THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

Play is an important part of our development. In playing, we learn to move, think, speak and imagine, as well as to cope with other people.

This second edition of The Development of Play addresses these key functions that play serves. David Cohen examines how children play with objects, with language, and most importantly, with each other and their parents. He goes on to ask why we stop playing, and looks at adult games. The Development of Play argues that psychology has accepted too uncritically the Victorian opposition of work and play, and argues that adults can learn to play more.

With its extensive account of recent work in this area, this book is the most up-to-date work on the importance of play and will be of interest to child psychologists, developmental psychologists, and a wide number of professionals involved with children.

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

Second edition

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London and New York
### CONTENTS

**Acknowledgements** vii

1 **INTRODUCTION** 1

2 **A HISTORY OF PLAY** 15

3 **PLAYING WITH OBJECTS** 37

4 **PLAYING WITH OTHER CHILDREN** 64

5 **PRETENDING** 90

6 **PLAYFUL PEOPLE?** 113

7 **PLAY THERAPY** 148

8 **ADULT GAMES IN A CHANGING WORLD** 168

9 **ENDGAMES** 187

*Bibliography* 194

*Index* 204
TO MY FRIEND JANE EAMES
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A number of people gave me valuable support and advice, as well as, in the case of
my sons, Nicholas and Reuben, some of the best lines. I should like to thank them
and their mother, Aileen La Tourette, for her incisive comments. Professor Alan
Smithers and Dr Stephen MacKeith also helped with some sharp points. Also I
should like to thank my agent, Sheila Watson.

Some of the research reported here was carried under a grant from the
Leverhulme Trust for my Ph.D. My supervisor, Professor Brian Foss, and Rom
Harré provided much stimulating criticism and drew my attention, very usefully,
to some implications of my findings.
INTRODUCTION

When I came to London as a boy of nine, I was baffled by some of the games English children played. Cricket was a total mystery but, at least, it didn’t seem dangerous. Far more threatening was a game called Double or Quits. The fat boy who lived in the flat above ours insisted I play this game with him. New to this country, I didn’t dare refuse because I wanted to be accepted. I didn’t dare admit either that I never understood the rules as FatBoy wielded them. The way we played the game I could never quit and never win. Often, at the end of an hour’s playing, I was seething with frustration while FatBoy grinned in ecstasy. I never discovered how to play Double or Quits and so, in the end, I avoided meeting him. I mention this experience at the start of this book because psychologists who write about play tend to lapse into a kind of romantic smugness. Playing is wonderful, fun, golden, innocent. Play is how we learn to handle the world and our social roles in it; play teaches and heals. The way some psychologists write, you would imagine that what the children in Golding’s macabre Lord of the Flies needed was a good dose of play therapy. Then, they would have acted out their fantasies instead of, well, acting out their fantasies.

Playing is, of course, often fun and light without any dark side but this romantic attitude has given the extensive psychological literature on play an odd feel. More than in other sections of psychology, studies on play report naturalistic behaviour in detail. There are extended accounts of life in playgroups and in ‘warm home-like laboratories’ (a phrase from a study) of children doing charming things. To read of three year olds playing doctors, nurses, fire engines, space adventurers and so on is entertaining and some children can be acutely critical. One wily boy refused to pretend a colander was a shoe because that’s too
silly to be a shoe’. All this yields good data. Since psychologists have often been blamed for providing too little raw data from raw life, it may be churlish to complain. But these reports also contain assumptions that beg many questions. Usually, play is seen as something children do and adults don’t. Then, while children are presumed to think that play is good fun, wiser adults (especially psychologists) know there’s more to it than that. Play is a learning experience. Piaget argued that as children get older, they reject the sillier games of childhood in favour of more realistic pursuits. Fantasy is a stage one grows out of.

Most texts on play do not investigate the origins of such assumptions even though it is quite clear that historical attitudes both to children and play have changed. Unusually, Brian Sutton Smith (1984) has claimed that Western societies have used play to make children conform and prepare them for their role in capitalism. It is certainly odd that there seems to have been no attempt to link a text like Marcuse’s _Eros and Civilisation_ to the subject. Before flower power, Marcuse claimed that capitalism did not dare allow adults real pleasure. Surplus repression was used to keep us in check. The notion that play is sinful stems from the Puritans and seems to have influenced research. Psychologists certainly seem to accept that while play may appear frivolous, it has to have a proper, serious explanation. It cannot just be; it has to have a purpose.

The paradox – let’s be serious about play – has not been commented on much since Groos (1896) claimed that we had a long childhood so that we could play and that we played to ‘pre-exercise’ skills we would need as adults. Groos originated the idea that we play in order to learn and, as we shall see, few people understand now what a reversal this was. Groos made specific links between some games and some skills. This prompted one of the few jokes by the great Genevan psychologist, Jean Piaget. It was unlikely, sniped Piaget, that when a baby dropped a rattle, it was pre-exercising its grasp of gravity and the laws of physics. Did Newton play much with apples? The growth of psychoanalysis, and the start of child analysis, gave Groos’ ideas a new interpretation. Emotional skills rather than cognitive ones were being rehearsed. Freud made only fleeting references to play but from the 1920s, analysts like Susan Isaacs, Anna Freud and Melanie Klein saw it as a crucial process and useful tool. In free play, children could express their anxieties. Guide them right and they could use play to conquer these. Klein and Freud were to have a heated dispute about the way analysts could use play but both believed it was an important activity. For both,
INTRODUCTION

though, it was a phase; Freud said there was a clear 'development line' which was from play to work.

