



Pour le mieux-être des enfants en difficulté

What play does for the child

*« Children are play more easily when the other person is able and free to be playful »
D. Winnicott*

Play is a universal activity, has always existed, and is indispensable in the life of the child. Like the imagination, it offers a world of unlimited potential. It gives the child the opportunity to excel and to be removed from ordinary life. It can provide moments of respite but also stimulate the child's physical and psychological capabilities. Play creates relationships with others and with oneself. During play the child's usual concerns are forgotten.

A child who does not play is often a sick child. This can be seen, for example, with the nutrition projects implemented in the wake of disasters; children may refuse to eat even though the projects are effectively and appropriately managed. Play is necessary for the proper development of all children, and especially for those in difficulty. It is also a right of the child. Through the text adopted by the UN in 1989, countries recognize that children have "the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age, and participate freely in cultural and artistic life."¹

What is play?

Further work and research have shown that play contributes to the healthy development of children. It helps them acquire social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills; the Dutch sociologist Huizinga said² that play is a serious task which protects against reality, compensates for shortcomings, and in this regard is as indispensable to the individual as a biological function and is essential to the community for the meaning it contains, its expressive value, and the spiritual and social ties it creates. In brief, it is indispensable as a function of culture.

According to Huizinga, every game has its rules and the rules of play are compelling and indisputable – once the rules are violated, the world of play collapses. The charm is broken and the rules of the real world are restored. Hence, the child learns the rules of life while learning the rules of play.

The psychologist Jean Piaget showed the indispensable role of play in children's cultural and intellectual development.³ His theory is based on the concept of stages which appear in a predetermined order. According to his theory, the child and the adult can be defined according to their skill levels, regardless of their cultural, ethnic or social background. Piaget classes types of play according to the stage of the child's development: sensory-motor stage (exercise games); preoperative or intuitive stage (symbolic games); concrete operations stage (construction games); stage of formal operations (rule games).

This classification has been used as a basis for Denise Garon's work which gave rise to the ESAR classification, which is a way to index and classify games and toys, but also an organizational methodology covering the overall management of a toy library or a structure with play equipment.⁴

For the English psychoanalyst D. Winnicott, play takes place in a "potential" space created by the absence of the mother. The child is alone and is frustrated by this absence, which forces the child between ages 1 and 5 years to seek replacement objects (called transitional objects). Thus is created what Winnicott called the "intermediate area," in which the young child is caught between the inability

¹ International Convention for the Rights of the Child, 20th November, 1989.

² HUIZINGA. J. *Homo Ludens*, Beacon Press, 1971

³ PIAGET J. *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood*, Heinemann, London, 1951

⁴ GARON D. (avec la collaboration de Rolande Filion et Robert Chiasson). *Le système ESAR. Guide d'analyse, de classification et d'organisation d'une collection de jeux et de jouets*. Québec, Canada, Editions ASTED inc. Et Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2002

to recognize and accept this absence and the beginning of an ability to do so. It is in this potential space that creativity develops and that all kinds of symbolic activities are found, namely play, language, and culture. "It is by playing, and perhaps only when he plays, that the child or adult is free to be creative."⁵

Bruno Bettelheim was interested in the emotional and social benefits of play, particularly those that help to build good relations between parents and children. The child at play seeks to create a link between his inner reality and the world around him. During childhood, play represents the child's first means of growing and communicating with others. In Bettelheim's mind, play is the means children use to make their first major cultural and psychological conquests. This is even true of the youngest children whose play consists only of smiling back at their mothers when they smile. Thus, and this is probably what is essential to Bettelheim's thinking, the most important thing about play is the immediate pleasure that the child gets from it and which leads to enjoyment of life.⁶

In her book *le Jeu en psychothérapie de l'enfant* Annie Anzieu argues that "Play appears to be spontaneous behavior in children. However, it is not possible without the prior establishment of a basic feeling of security. This primordial experience is the basis of the ability to play. "For this to exist, she said, "the immediate environment of the child must provide him or her with the confidence that there is no immediate need to be concerned about his or her survival, real or psychological. On the basis of that psychic structure, play is a search for and a constant creation of reality, of the feeling of existing by oneself and of the meaning that these phenomena take on for the child."⁷

Among philosophers, there is the very interesting book of Colas Duflo, *Jouer et philosopher* (playing and philosophizing) on the question of play, which argues that anyone who wants to be interested in the child, or even humans in general, must also deal with play. "Play is the brainchild of freedom and legality."⁸

For J. Château, play is "free action, seen as fictitious, outside common life, devoid of material interest and utility, well-defined in time and space, taking place under certain rules and leveraging group relations that accentuate their strangeness *vis-à-vis* the normal world." "In children play fills the role of work in adults."⁹

As for Francine Ferland, play is first and foremost "a subjective attitude in which pleasure, curiosity, a sense of humor and spontaneity mix, which manifests itself through a freely chosen attitude and for which no specific yield is expected."¹⁰

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⁵ WINNICOTT D. (1971), Playing and reality. Philadelphia/Sussex: Routledge, 1982

⁶ BETTELHEIM B. (1979), A good enough parent : A book on Child-Reading, Knopf, New York, 1987

⁷ ANZIEU A. et DAYMAS S. Le jeu en psychothérapie de l'enfant. Paris, Dunod, 2000

⁸ DUFLO C. Jouer et philosopher. Paris, PUF, 1997

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Relevant projects

The more than 1,100 toy libraries available to all in France offer play spaces, workshops, training, temporary projects with educational institutions, prisons, to children with disabilities, etc. Among these toy libraries, there are the «**Quai des Ludes**» **toy library** in Lyon, «**Les enfants du Lude**» in Perpignan and «**Les enfants du jeu**» in Saint Denis, which have much experience not only in France but also abroad.

For over the past two decades, several associations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been proposing play as a means to improve the living conditions of children in situations of great distress as part of their psychosocial projects. ERM [Refugee Children of the World] proposed an **International Play Trunk** (Dagnino and Valls, 2005) as a practical means of reviving the play activity of children who are victims of wars and disasters and/or living in extremely precarious conditions. With this book, the former NGO proposed recognizing play as the cornerstone of psychosocial work with children.