

# A Child's Play Life

An  
Ethnographic  
Study

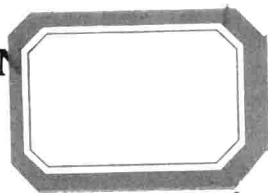
**Diana Kelly-Byrne**

*Foreword by Brian Sutton-Smith*

# A CHILD'S PLAY LIFE

*An Ethnographic Study*

DIANA KELLY-BYRN



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## Foreword

This foreword is a postscript to ten years of watching Dr. Diana Kelly-Bryne initiate this study, conclude it as a thesis, and ponder over it before bringing it to its present fruition. My part began in 1979 when she sought me out as her dissertation sponsor, after she had already begun this study. Most professors are reluctant to sign on to supervise a study that is already underway; and, even more so, are certainly not at ease with a one-subject dissertation. For my own part, and after some 30 years in play research, I was impressed by her determination to carry this project through and excited at what we might find out if someone “played” with a child, instead of just studying children playing as had been the usual procedure in therapy and research for the past 100 years. It was an amazing idea even if a remarkably simple one. One immediately asked: Why hadn’t anyone done this before? What is it about childhood that has militated against such a research approach?

Jean Jacques Rousseau, who is generally accepted as the precursor of all modern child study with his notion that the child is both driven by consuming impulses as well as perfectible if we educate him correctly, would certainly not have had anything to do with such a notion. He saw himself as the first to really take a research interest in the young and wrote in 1778:

I knew that there never was a man who loved more to watch little children joking and playing together than I, and often I stopped in the street and on walks to watch their cuteness and their little games with an interest I never saw shared by anyone.

But even so, much as he declared he loved children, he preferred to watch them at a distance rather than associate with them. He did not even like talking to them. He said, “I should be more at ease before a monarch of Asia than before a child whom I must make babble” (quoted

in Kessen, 1978). And paradoxical as it is that the father of child psychology liked to keep his distance from real children (rather than theoretical children), a strong case can be made that nothing much has changed amongst the philosophers and psychologists of play in the two hundred years since he said this. Their studies are also usually carried out in situations where children are kept at a distance, caged in some way or another by laboratories, classrooms, playgrounds, or playrooms. They seldom deal with the natives in their wild state and never by true participant engagement. Do they also fear that such participation with these Asian monarchs would be intolerable? Trivial? Boring? Puerile? Regressive? Insane? What is it that has kept them all out of direct research participation in the jungles of children's fantasy?

Perhaps it doesn't take long to discover. Already in the first session Kelly-Byrne is describing Helen as haughty, smug, directive, dominating, controlling, demanding, and thoroughly concerned with power. The price of her participation with the child on the child's terms is, in the early stages at least, complete subordination. She is made powerless as a playmate, and they spend all their time engrossed in fantasies of a fictional world in which Helen is the dominant figure who is beautiful, moral, wise, and mature. We learn from her later statements that after three to five hours of each session, Kelly-Byrne, the expert actress in her play of subordination and nonevaluative supportiveness, collapses from fatigue. Clearly Rousseau knew what he was talking about, and even though the children we deal with today are a very cleaned up form of the brutish variety that he had available in his own time, apparently the predicament is the same. Sometimes when we are reading through the explanations of what she has done, we are forced to wonder whether perhaps Kelly-Byrne is also defending herself post hoc against the babbling monarch.

If we ask where this discontinuity between ourselves and children comes from, there are various answers and solutions. Ruth Benedict, in her noted 1938 essay, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Cultural Conditioning," advanced the opinion that the discontinuity was primarily an American problem. Her subsequent apparent advocacy of cultural relativity throughout her own lifetime, however, was generally advanced at the expense of her American examples, and so we have to wonder about her anthropological equity in this matter (Geertz, 1988). Since Aries' 1960 work, *Centuries of Childhood*, most of us have considered that the invention of modern childhood as something separate from adults is a general Western condition beginning somewhere between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. For Rousseau the discontinuity began with civilization itself and with the separation of the child and

primitive from their trusting and direct relationship with those around them. When people began to live in cities, he opined, they developed that presentation of themselves in everyday life, both in commerce and in every social interaction, that separated them from their original and transparent selves. His theoretical education of Emile, in the book of the same name, in a physical environment with its discipline of natural consequences, was an attempt to defend the child's innocence against such demoralizing sophistications, and to develop in the child, from "nature," that certain conscience that would make the child capable of subsequent submission to the social contract of a communal society. Or at least that is how Ernst Cassirer responds in *The Question of Jean Jacques Rousseau* (1963), which refers to Rousseau's paradox of combining individual freedom in education with totalitarianism in political arrangements.

