

Play and Toys In the Life of Toddlers

by

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How do toddlers play today? Instead of an answer one increasingly hears mothers say, “My child can not play. Either she runs around wildly or sits there bored. If I do not give her something to do, she can not think of anything herself.”

The ability of children to play seems to be disappearing rapidly. In order to stimulate their children, concerned parents often buy them one toy after another. But the situation just becomes worse. The child sits surrounded by an overabundance of toys and still does not know what to do.

What does the small child, born into this world, want? He/she wants to experience the world and learn to live. The little child is a sensory organ. Every perception takes hold of his/her entire body. Watch her as she drinks milk from her mother’s breast, it is as if her little hands and feet also taste the milk. A three-year-old can not help but hammer along when he hears someone else hammering! The entire body enjoys the glorious noise. A five-year-old will stand before animated figures in their exact same positions. He will sit next to the “singing figure” with hands folded on his knees and his back straight and, along with the “dancing figure,” he will lift his feet and jump and dance throughout the room.

The impressions come, uncontrolled and unfiltered; the small child receives them throughout his or her whole body and the body responds with movement. The body plays along and imitates. The child can do nothing else but imitate and repeat what comes toward him as sensory influences. The child is practicing life. This is the activity that we refer to when we speak of the “play” of a small child. Play is as natural to a child as swimming is to a fish.

What happens when a fish is put into a small container? It will either swim around wildly or become apathetically quiet. Are not our children in a very similar situation?

The toddler’s environment today

Children of our time are everywhere confronted with limitations. Very early on they experience what they may not do. “Do not touch the buttons

on the washing machine! Stay away from the electrical outlets or you will get a shock! Do not run into the street; cars are coming!” Adults are always doing something that the little ones may not.

“Do not play in the mud; you will get dirty! Do not run on the grass; the sign says ‘Keep Off!’ Oh, leave that dead earthworm alone; it is disgusting!” How can children gain a relationship to their environment this way? How can they get to know the plants and animals?

Water makes the children wet. Dirt makes their clothes dirty. Fire is dangerous and not for children. Cold drafts in the air will make them sick. There are signs forbidding things everywhere one looks.

And what do the adults do? Mother turns the knobs and small containers start bumping and making noise. She opens cans or cuts up vegetables (purchased already clean) into the kettle. And Father? What can the child experience and imitate from him when he is away from home most of the time? It is usually a very boring world that is surrounding the child. Where shall the child go with his need for imitation; where can he find nourishment for imaginative play?

On top of that, if the playroom is full of plastic toys (the doll feels like the car, the building block, or the sand shovel, sterile and monotone) and when Walt Disney cartoon characters or monsters are leering from the walls, then the child is living in a world of deception, disappointment and fear.

Are we parents and grandparents conscious enough of how unbelievably much the world has changed since our own childhoods, of how much the opportunities for natural experience, that we took for granted, have since disappeared? We saw horses in the city streets. We brought water from the well. We swam without danger in the Elbe and the Rhine Rivers and saw fish swimming there. We felt the warmth of a flickering fire in a coal stove. We ate salad and potatoes that we saw harvested.

Today a child must ask, “Where does our water come from?” The child knows nothing more than that a faucet is turned on and off. Yes, where does it come from? A girl declines to drink her milk because she once saw how a cow was milked. And many children think that vegetables grow on the supermarket shelves.

Today, the natural world is penetrated and covered by a non-transparent synthetic world. The child gets used to this. A city child can hardly experience the forces and elements which maintain and enliven us and the Earth. Finished products are available everywhere. We get the products already cleanly packaged in plastic regardless of whether they are carrots or nails. It is seldom possible to follow the production process. For adults, life has become more practical, hygienic, and comfortable. For children it has become unproductive and detached from experience.

Is it any wonder that children do not want to play? Where can their senses still be met with genuineness and versatility? They have plastic and

synthetic fabrics in clothing next to their skin. Car exhaust and chemical fumes cover up the many natural fragrances. Chemical fertilizers cause fruits and vegetables to lose their original flavors. Traffic noise drowns out the variety of sounds of life and of quiet. And what does the sense of sight give them? When a small child looks for the little man behind the television set, that shows us how seriously he takes the world, but he gets used to the fact that there is nothing to be found behind the television.

It is common knowledge that unused muscles become weak. But are these appropriate questions ever asked: "Can senses develop to be lively and alert when they are never used and never find a variety of activities? And how can imagination, that mysterious creative force that a child brings with him in abundance, live when he does not get any real nourishment and stimulation through the senses but only caricatures of the world!"

