

Is Children's Play Innate?

William Crain

When contemporary educators reduce playtime, they might be frustrating an innate need.

My wife, Ellen Crain, an emergency room pediatrician, tells me that young children play in the E.R. even when they are fairly sick. For example, young children with acute asthma nevertheless play with the toys in the waiting room or the equipment in the examining room. Ellen has been so impressed by the children's behavior that she wonders if the need to play is innate.

Ellen's question takes on urgency today. Education policy makers act as if play is frivolous — as if we needn't make room for it. Focusing on early academic instruction, schools have largely removed playtime from kindergartens (Miller & Almon 2009) and have often eliminated or reduced recess in the elementary school grades (Ginsburg 2007). But if play is, in fact, an innate need, we cannot simply deprive children of opportunities for it. To do so is somewhat like depriving children of water or sleep. When this happens, serious consequences follow.

In this brief article, I will review three lines of research that bear on the possibility that children have an innate need and urge to play. No one line of research is conclusive, but considered together they suggest that the possibility is a real one.

Our Mammalian Heritage

The first line of research comes from scientists who consider animal behavior from an evolutionary perspective. Researchers such as Marc Bekoff (Bekoff & Pierce 2009) and Jonathan Balcombe (2006) have observed that play is ubiquitous in mammals, especially in the young. It is present in young cats, dogs, chimpanzees, wolves, sheep, horses, goats, rats — every mammal that has been studied.

What's more, young animals' play seems quite spontaneous, springing from the animals' impulses. If you have observed kittens or puppies, I bet this has also been your impression. I was recently struck by the spontaneous play of a baby goat, Boomer, who



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was born on our farm animal sanctuary. Within ten days after he was born, Boomer was scampering about and performing jumping stunts. He climbed on rocks and tried jumping down forwards and backwards, spinning in different directions on his way down. When he ran about, he periodically leapt into the air and threw his legs out in new ways. All the while, his mother kept an eye on him from a short distance, but she never intervened. I never saw the other goats (all were adults) engage in such antics, so Boomer hadn't learned the behavior from them. He seemed inwardly motivated to try out acrobatic movements.

Scholars have entertained various hypotheses on the adaptive value of play. One key possibility is that play develops the capacity to improvise and therefore enables animals to handle unexpected events. If Boomer were to suddenly lose his footing on a hillside rock, or if he needed to jump to escape a predator, he wouldn't panic because he would have a number of acrobatic moves at his disposal (Spinka, Newberry, & Bekoff 2001).

What does all this have to do with human children? In evolutionary theory, the fact that play is found in all other mammals is highly significant. It suggests that the human urge to play didn't develop in our species' unique evolutionary or cultural history after we had branched off from other species. Rather, the urge to play, like much of our physical structure, is rooted in the ancestry we share with other mammals.

Moreover, play in human children probably has served a similar adaptive function, promoting the capacity to improvise. To be sure, human children don't just run, jump, and engage in physical play, like other young animals do. Human children also make use of symbolic fantasy, as when they use sticks to represent people and create imaginary scenarios. But the urge to improvise — and to create and to imagine — has undoubtedly helped our species survive, and it may be an evolutionary continuation of a similar drive in other young animals.

Consequences of Promoting or Thwarting Play

If the human child's play expresses an innate urge or need, we should see consequences of permitting, rather than frustrating it. Several studies suggest that

preschool play enhances cognitive capacities such as problem solving and creativity, as well as the ability to see things from others' perspectives (Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer 2009; Taylor & Carlson 1997). Conversely, The American Academy of Pediatrics worries that children who are deprived of free play become depressed and stressed out (Ginsburg 2007). One study found that reduced recess is associated with classroom misbehavior (Barros, Silver, & Stein 2009). But more research is needed to establish links between play deprivation and emotional problems.

Evidence from the Holocaust

Additional evidence that play is innate comes from George Eisen's little-known (1988) account of children in the ghettos and concentration camps of the Holocaust. One might suppose that the children's hunger, fear, and anguish would have completely suppressed their desire to play, but this didn't happen. Summarizing the diaries and reports of Holocaust victims, Eisen (1988, 66) says, "Play burst forth spontaneously and uncontrollably without regard to the external situation." Lacking manufactured toys, the children made their own — out of mud, snow, rags, and pieces of wood. When a skeptical interviewer asked a girl how she could have played in Auschwitz, her face lit up and she said, "But I played! I played with nothing! With the snow! With the balls of snow!" (p. 72)

In the Lodz ghetto, children played games with cigarette boxes, which became treasured objects. One observer wrote, "Children's eyes beg for those boxes, children's hands reach out for them" (Eisen, 69). Hanna Levy-Haas, an inmate of the Bergen Belsen concentration camp, concluded that children's yearning for play is an "instinctual impulse." "I feel," she wrote, "it is an urge that springs from the soul of the children themselves" (pp. 60-61).

It seems quite possible, then, that the urge to play is just as innate in the human child as in other animals. If so, educational policy makers who ignore it ignore a fundamental and creative aspect of children's development.

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