CHILDREN'S IMAGINATIVE PLAY

A Visit to Wonderland

Shlomo Ariel

Foreword by Brian Sutton-Smith

CHILDREN'S IMAGINATIVE PLAY

This page intentionally left blank.

CHILDREN'S IMAGINATIVE PLAY

A Visit to Wonderland

Shlomo Ariel

Foreword by Brian Sutton-Smith

Contents

This page intentionally left blank.

Series Foreword

The twentieth century closed with a decade devoted to the study of brain structure, function and development that in parallel with studies of the human genome has revealed the extraordinary plasticity of biobehavioral organization and development. The twenty-first century opens with a decade focusing on behavior, but the linkages between brain and behavior are as dynamic as the linkages between parents and children, and children and environment.

The Child Psychology and Mental Health series is designed to capture much of this dynamic interplay by advocating for strengthening the science of child development and linking that science to issues related to mental health, child care, parenting and public policy.

The series consists of individual monographs, each dealing with a subject that advances knowledge related to the interplay between normal developmental process and developmental psychopathology. The books are intended to reflect the diverse methodologies and content areas encompassed by an age period ranging from conception to late adolescence. Topics of contemporary interest include studies of socioemotional development, behavioral undercontrol, aggression, attachment disorders and substance abuse.

Investigators involved with prospective longitudinal studies, large epidemiologic cross-sectional samples, intensely followed clinical cases or those wishing to report a systematic sequence of connected experiments are invited to submit manuscripts. Investigators from all fields in social and behavioral sciences, neurobiological sciences, medical and clinical sciences and education are invited to submit manuscripts with implications for child and adolescent mental health.

Hiram E. Fitzgerald
Susanne Ayres Denham
Series Editors

This page intentionally left blank.

Foreword

Children's imagination is one of the mysteries of the modern age. It is generally conceded to be a universal aspect of childhood, but just what it means is a matter of contradictory beliefs. On the negative side there are the Western industrial work ethic and puritanic attitudes that see play as a waste of time and its contributions to a useful life as being somewhat trivial. These views survive among those who currently don't want preschool class time or elementary school recess time to be wasted on play. They insist on more emphasis on the academic basics in the preschool and more on physical education in the recess period, which in itself they see only as a ''lord of the flies'' scene for violence and bullying.

Unfortunately, many moderns who do not sympathize with such ideological extremities nevertheless have little sympathy for the children's playground traditions. These often include quite a complex pastiche of male and female play genres that are more strikingly different from each other than modern sensitivities wish to admit. Each playground is often a fest of handclapping and jump rope rhymes and songs, riddles, tales and legends on the one hand; and on the other, teasing, jokes, gross rhymes, pranks, ball games and play fighting. As well as this unrefined imaginative context, this is a political world in which children establish their own power hierarchies and loyalties, none of which are particularly attractive to those devoted to adult concepts of morality and socialization.

Friedrich Nietzsche was one of the few to argue that the child's fantasies of giants and lions and kings are primarily about power and what it means to exercise it. He says, "Innocence is the child, and forgetfulness, a new beginning,

a game, a self-rolling wheel. A first movement. Aye for the game of creating which is at the same time a game of destroying."

Oddly this same turbulent view of child fantasy can be said to be implicit in the Freudian view of the child's fantasy life as a rearguard of pleasure-oriented compensation for the fallibilities of life's libidinal milestones. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that many academic social scientists have preferred to ignore this message of childhood emotional turbulence. Indeed much earlier in British literature, Charles Kingsley in *The Water Babies* defined the view that childhood was a stage which had to be sacrificed if adult maturity was to be attained. He thought he was following Darwin in saying that children were passing through a more primitive stage that entitled them in theological terms to be sacrificed as sinners in order that in their maturity they might be united with God. Children, he said, were characterized by an inordinate desire for the things of this world, and this inherited disorder could be corrected only when they were taught how to will their extinction.