Playrooms and toys

If one desires to help children play today, one must help create an appropriate environment. The old, natural surroundings can not be reproduced, but even in the most desolate city one can create a lot of beautiful things with a little imagination and enthusiasm.

The child should be covered in silk, wool, cotton, and linen in plain colors. How differently each of these fibers feels on the body! Very young children will, with true aim, grab for the silk scarves. There is no substitute. A canopy above the cradle completes this picture of happiness.

However, the child can only enjoy this pleasure when he is not forced to lie on his stomach from the first hours of birth. I have sympathy for the poor little bundles who, with the greatest effort and at the most tender age, try to lift their little heads up to see out of the crib or the stroller only to be met with furniture, people's legs, the black asphalt, or speeding cars! What a perspective! The child who is relaxed and laying on his back gets an entirely different picture of the world. He can look up at the sky, follow the rustling leaves on the trees, and see the faces of people. Besides, the stomach position robs the child of his first toys; namely, his own hands and feet. A child is long satisfied to play with his own fingers! The next play things are then simple wooden mobiles that can be hung over a crib. They can be touched and emit tender sounds. The poor baby on his stomach must leave all that behind. As long as the baby is happy with the things in his immediate vicinity, he should be protected from the larger environment. Later, pretty, simple curtains around the bars on the crib give this protection.

This canopy, this "sky," this covering, this little house should not disappear from the child's room. Single-colored, straight pieces of cloth are enough, draped over a simple stand or stretched between furniture and bed, to create a play tent in no time. If they are hung differently, then the store is open. Or, the children wrap themselves in the cloth to step into other forms and roles.

Then the dolls are wrapped up or the cloths themselves become dolls. They are an inexhaustible toy.



Plain colors on the walls radiate tranquility and security. Repetitious figures or little flowers on the wallpaper have a disquieting effect and paralyze the imagination. Good art prints from the Old Masters or paintings done by parents can enliven the walls. True art has an immediate effect upon children, as does the enthusiasm invested in pictures painted by parents.

What a variety of experiences can be had with stable, massive wooden furniture! The pride a child feels when he can carry a heavy stool or push a table by himself! Their little hands love to glide over the wooden surfaces along the wood grain. (Sharp edges and corners that are so beloved by modern furniture makers are very disturbing in a child's room.) Then the little furniture movers come again and turn the furniture upside down to facilitate further adventures. Children should not be spared from experiencing the weight of objects. They must learn how the things of the Earth have different weights. How disappointing it must be if a child wants to lift a huge toy boat by exerting all of his strength only to discover that, made of plastic, it is so light that it practically flies into the air! It looks so heavy.

Just as with the weight of objects, children must likewise experience how some objects are more breakable than others. Why should one treat plastic dishes with care! But if a ceramic plate from the doll's kitchen gets broken, then little hands are much more careful from then on.

Plain wool rugs on the floor or the walls bring the right level of comfort to a child's room. How proud is the child if he sees the rug being woven on his/her mother's loom!

Which toys belong in this room?

First rule: Few, few! Toys usually have the fatal quality of rapidly reproducing. What treasures (not to mention plunder) again and again find their way into our homes as gifts! Parents must tactfully go about reducing the quantity of toys without insulting the gift-givers. It is helpful to have a large container into which some things can disappear for awhile and then suddenly reappear for special occasions.

A large basket with building materials should always be within reach: sawed-up branches made into blocks, pieces of tree bark, roots, and many irregular pieces that begin as waste in a carpenter's shop. The cleverest things can be built from these materials. Such a crooked and off-balance structure is not easy to keep together. It requires many tries and much balancing. Equilibrium is practiced here, and this is the beginning for many future engineers. In contrast, what a poor experience is offered by Lego's building blocks. One smooth, straight little block is snapped onto the next one. And they always hold and never fall down. One does not need much more than the tips of the fingers to use them. With natural building materials the entire hand must be used. Every piece feels different. The tree bark is rough and the roots are smooth. Pine cones and other tree fruits also belong here. One can build entire landscapes with them. Animals, flowers, and people made out of beeswax, produced for play in many colors (you can never have too much of this wonderful substance) can live in these landscapes. In warm hands the beeswax becomes soft and pliable, but as soon as it is formed then it hardens again very quickly. Please do not use 'play dough' which is always sticky and soils hands, clothes, and everything in the area.

