
Book Reviews

The Role of Play in Human Development

Anthony D. Pellegrini

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. References, illustrations. ix, 278 pp. \$49.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780195367324

In his introduction, Anthony D. Pellegrini explains his purpose is to write “an academic book” (p. 3), and that his perspective is influenced by his own scholarly experiences and research interests. These, he states, have been guided by an orientation informed by evolutionary theory related to the role of play, by the extensive body of research on animal play, and by his own research. He suggests that much of the play research focused on the play of human children and on the role of play in educational practices has not been especially fruitful. He says that the research, in fact, may have used questionable research criteria and may have made unwarranted assumptions. Thus, his perspective is one that attempts to bring the extensive information about the evolutionary context of both nonhuman and human play together with the more standard theoretical approaches used in early-childhood research on play. He hopes this different perspective will have positive consequences on both child-development research and edu-

cational policy decisions. While this is an ambitious goal, readers may find that both the density of his writing and his segues into a number of more esoteric research areas within certain chapters together make it difficult to gain the integrated perspective Pellegrini seeks.

The book begins with chapters that review definitions of play and prominent theories of play drawn from ethological, developmental, and educational sources. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 discuss the role of play in promoting behavioral plasticity, cultural cohesion, functional skills, and social interactions. Next, individual chapters analyze specific types of play, such as object play, locomotor play, and pretend play. Chapter 11 addresses the role of games and the similarities and differences of games and play. Pellegrini then explores the value of all forms of play in education, and his final chapter presents the conclusions that draw these strands together. In each chapter, he provides an exhaustive discussion of early and recent literature on each issue, calling on the many theoretical and methodological perspectives from which play has been studied. The author thoroughly documents the importance of the work of early theorists and compares them to more recent ethological, developmental, and educational studies.

He spends time in a number of chapters discussing his view that much of the play research conducted by educators and educational psychologists has used categories of play types and qualities that are incompatible with the theoretical definitions used in other disciplines and in much animal research. Pelligrini concludes that play research methods used in studies with children may need rethinking.

The reader who is interested in the history, culture, and controversies in theory and research concerning play will gain an enriched perspective. However, the coherence of chapters related to types of play seem less effective, perhaps because of the author's attempt to include many diverse views on the subjects. For example, in the chapters on locomotor, pretend, game, and object play, the level of detail varies: chapters include long descriptions of some new and some older studies, while other important recent research is mentioned only briefly or not at all. Interestingly, in spite of the exhaustive reviews of many studies, Pelligrini does not mention play with technology-enhanced materials: augmented pretense, virtual object and locomotor play, and computer games.

The chapter on social play is especially well written, and it discusses the author's own extensive research on rough-and-tumble play. This discussion really seems to come alive, and it raises some compelling arguments that this play is a more effective way of teaching social skills than a didactic "social skills program." Pelligrini makes another important point in several chapters that the research on play and human development has focused primarily on the few years of young children's lives rather than including the later childhood years. He argues for the necessity

of studying the entire age span through an ethological perspective.

Although the author's treatment of his subject demonstrates sound scholarship, the density of the writing style sometimes interferes with the clarity of his points, especially when he diverges from a main idea to give detailed substantiating and disconfirming evidence. In relation to other relevant works in the literature, this book works best as an academic book that could be used more as a reference, especially for reading particularly relevant chapters, rather than as a general text in an undergraduate—or even a graduate—level classroom. It provides a thought-provoking perspective, however, and it certainly raises good questions about why and how the various disciplines that have studied play could have such different foci. Finally, this book asks whether the author's goal of improving developmental and educational research on play and of making better use of play research by practitioners is actually achievable.

—Doris Bergen, *Miami University, Oxford, OH*

Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul

Stuart Brown, M.D., with Christopher Vaughan

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Our culture seems to have a love-hate relationship with the act of playing. On the one hand, we value our leisure time and