Return to the paradox. Play cannot just be; it has to have a purpose. Otherwise, biology would not have permitted its evolution. The task, therefore, brave psychologist, is to burrow beneath the play for the real meaning.

A further assumption is that all children play though social and economic conditions may affect their style. Well, they would all have to play if it is such a major developmental process. In fact, there are non-players and they don't turn into monsters necessarily. J.S. Mill's father wanted his son to be educated from birth which meant there was no time to play. J.S. Mill could never remember playing. In his autobiography, the philosopher noted: 'Of children's books any more than of playthings I had scarcely any, except an occasional gift from a relative or acquaintance.' This deprivation does not seem to have hampered Mill except that he reckoned it made him bad with his hands. He could deal with people, politics and philosophy but not with the plumbing.

These assumptions and paradoxes may affect psychologists more than they admit. As it is a science, they/we are meant to be objective. But these cultural legacies prompt awkward, and often unasked, questions. Should one be playful about studying play or should one treat it as one might the aggressive behaviour of the well-reinforced pigeon? A recent review in Contemporary Psychology snapped that it wasn't necessary to be humorously about humour research. On the whole, play researchers have been conservative and grave but there have been interesting exceptions. All this argues that we need to look at play from a variety of perspectives.

To show how serious I am about being playful about play, there will be an interlude before getting on to the introductory ritual of explaining what is in this book and why it is necessary to add to the literature. A few quotations about play will reveal not just the contradictions and confusions surrounding it but the range of writers who have bothered to think about it without satisfying themselves (let alone others) that they have cracked the problem:

The function of play has been commented on for many centuries, to little avail.

Erving Goffman, sociologist, 1976
THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

Play is a child’s life and the means by which he comes to understand the world he lives in.

Susan Isaacs, psychoanalyst, 1933

Animals are young so that they may play.

Karl Groos, 1896

We can be sure that all happenings, pleasant or unpleasant, in the child’s life, will have repercussions on her dolls.

Jean Piaget, psychologist, 1951

In attempting to interpret the play of infants one must bear in mind the love of nonsense and tomfoolery.

C.W. Valentine, psychologist, 1942

[Play] is a systemic mode of meta-communication. Put simply, as a meta-communicative channel, play has a higher survival value than does ritual.

Don Hundleman, psychologist, 1976

[Play] is one of those concepts that Wittgenstein might have said is wrapped in so much toilet paper, it looks round. The cutting edges have been dulled.

Gregory Stone, sociologist, 1973

The motives of play are various and, often, complex, and they cannot be characterised by any brief formula; nor can any hard and fast line be drawn between work and play.

William MacDougall, psychologist, 1919

Generally speaking there is continuity between a child’s play and work.

Jean Piaget, psychologist, 1952

. . . in play, the ego aspires to its full expansion.

E. Cleftarède, psychologist, 1913

Fantasy play can reveal a great deal of material but any kind of play can be used defensively.

Anna Freud, psychologist, 1984

Play originated from boredom and deteriorated behaviour, an outrageous speculation that may, after all, be true of the writer and his thesis.

Gordon M. Burghardt, psychologist, 1984
INTRODUCTION

One could go on and on, as one could go on attempting to define what play is. I deliberately finished with Burghardt’s provocative words for two reasons. First, he provides a perfectly adequate set of working definitions for play and, secondly, he has mainly studied animal play. This book examines play in humans and does not consider, except very occasionally, animal work. It seems generally agreed that detailed studies of chimpanzee play such as Jane Lawick Goodall (1968) reveal that they use play both to improve manual skills and to practise social skills. Fagen (1981) has stressed that play leads to many reciprocal encounters in which apes learn to co-operate. He concludes that ‘it is most fruitful to look for social play as a source of certain kinds of flexible skills’. The psychology of human play involves many aspects that animal studies do not touch — such as the use of toys, the role of pretending and the impact of cultural fashions. The complex and cultural nature of human play makes animal analogies only of limited use. With so much research to make sense of, I have deliberately excluded any detailed analysis of animal work though it seems clear that human infants also derive manual and social skills through play. But they derive much more besides. The smartest chimp going does not seem to act out being King Kong because he is nervous of how well he’ll do on the rugby field.

Looking both at animal and at human play, Burghardt offers the following useful defining characteristics. Play has:

(i) no obvious immediate function
(ii) a pleasing effect
(iii) sequentially variable
(iv) is stimulus seeking
(v) is quick and energetically expensive behaviour
(vi) involves exaggerated, incompetent or awkward movements
(vii) is most prevalent in juveniles
(viii) has special ‘play’ signals
(ix) has a background in role relationships
(x) is marked by a relative absence of threat or submission
(xi) is marked by a relative absence of final consummatory behaviour.

