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THE PLAY LIFE OF THE CHILD

Play Necessary to Natural Development.

Watch a normal, healthy child. As a baby, he kicks, waves his arms about, gurgles. As a toddler, he is constantly active, using his legs, hands and body in all the ways we know so well. Throughout childhood, if he has space and opportunity for play, he runs, climbs, rolls, tumbles, pulls and pushes, builds things up and knocks them down, digs, swings, hammers, splashes in water, throws and tries to catch things. You seldom see him standing still for any length of time, or sitting inactive; and he is rarely quiet and uncommunicative.

The child who does not play is a sick child. To get at the cause of the sickness is the business of an expert, someone who has studied all aspects of child development. There may be a physical cause: perhaps wrong feeding, or over-feeding, has interfered with the natural functioning of the organs and clogged the machine. But, as well as physical sickness, there is such a thing as *mental sickness.* A child may be unable to play because of an over-strong emotional attachment to his mother; or he may be suffering from some fear which paralyses his actions—he may be afraid of other children, afraid of being alone, afraid of hurting himself, or there may be some deep-rooted emotional disturbance that even the expert finds difficulty in discovering. In such cases a child may regain his capacity for play as soon as his anxiety is lessened, but there is always the danger that his trouble will become fixed, and difficult to cure, if it is not handled wisely in its early stages.

Even temporary inability to play is a serious matter, as it means a definite set-back in the child's natural development. Sometimes it is the result of too little association with other children of the same age, sometimes of too much adult attention or interference. Some grown-ups have the mistaken idea that a child has to be entertained, and are constantly suggesting to him what he should do and how he should do it, thus depriving him of the chance to think or to act for himself. Again, a child may lose his inclination to play if he is constantly kept quiet or made aware of his clothes, or if he has not enough suitable playthings. Children brought up under

such conditions may not only be unable to play, but may, in addition, develop feelings of insecurity and fear when they find themselves without the support of their over-attentive parents. The result is that when they are placed in ideal conditions for play, such as those provided by the Kindergarten, they are unable to use their opportunities because of their lack of confidence and feeling of insecurity.

It is essential to healthy development that the child should enjoy plenty of play in the companionship of other children.

Play as a Safety Valve.

All living things must have an outlet for their energies. Many adults find an outlet in their work or in their hobbies. A child finds it in his play, through which he works off the physcial energy that his healthy body is constantly generating. He tumbles, rolls, runs for the sheer joy of "blowing off steam."

But there are less obvious ways in which play acts as a safety valve. In his play the child *expresses the intense feelings* of love, hate, fear, anger, and happiness that surge through him. He knows that in his relations with real people he must keep some of these feelings in check, but he can vent his hate or his anger on his toys without the fear of hurting them or of receiving a rebuff in return.

Play gives him also an outlet for *phantasy*. He can be in his play what he longs to be in reality. He can be a tiger and eat people up, a parent with babies of his own, a fairy giving gifts. In his phantasy he can do the things he cannot do, or would be afraid of doing, in reality. "Mother sweeps and cooks and pours out the tea —I can be a mother and do these things too." "Daddy smokes a pipe—I am a Daddy smoking a pipe." In play of this kind the child dramatises his impressions of the outside world and finds a way of satisfying desires that would otherwise remain unfulfilled.

Understanding the Child Through His Play.

No aspect of a child's behaviour is more important for adults to understand than his play. His play mirrors so much of all there is to know about him; it is our surest indication of the child as he really is. Training and long experience are necessary to a deep interpretation of a child's play, but we can understand much of

what he is thinking and feeling through intelligent and unobtrusive observation. By noticing the way he meets his problems and handles his toys we can learn a great deal about his disposition, skill and ability to learn. Modern intelligence tests include a variety of toys which the child is asked to used in different ways. The tester pays as much attention to the child's approach and the manner in which he handles the toys as she does to his ability to follow instructions and solve the problems he is set.

In observing a child's play with other children we can learn something of his *social development*—that is, his ability to adjust himself to other children. Proper social adjustment is something that must be *learned*. Adults often fail to realise that a child has to grow out of his own world, where he is egotistically preoccupied with his personal needs and desires, into a world of many people and many conventions. He has to learn the right approach to social life and he needs very sympathetic people to help him gradually to understand the rights of others, community laws and the many mysteries of our intricate civilization.

It is very important that the child have companions of his own age all through life. He must live with others in order to understand others, and development proceeds most satisfactorily when he lives more in the world of his contemporaries than in the worlds of those who are either too advanced or too immature for him. Companionship with children of about the same age, and the sense of security given by the knowledge that there is an understanding adult in the background who will help him deal with situations and impulses that are too much for him alone, are important requirements for satisfactory social development.

