THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY
by Bruno Bettelheim

The way a child wants to play is often very different from the way his parents want him to. The child, however, knows best.

“Children’s playings are not sports and should be deemed their most serious actions,” Montaigne wrote. If we wish to understand our child, we need to understand his play. Freud regarded play as the means by which the child accomplishes his first great cultural and psychological achievements; through play he expresses himself. This is true even for an infant whose play consists of nothing more than smiling at his mother, as she smiles at him. Freud also noted how much and how well children express their thoughts and feelings through play. These are sometimes feelings that the child himself would remain ignorant of, or overwhelmed by; if he did not deal with them by acting them out in play fantasy.

Child psychoanalysts have enlarged on Freud’s insights, which recognized the manifold problems and emotions children express through play; they also have shown how children use play to work through and master quite complex psychological difficulties of the past and present. So valuable is play in this connection that play therapy has become the main avenue for helping young children with their emotional difficulties. Freud said that the dream is the “royal road” to the unconscious, and this is true for adults and children alike. But play is also a “royal road” to the child’s conscious and unconscious inner world; if we want to understand his inner world and help him with it, we must learn to walk this road.

From a child’s play we can gain understanding of how he sees and construes the world—what he would like it to be, what his concerns and problems are. Through his play he expresses what he would be hard pressed to put into words. A child does not play spontaneously only while away the time, although he and the adults observing him may think he does. Even when he engages in play partly to fill empty moments, what he chooses to play at is motivated by inner processes, desires, problems, anxieties.

The most normal and competent child encounters what seem like insurmountable problems in living. But by playing them out, in the way he chooses, he may become able to cope with them in a step-by-step process. He often does so in symbolic ways that are hard for even him to understand, as he is reacting to inner processes whose origin may be buried deep in his unconscious. This may result in play that makes little sense to us at the moment or may even seem ill advised, since we do not know the purposes it serves or how it will end. When there is no immediate danger, it is usually best to approve of the child’s play without interfering, just because he is so engrossed in it.

Efforts to assist him in his struggles, while well intentioned, may divert him from seeking, and eventually finding, the solution that will serve him best.

A four-year-old girl reacted to her mother’s pregnancy by regressing. Although she had been well trained, she began to wet again, insisted on being fed only from a baby bottle, and reverted to crawling on the floor. All this greatly distressed her mother, who, anticipating the demands of a new infant, had counted on her daughter’s relative maturity. Fortunately, she did not try to prevent her daughter’s regressions. After a few months of this behavior, the girl replaced it with much more mature play. She now played “good mother.” She became extremely caring for her baby doll, ministering to it much more seriously than ever before. Having in the regressed stage identified with the coming infant, she now identified with her mother. By the time her sibling was born, the girl had done much of the work needed for her to cope with the change in the family and her position in it, and her adjustment to the new baby was easier than her mother had expected.

In retrospect it can be seen that the child, on learning that a new baby was to join the family, must have been afraid that the baby would deprive her of her infantile gratifications, and therefore tried to provide herself with them. She may have thought that if her mother wanted an infant, then she herself would again be an infant. There would be no need for her mother to acquire another, and she might give up on the idea.

Permitted to act on notions like these, the girl must have realized after a while that wetting herself was not as pleasant as she might have imagined; that being able to eat a wide variety of foods had definite advantages when compared with drinking only from the bottle; and that walking and running brought many more satisfactions than did crawling. From this experience she convinced herself that being grown up is preferable to being a baby. So she gave up pretending that she was a baby and instead decided to be like her mother: in play to be like her right now, in imagination to become at some future time a real mother. Play provided the child and her mother with a happy solution to what otherwise might have resulted in an impasse.

Besides being a means of coping with past and present concerns, play is the child’s most useful tool for preparing himself for the future and its tasks. Play’s function in developing cognitive and motor abilities has been explored by Karl Groos (the first investigator to study it systematically), Jean Piaget (to whom we owe our best understanding of what the child learns intellectually from play), and many others. Play teaches the child, without his being aware of it, the habits most
needed for intellectual growth, such as sick-to-
tiveness, which is so important in all learning.
Perseverance is easily acquired around enjoyable
activities such as chosen play. But if it has not become
a habit through what is enjoyable, it is not likely to
become one through an endeavor like schoolwork.
That we rarely succeed at a thing as easily or promptly as
we might wish is best learned at an early age, when
habits are formed and when the lesson can be assimilated
fairly painlessly. A child at play begins to realize
that he need not give up in despair if a block doesn't
balance neatly on another block the first time around.
Fascinated by the challenge of building a tower, he
gradually learns that even if he doesn't succeed imme-
diately, success can be his if he perseveres. He learns
not to give up at the first sign of failure, or at the fifth
or tenth, and not to turn in dismay to something less
difficult, but to try again and again. But he will not
learn this if his parents are interested only in success,
if they praise him only for that and not also for tena-
cious effort. Children are very sensitive to our inner
feelings. They are not easily fooled by mere words.
Thus our praise won't be effective if, deep down, we are
disappointed by the length of time it takes them to
achieve their goal or by the awkwardness of their
efforts. Further, we must not impose our goals on
them, either in thought or in action.

