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# What Play Reveals About Your Child

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*A psychiatrist explains how games help children understand each other and themselves.*



■ Children at play are for the most part charming to watch. Observing their abandonment and their whole-hearted immersion in their games, one can see the marvelous drive youngsters have to learn. For children at play reveal themselves to be learning many things—not only physical and intellectual skills, but something else, too, something perhaps not so readily discernible. I'm speaking of the emotional growth and development, of the insights and understanding that children gain through play.

In play, young children bring feelings to the fore which they do not even know they have or, at least, cannot put into words. Play helps youngsters to become aware of their own emotions and those of others; through play they are helped to recognize and find solutions for problems and conflicts in their lives.

The first steps toward this kind of understanding take place during the early pre-school years, when just about all children engage in a special kind of play: fantasy play. Fantasy, particularly when it's shared, is a wonderfully concrete way for children to express their fears, hopes, needs. Every child brings something different to the game. The ideas and actions of one are observed by the others. Each can muse on them, build on them, assimilate them into his experience, or reject them.

Three-and-a-half-year-old Jerry, for example, had been getting very little attention from the other children in his nursery school. Lacking the warmth and approval he needed, he sought to obtain these through play, and he began to make believe he was a dog named Rover.

Children love to pretend that they are animals—

strong, free, fierce, funny. Jerry, as Rover, didn't have to keep up the pretense of being satisfied with his place in nursery school. He didn't need to behave as he knew a child should. As Rover he could demand attention—and get it, for the other children fell in with the game eagerly. When Jerry jumped barking into the midst of a group at play, the other children would laugh and pet him and stroke his fur. But even these signs of affection weren't enough for Jerry. To prove to himself that he was really important to the other children, he made believe that Rover ran away. Sure enough, the other youngsters hunted anxiously for him, and when at last they found him, they shouted with joy and hugged him and told him how glad they were to see him and how much they loved him. Jerry played this scene many more times, acting out his need to be needed.

Fantasies of running away, of being lost, or even dead, are common in adolescents and adults as well as children, who imagine the sorrow and longing of those who failed to appreciate them when they were around. Thus they console themselves for the attention and concern they feel they're missing in real life.

When youngsters act out such fantasies, they receive even more reassurance than just daydreaming provides. Fantasy play is a form of wish fulfillment, satisfying desires a small child cannot or dares not express in words. And parents, observing their children at such play, can very often learn a great deal about their youngsters' current needs and preoccupations. For example, in group games, does a child reveal his uncertainty or



timidity by always accepting whatever place or part the other youngsters assign to him? Or does he show his assurance by casually and consistently taking the favored part when he enters into a game? Perhaps he likes to assume a protected, passive role in play, or does he show anger and belligerence, preferring to play games which allow him to shoot, hit, or frighten others? Some children always assume the same kind of role in their games; others reveal their spontaneity by taking different kinds of roles.

Frequently, when children have faced something unpleasant or frightening in their daily lives, they reproduce it in play. Thus they comfort themselves for the hurt they experienced and are enabled to accept or even forget it. I observed this, watching some youngsters in the park recently. One little boy had his arm in a cast; his wrist had been broken the week before. The day I watched, he started a game in which he was the doctor and another child had a broken arm. With great care he set the arm, murmuring reassuring words all the while. He sent the nurse out to buy an ice cream cone for the injured youngster. The other children in the group joined in, and before long the boy had become the overseeing doctor, directing the setting of several broken limbs. Through play-acting, the youngster was helped to master the fear and pain he had felt just a while before in real life.

Some almost universal fears are alleviated through play. One day a number of children in nursery school pretended that a storm was coming up. The game was

timely, because there had been a terrible storm the week before; branches of trees had been knocked down and some school windows broken. The children hid under the table, hugging each other. When one little girl started to crawl out, the others pulled her back, crying, "Stay here, where you'll be safe and we can take care of you." And the little girl returned to the protection offered her. During this game the children reassured each other as they re-lived a fearful experience. Re-enacting the scene and changing it enough to make it bearable enabled them to overcome their anxiety.

Children long for constancy in their lives. They need a safe, accepting, predictable environment. Should anything change this, they're likely to attempt to bring it back through play. One boy in nursery school had a new baby sister who was getting a lot of the attention that had formerly been devoted to him. He wished he could make the baby go away so that things would be as they had been before. But he was aware that that was wrong, and impossible, besides. So he made up a game in which the baby in his house wasn't really his sister. She had been left with them by mistake, and her real mother was going to take her away soon. Of course he didn't really believe the game even while he was playing it, but acting out his wish relieved his anxiety and, by providing a period of freedom from worry and unhappiness, helped him to accept the facts of his life.

Sometimes, when reality is extremely painful, children lack the daring and the energy to remake their world in play. They are afraid of make-believe. To them it is a way of lowering their (*Continued*)