A simpler if not unrelated view of the reason for our modern separation from the child might lie in our habit of segregating children in schools. It is not an accident perhaps that two thirds of the Aries history of modern childhood is devoted to the segregation of children from the rest of society, first into schools and then into age-graded classrooms. Along with this segregation, he says, there is the introduction of the harsh discipline required to keep the children orderly in such places. Any present discontinuity of adults and children most certainly rests on this three-hundred-year history of the forcible subjugation of children. And that subjugation, in turn, must certainly be seen in the perspective of the forcible subjugation of the insane, the criminal, and the poor that takes place during the same period of time and is a mark, according to Foucault (1965), of the rationalization of modern society, a symptom of the way in which the orderly progress of industrial civilization made sense (or nonsense) out of those various classes of human beings who did not or could not contribute directly to the work life of the evolving national societies (including children and to some extent women). In these terms we do not need any remarkable Freudian theorizing as to why we are strangers to our children, or why they engage in such orgies of power when they get the opportunity as in the present study. The enslaved are reaching for the power that we no longer share with them but once did, at least in the diminished form of the earlier apprenticeship system, where their direct contribution to the sustenance of life was self-evident.

One can argue further that the major modern response to this discontinuity of children and adults has been the practice of a subordinating discipline, which in this century has been given the euphemistic label of "socialization." Socialization is about the ways in which success-

ful parents induce their children into the normative patterns of the larger society. Psychologists with their research descriptions of sex typing, aggression, attachment, prosocial behavior, self, families, peers and siblings, etc., ostensibly yield information about the scientific cause-and-effect relationships within and between these variables. But as they are dealing with specifically cultural rather than universal realities, their work is ultimately a description of how the culture conducts itself and what the culture values in its own behavior and attitudes. It is a local science at best: What is taken to be a research result is eagerly converted into advice for the deficient by a surrounding pack of hungry journalists and writers of books of advice. Any research that states a norm or suggests a superior cognitive or behavioral mechanism, for example, immediately implies the deficiency of those who have not acquired the norm or do not possess the mechanism. We appear to live in a society in which such psychological information receives the reverence once reserved for religion and social status. The point of all of this is that the discontinuity between ourselves and our children is now deeply engrained. The whole force of educated opinion in society is devoted to keeping our children clean, sexless, nondisgusting, nonaggressive, rational, and tidy. In respect to our children, we administer a subtle puritanism, which is none the less real for being disguised in the gawdiness of consumer wrappings.

Our question must be, therefore, where Kelly-Byrne stands in the light of this history of discontinuity that Rousseau so well understood and she apparently seeks to bridge? Rousseau's attempt to rejoin us with our children was, on the one hand, a radical system of education, seldom subsequently copied, and, on the other, a radical political envisagement perhaps emulated in multiple communistic schemes. Kelly-Byrne's solution seems to be more derived from Wordsworth's privatized answers than from Rousseau's public schemes. Wordsworth, reeling from his disappointments in the character and outcomes of the French Revolution, subsequent to Rousseau's death, turned inward to his own childhood as a source of inspiration and, along with William Blake and others, engendered that cult of the childhood that has been the major response in the subsequent two centuries to Rousseau's predicament. What the adult is to draw upon from his own childhood is the "beneficent influence" of its sacral memory and imagination, "from which our minds are nourished and invisibly repaired" (Hartman, 1987, p. xvi). And in Kelly-Byrne's case, this is also perhaps what we are to draw upon from any child we should play with in her manner. She says that children "are capable of teaching adults their system if the adults are open to seeing things from a child's point of view." And if we do "we



open ourselves up to a world of wonderful possibilities and the opportunity to recapture something of our own lost power to transform our experience and our lives."

