
Book Reviews

Understanding Children's Worlds: Children and Play

Peter K. Smith

West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2010. Images, references, index. 256 pp. \$32.54 paper. ISBN: 9780631235224

Peter Smith is a leading play scholar. Starting with his dissertation in 1970, Smith has devoted forty years to the study of play. His contributions have been many, and they include one of the first evolutionary analyses of play in children and animals, numerous edited books on play, and his groundbreaking observational and experimental research on the nature and consequences of play. As academic interest in play has waxed and waned, Smith has continued to devote considerable energy to the study of this important human activity.

In his new book *Understanding Children's Worlds: Children and Play*, Smith brings his considerable expertise to a wide range of issues. After an introductory chapter devoted to defining play and research methods, he discusses the history of play studies and provides an analysis of play theory. He then devotes two chapters to animal play, considering structure and evolutionary functions. Following these, contributor Yumi Gosso provides a

chapter on play in different cultures. Subsequent chapters by Smith present physical activity and object play. The next two chapters address pretend play, followed by a discussion of implications for practice.

Overall, this volume provides a readable summary of the current research and theory on children's play, and it would be an excellent textbook or supplementary reading for an undergraduate or graduate class on child development, social development, or children's play. The book is of considerable interest to play scholars as well, because it provides a state-of-the-art review of current research and suggests directions for future inquiry. Particularly strong are the sections on history and theories, the functions of animal play, cross-cultural similarities and differences in play, experimental studies of play consequences, and pretend play.

Throughout the book, Smith refers to the "play ethos," or "a strong and unqualified assertion of the functional importance of play, namely that it is essential to adequate (human) development" (p. 28). Although Smith clearly advocates for children's play, he is one of the field's most outspoken skeptics and the leading researcher to date who has conducted rigorous experiments exploring the consequences of children's play. In contrast

to earlier studies that demonstrated the effects of play on children's creativity and problem solving, Smith and colleagues showed that after adding the appropriate experimental controls for adult stimulation and attention, play was no more effective than structured training. Smith uses these results, and the results of a number of descriptive and correlational studies, to argue that play should be viewed as a "middle way," that is, "play, while not 'essential for development,' does have important and beneficial functions" (p. 213). He cites the developmental concept of "equifinality," which he explains as "the idea that there are different routes to the same developmental goal or outcomes" (p. 68).

Smith addresses head-on the major challenge to play research—the difficulty of unequivocally demonstrating the benefits of play. Although we all know that play is important, it is extremely difficult to confirm its importance empirically. In his review, Smith examines all types of evidence—studies of play structure, sex differences, developmental differences, and correlational and experimental research. The main challenge is demonstrating the benefits of play using the gold standard of causal inference—the controlled experiment. Because children and young animals are spontaneously playful, they may already demonstrate sufficiently high levels of play to yield beneficial effects, possibly yielding experimental enrichment ineffective. Conversely, although play deprivation studies have been conducted with certain animals (especially rats), in most studies the animals are deprived of more than play experience, so causal conclusions are difficult. Even in the play enrichment studies that do work, the benefits

for children usually do not exceed those experienced by children in other nonplay conditions (e.g., attention or training controls). And given the spontaneous playfulness of children, it may be difficult to have training conditions where the children do not play.

In the final chapter, Smith draws the following conclusion: "Although the experimental studies of play—when viewed critically—do not prove that play is essential, or in most cases even superior to certain other possible experiences, nevertheless play comes out well on the overall balance sheet. . . . Play is clearly one way for children to learn lots of things. For young children it is a natural, enjoyable way, and often as effective as more structured activities" (p. 216).

Although I agree with Smith and share his skepticism, it may be too early to give up on the notion that play provides children with unique benefits. As Smith points out in his first chapter, a major difference between play and nonplay is its spontaneous nature. Play is "unconstrained and done for its own sake" (p. 13). It is a child-centered, not an adult-centered, activity. Therefore, although children may develop the same skills in play and nonplay contexts, subtle differences may exist in what is learned. Such differences may be detected only when spontaneous action is required or when children need to adapt their skills to novel situational demands. Because play researchers typically use standardized assessments of learning and development, the unique effects of play may be obscured. Measures that are more sensitive to play effects could be developed by closely observing how learning differs in play and nonplay contexts, and then using this knowledge to assess

competencies unique to the play. Such competencies might contribute to the development of autonomous, flexible behavior patterns—competencies that help prepare children for a challenging and unpredictable world.

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Reflective Playwork: For All Who Work with Children

Jacky Kilvington and Ali Wood
 London: Continuum, 2010. Images, index. 169 pp. \$28.84 paper. ISBN: 9780826497642

I am told that playwork, either as a job or as a way of working with children, is not a familiar concept in the United States. It is certainly a contested one in the United Kingdom (U.K.), perhaps because playworkers have to contend with a number of contradictions not faced by others working with children and young people. Playworkers in the U.K. work with school-aged children (approximately from four- or five-years-old to fifteen-years old), and their relationships with children at play aim to be more egalitarian than the standard expert-to-novice relationships within most forms of children's work. Playwork principles call for the playworker to support children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play. And play, as Jacky Kilvington and Ali Wood point out in the opening pages of their book *Reflective Playwork*, is something that children mostly prefer to do away from the eyes of adults. As if

that does not provide enough of a contradiction, working with the playwork principles' definition of play as a process that is freely chosen, personally directed, and intrinsically motivated raises all sorts of questions about power and control, purpose and benefit, even about childhood itself.

Kilvington and Wood are at pains to point out that although there is a job (perhaps even a profession) called *playwork*, not all playworkers use a playwork approach; conversely, a playwork approach can be used in any adult-child relationship or context. In nine short chapters, the authors outline an approach to working with children that foregrounds: (1) play for its own sake, highlighting the myriad obstacles to such an approach, obstacles that include dominant and entrenched understandings of the value and purpose of play and childhood; (2) the impact of legislation including health and safety, child protection, and inspection; and (3) instrumental outcomes (learning, development, crime reduction, tackling obesity, and so on) of publicly-funded services for children.

The foreword to this informal and accessible book sets the tone as each of the authors recounts her own childhood play experiences and journey into playwork. After a brief introduction to playwork and playwork principles, the first chapter enlarges on their term *reflective practice*, providing a model and illustrating it with their own personal reflections. These personal reflections are sprinkled throughout the book and serve both to illustrate key points in practice and also to show how much the small, idiosyncratic, and personal count in working with children at