

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION



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Summary

In a book on children's play, it seems permissible, even appropriate, to begin with an invitation to pretend. We might pretend that play has no adaptive value, no value for preparing children for anything except more play. We might also pretend that children's play is much more similar to adult recreation than is generally admitted. We might pretend that play is really best considered a mixture of good and bad, rather than an unequivocally good thing. Lastly, we might pretend that play is not a thing at all but rather an indefinable and hence immeasurable nonthing, and therefore nearly impossible to study scientifically.

Having engaged in this bit of playful pretending, you might feel there is something seriously real in what has just been said. You might feel that play may not have adaptive value, that play is very much like adult recreation, that there is indeed bad as well as good play, and that it may be impossible to pin down play scientifically.

What we have shown by this game of pretending is that when we talk about play, it often becomes something it is not, an unequivocally good *thing* that mostly children do. That is, when we talk about play as a thing, we often *idealize* play and make it be what we wish it to be, not what it is in reality.

However, when we actually play, even when we play at explaining play, we notice that something freeing and refreshing happens. The grains of truth

in our playing are interesting and important, but by playing with them and not taking them too seriously, we open ourselves to the process of knowing. We focus less on wrapping everything up in a neat conclusion and more on enjoying the process itself.

Play, then, is more aptly defined as *playing*. It is a verb more than it is a noun. As a verb, playing is something one experiences and makes happen. It need not be looked for in any particular place, at any particular time, or in any particular group. At any place, at any time, or in any group, playing may break out, even when it is least expected. And in those places, times, and groups designated for play, something quite different from play may occur.

Even when children are clearly playing, they often seem to go in and out of play. A nice example of this ephemeral nature of play occurs when children build or construct with blocks, Legos, or some other construction material. As George Forman (1998) has pointed out, as long as the experience of building has a “What if . . . ?” attitude, it is constructive play, but as soon as it shifts to a “Why won’t it do that?” attitude, then it is more like work. In Forman’s words, “the playful child is content to change what he or she does, just to see what it yields. The task-oriented child is determined to achieve a particular goal” (p. 394).

There is, then, a great deal of difficulty in defining play and determining when play happens. What should we do in the face of this ambiguity? The ambiguousness of the concept does not mean we cannot study and understand play. Many important concepts are equally if not more ambiguous, such as the concepts of love, feeling, and religion. Each of these ideas has resisted exact definition, and yet each remains indispensable for understanding the human condition.

One response to ambiguity is to develop criteria for deciding what is and is not play, with no one criterion being sufficient (Smith, 1985). But which criteria? Some suggested criteria have turned out to be useless, such as that play is *intrinsically motivated* (Smith, 1985). Others, such as that play produces *positive affect* or that it is *flexible, voluntary, egalitarian*, and (typically) *nonliteral* (i.e., based on pretense), have been found to work much of the time but not all of the time (Sutton-Smith, 1984). We need, then, to consider multiple criteria for defining play rather than settling on one definition.

Sometimes researchers define play as what children see is play. Using this definition, we learn that, for children, play is about having fun, being outdoors, being with friends, choosing freely, not working, pretending, enacting fantasy and drama, and playing games. Furthermore, we learn that it is not about preparing for the future (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

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Defining play according to what children see is play will be a main criterion used throughout this book. For this reason, we have included in our discussion phenomena that major scholars have sometimes treated as nonplay, such as humor, organized sports, and academic games. Our argument is that if play is the experience of playing, then we should not rule out these borderline activities that children see as play. We will therefore strike a balance between offering a precise but false definition of play and accepting almost anything enjoyable as play. In doing so, we will err on the side of being inclusive. We will let description and a flexible collection of criteria carry the burden of defining play.

