6 Of Marbles and Morals

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Introduction

Children's rapid transition from dependence to semi-dependence perpetuates high human fertility. Play activity not only keeps children busy, but plays a role in development. Play is affected by culture and environment, and aids in cultural transmission. Contemporary society uses parent-directed play as a learning medium.

Marbles

Through playing games, specifically marbles, a child develops motor skills, gamesmanship, social understanding, and an appreciation of rules. Children largely replicate what they observe and attempt to join in. When accepted, games and rules are often slightly altered for novices, but experts are expected to adhere to official rules.

Play with objects

Specific play objects, toys, are generally absent from village society. In contrast, modern societies place importance on a variety of toys to “nurture the child’s development.”

Object play may decrease with environment and the absence of toys; in contrast to middle-class societies, however, village societies, in the absence of toys, may allow for more active play.

Blowing off steam

Active play is universally more common among males. Just as primates, humans participate in play to promote physical coordination and development that may serve them in adulthood. Among males, skills developed in active play are beneficial in later male-male competition.

Physically active play is common in post-industrialist society, but has decreased in America. Active play in our society, in comparison to other modern societies, is relatively tame.

Constructing the dominance hierarchy

There are clear, yet subtle, distinctions between rough and tumble play and fighting, including verbal and non-verbal signals. Rough and tumble (R&T) play promotes the development of a dominance hierarchy while following codes of social conduct.

Play-fighting is accentuated in societies where adult violence is common. In some societies, play may develop further than just the need to blow off steam, and result in a “war with words” or minor physical violence.

R & T play is seen as a precursor to sports, and in American society, where both exist, serve as a means for establishing ranks among males, or the dominance hierarchy.

Gamesmanship

Proficiency in gamesmanship influences status in many societies. Among many gamesmanship benefits, the development of diplomatic skills, specifically among boys, benefit them in adulthood.

Males' proficiency in gamesmanship improves with time, unlike girls'. Girls' status is less influenced by gamesmanship, and therefore, they exhibit less competitiveness.

Play among boys and girls in the U.S. differs. Girls tend to place less emphasis on rules and aggression, which is highly important in males' play. There are important exceptions to this generalization as a study of Afro-American girls playing hopscotch shows.

Other benefits from R & T include emotional self-control in public; the development of social skills; success in the public school environment; and increased mating opportunities through negotiation, restraint, and cooperation.

The playgroup

Constraints on the composition of the playgroup may affect the nature of play, such as the size of the playgroup. Mixed ages in playgroups generally affects the complexity of play. Girls participate in more mixed-age playgroups, often because they are assigned sib-care duties.

Complex play results from playgroups composed of similar ages. Our society enforces these types of playgroups with daycare, schooling and organized sports, but it is often rare in many other societies.

Gender is a universal constraint on playgroup composition. Girls, often assigned more domestic responsibilities, play closer to home, when boys have greater freedom to explore and play.

Learning One's Culture

Children are keen observers and culture is commonly displayed in make-believe play. Skills needed in adulthood are practiced and improved in childhood make-believe. Social rank and gender roles are practiced in domestic scenes, which are commonly demonstrated in play, especially among girls.

Wedding ceremonies and other public rites are also often portrayed in make-believe play.

The moral lessons in folklore

Tales, myths, and oral histories are often infused with themes of social norms including moral lessons. Both village and contemporary societies use stories to teach culture and encourage the development of values and good behavior.

Children's culture has almost disappeared in many societies with the introduction of modern media and it is now unknown how much children learn of their culture through village "lore."

How culture shapes children's play

Culture dictates the nature of play. Societies where inherited rank is prevalent value competitive play, whereas, competitiveness is rare in egalitarian societies.

Dolls are the most common toys in most societies, but are found less in villages where girls are expected to be caretakers of siblings. Lower-class girls, who will be responsible for childcare, often take the role of mother in play with dolls. Upper-class girls, whose responsibilities will not include childcare, approach playing with dolls as a means of being introduced to "principles of the culture such as fashion, etiquette, and polite gatherings like housewarmings and tea parties."

Differences in make-believe are greatest between modern and traditional societies, and poorer and wealthier populations. Children in traditional societies imitate traditional roles, whereas children in modern societies engage in creative make-believe which may foster abstract and symbolic thought. Poorer minorities play less and are less creative than middle-class children. Children in modern societies may copy behavior seen on television more often than behavior around them that is less visible.

In Euroamerican society, sociodramatic play may serve as a means to develop leadership skills. Westerners perceive this play as essential to development and competency.

Suppression of play

Amount of play is affected by food availability and a mother's presence. A metaphorical tether is associated with juveniles and their mothers. Mothers dictate appropriate play among children, especially infants and toddlers. Mothers are often concerned for their child's safety, while the public may consider play as disruptive behavior.

Affluence allows for more play. Many communities, agrarian and poorer, demand child labor in order to remain sustainable. Children's play is often limited and work responsibilities take its place.

Children's play may be limited with concern for their moral welfare. With the Protestant Reformation, conservative views sought to eliminate creative play. Modern moralists often limit child exposure to sex and violence.

Parent-child play

In the village parents do not play with children.

In middle-class modern society, mother-child play is expected and common. Euroamerican and Asian parents invest much of their time playing with their children. Early engagement with children develops the teacher role of parents that is so significant in modern society. Also, parent-child play facilitates narrative skills as well as other skills important in western school success.

Father-child play is less than and differs from mother-child play among middle-upper-class U.S. fathers. Parent-child play is also less among lower-class U.S. populations.

Children whose play in monitored show greater curiosity and interest, and more imaginative play than children whose caretakers do not intervene in play.

The adult management of play

Middle-class Euroamericans, in contrast to traditional societies, intervene in children's play from birth. Research has shown that children prefer adult intervention in play; they believe it provides a structured activity which is better than boredom.

In a study of Little League, a prime example of managed play, some expressed concern about constant rigid instruction, with a lack of creativity among the children. When encouraged to organize their own game, the children expressed frustration and dissatisfaction.

Parents often invest significant time and money into managed activities for their children. Parents justify their investments through their child's achievements, and the assurance that their child is learning beneficial behaviors that lead to success. Children's involvement in structured activities also relieves parents of childcare responsibilities, allowing them to achieve their own success.