

Children's Right to Be Heard: Learning from Children about Their Perspectives on Play

by Julie Nicholson, Priya Mariana Shimpi, and Christine Carducci

As play researchers, we have an interest in the diversity of experiences and views people have on play. We are also curious about how the concept of play could be better understood in order to shape advocacy efforts in support of increased opportunities for children and adults to play. In 2010, we started a large research study, The Global Play Memories Project (GPMP), with the aim of collecting adults' memories of their childhood play and their thoughts about how children's play today compares to the play experiences they remembered.

In the process of collecting adults' thoughts on children's play today, we recognized that a critical piece missing from our research was the voice of children themselves. We were inspired by the United Nations Convention (UNCRC) on the Rights of the Child to include voices of children in our research. The UNCRC was the first legally-binding international document outlining children's human rights. The UNCRC made "respect for the views of the child" one of its four core principles and in 2009, a UN declaration was made for children's 'right to be heard' which encouraged the involvement of children in decision-making contexts where their lives and welfare were impacted (Liebel, 2012).

Children's Play Narrative Project

In Fall 2011, based on our initial adult play research and inspired by the UNCRC, we launched the Children's Play



Julie Nicholson, Ph.D., is the director of the Leadership Program in Early Childhood in the School of Education at Mills College. Dr. Nicholson directs a research project titled, "Making Inclusive Leadership Visible in Early Childhood: Stories from the Field of Leading for Social Justice and Equity," co-directs the Global Play Memories and Children's Play Narratives Projects, and chairs the Bay Area Coalition for Play.



Priya Mariana Shimpi, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Mills College. Dr. Shimpi's research focuses on the role of cultural and environmental experiences in children's learning, including the role of play in children's development. At Mills since 2009, she teaches in the Early Childhood Education undergraduate and M.A. Child Development programs.



Christine Carducci, M.A., is a doctoral student in the Leadership Program in Early Childhood at Mills College. She works as a research assistant on the Children's Play Narratives and Global Play Memories Projects. Chris also teaches child development classes for Foothill College and is an Infant Specialist with WestEd's Program for Infant Toddler Care.

Narratives Project, an interview study with children ages 3 to 17, living in diverse communities both within the United States and internationally. The study aims to document and bring greater visibility to children's opinions and experiences related to play. This project reflects children's right to be heard and included in discussions that may influence their access to and experiences with play. This article shares excerpts from our first year of interviews with children to provide a window into the knowledge and passion our participants demonstrated when they were given an opportunity to express their views on play.

Play Is to Have Fun and Concentrate and Do What You Want to Do

Children have many interesting ideas about what they consider to be the essence of play, as defined through their personal life experiences. It is not surprising that many children associate play with fun and experiences where *they* have decision-making control.

Leah (8): "Play is to have fun and to concentrate and to do what you want to do . . . [what] makes you happy."

Dara (10): "Play is when you are not doing anything especially, but you could do whatever you want and you can do it anywhere."

Neela (11): "[Play is an escape]. You get away from doing things that you don't want to do."

Many children described very specific, yet diverse activities when defining play.

Ruben (10): "Video games like Super Smash Brothers and Wizard 101."

Ben (7): "Building stuff with blocks."

Sofia (7): "Using toys and using your imagination to do things."

Marco (8): "Running around with my brothers and sort of like attacking each other."

Siddhi (11): "Interacting with people . . . getting active."

We Pretended We Ran a Summer Camp and All the Kids Were Being Naughty

While the adults in our play research tend to express play as positive and fun, we were curious as to whether children's conceptions of play also included different, even negative, aspects. We first asked children to describe a time when they played that was really fun. We then asked them to talk about the opposite: a play experience that was anything but fun. When describing play experiences they equated with fun, it was common for children to describe play involving social interactions with family and friends.

Zaniah (4): "Sometimes when Nanna gets me and she says, 'Want me to pick you up?' And I say, 'Yes,' and I say, 'Nanna,' and I give her a big hug. She always picks me up."

Ricky (9): "A summer day, me and my friends were swimming in the pool. We did obstacle courses with the pool materials and we did squirt gun fights. It was really fun . . . because I got to spend time with my friends and I get to do stuff with them."

Karina (10) described her last day of school as fun: "We all, the whole school, gets out and there's this huge field and we all play chaos tag, a huge game of chaos tag."

Children's perspectives on play are complex and thought-provoking and they deserve to be more visible in our adult conversations about the importance of play in children's lives.

For some children, play was fun because it allowed them to temporarily escape from reality.

Angelica (10): "We [my brother and I] pretended that we ran a summer camp and all the kids were being naughty. . . . We both had parts and we would say stuff like 'Brian, you are being naughty, you have to go on time out . . . sit over there for an hour.' It was fun . . . because kids don't usually do that. It's the grown-ups who tell the kids to go on time

out, the kids don't tell the grownups to go on timeout!"

