Beginnings

The Play's the Thing: Styles of Playfulness

by Elizabeth Jones

How did you play as a child? Ask this question in a group of adults and most can talk with pleasure about neighborhood games, outdoor adventures, and cozy hiding places. Ask, "What did you learn by playing?" and the answers are remarkably thoughtful, encompassing creative imagination, moral judgment, negotiation, physical skills, and courage.

Once when I asked these questions of a teaching staff, one teacher insisted that she *didn't* play as a child. There were knowing nods among her colleagues; a notorious workaholic and perfectionist, she was an inflexible thinker unable to compromise on program issues. "I'll bet there's a connection," one of them said thoughtfully. I'll bet there is, too.

The spontaneous play of young children is their highest achievement. In their play, children invent the world for themselves and create a place for themselves in it. They are re-creating their pasts and imagining their futures, while grounding themselves in the reality and fantasy of their lives here-and-now. (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 129)

Children at play are constructing their individual identities as well as their knowledge of the world. The choosing child is saying, in effect, "This is who I am. This is what I want to do. This is what I need to do it with. When I play with others, I can negotiate with them to include my experiences as well as theirs. We talk about what we're doing, and we act it out. I need to keep playing until I'm done." (Jones, 1990, p. 11)

What's play? Choosing for oneself. Children need to play, and so do adults, especially those who spend much of their time with children. Working in child care, it's important that adults be able to make choices for themselves, inventing things they like to do, rather than simply implementing plans made by someone else. As any child can tell you, if someone else makes you do it, it's not play. Teachers, like children, are most competent when they're playing — that is, when they're staying alert to the action and the possibilities, choosing, planning, negotiating, and elaborating.

Play is invented by each player; imitation is not the same as play. Good teaching ideas often reflect a particular teacher's preferred play mode. In Vivian Paley's "storyplay" (1981), she invites children to dictate stories and later casts them to be enacted in the group. Linda Gibson, discovering that three year olds' fascination with the sound patterns of language matched her own (she was writing a dissertation on children's wordplay), ended each morning in her preschool class with "Rhyme Time" (1989, pp. 53-54). My own children at home frequently re-created dramatic episodes from the stories I read to them:

"Little Girl, why for you move?" asks the Gunniwolf.

"I no move," she answers, trembling.

"Then you must sing me that guten sweeten song again," he growls.

"Kum-kwa, khi-wa," she sings, until her song puts him to sleep and she can run pitty-pat home, hoping he won't come hunker-cha hunker-cha after her — and Michael as Gunniwolf pounced on his sister Suzanne time after time. She loved both the scariness and the power of her song (Little Girl always gets away). (Harper, 1967)

Teachers Mamie King, Maggie Pucillo, and Georgina Villarino are all imaginative friendly visitors when domestic play is in progress in the preschool sandbox or playhouse.

Girl, handling play phone to Mamie: "It's your mom."

Mamie, on phone: "Hello. How you doing? Did you pick up that hamburger meat for me? And could you pick up some taco sauce for me — and lettuce and tomatoes? I'd really appreciate it."

Child to Georgina, in the sand: "More cake?"

Georgina: "Okay, vanilla. No more chocolate."

Maggie, to child approaching playhouse: "Hi, sis! We're having a cheese sandwich. Jessica, the phone's for you. Who is it? Is that who you thought it would be?" (Leaving:) "Thank you, Richard. That was a very tasty snack."

I love building miniature worlds, on the floor with blocks and animals, or outdoors with rocks and sticks and leaves. I like animals better than vehicles, but either will do. My grandson Evan prefers vehicles; and one evening when he was rather aimlessly driving a truck around the living room I was unable to resist joining in. We ended up with a newspaper-strip road taped to the floor, a Lego garage, and several busy vehicles coming and going.

Doug Tolbert is a master inventor of large-scale play settings, improvising on the spot as he notices the play potential of available materials and the interests of four year old master players. Children watch and help with construction, and then Doug stands back to watch them play, occasionally helping as needed. One day the climbing structure became a boat with a bamboo mast (the child care yard is bordered by bamboo) and a parachute for a sail; the sail could be raised and lowered by two children working together. Another day a train was constructed out of several large packing boxes, a crate for the cowcatcher, a pot and mallet suspended from an overhead bamboo rod for the bell, and a gallon plastic jug of flour, also suspended, for the smoke stack (when children blew through a tube in its bottom, *smoke* arose).

