



The Wisdom of Play

HOW CHILDREN LEARN TO MAKE SENSE OF THE WORLD

Introduction by **David Elkind**



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“Many of our greatest thinkers locate their capacity for original and profound thought in their imaginative abilities, first developed through creative play in early childhood.”

– **Sharna Olfman**

Psychology Professor
Point Park University

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...a way to learn about self and the world through self-created experiences.

Introduction

– David Elkind, PhD


Play, like love and work, is an ambiguous term—with meaning that changes over the course of the human life cycle. The play, love, and work of children are simply different from those of adults. We easily understand the new side of “love” that emerges in adolescence, and that the adult concept of work—earning one’s own living—does not apply to children. Yet when it comes to children’s play, we tend to think of it in adult terms—as the opposite of work, engaged in for its own sake.

However, child play is very different from adult play, as

the brief articles in this booklet present from a variety of perspectives. For young children in particular, play is a fundamental mode of learning. An infant’s playful babbling teaches them to create all the sounds needed to speak their native tongue or any language. A toddler learns that when you bang a metal spoon or a wooden spoon, you get two very different sounds. A child learns through dramatic play that some children are bossy, others timid.

In playing board games like Checkers or Monopoly, a child learns not only strategy, but also to read the body language and vocal intonations of other children. And, in seeing how other children respond to him or her during the game, the child learns about self.

When children play games of their own invention, or even traditional games like hide and seek, they often make up their own rules as to who is to be “it” and what the limits of the game are. In this way, children learn what Jean Piaget called “mutual respect.” Mutual respect means that when one child makes a rule, the others follow. But the rule maker must in turn follow the rules made later by another child. It is only when children engage in self-initiated play of this kind that they acquire a solid sense of mutual respect.

Clearly, play serves a very different function for children than it does for adults. For children, it is a way to learn about self and the world through self-created experiences. That is one reason child-initiated play is so important and why it should not be replaced either by adult-organized sports or by academic activities disguised as games. When we appreciate the important role play serves in a child’s learning about self and world, we give children the time and opportunity to engage in the self-initiated play that is the surest way for them to fully realize all of their intellectual, emotional and social potential. 





...it starts with the child and not with the subject matter.

History

– David Elkind, PhD

Early childhood education, the care and instruction of young children outside of the home, over the last half century has become a downward extension of schooling. It is now the first rung on the educational ladder. In many respects, however, this most recent addition to the pedagogical hierarchy is quite different from its elementary and secondary predecessors.

The early childhood curriculum is the most holistic and least differentiated at any level of education. It is also the most solidly grounded in philosophy, in clearly articulated methodology, and in theory and research. Those who contributed to the discipline of early childhood education came from occupations and professions outside the academic domain. What they had in common was an understanding of children. And that is what makes early childhood education unique; it starts with the child and not with the subject matter.

The philosophical foundations of early childhood education were provided by John Amos Comenius, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau. Its curriculum and methodology were created by the likes of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Rudolf Steiner. Most recently, it was scientifically grounded by the research and theories of Sigmund Freud, Jean Piaget, and Erik Erikson. While there are differences in the approaches of these progenitors of early childhood education, they are overshadowed by one common principle: that early childhood curriculum and practice must be adapted to the maturing needs, abilities, and interests of the child.

This was the principle embodied in the first kindergarten program, developed by Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) and the first early childhood program to be widely adopted in both Europe and abroad. The kindergarten movement was propelled by the industrial revolution and the introduction of women into the factory labor force. Later, Maria Montessori's (1870-1952) early childhood program was also widely adopted both in Europe and abroad. But it was not until after WWII that early childhood

education came to be seen as an important first step on the educational ladder.

In America, the Head Start Program, launched in the 1960s for low-income children, had an unintended consequence. Although it was very effective, the title gave parents the impression that education was a race, and that the earlier you start, the earlier and better you finish. Middle-income parents wanted their preschoolers to have a head start as well. This gave added emphasis to the importance of early childhood education as the answer to improving the educational system.


