TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY

Children and Play in Early Childhood Education—
An Exciting Challenge

OLE FREDRIK LILLEMYR

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Preface

It is argued that play is as old as human culture itself. Given this, play has specific functions for human beings, as all play has *meaning*. For children, play has a meaning of its own. Adults often forget this important premise, for example, with regard to educational, psychological, or sociological approaches to children's play (i.e., when applying play in a professional setting). On the other hand, it is useful for educators and psychologists to be aware of the possible applications of children's play in relation to educational or therapeutic work. In these cases it is important to be familiar with how play develops during the early years of childhood. However, for children play has a unique value in itself, and furthermore play is a way of being. Through play children learn about themselves and the world around them. In addition, experiences with play mediate cultural values. These are facts that are important to safeguard, in order to counterbalance some of the negative effects of the rapidly developing alternatives offered by various forms of media and information technology.

It is important to be aware that our attitudes toward children's play and our perspective on children will influence fundamental aspects of our platform of *educational values*. Our perspectives on childhood and society, as well as on children's play, will influence our fundamental opinion about what the upbringing of children is all about, and the importance of play in this respect. Writing this book has been an exciting venture and an interesting challenge. The environment at the Queen Maud University College of Early Childhood Education in Trondheim, Norway, has been highly stimulating in

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this respect. In particular, I have appreciated comments from and useful discussions with students and colleagues concerning aspects of children's play. Teaching in the Master's Program of Early Childhood Education, which is offered jointly by QMUC and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, has been interesting and inspiring. However, the fantastic experiences with play I have had with children as a schoolteacher, and as a parent of two children, have probably given me the most important foundation and inspiration for writing a book on children's play, in addition to my own experiences in play in childhood. Nonetheless, involvement in children's play will never end, as children will always go on telling us more.

Ole Fredrik Lillemyr
January, 1990

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Preface to the Second Edition

It has been interesting to learn how, over the last decade, children's play has acquired an even stronger position within early childhood education and care (children birth to 9 years). In Norway and the Nordic countries, it is obvious that preschool education now extends up into the first grades of primary school. It is accepted that a teacher's active role toward children's play is legitimate, even if it can be a challenge for teachers. By observing or participating in children's play, teachers, parents, and other adults can learn much of importance for their own development. The status of play in Norway in 2001 is quite different from what it was in 1990 when the first edition of this book was published. On the other hand, it is still important to be concerned about children's growth and upbringing, and to defend the unique value of children's play. Furthermore, play is closely tied to creativity, exploration, humor, and aesthetic activities. All these are important elements in stimulating children's activities, although it is not obvious that children have rich opportunities for play. Societal development in recent years has provided a more complex, less predictable situation regarding conditions for children's growth. In many cases value questions in relation to children's play and learning are discussed, or set aside, with substantial consequences for children's lives and development. It is more important than ever to safeguard what is said about children and play in the UN Convention on children's rights, designated as "children's best."

The second edition of the book attempts to show how to understand the phenomenon of play and explain why play is so important to children's

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learning and development. Based on this, I point out how children's play challenges the educator concerning educational values. The understanding of play needs to be integrated in our consciousness about bringing up children. This is essential for parents, for those working with children in preschools and schools and leisure activity programs. The content of the revised version of the book has been shortened to some extent and has also been brought up to date with recent theory and research. However, some chapters are added and some are extended. Even so, much of the content of the first edition has been retained. I am grateful to the Queen Maud University College for providing excellent working conditions for writing this book. I would like to thank my students and colleagues for useful comments and discussions over the years.

Ole Fredrik Lillemyr
June, 2001

Preface to the American Edition

In the American edition, much of the second Norwegian edition has been retained. However, the manuscript has been updated to include more theory and research from recent years. Some parts are rewritten and some further developed. Even so, I am not attempting to include or refer to all relevant theory and research, nor would this be desirable or possible. The content presented here is the author's responsibility alone. However, I have tried to refer to relevant theory and research from varied perspectives as well as from different parts of the world.