Adults need not join the play in order to acknowledge their admiration of it:

"Once upon a time," said Joan to her small class of three year olds, whom she had called into a snug circle as their ***going camping*** *play was coming to an end, and before clean-up time, "there were one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight children who went camping together." "Me!" said Charlie excitedly. "Me, too!" said Alicia, echoed by others. "Yes, Charlie, and Alicia, and Mark went camping," acknowledged Joan, going on to name every child. "They put their sleeping bags in the car, and they put their tent in the car, and they put their food in the car. . . ."* (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 125)

Joan gets particular pleasure from observing the details of children's dramatic play. Here she has used her observations to retell the story of their play to children, affirming their good ideas and encouraging them to "do it again." Her adult play — observing children — becomes a way to support their play.

Each of the adults mentioned above gets special pleasure from involving children in an activity she / he has invented for their delight *and* hers / his. In turn, part of the children's pleasure comes from the adult's enthusiasm. "Children, of course, sense what their teachers value and will move in the directions adults favor." (Gibson, 1989, p. 53) As teachers or parents, we are never neutral; by what we choose to acknowledge and participate in, we are communicating to children what we think is important. Fortunately, adults have diverse interests, and children learn different things from the different people in their lives.

It is important, however, that children learn that *they* are competent people with good ideas. They can be denied this right by adults whose need to play a starring role leads them to ignore the fact that play is the children's turf, which needs to be entered with care. Adults itching to play teacher are likely to interrupt children's play for the sake of their own wonderful ideas.

A simple arrangement of eight chairs in double rows in the corner of the three year old room has been stimulating bus play for several days. Today several boys have donned Batman capes. "I blue Batman, they orange Batmen," explains one. They are roaming the room, as are several girls in high heels. "Okay, Batman," says the teacher assistant. "What's Batman going to do today?" "Drive the bus," says one of the orange Batmen. They board the bus. A little later, as the assistant walks by, she observes: "Oh, you're driving the bus. Where's the bus going today?" "To school," the driver decides.

The lead teacher has put on a record and is clapping and dancing. She grabs the hands of a couple of girls as they

high-heel by, and they dance with her. She organizes a parade with instruments.

Play flows around the room. From time to time there are half a dozen bus riders, some with babies. Orange Batman is heard asking, across the room, "Want to go with us on the bus?" Blue Batman: "I'm reading a book." "I leaving! I leaving!" calls the bus driver.

Lead teacher: "Okay. Five more minutes to clean-up; we're going outside and paint. Let's take off your Superman cape," she says to Batman. "Children who are very quiet can help carry the paint out."

The children, who have been playing for only half an hour, have shown no signs of readiness for a new activity. But the teacher, who loves to paint and has decorated the room with her creations, is happiest when she can be the star, and now she is eager for them to play *her* good idea. In contrast, her assistant, who has no wish to be the center of attention, has been quietly extending *children's* good ideas.

Play is children's world, and adults who take it over are denying children's need to invent it for themselves. Yet children benefit from adults' ideas, and adults benefit from being free to do things they like to do. That's how energy is created and sustained, and adults working in child care need all the energy they can find. For the most part, appropriate adult *play* in group programs takes place around the periphery of the children's action — in setting the stage, adding props and dramatic ideas, helping with problem-solving, observing and talking about children's good ideas, and inventing new plans based on those observations. It's a delicate balance, sustained primarily by observing children, observing oneself, and being open to questions from other observers in a continuing process of reflection and dialogue. (Jones and Lakin, 1986; Carter and Jones, 1990; Jones and Carter, 1991)

Adults can learn to share their own playfulness with children without overwhelming them or performing for them, if they stay aware of children's developmental levels, children's interests, and what's playful for children.

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Beginnings

In Play, Children Learn . . .

To make appropriate choices among many possibilities.

To use their imagination, to improvise, to think flexibly and explore new options.

To be aware of their own real interests, without being distracted by other possibilities: to say "yes" and to say "no."

To solve problems, both with materials and with people.

To cooperate with other children in the creation of mutually satisfying projects.

To work through their feelings in creative, non-destructive ways.

To pay attention to a project until it's done.

To use something — a dramatic action, a word, a toy, a set of blocks, a collection of marks on paper — to represent something else — a real experience, a powerful feeling. Practice in these sorts of representation is essential in the process of becoming literate, which is another form of representation.

To see themselves as competent and interesting people, with useful skills and good ideas.