But even with the best collection of criteria, it will always be difficult, perhaps impossible, to pin down play, which means that any theory of play cannot be a theory of some thing, some clearly bounded unit of behavior that is easily defined. With play and playing there is always ambiguity, which is why the great play theorist, Brian Sutton-Smith, has preferred that we speak of *play rhetorics* rather than of play theories (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

● EXPLAINING PLAY'S FUNCTIONS AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Rhetorics are patterns of talk designed to persuade. They exist because, in the absence of sufficient data and clear definitions, we still need to understand, evaluate, and decide whether to support children's play. There is, then, nothing irrational about engaging in rhetoric. However, there are pitfalls when we take our rhetorics too seriously, when we forget that they are rhetorics, not well-grounded theories.

Functions of Play

Sutton-Smith suggests that there are several rhetorics of children's play, each emphasizing some presumed general function. One in particular stands out: what Sutton-Smith calls the *rhetoric of progress* (Sutton-Smith, 1997). This is talk about play as being good for children's physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. It is talk about play preparing children for the future.

In recent decades, the rhetoric of progress has been the dominant rhetoric among scholars as well as among parents, teachers, and ordinary people in industrialized cultures such as our own. As one reviewer recently put it,

children's . . . play has been hypothesized to contribute to the cognitive, motor, and social development of children, including the development of perception, attention, memory, problem-solving skill, language, communication, creativity, logical operations, emotion regulation, self-regulation, social skills, gender roles, social relationships, conflict resolution, coping with stress, and so on. (Power, 2000)

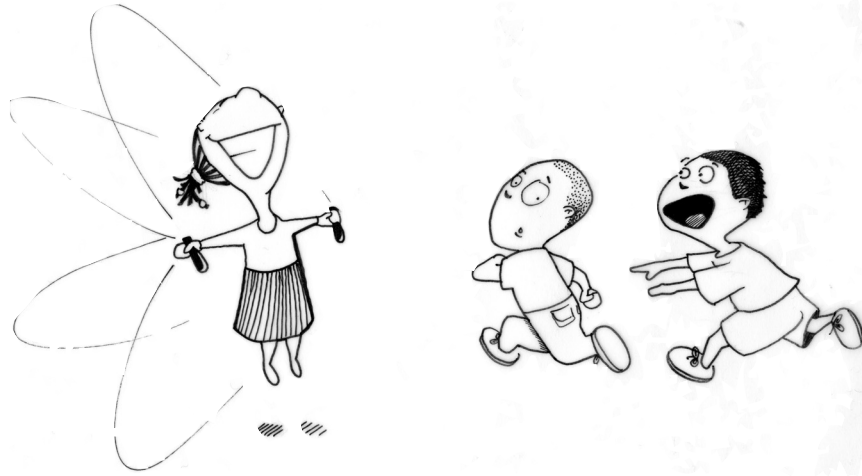
The rhetoric of progress makes good intuitive sense, which is why we adopt it throughout this book, and why it shows up not simply in older research but in the most up-to-date discussions on children's play (Harris, 2003; McCune, 1993). However, researchers disagree over whether there is solid evidence to support this rhetoric of progress. For example, after reviewing the literature on play's functions, Martin and Caro (Martin & Caro, 1985) concluded, "At present, there is no direct evidence that play has any important benefits, with the possible exception of some immediate effects on children's behavior" (p. 97). In seeming contrast, Fein and Kinney (1994) concluded that

children who spontaneously engage in (make-believe play), when compared to their less playful peers, tend to be more friendly, popular, expressive, cooperative, verbal, and creative, less impulsive and aggressive, and more likely to take the perspective of others. . . . More impressive, kindergarteners' participation in sociodramatic play predicts their social and social-cognitive maturity in first and second grades. (p. 189)

Fein and Kinney's argument has to do with relatively short-term correlates of play, which is why their differences with Martin and Caro may be only apparent, not real. In sum, though the rhetoric of progress makes sense, both intuitively and perhaps for predicting short-term effects, it has yet to make the kind of tough-minded sense that comes when there are sufficient data and evidence about long-term effects.

