



Shining Rivers Waldorf School

A Developing Waldorf SchoolSM

Thinking about Play

by Dr. Wildred Innerd

Dr. Wilfred Innerd began his career teaching Primary School in the UK. His specialty quickly became Early Childhood Education, and later Play. Dr. Innerd worked for 35 years at the University of Windsor's Faculty of Education (Windsor, Ontario, Canada), including a term as Dean, "teaching teachers how to be teachers". He was heavily involved in Ontario's committees for children's mental health. Although Dr. Innerd is a strong supporter of Public Schools, he has often cited the Waldorf method as an excellent example of how Play can and should be incorporated into a child's daily life.

Friedrich Froebel famously declared that: "Play is a child's occupation." By this he meant that Play is what occupies a child, but he also meant it in the sense that it is a child's job, his or her occupation, akin to being a teacher or a doctor or a plumber. It is a fact that by the age of five, a typical child has learned how to speak at least one language, how to crawl, walk, run, jump. He or she has mastered basic hygiene, how to clothe him or herself, basic human relations, a great deal about the physical and social worlds around him or her and a myriad of other bits of inter-related knowledge. One estimate is that by five, the child has learned 90% of everything he or she will ever learn. That is a full time job.

The point being that very little of this has actually been learned by means of instruction or even demonstration. Most has been learned through the medium of Play. Play is a very efficient and effective way to learn and babies begin to play within months, if not weeks, or even days, of being born. Initially, of course, they do not know that they are playing, but a one-year old has a tentative grasp of the concept of Play and a two-year old understand it perfectly. One of my grand children, when he was a little past his second birthday, used to go with his mother to her exercise club, which has an excellent play space for the little ones. The second time they went there, as they pulled up to the building and he recognised where he was, he turned to his mother and inquired, "Play?" With this single utterance he demonstrated his complete comprehension of the nature and function of Play and especially of the frame in which it occurs. Framing is an essential feature of Play and one which children grasp very quickly. Years ago I was working upstairs one day in my study when I heard a terrible scream from the basement where two of my children were playing with some of their friends. I rushed down stairs to the basement door, becoming aware that a child was coming upstairs from below. I threw open the door as my daughter arrived on the landing. She looked up at me and said: "We're only playing". She knew that I was not in the frame, was not a player, and needed to be reassured.

One of the many reasons why Play is so natural to children, and why they love to engage in it, is that it is the only time when they are in charge of themselves, of what they do, rather than

being told by someone else what is required. They are in control, even when they are playing with other children. This is because Play is essentially a voluntary activity and children can withdraw from it if they so choose. However, the reality is that adults have several very important roles to play in Play, if you'll pardon the pun. First, adults must provide sufficient Time for Play to occur, and I mean long periods of time, an hour, an hour and a half, two hours at a stretch, and over several days or weeks or even months. This requires Space, ideally dedicated Space, so that a construction, for example, does not have to be dismantled, or a pretend store taken down and rebuilt every day. To be clear, it is not necessarily a negative for children to re-create a play area, but if the point is to play store keeper and customer, to take time every day to get back to where the children were at the end of the previous play period, may detract from the activity. For example, my children had a restaurant game in the basement that they played for months and could plunge right in to afresh every day.

Adults must also provide Materials and Equipment. I tend to favour basic malleable objects that can exercise the imagination. Basics are such things as sand/soil, water, mud, clay, play-doh, blocks, sticks, plastic cups, paper, cardboard, paint, brushes, crayons, balls, dress-up clothes, house-keeping toys, cardboard boxes etc. We all are aware that children are likely to spend as much time playing with the boxes that the toys came in, as the toys themselves. Scissors and tools such as hammers, saws and screwdrivers are also important pieces of equipment, although they may require closer adult supervision than normal.

Close Observation by adults of children at Play is absolutely necessary. First and foremost there is no better way to learn about children and their individual patterns of development and their various capabilities. This is light years more informative than any standardised test can possibly attain. Second, observation allows adults to determine when Play needs to be re-directed, or re-started, or terminated. Play can become stale, or repetitive or even dangerous, and an adult needs to make a determination as to which appropriate action should be taken. My preferred solution is to replace one set of materials/equipment with another.

It would seem from the foregoing that I am only talking about one kind of Play, namely Dramatic Play, but in fact the comments refer to all kinds of Play, block, exploratory, motor, social, imaginative, outdoor, and so on. It should be noted that although these are useful categories for thinking about Play, in fact, in the real world of the child, they flow in to each other and overlap considerably. You should also know that there are arguments about the nature of some of these types of Play and whether they can be classified as Play. For example, some theorists believe that exploration is not Play, citing among other things, physiological differences. However, you should know that I discount such arguments, on the grounds that if the child believes he or she is playing, then the activity is indeed Play.

