The Many Meanings of Play

Play, Parenthood, and Creativity

Eugene J. Mahon

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If we define play as one of the unique communicative modes of childhood, a semiotic skill that merges action and symbolism, the link between play and parenthood will not seem obvious at first. But if we define parenthood as an object relationship in which a mature person gets down on the floor to meet the needs of an immature person, it will quickly become obvious that without play and playfulness the dialogue between Gulliver and the Lilliputians could never take place.

What parenthood is is probably as difficult a question to address as what childhood is. Should we define it as a category of object relations or a unique amalgam of ego functions in the service of child rearing, or from a libidinal point of view, as Therese Benedek (1959) suggests in her paper "Parenthood as a Development Phase"?

If the history of parenthood could be told, it would probably be as frightful and frightening as the history of childhood itself, a nightmare we have only begun to awaken from, with any relative awakening owing largely to the efforts of psychoanalysis in this century. Parental attitudes and convictions, like character traits, must have pedigrees that defy analysis, so deep are the identifications and reaction formations that support them. I mention identifications and reaction formations, but if all the psychological components of parenting skills or deficiencies were to be outlined, which defense mechanism, which aspect of the tripartite mind, could be left out of the reckoning?

From a libidinal point of view one could address all the love and hate that children stir up in the parents—incest, postpartum depression, and the Laius complex being obvious examples of libidinal and aggressive instincts dealt with pathologically rather than adaptively. In more normative examples of parenthood one could cite the love, tolerance, and educative principles that guide good enough mothers and fathers as examples of pleasure and compromise that come from libidinal strivings channeled in the service of society.

From a structural point of view one could argue that parenthood makes demands on all three facets of the tripartite mind. The id of a parent requires continuous nourishment from spouse and other object relations to keep it from turning against the child as frustrater. Child abuse is surely in part a reflection of unfulfilled parenthood acting out its frustrations on the perceived frustrater, the child. The ego of the parent will be tested constantly, day and night from infancy through adolescence. The resourcefulness, the frustration tolerance, the ingenuity of conflict resolution, the sheer energy required to meet the needs of the developing nation called childhood would tax the diplomatic and political skills of the most seasoned arbitrator. The ego will need to be able to titrate empathy and discipline, gratification and frustration, laissez-faire and authority, love and hate, in its arduous role as lover, educator, taskmaster. The parental superego will have to regulate the sense of guilt and pleasure with great flexibility and fairness as it not only frustrates and disciplines but also forgives child and parent with tact and timing. One way of focusing and perhaps simplifying the discussion of parental attributes and the mental structures that inform and sustain them is to introduce the concept of play and its role in parenthood.

First let us look at some examples of parents at play and other parents who seem unable to play.

1. A parent who has been away on a trip returns to a five-year-old who hides behind the kitchen door several times until the father, a humorless man, eventually "spanks" her for being naughty. This parent seems to be unable to enter into the spirit of the child's playful communication. The child is surely speaking in a ludic voice, saying, "If you go away, I can go away. I can make you feel what I felt in your absence." A playful father would join in this play, reading the ludic code accurately and thereby giving the child the feeling that his or her voice was heard.

2. A three-year-old bumps his head on a table top. The mother spanks the table, saying, "Don't you ever touch my child again." The child's trauma is relieved by this magical drama. This "good enough" mother knows intuitively that the three-year-old lives in an animistic world where "bad" tables hit "good" children and mothers who attempt to make the world "child proof" will fail but then try again to create the illusion of a protected child-proof world until children can gradually be weaned from such illusions as development proceeds.

3. Let us return again to that most celebrated example of child's play— Freud's grandchild in

> "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Even though Freud (1920) does not describe the parental or grandparental reaction (except for his own brilliant interpretation of its meaning!), we can imagine what an appropriate parental response could have been. The child throws the stringed object away and retrieves it, thereby depicting and mastering his loss in play. If the mother returned and saw this play taking place, how might she have joined in the play interaction? Depending on the amount of language available to the child, the mother might play peek-a-boo or join in throwing and retrieving the inanimate object, mixing language and play in an attempt to get across to the child that his affects of sadness and anger and loss and love were being heard. If the child punched the mother playfully, this might be viewed as confirmation that the mother's playful communication with the child was "getting through." I have "constructed" one possible playful interaction between child and mother. Play is inventive: the other possible interactions between mother and child are as endless as the limits of the imagination itself.