C.S. Lewis formulated the attitude this way: "To surrender a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation is a kind of death. We all remember this self-will as it was in childhood the bitter, prolonged rage at every thwarting, the burst of passionate tears, the black Satanic wish to kill or die rather than to give in. Hence the older type of nurse or parent was quite right in thinking that the first step in education is to 'break the child's will.' And if, now that we are grown up, we do not howl and stamp quite so much, that is because our elders began the process of killing our self-will in the nursery."

These moralizing attitudes are answered ironically by Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, when he says "persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot will be shot." And in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) takes up the similar irony that instead of childhood having to be gotten over its imagining, it becomes rather the redemption of adulthood, not its loss, which was also a theme throughout the poetry of William Wordsworth.

Contrary to much of this "negative" viewing of the so-called Wonderland of Play, since about 1750 the concept of the imagination took its place as a central concept in the Enlightenment notions of rationality. Philosopher Immanuel Kant contended that without imagination there could be no hypotheses in science. Furthermore in many secular quarters the imagination even took on the humanistic importance once occupied by the concept of the soul.

This very positive attitude to the imagination was echoed in the preschool nineteenth-century pedagogies of F.W.A. Froebel, and these still continue to be a fundamental tenet within the U.S. National Association for the Education of Young Children, despite the rising tide of antiplayground play mentioned earlier. Even so, a victory is not entirely there because in general even in most positive contemporary research on childhood there is a narrow search for the character of play's rationality. For example, those who are the most imaginative are said

to be more humorous, happier, smiling, empathic, less aggressive—all of which is nice to know. But very little mention is made about the darker side of the imagination which is so dominant in video games for children, as well as children's free fantasy play, in their own freely told stories (see Sutton-Smith, 1981 in the References at the end of this book), and in their multifarious playground folk play just mentioned.

The incongruity of these dark imaginative childhood phenomena are paralleled by the dark play in adult festivals, carnivals, roasts, tricksters, clowns, fools and jokesters which have been much written about by folklorists and anthropologists. But what is so ''rationalizing'' about most modern research on children's imaginations is not only that the darker side and social context of power are neglected, there is also a very intensive concern with children as conspicuous experiential consumers (self-esteem, flow, autonomy, etc.) rather than as groups of children making up their own beliefs. The focus is also upon what it is that adults should do to encourage the appropriate socialization of the child's imaginary qualities in order to develop such rationalities as literacy, or cognition or self-awareness.

There is thus throughout modern developmental psychology a thinly disguised rationalistic and moralistic concern with the way parents socialize their children into higher levels of complexity. This is almost always the narrow major focus in the modern supposed science of development.

And this brings us to the present work on *Children's Imaginative Play* by Shlomo Ariel. This book is a transforming work that does for this kind of play what the classics by Robert Fagen did for *Animal Play Behavior* (1981), and Mihail Spariosu did for the philosophical history of play in *Dionysius Reborn: Play and the Aesthetic Dimension in Modern Philosophical and Scientific Discourse* (1989), and perhaps even what Johan Huizinga did for play history in *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949). Each of these in-depth studies provided a coherence and breadth to the material on play that had not existed before, and in so doing transcended the prior subject matter, lifting the subject of play to an ever more central position in the understanding of human existence. And so it is with Shlomo Ariel's new work. All prior works so commendably cited by him throughout the book are nevertheless transcended.

As a beginning in this work, all the phases of imaginative play are phrased with a semiotic systemics that has not hitherto been available in former otherwise enterprising studies. What we receive is a study of play as a complex semiotic system, which then is used to examine the realm of play as an arena of power struggles within which we discover the intensity of the negotiations that are undertaken to both enter and maintain the field of playing. There is an exciting account of the child-engendered mini-legal system governing laws of participation, of leadership, of possession, of sanctions and of legal negotiations.