The way the child's play develops indicates how the child himself is developing. As the child's body and mind develop his play becomes more and more varied, skilful and intelligent. Parents should follow the development of the child from birth and notice his growing ability to control his limbs, his organs of speech, etc. It is also important that parents should compare their child's development with that of other children of the same age, so that they can learn to know what is *natural to the various stages of growth.* Because of ignorance of how children develop, many parents be-

come anxious. They think their child is backward or delinquent when his behaviour is simply that of an ordinary healthy child. As a result a state of anxiety is created in the child himself—when his parents have no confidence in his goodness, where is he to find security? Sometimes parents fall into the opposite error and view quite common achievements as those of a genius. In either case the child is given from the beginning a false idea of himself and his powers, and all sorts of emotional difficulties may arise.

Norms of development—that is, what we may expect as natural development at different ages—have been established by experts who have studied large numbers of children. These are of great help to parents who want to get some idea of how their children are progressing.

The Adult's Part in the Child's Play.

A healthy child is developing all the time—each week sees a forward step. These advances in his capabilities must be recognised and provided for if his needs are to be satisfied and his progress assured. Many difficulties in development arise from the lack of natural outlets for the child. Peevishness, irritability, boredom, destructiveness, dependence, and general ill-health, all result from insufficient interests, and lack of space and opportunity for healthy, progressive play. Many parents urge their children to go and play, without taking an intelligent survey of the opportunities their garden or backyard provides, or recognising that the provision of a variety of suitable toys and materials for the different stages of development is their responsibility. Above all, space is needed if the intense activity of the healthy child is to be given proper scope. Happy the child whose parents have been able to take this into consideration when choosing a home. But even where living conditions are crowded, open-air spaces are usually provided where parents may take their children and give them the outlet they need. Parks and other open spaces should be used much more freely than they are.

With the advent of motor cars, the evil of confining children's activity has taken another form. A walk, play in the park, or on the beach, are of infinitely greater value than long drives in a restricted space with limited and fleeting views of the landscape.

Wisely used, of course, cars are means of giving children a change of environment and the opportunity to see new things and actively investigate them.

Parents should understand that if a child's ideas are to grow, if his imagination and knowledge are to develop, he must have stimulus—opportunities to investigate the things around him, walks, contact with nature, excursions to places of interest to him, picture books, stories, and contact with people. The young child depends on the grown-up to provide *the stimulation his growing intelligence requires.*

Further, if a child is to be free and happy in his play he must not be expected to divide his attention between his engrossing occupation and his clothes. The child who plays well becomes absorbed in what he is doing—and it is play carried on in this spirit that we should do everything in our power to encourage. One thing we should do is to *provide suitable clothes*—dungarees, gumboots for the sand or wet, sacking or waterproof aprons for play with water, clay or paint and sun-suits for summer water play.

We should also remember that a child's play should never be interrupted except for a justifiable reason. We would do well to stop and ask ourselves, "Why do I need to interfere with his play?" When the child is busily absorbed in creating something, his whole mind and his whole body are at work. Unnecessary interruption or interference may rob him of his inspiration, his effort to achieve something and his satisfaction in succeeding. When there is a real necessity to interrupt a child's play—when a meal-time, or bed-time, has arrived, for example—a warning such as "It is nearly bed-time," or "You have just a little more time for play," gives the child time to adjust himself to the change and prepare for it.

Although a child resents unnecessary interruption, he likes to feel that there is a sympathetic adult in the back ground, someone who can share his joys and sorrows and enter into his play when required to do so. The adult has a place, and an essential one, but it is *mainly in the background.*

Learning is a difficult process and a gradual one. It is important to understand that however crude and amusing the child's

attempts may appear to the grown-up, they represent sincere and earnest effort on the part of the child himself. How much inspiration and courage have been lost as the result of ridicule! It is a sound rule never to laugh *at a child,* but always to laugh *with him.* We should never forget that the soul of a child is more sensitive than anything man can create. When we consciously set out to understand a child's mind, which works so differently from that of an adult, he becomes a creature of absorbing interest, and we wonder how anyone could ever regard him just as a toy, or as a nuisance. And we begin to realise something of what is involved in the business of growing-up: for even when he is given the support of loving, understanding grown-ups, the child has still to face all the difficulties of his own nature and to conquer the anxieties that arise from his lack of experience and lack of knowledge.

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NURSERY SCHOOLS, FREE KINDERGARTENS, CHILDREN'S PLAY CENTRES.

These are all places where excellent provision is made for happy, healthy play under the guidance of people specially trained to understand the child's needs.

Nursery Schools make provision for children from the toddler stage onward. As the name implies, they provide all the requirements of a well-run children's nursery founded on an educational basis. The staff consists of people trained to understand the physical, mental and emotional make-up of the child. Children attend the Nursery School for approximately 5 to 6 hours daily. They eat, sleep and play under guidance and supervision.

Free Kindargartens: These provide a trained staff and *are open for* children between the ages of 3 and 5 years. The children attend during the mornings from 9 until 12. The name "Kindergarten" means children's garden, and the aim of a good kindergarten is to provide for happy, healthy play out-doors when and