Insufficient evidence for saying anything definite about play's positive functions isn't the only shortcoming of the rhetoric of progress. The rhetoric of progress can lead to serious problems. First, it can lead to the idealization of play, to overlooking its darker, harmful side—as we shall discuss shortly—so that we don't prepare ourselves for times when we need to stop or prevent bad play. Second, this idealization can justify adults taking control of children's play when they shouldn't. Some people seem to feel that if play is essential for children's future, it can't be left to children to choose how to play.

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Sutton-Smith is concerned with the way adults have more and more come to control children's play. It should concern us as well, for, as Sutton-Smith (Smith, 1985) explains, "children need their play to make the present tolerable to themselves. We should defend that need and not intrude upon it for the protection of our own past values under the guise of preparing their future" (p. 146).

In the end, play need not be justified on the grounds that it prepares children for the future. It can be justified simply on the basis that it helps children thrive or at least survive in the present. But even this last statement is itself based upon a rhetoric.

Development of Play

This is first and foremost a book about play's development. Therefore, we need to be clear about what we mean by *development*. We do *not* mean simply changes with age, though we will describe how play changes as children grow older. What we mean has more to do with *maturing*, with becoming more complex and organized, with functioning or achieving on higher levels and with being more sophisticated and subtle, more flexible and aware. A developmental perspective on children's play means, then, a perspective that attends to the signs of maturing, whether about children maturing or about the maturing of play.

In observing children's play, you may sense that there is development without having the words and concepts to explain it. For example, you may

notice a child going from “feeding” her doll to having her doll “feed” another doll, and in noticing this shift you may sense that something has developed. However, without having the concepts and distinctions to explain this change, you may not know what exactly has developed. One of the major purposes of this book is to supply you with concepts and distinctions to explain play’s development.

One further point regarding the meaning of development, again using this last example of doll play: In both instances of doll play, the theme or content remains the same (feeding a baby); however, the form or *structure* differs. This notion of *structure* and the distinction between *structure* and *content* will be crucial to understanding what is meant by development. Like many crucial distinctions, it is difficult to explain with a single definition, but it will become clear with repeated examples and explanations. You can bear this in mind whenever we use the term *development*.

Support for Play’s Development

This book’s approach to what supports play’s development is broad and not determined by any one theoretical perspective. As Piaget (Piaget, 1952) and others have taught us, children support their own development through their active puzzling and problem solving. Parents, teachers, and caregivers support development, not just in broad ways, such as by helping children feel secure and confident, but also in narrow ways, such as by helping children fit Lego bricks together. Physical settings support development by offering materials to play with: a lake and beach to play at skipping rocks, a jungle gym to play at climbing and swinging, a shelf of blocks to play at building a fort. Children support each other’s play and development, especially by suggesting new lines of play. There are, then, many forms of support for development. We need to consider them all.

Now that we have clarified this book’s overall approach to defining play, its functions, its development, and the supports for its development, we can turn to discussing play theories.

KINDS OF PLAY THEORIES ●

One of the sad realities of student life is that students are often rewarded more for memorizing boiled-down conclusions of great thinkers than they are for emulating great thinkers’ ability to *inquire*. That happens especially in textbooks, where restrictions on space permit only a cursory view of a

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thinker's perspective. Although we need to touch upon key theories and theorists, we don't want to reinforce memorizing conclusions. This brief overview, then, is to be taken for what it is, an outline used only to give examples of *kinds* of play theories. For anything substantial, the reader needs to consult the original discussions.

This discussion is organized around *interests*, because different kinds of theories are generated and used by scholars with different interests. We begin with the interests associated with the psychoanalytic tradition.

Psychoanalytic Theory and Play

Those from within the psychoanalytic tradition (Erikson, 1950; Esman, 1983; Winnicott, 1977) have been interested in helping children whose problems stem from difficulty in managing feelings. They have shown how helpful it is to focus on when children are unable to express and cope with feelings, not just because feelings such as anger and love are powerful but also because feelings produce powerful *intrapsychic conflicts*. For example, "If I get angry, will she (he) still love me?" is a question pointing to an intrapsychic conflict, one that any reader can identify with. These intrapsychic conflicts get us into trouble if we don't know how to manage them.