Another item one should have on hand is good quality bees wax crayons, especially the block crayons that bring bright, strong colors to the paper and are not easily broken. The children quickly get used to making large, strongly-colored drawings.

One should not be worried about the choice of colors. Do not, for instance, choose only pastel colors or only the three basic colors. One can observe over and over again how the little ones enthusiastically reach for green. They will learn much later that green is a mixture of blue and yellow. And please do not leave out black! An emotional problem and difficulty can be put to paper using the black crayon and then the child can rid herself of the problem.

The drawings of their small children open up an interesting field of study for the parents. When left on their own the little ones know what they want to draw. With much enthusiasm they draw large spirals, circles, bars, ladders, the sun, and then, at some point, a head with legs. They will often give

explanations for their drawings, interestingly never copies of outer things. It is worthwhile to save all of these artworks and label them with names and dates. We have learned that children go through certain phases with their drawing and painting, and these are the same throughout the world regardless of race. It is very interesting to follow their stages of development. Just do not disturb the child when she is drawing or painting, nor have her color in patterns. Of course, this will change for school-age children.

Rhythmic toys

Already before birth the child experiences rhythmic movement from the mother's movements: breathing, walking, and so forth. After birth, this is continued by the up and down motion of a cradle. The little ones are endlessly happy with this motion just as they are with rhymes and songs. Soon the child is big enough to climb on the rocking horse and finally she can fly through the air on a swing set.

Some toys create rhythmic sounds, a little wooden figure that climbs a ladder or picking hens, for example. Children never tire of playing with these kinds of toys, and quite a lot of worry can disappear with the little climbing figure or through the joyful noises these toys make. Another new experience: The world around us makes sounds. Everything has its own tone. Even every kind of wood sounds differently and how much more different is brass, iron, and porcelain. Tone is something that must be available for children to consciously experience in our noise-filled era. Plastic is completely disappointing. It responds with a dull tone or no tone at all.

With all the toys that are given to children, the question should be asked: What does the child experience with each toy? Which senses are stimulated and in what way? Does it leave enough room for imagination? Certainly the best toys in the world are those that parents make themselves. That is also probably the best antidote for the childhood disease known as "buy me something!" which worsens with every toy purchased.

Dolls

Is it even possible today to buy a doll in a store that one would really want to give to a child? Even if the doll has a lovely facial expression, plastic is a highly unsuitable, soulless material to use to make something that should be loved by a child. When the dolls can move their mouths to laugh and cry "true to nature" or can stare at the child with cartoon-like features, then the dolls become fearful indeed. What a devastating effect must these grotesquely, moribund creations have on the malleable soul and the perception of form of a child!

I had a very enlightening experience with two brothers. The two-year-old was lovingly rocking a rolled-up piece of cloth in his arms: "Look, Mama, a weird old woman." The five-year-old saw it and also wanted such a doll.

Their mother took a green cloth, tied off a round head, two arms, and two legs. She needed a face. So she took a crayon and drew eyes and a mouth. The boy happily went off with his “hunter woman.” When the little one saw what had happened he “also wanted one.” He gave his cloth to his mother and she made a similar one and gave it back. But the boy threw it down, disappointed. It was no longer his “weird old woman.” The doll had become too finished. His imagination was frustrated.

Of course, the boy was only two years old. Later on, the child will want to be able to dress and undress the doll. It should always be warm and cushy but solid enough to stand and sit, with spare features so that the child’s imagination can turn the doll into the unique being that the child needs, boys as well as girls.

Children want to be co-workers

In spite of having the most beautiful room to play in, it happens over and over that the children will not want to play there continuously. They hang on Mother’s apron strings. This is completely normal for small children. Up to age three at least it is a good idea to have a play corner where the children can be close to their mother. There they will usually play happily without making any demands. A ball, a feather, a wiggly toy animal are enough to keep them occupied for a long time. Do not disturb them! Do not provide



something for them to do. If children get used to that, they will always look to the adult to keep them busy and they will be prevented from their own play. Mother can peacefully go about her daily work. If she sings while she is working or says little verses aloud, the little ears will certainly be attentive.

What about older children? Sometimes they would rather “work” alongside their mother than play by themselves. Then it is good when they can experience such work where they can help. How diligently they stir the contents of pots and bowls! What pride when they cook a vegetable or bake a cake by themselves. Sponges and brooms and are used with enthusiasm, but only if Mother is also using them. Again, one needs to pay attention that the children get enough and varied experiences. Sometimes the vacuum cleaner can be left in the closet and replaced with a broom. A coffee mill that is cranked by hand is much more interesting than an electric machine. And every child should be able to see and smell bread baking. Of course, the most genuine experience comes when they have seen and heard the flour being ground first.

