

“Play With Me, Mommy!”

Rahima Baldwin

It is amazing the number of children who have forgotten how to play. Left to their own devices, they are at a loss and require constant adult input and involvement. Parents, on the other hand, have bought into the idea of quality time to make up for all the time they aren't with their children, but they find that doing puzzles together feels artificial or isn't satisfying to either party

A first step toward creating a more integrated life is to let the children do more things with you. Children love to 'help,' to be doing the same things an adult is doing if they are not forced to do so. So let your child fold the laundry with you or hold the dustpan or help with the dishes. It will take you longer, but the time you spend together will be shared and will be a delight for your child.

It is beneficial for children to see adults doing real work, their fascination with the construction sites or workmen is universal. When they can see things being transformed through our hands, they see the human element at its best in a person's ability to be creative. So much of our work has been taken away from us today, perhaps some children see their mothers bake bread, but very few get to watch or imitate ironing. What do your children see us doing most, Rahima asks, as she pounds away at the type-writer? Providing examples of work, with real movement and examples they can imitate in their play, enables children to try on the roles and actions of adult life.

Children take everything into their being and will imitate not only the actions they see, but also the emotions behind them. For example, if they see a workman hammering in anger, they will copy the entire gesture in their play, not just quietly hammer on something. For this reason it is good to watch the quality of our gestures around a young child. Do we fling something aside in carelessness or anger? Do we stir the cake batter much too fast when our four-year old is there? Our attention to detail and movement can really help development of the young child.

Aside from providing children with chances to observe and help with real work, we can provide them with toys that let them transform life into their play. Child-sized brooms, hammers, dishes and so forth, lend themselves to imaginative play. And toys of natural materials, such as wood, cotton or wool, connect the child to something living.

Toys that are unfinished or archetypal lend themselves to imaginative play more than the plastic figures that are completely finished. A simple stand-up doll made of felt and stuffed with wool can be any of several characters, whereas a Star Wars figure has a definite and fixed identity and modes of action. Simple knot dolls made without faces enable the child to have that doll be a boy or a girl, and be happy, sad or angry. This is in marked contrast to the chrome and plastic dolls with their painted faces or imbecilic expressions.

Children want to grow and finish their own bodies. By having to finish the dolls and toys with their imaginations, they are involved in the real work of early childhood. Such simple toys as a pine cone and chunk of wood that has been whittled a bit lend themselves to the imaginative transformations children naturally bring forth. First it is a boat, then a person, then a log under which treasure is hidden. Given a few simple toys and a few simple costumes, children can be happy for hours playing by themselves or with one another.

Another reason that many children can't play is that they have become passive from always having adults do something for them and from watching so much television. The average pre-school child watches six hours of television a day, time when the child is unnaturally motionless while being bombarded by images. A child used to creative play will ignore television or will want to turn off 'Sesame Street' so she can play with her own puppets (imitation). But children who have been brought up on television as a before-dinner and Saturday-morning baby-sitter will sit passively or will only imitate the kinds of purposeless movement they see on the screen or in the cartoon characters.

Television also decreases the child's imaginative powers by providing powerful images that go in and come right back out in imitative movement. Stories which are heard, on the other hand, demand the child make them his or her own before acting them out in free play. The difference in the play of pre-school and kindergarten children who have watched television or who have not is very noticeable.

If children are allowed time and space to play on their own, a progression in their imaginative play will become apparent. Play for the child under three years primarily involves large movement and getting control of the body- jumping, running, climbing. Around the age of 2 1/2 to 3, the imaginative element will start to enter into the play, but play will be primarily solitary. Several children of that age will play next to each other but not really together. By the age of four, social interaction is predominate in group imaginative play, and by age five they are likely to spend more time planning who will be what than actually doing the scene. Play has the valuable role of helping the child come into earthly life, and internalise the impressions taken in. Children are a real mirror in their play for the gestures and tone of voice of their parents, siblings, teachers and television - in short, everything that they perceive works very deeply and will be expressed in their play.

The dilemma of the first child is that there is usually too much adult attention and concern. Such children tend to be overprotected and become overachievers because they have had all of their parents' time and anxiety showered upon them. With second and third children, the mother is more relaxed, and doesn't have the time she had with the first child. If there are no other children in the neighbourhood, or if the child remains an only child, a conscious effort can be made to have children over or to arrange an informal playgroup or participate in a nursery.