The analytically minded also focus on feelings of helplessness. Children can become overwhelmed by their smallness and their feelings of helplessness. They need help to gain a healthy sense of being in control.

This focus on problems associated with feelings has a great deal to do with children's play. Theorists working out of the psychoanalytic tradition have shown how play can reveal children's struggles with conflicting feelings and with their sense of helplessness. They show also how children can use play to master their feelings and sense of helplessness. One famous example will illustrate this last point.

Around the same time that Sigmund Freud was developing his concept of *repetition compulsion* to explain why so many of his patients repeated the same mistakes and talked about their difficult pasts over and over again, he happened to be staying in a household with a toddler (Erikson, 1950). Freud noticed the toddler throwing objects so that they disappeared behind other objects such as sofas and chairs, and then retrieving them, over and over again. Freud explained that the child was mastering the feelings he felt each time his mother left him. Like most toddlers, this toddler had no control over the comings and goings of his mother. He did, however, have control over the comings and goings of the objects he was throwing. In play, then, he could master feelings of frustration and helplessness that were difficult to master outside of play.

Feelings take center stage in the psychoanalytic perspective on play. In the next major theoretical perspective, thought and thinking become the principal actors.

Cognitive-Developmental Theory and Play

Consider Freud's example once again. From a different perspective, what is interesting is how the toddler's making objects disappear and then reappear rests on his ability to imagine or think about objects even when they are out of sight. The great Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, called this the ability to think about the permanence of objects or, to use his shorthand, *object permanence* (Piaget, 1952). Object permanence is a thinking tool that develops over time; it isn't there from the beginning. For the very young infant, out of sight can mean out of mind. Object permanence indicates the ability to *symbolize*, and the ability to symbolize is crucial to understanding the world. Therefore, to a Piagetian, the toddler's play in Freud's example seems to *consolidate* acquisition of object permanence as a tool for thinking symbolically—no trivial function indeed (Piaget, 1951).

A Piagetian explanation does not negate Freud's explanation. The toddler in Freud's example could have been using his play both to manage his feelings and to consolidate a newly acquired ability to think symbolically. Theoretical perspectives often complement rather than compete with one another.

The Piagetian explanation represents another common feature of cognitive-developmental approaches, namely, a focus on explaining development in terms of structural changes that define different *stages*. Piaget gave us three broad stages for explaining play's development: a stage dominated by nonsymbolic *practice games*, followed by a stage dominated by make-believe and *symbolic games*, followed by a stage dominated by *games with rules*. These stages are about the form or structure of play and not about its themes or content.

Piaget's Stages of Play

The great Swiss psychologist and stage theorist, Jean Piaget, developed three major stages for play's development, which are still used today. They are based on changes in play's *structure* rather than in play's *content*, and they reflect Piaget's major interest in the way

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play's development reflects children's developing capacity to think *symbolically*. The shift from the first to the second stage is a shift from presymbolic to symbolic play. The shift from the second to the third stage is a shift from symbolizing from one point of view only to symbolizing from multiple points of view, as children come to realize that the rules of games are constructed so that games can be played uniformly and fairly. Here are the stages with their approximate ages.

<i>Age (Approximate)</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
Early to late infancy	Nonsymbolic practice games
Early childhood (before age 6)	Make-believe and symbolic games
Late childhood (before age 12)	Games with rules

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and educator, is another well-known cognitive-developmental play theorists (Vygotsky, 1976b). Being an educator as well as a psychologist, Vygotsky was interested in how children learn and how learning contributes to development. Perhaps his most valuable contribution was demonstrating how children's development rests on their actively participating in their culture. After all, no child develops in a vacuum. We will have more to say about this later on when discussing play and culture.

