



Education: Words and Meanings

Exploring the Term: “Children’s Play”

Sandra Stone^{b\la}

^aNorthern Arizona University

Dr. Sandra J. Stone is Professor Emeritus at Northern Arizona University. Her research and publication interests include multiage education, early childhood, play, and literacy. She consults nationally and internationally.

Children’s Play

The word “play” is, as play expert Brian Sutton-Smith (2005) explains, “a highly complicated phenomenon and has never yet been adequately explained in any agreeable scientific terms. On the other hand, the one thing that most scholars do agree about (and then forget) is that play is primarily intrinsically motivated . . . play is fun” (p. xiii). Elkind (2003) agrees that play does not have an aim other than the child enjoying the experience. As Johnson et al. (2005) state, “When playing, children are in a special state of being in which they are not concerned about adult evaluations of them or achieving an external goal. They are in a blissful state of play in which external pressures do not matter” (p. xviii).

Of fundamental and critical importance, is the understanding that play is essential for the *well-being* of children (Burriss & Stone, 2025; Elkind, 2007; Gray, 2013; Gray et al., 2023; Robinson, 2015; Stone, 2017). Unfortunately, Gray (2011) notes how children’s play has declined during the past fifty years which has increased children’s feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and depression; these increases are not indicators of children’s well-being.

Hundreds of books have been written regarding children’s play with many theories about its purpose and value. From Plato, to Piaget, and to Vygotsky, play has been evaluated and promoted as important for not only children’s happiness and well-being, but also for their development. Organizations such as NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) and ACEI (Association for Childhood Education International) recognize the importance of play and its essential role in children’s healthy development. Nancy Carlsson-Paige, in her 2013 TedTalk, appreciates how “When we watch children play, we understand how central play is to healthy development – to children’s emotional, social, and cognitive health and learning . . .” Burriss and Stone (2025) add how play is a risk-free endeavor where there is no failure and children can try out different ideas.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary definition states that the purpose of play is “to engage in activity for amusement or recreation.” The Oxford dictionary defines play as engaging in “activity for enjoyment and recreation rather than a serious or practical purpose.” However, these definitions are seriously limited when we consider the true importance of children’s play.

Burris and Stone (2025) convey how “play provides children with the inspiration, motivation, enjoyment, and abilities to engage future ideas” (p. 25). Play offers children the freedom to imagine, create, and invent. Play supports avenues for children to be resourceful, to persevere, to be resilient, to solve life’s problems, and negotiate life’s challenges (Burris & Stone, 2025; Gray, 2013, 2017; Stone, 2017). Stone (1993) shares how children use play to ‘test ideas, discover relationships, abstract information, express their feelings and ideas, define themselves, and develop peer relationships” (p. 1). Play is the primary way children learn about our world and themselves within this world (Bergen, 2009). A simple dictionary definition of children’s play is not able to provide the vast depth of what play means for children and how it provides for their well-being and development. Volumes of research and literature support a positive relationship between children’s play and children’s well-being and learning (Carlsson-Paige, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dickey et al., 2016; Elkind, 2007; Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Gray 2013, 2014, 2017; Leong & Bodrova, 2001; Piaget, 1952, 1962; Stone, 2017; Stone & Burris, 2019; Vygotsky, 1976, 1978).

In defining play, its important characteristics include that play is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, process not product-oriented, nonliteral, and enjoyable (Johnson et al., 1999; Stone, 1995, 2017; Stone & Burris, 2019). Exploring these characteristics provides a deeper understanding of children’s play.

- *Intrinsically-motivated* means that no one is guiding or directing children’s play; a child pursues play for his or her own satisfaction.
- *Choice* is an important characteristic of play. It means that the child freely chooses what he or she wants to play, and with whom, and how the play unfolds. Importantly, “the child controls the play, not an adult” (Stone & Burris, 2019).
- Children’s play is *process, not product, oriented*. The process is more important than the product. As Stone (2017) suggests, “The absence of a goal *frees* children to try many different variations of the experience, which is why play tends to be more flexible than goal-oriented behavior” (p. 307). Play prepares the setting for multiple possibilities for the child’s divergent thinking.
- *Non-literal* means that a child can create his or her own reality. Non-literal gives room for children’s imagination to flourish. The child can change reality to what he or she wants it to be. The child can experiment with new possibilities. For example, a block can become a car, a stick can become a magic wand, the child becomes a roaring lion, and so forth. The child can experiment with an array of new possibilities.
- And finally, play is *enjoyable*. A child finds pleasure in play; the child is filled with self-satisfaction (Burris & Stone, 2025; Johnson et al., 2005; Stone & Burris, 2019).

In defining play, researchers have identified four different types of play: Functional, constructive, dramatic, and games with rules (Johnson et al., 1999; Stone, 1993). *Functional play* usually revolves around the child's senses (taste, hear, see, touch, smell) and fine and gross motor play: blowing bubbles, jumping in a puddle, splashing water, making mud pies, climbing a tree, listening to birds, and chasing a friend. In functional play, the child finds pleasure playing and interacting with his or her environment. The child learns about the world and what he or she can do in the world.