As a consequence, kindergarten, once a half-day affair required by only 40 percent of US states, has become largely a full-day affair required nationwide. Academics, including math and reading curricula, testing and grades, are now the norm in many schools. Programs for younger children have expanded as well. Today, some 80 percent of children under the age of six spend part or full time in non-parental child care settings. Having your child cared for outside of the home, once looked down upon as an abrogation of a mother's maternal instinct, is now a socially accepted practice. Indeed,



those parents who choose not to put their children in out-of-home settings are the ones perceived as insufficiently concerned with their child's welfare.

With the rapid expansion and acceptance of early childhood programs, the basic principle

of early childhood education, supported by an overwhelming amount of contemporary research and classroom experience, is dismissed as irrelevant. Instead, we have had a politically and commercially driven effort to make early childhood education

“the new first grade.” The articles presented in this booklet make clear that a play-based curriculum is best suited to meet the emerging needs, abilities and interests of young children. We have come too far from where early education began: with the child. 

...the hummy rhythm of the children's attention to their work.

Time

– Sydney Gurewitz Clemens

A **two-year-old** on the sandy beach with a pail and a shovel lives in joy, outside of time. He has the attention span of a giant. He will play, with or without your company, as long as you'll let him.


A seven-year-old city child, at that same beach, lets himself hang out, observes people, birds, and water. Suddenly, without an external trigger, he gets up and sprints along the beach and into the water up to just the right height, stops, rests, considers,

relaxes. To children, time is measured in units of joy.

From the moment they greet the children in the morning, adults at a child care center or kindergarten convey their attitude about how time is to be used. Without pressure, there's time to say hello and ask how things are going. Courteous, relaxed interactions start a good day. Where time is organized rigidly and there's never enough of it, staff and children collide. Children want to keep on building with blocks until they've finished what they're building, and they resent having to tear down what they've built because

it's "cleanup time." Respecting this, some programs choose to let structures remain—out of the way of the cleaning staff—so building can continue tomorrow.

Waiting in line at the supermarket feels wasteful unless you play with the other people in line. So it is in the early childhood classroom. If children have to wait, they will get impatient or angry—not emotions you're trying to develop. Wise teachers thus arrange a fluid, responsive day with minimal waiting. In Reggio Emilia, Italy, children and staff work together on a project for as long as eight or ten weeks, returning to it most days, as if they had all the time in the world. A great deal can be accomplished by children working on this kind of extended timeline, and these children's ability to understand how the world works changes because mindful time was invested in important exploration.

A good classroom will flow. Teachers will have a general idea of a schedule, but respond intuitively to the hummy rhythm of the children's attention to their work. Like good parents and good friends, good teachers tune in to those they care for, and promote a flowing, peaceful use of time. 





...bringing children into a space of their unique knowing and understanding.

Imagination

– Richard Lewis


Play is an act of imagining. When children go outside to play—running, skipping, jumping—what is activated is a different form of knowing. It is a way of believing that allows children, if they wish, to run as fast as the wind or jump as high as the clouds, becoming, in an instant, a part of the exuberance and playfulness of nature itself.

In more solitary forms of play—be it a child playing in a sandbox, dressing up, or having a conversation with a doll—the imagination is now, through its own resources, at play. It is creating, pretending, performing, and bringing children into a space of their unique knowing and understanding.

Even our own adult imagining is a form of play. Haven't we all noticed that when we imagine, dream and reality, time and space, feeling and thought begin to intertwine, blending components

that reflect who we are and how we interpret the wondrously complex world around us?

For the child, both play and imagining are instinctive capacities. They are not only crucial to a child's sense of well-being, but also, if encouraged and supported, the path to envisioning possibilities, discovering new ideas, enlarging experience, and questioning and expressing the delicate boundaries of the known and the unknown.

Perhaps it is part of the genius of childhood to integrate play and imagining into one seamless activity. A way in which the life of our minds and our bodies are in dialogue with each other. Or, as one child, Maggi, said to me: "When I play it feels like you can't fall down. And it feels like the stars are carrying me." 





...nothing lights up a child's brain like play.