Vygotsky also emphasized the way parents and teachers help children learn by working within their *zone of proximal development*, that psychological "space" just beyond children's comfort zone or where they are used to functioning but not so far beyond that they cannot stretch and grow.

Finally, Vygotsky saw in young children's make-believe play their use of play as a boot-strapping operation to help them *free thought from perception*. Vygotsky, then, saw play as a leading source of children's cognitive development. In later chapters, we will have more to say about exactly what this means.

Jerome Bruner is yet another central figure in the cognitive-developmental tradition. One of his many contributions to our understanding of play's development is his concept of *scaffolding* (Bruner, 1982). For example, in playing with their infants, parents often provide scaffolding so that their infants can participate in the play, such as by holding their infant's attention, giving a clear "play" face, and using a high-pitched voice—all to

help their infant see their play as play. Play's development (and children's development too) can happen, then, because more skilled play partners support the development of play skills.

Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner attended to how play reflects and fosters children's cognitive development. Today's cognitive-developmental theorists do the same. However, in the past 30 years or so, there have been two major shifts in how cognitive development is conceived. The first shift is away from seeing thinking as developing toward being logical (Harris, 2000, 2003). Piaget's view was that children outgrow make-believe by becoming more logical, when, for example, they give up make-believe play for games with rules. However, today's cognitive-developmental psychologists argue that imagination continues to develop well into adulthood, as evidenced by how imagination operates in older children's and adolescents' play (Singer & Singer, 1990). We will have more to say about imagination in Chapters 3 and 4.

The other great shift has been toward appreciating how culture, play, and cognitive development work together (Rogoff, 2003). Today's cognitive-developmentalists have been listening to anthropologists, and the result has been to picture play as but one of several supports for cognitive development. In many cultures, work, not play, is the principal domain where children are supported to think and develop, and these children turn out just fine (Gaskins, 2003). There are, it seems, many roads to maturity.

Today, then, cognitive-developmentalists are more likely to emphasize that development never occurs in a vacuum or in a single, unchanging environment. Rather, children develop through *participating* in their culture, which may or may not emphasize play. This thought is further developed by cultural-ecological theoretical perspectives on play.

Cultural-Ecological Theory and Play

As we have just indicated, development never occurs in a vacuum. That is as true for the development of play as it is for any other development. Play occurs within multiple and nested contexts (home, neighborhood, etc.) that deeply affect whether and how children play. Those theories that explain play in terms of contexts are often referred to collectively as *cultural-ecological theories*. In this book, there will be plenty of examples of cultural-ecological theories, as when we discuss Anthony Pellegrini's research on school recess and Gary Moore's research on the design of early-childhood classrooms.

Throughout this book, we will look at several contexts important for understanding children's play. In particular, we will look at the home, neighborhood, and school settings and at how they influence the way children play,

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Photo 1.2 Young people's social and cultural contexts shape the materials they use and how they play. Here, a girl enjoys playing with a hula hoop at an outdoor basketball court.

so there is no need right now to say much about settings. However, because *culture* is such a misunderstood concept, we need to say a few words about it.

Culture is often treated as a single variable tied to particular geographical regions. However, culture is far more pervasive and subtle than this treatment implies (Rogoff, 2003; Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994). With respect to play, culture can be found in the smallest details—in an offhand reference to a TV show during doll play, in the particular materials chosen for building a play house, in the preference for one type of play over another, in whether or not parents encourage children to play, or in whether certain kinds of play are considered good or bad. The list is long.

Much of the list refers to surface matters, details that can be observed and measured. However, much also refers to what is hidden, to underlying assumptions, values, and worldviews. For example, some cultures are *interdependent*: They define development in terms of a child's needing to "fit in." In these cultures, harmony among group members is valued. Therefore, play

in interdependent cultures is less likely to feature competition. In contrast, *individualistic* cultures define development in terms of a child's needing to "stand out." Individual achievement is what matters, so play in individualistic cultures is likely to feature competition (Rogoff, 2003).