Some of Burghardt’s points fit animals better than people. Children do not always move awkwardly when they play. In a Wendy House or clambering up a climbing frame, children can move normally or, even, gracefully. Pouring sand
into containers also does not seem to be expensive in energy terms. Burghardt makes something of the lack of real threat or submission. With human beings it is more complicated. Freud suggested long ago that jokes allowed real hostility to surface in a socially acceptable way. The bightly repartee is a real put-down but acceptable. Observations of children indicate that they often are hostile in their play but they know that the gloss of a game makes it likely they will get away with it. Despite such quibbles, Burghardt draws attention to some useful boundaries between play and ‘not-play’. It seems possible to accept that play does involve a varied set of activities and behaviours. Not every instance of play needs to fulfil all the criteria (i) to (xi). Many forms will only cover some of them while being recognised easily as play. Burghardt also does not help much in describing moments of transition such as when a child shifts from walking down the street to galloping like a horse. Usually, there is no difficulty in recognising when children are playing. And children themselves experience no difficulty in knowing when they’re playing – but psychologists have to ask them first. I doubt if it is possible to get a perfect definition of play precisely because it is such a wide behaviour.

There are many ways of playing play.

Despite the variety of quotations – and, of course, many more could be culled – the literature on play tends to one of three traditions. The most influential today is probably the Piagetian one. As McCune-Nicolich has noted (1984), Piaget was one of the few psychologists to map in detail the development of imitation and play in his children over a long period of time. It ought to be said that Play, Dreams and Imagination in Childhood is, compared to others of Piaget’s books, both accessible and fairly short on observations. In plotting the growth of intelligence, Piaget seemed to make notes virtually every day – certainly every month – on new things his children did. With play, there are huge gaps between observations. Piaget notes the play behaviour of J and L at three-month, even six-month, intervals. Interesting as the material is, it is not as thorough as his cognitive work. Nevertheless, as McCune-Nicolich points out, it is a seminal contribution. Psychologists who approach play in the Piagetian tradition tend to focus on what children do with objects, the point at which they can use an object for something else (say, an eggshell to be a spoon) and the relationship between play and exploration.
INTRODUCTION

Piaget commented on Freud’s ideas about play and accepted that, for the very young child, play was totally gratifying to the ego. The demands of reality did not intrude. Play should fade away, Piaget believed, as the child became more competent at coping with real objects, and real situations, in the real world.

The second tradition has been closely linked to psychoanalysis. It concentrates on what emotions are expressed in play and, also, on how play can be used to heal. These two traditions have tended to function in isolation – few studies even now ask how a child’s cognitive ‘level’ of play is linked to his emotional development – but they do share one prejudice. For Piaget and for Freud, only children play. Any adult who larked about in a funny hat would be a candidate for the funny farm or, in Piaget’s case, for a severe dose of logic. Freud claimed that the human task was to learn to be able to love and to work. Not much room for play there. Piaget went to some length to explain why some adults persisted in playing organised games. But, of course, to play tennis is not to play in quite the same way. Nor is to play the Stock Exchange. The play of adults is, by tradition, rather limited.

The third tradition is an educational one. Much of the early work on play was done not by psychologists but by educationalists like Froebel and Montessori. They wanted to see not why children played but what play could be used for. Initially, many of these workers wanted to liberate what was best in the child through free play. But, as Sutton Smith has observed, $100 million were spent in America on building playgrounds between 1890 and 1990. That was not because American society wanted to foster the sweet bird of liberty in its young. Rather, social leaders hoped to train youngsters, especially working-class youngsters, to take their place in American society and become productive members of it. Studies of playgroups since 1920 have tended, usually without much awareness of it, to accept the fact that play ought to be used to certain ends. Children ought to learn how to co-operate, to share things and, of course, to obey wiser adults. There is much descriptive literature on what happens in playgroups but rather less writing on why adults have created and run corrective playgroups. There were social engineers on the swings.

As a result of these independent traditions, the literature on play has tended to be rather fragmented. There are some useful introductory texts such as Millar’s Play (published in 1968) and now a little out of date) and Garvey’s Play (1977). But most books on the subject tend to be collections of essays in which authors with different special interests concentrate on them and offer few connections to
the rest of the literature. A good example of this trend is Yawkey and Pellegrini’s (1984) *Child’s Play, Developmental and Applied*. Their authors include many contemporary authorities like Sutton Smith, McCune-Nicolich, Fein, McGhee, Curry and Arnaud, and Schwartzman. There are chapters on pretend play, the play of handicapped children, humour, exploration, the uses (and misuses) of objects, playschools and, even, play in the hospital setting. The list may be comprehensive but Yawkey devotes just 7 out of 370 pages to any general introduction and most of that is taken up with listing what the following chapters are about.

Since Piaget wrote his book on play, there has been a vast amount of research on the subject. For reviews, see Garvey (1977), Mayles (1990), and Singer and Singer (1990). I believe it’s both possible and useful to offer a coherent account of the state of our knowledge about play – and the implications of that.