I believe that the links between play and parenthood are subtle but crucial for an understanding of the parental role in development. Since play tends to diminish as symbolic development proceeds from childhood to adulthood and human semiotic skills rely less and less on action and more and more on abstraction, the return of this relatively repressed secret garden of playfulness is mandatory if parental regression in the service not only of the parental egos but also of the collective egos of childhood is to reach its full creative potential. I am suggesting that the creativity of parenthood is a totally neglected issue, its lack of glamour as a research topic owing probably to countertransferencelike affects in the research community.

If creativity can be defined by the scope and ingenuity of the ego's multiple and resourceful regressions in the service of the ego, where is the call for creativity more urgent or more enduring than in the parent-child relationship; and where can one find a developmental canvas more varied in psychological nuances and pigmentations or more challenging for the artist-parent to play upon; and where else can one find an artistic work-in- progress that takes at least eighteen years for the developmental paint to dry? And even then many further masterful touchings and refinishings are required before the artist can relinquish the developmental brush and rest a little from the labor in some midlife oasis of satisfaction (why do we tend only to describe the crises and rarely the satisfactions of the unfolding stages of the human condition?). I would suggest that the capacity to play is one of the essential components of this parental artistry.

I want, however, to focus on one feature of play only: its relation to regression. Play may well be the first aesthetic exercise of the human mind as it struggles with conflict. The regression in play is of course a calculated regression, ego dominated rather than id ridden, an aesthetic detour in Hartmann's sense (1939) rather than the mind out of control or gone astray. Since *analysis itself* can also be depicted as titrated regression, an analysand's willingness "to play the transference game," as one of my patients put it, *play in* childhood, *play in* parenthood, and *play in* analysis can be compared and contrasted from this point of view. An analyst is interested not only in how the analysand deals with the transference-fanned flames of regression in the psychoanalytic situation but also in the patient's creative handling of regression in all other aspects of life—play, foreplay, aesthetic pursuits, fantasies, parenting, and so on. The creative handling of regression is a euphemistic phrase that makes the analytic process or the parental process sound a lot easier than it is in reality.

There are powerful resistances both in analysands and in parents that derail the creative process, and the bulk of analytic work lies in exposing them and thereby diminishing them: (1) when Winnicott (1981) compares psychotherapy and playing, stating that if the patient is unable to play, the analyst's job is to get the play going again, he oversimplifies (not unwittingly, given Winnicott's impressive clinical savvy) a process of defense analysis and resistance analysis that is arduous and laborious; and (2) if a parent walks around the house naked, overstimulating the child, confusing domestic exhibitionism with the parental responsibility for the sexual enlightenment of the child, regression is being abused and indulged rather than being tamed and tempered in a more creative parental attitude.

In chapter 10 of this book, I argued that play, the essential communication mode of childhood, recedes in importance as the developing psyche weans itself from its action-packed infancy and embraces the abstractions and conceptualizations of adulthood. This is a relative issue obviously. If the mind never relinquishes anything, as Freud argued, but secures a permanent albeit repressed place for abandoned psychic products in fantasy, it is unlikely that play could ever be totally abandoned either. A parent makes a good example of an adult who must rely most of the time on the formal thought processes outlined by Piaget as the hallmark of adolescent and postadolescent cognitive achievement (Flavell, 1963). But if the parent is to be empathic and effective as a caretaker

of children throughout their developmental cycles, he or she must revive the play mode that was temporarily rejected in the service of other more adult modes of being and thinking and behaving. The parent who never learned to play even as a child will obviously have a difficult time speaking the foreign language of play with a citizen who knows no other tongue for so many developing years.

The concept of creativity, that much-written-about province of the mind, is rarely used in the same breath with the concept of parenthood. Is it perhaps some pathology of the collective ego ideal that can sing the praises of creativity in childhood but never even conceive of creativity in a parent? In an age of abstract expressionism, is it not ironic that we insist on concrete marks on canvas or paper before we call it art when the indelible but invisible marks of parenthood on the evolving canvas of childhood clamor for equal attention? In a sense competent parents are the unsung artists of generation after generation, their canvases not honored in museums, their subtle artistry invisible in the complex fabric of society. Is some form of recognition not long overdue for this creative parental playing?

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