To illustrate how culture works to influence play, consider the game of Monopoly. Monopoly was first developed in 1904, but it was not until 1935, during America's great economic depression, that a modified version became popular (Freitag, 1998). That version emphasized winning by accumulating wealth that put competitors out of business. The game reflected not only the individualistic nature of American culture but also the hard times of the Depression era. However, though the rules of Monopoly reflect a Western, individualistic culture, the way it is played need not, as illustrated in the accompanying box.

Playing to Emphasize Interdependence

Two East Asian girls had been playing Monopoly for quite a while when it was clear that one girl was about to go bankrupt. Rather than let that happen, the other girl gave her a sizable chunk of her own play money. From a cultural perspective, this seeming act of charity was not simply charity. It was an expression of an East Asian culture's emphasis on *interdependence* between individuals and maintaining harmonious relations.

But perhaps the most relevant points to make right now about culture and play have to do with basic assumptions about children's play. In the dominant North American culture, most assume that play is good, even essential, for children. Most assume that adults should be actively involved in supporting and at times coaching children's play. And most assume that children's age-mates are children's natural play partners. These assumptions turn out to be cultural assumptions, not universals. That is, other cultures make very different assumptions about children's play, as we will see in later chapters.

Evolutionary and Comparative Theories and Play

In this book, we won't say much about evolutionary and comparative theories of play, but readers should know that these theories have played important roles in the history of play theories (Smith, 1984). Evolutionary theory has been particularly important in developing the rhetoric of

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progress. For example, Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1972) argued that play is a major precursor to the emergence of language and symbolic behavior in higher primates and man. He made much of the fact that old-world monkeys play less than later evolving new-world monkeys, and of the fact that new-world monkeys seem to use play to imitate and practice important skills.

The study of play among nonhuman animals has also contributed enormously to the development of play theory. Comparative studies have dispelled misconceptions about play in general, including misconceptions about play's being practice for the future. For example, the "galumphing" movement characterizing play fighting among juvenile baboons exists side by side with remarkably agile movements carried out when fighting is for real; the one does not lead to the other (Bruner, 1976).

Perhaps what is most important about the research having to do with evolution and nonhuman animals is that it has bolstered the argument for studying children's play. Play, it turns out, is ubiquitous. It connects not only different groups within the human species but different animal species as well. When we play with a family pet or observe a colt cavorting, we feel this connection. Paradoxically, then, by studying the diverse ways that different species play, evolutionary and comparative theorists have fostered a sense of unity among all animal species. In observing play, we better understand that we humans share a great deal with our nonhuman cousins.

So much for the major kinds of play theories. We need now to say something about play and the influence of major group characteristics: gender, socioeconomic status, and disability.



MAJOR GROUPINGS AND PLAY: ● GENDER, SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, AND DISABILITY

Gender

Gender has a profound influence on play. Very early on there are expectations with regard to how girls should play as compared to boys, expectations placed not only by adults but also by children themselves. Around age 3 ½, girls and boys separate themselves into same-sex play groups (Maccoby, 1998; Pitcher & Hickey-Schultz, 1983). This *gender segregation* continues throughout childhood, and it deeply affects how children play. Crafts, make-believe with domestic themes, and noncompetitive jumping and rhyming games often characterize girls' play. Trucks, war play, and physically vigorous competitive games and rough-and-tumble play characterize boys' play (Meany & Beatty, 1985; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). But the main overall differences have to do with physical aggression, activity level, play fighting, and interactional style, boys being higher on the first three items on this list. As for interactional style, boys are more likely to draw attention to themselves, and girls are more likely to facilitate conversation (Maccoby, 1998). With respect to children's play, then, the world is fairly gender stereotypical.

There is, however, no evidence that girls and boys differ significantly in their overall development as players. Boys and girls are equally playful and imaginative, and the overall structural development of their play is roughly the same. This is what we have chosen to focus on throughout this book: the similarities in the way boys' and girls' play develops.

