The Many Meanings of Play

Psychoanalytic Views of Children's Play

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Table of Contents

Psychoanalytic Views of Children's Play

Functions of Play

Conclusion

References

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Psychoanalytic theories about the developing functions, structure, and content of the inner lives of young children derive in large part from observations of play activities in the consulting room. Child analysts seek to understand what the child is expressing through the language of play about his or her innermost fantasies and emerging relationships with others.

Even though it is difficult to develop a unified definition of it, "we all think we know what we mean when we speak of or hear about play, [and] in fact play is better described by its functions than by a formal definition" (Solnit, 1987, p. 205). The intent of this chapter is to present central psychoanalytic propositions regarding developmental characteristics and functions of coordinated activities that child analysts recognize and designate as "play." With these ideas in mind, we will address and review three broad questions about play in child psychoanalysis and trace the evolution of various conceptualizations relevant to each question. (1) Why do children play? (2) What are the various characteristics seen in children's play? (3) What happens to play in later childhood and adulthood; that is, are there direct derivatives of the very young child's play activity, or is work truly the heir to play in later life? Each of these questions has to do with the narrative function of play activities—the ways in which play scenarios and activities form coherent representations of what is uppermost in children's minds and most available in their repertoire of modes of expression. Although we focus on the play activities of children, the fate of their modes of expression over time will be discussed in relation to the creativity of adults as well.

Several caveats are important about our intent. First, though every child-analytic case report informs our understanding of play behavior, this chapter reviews selected works that focus on play *conceptually*. Second, though our broad questions are relevant to play between child and analyst, we will not focus on or systematically review the broad literature on the therapeutic uses of play in the

analytic setting.

Functions of Play

During the earliest phases of the development of psychoanalytic theory, Freud used the phenomena of children's play to illustrate and identify the origins of various features of psychic functioning in adult life. Many of Freud's descriptions and formulations about play phenomena remain central to child psychoanalytic theory about the function of play. Examples are the nature of the child's orientation to reality; the genesis and use of fantasy; the tendency to achieve active mastery over experiences of passivity; the compulsion to repeat as a means of reworking trauma; and superego formation. The direct observation of the play of children in analysis has further informed analytic theories not only about the function of play but also about the importance of early childhood experiences in psychic development. These direct observations have changed our emphasis on the relative importance of certain functions of play.

Freud (1905) first referred to children's play when he suggested that play appears as the child is learning to use words and organize thoughts. Pleasure for the young child is derived from the repetition or rediscovery of the familiar. Play is not bound by the "meaning of words or the coherence of sentences" (1905, p. 128). Indeed, for Freud, this pleasure in the meaningless or absurd is both a characteristic and a function of play. Children's play comes to an end with the institution of the as yet unnamed "critical faculty" that rejects pleasure in the form of the meaningless or the absurd. Stated another way, children's play reflects the broader range of tolerance for the drives that can occur as long as the superego is not yet fully in place. Freud, however, did not allow the "critical faculty" absolute censorship over such playfulness in adults. As heirs to play, jokes fulfill the adult requirement for order and "reasonableness," re-creating the pleasure of play in their use of thoughts and words that, though they seem absurd, are always in the service of conveying specific meaning, often emphasizing incongruity and paradox.

Central to Freud's conceptualization of play in older children was his observation that it serves as an acceptable mode for discharge and satisfaction of instinctual drives and for mastery of experiences that make "a great impression" (1920, p. 17) upon the child. In contrast to his

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description of the play of young children, he pointed out that the older child at play does not disavow reality but rather suspends it in the service of reworking unpleasurable experiences. Such reworking is achieved through play by the child's reversing his or her original role of frightened, passive victim into an active, masterful role. Similarly, Freud suggested that play serves a reparative function as seen among the sequelae of traumatic experiences. This function of children's play was an example of a natural inclination toward a "revolt against passivity and a preference for the active role" in the service of practicing and assuming greater self-sufficiency (1931, p. 236).

Moreover, Freud emphasized that the compulsion to repeat is another driving force behind children's play, recapturing feelings associated with pleasurable experiences. The reexperience of pleasure and attempts at mastery of an unpleasant situation are not mutually exclusive (1920). For example, Freud's observation that the child's play is dominated by the wish to be grown up and to be able to do what the adults do speaks both to the child's oedipal longings and reverses the specific role of victim to father's expected retaliation. The child's mastery through a reversal of roles yields pleasure as he passes on the "disagreeable experience and . . . revenges himself on a substitute" (1920, p. 17).