Gregory Bateson and others have demonstrated
how destructive it is for a child to receive contradictory
signals from his parents. Exposed to one message from
verbal statements and a contrary one from subliminal
signs (which the speaker may be unaware of making),
the child is utterly confused, for what he hears is the
opposite of what he senses is the truth. This will pre-
vent him from persisting in the face of difficulties as
effectively as will criticism for his failure or praise only
for his success.

Some parents (usually for reasons of which they
are completely unaware) are not satisfied with the way
their child plays. So they start telling him how he
ought to use a toy, and if he continues to suit his own
fancy, they "correct" him, wanting him to use the toy in
accordance with its intended purpose or the way they
think it ought to be played with. If they insist on such
guidance, the child's interest in the toy—and to some
extent also in play in general—is apt to wane, because
the project has become his parents' and is no longer his
own. Such parents are likely to continue to direct and
dominate the child's activities in later years, motiva-
ted by the same inner tendencies that did not allow
them to enjoy his play as he developed it. But now
everything is happening on a more complex intellec-
tual level. The parents may try to improve the child's
homework by suggesting ideas that are much too
sophisticated and in any case are not his own. In con-
sequence he may lose interest in developing his own
ideas, which pale by comparison with his parents'.
What he wanted, in talking with his parents about his
homework, was appreciation of his efforts and encour-
agement that his own ideas were valuable—not a
demonstration that his ideas were not good enough.

Such parents would be most astonished to learn that
their efforts to help were the cause of the child's lack of
interest in his homework.

A child, as well as an adult, needs plenty of what
in German is called Spielraum. Now, Spielraum is not
primarily "a room to play in." While the word also
means that, its primary meaning is "free scope, plenty
of room"—to move not only one's elbows but also one's
mind, to experiment with things and ideas at one's
leisure, or, to put it colloquially, to toy with ideas. The
biographies of creative people of the past are full of
accounts of long hours they spent sitting by a river as
teenagers, thinking their own thoughts, roaming
through the woods with their faithful dogs, or dream-
ing their own dreams. But who today has the leisure
and the opportunities for this? If a youngster tries it,
as likely as not his parents will fret that he is not using
his time constructively, that he is daydreaming when
he should be tackling the serious business of life.
However, developing an inner life, including fantasies
and daydreams, is one of the most constructive things
a growing child can do. The days of most middle-class
children are filled with scheduled activities—Boy or
Girl Scout meetings, music and dance lessons, organ-
ized sports—which leave them hardly any time simply
to be themselves. In fact, they are continually dis-
tracted from the task of self-discovery, forced to devel-
lop their talents and personalities as those who are in
charge of the various activities think best. Today aca-
demic teaching begins in Kindergarten, if not in nursery
school. Kindergarten, as conceived by Friedrich
Freiberg in the nineteenth century, was a place where
children would play, as if in a garden. During most of
the period in which kindergartens have existed, they
have been play schools.

A lack of sufficient leisure to develop a rich inner
life is a large part of the reason why a child will pres-
sure his parents to entertain him or will turn on the
television set. It is not that the bad of such mass-pro-
duced entertainment drives out the good of inner rich-
ness. It is that, in a vicious circle, the lack of a chance
to spend much of his energies on his inner life causes
the child to turn to readily available stimuli for filling
an inner void, and these stimuli then constitute anoth-
er obstacle to the child's development of his inner life.

Play, Games, and Rules

Most adults find it easier to involve themselves direct-
ly in complex, adult games, such as chess or baseball,
then in play on simpler levels, such as stacking blocks
or riding a hobbyhorse or a toy car. Although the words
play and game may seem synonymous, they in fact
refer to broadly distinguishable stages of development,
with play relating to an earlier stage, game to a more
cumbersome one. Generally speaking, play refers to the
young child's activities characterized by freedom from
all but personally imposed rules (which are changed at
will), by free-wheeling fantasy involvement, and by the
absence of any goals outside the activity itself. Game,
however, are usually competitive and are character-
ized by agreed-upon, often externally imposed, rules, by a requirement to use the implements of the activity in the manner for which they are intended and not as fancy suggests, and frequently by a goal or purpose outside the activity, such as winning the game. Children recognize early on that play is an opportunity for pure enjoyment, whereas games may involve considerable stress. One four-year-old, when confronted with an unfamiliar play situation, asked, "Is this a fun game or a winning game?" It was clear that his attitude toward the activity depended on the answer he was given.

