

1 The Importance of Playing

When Debra comes to nursery school each day, she is ready to play. When Jimmy arrives, he says, "I'm gonna play with my friends." Another time he says, "Play with the dumper." I asked Katie's mother what she expected Katie to do at school one day. Her reply, somewhat resignedly, was, "Well, I expect she'll just play." When Joey and Jennifer arrive too early, I say to them, "Your teacher isn't here yet. You may go to Miss Alyce's room and play until she comes." When their teacher arrives, she says, "I'm going to put out the red clay to play with today." When Betsy is ready to go home, I ask, "What are you going to do after you have your lunch?" "Play-ay-ay-ay!" she says, drawing the word out with relish as though she hadn't played for weeks. When any parent who has ever had a child in nursery school or a kindergarten that is not trying to emulate first grade asks "What did you do today?" he or she hears on many occasions, "Oh, nothing—just played," even though the child knows full well that the mother's face will reveal tremendous feelings of disappointment. On the other hand, as Eric was leaving school one day, one of the teachers asked him, "Eric, did you do anything special today?" His eyes lit up with enthusiasm as he said, "Yeah! I played!"

One day, I asked a group of eighty-five experienced nursery-school and kindergarten educators at a university seminar, "What in your collective opinion is the reason children want to come to your schools?" "To play!" they shouted in unison, as though the answer had been rehearsed. This answer was given in spite of the fact that over half of those educators worked in situations where play was downgraded because the emphasis was on teaching language and concepts, with tightly structured formats to follow.

The common denominator in these incidents is the free and natural use of the word *play*. That is how it should be. No matter what the program, no

matter how the adults may try to turn it into something else, the primary occupation of most children before cultural inhibitions and formal schooling take over is *play*. Play is their way of coping with life. Play is early lifehood education at its best.

Theories about the influence of play on the development and education of children are based on observations of children at play naturally. They are observed through various stages of growth. Then, in most formal situations, complex programs and models are devised to insure that the children are *taught* these things at the appropriate ages, instead of concentrating on giving them the kind of environment and offering the guidance in which they will learn what they are ready to learn anyway.

By the time children reach four years of age, they have learned many things without formalized teaching programs. Somehow, by that age, normal children everywhere learn to walk, run, jump, climb, tumble, hide, tease, say "no," and maybe "please." They learn about hot and cold, and the way things taste, and to push, pull, stack, and knock things down. They know what bugs are, as well as airplanes and trees. They can tell the difference between one chocolate cookie and three, whether they can verbalize that difference or not. They can classify people as to whether they are family, friends, or strangers, even though they may not necessarily be able to use the word "stranger." They can tell you which is their neighbor's apartment or house and which is the family's, that they like the smell of some things and dislike others, that they can reach certain things and that other things are too high—or too hard, or too far, or too tight. Much of their knowledge depends on their cultural background, but it is extensive in any case when compared to what little knowledge they have at birth.

Yet, about the time that children are showing evidence of the vast amount of learning they have acquired along the way, we start inhibiting the process of learning by denaturalizing it in the name of education. We look at a child and say, "You've played around long enough. Now it's time to learn something." To do this we must assume that we know what all children are thinking and what they are interested in and what they will react to at any given moment. The result is overprogrammed curriculae, rote teaching, line standing, patterns, testing and retesting, no-talking rules, competitiveness, comparisons, and other well-known classroom techniques. Too often these unrealistic goals overwhelm the individual and sacrifice his worth as a human being to the all-powerful objective.

Children learn through the processing of sensory information. They hear, feel, see, smell, and taste. The sensory input usually comes from some kind of movement, or it results in producing a movement, voluntary or involuntary. When the brain receives sensory information, some kind of muscular activity takes place at almost the same instant it is processing that

information. The sensory information is relayed to the brain and then back to those parts of the body that will respond. When this response takes place, perception occurs.

A simple example might be given of Kevin, who is playing with blocks. He puts one block on top of another and then adds a third one. He's done that before and it is easy. Now he adds a fourth. He has made a small tower. Then he puts a fifth block on, but it doesn't set exactly the way he meant for it to and one end is sticking over the edge of the tower. He sees the tower wobble back and forth for an instant and then it collapses. After three or four such experiences, Kevin will probably have formed the perception that when the tower he is building starts to wobble, that means it is going to fall in another instant. This perception will be further strengthened when he begins to anticipate the collapse and, as he observes the wobbling, he experiences a sinking feeling inside of himself, in anticipation of his disappointment. Or perhaps his muscles tighten in anger at his failure. Meanwhile, the foundation has been laid for the formation of concepts regarding balance, stacking, gravity, wobbling, apprehension, and so on.

Play is a natural function, and the learning it leads to is achieved by the well-accepted process of "doing," by a sequence of exploration, testing, and repetition. Books may provide us with facts and patterns. Lectures may give us clues. But actual learning comes through doing. Through doing we learn to drive automobiles, to cook and sew, to write and paint pictures, to repair machinery, roller skate, play tennis, and do all the other activities that make up our daily lives.

The creative play philosophy is based on the premise that the more our emotions are involved, the more sensory information we receive, the more easily learning takes place. This is why play is important. The natural world of our less sophisticated past provided opportunities for "learning by doing" either through the freedom and the space for play, or through the need, for economic, cultural, and societal reasons, to participate in community responsibilities at a very young age, and to assume family responsibilities even younger.

Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782-1852), along with the American philosophers William James (1842-1910) and John Dewey (1859-1952), and many others, promoted the principles of learning by doing, learning through play, and the right of a child to a joyful childhood. The idea of relating education with happiness and joy has met considerable opposition in our society. Many people still retain a strict, almost punitive, attitude toward schooling.

It is important that we discontinue viewing the child as some unique creature that will one day be a human adult. Rather, we should take joy in being able to participate in the lifehood of a person who is undergoing a

process of growth and development that will continue, to some degree, through his entire life.

There is presently a great deal of research on play in relation to learning. From it has grown a number of new theories, each vying for acceptance and adding to the confusion of those who may be looking for one pat answer, when, in fact, there is none. One of the problems in using theory to arrive at an understanding of play is the difference between the perceptions of adults and children. Being adults, we can consider play with adult perceptions. We know that because of their immaturity, children have views that differ from ours. We can understand and accept that their perceptions are different, but in no way can we perceive as they do. Even if we record their responses to one stimulus a thousand times, we still have to interpret them from an adult's point of view. So we cannot be certain of knowing the children's real world or of understanding what drives them to play. The closest we can come is to relive periods of our own early lifehood that come to mind and try to recapture some of the emotions, thoughts, and feelings of the time.