Theorists after Freud continued to view play as having a discharge or modulating function for the child. Melanie Klein (1929) emphasized that play serves the function of discharge for infantile masturbation fantasies. According to Klein, these fantasies give expression to the infant's sadistic wishes toward the mother, which are projected and then provoke retaliation from the persecutory object. Play affords a relatively safe activity in which the infant may displace these wishes and avoid the anxiety associated with expected annihilation. Although Klein shared Freud's views about the role of the repetition compulsion and the child's use of play as a central means of achieving mastery of internal conflicts, other aspects of her ideas on play were her own contributions. Her developmental timetable, assumptions about the specific content of infantile fantasies, and the relative inattention paid to daily experiences as material for play represented a significant departure from the views of many of her contemporaries and of later contributors.

In keeping with the increased focus on the developing ego, Waelder (1932) elaborated on Freud's notions of the repetition compulsion as a way of facilitating the assimilative function of play

in the child’s attempts to master the environment. Through play, the child can turn passive into active, thereby gradually reworking originally painful or overpowering events through a sense of mastery of them. “Play may now be characterized as a method of constantly working over and, as it were, assimilating piecemeal an experience which was too large to be assimilated instantly at one swoop. The pain in an experience must be overcome before the experience can be repeated and enjoyed in play” (pp. 217-218). Asserting that the pleasure principle alone cannot explain the nature of children’s play, Waelder highlighted the distinction between “functional and gratification pleasure.” Drawing on the ideas of Karl Bühler, he pointed out that in addition to the pleasure sought in the gratification of wishes, children’s play may be motivated by the pleasure “derived from pure performance” (p. 211).

The thrust of Waelder’s contribution, however, was to examine the relationships among the strength of the developing ego, the child’s vulnerability to trauma, and the use of play as a means of abreacting and assimilating overwhelming stimulation. He proposed that “difficult experiences of the past function as preparations for future tolerance” (p. 217) and that with age, both vulnerability to trauma and the flexibility of response diminish. The younger child’s relative inexperience in the world makes her more vulnerable to “excessive stimulation” but, at the same time, less rigid in her responses. In this sense, play serves a psychic metabolic function and provides a means of breaking down and repeating overwhelming experiences until they are mastered and assimilated. The intent of play is “not so much the preparation for future activities in adult life as it is the assimilation of the mass of excitations from the outer world” (p. 218), which in turn strengthens the ego’s capacity to tolerate and endure difficulties. The plasticity of the immature ego both necessitates and facilitates the abreactive function of play that occurs only in children.

Anna Freud (1965) proposed that the child’s earliest play with his and mother’s body promotes the child’s capacity for differentiation between self and others and between fantasy and reality. Later play with toys, solitary role play, and group play give expression to displaced and sublimated drive energies and pave the way for pleasure in task completion, problem solving, and the ability to work. Although Anna Freud never devoted a monograph to the specific topic of play, her writings focused on the child’s developing capacities for defense activities and ego adaptation that form the constituent properties of play (1965). She viewed play activities as one source of

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information about the child's developmental status and as a window onto the child's attempts to gain mastery over conflicts generated from within and those resulting from the demands of external reality (A. Freud, 1965, 1979). From Anna Freud's perspective, the importance of play lay in its role of moving the child toward an increased capacity for autonomy and self- confidence, socialization, and work.

Erikson outlined his studies of children's play according to libidinal zones and phase-specific conflicts. In 1937, Erikson focused on the developmental trend toward displacement of bodily experiences and associated aims and conflicts to the "manifestation of an experience in actual space" (p. 139). He pointed out that rather than displacing from "one section of their own body to another" most children "find objects in the toy world for their extrabodily displacements . . . externalizing the entire dynamic relationship between the zone and its object" (p. 161). The goal or central function of play is that it affords the child the "opportunity to experiment with organ- modes in extrabodily arrangements which are physiologically safe, socially permissible, physically workable and psychologically satisfying" (p. 185).

In later papers, Erikson outlined the function of play as preparatory for adult roles and for the expectations of society. Play allows children to try on adult functions and to alter these roles as they become more aware of "society's version of reality" (1972, p. 127). Through play, children elaborate their own identity based on the roles available for their observation and the external demands of their social world. Because of the vicissitudes of development, these external factors seem different to children at different periods of development and thus the roles are constantly being revised. "No wonder . . . that man's play takes place on the border of dangerous alternatives and is always beset both with burdening conflicts and with liberating choices" (1972, p. 127).