Boys' and Girls' Play: Differences in Content but Not in Structure

Boys and girls generally play at different play content, boys more with aggressive themes and girls more with domestic themes. In addition, boys' play is more physically active. These and other features have distinguished boys' and girls' play. However, there is no difference in terms of overall structure and structural development. Girls and boys develop their play in the same stagelike progression described by Piaget. And both genders follow the same transformation from playing in parallel to eventually playing cooperatively with others.

Socioeconomic Status

Socioeconomic status (SES) became a focal point of discussions about children's play when, in 1968, Sara Smilansky published her book comparing the play of immigrant children from poor families with the play of children from middle-class families. She found immigrant children's play to be deficient (Smilansky, 1968). However, since then, there have been numerous criticisms of the way that Smilansky drew her conclusions, and today the trend is away from evaluating SES differences as indicating deficiencies. Poverty never stands by itself; it is usually confounded with other variables such as culture and race (Ramsey, 1998), making it very difficult to make evaluative statements about the play of children from different socioeconomic groups.

We will have more to say about Smilansky, socioeconomic status, and play in Chapter 3 when the focus is on play in early childhood. For now and with respect to socioeconomic status and play, the best we can say is that it is premature and unfair to make assumptions about poor children being deficient in how they play.

Disability

The term *disability* covers a wide range of conditions, making it unfair to lump all disabilities together. Furthermore, doing so can lead to wrong generalizations. Certain disabilities have profound effects on the way children play. Autism, for example, renders children seriously impaired in their ability to generate make-believe (Cicchetti, Beeghly, & Weiss-Berry, 1994). Other forms, such as mental retardation, simply slow down the stage-like progression we expect in the play of all children. And still other forms render children without access and opportunity to play, as when children in wheelchairs don't have access or opportunity to engage in sports. The main issues, then, have to do with the special supports and opportunities needed for children with disabilities to play.

With regard to special supports, aside from special equipment and techniques employed by occupational therapists and special educators, many of the supports needed for children with disabilities are the same supports needed for typical children, though they may be for children at younger ages. Therefore, it is important to remember that the discussions in this book about supports for children's play are applicable to children with and without disabilities.

The issue of opportunities may be more subtle and complicated to resolve. The history of rehabilitation psychology and special education tells

us that excluding children with disabilities from the mainstream has created painful problems having to do with denying basic opportunities (Biklen, 1989). Later on, we will have more to say about this issue of disabilities and opportunities.

BAD PLAY ●

Most of this book is about positive instances of play. Therefore, to avoid idealizing play, we need to say something about bad play and play that is ambiguous with respect to whether it is good or bad.

Some readers may object to the term *bad play*. It can suggest that we are judging children as bad and that what is good and bad is something objective. However, in using the term *bad play*, we are not implying anything about the goodness or badness of children, and we certainly aren't saying that judging what is bad is a simple and objective process. What we are saying is that thoughtful, responsible caregivers stop or try to prevent certain forms of play because those forms are harmful or potentially harmful to children. In fact, we thought of calling this kind of play *stop it play*, but decided in the end that *bad play* would suffice. Furthermore, there is scholarly literature acknowledging that certain forms of play are indeed "bad" (Sutton-Smith, 1984).

Types of Bad Play

Risky Play. By "bad play," we mean first of all *risky play*, or play that puts children at risk for serious harm: lying down on railroad tracks to wait as long as possible for oncoming trains is a dramatic example. But there are less dramatic and much more common examples. Throwing sand at one another and stones at cars are among them, as are the many examples having to do with jumping off and into something. Visit certain country bridges crossing shallow, rock-strewn rivers on a hot summer day, and you are likely to see what we mean. This is bad play because it is risky play.