Piaget stresses how important learning the rules of the game is in the process of socialization; a child must become able to control himself in order to do so, controlling most of all his tendency to act aggressively to reach his goals. Only then can he enjoy the continuous interaction with others that is involved in playing games with partners who are also opponents. But obeying the rules and controlling one's selfish and aggressive tendencies is not something that can be learned overnight; it is the end result of long development. When he begins playing games, a child tries to behave as he could in his earlier play. He changes the rules to suit himself, but then the game breaks down. In a later stage he comes to believe that the rules are unalterable. He treats them as if they were laws handed down from time immemorial, which cannot be transgressed under any circumstances, and he views disobeying the rules as a serious crime. Only at a still later stage—often not until he has become a teenager and sometimes even later than that—can he comprehend that rules are voluntarily agreed upon for the sake of playing the game and have no other validity, and that they can be freely altered as long as all participants agree to such changes. Democracy, based on a freely negotiated consensus that is binding only after it has been formulated and accepted, is a very late achievement in human development, even in game-playing.

When children are free to do as they like in games not supervised by adults, more often than not arguments over which game they will play and how, and what rules they should follow, take up most of their time, so that little actual playing gets done. Left to their own devices, children may require hours of fruitful deliberation before they agree on the rules and related issues, such as who should begin the game and what role each child is to have in it. And this is how it ought to be, if playing games is to socialize children. Only by pondering at great length the advantages and disadvantages of various possible games, their relative appropriateness to the conditions at hand—such as the size of the group, the available playing area, and so forth—and what rules should apply and why, will children develop their abilities to reason, to judge what is appropriate and what is not, to weigh arguments, to learn how consensus can be reached and how important such consensus is to the launching of an enterprise. Learning all this is infinitely more significant for the child's development as a social human being than is mastering whatever skills are involved in playing the game itself. Yet none of these socializing skills will be learned if adults attempt to control which games are played, or if they prevent experimentation with rules (out of fear that this may lead to chaos), or if they impatiently push for the game to get started without further delay.

When thinking about an organization like Little League, we should keep in mind that the most important function of play and games for the well-being of the child is to offer him a chance to work through unresolved problems of the past, to deal with pressures of the moment, and to experiment with various roles and forms of social interaction in order to determine their suitability for himself.

A freely organized ball game looks very ragged, and it is very ragged. The children use the game to serve their individual and group needs, so there are interruptions for displays of temper, digressions for talking things over or to pursue a parallel line of play for a time, surprising acts of compassion ("give the little guys an extra turn")—all acts outside adult game protocols. If adults want to see a polished game of baseball played according to the rule books, they can turn on their television sets. John Locke wrote that "because there can be no Recreation without Delight, which depends not always on Reason, but oftener on Fancy, it must be permitted Children not only to divert themselves, but to do it after their own fashion." How wonderful it would be for our children if we adults would heed the advice of this great philosopher!

For years the growing child moves back and forth among the many demands that playing games imposes on him. When all goes well, a child can do full justice to the game's requirements. But when things become psychologically too bewildering or frustrating for him, he may revert to spontaneous play. Although he may understand the rules governing the game—even insist that others follow them—he himself will be unable to obey them and may assert that they do not apply to him. For example, a young child may know perfectly well how to play checkers. All will go smoothly until he realizes, or believes, that he will lose. Then he may suddenly request, "Let's start over." If the other player agrees and the second game goes more in the child's favor, all is well. But if things look bleak for the child the second time around, he may repeat his request for a fresh start, and he may do so repeatedly. This can be frustrating to an adult, who may decide that the child should learn to finish a game once he has started it, even if he is about to lose. But if the adult is able to be patient and agree to repeated new beginnings, even though the checker game may never be concluded the child will eventually learn to play better.

If the adult insists that the child continue playing when he is likely to lose, he will be asking too much of the child's still weak controls. If the child could articulate his position, he might say, "Obeying the rules when it seems I'm going to lose is just too much for me. If you insist that I go on, I'll just have to give up on
games and return to fantasy play, where I can’t be defeated.” Then the checker, which had been accepted as a marker to be moved only according to established rules, will suddenly be moved as the child’s fancy determines, or in a way that seems to assure his winning. If this is not accepted, the marker may become a missile, to be hurled off the board or even at the winning opponent.