Like Erikson, Peller's conceptualizations reflect the influence of Anna Freud, Hartmann, Kris, and Loewenstein, and the shift in emphasis within psychoanalysis from drive theory to ego psychology. Peller (1954) viewed play as deriving from the ego's attempts to deal with the anxiety associated with "blows or deprivations exerted by reality as well as with pressures originating in the id or the superego" (p. 179). Her work, however, also went well beyond earlier ideas that play is primarily instigated by the repetition compulsion and attempts to rework trauma. According to

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Peller, play is a centrally organizing activity that illustrates the interdependence of libidinal—if not aggressive—urges and ego development. Play is a fantasy accompanied by action and is possible when the level of anxiety to be mastered is not overwhelming. The activity of play is gratifying in its own right but compatible with reality and superego requirements. Play, according to Peller, reflects the child's attempts "to compensate for anxieties and deficiencies, to obtain pleasure at a minimum risk of danger and/or irreversible consequences" (p. 180). Instinctual drives are not directly discharged in play but are able to enter into it with increasing degrees of sublimation as the child develops.

For Peller, the primary function of play is to deny, decrease, or work through the anxieties that are specific to each phase of development. Compensatory fantasies are the backbone of all play, whether they occur in response to the limitations of the toddler's body, control of the preoedipal mother, exclusion from adult relationships, or the dangers of the superego. In addition, Peller pointed to the nonconflictual spheres of functioning that are utilized and facilitated in children's play—for example, bodily competence, information processing, and cognitive structures (Hartmann, 1939; Piaget, 1945). Peller described different functions and features of play according to the developmental phase in which it appears. She referred to four basic types of play characterized as (1) play originating in relation to one's own body, (2) play rooted in the relationship to the preoedipal mother, (3) play instigated by conflicts at the oedipal level, and (4) postoedipal play or games with rules.

In his broad views of human functioning, Alexander (1958) posited three dynamic processes that govern life: the principles of stability, economy, and surplus energy. According to Alexander, play is "the exercise of surplus libidinal energy not required for the grim task of survival" (p. 178). Although agreeing with earlier psychoanalytic theories that play serves the function of repeating, abreacting, and mastering trauma, he argued that playing is an aim in itself: "Erotic play for the sake of pleasure is the first phase, and the utilization of the functions acquired during erotic play is the second" (p. 182). Although play may incidentally serve the resolution of conflicts and provide opportunities for ego mastery and development, "the solution of a problem is not imperative" (p. 186). In emphasizing this erotic or nonutilitarian discharge of surplus energies as the primary motivation for children's play, Alexander did not take into account the symbolic nature of play or its

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specific features as they relate to the development of the child's inner sense of self and others. In focusing on his own version of the instinctual sources and economy of play, Alexander departed from the mainstream of psychoanalytic theory, which emphasized the functions and characteristics of play in terms of the developing ego.

Greenacre (1959) elaborated on the function of play as it serves the development of reality testing in young children. She suggested that children's repetition of themes in play represents their attempt to verify the difference between fantasy and reality until familiarity with that difference has been adequately established for each of these significant themes. She saw play as a central activity employed for testing reality. She agreed with Freud's observation that imitating adult roles and functions is a prominent feature of children's play and highlighted the maturational sources of new capacities and their expression in the child's wish to be "grown up." Greenacre disagreed with Waelder's formulation that relief from trauma derives from the fusion of fantasy and reality that occurs in play. In the first instance, she suggested that mastery of trauma is never complete and that part of the excitement and fun of play derives from the persisting affects and tensions associated with the original traumatic experiences. Second, she argued that the greatest relief from the effects of trauma is afforded by a combination of the child's ability to *separate* fantasy and reality through play and, through that separation, to deal with the traumatic situation successfully. Greenacre also pointed out that with the establishment of secondary thought processes—particularly the introduction of a sense of time—the child is able to project memories forward as events to anticipate in the future, a capacity that broadens the functional repertoire of play. The possibility of now "anticipating" what was once unexpected and overwhelming and directing and controlling the remembered scenarios in play yields a greater potential for mastery.

Unlike previous psychoanalytic writers who emphasized mastery of the drives and traumatic experiences of the past, Winnicott (1968) focused on playing as it reflects and facilitates the development of the self in relation to others. As an extension of transitional phenomena, Winnicott viewed play as a "basic form of living" (p. 597) that serves the child's development of an autonomous sense of self in relation to others. He argued that the excitement of play is not primarily associated with displaced drive expression but rather with the child's pleasure in the "precariousness that belongs to the interplay" between personal psychic reality and the experience

of control of actual objects (p. 598). The interplay derives from the infant's earliest experiences of magical control of the responsive mother and facilitates his trust in her availability and love *and* in his own magical potential. The internalization of these features establishes a template for later play — both alone and with others—in which the child can create, or re-create, a world that hovers between psychic and objective reality.

