play may become the basic substance out of which he lays down one of his life patterns, namely, not only that one can *have* fun but that one can *create* fun. Most of us as adults enjoy only a watered-down manufactured kind of fun—going to the movies, shopping, listening to a concert, or seeing a baseball game—and do not feel secure that some of the deepest resources for happiness lie within ourselves, free of a price of admission. This is one of these securities that compose a positive attitude toward life, in general.

In dramatic play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. There are no directions to follow, no rules to stick to. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives.

Another important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world. In play we give them an opportunity to counter-act this powerlessness to a degree. It is the child's chance to lay plans, to judge what is best, to create the sequence of events. Dramatic play is one of the basic ways in which children can try out their talents for structuring life. The fact that they deal with symbols rather than realities does not detract from the sense of mastery.

As you watch children playing, you see the ingredients of the child world spread out before you, differing in complexity and elaboration according to the level of maturity. When a two- or three-year-old plays train, he does so simply. The train goes. It makes sounds. Just a block and a child saying "choo" may be Johnnie's idea of a train but very soon he meets up with Mary who has been very much impressed with the odd way that people sit in trains, looking at each other's backs. To another child in the group a train is not a train unless it whistles. Soon, a composite train emerges: it goes, it says "choo," it whistles intermittently, people sit in it one behind the other. Children, at all levels, pool their ideas in free dramatic play, expose each other to new impressions, stimulate each other to new wondering and questioning. Can we fail to recognize this process as learning? Can we

neglect to notice that here is learning going on in a social atmosphere full of pleasure and delight? In re-living and freely dramatizing his experience the child is thinking at his own pace with other children. He is learning in the best possible way.

More than that, the ways of the world are becoming delicious to him. He is tasting and re-tasting life in his own terms and finding it full of delight and interest. He projects his own pattern of the world into the play and in so doing, brings the real world closer to himself. He is building the feeling that the world is his, to understand, to interpret, to puzzle about, to make over. For the future, we need citizens in whom these attitudes are deeply ingrained.

We would be seriously in error, however, were we to assume that all play of young children is clear and logical. Horses are more likely to eat lamb stew than hay and what starts out to be a boat often ends as a kitchen stove without any obviously clear transitions. Often when play violates the line of adult logic, we can see that it has a special kind of coherence all its own—perhaps the coherence of an action rather than a thinking pattern. Playing dentist may take the form of sitting on a keg and whirling one's feet around because the wonderful dentist's chair is the outstanding recall for the child. Teeth and drills may be altogether omitted while the child accentuates through his play what impressed him most. It makes sense in child terms even though it may not to the adult who is told that the children are playing dentist when what meets the eye looks like a crowd of whirling Dervishes. To understand children's play we must loosen our imaginations from the restrictions of adulthood and the limitations of logic that is tied in within literalness and objective reality.

If free play is to yield these values in terms of children's growth needs, it requires a skilled guiding hand, especially where children are collected in groups as they are in nursery schools. There is a way of setting the stage and creating an atmosphere for spontaneous play. Most important in this atmosphere is the teacher's sensitive understanding of her own role. Sometimes the teacher needs to be ready to guide the play, especially among the fives, sixes, and sevens, into channels that are beyond the needs of the nursery years. But she must guide only in terms of the children's growth needs. Her guidance may be in terms of her choice of stories, materials, trips, experiences. It may function through discussions. Without skillful guidance, a free play program for successive years can become stultified and disturbing to children.

One of the main problems with respect to play which we are working through as teachers is—how much shall the teacher get involved in the children's play? Shall she correct, suggest, contribute, participate? I don't have the answer, but I hope teachers will continue to think about and talk about this problem. We have left behind the stage of education in which the teacher was relegated to the background. We have still to discover what are the optimal points at which the teacher can step in, offering new material or ideas to enrich the play. In our teacher training institutes, we encourage teachers to have imagination and use it, but if you teach this too well, the teachers themselves (and this goes for parents, too) will be expressing themselves in the play, and before you know it they will have taken away the play from the child. This, naturally, is closely related to teacher personality. Some people intuitively know when it is best to withdraw and take a passive role, when a new idea will not be an intrusion and when stimulation had best be indirect. It behooves us

all as teachers to think: are we becoming so active that the children are overwhelmed and restricted by the flood of our bright ideas?

Day in, day out, we affect children's play by the things we provide for them to play with. We choose equipment and materials with care and thought and have accepted the premise that a good share of play materials should be of the "raw" variety—things like clay, blocks, paper, mud which the child can freely shape to his own purposes and upon which he can impress his own pattern. These are in contrast to the finished dolls and trains, trucks and doll dishes which come in finished form and are adapted, as established symbols, into the flow of the child's free play. One of the interesting questions in education today has to do with what balance shall be kept between raw and finished materials, recognizing that each kind serves a different function with respect to play and may meet varying needs of different individual children. This is an area for study and experimentation in which we have made only a fair beginning.

To return briefly to the point that children's play cannot always be understood from the vantage point of logic and realistic accuracy. The inner coherence of play is as often based on emotion as it is on logic or action. If it seems incomprehensible, rambling, or slightly insane, it is because we cannot read the deep emotional life of children, because we do not understand adequately how feeling can transform thought, at all ages.

We know that children are full of feeling—deep and good, hard and strong feeling. They get mad and glad with intensity. Their feelings are as quick, as volatile as they are deep. This vital aspect of their life experience needs outlet through play quite as much as their developing curiosities and their effervescent energies. Many of us who can accept play as a child's way of interpreting life intellectually, often stop short at allowing children full freedom in expressing the feeling aspects of their lives. Or else we make the error of thinking of emotional expression of this kind in terms of negative feeling, of avoiding repression of hostility and such. This, to be sure, is an important aspect of wholesome growth. The chance to express negative feeling through play can save the child considerable anguish. The dolls he is allowed to hit leave him more able to face his real life troubles successfully.

But there is the positive aspect of a child's emotional life which should not be overlooked. Covering the doll lovingly with layers of blankets is as deep and important an experience as the smacking and the spanking. What we must remember through all of this is that the child does not necessarily play out what his actual experience has been. He may instead be playing out the residue of feeling which his experience has left with him—quite another dimension, psychologically. It has been possible only to indicate this latter point briefly.

Summing up, we can say that play serves two different growth needs in the early years—learning about the world by playing about it (realizing reality) and finding an outlet for complex and often conflicting emotions (wherein reality and logic are secondary). We, the adults, need to understand this process more deeply than we do and to continue to improve our techniques for providing experiences through play by means of which the child can freely express feeling and creatively master reality.