The reasons for the child’s behavior are not difficult to understand. Feeling himself momentarily defeated by the complex realities of the game—he is losing, and thus his extremely tenuous self-respect is about to be damaged, something to be avoided at all costs—he reverts to a play level at which the rules no longer pertain, in order to rescue his endangered feeling of competence. If the opponent is also a child, he will intuitively understand (although not applaud) his companion’s action. The child opponent may say in response, “Come on, now, you’re acting like a baby,” as if recognizing—probably from his own experience in similar situations—that what has taken place is a regression to an earlier stage of development, because the higher stage has proved too painful to be worth the effort to maintain. Or he may say, “Let’s play something else,” knowing that checkers has become too difficult.

If the opponent is an adult, however, such intuitive understanding may be missing. Some parents, unfortunately, are eager to see their child behave maturely before he is ready to do so. They become unhappy with his behavior when he reverts to simple, unstructured play. But criticism and insistence on mature behavior just when the child feels most threatened merely aggravate his sense of defeat. We ought to recognize that a child may be forced by as-yet-uncontrollable pressures to disregard, or even to pervert, the rules of the game in an instant, and that if he does so, he does it for compelling reasons.

Again we must remember that for a child, a game is not “just a game” that he plays for the fun of it, or a distraction from more serious matters. For him, playing a game can be, and more often than not is, a serious undertaking: on its outcome rest his feelings of self-esteem and competence. To put it in adult terms, playing a game is a child’s true reality; this takes it far beyond the boundaries of its meaning for adults. Losing is not just a part of playing the game, as it is for adults (at least most of the time), but something that puts the child’s sense of his own competence in question and often undermines it.

What makes it all so confusing is that now and then the child is easily able to finish a game even though he is aware that he is losing. So if he can accept defeat sometimes, why not always? Because he could act mature yesterday, adults expect him to do so today, and they try to hold him to this maturity or are critical if he does not. What they overlook is that they themselves act similarly in real life. They are able to accept defeat with relative equanimity when they feel secure in other important respects; at other times defeat temporarily disintegrates them, makes them depressed and unable to function. Since game-playing is for the child a real-life experience, he behaves accordingly: when feeling relatively strong and secure, he can accept defeat in a game without falling apart, but when insecure, he cannot. Because a child’s inability to accept defeat in a game is a sign that at that moment he is quite insecure, it becomes even more important that we do not add to this feeling by criticizing him.

Some children—and most children at some stages in their lives—simply cannot afford to lose. So they correct their fortune in order to win—wanting to move a checker more spaces than they are entitled to, for example, or asking for an extra turn (as opposed to making a move when an opponent is out of the room). It is then wrong to hold them to the rules of the game, because they may give up playing altogether and become utterly dejected, deeply disappointed in themselves. If, instead of objecting to their insisting on changing the rules, we silently accept it and in this way make it possible for them to win, they will enjoy the game and continue playing it. As a child continues to play—and to cheat in this way—he slowly becomes more experienced in playing the game and needs to cheat less often, and less outrageously. This is why it is especially important for parents to play games with their child, because others are not so ready to let him change the rules at will without at least remarking on it. But improving his chances of winning may be necessary if the child is to play often enough to become sufficiently expert to win playing by the rules. Winning makes him more and more secure about his ability to hold his own in the game, and soon he will give up changing the rules altogether, although he will by no means win every time. The ability to win fair and square will provide him with enough security in playing the game that an occasional loss will no longer be experienced as such a severe defeat that he must avoid the game altogether. And the parent’s pleasure in playing will increase with the child’s.

Toys as Symbols
There are many contributions that only parents can make to the play of their children. For example, no teacher, and certainly no age-mate, can be as deeply and personally involved in play that seems to relate to the child’s future as are his parents. Play is anchored in the present, but it also takes up and tries to solve problems of the past, and is often future-directed, as well. So a girl’s doll play anticipates her possible future motherhood and also helps her to deal with emotional pressures of the moment. If she is jealous of the care a sibling receives from their mother, doll play permits her to act out and master her ambivalent feelings. She deals with their negative aspects by mistreating the doll, who represents her sibling. In this symbolic way a girl is able to punish her sibling for her jealous agonies, of which the sibling is the innocent cause. She can make amends for her negative attitude and satisfy the positive elements of her ambivalence when she takes good care of the doll, just as her mother does of the sib-
ling, and in this way can free herself from guilt and identify with her mother. In taking good care of the doll the girl can also identify with the doll, and thus vicariously receive the care her mother lavishes on the sibling. Thus in many ways doll play is closely connected with a girl's relation to her mother.