Brain Research


– **Stuart Brown, MD**
(founder of *National Institute for Play*)

A close look at young children worldwide reveals the spontaneous whole-self involvement of their bodies, minds and spirits in the joyful pursuit of play. Something deep within prompts them to enjoy the tug of gravity and urges them to move, chase each other, wrestle and squeal with delight—and to find pleasure through exploration and tinkering with objects around them, making toys or building fantasy forts and hiding places.

In studying what occurs in the brain during play, researchers into animal play have provided evidence of play-brain relationships that also apply to humans. They have discovered that play arises from areas of the “ancient” brain (that all mammals possess) that are organized for survival, and they flow “upward”

into higher centers, activating interaction with the environment. This flow is similar in humans and involves our hands, which are so richly connected with our brains, and a primary way we interact with the world. As kids play with blocks, fashion mud pies, and throw balls, they are constantly fertilizing neural growth and integrating complex areas that the natural world offers.

Immersion in the natural world is a central aspect of healthy child's play. High-tech industries such as NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory have found that their best overall problem solvers were master tinkerers in their youth. They have even altered their hiring policy to give high priority to this play background information.

In childhood play, it is a safe assumption that kids need more than a two-dimensional screen to gain competency. Children need free, hands-on play that is kid-organized, to maximize their potential. Nothing lights up a child's brain like play. 





...play works, but is seriously endangered in today's schools.

Research & Current Trends

– **Joan Almon & Edward Miller**
(Alliance for Childhood)

The vital importance of play in young children's development has been shown in study after study going back more than half a century. Nevertheless, early childhood education has in recent years become increasingly focused on teaching literacy and other academic skills, in part because of popular misconceptions about play being a waste of time.


Three recent university studies of public kindergartens, sponsored by the Alliance for Childhood, provide evidence of how far this trend has gone. A survey of 254 teachers in New York and Los Angeles showed that their full-day kindergartens devoted two to three hours per day teaching literacy and math and preparing



students for or giving them standardized tests. Play with blocks, sand, or water is rare. Most kindergarteners get 30 minutes or less to play per day; many have no playtime at all.

Policymakers and school administrators push early academics as a way to give children a competitive edge in a global economy, and to help children from low-income backgrounds catch up with

their middle-class peers. But those arguments are based on assumptions not supported by well-designed research. The federal government has invested heavily in research on early literacy, with disappointing results. The federal Reading First program, for example, significantly increased didactic, phonics-heavy reading instruction but had no effect on reading comprehension scores. Intensive test-driven programs may produce short-term gains in scores, but long-term research indicates that these gains fade away. Studies of Germany's experiment with academic kindergartens showed that play-based early education produced better results in reading and math, social and emotional adjustment, creativity, intelligence, oral expression, and "industry."

The research base on early education is clear: play works, but is seriously endangered in today's schools. 



... balancing one block atop another, they are registering principles of physics and support.

Building Blocks for Learning

- **Katrina Ferrara**, BA
- **Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek**, PhD
- **Roberta M. Golinkoff**, PhD

“Creating environments where children can learn through play is not a simple thing to do consistently and well...The role of the adult is critical...The adult designs an environment with hands-on, concrete materials that encourage exploration, discovery, manipulation and active engagement of children.”

– **J. Hewes**




Blocks. Seemingly simple, they actually offer children an entire classroom’s worth of opportunities for mathematical and spatial learning.

As children pick up and feel the rigid angles and smooth curves of wooden squares, circles, and triangles, they are learning the fundamentals of shape and proportion. When they distinguish the green block from the red, they refine their ability to note patterns and compare

features. And when they build towers by masterfully balancing one block atop another, they are registering principles of physics and support.

Research suggests that four and five year-olds given 15 minutes of free play will spend a third of this time engaged in spatial, mathematical, and architectural activities! Studies also show that this kind of play, especially with blocks, helps children discover principles such as symmetry and geometry and sets the stage for more advanced skills used later in mathematics and geography.

Given their utility as a creative medium, a foundation for learning, and a basis for fun interaction between parents and children, blocks are one of the most versatile and rewarding items in the toy box. No wonder the American Academy of Pediatrics recognized blocks as among the “true toys” that should be valued in our homes and schools. 



