

Learning from play

Dr David Elkind explores the concepts of repetition and innovation in play.

Bringing together the concepts of repetition and innovative play, would seem, on the surface at least, to be something of an oxymoron. To make the case that these two activities complement, rather than contradict one another, we need to start with the definitions of play and of work, and then move to their intimate connection with repetition.

Play

In the broadest sense, play is always a transformation of reality in the service of the self. Young infants, for example, transform every object they can grasp into an object to be sucked. Older children may transform a stick and a piece of cloth into a doll or a piece of wood into a boat that floats on a puddle. When playing a board game like checkers, chess or Monopoly, the pieces of each game are transformed and given an importance they would never attain outside of the game. Adults too transform golf balls, tennis balls, footballs and basketballs into objects of great symbolic value. It is important to distinguish transformations of reality from creativity. Creativity always involves a transformation of reality, but not all transformations of reality are creative. In board games and sports, for example, the players adopt pre-established, conventional transformations. Creativity always involves original transformations.

In contrast to play, work is always a transformation of the self in the service of reality. When a child learns to use a spoon to feed himself or herself, this is an adaptation to the demands of society. Learning to wash and dress oneself are also examples of work. Social skills such as listening to, and following instructions, taking turns and

Children need to learn about the real world before they discover the virtual one



quietly standing in line are ways in which the child transforms the self in the service of adapting to society. Acquiring the tool skills of reading, writing and arithmetic are social adaptations. In the same way, moral behaviors such as telling the truth and not taking things which don't belong to you are other examples of work, of transforming ourselves to meet the

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demands of the larger society.

Although we tend to think of work and play as in opposition to one another, they are most effective when they are brought together. Therein lies the genius of the Montessori curriculum materials. The Geometric Cabinet, for example, brings together both play and work. The child must mentally transform the Geometric Tray, and the pieces to be placed within it, into a problem to be solved, the play component. Positioning the pieces into their proper places is the adaptation to reality, the work component. By bringing together materials which unite work and play Dr Montessori was able to mobilize the child's personal motivation for engagement in social

adaptation. I believe that this is what Montessori had in mind when she said that "Play is the child's work." It is not that play and work are identical, as it is sometimes misunderstood, but rather that play should be the motivation for the child's work.

Repetition and Innovation

Montessori's integration of play and work helps to explain an apparent paradox when children are engaged with her materials. Many of the activities seem to be simply repetitive and leave little room for transformations of reality, for play.

Consider the following example given by Montessori:

"I then decided to see how concentrated she was in her strange employment. I told the teacher to have the other children sing and march around her. But this did not disturb the child at all in her labors. I then gently picked up the little chair in which she was sitting and set it on a small table. As I lifted the chair she clutched the objects with which she was working and placed them on her knees, but then continued with the same task. From time to time I began to count; she repeated the exercise forty two times. Then she stopped as if coming out of a dream and smiled happily. Her eyes shone brightly and she looked about her. She had not even noticed