

The Value of Unstructured Play

Carlo Ricci

When I was a child, adults played a significant part in our play by allowing us to do it without interference. Unfortunately, this child-structured play is increasingly being replaced by adult-organized, controlled and supervised play.

When I was young, I would simply tell my parents that I was going out here or there and the rest was up to me and my friends. Having to create our own play challenged our creativity and imagination. We had to decide what we wanted to do and we had to make it happen. Sometimes, this took a lot of organizational skills.

For example, if I wanted to play football, I had to make sure that I would round up the necessary number of players to meet at the specified location and ensure that the necessary equipment was available to make it happen.

Playing hockey was an ongoing logistical and organizational process that forced us to be creative and imaginative. We spent months scouring the neighborhood looking for materials that we could use to make the equipment that we needed. We would enthusiastically ride our bikes looking for foam to make goalie pads. We would go to the local arenas and look through the trash bins for sticks that were salvageable. We made our goal nets out of plumbing pipe and meshing that the arena threw out and that we learned to patch.

We organized a hockey league, with teams made up of children who lived on different streets. We named ourselves the Major Street Devils because we lived on Major Street. We made sure that on game day each team would wear the same colored tops. Some teams created their own jerseys. We scouted several locations that were best suited to play hockey, where the ball would remain in play within a confined area and we would not spend the whole game chasing it. We were not bound by adult-controlled, rented space and time limits. We decided for how long we wanted to play. At times, we would just play until we no longer wanted to play; at other times, we played until we reached a certain tally of goals. Once we reached that number, someone would inevitably shout, "five more goals," or "let's play again" and we did. Our only limit was the disappearance of the sun. We often played until we could no longer see the ball, and sometimes we played even when we could no longer see the ball. We were largely bound by our own rules.

Most of today's children don't make pads and nets. Instead, their parents buy them from for-profit businesses. Then they don't even organize their own hockey games, but join an organized league where everything is decided for them. It's as if those of us who created our own unstructured free space as children continue to do it as adults, but this time not for ourselves but for our children. In the process, what are we depriving them of?

I am not suggesting that adults and children should not play together. What I am suggesting is that adults can join the play

but they should not control it. I know a woman who is so skilled at playing with children that children swarm her whenever she is around. Every child wants to play with her, because she has retained what most of us have lost: the ability to play. At gatherings, she seems to prefer playing with the children, rather than interacting with the adults. But she doesn't control the play; she listens, follows, contributes and participates in the play with the children. She becomes a part of the group.

That is not what happens most of the time. And it's not what happened when my wife and I enrolled our eldest daughter in a gymnastics program. The day that I took her to her class, I was impressed by the quality of equipment that was available for her to play with. I was excited and thought that this was going to be fun for her and for me. However, the fun ended when the adult instructor entered the room. There was nothing wrong with her; in fact, she was a very pleasant and charismatic woman. She was simply doing what she believed she needed to do, which was to teach. Unfortunately, "to teach" has become synonymous with "to control."

This particular teacher started by asking all of the children to gather around her for a warm-up activity. The activity was inappropriate and teacher-centered. It was inappropriate because it was clear that this was not what the children wanted to do. What ended up happening was that the parents were behind their children like puppeteers and the children were being "marionetted" to follow the teacher's lead. The parents tried to bribe, cajole and manipulate their children to comply, mostly without success.

I quickly realized that I could not be an accomplice to this and so I politely allowed my daughter to rescue us. We ended up having as great a time as we could in an environment where people thought that our removing ourselves from the group was inappropriate and gave us stares and made comments to indicate that. For example, they would share with their children in a voice that was loud enough for me and my daughter to hear that going off on your own and playing with the equipment is not acceptable and that their children should stay with the group and follow the teacher. So their children stood in lines waiting to use the equipment, resembling disinterested parts going through an assembly line. Although the children often resisted, the parents quickly rallied them back and forced them to continue along the line. I was left wondering what had happened to the excited bunch of children that I saw playing with the equipment in creative and imaginative ways before the class started. The imposed structure just sucked the life right out of them. Even though there was so much equipment, everyone had to share the same piece, which resulted in them spending most of their time standing around waiting for their turn.

My daughter and I got to play with all of the equipment except for the trampoline. The teacher warned us to stay away

from it without her direct supervision. Fortunately, as most children soon find out, beds make great trampolines and so my daughter plays on our bed as if she is on a trampoline. Although she is no longer in gymnastics, she continues to play acrobatically on her own and with her friends. She can somersault, do cartwheels and plays with the equipment at the local park.

It's the same in her swimming class. In this class she is forced into the same situation where the children are expected to obey orders and not initiate the play. The swim instructor is pleasant and comfortable around children. And the children are comfortable around her. However, she still falls prey to the teaching myth. Again, my daughter spends much of her time waiting to follow an instruction, at which point she half-heartedly does it, not because she wants to but because she wants to please her instructor, whom she adores. After her first set of lessons in an indoor pool, her progress, according to the instructor, was "acceptable," even though she hadn't previously spent much time in the water. As summer came around, we were invited to our friends' homes to swim in their backyard pools. During this unstructured play time, her skill development just took off. We put water wings on her and allowed her loose. She played with other children her age, and they challenged and dared each other to do more "risky" things until they were doing things that awed us.