...we learn what we do.

Active Learning

– **Larry Schweinhart**, PhD
(HighScope)

Active learning is the way we all learn. From our beginnings, our brains are constantly growing, connecting their synapses in new ways and into increasingly complex structures. At birth, we first learn to make sense of booming, buzzing confusion. We learn from what we see, feel, touch, taste, smell, and do. We develop the special human abilities of language-speaking, listening, reading, writing, and discovering meaning. These new abilities enrich our lives with whole new realms of knowledge, but they never replace our immediate world of senses and activities. We learn what we do.

When we make a plan, we are learning how to work toward objectives. When we carry out



a plan, we are learning how to follow through on what we say. When we review the plan afterwards, we are learning how to take responsibility. When children do what we tell them, they are learning how to do what we say. When we ask them what they want to do and they do it, they are learning how to take initiative.

The HighScope Educational Research Foundation conducted a long-term follow-up study of three types of preschool education:

direct instruction, traditional nursery school, and HighScope's active participatory curriculum. Direct instruction teachers taught children lessons and how to give the right answers. Traditional nursery school teachers let children do what they wanted and followed their lead. Teachers in the active participatory program had children plan, do, and review their own activities and supported them in these activities. All three groups of children became better prepared for school, but the two more child-led approaches seemed to better prepare children for life—with fewer emotional problems and fewer crimes committed as teens.

Children engaged in active learning learned not just from the lesson content, but also from the educational activities themselves. 



...outside—all they need is time, playmates, and permission.

Nature

– **Rachel Grob**, MA, PhD
(Sarah Lawrence College)

Think back to when you were a child. Did you crave the outdoors? Did you have a favorite spot to play—a tree, a stream, a rocky crevice or vacant lot? Did you have a special place to hide, where you could watch without being seen and let your imagination run free? Did you resist being called back inside, wanting to swing one more minute with your face tilted up to the darkening sky or to finish a last exhilarating game on the street?

Because of our own experiences, many of us already know and feel the benefits of play in natural settings. Research corroborating our firsthand perceptions comes as no surprise, but it helps us understand why outdoor play is so essential. One reason is that nature offers unparalleled opportunities for exploration and experimentation. As landscape architect Samuel Nicholson put it, “In any environment, both the degree of inventiveness and creativity, and the possibility

of discovery, are directly proportional to the number and kind of variables in it.”

The number and kinds of “variables” outdoors are endless: plants, animals, insects, water, sand, dirt, dust, hills, holes—all of these are fascinating, and many change over time, constantly revitalized as material for children’s play. Nature is the very best place for children to find “loose parts”—that is, material for play that can be moved around and used in many ways. Pieces of wood can make a fort or a miniature world; rocks can serve equally well as pretend people or pretend food in an imaginary game; dirt can be sculpted into a palace for ants or dug to create a hole for buried treasure. The open-ended characteristics of the natural world excite play far richer than what children will ever find in manufactured toys that require them only to push buttons or follow pre-set rules.

In addition, the gross motor play children need to become physically adept emerges spontaneously and joyfully in the outdoors. The natural world offers room to run, irresistible


opportunities to climb, uneven terrain to be negotiated. Most children need no coaxing or coaching to burn calories outside—all they need is time, playmates, and permission from adults to explore what their bodies can do. As landscape architect Robin Moore writes, “The indeterminacy of rough ground allows it to become a play-partner, like other forms of creative partnership: actress-audience, potter-clay, photographer-subject, painter-canvas. The exploring/creating child is...using the landscape as a medium for understanding the world by continually destructing/reconstructing it.”

Nature offers children not just physical room to play, but mental and emotional room as well. The “secret spaces” young people need for private reflection and growth can be found in abundance, and children will use their time outdoors to nurture contemplative as well as active forms of playfulness. Their ability to relate creatively and peacefully with others expands in nature too; researchers have found decreased incidents of aggression and increased imaginative play and creative social interactions



Jonah – by Talia Grob Stewart (age 9)

in environments converted from asphalt to an “environmental yard” with ponds, gardens, a meadow, and trees.