Winnicott did not explicitly address the function play serves in problem solving, negotiating tasks of development, or resolving conflicts. He referred to the special role of the body, observing, "The pleasurable element in playing carries with it the implication that the instinctual arousal is not excessive" (p. 598); he adds that when direct bodily excitement is too great, play will be disrupted. For Winnicott, however, instinctual discharge does not figure so prominently as a source of pleasure and motivation for play. Instead, play is a reflection of the child's capacity to occupy a space between psychic and external reality in which the child uses elements from both domains.

The various functions of play serve the child's attempts to establish a sense of self in a constant interaction between the inner world of fantasy and the external world of real experience. Mastery of instinctual life, adaptation to current and internalized demands and expectations of others, the resolution of conflicts, and practicing and extending motoric, linguistic, and cognitive skills acquired in the course of maturation are viewed as some of the essential functions of play as it promotes growth and assists the child's preparation for future roles and challenges of each new developmental phase.

It would seem that play, above all other forms of activity and expression in childhood, facilitates the appearance, organization, and consolidation of a number of fundamental developmental tasks in early childhood. Play provides a window on the elaboration of other mental structures. Play is central in early development because it simultaneously advances development and reflects the particular capacities available to children at any given time in their development. The types of play—autoerotic or dramatic, solo, parallel, or interactional—always reflect the developmental status of and interplay between the capacities for (1) balance of id, ego, and superego requirements, (2) reality testing and fantasying, (3) object relationships, (4) language, symbolization, and communication, and (5) mechanisms of defense and adaptation. That play

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reflects developments in each of these areas makes this childhood activity a central focus of clinical and theoretical investigation.

Status of Id, Ego, and Superego

To discuss the characteristics of play vis-à-vis emerging mental structures necessarily involves a consideration of what constitutes play. This is particularly true in considering play as a reflection of id, ego, and superego differentiation. Although it can be said that play, in part, serves as a transition from action to thought as trial action, a discussion of what constitutes play proper and when it begins has many facets and no single answer. Typologies (Erikson, 1937; Peller, 1954; Plaut, 1979) that distinguish the phenomena of play according to different stages of development reflect the fact that the term *play* does not signify one set of unified characteristics and functions that persist throughout the course of life. The prevailing psychoanalytic interest, however, has been on a particular kind of play that involves pretending. Pretend, or imaginative, play is usually initiated in the second year of life by the coordination of ego achievements, including the acquisition of language, the capacity to distinguish internal and external reality, the achievement of object constancy, nascent internalization of parental demands and expectations, and the defenses of displacement, externalization, the turning of passive into active, and identification. It is no coincidence that psychoanalytic writings have focused on the characteristics of play that begin to emerge during a period of development in which secondary thought processes gain ascendancy and ego-id and ego-superego conflicts obtain greater structuralization. With the addition of verbalizations to their actions in play, children can clearly mark out for themselves and the observer what is play and what is not. Pretend, or imaginative, play serves as a domain in which fantasies and conflicts can move from the internal to the external realm, at once owned and disowned on a stage set in suspended reality.

Anna Freud (1936, 1965) viewed children’s play activities as promoting and reflecting the changing status of the ego’s capacity to mediate among the demands of the drives, superego, and external world. Elaborating the developmental line “From the Body to Toy and from Play to Work,” she took as a starting point the infant’s primary narcissism and the pleasures of playing with her own and her mother’s body. Such early autoerotic play promotes differentiation of ego boundaries.

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The pleasures and properties associated with the child's and the mother's body are invested in the first extrabodily plaything or transitional object (Winnicott, 1953). The developing ego capacity for symbolization expands the soothing transitional function of the cuddly toy, a bridge between self and mother, to the role of safe substitute for the child's ambivalent feelings toward the mother. The move to play material which does not "possess object status but . . . serves ego activities and the fantasies underlying them" (A. Freud, 1965, p. 80) is accompanied by the child's use of adaptive and defensive ego functions such as imitation and identification, displacement, condensation, sublimation, and the turning of passive into active. Along with the functional pleasure involved in mastery of bodily skills, task completion, and problem solving, the coordination of these ego capacities is facilitated by play activities reflecting phase-specific interests and conflicts.