I am grateful to Ingrid Greenhow for her excellent work and cooperation in the translation of the manuscript and for her patience with my many suggestions for suitable English expressions for Norwegian terms, from the perspective of an English-as-a-second-language writer. This translation has been published with the financial support of NORLA (Norwegian Fiction and Nonfiction Abroad). I am also grateful for the inspiration and encouragement from my colleagues and for excellent working conditions at the Queen Maud University College. However, writing a book on children's play could not have been possible without observing children's play and discussing children's play with my students at the college throughout the years. In this concern it has also been of great virtue to draw on the playfulness of my three grandchildren.

Finally, I am very grateful to Information Age Publishing for giving me the opportunity to publish my book in English, so I can be so privileged

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to be able to present ideas, thoughts, and theories as well as a selection of international research within the field of children's play to an English-speaking audience.

Ole Fredrik Lillemyr
January, 2009

Foreword

The role of play in human development and educational practice has been a very controversial topic. For example, noted evolutionary biologist E. O. Wilson (1975) anointed play as one of the most important topics in the understanding of human development. Similarly, some quarters of the child developmental community have come close to sanctifying play, considering it a necessary experience for children, without which serious social emotional damage will be done (e.g., Singer, Golinkoff, Hirsh-Pasek, 2006). Relatedly, it has been researched by some of the most notable psychologists in our field, such as Jerome Bruner (1972), Jean Piaget (1962), Brian Sutton-Smith (1966, 1967, 1997) and L. S. Vygotsky (1967).

By contrast, the topic has been virtually ignored by an influential segment of child developmentalists for the past half-century. Schlosberg (1947), for example, saw the topic as irrelevant and unworthy of study. As if tasking their cue from Schlosberg, the six editors of the *Handbook of Child Psychology*, from 1946 to present, have included only one chapter on play (Rubin et al., 1983). Similarly, a segment of the evolutionary biology community (e.g., Sharpe, 2005) is skeptical of the value of play and when value is conceded its putative function is thought to be minimal, at best (Martin & Caro, 1985).

In education, too, opinions regarding the importance of play are bimodal. Some educational organizations, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (1992), list play experiences as crucial

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for healthy early education and development. An extreme variant of this opinion holds that depriving children and youth of play can turn them into mass murders (S. Brown, http://nifplay.org/about_us.html, accessed April 29, 2008). At the other end of the spectrum, children's play experiences are being diminished or eliminated altogether in many primary schools in North America and Britain. Specifically opportunity to play, in the form of recess periods during the school day, has become marginalized and eliminated from the curriculum of many primary schools across North America and Britain (Pellegrini, 2005). This level of discord, especially within disciplines, is reason to pause. Why is it that very well-respected scholars come to such different conclusions? My view is that many students of play do not take adequate care in defining play or specifying theoretically relevant benefits associated with play.

In *Taking Play Seriously*, Ole Fredrik Lillemyr takes great care to chart this territory not only by defining play and its possible benefits, but more uniquely ties play to educational outcomes. So what are the implications of this discussion of varying definitions and functions of play? First, and perhaps most importantly, we should take care to label a behavior as play when it fits explicated definitions of the construct. From my definition (Pellegrini, in press), all that children do is not play. Nor is it play, for example, when we tell children that we're going to "play" a phonemic awareness game and have them sing scripted letter–sound correspondences. In play, from my definition at least, children are more concerned with the means of an activity, such as recombining different sounds in a variety of orders, for example, rather than the ends of the activity, such as making the correct sound for a specified letter.

Lillemyr's work is especially important in the ways in which he situates play not only in modern society but more directly in schools. This sort of theory-driven orientation is a necessary antidote to current educational practices in both North America and Europe that minimize or eliminate play from preschool and primary school programs (Pellegrini, 2005). Educational policy, from my view at least, needs to be guided by theoretical and empirical relations between specific, and clearly defined, forms of play and specific outcomes. There are data on various aspects of play to guide this enterprise, as demonstrated by Lillemyr. With this said, there is a real danger of some advocates of play for children to be overzealous in their overattributing the benefits of play. While this is understandable in an educational environment that is trying to minimize children's play-related activities, such a position also jeopardizes the possibility of future inclusion of play in educational programs: Policymakers and parents will equate play

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with overblown claims. To paraphrase Sir Thomas Gresham, the bad evidence will drive out the good evidence. If advocates of play stick to realistic readings of the data, it will be included in curriculum.

Anthony Pellegrini
January, 2009

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