

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

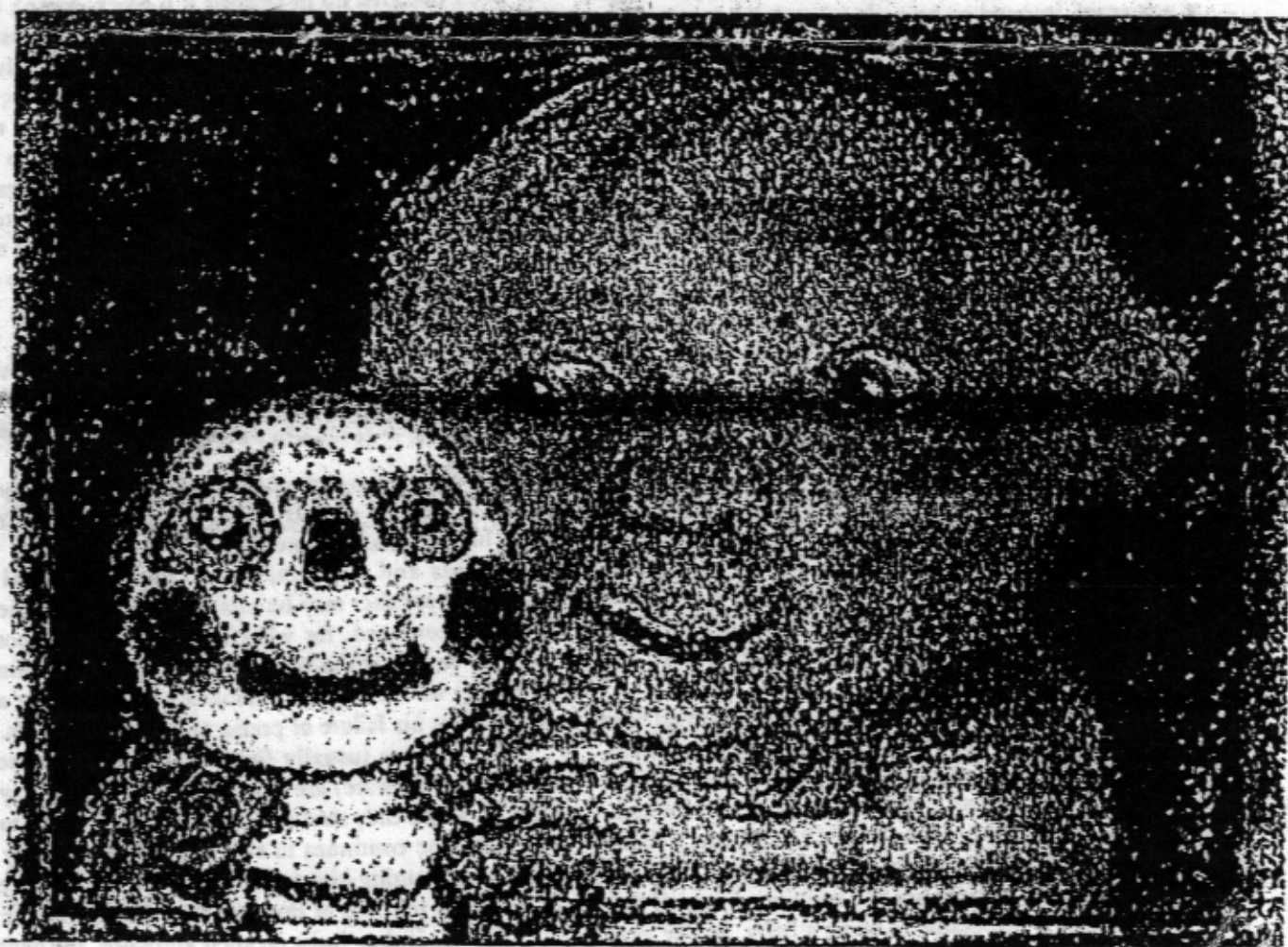
THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

BY BRUNO BETTELHEIM

“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 to 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 stick-to-itiveness, 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 school-work. 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 immediately, 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 tenacious 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—this is their play, 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 prevent 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 gener-

al—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, motivated 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 intellectual 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 consequence 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 encouragement 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 dreaming 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, organized sports—which leave them hardly any time simply to be themselves. In fact, they are continually distracted from the task of self-discovery, forced to develop their talents and personalities as those who are in charge of the various activities think best. Today academic teaching begins in kindergarten, if not in nursery school. Kindergarten, as conceived by Friedrich Froebel 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 pressure his parents to entertain him or will turn on the television set. It is not that the bad of such mass-produced entertainment drives out the good of inner richness. 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 another obstacle to the child's development of his inner life.

Play, Games, and Rules

MOST ADULTS FIND IT EASIER TO INVOLVE THEMSELVES directly in complex, adult games, such as chess or baseball, than 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 mature 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. *Games*, however, are usually competitive and are characterized 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 in-

teraction 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 suggest, "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 while 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.