I also wanted to write this book because of two previous pieces of research. First, I did my Ph.D. thesis on the development of laughter basing most of it on following what made my children laugh over four years. Secondly, in a critique of Piaget, I have argued that his theory, valuable as it is, is focused far too much on how children reacted to things and far too little on how they reacted to people and, especially, to their parents. Some of these criticisms may be useful in looking at play as there is a need to integrate different approaches. Play is not either cognitive or social or emotional. When children play, they often combine all these faculties.

Psychologists have played the game of play research in some curious, even defensive, ways. I’m not being offensively flippant in describing it as a game; much work in the philosophy of science since Kulm (1962) has stressed that science is a game with its own rules. Two of the traditional approaches emphasise research in controlled situations, either the laboratory (which can be dolled up to look playful) or the consulting room. The playgroup is somewhat less controlled, of course, though researchers often impose their own restrictions on what slices of play they study. More than most psychologists, students of play have ventured into homes but they often feel compelled to turn these into mini-labs for they bring with them a bag of approved toys (in case the ones people have don’t suit) as well as much techno-baggage such as video cameras, tape-recorders, electronic beepers and so on. Mothers are sometimes given bells to ring to signal the start of the experimental period. The experts, as Belsky (1981) has admitted, are rarely content to observe playful behaviour as it happens. They catalyse it or limit it.
McCune-Nicolich and Fenson (1984), for example, often do a ‘warm up’ visit to set mothers and infants at ease a week before they actually do their video with toys they provide. The observation period lasts 30 minutes. Psychologists control to an unnatural degree the setting and tools with which the play they observe occurs. Is 30 minutes enough? Why not use the toys on site? Belsky (1981) even constructed a twelve-stage model of the development of play using such short bursts of observation.

Play researchers acknowledge that children play with their mothers and a few pioneers like Clarke Stewart (1978) even accept that father makes three but the methodologies remain odd. As a result, the way a child develops his, or her, play in his, or her, home with parents, siblings, neighbourhood friends has barely been studied. The convenient assumption is that play in the lab or the home or the nursery class is much the same. My observations on laughter show clearly this is not entirely true with laughter. Over four years, Nicholas and Reuben played far more complexly at home than at school. Their home play incorporated and dealt with far more emotional material. As parents, their mother and I played with them in ways that their teachers didn’t. This is no criticism of their teachers but a fact of family life.

The first edition of this book was published in 1987. Since then, there have been a number of important practical and theoretical developments which have made play research actually more central to developmental psychology.

First, the availability of good, cheap video recorders – everyone is a cameraperson now – has made it easier to acquire large amounts of observational data in naturalistic settings. Many studies still appear to prefer bringing children into the laboratory to study what must be fairly artificial forms of play, as Haight and Miller (1992) complain in their analysis of everyday play. One perhaps unintentionally amusing study, for example, observed how children responded to a non-reciprocating robot in a lab and noted in all seriousness that frustrated children tended to hit the thing. Despite such continuing eccentricities, there has been some move towards observing real behaviour in real settings. Data has become more complex, messier and more revealing.

Naturalistic observations make it even more clear than in 1987 that parents and siblings play an important role in teaching children how to play. It seems staggering – and reflects the extent to which Piaget dominated those parts of
developmental psychology he hardly attended to – that there should ever have been doubt of the importance of parents. There have been a number of longitudinal studies like Haight and Miller (1992) and Howes and Matheson (1992) which outline how that develops. The importance of parents in creating the setting for play and using it to teach young children has also been made clear by the work of Ladd and Hart (1992) on how American parents organise playmates for their children. It turns out that you’re never too young to network.

Perhaps the most important development since 1987 has been the link between play studies and what has come to be called the child’s theory of mind. In the 1987 edition, I devoted a large central chapter to pretending. I argued that there was evidence that children as young as 2.6 could pretend and knew they were pretending from three years of age. Children can only know they are pretending if they have some sense of their own mental states and can compare real feelings with unreal ones that are put on. As I shall show in Chapter 5, there is now a lively literature on young children’s ability to deceive, to induce false beliefs and the various strategies they master at different ages (Sodian 1991, Peskin 1992). Pretend play, which once seemed a slightly esoteric interest, has come to occupy a central focus in developmental psychology. Knowing the difference between appearance and reality is a crucial mental leap. There is now growing evidence for some form of quantum leap in children’s cognitions between the age of three and 4.6 – a leap that seems to require the revision of key elements in Piagetian theory. Pretend play seems to be a key skill in social and cognitive development.

Another interesting change since 1987 has been in research on how children understand the media, on how they distinguish reality and fantasy on television and in video games. Two very different kinds of experts operate in this field. On one hand, there are meta-analysts inspired by work on deconstruction; on the other, American TV companies commission endless market research to ensure that the latest cartoon doesn’t stretch little Timmy’s attention span too much because he might then not pay heed to the adverts. What emerges from all this is that children are much more sophisticated in understanding media and media games than one would have imagined (Kinder 1992).