But there is more to the Kelly-Byrne solution than a reiteration of Wordsworth, because she, unlike both he and Rousseau, is actively participating with her child, at least in the temporary and segregated space of the play world. Here she and the child put aside their chains of separation and commingle. However, in the background here and there are hints that make us wonder whether she too, like Wordsworth, is drawing on some important resource from her own childhood. Are these occasions with Helen totally independent lessons for us, or are they also projections of the author's need for some redemption of her own childhood? Ours, after all, is also the therapeutic century, where it is common to think of those who work with children as also working on problems from their own childhood. As Kelly-Byrne says in the text, "We save others to save ourselves." Still, even if this is the case, it is different from that of Wordsworth and Rousseau, who make moral or epistemological uses of the childhood self rather than psychological ones and who have limited concourse with real children. On the other hand, there are grounds, paradoxically enough, for finding the Kelly-Byrne approach to childhood is more like that of Rousseau than that of Wordsworth. Consider, for example, that Rousseau was an advocate of public games and a strong antagonist of private fantasy. For him public games bound the players into a collective consensus. Private fantasy led them into the practice of theatric duplicities, which were again an obstruction to the directness of the childlike soul. He could hardly have countenanced Diana and Helen in their play of multiple voices. In a sense, however, there is no contradiction, because in Rousseau's ultimate social scheme, there would be no need for inauthentic separate selves, and therefore no need for private play (Starobinski, 1988). Moreover, there is no contradiction in this present Kelly-Byrne work, because although the play is given to multiple fantasy transformations (which Rousseau might disapprove), this can only occur because of the deeply genuine nature of the underlying relationship (which he would clearly approve). Kelly-Byrne tells us in no uncertain phenomenological and ethnographic terms that the relationship as thus described will give us a deeper understanding of play than any other existing methodology in the literature. At least two thirds of her work is given over to defending and explicating the merits of this particular methodology. Intriguingly, Aries spends two thirds of his book showing how children become segregated and Kelly-Byrne spends two thirds of hers showing how she and Helen can be related. She counters the historical unbond-



ing of childhood with the bonding of a superior methodology. While, on the surface, these may be birds of quite a different feather—the public segregation of children versus an intimate relationship between an adult and a child player—in a symbolic sense at least, the latter is meant to be an answer to the former. Kelly-Byrne is quite as earnest as Rousseau about this. They both struggle for transparent relationships and both seek to express themselves in a voice of inner authority.

In sum, it is reasonable to suggest that Kelly-Byrne sees the discontinuity between adult and child as more apparent than real. She has written an article in which she seeks to show that, when you put aside the stereotypes, adult and child players are not as different as they seem. There is secrecy, masking, crudeness, and intimacy in both cases (1984). I would like to suggest, however, that her present book does not gain its power from any new revelation of that kind. Its chief value, I believe, lies in its suggestion of new roads into the discontinuity itself, not into its demolition. What has happened in recent years is not that the discontinuity has gone, as some have suggested (Postman, 1982), only that it has become mollified by the affluent consumer world of gifts, confections, toys, clothes, fantasy worlds, television, and organized recreation for children. But children are still basically outsiders to the sharing of economic powers. As Zelizer (1985) has said: the more useless they have become, the more priceless they have become. They are a popular form of conspicuous consumption; which is to say, children's discontinuity from adults continues in a pervasive and subtle fashion. In these terms, Kelly-Byrne's appeal to make more use of their imagination and to play with them more would hardly change the discontinuity radically, but what it might do is change radically our conception of socialization. The current conception is largely anachronistic. It is concerned with issues that had to be paramount in the control of children in earlier centuries and earlier decades, but now that children have become pampered in their powerlessness, the edge for such concerns has departed, at least in the homes of the affluent. Children of neglect still roam their domains with the dangerous capacities of the dispossessed. What is important about the contemporary pampered, however, is their grasp on the potential future, not their conformity to our own past. In our century, children are still seen as the secular residual legatees of predestination and progress. They still carry both our hope for the future and our relative immortality within it. And here the cultivation of their imagination is central. That children are attached, toilet trained, sexually modest, relatively nonaggressive, and sex-typically flexible gains us no future. It gives us only obedient and docile citizens. The changing future in a world of galloping informa-

tion, incredible diplomatic problems, and a series of populations to be contained not by force but by the imaginative scenarios and opportunities will be provided by those of imaginative and novelistic leadership. The guarantee for this future is a socialization of generations of children into their own imaginativeness, not into the disciplined behavior of the parents' own idealized past. From birth onward the central topic for such a future would be children's playfulness and their inventiveness. The mundane competences like reading, writing, and arithmetic would be merely some of the agencies to such an education, not a central focus as they mostly are today and have been for centuries. In such an envisageable polity, this work of Kelly-Byrne's might be that of a pioneer in the development of the imaginative young.