It is a misfortune for boys that they are only rarely offered the opportunity to play with dolls and even more rarely encouraged to do so. Many parents feel that doll play is not for boys, and because of this boys are usually prevented from dealing with issues such as sibling rivalry and problems of family constellation (emotional grouping), among many others, in this convenient symbolic way. Perhaps if parents could see how eagerly boys use dolls and doll houses in psychoanalytic treatment—certainly as eagerly and persistently as girls do—to work out family problems and anxieties about themselves, they would be more ready to recognize the value of doll play for both sexes. For example, in doll-house play boys—as eagerly as girls—put a figure representing their sibling out of the house, put a figure representing a parent on the roof or lock it in the basement, place both parents together in bed, seat a figure representing themselves on the toilet or have it mess up the house, and in countless other ways visualize, act out, and thus become better able to deal with pressing family problems.

Some parents, especially fathers, think that doll play is contrary to masculinity. It is not. There is a great deal in a boy's past (just as there is in a girl's)—the way he was fed, held, bathed, and toilet-trained—that he can best master through doll play or through play with doll-house furniture, such as tubs and toilets. There are present-day problems, such as sibling rivalry, for him too. And although child care will probably play a more peripheral role in his future than in that of a girl, it may be a very important aspect of his life as a father. If parents are worried that doll play may feminize a boy, all they need for reassurance is to watch how boys play with dolls, because it is very different from the way girls play with them. Unless a boy has already embraced femininity by reason of severe neurosis, his approach is quite distinctly masculine, typically much more aggressive and manipulative than that of girls—for example, boys make their dolls have fights much more often than girls do.

True, boys' doll play is usually shorter-lived than girls' and not quite as significant an experience for them; but this is no reason that they should lose out entirely on what doll play can offer them. Actually, toys typically viewed as being for boys (dump trucks, racing cars, railroad sets, and many others), though they may offer a chance to work out problems of the present and anticipate the future, are much less suitable than dolls for mastering difficulties of the past. If parents feel relaxed about their son's playing with dolls, they will provide him with valuable opportunities for enriching his play life. For them to do so, it is not sufficient that they simply refrain from disparaging such play. Because of the still prevalent attitude that doll play is only for girls, both parents need to have a positive feeling about a boy's doll play if he is to be able to take full advantage of it.

It is relatively rare for a parent to become as engrossed in a play activity as his child does, but there are toys that evoke deep feelings in a parent, as they do in a child. Dolls are probably the best example of this. Whether a mother merely watches her daughter play with dolls, encourages her in it, or actively participates, she is often deeply involved on many levels. She may re-experience aspects of her own childhood doll play and her own mother's involvement in such play and in herself. The child as she plays with her doll feels, in some way, strong emotions that reign in her mother's conscious and subconscious mind, and experiences a closeness to her mother based on the deep emotional involvement they both have in the girl's doll play. This closeness gives the play a special significance and depth of meaning for the child which it never could attain without the mother's involvement.

In order for the child's doll play to take on this special significance, the mother need not always be physically present, nor when she is present must she be so personally involved on many levels; it is enough if the child carries a mental image of her mother's involvement. One such experience of involvement with her mother can make an impact so lasting that the child will carry this image within her and reactivate it whenever she plays with her doll—it is that meaningful. She will continue to react to the emotional signals she has received from her mother and to combine them in her doll play with other feelings that originate in her past and present experiences of being mothered and playing at mothering. Important as her feelings are about being mothered and about someday becoming a parent herself, her doll play could not attain the same depth of meaning if her mother had not on occasion been deeply and personally involved because of the recollections it evoked in her.

A Double Standard

Certainly parents are happy to see their children absorbed in play. But are they equally happy to become engrossed in the playing themselves? If a child's play is pleasurable to a parent chiefly because it allows him to pursue his adult activities without feeling bad about neglecting his child, it does not take the child long to realize this. He soon learns that to his parents play itself is not very important, but his being out of their way is; this lesson simultaneously diminishes him and his enjoyment of play and reduces the capacity of play to develop his intelligence and personality.

The true test of a parent's beliefs about play is not what he says but how he behaves. The fact is that parents often behave inconsistently. Sometimes all goes well: The parent is not doing anything of particular importance, and his child asks him to play. The parent obliges. The child wants him to admire what he has built, and the parent again obliges. But if the parent is occupied with something that demands his attention, usually his response to the request is, "Not now—I'm
busy." If the parent is in a good mood, he may preface his refusal with an apology or a promise to make up for it later—a promise not always kept. Parents tend to assume that if a child doesn't repeat his plea, he has either lost interest or forgotten about it. But many a child hears "In a few minutes" as a brush-off, and he's not all that eager to receive a second brush-off by repeating his request.

