

## THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF PLAY

### What is Play?

Plato came up with the briefest and maybe the best formulation of play. He saw the model of true playfulness in the need of all young creatures, animal and human, to leap. To really leap you have to learn how to use the ground as a springboard and how to land safely. Whenever there is playfulness there is an element of surprise. It's not predictable or repetitive.

Freud emphasised the cathartic function of play - a way we can work out repressed consciousness of unpleasant experiences. For example, he describes how a small boy turned his mother's upsetting absences into a game in which he would make his toys disappear and then appear again. The boy was able to take control of distressing emotions which were caused by events he couldn't control.

Piaget in the 1940s defined play through the player's experience of it, rather than the observer's. He focused on the way we feel and think while we are doing something, rather than the activity itself, to determine whether or not we are playing. This helps us think in terms of a playful self - a self that is willing and able to become engrossed, to lose track of time, to do something for the sheer enjoyment of doing it.

We need to distinguish play from work and leisure. Because so much of our time is taken up with work we tend to think of play as the opposite of work. This leads to:

1. We overlook play opportunities in work
2. Play is often confused with leisure, which is the true opposite of work.

If we accept that play can occur while working then what makes some jobs highly rewarding and others very tedious could be the amount of play in different kinds of work.

This is an example from Rebecca Abrams' book, "The Playful Self"

"Victoria and Sue run a small flower shop in Oxford. It is just one room with plain white walls and black and white lino on the floor. There is no heating and in winter they have to huddle round a small heater in the back room. Twice a week they get up at 4am to drive to New Covent Garden market, returning in time to unload the van and open the shop at 10am. By Thursday evening they are exhausted. But the sheer sense of fun that emanates from that one little room is utterly infectious: it is impossible to look in the window without smiling. This is not just a flower shop it is a playground. There are miniature pineapples, enormous poppies, tropical plants that resemble exotic birds, willow branches, palm fronds, roses of impossible hue, even in one corner small prickly green balls aptly named, testicoli. There is nothing ordinary or mundane or serious here; everything is outrageous, eye-catching, startling - whether in colour, shape or mere suggestiveness. People go to the shop just to see what new marvel has arrived that week and then cannot resist buying some for themselves. Victoria and Susan work long, hard hours but what comes across is their creativity and exuberance. One day before Christmas I dropped by and found the shop adorned with miniature fir trees, all decorated with heart-shaped sequins and smiling plastic cherubs. Instead of the conventional garlands of holly and red berries the walls were covered with hoops of ivy and scarlet chilli peppers. "You two are just playing!" I declared teasingly. And, with five grown-up children between them, Victoria and Sue did not deny it for an instant. "Yes", they agreed happily, "we are"."

Here is a second example of play in work. It is from the book "Fish! A Remarkable Way to Boost Morale and Improve Results" by Stephen Lundin et al. This example is taken from the fish market in Seattle.

*"Her mind flashed back to the scene at the market she witnessed on that first day. She had been looking at a playground with adult kids at recess. Throwing fish, kidding with each other and the customers, calling out orders, repeating the calls. The place had been electric.*

*"Don't misunderstand." said Lonny, "This is a real business which is run to make a profit. This business pays a lot of salaries and we take the business seriously, but we discovered we could be serious about business and still have fun with the way we conducted business. You know, not get all up tight but let things flow. What many of*

*our customers think of as entertainment is just a bunch of adult kids having a good time but doing it in a respectful manner."*

*"And the benefits are many. We sell a lot of fish. We have low turnover. We enjoy work that can be very tedious. We have become great friends, like the players on a winning team. We have a lot of pride in what we do and the way we do it. We have become world famous. All from doing something which children do without much thought. We know how to play!"*

It is not the activity itself that defines play but the way we feel about it and the way it makes us feel while doing it. For example, a game of netball won't be much fun if you are much worse than everyone else in the team. Eating, drinking, making love, resting, spending time with close friends or family, taking physical exercise, reading, listening to or making music, all these leisure activities may be experienced as play but it depends who is doing them, when, where and how. It all means that leisure is not a guarantee of well-being. Having a choice about doing something increases the chance it will lead to play. Playing transforms an activity into something special, something that makes us feel better about ourselves, about other people, about the world we live in. Watching TV is not play and therefore has little benefit in improving our wellbeing.

## **Why Play?**

When we play we are at our most creative, most able to overcome problems and meet challenges. Donald Winnicott said, " It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self". Therefore, we need to locate play firmly at the centre of our lives.

