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Girls go to the gym to get more

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This is a subculture that mocks as well as mimics. The play with

language — the deliberate subversion of adult-provided patterns are 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. We have all been 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 aftempt to control and direct 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." their mastery. children reinforce breaking the rules, By deliberately

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".

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 regarded as a useless activity. A few years ago the Atlanta public school districts eliminated recess in elementary school. In parts of the US it is even worse. Whole school districts have

Other American schools have blished "socialised recess",

established "socialised recess", where children are required to take part in structured, monitored activities invented and directed by adults.

What would a visiting Martian 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 sol-

ution. But adult sports are competitive and skill-based. However kindly and patient the instructors, many children dread d escape as quickly as they can.
By contrast, the play children
dertake voluntarily is collaborative k straight. They know they will be

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 meresting, and was fairer to all players. Such playfield hadaptations of adult games can be found in schools across the

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 Cliffon Hill. I asked: "What happens if one player is so good he wins everyone else's marbles?"

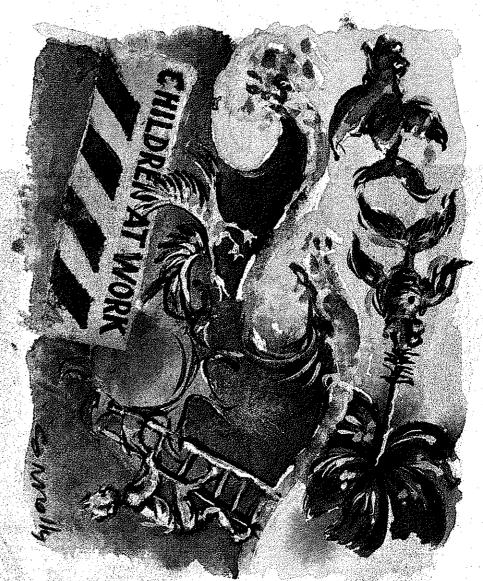
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"He has to put six marbles back into the ring, so the game goes on. Having children of my own, I thought to ask another question. What's the rule?"

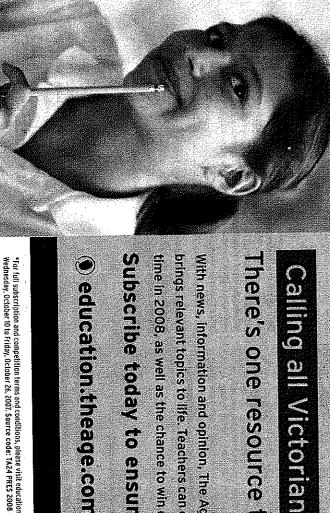
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the continuation of the game. Play its own reward. or these children there was an

June Factor is an honorary senior research fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her latest children's folklore collection is Okey Dokey Karaokel.



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



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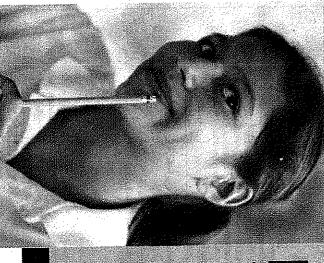
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For these children there was an even higher purpose than winning: the continuation of the game. Play is its own reward.

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