Implicit in these formulations of the development of play are two notions: (1) the subject of the child's play is determined by the status of drive organization and object relationships, and (2) the modalities of play are determined by corresponding development of ego functions—memory, reality testing, symbolization, language, and motor skills. The form and complexity of play reflect the stability and integration of these capacities; the content represents the challenges and conflicts that arise from each phase of development. Accordingly, those who view the infant as endowed with the ego capacity for fantasy, conflicts, and some rudimentary reality testing (Klein, 1923, 1927; Searl, 1933; Winnicott, 1968, 1971) freely designate the infant's earliest manipulations of his and his mother's body as "play." For others (Erikson, 1937, 1972; Peller, 1954; A. Freud, 1965), these infantile activities yield functional pleasure while serving the beginning ego orientation to the world. Peller (1954) points out, "Earliest play emerges almost imperceptibly with non-play" and might best be characterized as a prestage of play that will later serve the child's attempts and ego capacity to achieve a "compromise between the demands of the drives and the dictates of reality" (p. 185).

Suspension of Reality: Reality Testing and Fantasying

As previously outlined, from Freud's earliest descriptions, play has been viewed by psychoanalysts as a bridge between fantasy and reality. He pointed out, "The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real." He added that the child "likes to link his imagined objects and situations to the

tangible and visible things of the real world. This linking is all that differentiates the child's 'play' from 'phantasying'" (Freud, 1908, p. 144).

Later, Freud (1924) compared the use of symbolization in children's play to that of the adult neurotic as a "substitute for reality" (p. 187) to be distinguished from the loss of reality that occurs in psychosis. Implicit in these descriptions is the characteristic that others have variously referred to as unreality or withdrawal from reality (Klein, 1929), a leave of absence from reality (Waelder, 1932), pretending (Peller, 1954), or suspending reality (Solnit, 1987; Cohen et al., 1987). The critical difference between fantasy and play is that in play the suspension of reality sets the stage for and is most often accompanied by action (Waelder, 1932; Peller, 1954; Alexander, 1958; Winnicott, 1971; Neubauer, 1987; Solnit, 1987). In addition, the suspension of reality presupposes (1) that the child is able to distinguish between reality and play, and (2) that the activities of play have no consequences in reality (Freud, 1908; Waelder, 1932; Alexander, 1958; Erikson, 1977; Plaut, 1979; Neubauer, 1987; Solnit, 1987; Cohen et al., 1987).

With the capacity to suspend reality, play reflects a significant way station between fantasy and direct action—if fantasy is thought of as preparation for action, then play is fantasy in trial action in which the child can simultaneously concretize the expression of a wish by proxy and control the action according to any contingencies that may heighten or diminish the yield of pleasure. Essential to the child's degree of directorial control of the narrative action is the confidence that however closely the action approximates real events or however intense it becomes, the action of the characters in play is not and does not need to be "real." With the suspension of reality the child is able to enact a preferred, active role in the re-creation of an experience of passivity or enact derivatives of instinctual wishes that would otherwise be repudiated by the superego or invite potentially dangerous consequences from the real world. If drive and superego pressure are too strong for ego regulatory responses and the child is unable to "trust the strength of his ego" (A. Freud, 1965) to mediate successfully between internal and external demands, then the suspension of reality cannot be sustained and the play will be disrupted (Freud, 1908; Waelder, 1932; Plaut, 1979; Neubauer, 1987). In the case of the psychotic or obsessional child, limitations of the ego or the severity of the superego will preclude the child's capacity to enter into imaginative play.

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Object Relationships: Parental Attitudes toward Play

One of the most direct statements about play and object relationships is contained in Winnicott's notion that playing reflects a recapitulation of children's earliest experiences of omnipotence in their relationship with their mother. Because play establishes and draws on the infantile, magical control, it serves as a template for developing a sense of self and organizing a sense of me/not me.

Part of the child's early playfulness in the realm of self-differentiation involves the capacity to distinguish between me/not me while retaining through play the potential for assuming either role. If parents are unable to support this domain of pretend and creativity or if their own conflicts actively discourage or disrupt the child's pleasure in playful activities and imaginative play, then a significant avenue for expanding object relationships may be closed to the child.

Indeed, another aspect of play and object relationships is how parents' activities support and elaborate their children's play. Child analysts have been particularly interested in the role and influence of parents in the child's ability to utilize play in the service of intrapsychic adaptation (Kennedy et al., 1985; Winnicott, 1971; Plaut, 1979). In a study at the Anna Freud Centre, parental attitudes were examined in a group of ten five-year-old children for whom play was associated with anxiety, disapproval, and shame rather than pleasure and mastery. The children and their families were followed from birth through the course of well-baby clinic visits. Observations were made of the mother-infant interactions in the home and in a mother-toddler group and of the child in nursery school and in subsequent child analyses, and of the parent in guidance sessions.