For the first time in this field, Ariel has arrived at a way of discussing the quite different ways of imagining that are tolerated in different cultures with different kinds of power fields. Like Nietzsche, he gives power the antecedent

role in the understanding of the social workings of the human imagination. What we learn however is that in modern urban society there is a proliferation of these legalities, whereas in some more traditional communities the preexisting hierarchy tends to predetermine all the moves.

Again, when the study moves to the meaning of play in individual terms, Ariel fulfills for the first time a point made by some prior scholars that the emotions are at the heart of the pleasures of play. His approach to the emotive regulations of play opens us to all of the sides of play, dark or light. He shows in these terms the children moving back and forth from more focal to more peripheral renderings of these themes, according to their levels of emotional comfort. Play becomes in itself a structural dialectic for the homeostatic management of personal and group feelings. Finally he reviews and revises most originally the developmental, educational and therapeutic literatures in these new terms.

It is a privilege to write the Foreword to a book that totally transforms this field of play study in such a novel and brilliant way.

NOTE

I want to thank my colleague Kevin James Sheehan for educating me about the Two Childhoods in terms of which to describe the children's literatures of England and the United States, from which most of the above quotations are derived (1995 Ph.D. dissertation, UMI no. 9534476). The rest of the quotes are to be found in chapters 8 and 9 in my own 1997 work (see References at the end of this book).

Brian Sutton-Smith

Preface

One winter afternoon, when my eldest son Gilad was five years old, I was sitting in a cozy armchair in our living room, reading a newspaper. Gilad and his friend Daliah were busy moving about, chatting vivaciously. Their faces were heavily painted with makeup. They were fancy-dressed with a whole assortment of colorful clothes which they took from my wife's wardrobe. They looked like witch doctors. I overheard parts of their chitchat. Gilad spoke with a funny tone of voice, expressing wonderment and fascination. "We are angels!" he called, "Fire angels! My hair is on fire! My wings are on fire! My belly is on fire! My tushie is on fire! Let's fly to that star over there!" And Daliah echoed him: "We are fire angels! Me too! It's our birthday! We are ten thousand years old! The fire does not burn us. It's a special kind of angels' fire!"

Then all of a sudden Gilad addressed me in his normal voice: "Daddy, can I light a match? Please, you'll hold the match and I'll hold the box!" And I said: ''No, Gilad, you know mummy does not allow you to play with matches." But he continued begging: "Please, daddy, please, only this time." At that point Daliah began to yell in a panicky voice: "Fire angel! Let's fly away! The electricity monster is coming back!" Gilad addressed me again: "So give me a flashlight, OK daddy?" and I said: "OK!", impressed by the facility with which these kids could slip out of their world of wild imagination into the mundane reality around them and back.

This and many other similar episodes I had witnessed had aroused my curiosity with respect to children and their imaginative play. I began to watch my own and other children's make-believe games more attentively. Soon enough I became the laughingstock of my whole family, who saw me behaving like some

kind of comical spy, hiding behind the door of my children's nursery room, writing feverishly in my notebook. I still don't know what Gilad's kindergarten teacher thought about his father, spending hours following the children and videotaping their play. The more I observed and listened, the more I was intrigued and fascinated. So much so, that at a certain stage I came to a decision to make the investigation of make-believe play one of my central pursuits.

The first opportunity to put this decision into practice came to me in the early 1970s, when I was invited to join the research team of the Study Center for Children's Activities of Oranim, The School of Education of the Kibbutz Movement. That project was motivated by the principle that the best approach to preschool education was active teachers' participation in the children's spontaneous play and creative activities. To become conversant with such activities, a cross-cultural ethnographic investigation of children's spontaneous individual and social behavior was conducted. Samples of play activities of children of various sociocultural communities, ranging from the Kibbutz communal nurseries to Bedouin tent camps in the Sinai Desert, were recorded in written protocols or videotaped and then systematically analyzed. I came to this task equipped with field techniques and analytic tools developed by anthropologists and linguists, acquired in my previous academic education. For me make-believe play was a kind of language, a rule-driven culturally transmitted system of heterogeneous signs and symbols through which children conduct their social interactions. This approach proved both fruitful and revealing.