When we finally signed her up again for lessons, we were amazed at how different she was in a structured class environment versus playing on her own. She enjoyed being around the instructor, but her comfort level and skill development had nothing to do with the lessons and everything to do with her

self-initiated unstructured play. Clearly, learning how to swim requires this sort of play, rather than obedience to others' directions.

I would like to share one more example. This same daughter recently turned three and we had a party for her at a local grocery store where the children made their own pizzas and decorated their own cakes. During this activity, some of the parents took over the pizza making and cake decorating to create beautiful looking cakes...except that the point of the party was to have the children enjoy cooking, rather than to watch their parents. Even more curious was that the other parents were looking at me as if I was a negligent parent for not showing my daughter how to do it "right" and for not doing it for her so that it looked "proper."

When we first entered the party area, there were balloons scattered on the floor. As the adults huddled along the walls, the children enthusiastically engaged in creative and imaginative play with the balloons. But it was the facilitator's job to run activities. As soon as this pleasant and personable woman began to interfere, the children's play was stifled. She tried to control what they did, tried to lead structured activities and set limits to where children could roam, attempts that were ignored by the children. Thinking I would rescue both her and the children, I politely offered for her to let them be. Once she did, the noise level went up and the children were once again enthusiastically initiating play - something they do naturally, without our help. Children know how to play and will learn from that play...if only adults who have forgotten how can stop interfering with their enjoyment, creativity and imagination. - LL -



Play is Self-Directed Learning

Marty Layne

A few years ago I helped a ten-year-old boy at the beach build a dam across a little stream. I was helping my teacher husband with a class field trip. At the end of each school year, he takes his class to the beach. This particular year, the lake he usually goes to had a lot of algae so instead of going there, he took his class to a beach by the ocean. We live in Victoria, B.C. While the air gets warm, the Pacific Ocean never gets much warmer than about 12 or 13 °C in the summer. So instead of swimming, the children often build sandcastles or climb around on and/or build things with the logs that have been washed ashore.

One of the boys wanted to build a dam across a stream quite a way down the beach from where the group was. He needed an adult to go with him, so I volunteered. I found it fascinating to be with this child as he built his dam. He had lived in Victoria for most of his childhood. One of the best things about Victoria is that there are many accessible beaches that have lots and lots of driftwood. I watched as Hayden (not his real name) carried various pieces of wood to his dam location and started building. I asked if he wanted help to carry more driftwood. He said sure. Soon we exhausted the supply that was light enough for us to lift. Hayden then decided that he needed a bigger log. He tried to move a log that was almost two meters long and 16 or 17 cm across. He tried tugging at it. He tried pushing it from one side. He tried pushing it from the ends but it was too heavy for him to move. I offered to help, but he wanted to work on his own. After 10 minutes, I offered to help again. He accepted my help then and I suggested that he use a long, thin log nearby to put under-

neath the bigger log to pry it up and move it that way. He thought this was a great idea and soon he was using the pole as a lever. It took him a while to get the hang of it, but he kept trying and soon began to figure out how the pole could help him move the bigger log to where he wanted it to go.

I was pleased for him that he had time to explore the possibilities of a lever. At the same time that I was pleased, I was sad. Here was a child who had not had the chance to spend enough time just poking around on the beach to discover that you can use one log to pry up another one. It made me think about how many times I was asked how my children could possibly be learning anything if they were just playing all the time.

This experience on the beach epitomized for me why children need to have time to play in unstructured ways. It helped to validate that self-directed play is a vital component of learning. Children need to explore the world and experiment to really begin to understand how things work. They need many experiences of rolling down a hill, rolling a ball down a hill, watching water from a hose run down a hill, seeing streams run down hill, etc. to grasp what gravity means. It is from experience that we build understanding and knowledge.

Current learning theory states that learning is:

- a process of knowledge construction, not of knowledge recording or absorption;
- knowledge dependent, as people use their existing knowledge to construct new knowledge;
- affected as much by motivational issues as by cognitive ones;
- highly tuned to the situation in which it takes place.

Let me illustrate how this theory works during play. Recently I watched an 18-month-old play with Play-doh. Sara wanted her mother to make a Play-doh snake come out of an extruder. She had had enough experiences with this toy to know that it makes snakes out of Play-doh.

Her mom showed Sara where to put the Play-doh and demonstrated how to push it in. Her daughter put the Play-doh in where her mom had shown her and then tried to put the Play-doh in the place where she knew it would come out. Her mom showed her again where it needed to go in. Mom then pushed down and the Play-doh came out in a snake form while Sara watched. Then they went through the whole procedure again and again and again. Sara continued to try to put the Play-doh in the place where it would come out as well as the correct spot. She played with Play-doh for about 45 minutes, continuing this process with her mom helping her while her mom and I were talking.