For *constructive play*, the child is building a tower, painting a flower, sculpting a sand castle, experimenting with paint colors, and creating a robot. With constructive play, the child engages thinking skills as he or she hypothesizes, solves problems, invents, and creates. Mentally, the child learns to symbolize such as drawing a picture to stand for a tree, or using blocks to stand for a house.

In *dramatic play*, the child engages in the most highly developed form of symbolic play (Stone & Burriss, 2016; Stone & Stone, 2015.) The child uses a stick to stand for a horse, a block to stand for a car, a box to stand for a boat. The child can change himself into Spiderman, or she can change herself into Bluey. In dramatic or sociodramatic play, the child is imagining, creating, symbolizing, organizing, and inventing. The child is able to see the world from another person's perspective.

For *games with rules*, the child is learning and creating rules of play. With age, the child begins to understand the complexity of games with rules, along with understandings of fairness, cooperation, turn taking, and sharing. The child is learning to "decenter" and consider another person's point of view.

As children play, they are personally constructing their own lives cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically. Cognitively, children are engaged in active brain development. Play provides children with opportunities for the ability to symbolize, engage in diverse thinking, and problem solving (Fromberg, 2002; Stone, 2017; Stone & Stone, 2021). Elkind (2008) shares how play "nourishes the child's curiosity, imagination, and creativity" (p. 2). In play, children are free to take risks, without the fear of failure, and experience the joy of playing with possibilities (Gray, 2013).

Socially, children are developing social awareness and learning how to deal with the different feelings and attitudes of playmates. They are learning how to solve social conflicts, how to be patient, to take turns, to cooperate, and to share. Play is a natural framework to make friends and get along with others.

Emotionally, children can express feelings of happiness, sadness, anger, worry, and passion through play. Play provides children with a safe context to play out unhappy feelings as well as to show joy. Play provides the environment for children to not only express their feelings but to learn to cope with them as well.

Play is also the predominate way children develop physically. Children run, jump, throw and catch balls, and skip and hop as they develop a command of their own bodies. They develop

hand-eye coordination as they cut, paste, and paint. Over time, they become physically confident as they explore how their bodies work.

In exploring the meaning of children's play, a simple dictionary definition is not adequate. Play is dynamic, vibrant, brilliant, vital, exciting, energetic, thoughtful, personal, important, necessary, imaginative, creative, and the list goes on. Understanding children's play from an adult's point of view necessitates careful action and protection of the gift of play for our children.

Thus, it is important to note the role of adults in regard to children's play. It is essential for parents, caregivers, and educators to understand that play is not a curricular goal designed to reach a standard or objective. Play belongs to the children. For example, a classroom teacher had set up a wonderful environment that included play for the children. However, the teacher informed the children that they had to "write" about each of the choices they made in the environment. As one child walked around the room, he wanted to play with the blocks but remembered he had to write about it. He then went to the home center where he could pretend to be the dad, but he remembered he would have to write about it. The young boy walked around the entire room thinking about where he would want to play and enjoy the different experiences. However, he decided to opt out of the experiences as he didn't want to write about them. The curricular literacy objective averted the young boy's play experiences which would have contributed to his holistic development. In another example, a young child was playing with toy farm animals when the teacher intervened in his play by trying to teach him to count and classify the animals (Stone & Burriss, 2019). As a result, the child disengaged in the play, because the teacher used the child's play as a tool to reach an instructional goal.

Bergen (2009) writes, "All human beings are active seekers of knowledge, and play is an integral facet of this ongoing quest. The pedagogical value of play does not lie in its use as a way to teach a specific set of skills through structured activities called 'play.' Rather, play is valuable for children primarily because it is a medium for development and learning" (p. 416). As Stone & Burriss (2019) note, "If we value play in our environments, then we must protect play as being under the child's control" (p. 214). For play to be *meaningful* for the children, play must be in their control.

Adults can support children's play by providing a rich environment where children choose what and how they play, and with whom they play. By providing play materials and play areas, adults can enhance children's play opportunities without using the play experiences to meet curriculum objectives. Distinguishing between the two approaches is important. Again, play belongs to the child, not to the adult. Elkind (2003) shares how play does not have an aim other than the child enjoying the experience. Or, as Johnson et al. (2005) suggest, playing children should not have to be concerned about achieving a goal set by an adult or their play being evaluated as to whether they meet the desired curricular objective.

However, as Robinson (2015) states, "play is absolutely fundamental to learning: it is the natural fruit of curiosity and imagination" (p. 96). Gray (2013) emphasizes how "[P]lay is the means by which children learn to make friends, overcome their fears, solve their own problems, and generally take control of their own lives. It is also the primary means by which children practice

and acquire the physical and intellectual skills that are essential for success in the culture in which they are growing” (p. 5). According to Wasserman (1992), play supports the “true empowerment of children” (p. 133). Adults in children’s lives can greatly support children’s play without controlling their play. Controlling play is not synonymous with the meaning of children’s play.

As children enjoy the play experience, we must remember that play is the natural way children learn (Robinson, 2015). Children’s play is important. Adults, in children’s lives, can rest assured that play is critical and essential for children’s overall well-being, as well as their development cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically. As Wasserman (1992) concludes, play empowers “children to make discoveries that go far beyond the realm of what we adults think is important to know” (p. 133). Knowing how play is vitally important for children’s overall healthy development, we, as adults, are reminded that for children the definition of play is “fun.”

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