There is a further oddity of the play research game. It rather peters out round when children are eleven or twelve. Do teenagers never play? Perhaps we don’t study how children play with their parents enough because adults are not meant to play. Peter Pan today is seen as pathological rather than charming.
INTRODUCTION

But who decided that play ends so abruptly? Is it a biological fact or a cultural convention? If it is the latter, is it changing? In the chapters that follow I give an account of play research in its cognitive, emotional and social perspective. But it seems important also to ask a few historical questions. The French historian of ‘mentalties’, Philippe Aries, claimed that childhood is not a historical absolute. In the Middle Ages, children had no ‘childhood’; they were seen as miniature adults and, as soon as physically possible, integrated into adult life. Parents saw children die young too often. Aries believed, to invest emotionally in them. There was no protected period of innocence. Pollock (1984) has argued that Aries is wrong. She found examples from the sixteenth century on of children who were doted on by their parents and a few scattered accounts of games they played together. Nevertheless, play was not considered a subject for study until the late eighteenth century. Rousseau’s Émile waxed lyrical about its joys. The Victorians adopted some of his romantic view of childhood; they believed that childhood was the best days of our life. Victorians also sent their children down mines and into factories. This dichotomy is interesting and I consider some of its origins in Chapter 2 which looks at some of our historical attitudes to play. Most developmental psychologists do wrong to ignore such issues. It stops them asking important questions about how adults play with their children and, also, about whether adults go on playing.

Digging is work; digging about in the playground is play.

I want to argue that psychologists are still too apt to accept the dichotomy the Victorians set up of work versus play. In his Hard Times, Dickens gave the definitive picture of the awful Victorian school where Mr Gradgrind ground facts into his poor pupils. Play was sin. The good child worked all the time. Dickens did not criticise Mr Gradgrind for drawing too sharp a distinction between work and play, but because, for Gradgrind, there ought to be no play at all. Dickens accepted, nobly, like most Victorians, that work was one thing and play another. He wanted children to have more play. It has been argued that one reason for the Victorian accent on work was that industry needed to persuade the labour force that it had to work its guts out. Anything else was immoral.

Since Dickens, the industrial world has changed. We have to live with more leisure for the lucky and more unemployment for the unlucky. More confusing, in some areas of work, it seems much harder to justify the rigid division between work and play. Doing the same task month after month on a car assembly line may
be work but what about writing computer programmes? Or running a small business you like? Or doing psychology? Many people (especially middle-class people) can enjoy their work now in a way that would have been inconceivable in Dickens’s day. Is writing a new book work or play? Especially difficult if the book is about play!

We have also become, the pun is deliberate, far more used to the idea of playing with ourselves. For Freud and the early analysts, therapy was serious, perhaps even sacred. The growth of endless therapy groups, growth groups and grops groups means that there are group groups, people who devote much of their time to personal games. You need only read the personal and therapy ads in publications like London’s Time Out or the New York Review of Books to see that we are in a universe that neither Dickens nor Freud would recognise. People addicted to psychological games may be lonely and/or a small minority but the whole ‘personal growth’ movement has affected the way many people think about psychological change. Playing for adults has come ‘on to the agenda’. Even quite conservative organisations like the British Medical Association run role-playing groups for doctors so that cold-fish medics can get to feel what it is like to be the patient. Somehow, developmental psychologists have managed to ignore almost entirely these adult aspects of playing and have failed to ask what it might mean in terms of how they play with their children.

A contemporary book on play needs to look at such issues and I intend to argue that adults need to learn how to play more. Playgroups for the over-20s!

There is, as I said, the game, or is it ritual, of setting out what is in the book to come. Chapter 2 looks at historical attitudes to play and how they have influenced play research. Chapter 3 looks at the way children play with objects and toys. It analyses Piaget’s views and tries to incorporate the fact that often children play with toys with other children or adults. Chapter 4 looks at the social games and pretend play of young children, focusing mainly on games with their peers. This Chapter, and Chapter 5 which looks at the ways in which children play with their parents, try to integrate my own research material with the latest ideas in work on the child’s theory of mind. Dividing the research into these three areas looks rather arbitrary but it follows the pattern of most work. Connections need to be made between them because, when a child is playing he or she is using mind, body, heart and social skills. In Chapter 4, I also look briefly at the issue of whether children
can be taught to play better by adults. Ponder the irony! Children are the experts at play, play is their work and yet we, long-out-of-practice oldies, think we can teach them how to play!

The next two chapters (6 and 7) also focus on how children play with their parents. I draw to a large extent on my research on my own children who often laughed, while they were playing. Some observations support Bruner’s analysis of how children develop their peckabo skills. The value of long-term observations in the home is that they offer a richness of data. They also reveal what the child uses, and transforms, in everyday life and something of the interaction between daily events and the child’s play. Since Nicholas is three years and nine months older than Reuben, the observations also suggest much about how brothers play together and what they learn from each other. It is not all one-way traffic with the younger learning. The literature carries little of such data apart from Dunn (1982).

I have nurtured the paradox that psychologists don’t know whether to be playful about play. Psychologists have few such tensions. Play is the road royal to the child’s unconscious and you would no more be frivolous about it than about dreams. Chapter 7 looks at play therapy and asks how much of it is play and how much of it is therapy. In an interview not long before her death, Anna Freud had some sceptical points to make about the use of play.