When children were asked if they could remember a time when they played that wasn't fun, a common theme throughout their stories reflected a loss of fairness, freedom, or personal ability to control a situation.

Dara (10): "It's not that fun when this boy, he always decides what everybody gets to do."

Angelica (10): "When I played with somebody who was really bossy and she made me do what she wanted me to do; she wouldn't let me do anything."

No, You Never Stop Playing or Else People Might Not Want to Get Older

We were curious about children's ideas regarding play as a developmental concept. That is, did they think that play was bounded by childhood, and if so, when did they think children would or should stop playing? The children had many ideas to share and generally reported their belief that

play is not something to outgrow, and that children should continue playing throughout their childhood years.

Siddhi (11): "No, it's always good to be active and to have fun. I should never, I don't think that [children] should ever stop playing because as you let go of that, you're not gonna have any fun in life and you're just not gonna be a very happy person."

Neela (11): "No, you never stop playing . . . I don't think. . . . Or else people might not want to get older and then that wouldn't be great."

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAY ENRIQUEZ, TAKEN AT THE SALVATION ARMY BOOTH MEMORIAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM, OAKLAND, CA



Dara (10): “[Children shouldn’t stop playing because] they need a lot of exercise because they eat more sugar than adults usually, and they need to burn it all off.”

Grown-ups Like to Play Games, too; They Just Don’t Show it as Much

We asked children if they thought adults — mommies, daddies, grandmas, grandpas, teachers — played. This question inspired a wide range of responses.

Felicia (3): “Nooo . . . because that is only for kids!”

Marcus (4): “No. Mommy and Daddy ‘posed to work.”

Rafael (5): “The teacher is not supposed to play, but the other people [adults] are.”

In contrast, some children thought adults might play, if not for key constraints.

Marco (8): “Yeah, I do actually [think adults play], because I used to play a lot of games with my Grandpa. Now he is really busy, so I can’t anymore. I really do think grown-ups like to play games too; they just don’t show it that much.”

Dara (10) relayed why her mom doesn’t play outside very much: “Because she might break her nails.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAY ENRIQUEZ, TAKEN AT THE SALVATION ARMY BOOTH MEMORIAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM, OAKLAND, CA

“You have to think more, think about it, if you didn’t play . . . when you were a kid, what would you be like now?”

Several children shared their opinions about what types of activities they perceived as adult play.

Yin (4): “On Facebook. People play Farmville. And some adults play like video games and stuff.”

Neela (11): “I think they play with their friends. . . . Not exactly the same way we play, their play probably is talking, going to lunch maybe, going shopping, at night-times, going to people’s houses, eating, talking about grown-up stuff. . . . ‘Oh my gosh she can’t keep her room, she can’t keep it clean.’”

Siddhi (11) shared her beliefs about why adults play: “Maybe just to get a break from all the stress that they’re under. Maybe, just to feel young again.”

You Don’t Have the Right to Take It Away

We asked children, “If adults said that play wasn’t important for children, what would you say to them?” This question elicited the strongest physical and emotional reactions among our participants.

Jimarcus (6): “It sure is important. Because you get more energy and you do more stuff.”

Ricky (9): “They just don’t get it. It may not seem like it,

but play is a very important thing and you don’t have the right to take it away!”

Siddhi (11): “I would say, ‘You probably didn’t get enough play when you were a kid.’”

Karina (10): “You’d have to like, think more, think about it . . . if you didn’t play . . . when you were a kid, what would you be like now?”

Ruben (10) yelled loudly while pounding his fist on the table: “YOU’RE JUST PLAIN OUT WRONG!”





PHOTOGRAPH BY RAY ENRIQUEZ, TAKEN AT THE SALVATION ARMY BOOTH MEMORIAL CHILD CARE PROGRAM, OAKLAND, CA

adults everywhere had an opportunity to hear Siddhi (11) ask her provocative question, “You have to think more, think about it, if you didn’t play . . . when you were a kid, what would you be like now?”

Reference

Liebel, M. (2012). *Children’s rights from below: Cross-cultural perspectives*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Play is Really Important ‘Cause it Teaches People Things that They Don’t Learn in School

We offered children time to share additional thoughts and ideas outside of the structured questions we asked.

Angelica (10): “You asked me this but I want to say it again, that play is really important cause it teaches people things that they don’t learn at school. It teaches, like questions and stuff like that. How to be creative and how to use their minds and look at things in different ways. There is just not one way to see things, not just one way to do it. There is not just one way.”

If You Didn’t Play When You Were a Kid, What Would You be Like Now?

Children’s perspectives on play are complex and thought-provoking and they deserve to be more visible in our adult conversations about the importance of play in children’s lives. Including children in research, advocacy, and policy contexts — and allowing their ideas to inform the actions we take on their behalf — will only strengthen our work as we commit to truly listen, to learn and to respect their “right to be heard.” And most importantly, children’s voices can be powerful levers for positive change. What if

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