



The Home

The Child's Play

WHY does the child play? This is a question that has been variously answered. Let us approach its solution first from the biological viewpoint, by inquiring into the value which play has for the life-development of the child. One man says that play is the overflow of the child's surplus energy, the result of an irresistible impulse to exercise his growing muscles. Another explains it as relaxation from work or fatigue. A third maintains that play is the preparation for the serious business of life. A fourth, from the study of evolutionary processes, concludes that play is the outcome of a tendency inherited from the accumulated experience of the human race, and represents, now in pleasureable form, what was once the serious occupation of our ancestors. Without confining ourselves rigorously to any one of these explanations, it is safe to say that the correct interpretation of the playful instinct embraces elements from all of them.

In seeking a psychological answer to our question, we find that the all-pervading factor in every manner of play is the pleasure that is derived from it. Enjoyment is essential to all true play. Another distinctive feature, especially during the imaginative period of life, is the acceptance of illusion or make-believe, to provide for persons and associations which would otherwise be lacking to the fullest enjoyment of play. It is well to remember that the instinct of play involves many other instincts, notably those of imitation, curiosity, and rivalry.

Play then is a form of action often releasing the energy with which the body of the child is surcharged; pleasureable for its own sake, useful in the acquisition of valuable habits, and affording a means of diversion from the tedium of regular occupation.

The functions of play are of a spontaneous character. No important issues are at stake, as in work. There is no restriction or economy put upon the amount of energy that is expended.

Effort is freely spent, without reference to any definite end beyond play itself, and without any special voluntary guidance. Play, in fact, is always and entirely for its own sake. Its final issues are of much less moment to the individual than the results of work. For this reason, play is more or less set aside when one has to enter upon the important task of making a living.

Simple play is characteristic of the small child. Games, implying rules and impositions, come only at a later age. Play is open and free; while games are full of restraints because of their organized and distinctly purposive nature. The child may play with himself; but the game always implies companionship of some sort.

Play and necessity are two of the chief means of learning. In children, who are largely shielded from necessity by the screen of parental care, play in its various forms is the more consequential factor in development. Play is nature's jolly old nurse who charms children into using every power they possess and prods their curiosity into finding out everything possible about their surroundings, from the bright blue heavens above, to the earth beneath.

Every faculty in the child, physical and mental, is playfully exercised when it first appears. In this manner its development is hastened; and after each power has unfolded itself, it is tested and perfected in contests and games.

Well-directed play serves an excellent purpose in teaching the growing child the lesson of law and self-discipline as a means to true freedom. In no other place can the child so fully realize for himself the value of law as on the playground. The teacher who can lead her children to play happily and in accordance with whatever rules are necessary, is not only forming a public sentiment in favor of orderly and fair-handed play, but she is also preparing the children for good citizenship more effectually than she could hope to do in the schoolroom, where the children do not take so personal an interest in what is being done.