

EDUCATION

Let kids rule the playground

OPINION JUNE FACTOR

For children, the entire point of playing is playing, not its outcome.

THE consistent aversion of the child to carefully established reality is universal."

Thus wrote the Russian poet Korney Chukovsky in the 1920s — and he was right. Children spend a great deal of their play time turning reality upside down.

*Ladies and jellypoons
I come before you
To stand behind you
To tell you something
I know nothing about.*

*On Monday
Which will be Good Friday
There is a Mothers' meeting
For Fathers only.
Patience is free
Bring your own chairs
And sit on the floor!*

Children can be Marians, emperors and aeroplanes. They have imaginary friends, and talk happily to their dolls. They are fluent speakers of Pig Latin and other secret languages, perform elaborate rituals to select the "He" in a game, and know innumerable jokes and riddles and an array of child-adapted verse:

*Mary had a little lamb,
Her father shot it dead,
And now it goes to school with her
Between two chunks of bread.
Girls are sexy, made out of Pepsi.
Boys are rotten, made out of cotton.*

Girls go to the gym to get more slim.
Boys go to rugby to get more ugly.
This is a subculture that mocks as well as mimics. The play with



language — the deliberate subversion of adult-provided patterns and concepts — paradoxically strengthens children's understanding of the language, and of the culture in which it exists.

By deliberately breaking the rules, children reinforce their mastery. They are not just receivers of knowledge but manipulators and creators of it.

Everything is possible in play. It is an arena unfettered by gravity, time or the limitations of childhood. The Polish writer Bruno Schulz observed that for children, "there is no dead matter. Lifelessness is only a disguise behind which hide unknown forms of life."

In voluntary play, children make the rules and organise the activities. They inherit play traditions and retain or alter them at will. In the contemporary world, where children increasingly control less and less, this is one area where they are the experts and the masters.

By deliberately breaking the rules, children reinforce their mastery.

We have all seen children, and yet we forget the importance of play in our young lives. Or we disregard children's play because it can't be significant. What do children know? Worst of all, we may attempt to control and direct it.

That is happening increasingly in

primary schools. Teachers, fearful of the threat of litigation should a child be hurt while playing, are saying "don't" to games that involve running, or throwing balls, or hiding, or climbing. In some schools, marbles have been banned — all that swapping and arguing about how many Cat's Eyes should be handed over for a fast Tom Bowler causes "trouble".

In parts of the US it is even

worse. Whole school districts have abolished recess — because play is regarded as a useless activity. A few years ago the Atlanta public school districts eliminated recess in elementary schools as "a waste of time that would be better spent" on school work. According to the Atlanta

superintendent of schools, "We are intent on improving academic performance. You don't do that by having kids hanging on the monkey bars."

Other American schools have established "socialised recess", where children are required to take part in structured, monitored activities invented and directed by adults. What would a visiting Marian think of us? There are newspaper editorials and countless articles written about the dangers of children being overweight — and children are stopped from playing their energetic games. The government throws money at organised sport as a solution.

But adult sports are competitive and skill-based.

However kindly and patient the instructors, many children dread their failure to catch, or run fast, or kick straight. They know they will be last to be picked for a team. And some dread the looks of pity or contempt when they appear in shorts. They will do what they are forced to, and escape as quickly as they can.

By contrast, the play children undertake voluntarily is collaborative far more than competitive. Part of the folklore of childhood that stretches back beyond memory, it allows for different levels of skill, and adapts the rules of a game to suit the participants.

In a school in Brisbane some years ago, the boys played a game they called "non-stop cricket". The players, using a rubbish tin for a wicket and a tennis ball, happily changed the rules to vary the length of the pitch: when the game slowed down because a batter was hard to get out, they made the pitch longer. It kept the game interesting, and was fairer to all players. Such playful adaptations of adult games can be found in schools across the country.

Maintaining the continuity of play is a central goal. That was made clear to me by a group of seven and eight-year-old boys I observed playing marbles at a school in Clifton Hill. I asked: "What happens if one player is so good he wins everyone else's marbles?"

"We have a rule for that," they said.

"What's the rule?"
"He has to put six marbles back into the tin, so the game goes on."

Having children of my own, I thought to ask another question:

"And what if he won it?"

"We have a rule for that."

"What's the rule?"

"We take the six marbles out of his pocket."

For these children there was an even higher purpose than winning: the continuation of the game. Play is its own reward.

June Factor is an honorary senior research fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her latest children's folklore collection is *Okay Dokey Karaoke!*.

'What goes on outside in the playground is as important as what goes on in the classroom' — LETTERS, page 14

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