

GAMES WITH RULES

Games with rules provide the basis for sports and recreational activities. They also stimulate social and cognitive development. The games that we play with children have the general features of all true play, that is, they are spontaneous, enjoyable, and satisfy inner needs. The difference is that games have explicit rules. Up until age seven, children tend to make up the rules as they go along. At age seven as they experience a cognitive growth spurt, children become very aware of rules as any teacher on yard duty knows. Grade two students are constantly agitated because someone isn't playing right.

Play is bound by implicit rules understood by the players. Play is not a free-for-all. It is highly active but never chaotic. Adults don't always see the rules but children themselves clearly understand them. In pretend play, for example, such things as staying in character, performing situation appropriate actions, and using language to further the actions make play a safe and productive activity.

Games with rules, particularly sports, are generally governed by external rules. For this reason, some play advocates suggest that sports are not true play. Playing sports, however, has proven to be an effective way of teaching valuable interpersonal skills such as co-operation, teamwork, and tolerance. The Right to Play organization, operating around the world, is dedicated to promoting education through play and sports. It has as its motto, "Take care of yourself. Take care of others." There can be many opportunities to participate in self-directed play through sports. If the expectations for sport games respect age-appropriate behavior and the goal is not necessarily who wins or loses, sports can be an enjoyable part of a child's play world.

When children take the soccer balls outside, different games emerge. Two children set up a target on the wall and practice kicking the ball at the target. They decide what counts as 'hitting the target', and how many points are awarded for each target. Others begin to organize a soccer game, deciding on the goal line, what will serve as goal posts, and who will be the goalie. One child takes over and chooses the teams and some express the feeling that the selection process is not 'fair'. The game begins, and after a while one of the goalies declares she wants to switch roles. Another child takes her place. There are arguments about a non-goal, but these quickly fade as the desire to keep playing is more compelling.

Each of these forms of play has something unique to offer. In an article featured in the New York Times (2008), Robin Henig examines why children play. She challenges the romanticized view of play and childhood as "too squishy" and searches the literature on animal play to find the essential purpose that play has in primate development. She concludes: "Animal findings about how play influences brain growth suggest that playing, though it might look silly and purposeless, warrants a place in every child's day ... a place that embraces all styles of play and that recognizes that play is every bit as essential to healthful neurological development as test-taking, Spanish lessons, or Suzuki violin." As adults we may not understand the value of play, but we can appreciate and respect the place it has in the lives of our children.