Features of the natural world children explore with their senses by day, they play with in their dreams at night, and turn into poetry when they wake. 

***When I remember** my brother Jonah I picture him on the back of a whale.*

***It's raining** but Jonah doesn't care because he's already wet from diving into the water and coming up again like Jonah and the whale, his hands clutching the whale's neck.*

***I picture Jonah** on the top of a mountain his hands on either side, and his fingers spread out wide, with his open jacket flailing behind him.*

***When I picture Jonah** I picture him on the back of his favorite horse named Yawer, no saddle, no pommel, his hands grasping Yawar's mane.*

...a sense of power, control, and mastery of their own learning.

Open-ended and Creative Play


– Francis Wardle, PhD

I **observed some** young girls helping their mothers wash clothes in the stream. The Maya living in the highlands of Guatemala care for their children while engaging in work—the boys with the men, the girls with the women. On this occasion, a small group of three to five-year-old girls was helping their mothers. However, they soon got bored, so they started to invent a game by tossing the small pieces of soap to each other, and trying to catch the slippery objects. They delighted in the fun of a game that required great concentration, physical agility, and creativity! This game continued for a considerable length of time as the girls found different ways to enjoy this activity. The mothers seemed quite content to watch them have fun playing in the stream. It seems to me these girls were doing many things, including:

- **Creating play activities** to eliminate boredom;

- **Creatively adapting** everyday objects to play with;
- **Imposing new meanings** and uses on familiar objects and the environment;
- **Enjoying themselves** without needing to use expensive, technological or educational toys;
- **Finding a creative way** to have fun and enjoy each other's company.

Open-ended play materials are those that offer children many ways to engage with them. For example, children can play with sand, water, or clay in a variety of ways. In creative play, children use objects and toys to create stories, build constructions, and engage in a fantasy world. The use of materials in flexible and creative ways teaches children to be flexible and creative thinkers with abstract ideas and concepts.

The value of open-ended and creative play is that it enables children to explore a variety of creative uses of common materials and environments, challenges conventional ways to use materials, and gives children a sense of power, control, and mastery of their own learning. 





Author Biographies

We are especially grateful for the help and support of these authors, without whom this book would not have been possible. Thank you for your time, creativity and enthusiasm in writing these beautiful chapters. Thank you for your care and respect for children everywhere and your tireless work in celebration of childhood.

David Elkind, PhD, is currently



Professor emeritus of Child Development at Tufts University in Medford,

Massachusetts. His research and theorizing have been in the areas of perceptual, social, and cognitive development where he has worked to build on the theories of Jean Piaget. Perhaps Elkind is best known for his books, *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, *Miseducation*, and most recently, *The Power of Play*. Dr. Elkind also writes a weekly blog on child development issues at www.justaskbaby.com.

Sydney Gurewitz Clemens,



an early childhood teacher for more than thirty years, is a widely recognized author

and presenter on topics which involve hot cognition: children learning through things they are passionate about. These topics can be from the happy parts of life: early literacy, creativity, and many aspects of the work being done in Reggio Emilia, or from life's painful parts, including divorce, death and dying, and parents in prison. Sydney is the author of two practical and inspiring books on early childhood: *The Sun's Not Broken*, *A Cloud's Just in the Way*; *On Child-Centered Teaching*, and *Pay Attention to the Children: Lessons for Teachers and Parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner*. Visit her website at www.eceteacher.org.

Richard Lewis is a teacher,



author, and the founder and director of The Touchstone Center for Children,

an arts and education organization located in New York City.

(www.touchstonecenter.net)

The Center's particular interest is the role of the imagination within learning—and its relation to our understanding and expression of the natural world. Recent books by Richard Lewis include: *When Thought is Young*, *Living by Wonder*, *I Catch My Moment: Art and Writing by Children on the Life of Play*, and a collection of poems, *Shaking the Grass for Dew*.