Mean-Spirited Play. Bad play also includes the many forms of *mean-spirited play*, play at making someone else unhappy or terrified. Teasing falls under this category, unless it is affectionate teasing among friends. So too do bullying and beating someone up "for the fun of it." We also include here the numerous kinds of inappropriate sexy play often carried out by preadolescent boys both to excite the perpetrator and embarrass the victim. Bra snapping is one example; there are many others. This too is bad play.

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Misbehaving Play. A third category of bad play consists of certain forms of *misbehaving play* that are both chronic and compulsive. We say “certain forms” because not all misbehavior is bad. The child who never misbehaves is not healthier for being so good. That said, chronic misbehaving play that reveals psychological problems because it is chronic and compulsive is indeed bad. The preschooler who constantly gains attention by showing off at circle time and the 11-year-old who constantly adopts the role of class clown are examples. Therefore, when misbehaving play is chronic and compulsive, it is bad play.

Ambiguous Play

The same cannot be said for a whole host of examples in which the presumed badness of the play rests on differences in taste and perspective. Children have different tastes than adults. They take delight in what is disgusting or offensive, such as jokes about nose picking and farting. These are ambiguous examples in terms of whether the play is good or bad. The amateur will rush to make judgment. The professional will pause to ask questions. This book will provide many examples of these ambiguous types of play and show how questions can lead to an appreciation of their hidden value. In the meantime, we give two examples of *ambiguous play* to further clarify what this type means.

The first is of three preschoolers, age 4, playing at being “robbers”—what they called themselves when pretending to dismember baby dolls. What are we to make of this play? Is it unequivocally bad play? Or is it ambiguous? Here, we treat it as ambiguous, and for three reasons. First, the boys were clearly pretending. They weren't actually destroying the dolls, and they weren't being themselves; they were “robbers.” Second, they were carrying out pretense collaboratively, always an achievement for children this young. Third, they engaged in this play sporadically, not all the time. Given these additional observations, we are still left with some concern because of the brutal and odd nature of the play's content, which is why we call this play ambiguous.

Take another example, this time of much older children playing a rougher game. These were children living in the city, children often stereotyped as being “tough” and “inner city,” as if the basic differences between them and other children are great when they are not. Their game was as follows: Each member was expected to contribute to the group's fun by occasionally telling a joke. However, if any member told a joke that the others did not find funny, the others had to pummel him hard. No member enjoyed being pummeled, and no member bullied.

On the surface, this might be considered “bad” play. Someone is getting hurt. But the fact that all the members accepted the play should give us pause. Was this play helping members feel closer to one another? Was it making members become more thoughtful humorists? Was it helping them develop a degree of toughness needed in this neighborhood? The answers to all three questions might well be “yes,” which is why we treat this as an example of ambiguous play.

In sum, bad play and ambiguous play exist alongside good play. We need to distinguish between them if we are to understand children’s play.

SUMMARY ●

We have seen, then, that although play is difficult to define and its functions are difficult to observe directly, play still has been a focus for scholarly discussion. Furthermore, we have seen how most scholars view play positively, as promoting children’s overall development. We have seen how play’s development never occurs in a vacuum, how it derives from children’s participating in their cultures and in particular settings. Finally, we have seen that not all play is good, that there are several forms of bad play. We move, now, to more focused discussions on these and other issues, beginning with discussions of age changes and play’s development.

KEY WORDS, NAMES, AND IDEAS ●

Ambiguous play
Boot-strapping play
Cognitive-developmental theory
Cultural-ecological theory
Development
Erikson, E.
Freud, S.
Gender segregation
Individualistic society
Interdependent society

20 ● CHILDREN'S PLAY

Intrapsychic conflicts

Mean-spirited play

Misbehaving play

Object permanence

Piaget, J.

Psychoanalytic theory

Repetition compulsion

Rhetorics of play

Rhetorics of progress

Risky play

Scaffolding

Structure vs. content

Sutton-Smith, B.

Symbolic games

Vygotsky, L.

Zone of proximal development