## **The Benefits of Play**

We are born with an instinct for playfulness but it needs nurturing. For example, remember the films of Romanian orphanages where the children were blank-eyed and emotionless in their rows of identical cots, depleted of the energy and curiosity we normally associate with small children. Without opportunities to play any child will become depressed, withdrawn and antisocial. Research has shown that babies living with their own families were played with seven times as often as those in institutions.

Play offers children:

- ❑ A safe way of learning and mastering practical and social skills
- ❑ It teaches good communication
- ❑ It provides an acceptable means of expressing and exploring feelings of aggression or hatred
- ❑ It helps the individual to manage uncomfortable or frightening emotions
- ❑ It helps bridge the gap between inner personal reality and external shared reality

Childhood experiences of play may well influence the kind of adults we become. For example:

- ❑ How we relate to other people
- ❑ How we handle our own emotions
- ❑ How we respond to new challenges
- ❑ How we cope with stressful experiences

The instinct for play is resilient. In the squalor of the Rwandan refugee camps around Goma, children got hold of empty grain sacks and turned them into makeshift kites. During the appalling 1985 famine in Sudan, sardine tins were turned into go-karts. As one relief worker put it, "When the children start playing you know the worst is over. It is the beginning of hope".

Winnicott put it this way:

"Instead of going on trying to explain why life is normally difficult I will end with a friendly hint. Put a lot of store on a child's ability to play. If a child is playing there is room for a symptom or two, and if a child is able to enjoy play, both alone and with other children, there is no very serious trouble afoot. If in this play is employed a rich imagination, and if, also, pleasure is got from games that depend on exact perception or external reality, then you can be fairly happy, even if the child in question is wetting the bed, stammering, displaying temper tantrums, or repeatedly suffering from bilious attacks or depression. The playing shows that this child is capable, given reasonably good and stable surroundings, of developing a personal way of life, and eventually of becoming a whole human being, wanted as such, and welcomed by the world at large." ["What Do We Mean by a Normal Child?" 1946]

## Child's Play

For every kind of play we enjoyed and benefited from as children, there is a parallel available in adulthood.

Child's Play	Adult's Play
Using clay, dough, sand and water to express creativity; to resolve feelings of aggression, anger or fear; to be sociable in a non-confrontational way.	Pottery, woodwork, making bread, to release pent-up tensions from a day at work, perhaps with few chances to be creative; "hand" play to counter the "head" work of the day.
Using puppets, telephones, mirrors, dressing-up, to overcome problems with language and help to develop verbal play.	Amateur dramatics, singing, chatting on the phone, as forms of verbal play, and to overcome problems of shyness.
Sorting- natural and man-made materials - to help children with perceptual difficulties and retention problems.	Tidying drawers/cupboards, sorting sewing boxes, button tins and toolbox, to give a sense of mastery, order and calm. It is the absorption into the activity that can feel playful.
Using picture books to help language development and group participation; to enable children with fears or anxieties to find support through stories.	Reading, going to the theatre, museums, galleries, to provide escapes from ordinary life into art, a vision of alternatives, and the possibility of support.
Using climbing frames, swings, walks, to help a child who is lethargic or overactive to find legitimate experiences of energy or tiredness.	Physical exercise, sport or dancing, to counter the tiredness that comes from desk-bound or repetitive work.

The right-hand column illustrates how when there are difficulties in our adult lives we can be helped through play in the same way that children can.

## Play Through The Ages

From the age of just a few months a baby will become deeply absorbed in exploring objects that attract her. She will look at it from every angle, pass it from hand to hand, turn it this way and that, bring it to her mouth to taste. As she plays, the baby engages with the physical world with her whole, small, physical being - not just her eyes, ears, hands and mouth but often her feet and toes as well.

Young children use play to explore. Exploration and play are indistinguishable in infancy as they occur simultaneously. Even in infancy, play is fused with a powerful drive to understand, to know, to conquer.

Older children, in addition, use play to explore their social and moral world. Fantasy play is central from the age of three or four onwards. Pretend worlds and imaginary friends are common:- a broomstick is a horse, a curtain is a queen's cloak. Make-belief play allows the child to bend reality to suit her own intellectual and emotional needs which help to absorb and make sense of experience rather than be overwhelmed by it.

Between the ages of seven and eleven games with rules become increasingly important. Skipping games, clapping games, hopscotch, conkers and marbles, all come with complex codes of conduct. For example, there are numerous rhymes with which children collect players for a game and then select the one to be "it". In this way, children are learning to abide by rules but also how to create and modify them.