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## Preface

*A Child's Play Life: An Ethnographic Study* is the story of a seven-year-old girl, whom I call Helen, and her play life with an adult, me. Initially, we met in the roles of child and baby-sitter and soon grew to establish a relationship in which we played together. We did this on fourteen occasions for several hours at a time over the course of a year. This was an unusual relationship because adults in our culture do not usually play with young children in any systematic way for lengthy periods. Further, those who study children's play have also generally not sought to understand the behavior by playing with a child. Although some child therapists may play and encourage children to play for diagnostic and therapeutic purposes, they have not gone beyond this to describe the character and nuances of children's play.

However, believing that play is a relational phenomenon and can best be understood by observing and studying the relationship through which it finds expression, I decided to plan and execute a study that focused on the play life of a seven-year-old. I was especially interested in discovering how play occurred and was given expression in the home. Thus my study was to be in contrast to those of most researchers, who observe children's play in school settings. On beginning, I was eager to observe Helen's play relationships with her toys and peers; however, I soon discovered that Helen wished to play with me. It was her price for the privilege I had of being privy to her play life in the home. Consequently, I became Helen's chief play partner during the occasions on which we met. In these circumstances, I was able to observe, record, and understand a great deal about the way play expressed itself in Helen's life. I learned about the many faces of play and its uses, forms, stages, themes, and concerns, as this little girl expressed them.

This book has three major parts. The first part provides information of an introductory nature and acts as a backdrop for the story of

the unfolding of the relationship between the child and the adult. The chapters focus on child play studies that have been done within the mainstream of research; on the methods and procedures used for executing the study, gathering data, and ordering it; and on Helen, her parents, and myself as the researcher.

The second part is a storied account of the course of the relationship between Helen and me. It includes a textured recounting of what happened between the child and the adult during each of our meetings over the course of almost a year and is told from the adult's point of view. As such, it is a first-person account but one in which the child is kept in focus and where it is believed that her world is to be respected at all times; one that is to be entered into and participated in—never patronized. In addition, following the description of each play session is a commentary aimed at drawing the reader's attention to significant points of a theoretical nature that are embedded in the narrative details of the shared relationship and the behaviors within it. Attention is also drawn to two developing strands of significance in the study: (1) the development of Helen's world and her relationship to me and (2) the development of the research journey and the ways in which play functions in this case.

The third and final part discusses the import of the study for play research and theory and attempts to locate the case in a wider context. Accordingly, it considers the implications of this study for working with children as informants and how prevailing conceptions of children's play and child/adult interaction patterns should be modified.

This book will be of great interest to those who wish to understand what some children do when they are allowed to play largely on their own terms. It will also appeal to those seeking to understand something of the hazardous nature of establishing relationships with children for the purposes of research and to those who sense some of the trials and joys of working closely with them. It also informs the reader of a child's world of wishes—of fantasy play and the uses of television, play, and lore in gaining such private ends.

Like several other books that record detailed accounts of various aspects of the lives of particular children, this is a highly contextualized account. It seeks to capture the unique way in which a brilliant little girl dealt with her hopes and fears, her dreams and impulses as she drew on many details of her life and experience in forging a relationship with an adult play partner. Nevertheless, it could also be about many children of a similar age and background whom I have known over the past ten years in my work as a teacher, researcher, and parent.

## *Acknowledgments*

I am deeply indebted to the little girl whom I call Helen, who taught me much about the play life of a seven-year-old. To her parents, without whose understanding and generosity this work could not have been done, I also wish to express my thanks.

There are several who served as advisers to this study. During its early stages I appreciated the encouragement and counsel of Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Gerald Prince, Bambi Schiefflin, and Shirley Brice Heath. Ray Birdwhistell constantly challenged my conceptions of research, data, and interpretation and alerted me to the implications of working as a member of a dyadic research relationship, especially the notion of researcher reflexivity. In addition, his as well as Dell Hymes's scholarly concerns with and support of ethnography influenced my understanding of work in this tradition. In fact, this study bears the marks of the decade (1978–1987) I spent at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, during which time I had the opportunity to work with many fine colleagues and learn their multidisciplinary approaches to scholarship.