Washing day can be a festive occasion! A child must know what washing machines do for us. A six-year-old girl looked on in amazement as the clothes are being rinsed: “Why are the clothes made wet over and over?” “We put the clothes in the washing machine, and when they come out we hang them up to dry.”

Machines are a great help to us but we must not fail to realize what children experience, or do not experience, with them. All work with the hands is appealing to children and it stimulates them to imitate.

Why are the boys are so crazy about the chimney sweep, the trash collector, and the construction worker? These are a few jobs at which a child (a five-year-old, for instance) can still experience something “for real.” Few such trades remain out of the many that have disappeared from our experience.

Our journey on the earth – what an adventure!

Children need examples for their play. The whole world, Heaven and Earth, can provide them.

Stars and Clouds

Already when they are very young, children recognize and love the stars. They hold up their little arms to the sun and even in the daytime the sky will joyfully greet the dim, white sliver of moon. An eighteen-month-old child will happily recognize the dim light of the stars on a winter’s evening, even through the bright, garish lights of the city. If a child wakes up in the night and is restless, often looking out of the window at the star-filled sky can work wonders, and the child will peacefully return to bed.

It is a big step when the connection between clouds and rain is discovered. A five-year-old spent weeks observing the clouds daily, making bold weather predictions and proclaiming them loudly all around. How this works in the child’s soul! And then, a thunderstorm! The parents are as enthusiastic as the child and express amazement at the powerful events taking place in the sky. Enthusiasm and joy on the part of parents are important bridges from the child to the world. Parents need to be aware of this.

Earth and Water

It is good to have many playgrounds in the children’s area. Sand is an indispensable material. Imagination can take flight. The children make pies and build towns and waterways, streets and gardens. But, often we see children sitting in the sand doing nothing. If we let these children play in black, damp earth with lots of earthworms, centipedes, and snails, they will soon perk up. If there is a water source nearby and some really good, slimy mud can be made, then their happiness knows no bounds. How their cheeks glow from enthusiasm! No child should be prevented from playing in water and mud. They stamp their little feet joyfully around in the water. They touch it, build

streams and dikes, and anything that can float is pressed into service as a boat. Why should this be forbidden to the children just because it makes them dirty or could cause them to get colds? There are rubber boots and waterproof clothing in that case. But what Mother finds it easy to let the little ones enjoy their “water addiction” in the kitchen? What should one do if no yard or garden is available? Children must be able to play in the water. Little girls are untiringly diligent when they are washing their doll clothes. Even a bath tub can be some kind of a substitute for floating boats.

Air

Pinwheels turn and feathers float, driven by our puffing breath. Leaves and seeds from the trees twirl around in the air. Paper airplanes glide peacefully and elegantly off the porch to the ground below. And if a strong wind comes up, then run outside to the big meadow where the little ones can feel how the once soft breeze can suddenly take their breath away and tear at their jackets. Outdoors the children experience natural laws with their whole bodies in such a way that we could never hope to teach them through schoolwork.

Such joy when Father lets a kite fly up in the air. And if the child is allowed to hold the string, then he is completely convinced of the liveliness and strength of his companion high up in the air because the kite is pulling so hard on his own little hand. But as long as the child holds on to the string the kite is also responsive to the child and copies all the little movements that the child makes on the ground in a big way in the sky. If the kite is “set free,” then it tumbles to the ground. Mysterious physical laws are experienced in this way.

Fire

As with all earthly things, what goes up must come down. Fire is the only thing that strives up to the heights. Spark on spark, flame on flame, all are sent upward. Here “lightness” is an opposing force to heaviness. But children are often prevented from experiencing this. There are school-age children who have never seen an open flame, never struck a match. But if one only knows of the heaviness of Earth, then one knows only half. For this reason children must experience fire. What things will burn? What can extinguish fire? They must learn these things if they are not to grow up estranged from the world and life. Somewhere in the city, or its surroundings, there can surely be found opportunities for such experiments.