Chapter 7 also raises the question of whether research helps find ways in which parents can teach their children how to play creatively. Having stressed the point that children often start playing with their parents, Chapter 8 considers some kinds of adult games. The late radical psychiatrist R.D. Laing suggested grown-ups need to play both with their children and with their lovers. I argue that adults need to play more and more freely. The growth of many sports and leisure activities indicates that we are continuing to play once we pass the age of consent but there are also many signs that we feel uneasy about it. As industrial societies become post-industrial (whatever that label quite means) adults ought to become less inhibited about playing. And psychologists ought to struggle through their Puritan heritage and become less inhibited about studying it. Finally, the last chapter conforms to the rules of the bookwriting game. It sums up what we have learned and points out directions research ought to go.

Over the years, attitudes to play have changed. In his delightful Let Your Mind Alone the humorist James Thurber berated psychologists who, in 1936, ‘agree(d)
that realism as against fantasy, reverie, day-dreaming and wool-gathering, is a highly important thing’. Thurber pointed out: ‘In this insistence on reality I do not see as much profit as these shapers of success do. I have had a great deal of satisfaction and benefit out of day-dreaming which never got me anywhere in their definition of getting somewhere.’ Today, few psychologists would argue against play or fantasy but the feeling still persists that such frivolous activities need to be justified by being in the service of reality. The right games should spur the best development. I hope this book offers not just a more rounded view of play but also a less utilitarian one. To be worth studying, play does not always have to be for something else.

Let play begin.
A HISTORY OF PLAY

The West Indian writer C.L.R. James who was an authority on cricket noted wryly, 'What do they know of cricket who only cricket know.' Upper-class romantics might imagine it was only a game with the thwack of leather on willow but James who was poor, black and a Marxist could see that its rules, rituals and commentaries were profoundly affected by social and political events. Play is not different; it cannot be viewed in a vacuum. As long as there have been writers and artists to observe them, children seem to have played and to have mimicked adult behaviour. But what commentators have made of this has varied widely. In this chapter, I do not attempt to give either a history of play or a comprehensive history of play research. Rather, I want to pick out certain themes and periods which seem interesting because they show how research into play has been influenced by very different factors. Today, influenced by the playschools movement and slightly nervous about what too much work stress will do to us, we glorify play. Plato in The Republic described a comprehensive system of education for his philosopher-kings without ever mentioning play. That was something women did with infants and it didn't matter a jot.

In this chapter, I examine briefly what we know about play in antiquity and the Middle Ages. As a subject for philosophical consideration, play hardly figures before Rousseau. I go on to look at how the eighteenth-century romantic movement rhapsodised play. It was, after all, what l'enfant sauvage got up to in a state of nature. For the romantics, play and its freedoms were normal. They discussed the subject to prove that we had lost much natural innocence. For the Victorians, the opposite was true. It is no accident that the scientific study of play began in the mid-nineteenth century with writers like Herbert Spencer.
society and industry needed to define play and leisure as rare, abnormal activities that were the opposite of that normal activity, work. Even an enlightened visionary like Robert Owen in his model industrial villages incorporated few facilities for play.

We have not yet outgrown this Victorian legacy. From the 1870s onwards, research on play branches out mainly in three directions — the cognitive value of play, the emotional value of play and the social value of play in animals. Educators like Froebel and Montessori did not see play as a good in itself so much as a means through which the child could better be taught formal skills. Make mathematics fun and the child will learn to add up better. Fifteen years before Freud wrote his book on jokes (which had only a few asides on play), the American ‘mental hygienists’ were arguing its educative uses. Joseph Lee of the National Recreational Association claimed in 1910 that if immigrant children were put in ‘sylvan sanctuaries’ they would soon absorb the American way of life. When psychoanalysts started to suggest that play was therapeutic and that, properly handled, it could help treat children, they were building on old foundations.

There is much paradox in all this. Most writers who admit that it is hard to draw boundaries for play argue that play is a free activity and one which has no clear goal or purpose. Nearly all research then contradicts this nice, free-wheeling view. The questions psychologists put attempt to unravel the truer, deeper, more meaningful meaning of play or to find its purposes. Freud and Piaget are the masters of this approach, weaving deep epics out of the way a child plays with a mobile or pours water about. Studies of laughter reveal the same lust for the serious. Ever since philosophers and psychologists paid any attention to laughter, they have tried to unlock its deeper purpose. Hobbes saw laughter as an expression of hostile triumph; Bergson saw it as our reaction to seeing ourselves depicted as machines; Nietzsche saw it as a means of subverting the ordinary. You can’t just laugh — or play — for the fun of it. Truth has to be more sombre. I do not suggest we limit our investigations by accepting behaviour at its surface value but it is worth noticing how psychology needs to make ‘light’ trivial behaviours the outward signs of much weightier things. Victorian attitudes have left their mark. Who can justify studying play unless it indicates hidden depths?