I am still grateful to Gideon Levin, the director of the Study Center for Children's Activities, a man of vision and an innovator in the field of education, for having invited me to join that exciting and important project. I also owe a debt of gratitude to my colleagues in this research team, Matia Kam and Irene Sever.

Another opportunity came to my door in 1979, when I was invited by Jerome L. Singer and Dorothy Singer, leading investigators of make-believe play, to join their research team at Yale University. Professor Singer let me dig in his treasures—cardboard boxes full of reprints of journal articles and dissertations about play. From these and from my informal conversations with him I learned to look at make-believe play through the lenses of cognitive, developmental and clinical psychology. I began to appreciate the role of make-believe play as an emotional pacifier, a mechanism by which children regulate and balance their level of emotional arousal. I also became keenly aware of the central contribution of make-believe play to the child's cognitive and socioemotional development. I am still thankful to Jerome and Dorothy Singer for this formative year. I am also grateful to Jerome Singer for having agreed to devote time to reading the manuscript of this book and contribute valuable comments and suggestions.

Children's imaginative play was one of the attractions that lured me, like "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," to my current vocations—a clinical psychologist and a family therapist. Play therapy with individual children, groups of children and families seemed to me like an enthralling way of communicating with people and helping them overcome their difficulties. It would enable me to frequent

the wonderful world of childhood. As a play therapist I would be able to bring together and put into practice everything I had learned about children and their play, and learn more.

This book is, in a way, a place in which all these avenues that have led me to that wonderland called children's imaginative play meet. It summarizes what I have learned about make-believe play all these years.

Beyond the persons mentioned above, I am greatly indebted to the following play scholars and clinicians, who have inspired and assisted me in various stages of my development as a play researcher and therapist: Brian Sutton-Smith, Greta Fein, Catherine Garvey, Artin Göncü, Cleo Gougoulis, Joop Hellendoorn, Galila Oren-Tabachnikov, Odeda Peled and Jean-Pierre Rossie. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Brian Sutton-Smith for having written the Foreword to this book. Jean-Pierre Rossie read the manuscript and offered important comments. I would like to thank him for his continuous attention. Cleo Gougoulis obtained English abstracts of all the Greek texts included in a book she co-edited (Gougoulis and Kouria, 2000).

Finally, my love and gratitude to my wife Ruttie for her support and encouragement and for her extremely useful comments on the manuscript.

This page intentionally left blank.

Introduction

You are hereby invited to a very special journey, a journey to the wonderful world of children's make-believe. Such a journey does not require traveling far away. In fact, the make-believe world is very near. It is in the nursery room of our children, in their school, in our backyard, on our street. And yet, its gates are not widely open for everybody. For many adults, make-believe play is like a fascinating book on one's bookshelf which cannot be read because it is written in a language one cannot fully understand.

Everybody who has close contacts with young children—parents, teachers, caretakers, therapists—wants to understand them and achieve a meaningful rapport with them. Learning the language of imaginative play and its rules is a prerequisite for attaining this goal, because this is the main language through which young children express themselves and communicate with their peers. This book may be viewed as an introductory textbook for learning this language.

Every language is both individual and social, a medium into which we mold our private thoughts and feelings as well as a vehicle for communicating these thoughts and feelings to our fellows. The same applies to make-believe play. Learning the language of make-believe play involves becoming thoroughly familiar with both its personal expressive functions and its interpersonal, cultural and social-communicational functions.

We all want to enjoy our children's company. Deep understanding of their imaginative play will make the time spent with them more gratifying. Make-believe play is like good music: The better one understands it, the more pleasurable it becomes. I hope that an adult who has read this book will find watching the imaginative play of children or participating in it more enjoyable than before.