In some cases, the absence of pleasurable interaction was apparent from early on in the parent-child relationship. In a second category, parents with serious concerns about their own fantasies and an intolerance for id derivatives tended to control their child's play by emphasizing reality in exaggerated ways. Alternatively, parents in a third group were unable to support or sustain the child's reality testing either through overemphasizing their own distorted, fantastic, and frightening versions of reality or by conveying to the child their own anxious responses to reality. The demanding, hypercritical, or sadistically teasing attitudes of other parents led to the child's defensive avoidance of and vigilance toward anything in the realm of pretend. In each case parental

attitudes were seen to interfere with the child's capacity to use play and fantasy to help mitigate anxiety and to leaven the demands of the external world as well as soften internal expectations (Moran, 1987).

Similarly, Plaut (1979) emphasized the significance of the parents' ability to play with their children. He suggested that the "parent who was not able to play, freely and pleasurably, in earlier stages of his own life will have difficulty enjoying play with his or her children" (p. 227). As a result of this inability fully to participate in the child's life, the child will feel that she is not valued in her own right but only in the ways that she is learning to become an adult.

Relation of Play to Other Areas of Functioning in Children and Adults

That so many theorists and clinicians have speculated about the relations between adults' play or work and the imaginative play of young children may reflect in part a wish that the child's capacity to play would live on in the adult. They apparently expect play to serve some preparatory and facilitative purpose in other domains. Surely all that imaginative effort will in the end be evidently functional and positively productive.

At least two major themes characterize the work of the last century on the relation between imaginative play and other areas of functioning: (1) the relation between characteristics of children's play and adaptive functioning (problem-solving skills and social competency), and (2) the relation between children's play and creativity in adults. That such themes predominate in views of the concurrent and predictive relations of play to other functional areas also reflects the view that play along with other forms of imaginative activity is secondary to other forms of thought characterized by science, logic, and philosophy and that play serves primarily as the imitative testing ground for more rational, ordered thought and work (Sutton-Smith, 1984).

Play and Social Adaptation

It is an implicit assumption of child analysis that through the use of play, certainly the play between child and analyst, children learn more adaptive approaches to situations in their day-to-day lives. By imitation and practice, children in effect try on solutions and adaptations to potentially conflictual

situations. Analytic views of play as an adaptive function are confirmed and supported by other theories of play that also have addressed the relations between imaginative activity and adaptive capacities (Fein, 1981). Sutton- Smith (1984) and Bruner (1972) both stress the importance of fantasy play for generating interest in the novel, more flexible approaches to unexpected or ambiguous solutions and overall a greater range of adaptive behaviors. According to their views, because children use the safe confines of play to test a variety of situations and solutions, they develop a series of strategies and associations that they apply to situations in their external lives. Such theories do not address the concomitant effects of practice within play on inner conflict resolution, nor do they suggest that it is such conflict resolution that allows the child a broader adaptive repertoire rather than the behaviors learned in play. They do emphasize, however, that play serves an adaptive and organizing function that is evident in other areas not directly involved in imaginative play.

Several studies outside of the field of child psychoanalysis support the socially and adaptively organizing functions of play. Studies of children's behavior in free-play settings indicate that children who participate more in dramatic play in which reality can be suspended also tend to be involved more actively in social contact with adults and peers (Marshall and Doshi, 1965; Singer, 1979) and to be more oriented overall to social interaction with others (Jennings, 1975). There is also evidence to support the notion that dramatic play is related to the children's capacity for flexibility in social and nonsocial situations and their ability to adapt to alternative solutions in a number of settings. For example, children who play imaginatively with objects, that is, use objects in the service of creating imagined scenarios, do better when asked to solve problems involving these objects (Moore et al., 1974). It has also been suggested that the capacity to use pretend or dramatic play enhances impulse control (Saltz et al., 1977) and serves an arousal- maintaining and modulating function (Fein, 1981)—that is, children who are able to engage in pretend play show a greater capacity for regulating states of anxiety and tension, a finding that complements and supports analytic views of the function of play.

Play and Creativity

From a phenomenological standpoint, it seems reasonable to consider play a creative activity and to

posit its longitudinal connection with the artistic (and perhaps scientific) creativity of adults. At the very least, both play and artistic creativity involve imagination, originality, and invention. Freud (1908) proposed that "every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him" (pp. 143-144).