King and Princess

An insignificant occasion, hardly noticed by adults, is enough for the image of the king to spring forth from the child’s imagination. The child will put something on his or her proudly held head for a crown and say: “I

am a king!” The next time he may pretend to be a princess. There are images that the child immediately recognizes almost without any outside influence, as if they are simply remembering them. For example, the image of a wolf need not be explained. This is why children intensely like hearing the fairy tales. They awaken images that lie deep in the soul. Grimm’s fairy tales are an inexhaustible treasure. They nourish the imagination of the child and, at the same time, stimulate new ideas for play. This occurs even if one very carefully and slowly introduces the child to the fairy tales. The story of “The Sweet Porridge” can satisfy a three- or four-year-old for a long time. Beginning at an earlier age is not advisable. Before that age, simple stories out of the experience of the child, and rhymes and verses are enough.

One must have a sense for what fairy tale would work best at the time of telling. It can often serve as an answer to something that is troubling a child. For example, a small boy plagued by fear and afraid of the dark heard about the big, bad wolf from older children, and that became the personification of everything which frightened him. After he heard the story of “The Wolf and the Seven Goats,” his fear completely left him.



The first and second times one tells a fairy tale to a child one notices how he or she attentively follows the story. However, by the fifth or sixth telling something new appears: the plot is no longer the most interesting part of the story. The child takes in the word order like nourishment. Oh, woe, if a little word is missing or some other word is interjected! No changes are tolerated, the same as with sacred texts. Children may want to hear the same story for months. One sees that, for the child, repetition of the same experience increases its value. Fairy tales should be told, not read. The common experience shared by the storyteller and the child is very different when the story is brought forth from the inside than when it is read from a book. The book is like a wall coming between the storyteller and the listener. Freely telling the story will be the most fruitful experience for parent and child. However, one can not always thoughtlessly trust one’s own memories from childhood. It is amazing how differently the Grimm’s fairy tales are held in people’s memories. A little review and preparation time is necessary and very worthwhile.

Do not keep them busy – just be there

It often happens that children go to their mothers and say, “Mother, I don’t have anything to do!” Or, perhaps the children just sit around and

whine. One must have ideas for times such as these. Even so, do not give children something to do just to keep them busy. Children who otherwise play well usually react badly to busywork. Rather one can make suggestions or do something playful oneself, and the children will soon follow along. But what about those times when the laundry must be done and dinner must be started? Children can be very disruptive at these times. “Mother, you have to come and buy something from my store!” Shall we now put off the little disturber so we can get on with our work? If we try, the child will certainly not give up. “Mother, can you please make me a crown, a gold one?” At this moment, if one stops what one is doing and makes the crown, or whatever it happens to be, then the child is quickly immersed in play again, and the adult can continue the work that was started. The best idea is to react immediately to the children and be there for them in the moment, and then resume the adult task.

Weekdays and holidays

Periods of idleness every so often are to be expected and appreciated. For example, the weekdays have their own identifiable characteristics as to what certain things happen repeatedly (shopping day, laundry day, bath day, baking day, and so forth); And then comes Sunday or a holiday. Yes, the holidays! We should not let these valuable occasions slip by unnoticed. They break up the long year and allow us the opportunity to experience the uniqueness of every season in a living way. If one does not wish to take on old traditions, then new, still meaningful, ones can be discovered or invented and repeated year after year. If we live with a solid rhythm in our daily lives, and if we know how to celebrate holidays, then the children are upheld by the harmony of the whole and will find their way back to their play.

Preparation for life

The first seven years of life are a unique space of freedom for the human being. A person will never again go through his or her days so unfettered and free. The whole world is there for the small child and he or she opens wide the door of the senses in order to let it in. Never again will the person perceive so intensely or be able to live life so devotedly. The intellect and reason have not yet taken on their leading roles.

Children have a finely tuned sense of justice and freedom. They are very sensitive to orders and demands that require their subjugation. If one orders them to do something, they simply become deaf. If the same demand is turned into a game that we also enjoy, then the little ones will immediately and joyfully join in and help. Wherever we are at play that is where we are nearest to the child. If we live our lives with joy and enthusiasm, then the children will freely and gladly follow us. Let us make use of this great chance that the children offer to us! Let us learn how to play again! Many things will become fun, golden, and cheerful.

Often today, instead of having this attitude, adults try to break into this golden space of freedom in all places. The little ones are kept busy and directed. They must be 'prepared' for life, adult life, that is so earnest and important. There is an array of very cleverly designed games of intelligence which are supposed to program our children from the cradle onward. Are we blind to the fact that a separating filter is being put into place much too early?

Much is spoken about developmental phases which should not be overlooked. Truly, the first seven years constitute the not-to-be-repeated phase of experience and play. We should take this phase seriously and learn to play along. If so, we are giving the children the best preparation for life that they could have.