Play is primarily a social activity, in adults as well as children, by the way. Mildred Parten (1932) long ago delineated the types of Social Play that children can engage in and surmised that it is developmental in nature. There are modern criticisms of Parten, some arguing against the stage nature of her categories, others that her distinctions are not fine-grained enough. However, I believe that they are still valid, simple to understand, easy to observe and therefore give us valuable information not only about a child's social development but also her or his motor and cognitive development as well. Her six types of Social Play are:

Unoccupied Behavior. The child is apparently not playing, but instead moves and looks around randomly, wiggles, flops about, plays with own body, may follow an adult about.

Onlooker Play. The child exhibits more focus, definitely observes, watches others. Talks, asks questions about what is going on, may make suggestions, but does not participate.

Solitary Independent Play. The child plays alone with toys or playthings. No effort to play with other children, if present. No reference to their activities

Parallel Play. Children play beside each other but not with each other. Play is independent even if the toys or playthings are similar or identical, for example in the sand box. There is no attempt to influence the Play of other children. Interactions that do occur may be negative, as when both children want the same shovel.

Associative Play. Children play with other children. Conversations are about the common activity. Sharing, borrowing and lending occur. There is some control over who can Play and who cannot. Similar or identical Play occurs, but no division of labour, no common goal oriented activity, no subordination of individual to a group or a role. Each child acts as he or she thinks fit. The association is more important than the activity. This behaviour is very common among teenagers, by the way.

Cooperative Organised Play. Play occurs in groups. It is goal, even product oriented, (e.g. building a structure, within the Play frame) or socio-dramatic, or a formal game. It is very clear who can or cannot play, often controlled by one or two children. Division of labour and roles, and differentiation between them is marked. Statements such as “It has to go on top”, or “You be the mother”, or “I play 2nd base”, are likely to be heard.

N.B. Participation and organization increase over time as does the complexity of rules and roles. However, in my view, it is not strictly a developmental and therefore age related sequence. All categories of Social Play can be observed in adults, for example. The jiggling foot of the university student in class, which I have observed many times, is a perfect example of Unoccupied Behaviour.

Characteristics of Children's Play

My own view of Children's Play is that it is:

1. **Participatory.** As already noted, it is what children do. A lot of adult Play is spectatorial, that is adults often watch others playing, much more than children do.

2. **Non-serious.** There is no purpose to the Play outside of the activity itself. There is no end product. This is one of the aspects of Play which differentiates it from Art, which typically does have an end product, a piece of work. Of course Art can be (perhaps should be) very playful in nature and is every bit as important as Play. But although Play is by definition non-serious, it has very serious developmental functions. Another way of thinking about it is to realise that it does not matter in the slightest what the particular Play activity happens to be. The fact that the child plays is enough.

3. **Self-contained.** This is the concept of Framing that we have already met. While playing, children are in another world, which they inhabit and control. Adult interference may

not be welcome. I used to advise my students to be invited to play with children and not to assume that they can legitimately just barge in. I have seen more clumsy interventions in to Play than I care to remember

4. **Voluntary.** Children play because they want to, the way they want to and with whom they want to. We all remember as children being taken somewhere and being expected to play with other children who we did not know. Some times that was successful, often it was not.

5. **Immediate and Spontaneous.** The less this is so, the less likely an activity is actually Play. In Play, especially Dramatic Play, a great deal of discussion may take place about what should happen next, but the decisions taken do not contravene this characteristic, simply because they are not pre-determined, especially not by those outside the Play frame. Furthermore when children return to a Play activity, they immediately and spontaneously pick up from where they left off.

6. **Increasingly Rule Bound.** However, the rules that govern the Play are those that the children create themselves. The rules involve such things as who can play and who cannot, and most of all what roles a given child should play. Roles and rules become intertwined. Usually older children make the rules and younger children follow along. Adult rules should only be concerned with such things as the safety aspects of the play.

7. **Fundamental.** Children who do not Play, or are not allowed to Play, or do not have enough Play, do not develop appropriately. Unfortunately, child soldiers are prime examples of the deadly effects of not playing. Children with dead eyes and no smiles are terrible to see.