Such parental behavior suggests to children that their activities rarely seem as important to parents as the parents' activities, and hardly ever more important. There is nothing very much wrong with that: if both parties are seriously engaged, why should parents drop what they are doing to join their child? The situation is different, of course, when there is an emergency. In such cases the transfer of our attention is virtually automatic. This is very important for the security of the child, and some bright children test how reliably they can depend on our reaction by claiming that an emergency has arisen. Others, without necessarily wishing to ascertain how dependable their parents will be in a crisis, pretend that an emergency exists in order to bring a parent hurrying to their side when they have a great desire to tell or show the parent something of importance. But this works only a few times. Then the parents cease to respond, and make no bones about their annoyance at being taken advantage of in this way—as in the fable of the child who cried "wolf" once too often. This is understandable. But are parents really being taken advantage of when a child goes to great lengths to signal how important it is that they come to him, emergency or no emergency? Or, to put it differently, is only what parents consider an emergency—such as an actual danger or mishap—truly an emergency? Is not a child's need to reassure himself that he and what he is doing are important also an emergency? If a parent is just a bit more patient with a child's claim of emergency, even if all the child needs is to convince himself that the parent is ready to drop everything and rush to his side, then the child will feel more secure about his importance to the parent. This improvement in the child's security will be reflected in parallel improvement in his relationship with his parent. Such a result may well be worth the inconvenience of responding to what we don't regard as real emergencies. As the child grows and matures, he will learn to accept that it is unreasonable to expect that if two people are deeply engaged, one will always be ready to quit what he is doing to join the other.

What happens when a child is engrossed in play and the parents are ready to go out? They call him to come and get dressed. Or perhaps they want him to greet a visitor, or come to the table for lunch. His answer is, as ours would be in an analogous situation, "Not now—I'm busy." Are we prepared to honor our child's statement, as we expect him to honor ours? Or do we insist: "You come here, right now"? If we do, then we have once again succeeded in impressing on him that we do not take his activities as seriously as we do our own. Worse, we have demonstrated that we do not take his activities seriously at all when they conflict with our plans. If we truly took our child's play as seriously as we take our own tasks, we would be as loath to interrupt it as we are reluctant to be interfered with when we are working. This is the pattern demanded by consistency and a sense of fairness, and one reward for thus respecting our child's play is that it enhances his own sense of play as an important activity in the whole context of family life.

Despite how important it is that we encourage play, it is never beneficial for parents to play with their children strictly out of a sense of duty. To play because one "should" is simply not the same as playing together with one's child, or even appreciating the importance of his play. This confusion about the parent's intent is precisely what mars so much of the child's play with his parents. Many adults, whether parents or teachers, tend to play with children for purposes outside the play; they may wish to distract, entertain, educate, diagnose, or guide them. But this is not what the child desires. Unless the play itself is the thing, it loses much of its meaning to the child, and adult participation becomes offensive; the child can guess the adult's purpose and becomes annoyed at the pretense of wholehearted participation.

The use of educational toys, so dear to the hearts of many parents, may serve as an illustration. There is really nothing wrong with educational toys if the emphasis is entirely on the enjoyment of play and not on the intent of educating. Such toys become problematic, however, when parents emphasize what using the toy supposedly teaches the child over how the child desires to use it. Educational toys become absolutely deadly when the child is expected to learn what they are designed to teach rather than what he wants to learn. A child must be permitted to use a toy the way he wishes to (if the toy is not made of any dangerous materials, of course), not as the parent, teacher, or manufacturer thinks it ought to be used.

It is amazing what an infant can learn just by playing with the cardboard core of a roll of toilet paper, and how constructive, imaginative, and educative a child's play with empty boxes can be. In earlier days, when thread came on wooden spools, young children used the spools as blocks and gained as much pleasure and learning from them as they do now from specially constructed building blocks. Indeed, they probably got something more out of playing with spools than they do with blocks, because they knew that their mothers, too, made use of spools. Thus both child and parent found something important represented in wooden spools, whereas blocks are important only to the child.

Some parents spontaneously realize the value of having a personal investment in their child's play objects, although they are not always conscious that this is what motivates them. They instinctively add a measure of mutuality to their child's pleasure, without setting out to do so. Some of these parents may have the time and inclination to fashion toys for their children, thereby duplicating what their own parents or grandparents did out of necessity. Such parents
become emotionally involved in the toys they have created with their own hands. They get enormous enjoyment not only from the task but also from imagining how their child will play with these toys. The meaning the parents have invested in the toys remains active as they play with their child or watch his play.

Other parents make the production of toys a common project. For example, with the child's help they collect scraps of wood. Together parent and child cut and sand the wood; perhaps the child invites some of his friends to help with this labor and with the painting and theshellacking that follows. From then on and ever after these blocks are very special to child and parent. No store-bought blocks can compare in importance to these visible and tangible examples of the child's and the parent's common investment in a toy.

