

Why children need to play

Making sense of internal and external worlds is at the root of all the free-style activity

•• NUPUR D PAIVA

Nowadays, we are all obsessed with our children developing motor and cognitive abilities through play, but my pitch here is different. Children need to play to make sense of their internal and external worlds. For children, play is not just recreation or leisure, which implies that it is an indulgence, but important and serious work. It is pleasurable and engrossing precisely because it is emotional. Otherwise, it would merely be the handling of objects.

If you wish to understand your child you need to understand his/her play, because it is through play that children express themselves, conveying what they cannot express in words. What a child chooses to play at betrays 'his inner processes, desires, problems and anxieties'.

It is how children make sense of difficult feelings – jealousy, anger, guilt and hatred are enacted between dolls and monsters – which makes it easier to handle it in real relationships. In play, the little child can escape from the impact of a situation that is too painful for him to accept as it stands. He can escape for a little while by pretending that he is someone else.

In her real life, eight-year-old Tina was at the receiving end of many instructions from many teachers – for sport, music, art, theatre, school-work, dance – all of which she (at least partially) strongly resented. In her play with me, she made herself the teacher who gave the children endless instructions. She talked non-stop for 40 minutes, entirely disinterested in the other.

She would ask 'Is that



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be negotiated with rather than be infantilised. She wanted to be taken seriously, not just indulged.

Left to themselves, children will play with anything: empty cardboard boxes become houses, curtains become tents, dolls and stuffed animals talk to each other; kitchen odds and ends become a drum-set or an imaginary playing house. It is not the objects, therefore, that are as important as the fantasies that accompany it. Children have ideas about what they are doing; a kind of storytelling, sometimes consciously expressed and easy to understand if we are paying attention, but also with unconscious undertones, less obvious to see.

Watch a young child playing (where they are free from instruction, anxiety or targets of outcome); for example, jump-

ing off the sofa again and again: this is one kind of play – to achieve mastery over something, build skill and lose the fear of being hurt. Then there is acting out active destruction: building towers with blocks only to enjoy toppling them over, or displaying complex emotions in imaginary play – death and destruction, anger, loss, magical strength and resurrections as well as persecution, care and affection.

Every evening in the garden of her home, four-year-old Anya would play at being jailed by the evil policeman, dragged to the tree and tied up. What was being played out is difficult to know exactly, since no one really paid much attention, though her mother recalls that they were going through a difficult phase together, where Anya was frequently angry and defiant with her. Clearly something was going on for Anya that, according

less frightening, more consolidated. It is like leaving feelings to marinate so they truly sink in or pushing down on them so they sediment and become more substantial.

Games where there are emergencies, rescues, doctors, blood, thunderstorms, evil jailors, robbers or death are a child's way of destroying and repairing relationships in fantasy. When a three-year-old pretends to be Chhota Bheem, beating up Mangal Singh, who has captured his friend Raju, there is a lot going on beyond depicting what the child may have watched on television.

Power, anger and making things better are some of the processes at play here. Being small yet powerful, is an important part of why Chhota Bheem and his friends ap-

pretending to hide from the rain, or be shot at by bullets and be grievously injured or fall dead, only to be magically revived by the doctor/child. By playing the role well, parents are doing something significant. They are making the experience emotionally real for the child and not ruining it by bringing in reality.

Something similar happens when a child is 'helping' in the kitchen or home.

Parents may know that the child's presence actually creates more work for them, that it takes more effort and creativity to keep the child engaged in mixing the batter, more serenity in overlooking the mess they make by spilling water, yet they allow their child to feel that the cake would not have been so tasty had it not



THE CREAKING TREE



How to become both active and eco-friendly



•• SHOVOON CHOWDHURY

I'm feeling very annoyed with *The Hindu*, and I need to speak up. You could call this biting the hand that feeds me, but they don't really pay me that much. I'm doing it reluctantly. It's just that it's my duty to protest injustice and malpractices, and *The Hindu* is crossing all limits.

First, they tried to force everyone to eat salads. Then they tried to make people do yoga, despite the risk of grave physical injury. Yoga is not something to be practised indiscriminately. Next time you're having French fries at McDonald's, look around you. You will see many people who definitely should not be attempting the *Chaturbhagashan*. Some facts are self-evident. Some people are built to do the *Chaturbhagashan* and some people are not. But does *The Hindu* ever carry any disclaimers with their propaganda? It does not. As the stress and strain of modern living jeopardises our mental condition, is it right or fair to promote Deenak

have been active without being eco-friendly. The Greeks conquered the world wearing skirts. Gandhi marched to Dandi in a dhoti. For over a decade, no one was more active than Usain Bolt. He was the fastest man on earth. As far as we know, he did not achieve this while wearing organic underwear. What's the point in combining the two? Will it make us twice as trendy? On the other hand, this could be a case of re-branding, like when government schemes have their names changed into Hindi, thereby ensuring that this time they will work.

I realised this as I was on my morning walk yesterday, in between bouts of coughing. That's when I understood that *The Hindu* might be doing a good thing. I was wearing a cotton tee shirt, khaki shorts, cotton underwear, and canvas shoes, because I'm too cheap to buy sneakers. All of these are items which will quickly disintegrate when buried, causing Mother Nature no harm. Some of my older items of clothing are already doing this in my cupboard. I am already both active and eco-friendly. I thought I was just getting fitter, but I'm saving the planet too. I now feel much better about myself, thanks to *The Hindu*. I may have misjudged