



# Speaking

by Bonnie Neugebauer

"First a slice of bread. Then we'll spread it with peanut butter, lots of peanut butter. Now we need some jelly; let's swirl it around. Here's a banana; let's slice it up and add it to the sandwich. And top it with another slice of bread. Yeah! We have a people sandwich!" Roger would roughhouse with our children; he would grab them and turn them into bread or pickles or mayonnaise. Finally, he would throw himself on top of the pile and wiggle and squirm, until everyone was laughing, disheveled and exhausted. Such good play, such grand fun. And inevitably someone would plop down on the floor and beg for the next sandwich!

When I was a graduate student of Diane Levin at Wheelock College, she took us outdoors and then directed us: "Play." I remember the moment, standing on the vast lawn, the evergreens and stone buildings swirling around me. I felt caught in the moment, caught in the choice. What would it be like to play there on the lawn? Would I run? Would I explore the trees or lie down and listen? Would I invent a game or instigate an old one? What would my play feel like?

As early childhood professionals we talk often about the importance of play, play for children. But how can we support and stimulate children's play if we haven't invested in our own play? I think that was Diane's point. Adults who work with children need to play.

What does adult play look like? How is it like children's play and how is it different? When is an adult really playing?

Zachary, age 15 months, peeked into the green bag\* with interest. He began pulling out something sheer and red — he pulled and pulled, and finally, the curtain was out of the bag. He took out the red bowls and the spoons, the crayons, paper, and chalk. Such simple equipment, such perfect toys. We made up a game of stirring his plastic farm animals into a stew; the curtain was part peek-a-boo play, part sensual pleasure; the bowls became hats. For three days Zachary chose his green bag from an array of toys that twirl and whizz.

Last night we were talking with Docia and Ann Zavitkovsky about Play Matters\*\* and this green bag. Docia posed some interesting questions:

- Did Zachary ever put anything else into the green bag besides the original contents?
- What did he seem to enjoy about the curtain?
- Did he add other elements to the contents during play?
- Did he leave items out of the bag when it was time to clean up?
- How did adults enter the play?

And then we talked about adult play and what it might mean. What each of us considered to be our play was different — we talked about engagement, freedom, escape, pleasure. In sum, we agreed that we all need to really think about adult play and invest in discussions about how it is similar to and different from the play of children.

In order to be players, we need to have players in our lives to help us see the possibilities. I know lots of players who have motivated me: Jim Greenman plays with words, Kevin Carnes plays with ideas, Roxana Salazar plays with clay, Shawn Murphy plays with sounds, Caren Brown plays with recipes, Roslyn Duffy with texture and color. All of these people play and each of them invites children into their play.

It isn't enough for us to believe in play, we must experience it — sometimes just on our own. When we value play for ourselves, we will better understand the great learning inherent in children's play, and we will be better equipped to speak for the critical role of play in children's lives.

\* This bag of toys is part of an initiative of Early Years in Northern Ireland, which aims to link home-based activities with activities in early care settings. It is given to parents to help build whole body learnacy in two year olds.

\*\* Play Matters believes play is essential to healthy human development. Their mission is to place play in the hearts of children's lives. To carry out this mission, they award small grants to projects in Los Angeles and Seattle, occasionally give presentations, and seek like-minded collaborators.