As I watched this little girl try to put the Play-doh in the place where it came out, it was clear to me that she had experienced other situations where when something comes out, it also goes back into that same place so that it



can come out again (learning – a process of knowledge construction). This toy had a different way for things to come out. The Play-doh had to go in one place for it to come out another place. It may take many more times before Sara learns the concept that while the Play-doh comes out of one part it is not where it goes in. She has to build new knowledge based on her other knowledge. (Learning is knowledge dependent; people use their existing knowledge to construct new knowledge.)

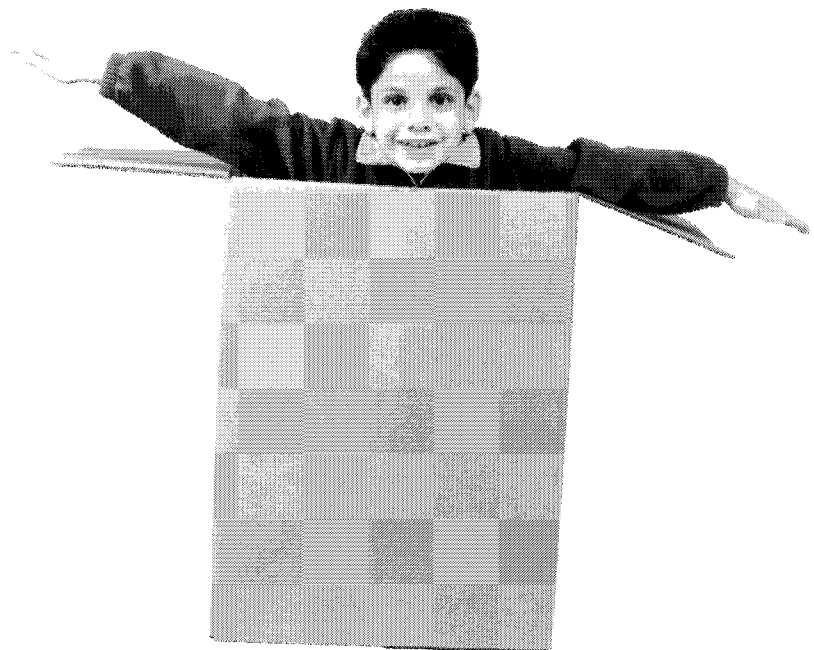
She will continue to try to put the Play-doh in the place where it comes out until her new learning fits on top of her old learning. Her mom will probably show and tell her each time where the Play-doh goes because that is what we do with toddlers, we give them words and demonstrate how something works. But until Sara has learned for herself, she will continue to try to put the Play-doh in at the place that makes the most sense to her based on her previous understanding of how things work. The Play-doh extruder works differently and she will need many experiences before this makes sense to her.

Children learn about arithmetic in much the same way – with hands-on experience of objects like dolls or rocks or Lego pieces as they play. Parents give a child words and concepts, but it is the manipulating, the sorting and tactile experiences that make sense of number concepts. Until a child has his or her own understanding of these number concepts, has built this knowledge internally and understands it, arithmetic problems may feel like Sara did when she was trying to figure out why the Play-doh didn't go back in where it came out. Until a child has had many experiences with quantities of items and manipulated them, the process of addition, subtraction, multiplication can look as mysterious to them as the problem Sara had figuring out the Play-doh extruder.

When my children were young, it was in their fantasy play that I observed them using all kinds of objects, materials and ideas that led to knowledge and understanding. They played for hours, both indoors and out. They dressed up in costumes, built forts and tents, created towns both life-size and in miniature in which to enact their spontaneous play. Their fantasy plays sometimes continued over many days, as they returned to a certain setting they had created, and sometimes it was a very short thing.

This time to play gave them a background of experiences to draw on as they grew older. They learned how to create situations and how to make choices that fit into the situations they had created. They learned to do practical things like how to hammer nails into wood so that a fort would stay together or how to sew something so that it stayed together. If they wanted finger puppets to enact a story, they made them. I was there to give some basic instruction and then watched and helped as needed.

Living and learning at home allows families to create time and safe places for children to play. Children can take advantage of the time at home to build Lego structures that can take days to build and perfect, create a fort in the living room to play in if it's



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raining outside, spend hours swinging or engage in any number of other activities limited only by their imaginations. As they play, they learn many things – some that are measurable and some that are not. As stated in learning theory, learning is affected as much by motivational issues as by cognitive issues and it is highly tuned to the situation in which it takes place. When a child is engaged in play, learning is something that happens as part of the experience. It is not directed by someone else but self-directed by the child.

This opportunity to be self-directed – to make decisions about what to play with and how to play – will help in later life. Decisions about which of the Playmobile pieces to play with and sorting them out accordingly can lead to an ability to organize and prioritize. Unlike artificially divided subjects, play covers the entire learning spectrum – for example from biology (learning which berries are OK to eat) to sociology (how many people are needed to make a village fantasy game work.) Self-directed, spontaneous fantasy play gives children an opportunity to interact and make decisions the way adults make them in life. What could be more educational than that? -LL-