Research into play is also beginning to be affected by two much more recent developments. Since the 1960s, we have learned that we live in a stress society. To avoid stress, ulcers and heart attacks, it is necessary to relax. All kinds of sports
and games have boomed. So have psychological games. In the latter I include encounter groups, growth movements, self-help groups of some sorts, following-the-guru, self-therapies and all kinds of ego-fests. Obviously, many people take these activities very seriously and some need help. But, for many people, going to groups has become a form of ‘deep’ play. We have learned to play with ourselves. As a result, psychologists need to study adult play.

Finally, consider the way the media has become playful. Once, advertising was content to ram home the message that Brand X was best. Watson, the founder of behaviourism who went to work for J. Walter Thompson, believed that the way to sell products was to appeal to the emotions (Watson 1925). Today, many ads have adopted a deliberately playful style. Take an ad like that for Ferguson TV’s which offers ‘Good News for TV addicts; even square eyes’ because ‘no one is more switched on than Ferguson.’ And punch lines try to sell, not punch, but cognac. A lavish ad for Hennessy XO Cognac shows a bottle encrusted with fine jewels. The paradox is in the text: ‘It takes 100 painstaking hours to create a half a million pound watch and 300,000 hours to make Hennessy XO.’ Puns are even used now in the service of ecology. West Midlands County Council is running an environmental campaign whose slogan is “Operation Green Up”. The style of much advertising has become playful. Underneath the stylish message may lie the hard sell but this whole style is nicely contradictory. We are playing – and yet trying to persuade.

In 1956, in a classic paper, Bateson anticipated such trends. He pointed out that play was a form of meta-communication. To play cops and robbers, we have to have a double dialogue. If all I say is ‘hand over the money’, you might imagine I really meant it. For it to be a game, I need to preface my aggressive demands with a sign-post like, ‘Let’s play cops and robbers.’ The signpost need not be so literal. Putting on a funny voice or face or a mask will do. Then, you know that what follows is not for real. Bateson’s paper was well in advance of its time. Since 1956, semiotics, the theory of signs, has become very fashionable. Bateson was surprised to find that monkeys could meta-communicate and signal ‘this is play’, which was the title of his paper.

Yet psychologists have tended not to acknowledge fully the historical and cultural influences on play research.
THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

THE ORIGINS OF PLAY AND ‘THE PLAY’

In explaining the origins of play, psychologists draw analogies between human and animal behavior, especially that of primates. Bruner, Jolly and Sylva (1976) in their 700-page selection of writings on play devote nearly a third of the book to animal play. The psychoanalytic tradition gets only one article by Erik Erikson. Though there are a number of short extracts from literary figures like W.H. Auden and Simone de Beauvoir, the editors entirely neglect the tradition which has looked for the origins of play and laughter in drama or ‘the play’. This bias reflects orthodox psychological thinking but it is a pity.

In his Poetics, Aristotle argued that comedy and tragedy sprang from similar religious roots. Both developed out of the improvisations that accompanied religious rites. Comedy, Aristotle suggested, began as a form of prayer. During processions in honour of the god Phales whose emblem was a giant phallus, the ‘worshippers’ larked around. Aristotle believed these improvisations slowly became more formal and established the basis for the comedies that Athens was famous for. Such improvisations suggest that play was not something that only children did but that it might have important connections with very adult activities—such as ritual, prayer and drama.

Aristotle was writing specifically about the origins of comedy rather than origins of play. This was a subject not much discussed even though Greek and Roman children clearly played and had toys. Archaeologists have found, for example, Roman toy soldiers. The Vatican Museum in Rome has a sarcophagus showing Roman boys in a piggyback fight. H.A. Harris in Sports in Greece and Rome (1972) shows that children then took part in a variety of running, jumping and throwing games. In the Odyssey, Nausicaa tosses a ball at one of her maids and misses; the ball falls in the pond and ‘they all shrieked to high heaven’. The great doctor, Galen, described how Greek children made balls out of pigs’ bladders which they blew up. To improve the shape, they rubbed them with warm ashes and sang songs over them. Galen even wrote an early version of the aerobics textbook, Exercise with the Small Ball, in which he suggested that playing ball kept you healthy at all ages. The satirical poet Martial observed that children, and adults, used five different kinds of balls. The early Christian writer Dio Chrysostom talked of a game in which children threw the ball at one another and the one who got hit lost. Plato observed that children who dropped balls were called donkeys.
The philosophical emperor Marcus Aurelius observed that small children could get as obsessive about possessing balls as emperors did about possessing countries. Harris also quotes many references to children playing the game of ‘hoop bowling’. They made the hoops out of the iron frames of wheels and careened along the street with them. Sextus Empiricus noticed that children loved both ball games and hoop bowling. Many of the games described by the Opies (1969) in their catalogue of street games in Britain had parallels in Greek and Roman times, according to Harris.

Ancient children played and, in a haphazard way, authors mentioned it. But no one wrote on play. Plato, who described how clumsy children were called donkeys, did not think that his philosopher-kings needed to play. Silly games of the sort that most children played with their mothers were not for the ruling elite. The neglect of play is interesting given the evidence that children played and given also the many treatises on education. Until Rousseau’s Émile, play did not get a bad press so much as no press at all.