Becoming Civilized

In psychological treatment a child might be encouraged to shoot a toy pistol at a figure; this might be done either to free his aggressions or to discover their source and intended target. But this occurs in the presence of an adult acting as a therapist, in an "as if" therapeutic situation. If a parent encourages his child to shoot a toy gun at someone, even at himself, in a normal play setting it is a mistake—he is not taking the child's play seriously enough. If he were, rather than just pretending to do so without paying close attention to what the play is all about, he could hardly encourage such an unequivocal show of aggression against another person, not even against himself.

A common mistake adults make in reacting to a child's play is taking it as "not real." But in more than one sense play is the child's true reality, and we have to respect it as such. This is why we ought not to encourage our child to shoot at anyone. But this caution refers only to our encouragement. We may very well give him a toy gun to use as he likes or sees fit, be it for his protection or for aggressive play. Whether, when, and how to use such a toy should be entirely the child's own decision. Our giving him the gun implies our permission to use it as he wishes, when, and how he feels a desire or need to do so, but not more. More important, it also implies our confidence that he will use it in a way that is appropriate, even wise, as seen from his perspective.

Children have a need to rid themselves of their aggressions, at least through symbolic play, and it is sufficient permission to do so when we give them toys suitable for that purpose. If we encourage a child to play aggressively, we exercise—however subtly—control over the activity, which is likely to increase his frustration or aggression and with it the need for discharge. But if his aggressive play is directed toward us—as it might be, not necessarily because he wishes to hurt us even in play, but because he wishes to discover what our reaction might be—and we do not react appropriately to what he does, then we effectively demonstrate to him that we take neither him nor his aggression very seriously. If we show a contradictory approach to the play by initially intellectualizing ("Let him work off his aggressions") and subsequently attempting to render the activity harmless ("Even though you've just 'shot' me, it means nothing"), our attitudes destroy the serious qualities that play has for the child.

When a child "shoots" his parents, should they shoot back? Certainly not. Counteraggression by an adult—whether in play or in earnest—has never yet proved beneficial to a child. Nevertheless, it is not much help to him to shoot us with his toy gun unless we react appropriately. The reaction, of course, must be not to his action as such but to his intentions. Only our on-the-spot assessment of what motivated the action can tell us whether the best response is admiration of the child's assertiveness—what a powerful warrior he is—or a playful dramatic collapse to the floor, or a show of anxiety, or a question about how he will manage with us out of the way. A well-placed question such as this one is much more effective in convincing a child that shooting and killing are detrimental to his well-being than any theoretical discussion of the evils of war and violence. This is because the child lives in the immediate present and within the limited confines of his direct experience. Wars, even those he sees on the TV screen, take place in some far-distant place and have no bearing on him that he can understand. And should we succeed in pressing on him the tragic consequences of war, the primary effect will be to confine him with an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. After all, the youngster is smart enough to figure out that he has no effect on what is going on somewhere far away in the world. But shooting at his parent is something he can control. Almost any child realizes that however angry he is at his parent, however much he may want to get rid of him at the moment, he does not want to lose him forever.

Some adults may overreact to shooting play. Parents who fall into this trap are usually concerned more with their own feelings about aggression than with helping a child to master rather than simply repress his aggression through such play. This is also true with respect to bodily and other types of anxiety that many children try to cope with through shooting play, such as with water pistols. So when parents forbid such play, they block the age and necessary outlet it can provide. At the same time, they rob the child of the valuable lesson that if we try to shoot someone, that person may shoot back, and everybody will lose.

Some parents, out of their abhorrence of war and violence, try to control, or forbid altogether, any play with toy guns, soldiers, tanks, or other toys suggestive of war. Although these feelings toward violence are most understandable, when a parent prohibits or severely criticizes his child's gun play, whatever his conscious reasons for doing so, he is acting not for his child's benefit but solely out of adult concerns or anxieties. Some parents even fear that such play may make a future killer of the child who thoroughly enjoys it, but the pitfalls of such thinking are many and serious.

First, as playing with blocks does not indicate that
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a child will grow up to be an architect or builder, and playing with cars and trucks does not foretell the future auto mechanic or truck driver, so playing with toy guns tells nothing about what a child will do and be later in life. Second, one may reasonably expect that if through gun play a child feels that he can protect himself, and if he discharges many of his aggressive tendencies, then fewer of these will accumulate and require dangerous ways of discharge in later life. Parental prohibition also leads to additional frustration and anger, because the child is prevented from using an outlet that he sees made available to other children and is suggested to him by the mass media.