Once the study was completed and available in manuscript form, several of my doctoral students at the University of Pennsylvania generously provided useful comments and critiques. To them I am grateful.

Hattie Kalish, a social worker in Philadelphia, also read the manuscript and made several helpful comments. I thank her for always supporting and encouraging my efforts. Kenneth Burke also read parts of the narrative of Helen's play and was excited by the work. I benefited from his reading of these texts.

There are two people who stand behind this book in separate but extraordinarily influential ways. They are Brian Sutton-Smith and Kenneth Byrne. Throughout the venture they showed great personal faith in and support of my work. With both, I have had the privilege of endless conversations about all aspects of this work. Under Brian Sut-

ton-Smith's tutelage I have learned a great deal about play, developmental psychology, and other scholarly matters that are close to the heart of this book. Kenneth Byrne, a clinical psychologist, has been a constant presence during the undertaking and completion of this venture. Indeed, much that appears in this book was first introduced for my consideration in conversations with him. In addition, I deeply appreciate the ways in which he has facilitated and supported my work over the years. His friendship and love have been a significant force in my journey of seeing this book move from its inception to its conclusion.

I wish to express my thanks to Sarah Biondello for her thoughtful reading of the manuscript; to Sue Liddicoat and Susan Keniston for their sensitive and careful editing; and to Cathy McClure for seeing this work through to completion.

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# A CHILD'S PLAY LIFE

*An Ethnographic Study*



# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	ix
<b>Preface</b>	xvii
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	xix
<b>Part I Setting the Stage</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Play: A Scholarly Matter	3
<i>Historical Approaches</i>	5
<i>Recent Alternative Approaches</i>	8
<i>A Significant Development: Play as Communication</i>	10
2. Observing and Interpreting Play	13
<i>Research Procedures</i>	14
<i>Presentation of the Data</i>	17
<i>Some Influential Theoretical Lenses</i>	19
3. Portraits of the Participants	23
<i>The Child</i>	23
<i>The Child's Parents</i>	26
<i>The Researcher</i>	27
<b>Part II Story of the Relationship</b>	<b>33</b>
4. The Beginning Phase	37
<i>Session 1, September 19: The Preliminary Tests</i>	37
<i>Session 2, October 20: "I've Missed You"</i>	47
<i>Session 3, October 23: "Five or Four Chapters"</i>	57
<i>Session 4, October 30: "The Rule Is to Keep You in the Dark"</i>	68
<i>Session 5, November 9: "Barking as Talking"</i>	80

5. The Middle Phase	97
<i>Session 6, February 15: Transition</i>	98
<i>Session 7, March 14: A New Beginning</i>	102
<i>Session 8, March 28: Baby Talk</i>	118
<i>Session 9, April 24, Part 1: Coming of Age</i>	132
<i>Session 9, April 24, Part 2: "The Beautiful Life of the Gods"</i>	139
6. The Final Phase	150
<i>Session 10, May 9: The Game of "Darlene"</i>	150
<i>Session 11, June 6: Play Under Duress</i>	168
<i>Session 12, June 12: Emerging Discontents</i>	183
<i>Session 13, July 23: Conflicting Interests</i>	189
<i>Session 14, August 20: "I Don't Care. It's Up to You"</i>	197
<i>Endings</i>	205
<b>Part III Interpretive and Theoretical Points</b>	<b>207</b>
7. Summarizing Helen's Play Life	209
<i>Characteristics</i>	209
<i>Stages</i>	213
<i>Behavioral Components</i>	215
8. Implications Drawn from the Study	217
<i>Methodology</i>	217
<i>Environment</i>	220
<i>Relationships</i>	223
<i>Needs and Competencies of Young Children</i>	232
<i>Playing with Children: A Summary</i>	233
9. Theoretical Considerations of the Study	237
<i>Play Theory</i>	237
<i>Supporting and Modifying Prevailing Conceptions</i>	248
<i>Rounding Out the View</i>	250
<i>Epilogue</i>	255
<i>References</i>	257
<i>Bibliography</i>	265
<i>Index</i>	269
<i>About the Author</i>	279