In addition, like the creative artist, children are intent about their play, invest a great deal of emotional involvement in the process, and use their play in part to present a carefully constructed demarcation between the fantasied and the real worlds. Freud (1908) also emphasized that play, like creative writing, can serve to present situations that, if real, would cause little pleasure but through imaginative activity can be both exciting and enjoyable. Thus, the child plays out separation and loss just as the poet writes of unfulfilled love.

Freud (1908) carried the relation between play and creativity deeper than these phenomenological similarities when he suggested that adults exchange the pleasure they once obtained through play for the pleasure obtained through daydreams. As with children, adults dream out their unfulfilled wishes and experiment in their fantasy life with a variety of solutions that often hark back to earlier times when such wishes seemed satisfied. In play and daydreams, the individual experiences the gratification of the wish that all will turn out well, the pleasure of limitless capacities, and the comfort of having control over the amount of psychic stimulation. The creative writer converts inner fantasies into works of art, and as Freud suggests, artists use their creativity as the adult substitute for the imaginative play of children. The motivation to play, to daydream, and to do creative work is gratification and wish fulfillment.

Other theorists since Freud have also proposed a relation between children's play and later creative activity in adulthood. Greenacre (1959) made two critical distinctions. First, she suggested that play in the service of creative imagination functions differently from play in the service of the neurosis or in the service of the conflict. Second, she distinguished creativity from productivity and defined creativity as "the capacity for or activity of making something new, original or inventive" (p. 62). It is the quality of originality, not the product, that defines the creative act and imaginative play.

For Greenacre (1959), the link between early imaginative play and later artistic creativity is based on the child's and the adult's tendency to repeat experiences. She suggests that throughout life, one source of repetitive activity is the need to establish or reestablish a sense of reality or familiarity in the perceived or remembered experience. Through play or creative activity, the individual gradually establishes an experience as familiar and then feels the pleasure and relief of familiarity. Such repetition is different from the repetition of a previously traumatic experience in an effort gradually to master such an experience. At the very least, repetition of traumatic experiences in the classic sense of the repetition compulsion limits the inpidual's freedom to experience reality through a variety of internal mental viewpoints inasmuch as the traumatic experience exerts an unconscious, constricting influence on perception. This, in part, could be the basis of the distinction between imaginative play and play in the service of conflict.

The artist, like the child at play, uses his artistic efforts to test the relation between the inner world of unconscious and preconscious fantasies and the outer world of reality experiences. The more creative work brings these two worlds into a relationship of connectedness and synthesis, the more it is experienced as satisfying and stimulating to the artist and aesthetic to observers. Such a notion of creativity and play as uniting inner and outer worlds is similar to Winnicott's concept of the transitional space. He proposes that play gradually communicates a relationship between inner psychic reality and external experience, and that the very "precariousness" of play is due to its always reflecting the boundary "between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived" (1968, p. 597).

Greenacre (1957) also emphasizes that though creative power is sometimes enhanced by a loosening of individual conflicts, artists rarely use their work to resolve conflictual situations. Indeed, a particularly restless quality characteristic of creative adults that brings them to the novel and unfamiliar is similar to the energetic explorations of playing children. Creative work brings the individual to the edge of unfamiliar stimulation and then to the comforting solace of connectedness and familiarity. It is this rhythmic ebb and flow that modulates anxiety in the service of imaginative play and adult creativity. As Greenacre noted, many creative artists do not wish to be relieved of their anxiety for they fear that with such relief they will lose their creative urge. Several theorists have considered modulation of states of discomfort or level of stimulation as the essential motivation for

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and purpose of play and creative work (Berlyne, 1960; Fein, 1981; Shultz, 1979). Although such theories do not take into account the possible inner fantasy configurations that lead to discomfort or heightened arousal, they do underscore the affective regulatory functions of play. Moreover, the rhythmic fluctuation in states of arousal has been proposed as a feature shared by adult work activity and children's play (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, 1971).