Teenagers use play to retain links with their childhood selves but also tentatively and recklessly, their emerging adult-self. Adolescence pulsates with hormones and sex orientated play comes to the fore. Sport becomes an important "container" for energy and ability that has, as yet, no outlet in the adult world. (Interestingly, this seems to apply more to boys than girls, who in general, quickly seem to lose interest in sport.)

Play gets confusing in adolescence: it becomes intense, risky, double-edged. This confusion is what we tend to take with us into adulthood rather than the ease of our childhood play. For example, the agonies of self-consciousness.

As an example of the confusion about play in adulthood, think about making a noise. Many adults have considerable anxiety about how much noise is acceptable (apart from the neighbours from hell). Noise can be a wonderful form of play and is closely connected to the fundamental issue of how entitled we feel to express ourselves in a range of different ways, play being one of them. Singing, moaning, humming, whistling, shouting: all declare our

presence and express how we feel at that moment. To release the voice is to release the self. Noise-making is a way of taking your own desire for space seriously; it is a way of expressing your need to be there and to be noticed.

## Conclusion

I would like to end my talk with a poem by Heathcote Williams, "Whale Nation", which captures the quality of effortless playfulness in whales that we too need to rediscover.

### Whale Nation

Whales play, in an amniotic paradise.  
Their light minds shaped by buoyancy, unrestricted by gravity,  
Somersaulting,  
Like angels, or birds;  
Like our own lives, in the womb.  
Whales play  
For three times as long as they spend searching for food:  
Delicate, involved games,  
With floating seabirds' feathers, blown high into the air,  
And logs of wood  
Flipped from the tops of their heads;  
Carried in their teeth,  
For a game of tag, ranging across the entire Pacific.  
Play without goals.  
...  
And they do not work to eat.  
They play to eat.

### Heathcote Williams

John Whitwell  
Managing Director  
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## Appendix

### The Squiggle Game (Edited extracts from Jan Abram's, "The Language of Winnicott")

Winnicott initiated the Squiggle game in first assessment interviews with children. He started off by drawing a squiggle on a piece of paper; he then asked the child to add to it. Over the course of the initial interview, Winnicott and the child took it in turns to draw something in response to the other's squiggle. In this way, the squiggle sometimes turned into pictures. For each interview, there were usually about thirty drawings produced.

Winnicott was quite reluctant to write about the Squiggle Game, lest it be turned by some into a psychological test:

".....I have hesitated to describe this technique, which I have used a great deal over a number of years, not only because it is a natural game that any two people might play, but also, if I begin to describe what I do, then someone will be likely to begin to rewrite what I describe as if it were a set technique with rules and regulations. Then the whole value of the procedure would be lost. If I describe what I do there is a very real danger that others will take it and form it into something that corresponds to a "Thematic Apperception Test". The difference between this and a T.A.T. is firstly that it is not a test, and secondly that the consultant contributes from his own ingenuity almost as much as the child does.

Naturally, the consultant's contribution drops out, because it is the child, not the consultant, who is communicating distress."

He describes the simplicity of the technique in the following way:

"At a suitable moment after the arrival of the patient, usually after asking the parent to go to the waiting-room, I say to the child: "Let's play something. I know what I would like to play and I'll show you." I have a table between the child and myself, with paper and two pencils. First I take some of the paper and tear the sheets in half, giving the impression that what we are doing is not frantically important, and then I begin to explain. I say, "This game that I like playing has no rules. I just take my pencil and go like that.....," and I probably screw up my eyes and do a squiggle blind. I go on with my explanation and say, "You show me if that looks like anything to you or if you can make it into anything, and afterwards you do the same for me and I will see if I can make something of yours."

This is all there is by way of technique, and it has to be emphasised that I am absolutely flexible even at this very early stage, so that if the child wishes to draw or to talk or to play with toys or to make music or to romp, I feel free to fit in with the child's wishes. Often a boy will want to play what he calls a "points game"; that is to say, something that can be won or lost. Nevertheless, in a high proportion of first-interview cases the child fits in sufficiently long with my wishes and with what I like playing for some progress to be made. Soon the rewards begin to come in, so that the game continues. Often in an hour we have done twenty to thirty

drawings together, and gradually the significance of these composite drawings has become deeper and deeper, and is felt by the child to be part of communication of significance."

[The Squiggle Game 1968]