Another aspect of imaginative play discussed and illustrated in this book is its function as a major vehicle of learning and development. Children who play at home, in the street, on the playground or in the schoolyard acquire a great amount of information and many useful and important skills. They explore the cultural, social and material world in which they live. They ask themselves significant questions and attempt to find out the right answers or obtain them from their playmates. They exercise, rehearse and strengthen their physical and mental abilities.

Not all adults who take upon themselves the mission of raising and educating young children appreciate the great value of make-believe play as a vehicle of learning and as a propeller of development. In my many visits to nursery schools and kindergartens over the years I have encountered, over and over again, the following situation: The children are given a "free play time." They are engrossed in vivacious play activities, while the teachers and their assistants are sitting aside, resting, chatting, from time to time telling children to behave themselves. Afterward they assemble the children, have them sit around little tables and start "learning-activities time." Invariably, the learning done during this organized time is extremely meager and sterile compared with the rich, highly stimulating learning experiences the children have gone through during their free-play time.

Another purpose of this book is therefore to guide teachers and other caretakers toward instructive involvement in the play of the children under their care.

Sometimes we realize that our own child or a child under our care needs help, but we are at a loss trying to figure out what the trouble is and how help should be extended. Make-believe play can provide the key for detecting the child's sources of pain. It can help one find leads toward solutions. Yet another purpose of this book is to help teachers, parents and other adults working with children read and decipher signs of distress in a child's imaginative play. Furthermore, the question of how children use make-believe play to solve emotional and social difficulties, with or without the professional intervention of adults, is examined in this book in some detail.

To sum up, this book may be viewed as a general introduction to children's imaginative, make-believe play. This fascinating genre of human behavior is looked at from manifold angles in this book. It is viewed as a language for expressing and communicating thoughts, feelings and fantasies, a language that has its own characteristic vocabulary and rules of grammar and syntax. It is regarded as a product and as a vehicle of culture. The various functions of make-believe play are discussed in this book in some detail: its balancing, sublimational and cathartic powers with respect to the child's emotions; its culture-bound regulative role in children's social life; and its contributions to learning and development. All these are presented with a practical purpose in mind: to help adults understand children and establish a more rewarding and beneficial rapport with them.

The contents of this book are drawn from both the writer's own work and other people's work. The author has been engaged in children's imaginative play in many ways for many years—as a researcher, a child-and-family therapist, an educator, a field observer and a watchful parent. Much of what this book contains is a summary of his own ideas and insights, findings, observations and experiences. However, many concepts proposed by other specialists and research results reported in the literature since the early days of the twentieth century are also incorporated in the text.

The approach to make-believe play adopted in this work is interdisciplinary. This form of play has been studied by developmental psychologists, cognitive psychologists, social psychologists, clinical psychologists and psychiatrists, anthropologists and human ethologists, sociologists and linguists. Scholars and practitioners representing each of these fields have brought to the investigation of imaginative play their own special theoretical constructs, foci and research methods. All these are represented in this book.

The work presented in this book, being interdisciplinary, comprehensive and grounded in academic research, can be of interest to various groups of professionals and scholars, such as child psychologists and psychiatrists interested in play diagnosis and play therapy, educators, scholars and students interested in play research and child studies, linguists and semioticians, anthropologists specializing in socialization and children's culture, creators of children's theater, writers for children and producers of toys.

This book includes various techniques of formal analysis of diverse aspects of make-believe which can be applied in clinical and educational diagnosis and in research. It also contains narrative parts which can be beneficial for parents and other laypersons interested in children and their play. Notwithstanding the technical nature of parts of this book, efforts have been made to formulate its contents in a readable language, relatively free of scientific or professional jargon. The introduction of technical terms has been kept to a minimum. Highly specialized analytic techniques of interest mainly to researchers and other professionals have been placed in the Appendix rather than in the body of the text. The text is not interrupted by references to the literature, except where this is absolutely necessary. A Classified List of References is provided at the end of each chapter, arranged according to broad subject areas covered in each chapter.

This page intentionally left blank.

