Educators and child specialists have recently focused attention on the “play deficit” facing children in the twenty-first century. Increasingly, parents find it challenging to promote imaginative play, given the seductive draw of the screens of iPads, iPhones, and computers. Children have to be taught the playful pursuits in which past generations routinely participated. In addition, 40 percent of the schools in the United States have eliminated or curtailed recess, and parents have to protest loudly to bring it back.

Anna R. Beresin’s book Recess Battles comes at an opportune moment. This longitudinal ethnographic study documents the history of recess and the culture of children’s play in a particular working-class, multiracial, public elementary school in Philadelphia (the Mill School) between 1991 and 2004. As Beresin argues, this book is distinguished by its “documentation of children’s culturally stylized processes of invention within the framework of a particular urban historical context.”

Beresin deftly integrates theory and data as she explicates how children—beyond the surveillance of adults—craft stories, rhymes, songs, and games such as handball, hop scotch, and wrestling—all responsive to local power structures and geographies—as well as discusses the time periods in which they played. Adults, she notes for example, disliked the game of Sui (short for Suicide), a form of “old-school” dodgeball that uses tennis balls. The adults banned kids from playing the game in the gym. Nevertheless, the game was wildly popular with the children because of its sense of danger. In 1991 only boys played Sui, but by 1999 girls played it too. Girls on the playground showed agency by bringing their own balls from home to play Sui, prohibiting male intruders and maintaining an ever-vigilant watch for adults who might break up the game. Using audio and video
In upper middle-class neighborhoods, they perceive recess as a distraction from academics. Important research has argued that recess, even fifteen-minutes worth, promotes better behavior in the classroom. On the playground, children of diverse social classes and ethnicities mix and learn from one another. As Beresin so artfully argues, games and recess provide “a lending library for trying on ‘otherness.’” While adults find the playground a risky and violent place, Beresin argues that it provides a space for “bodily ways of knowing.” Children do not learn the art of negotiation in front of a computer screen.

Beresin’s book provides a fascinating and much-needed perspective on children’s play. Interested readers might also want to look at the considerable body of complementary work by linguistic anthropologists, sociologists of childhood, ethnomethodologists, conversation analysts, and folklorists including Linda Hughes, Ann-Carita Evaldsson, Susan Danby and Carolyn Baker, Amelia Church, Sigrid Berentzen, William A. Corsaro and Thomas A. Rizzo, and my own studies in children at play.

Anna Beresin’s *Recess Battles* provides a masterful and well-documented account of how children socialize children in the midst of the battles they must fight on the playground. Her very readable and engaging text will certainly have a powerful impact on social scientists, educators, and anyone concerned with the nature of children’s play.

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