Theoretical considerations from both psychoanalytic and developmental psychology perspectives suggest that artistic creativity and daydreaming serve similar psychic functions for adults as imaginative play serves for children. Several investigators have studied the concurrent validity of a functional relation between play and creativity. For example, Dansky (1980) pided a group of preschool children (ages three and four) into players and nonplayers according to the amount of time the children were engaged in imaginative play during a free-play period. The nonplayer group was involved in imaginative play less than 5 percent of the observation time; the player group showed imaginative play at least 28 percent of the time. In a more structured, one-on-one play setting, children using more imaginative play were more likely to use objects in unusual or nonliteral ways and were able, when asked, to suggest more alternative uses for a given set of play objects. Similarly, Hutt and Bhavnani (1976) presented preschool children (ages three and four) with a novel toy and pided the group into those who did not explore the toy, those who explored but did not play with it, and those who explored and then used the toy in an imaginative play sequence. When the children were compared on a test of pergent thinking or problem-solving strategies, those using the toy imaginatively scored higher.

Predictive relations between imaginative play and later creativity in adulthood have been suggested by several analytic writers. Greenacre (1957) believes that the basic characteristics of creative talent involve a sensitivity to sensory stimulation and a greater than usual awareness of relations between various stimuli coupled with a "predisposition to . . . empathy" (p. 53) and sufficient sensorimotor equipment to allow for symbolization. These capacities, though subject to great individual variability, are aspects of imaginative play as well, and Greenacre posits that such characteristics were especially heightened in the childhood experiences of creative artists. Finally, such relations may not be limited to creative activity for, as mentioned earlier, Freud suggested a functional relation between the relief provided adults by jokes and the child's use of play. Jokes

allow thoughts and fantasies to "escape" the censoring activities of the superego and provide an avenue for the release of instinctual tension and the expression of instinctual derivatives. In this form, humor and jokes are a direct heir of the child's play.

Conclusion

Psychoanalytic theories of play emerged from Freud's earliest formulations about children's activities as they demonstrated origins of central characteristics in the psychic life of adulthood. Whereas Freud used his observations of children's play in the service of building a theory concerning adult mental functioning, the work of Klein, Waelder, A. Freud, Erikson, and others focused on aspects of play as a part of attempts at understanding the development of children in their own right.

The simultaneous growth and mutual influences of child analysis as a subspecialty of psychoanalysis and of interest in ego development were reflected in the increased focus on examining specific functions and characteristics of play activities. Conceptualizations about the reasons children play and about the characteristics of those activities began to emphasize ideas about shifting internal and external demands in the child's life and the increasing array of functions available for adapting to them. These ideas added to previous ones held about the role of trauma and repetition compulsion in play. Greater attention paid to phase-specific characteristics in the child's ego development and object relationships helped to sharpen views about differentiating types of play and functions served according to periods of development.

As child analysis and ego psychological theories evolved, types of play were described according to various developmentally determined criteria. These include different sites and props employed in play activities; the various ways of using and representing others in play; autoerotic, solitary, or group dramatic play; games with rules; the use of differing amounts of narrative and action; and the like. Play may be viewed as both reflecting and advancing the child's growing capacities and negotiations of shifting developmental tasks. Differing types and characteristics of play could be seen as one view of the child's developmental status.

In addition, children's play may be seen as representing the earliest form of verbal narrative

and expression of unconscious fantasies and wishes. The thematic content of the narrative provides a view of those fantasies that are most active for the child at that moment of play. The process of developing the narrative—that is, the shifts in play and the interaction between the different narratives—reveals the interplay between wish and conflict and the workings of defense. Further, creating a play narrative may actively facilitate the emergence and maturation of psychic structures such as more elaborate and adaptive defenses and more mature affective regulatory capacities. In each of these ways, children's play narratives provide a means for understanding the changes in mental functioning and structure.

In summary, a selective critical review of the psychoanalytic literature reveals evolving perspectives on children's play that reflect the dominant trends in, as well as departures from, the mainstream of analytic theory. Where Freud was initially concerned about what children's play could tell us about adult psychic functions, subsequent contributors first emphasized the equivalence of children's play and adult activities (free association, for example) and then focused on the importance of children's play as a set of phenomena worthy of consideration in their own right. Elaboration of notions about play has moved in both directions of the developmental spectrum —from the playful activities of infancy to the role of play and playfulness in adulthood and in the creative process.

In addition to current attempts to deepen existing conceptualizations, psychoanalytic investigators hope to expand the range of questions involving the role and fate of play in children who are, for example, confronted with acute trauma, chronic overstimulation, and deprivation. What are the differences in the form and content of play in the face of various forms of impingement on development? To what extent can psychoanalytic observations of children's play increase our understanding of the flexibility of developmental capacities and the range of adaptations available to the child in the face of internal and external limitations? Continued efforts to expand psychoanalytic views of plays will likely yield some answers to these and other issues and will most certainly help to raise, clarify, and elaborate on the questions that have not yet been asked.

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