

The Dark Side of Play

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Everything has at least two sides; different perspectives that reveal the essence of the object, the feeling or attitude we are interested in. What would day be like without night? Summer without winter? The individual without society? The opposite of what we wish for helps reveal the boundaries of our desire – in games we like to be chased but not always to be caught; the last chocolate in the pack tends to be the sweetest and the one most savoured. And so it is with play; while it is often celebrated for its benefits, play also has a dark side, which according to our viewpoint may be seen as silly and troublesome, naughty and cruel or dangerous and deadly.

Play should be a process, done for the pleasure of the moment yet it often creates a product as well. It should be freely chosen by the player, yet if we don't play what the others want, we'll be playing on our own (Sutton-Smith 1997). The manner of playing should be decided by the child, but often is shaped by the environment or resources available. And play should be engaged in for its own sake, yet for the most part, adults make the rules in an aim to direct, limit or constrain playing – 'Rules are one way in which adults are able to adopt positions of power in relation to children' (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010:60).

In society there are many rules that affect children playing, from the obvious, 'Keep off the grass' to the subtle, 'You can go outside when you have finished your tea/homework/chores' – permission is given but at a price. Numerous rules apply in many situations; the home, the friend's home, the street, the park, the school, the after school club, the religious centre, the medical centre, the art gallery. It's no wonder that children get confused trying to remember what is 'allowed' where. This results in two opposing responses in children: 'The over-protected child assumes there must be terrifying things out there if he needs so much protection and lives in fear' (Philips 2005:61), yet 'The child's freedom... depends upon being able to treat orders and instructions as though they were also hints and suggestions; as open invitations rather than merely prescriptions' (Philips 1998:90). Children need to break rules when growing up in order to find out where the edges of the frame are, both physically and psychically; they need to play with people, situations and the things they find. Without exploring, challenging and mastering the world around them, they are not fully alive nor can they truly understand how it all works – 'Playing is a very serious activity that is part of our survival mechanism in the human world' (Jennings 1995).

This exploring is not scientific, it happens when it happens and in surprising ways. As a society we tend to look at things in a binary manner – in terms of black and white, yes and no, past and future – but reality is much more complex than that. Children are amazingly adaptable at subverting the ways things should be done:

... on what is, for them, a most uncontrolled and unpredictable existence. If children are subject to a mysterious adult world where the control – if not the meaning – of events is often beyond them, they re-assert their power in play. (Bates 1999)

Whether this assertion is considered good, helpful, challenging, naughty or dark is first and foremost assessed by the playing child, but also by those around them. There are many forms of play where children like to feel the thrill of being alive. Toddlers enjoy the ecstasy of the swing, shouting 'Higher, higher!' to the parent pushing them. That same thrill leads to climbing higher, riding faster and, eventually, to bungee jumping, *parkour* and other extreme sports – often without any safety equipment or crash mats. Sadly in our society children are too often 'banned' from troublesome play that's even slightly challenging for, 'It's too risky for staff, in that play could get out of control and children might be hurt' (Grieshaber and McArdle 2010:61).

Toddlers also like the thrill of hide and seek, the magic of seeing things appear and disappear at will. Of course as children get older they understand that magic is not real, yet are still drawn to dark

corners, secret drawers, cobwebbed rooms or caves where secrets are hidden and ghouls and monsters may appear. This fear of the unknown echoes the darkness within us all that Jung called the *shadow*, the part of ourselves that we chose to keep hidden from the world for fear that they see how we really are. Yet paradoxically, Jung also said that we all needed to let out the shadow from time to time, to let it see the daylight, and to come to see it as a healthy part of us as, 'The less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is' (Jung 1938). We need the dark in order for us to know what the light looks like. And of course one person's worst nightmare is another's favourite dream.

For some, appearing on stage is the highlight of their week, for others it's to be avoided at all costs. Playing roles can be seen as 'healthy' and funny if it's in play or on the stage, but as criminal if it results in pretence, deception or fraud; once again we need to know the rules – and stick to them. In society, rules are the glue that aims to make it all work, the sense of roles and rights, place and responsibility. Woe betide the person who exposes the game for what it is or who dares to speak out for what they believe in – the naughty chair or time out awaits, or more seriously the prison, or the asylum for those who really don't fit.