1
What Is *Make-Believe Play*?

A DEFINITION OF *MAKE-BELIEVE PLAY*: IT'S ALL MENTAL

The term *make-believe play*, as it is used in this book, denotes a genre of play which has been designated by various other names, such as *imaginative play, fantasy play, symbolic play, pretend play, ''as if'' play, representational play* and *sociodramatic play*.

Many writers have referred to the concept of play in general and to that of make-believe play in particular as "illusive," "slippery" or "hard to define." To my mind, this verdict is unjustifiable. I believe that make-believe play can be defined exactly, in a way which clearly sets it apart from various different, superficially similar phenomena such as other forms of play, imitation, symbolization, pretending, fantasy, story-telling, drama, rituals and delusions. Moreover, as will be shown in many parts of this book, it is extremely important to define make-believe play in a formal, rigorous manner, because such a definition can throw light on many central characteristics and functions of this genre of play.

Imagine a little girl—let's call her Diligent—standing on a chair by the kitchen sink, washing dishes. What kind of activity is she engaged in? One possible answer is, plainly, "the activity of washing dishes." But this is not the only possibility. It is also likely that she is imitating her mother washing dishes. If this is so, her activity should be qualified not simply as "washing dishes," but rather as "imitation." There is however a third possibility: She is neither plainly washing dishes, nor imitating her mother. She is making believe that she

is her own mother, washing dishes. If this is the case, her activity should be qualified as make-believe play.

Obviously, whatever the inner nature of Diligent's activity, whether it is just washing dishes, imitating or playing make-believe, she is doing exactly the same things, going through exactly the same motions. The differences between what makes her actions imitation, make-believe play or just washing dishes do not lie in their outward, observable features. These differences are to be looked for inside her own head. It is her mental attitude toward her own actions, her state of mind, that makes her activity into how it should be qualified. A definition of make-believe play must therefore identify and formulate those ingredients of the player's mental attitude which turn his or her activity into make-believe play.

Let us enter Diligent's head and try to see what is happening there when she is making believe she is her own mother washing dishes. Imagining myself to already be inside her head, I can see more or less articulate visual images popping into the darkness. One of these is the mental picture of Diligent's own mother, washing dishes. This particular image is now expanding, filling the whole space. The other images have disappeared. And now I can hear an extremely small voice, close to my ear. It reminds me of the voice of the looking-glass insect who spoke to Alice in the looking-glass train in Lewis Carroll's book *Through the Looking Glass*. I identify it as the voice of Diligent's unarticulated inner thoughts. What is the voice saying? I am listening very carefully. It is saying: "This picture is not inside my head. It is out here, in the real world. My real mother is actually washing dishes here at this very moment." Diligent is implicitly denying that the image of her mother inside her head is just a mental picture, a figment of her own inner mind. She is claiming that her real mother is actually present in the immediate external surroundings, washing dishes. In a way she is *animating* this mental picture, breathing life into it.

Still inside Diligent's head, I am straining my ears, listening very hard, expecting the tiny voice of her inner thoughts to speak again. Yes! I can hear it speaking, saying: "I am not being Diligent now. I have become my mother, washing dishes." In a way, Diligent has changed her usual identity. She is identifying herself with the mother image she has *animated*. She is not just *representing* her mother. She, as it were, has stopped being herself and has become her mother.

I keep listening. The tiny voice can be heard again. It is saying: ''No! My mother is not really here now washing dishes, and I am not her, I'm me! I am just making believe. I am doing it just for the fun of it!''

What has my tour inside Diligent's head taught me about make-believe play? It has taught me that the silent mental activity underlying such play involves *animating* some mental image, *identifying* the player with it and *denying the seriousness* of both these mental operations.

Consider now another instance of simple make-believe play: A boy—let's call him Bonbon—is playing as if a little stone is a rabbit. Like Diligent, Bonbon is evoking a mental image, that of a rabbit. He is *animating* this image, telling