This absence of early comment on play may have lulled psychologists into ignoring its historical and cultural origins. The sources Harris cites also suggest something that we would have found very odd until recently. Children and adults in ancient Greece and Rome played many of the same games. Both these points are crucial to the arguments developed in Homo Ludens. This book by Huizinga was first published in 1946 and it was translated into English in 1949. Despite acquiring the status of a classic, it appears now to be out of print in English. It may be one of those classics which is more quoted than read especially because it does not fit properly into conventional thinking about a subject. In their anthology Bruner, Jolly and Sylva (1976) give a twelve-page extract from Huizinga’s book, far less space than they allow for descriptions of Balinese cockfights, let alone animal play. Huizinga was a historian and attacked the way psychologists and sociologists tackled play. All their hypotheses ‘have one thing in common; they all start from the assumption that play must serve something which is not play, that it must serve some kind of biological purpose’. Huizinga complained that most of these theories ‘only deal incidentally with what play is in itself and what it means for the player’. Measuring how much children played in certain situations, already a familiar form of research when Huizinga was writing, was more important than
THE DEVELOPMENT OF PLAY

‘paying attention to its aesthetic qualities. As a rule they leave the primary quality of play untouched.’

This neglect of the aesthetic made for even more bias. Huizinga deployed a formidable amount of literary, historical and archaeological evidence, from Troy to the troubadours, from Chinese history to Canaan. He used this to develop a surprising argument. Play was not an activity that developed as civilisation became more sophisticated; rather, play was at the heart of the start of civilisation. Since psychologists usually assume that we can explain play by pin-pointing the real activities it prepares the child for, it is worth quoting Huizinga at some length. He said:

The spirit of playful competition is, as a social impulse, older than culture itself and pervades all life like a veritable ferment. Ritual grew up in sacred play; poetry was born in play and nourished on play; music and dancing were pure play. Wisdom and philosophy found expression in words and form derived from religious contests. The rules of warfare, the conventions of noble living were built up on play patterns. We have to conclude, therefore, that civilisation is in its earliest phases played. It does not come from play like a babe detaching itself from the womb; it arises in, and as, play and never leaves it.

Huizinga certainly does not consider animal evidence and, at time, psychologists may be irritated by flights of near-pedantry. Allusions to Norse myths, Sanskrit etymology, boasting contests and Icelandic riddling feats tumble out as does much else that empirical psychology doesn’t usually consider. But the very weight of this evidence makes one wonder why nearly all psychological work on play assumes it has a biological explanation. Couldn’t play be either cultural or, even, truly for its own sake?

Cultural and historical attitudes to play certainly vary though the evidence both of classical texts and of medieval pictures suggest that play is as old as humankind. In his account of the sports of Londoners in the thirteenth century, William Fitzstephens noted that they went into the fields on Sunday afternoons in Lent to have mock fights. The older men used real weapons for unreal fights while ‘the younger sort with pikes from which the iron heads had been taken off and they get up sham fights’. In medieval art, as in the Flemish Hours of The Virgin (c. 1290),

20
A HISTORY OF PLAY

children are shown playing to one side. It is not till the sixteenth century that games became the focus of any pictures, such as a few of Brueghel's. Some artists were well aware of the power of play and comedy—Shakespeare makes much of it both in Hamlet with the players and in King Lear with the Fool who teaches that 'tis folly to be wise'—but nobody considered them sufficiently significant processes to analyse.

Recent work in communications theory has shown neatly how certain subjects are put on the agenda by powerful groups while other subjects are ignored. It is interesting that, as the Renaissance developed, children's play and laughter simply never surfaced as topics. Consider, to get this in perspective, what writers did write about. Erasmus in In Praise of Folly made fun of human unreason. Why could we never be reasonable? A century later, Burton's Melancholy gave a long account of everything that made people miserable and why. Frances Yates in The Art of Memory has shown how men like Giordano Bruno spent years perfecting their memory skills and analysing how they did it. Between Erasmus's writing in 1483 and Rousseau writing Émile in 1759, John Locke, Bishop Berkeley, Leibniz, Spinoza, Thomas Hobbes and David Hume all produced significant treatises on how the adult mind worked and developed its many faculties. Hobbes briefly mentions laughter as 'sudden glory' which is 'those grimaces' we flash when we see someone in worse shape than ourselves. We laugh 'at the imperfections of others'. In the country of the blind, they guffaw at the man who has also lost his leg. The absence of comment on play is striking. Some writers like Philippe Ariès who wrote Centuries of Childhood would not be surprised as he claimed that medieval parents did not treat children as special creatures to be petted and loved. Psychologically, they dared not do so because too many children died. Instead, children were treated as miniature adults. Pollock has recently challenged this view. In Forgotten Children (1984), she reveals many parents did care for their children because their letters and, sometimes, memoirs of a dead child are full of feeling. Pollock found that play did not often surface in the texts and, when it did, it was disapproved of. C. Mather (1663–1728), for example, wrote: 'I am not fond of proposing play to them [children] as a Reward of any diligent application to learn what is good lest they should think Diversion to be a better and noble Thing than Diligence' (Pollock 1984, p. 236). Mather did give his children paints but thought his offspring should have their minds raised 'above the Sillier Diversions

21