8. **Sometimes Risky.** Perhaps adventurous would be a better term (See Caplan and Caplan), but I prefer risk as a term. Play often requires children to experiment with playthings, play spaces, real objects and so forth, and this sometimes means taking risks. We, of course, should never put children in harm's way, but a child who is never given the opportunity to rise to a challenge, to stretch him or herself, physically or psychologically, is being short changed from educational and developmental points of view. Trees are to be climbed, streams to be jumped over, fences to be walked along.

9. **Joyful.** Joy is the one essential element of Play. Generally speaking, whatever else is happening in their lives, children immersed in Play are happy children. As every parent knows, a child who is uncharacteristically listless when playing is a child who is about to come down with some illness, and equally a sick child who starts to play is a child who is getting well again.

I would add one other thing, although it is not really a characteristic, and that is that Good Players are almost invariably Good Learners. I am not arguing cause and effect here, I am merely recording a relationship that I have noted over many years of observing children at Play and at Work. It is also the case that Play and Work are on a continuum and that it is often unclear which is which, and that the distinction is unimportant anyway. To illustrate, I remember being in a Day Care Centre watching a group of children, two boys and two girls, playing house, This involved amongst other things, setting the table. Lunch time was

announced and the same group was assigned to set the tables for the entire Centre. One activity was definitely Play and the other definitely Work, yet the activity was identical.

Parents who have children attending a Waldorf School such as Shining Rivers, will recognize that the thinking about Play I have described is a fundamental component of the philosophy that permeates the School. If your child or children do not attend, perhaps the message sufficiently resonates enough with you that it is worth taking a look.

End Notes

Some of the ideas of Frank and Theresa Caplan on the power of Play.

Play:

1. Aids growth and development
2. Is a voluntary activity
3. Offers freedom of action
4. Provides an imaginary world a child can master
5. Has elements of adventure
6. Provides a basis for language development
7. Has a unique power for building interpersonal relations
8. Offers opportunities for mastery of the physical self
9. Furthers interest and concentration
10. Allows children to investigate the material world
11. Is a way of learning, and learning about, adult roles
12. Is always a dynamic way of learning
13. Helps children to refine their judgements
14. May be academically structured
15. Is vitalizing and essential to the survival of humanity.

Adapted from: Caplan, Frank & Theresa Caplan. (1973). The Power of Play. Doubleday, garden City, N.J.

Caplan and Caplan provide a strenuous defense of Play and its properties. If you want something a little more up-to-date, although I believe the benefits and the nature of play are timeless, try Alix Spiegel, Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills. (2008).

www.npr.org/templates/story

Play Areas

House	Airplane	The Moon
Kitchen	Boat/Ship	Space Station
Office	Bakery	Launch Control
Post Office	Toy Store	Pet Shop
Restaurant	Shoe Store	Cake Shop
Beauty Parlour	Forest	Candy Store
Fire House	Desert	School
Garage/Gas Station	Sea	Hospital
Camp	Sea Floor	Doctor's Office
Barber Shop	Car Wash	Ranch
Road Building	Hardware Store	Jungle
Pizzeria	Train	Space Ship

As a parent or a teacher, you are limited only by your imagination as to what play areas you can create. The above list is made up of Play Areas I have created, helped to create, or observed, that I can remember. Fire House I remember vividly. We made hoses out of panty hose with the tops cut off and stuffed in to the legs and fought many a fire. My designated role was victim and if you have never been rescued from a 'blazing' building and carried on a stretcher made of newspaper an inch above the floor at speed by a bunch of wildly excited kindergartners you haven't really lived. Space activities were always very successful, involving as they did boxes and boxes of tin foil (for space suits). I always particularly enjoyed the outdoor areas, especially ranching, gas station and road building. I guarantee the children enjoyed it all nearly as much as I did.

Adult Roles

I would suggest that an adult (parent, teacher, care-giver) has four roles to play.

1. **Observer.** This is something that needs to be done 100% of the time, whatever else needs to be done.
2. **Participant.** By invitation only. An adult who plays with children validates the particular Play activity and the importance of Play in general. The logic is that if the adult takes time to play, Play must be important.

3. **Initiator.** The adult controls the initial environment, provides, toys, equipment, space, time and, very often, ideas.

4. **Intervener.** Ideally a role that should never need to be played, but we live in a real world. Children will get in to arguments, behave badly, be cruel to each other. On such occasions an adult must intervene. More subtly, play will sometimes become stale, be played out, be boring. The ability to detect these facts before the children do, is what makes the superior teacher, parent, care-giver and having detected them do something about it, preferably, as I indicated, by taking on the initiator role, making a positive intervention, introducing new materials, equipment or ideas.