Stuart Brown, MD, is a medical



doctor, psychiatrist, clinical researcher, and the founder of the National Institute

for Play. (www.nifplay.org) He first discovered the importance of play by discerning its absence in a carefully studied group of homicidal young males, beginning with the University of Texas Tower mass murderer, Charles Whitman. Dr. Brown speaks regularly to Fortune 500 companies and groups across the country on the importance of play in our lives. Most recently, he appeared at the New York Public Library. The producer of a three-part PBS series, *The Promise of Play*, he has also appeared on NPR and was featured in a cover story in *The New York Times Magazine*.



Joan Almon is

director of the US Alliance for

Childhood, a public

education and advocacy group that addresses issues affecting children's overall health and well-being. The Alliance is focusing on restoring play in kindergartens and other early childhood settings, as well as in the lives of all children. Materials can be found on their website at www.allianceforchildhood.org. For over 30 years, Joan was a Waldorf kindergarten teacher, teacher-educator, and consultant to Waldorf schools worldwide. She has written numerous articles and chapters on early childhood, play, and imagination.

Edward Miller, MEd, is a founder



of the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit research and advocacy organization, and of

the New York Coalition for Play. He is co-author of *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School* (2009), and he edited the Alliance's two reports on children and technology: *Fool's Gold* (2000) and *Tech Tonic* (2004). A former editor of the *Harvard Education Letter*, Ed has taught at Harvard University and at Sarah Lawrence College, where he is a member of the Professional Advisory Board of the Child Development Institute.

Kathryn Hirsh-Pasek, PhD, is



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Larry Schweinhart, PhD, is



an early childhood program researcher and speaker. He has conducted research

at HighScope Educational Research Foundation (www.highscope.org) since 1975 and served as its president since 2003. He has directed the HighScope Perry Preschool Study through age 40, the HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study through age 23, evaluations of Head Start and Michigan School Readiness programs, and the validation of the HighScope Child Observation Record. He received his PhD in Education from Indiana University in 1975. He and his wife have two children and five grandchildren.

Rachel Grob, MA, PhD, is a



faculty member in the Health Advocacy Program and directs the Child

Development Institute at Sarah Lawrence College. Activities of the Institute include research on play, a week-long summer institute on facilitating play, and collaboration on a series of films for public television. Dr. Grob is author of articles on parenting and childhood; her forthcoming book from Rutgers University Press is titled *Testing Baby: The Transformation of Newborn Screening, Parenting and Policymaking*. Her children, Jonah and Talia, play and write poetry at the Blue Rock School in West Nyack, N.Y..

Francis Wardle has a PhD in



Early Childhood Education from the University of Kansas. He has

been a Head Start director and national education director for Children's World Learning Centers. Currently he teaches at the University of Phoenix and Red Rocks Community College. Dr Wardle has authored several books, including *Play, Development, and Early Education* (with Johnson and Christie) and many articles on play. He is a member of Partners of the Americas, and a founding board member of the Starfish Educational Institute, which organizes an annual teacher training conference in Maceio, Brazil.

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Organizations

Alliance for Childhood promotes policies and practices that support children's healthy development, love of learning, and joy in living. Their public education campaigns bring to light both the promise and the vulnerability of childhood. They act for the sake of the children themselves and for a more just, democratic, and ecologically responsible future. Visit the website at www.allianceforchildhood.org.

Playing For Keeps: Association of Children's Museums (ACM) adopted Playing for Keeps as a leadership initiative in April 2008. Play has always been at the core of ACM's work and that of its members. Yet play opportunities for young children are diminishing, drawing increased concern from educators, parents, and the general public. Promoting the necessity of play and advocating that communities and families make play a daily habit has become more important than ever. Learn more at <http://www.childrensmuseums.org/programs/playingforkeeps.htm>.

International Play Association, USA (IPA/USA) is the national affiliate of IPA World, an international non-governmental organization, founded in Denmark in 1961. The purpose of the IPA is to protect, preserve, and promote the child's right to play. Specific interests include environments for play emphasizing universal access, leisure time facilities, programs that develop the whole child, play leadership training, toys, and play materials. Check out the website: www.ipausa.org.



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“For children in general, and for young children in particular, self-initiated play is a basic mode of learning. Through such play, children create new learning experiences that they might not otherwise encounter.”

– Dr. David Elkind



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