Third, and by far the most important attitude, because whether spoken or implied it is the most pernicious in its consequences, is parental fear that the child may become a violent person. This thought is far more damaging to the child's emotional well-being and his sense of self-worth than any play with guns can possibly be. This is particularly true because of the importance to him of his parents' view of him. After all, a child gains a view of himself primarily from his parents. If they seem to hold such a low opinion of him, it is apt to make him very angry at them and the world, and this increases his propensity to act out his anger, not just in symbolic play but in reality, once he has outgrown parental control.

Girls are as subject to all kinds of frustrations, very much including sibling rivalry and anger at their parents, and so it would serve them equally well to be able to discharge their anger through symbolic play, such as with toy guns. Furthermore it would prevent their frustration at being denied an important type of symbolic play that is available to boys.

Parents who worry exclusively about shooting play often fail to take into account the duality of our human and animal natures and the distance between them. Certainly there is a great deal of the animal—and with it of violence—in human beings, and sometimes these irrational forces do appear in children's games, making many parents uncomfortable. But more often it is actually the child's developing sense of humanity that motivates what seems to the uninvolved and uninformed parent to be mere brutality. Since ancient times children have played out war games in which we fight them, them being the enemy of the historical moment.

Children of the Middle Ages surely played at being knights and infidels, just as our own children play at being cops and robbers. Elizabeth I is said to have inquired whether the boys were now playing the war of the English against the Scots. In Europe early in this century much play involved the Foreign Legion against the Arabs. And as soon as the wall went up separating West from East Berlin, German children began shooting at each other across miniature walls. Such battle play invariably features the conflict of good and evil in terms and images that a child can readily grasp.

In a game like cops and robbers a child experiments with moral identities. Such games permit him to realize his fantasies. Acting out the roles of cop and robber permits him to get closer to the reality of these characters and what it might feel like to be them, which reading or watching television cannot provide. A passive, receptive role is no substitute for active encounters with experiential reality.

Psychoanalytically speaking, such conflicts between good and evil represent the battle between tendencies of the asocial id and those of the diametrically opposed superego. Such battles—either dramatized by two groups of children warring against each other or acted out by one or more children manipulating toy soldiers—perpetuate some discharge of aggression either actually or symbolically, through conflict. Only after such a discharge of anger or violence can the forces of the superego gain ascendancy to control or overbalance those of the id; with that, the ego becomes able to function again.

As we watch the progress of aggressive activity in our child, we can gradually discern a developmental move from free play, which permits direct id expression and satisfaction (the unstructured free-for-all shooting match, in which aggression is freely discharged), to a more structured game setting in which not mere discharge of aggression but a higher integration—the ascendancy of good over evil—is the goal. So we destroy them: the Greeks defeat the knavish Trojan wrongdoers, the Christian knights destroy the infidels, the cops corner the robbers, the cowboys crush the savage Indians.

As objective adults, we may know that the Trojan culture was perhaps superior to that of the Bronze Age Greeks, and that the case of the Indian was at least as strong as that of the cowboy. But such objectivity is the end product of a protracted intellectual and moral struggle, a long process of cleansing, tempering, and refining the emotions. For the child such objectivity is not yet possible, because emotions, not intellect, are in control during the early years. Our children want to believe that good wins out, and they need to believe it for their own well-being, so that they can turn into good people. It serves their developing humanity to repeat the eternal conflict of good and evil in a primitive form understandable to them, and to see that good triumphs in the end.

When play and games have firmly established the ascendancy of good in the child's mind, so that the outcome of the fight is no longer at issue, he can turn to humanitarian refinements of the original war game—the enemy becomes imaginary, and the child's attention is focused instead on the good feeling of comradeship against a common enemy. Then the issue expands to encompass no longer merely order against chaos and good versus evil but sublimation of violent emotions.

At this point the problem ceases to be whether the knight will win out over the infidel (of course he will) and becomes whether he will be able to do so with elegance, according to the protocols of the ring or of
knightly virtue. Thus the game determines not merely which is stronger—id or superego, my primitive I or my socialized I—but also whether the ego can ensure the victory of the superego in ways that enhance self-respect. Good must triumph over evil—and it must do so in a way that demonstrates the value of our higher humanity. When the knight errant slays the monster, he does so to free the captive maiden. Good has prevailed, but it has prevailed for a purpose, gaining erotic (id) satisfaction as part of the bargain. Thus ego and superego combine to promise the id a reward if it does their bidding. Serving the good is reinforced by the motivating force of a higher purpose.

When a child acts out this understanding, he begins to appreciate a lesson that cannot be taught to him in a purely didactic fashion: to fight evil is not enough; one must do so in honor of a higher cause and with knightly valor—that is, according to the rules of the game, the highest of which is to act with virtue. This, in turn, will promote self-esteem, a powerful incentive to further integrate id, ego, and superego—to become more civilized.