
Book Reviews

The Cambridge Handbook of Play: Developmental and Disciplinary Perspectives

Peter K. Smith and

Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, eds.

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019. List of figures, list of tables, list of contributors, editorial introduction, and index. 747 pp. \$56.99 paperback. ISBN: 9781316640906

This comprehensive collection, with chapters addressing different areas of play, features work from an impressive list of experts in the fields of education, psychology, family science, animal science, playwork, sociology, anthropology, history, and others. An indispensable resource for play, this well-organized handbook includes such sections as the “Evolution of Play” (including mammalian play), “Development of Play in Humans,” “Historical and Anthropological Context,” “Theories of Play and Research Methodology,” “Play and Learning,” “Play with Special Groups,” and “Play Spaces and the Rights of Children” and offers current research on different types of play and classic theories about play.

The difficulty of defining play proves a persistent theme throughout the book, but the editors agree on the voluntary or self-chosen nature of play. For example, Peter Gray, Gordon M. Burghardt, and Sergio M. Pellis all believe that an individual cannot be forced into an activity for it to be labeled play—whether human play or play among other animals. However, Ditte Winther-Lindqvist notes that determining if an activity is play should not involve a binary categorization but rely on a continuum of which activities may be considered more or less playful (pp. 222–39).

Part 1 of the book on the evolution of play contains seven chapters including research about the evolution of humans, rodents, mammals, and play with pets. As part of a comprehensive play resource, part 1 is a great introduction to the literature about the evolution of play and play among different types of animals.

Part 2, on the development of play in humans, offers an overview of the different play topics within human play (such as infant play, parent-child play, imaginative play across the lifespan) and different types of play (such as object play, pretend play, rough-and-tumble play, games with

rules, and play with digital technology). In the valuable chapter on digital play, titled “Troublesome Binaries: Play and Learning On Screen and Off,” Fiona Scott argues that—contrary to popular belief—children’s interactions with television and other digital devices can indeed be playful and that during this type of playful activity, children are not completely passive but may be more or less active, depending on the specific type of activity. The chapter on rough play, too, is an asset. Although the research on this form of play is limited, it is important to note that there are many developmental benefits to rough and risky play. Aggression rarely results from these beneficial activities. This section also includes limited discussions of play throughout the lifespan. However, the authors do identify the need for further research in the area of adult and intergenerational play.

Many play scholars romanticize the play of the past. However, as Linda Pollock points out, “There has never been a time of completely carefree childhood for all” (p. 281). Many children in early modern Europe were encouraged to work hard at school at a young age and not spend much time at play. Part 3, focuses on the valuable historical and anthropological context, which includes descriptions of children’s play in Western Europe, foraging societies, South American indigenous communities, and areas influenced by Confucian values.

No handbook on play would be complete without a discussion of play theories. Various play theories appear throughout, but a chapter on Brian Sutton-Smith’s views about play proves a unique contribution to part 4. A noteworthy theme of Sutton-Smith’s work involves trusting

children to navigate the adult world they encounter; his work is also known for challenging Piaget’s belief that individuals stop playing when they develop logical reasoning. Addressing the challenges associated with the study of play, the chapter entitled “Methods of Studying Play” provides a methodological guide for scholars.

Part 5 covers the link between play and learning. The authors in this section consider formal and informal settings from varied cultures. They also examine the role of adults in children’s play. Part 5 also includes a chapter on toddler play in educational settings, noting that teachers need to be available when toddlers play but adults do not always have to direct the play. The authors also describe the various roles teachers assume during children’s play, including as play partners and leaders. This section concludes with an interesting argument from Susan Engel, who asserts that play is predominantly made up of inquiry and invention. Implications for future study and implementation of concepts abound.

Part 6 focuses on play with special groups, a vital component that contains chapters on play and children with autism, sensory impairments, physical impairments, play in medical settings, and play therapy. Play is essential to the healthy development of all children regardless of their interests and abilities. This section emphasizes adaptations and accommodations to meet individual needs of diverse children and ends with a review of the research on the effect of war and terrorism on children’s play.

The last section of the book includes chapters on additional play topics: play spaces, recess, playwork, and children’s

right to play. The playwork perspective seems important to consider because adults often have their own agenda for a child's play. Children should enjoy the opportunity to play free from adulteration and to follow their own agenda.

The Cambridge Handbook of Play: Developmental and Disciplinary Perspectives is an impressive collection of works written by experts in the field. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in the study of play.

—Julia Kroeker, *Florida SouthWestern State College, FL*

Let the Children Play: How More Play Will Save Our Schools and Help Children Thrive

Pasi Sahlberg and William Doyle
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. Foreword, acknowledgments, appendix, notes, select bibliography, about the authors, and index. 445 pp. \$24.95 hardcover. ISBN: 9780190930967

This informative, inspiring book is coauthored by Pasi Sahlberg, a teacher and the Director General of Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture, and William Doyle, American author and television producer. When Doyle interviewed a panel of educators for a book he was writing on school improvement, one of them—Howard Gardner (known for multiple intelligences) —suggested he take a look at Finland, which led Doyle to Sahlberg's writings. During one of Sahlberg's New York trips, the two met and decided to collaborate. Sahlberg became visiting

professor at Harvard, and Doyle became Fulbright Scholar in Residence at the University of Eastern Finland and advisor to the Ministry of Education and Culture. These authors, both fathers, gained insights into the role of play (or lack of play) in their new countries, through their own work and their children's experiences. What they learned illuminates the role of play for the education and well-being of children; and their insights have important implications for U.S. educational reform.

Reflecting on his experience in America, Sahlberg noted with dismay the negative effects on play of the country's focus on standards, early academics, and testing. He shares his experience in checking out preschools for his three-year-old son. In each case, the preschool was concerned about whether his son knew his letters and numbers and was therefore ready for its academic program. Knowing that young children learn through play and unconcerned about academics for three-year-olds, he and his wife decided to keep their son at home. Sahlberg's experiences in Finland had convinced him that "the life of a child is to play... with academic concepts, math and language, science, objects, drama, books, music, the arts, nature, sports, risk, tools, imagination, experimentation, trial and failure, with guidance from adults and completely on their own" (p. 36). In the United States, Sahlberg found schools focused on testing, curricula mainly restricted to the subjects tested, and many hours, even full days, spent without recess. He calls the "death of recess" an "American tragedy" (p. 171). Even in schools with recess, many of these play periods are led by coaches who organize play, claiming children cannot be