We try to agree on the things that should not occur in 'decent' society; we set laws and policies to prevent nepotism, bullying, bigotry, race hate and violence. Yet often these policies do not work in society or with children – 'Just you sit down and think about what you've done,' overheard in a child care centre as a member of staff addresses a three-year old accused of 'stealing' something from another child. Does the child learn about the nature of right and wrong, or how to behave when shouted at by an adult – or how to 'borrow' when no one is looking? (If only we could sit the bankers in a corner and ask them to think about what they have done.)

Without peeking at the dark side of life from time to time, how will children learn how to protect themselves, how to develop resilience in the face of adversity?

Playing helps to build resilience through developing regulation of emotions, attachment to peers and places, stress response systems, emotional health through pleasure and enjoyment, and physical health. (Lester and Russell 2008)

It's by being angry that we know what satisfaction feels like, being alone helps us know friendship, by visiting strange places that we know where home is; by being ill we appreciate our lives and abilities a little more. And what is normal anyway?

Susan Grieshaber and Felicity McArdle (2010:29) say that, 'Ideas about what is natural in children are selective. They are a conglomeration of science, tradition, history, culture, and other ideas. And they vary across time and place.' In the western world, children are protected from the dark side of life, from harm whether physical or psychological, while in the rest of the world, children grow up without adults, caring for siblings, living in the street or in the forest using knives and tools, playing with and using fire – actions that are banned or considered irresponsible in many homes and settings in capitalist countries. Taking risks, playing with the elements of the world, exploring limits – it's these actions that help us adapt to a hostile world; 'Play is training for the unexpected' as Marc Bekoff puts it.

And what of the darkest corners of all? Being left out of the game, being picked on? Exploring sexuality, exploring sexual difference and deviance – do these have a place in 'good' play?

Grieshaber and McArdle tell of an event that took place in a children's setting with three girls playing 'Cinderella' and a fourth watching from the sidelines. The helpful practitioner negotiated for the fourth to join the game and it continued for over 45 minutes. The teacher, for that was the practitioner, asked for a review of the session and the three girls animatedly told of their exploits as Cinders, the prince and so on. The fourth child was silent, so the teacher asked;

'Who did Lulu play in your game?' The girls quickly glanced at each other again, and one girl explained while the others looked at the floor: 'Lulu was the piece of paper that was in front of the fireplace, collecting the cinders.' Lulu nodded.

(Grieshaber and McArdle 2010:28)

Was this dark play? It would seem that Lulu was not part of the game, yet she quietly colluded in playing the role of the piece of paper – ‘Lulu nodded’. It might be that her original interest in the game was enhanced when she was ‘invited’ to join the game by the teacher. Or she may have felt intimidated by the animated actions and familiarity of the others into a passive or subservient role, we can’t know. The researcher records that the girls ‘looked at the floor’ – an act of contrition in many cultures, yet they had happily played for 45 minutes with Lulu in the role of a piece of paper. What would happen in the game was to be repeated, would Lulu be elevated to the role of Cinderella? Not likely.

And what about sexuality? This is an aspect of play that is very rarely spoken of in practice as it can be a ‘taboo subject’ and is often annihilated (stopped) or adulterated (changed) by the adults present in the play frame (Else 2009:57). Adults may feel embarrassed or threatened by children who are exploring their bodies and their gender and, ‘The grownups tell them that they need to know about something else; and they need to know about something else – call it culture – to distract them from what they are really interested in’ (Philips 1998:23). So where is the darkness here? Is it in the children exploring and trying to make sense of their feelings and desires. Or is it in the actions of the grownups, burying the child’s needs under layers of respectability and propriety so that questions go unanswered, perhaps to re-emerge later as repressed feelings or extreme deviance and perversity? The individual grows up in the society to which they are born; each society has corners that escape the bright light that is created by the dominant values and beliefs. It is only natural that children seek out those dark corners to see what’s there, facing the bogey man and getting stronger by sticking a tongue in his general direction.

The theme for this year’s *Beauty of Play Conference* is **The Dark Side of Play**. This takes place Friday to Sunday, 9-11 September, 2011. We will explore this topic through workshops either indoors or outdoors. For more details see www.ludemos.co.uk or contact info.ludemos@virgin.net

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