

Construction of Play

A. The general course of events:

- 1 **Action.** First one gets into it. You pick up the materials. Observe. Grab a pile of pieces. Click pieces together until some idea forms. (After some discussion it becomes apparent that we had to make a distinction when play actually starts. Some people said that when they are thinking and watching they are playing. Others disagreed. Because we were working on a definition of play that we could apply to watching others, we agreed that play doesn't start until an action starts. Thinking is not a part of observable play.)
- 2 **Intention.** Then a plan, a thought, or intention emerges that focuses action: a decision to make something happen. Could be collecting the blue ones or attaching as many sticks as one can to a ring, make a pair of eyeglasses, necklace, or something large, etc.
- 3 **Adapt and Refine.** Gradually a new phase emerges. In implementing an intention we run into problems. The reality of the materials at hand creates a series of difficulties, like how to make not fall over, or how to get it to actually look like a horse, etc. What results in early tries doesn't match the early vision. One can creatively problem-solve to make it better, adapt the intention to the constraints, or change the idea. If the problems are solved and conditions are right, the construction gradually involves more people and becomes embellished, elaborated upon, and refined.

B. Positive Social Forces

- Conversations commence. People comment on what others are doing. Laughter. Socializing gab establishes friendships. They share thoughts and experiences and get to know others because defenses are down and one is more naturally spontaneous. People come out of their shells in this new relaxed space. It's fun and goofy at times. Joking. Spreads to others. Busy. Talkative. Interactive. It gets loud.
- Watching what others do. Copying ideas, Looking at what others do is fun. Other's actions and comments received from them generate ideas.
- Hearing positive comments about one's work.
- Sharing. Combining. Cooperation. Other's reactions, their contributions, and their variations extend the play longer and make it more interesting and engaging. This positive energy feeds that Adapt and Refine phase of play.

C. The Dark Side

- People compare their own work with that of others and often judge what others do as better and their own negatively. Jealousy. One's apparent ability to be clever is revealed for the world to see. *"Her's is better than mine."* *"I wish I could do that."*
- Negative judgments about oneself are easy for many people to make heightening sensitivity to even implied criticism. *"I am really bad at..."* *"I don't want to..."* *"This is not for me."* *"She doesn't like my idea."*
- One plays at the edge of one's competence in a state of vulnerability. People bring a tendency to avoid risk or exposure. Pressure to produce. Pressure to justify self and try to look good.
- Putdowns and ridicule hurt; so does having others not respond. Fear can lead to passivity or disengagement.
- Certain resources become important to obtain in order to carry out one's intention. Materials are hoarded, grabbed, competed for.
- Destruction of one's work.
- Being told what to do.
- Being stopped too soon.

Reflective Discussion

- Positive social forces maintain the life of play. Synergy fuels the fire and gives play the energy that sustains it through difficulties.
- Play is fragile: a dump of water and the heat is gone.
- Play can fall apart at any time, during phase two, or even right at phase one and never reach phase three.
- Play consists of being spontaneous, present, and doing new things. Repeating old ways, isn't play, because it lacks joy.
- Play may be delicate in the beginning, but under the right conditions it offers strong, determined dynamism, synergy, and creativity. It offers the best that humans can be.

Conditions That Foster Play

Physical Conditions

Physical Safety: the environment is free from dangers

Space: sufficient space is available that is open and adaptable so it can be altered as play develops

Time: long enough periods of time each day, as well as opportunities to extend work across days

Materials: in quantity, offering hands on experience, made accessible and visible, in variety, open-ended to be used in many ways, and aesthetic

Physical Well-being: spaces are warm and lighted and furniture is of a comfortable size for children who are well fed and well rested

Leadership and Facilitation

- **Offer freedom.**
- **Observe without impinging** on what is happening, being present with little, if any, involvement, documenting by writing down what children say, taking photographs and video of significant developments to reshoot at a group meeting time.
- **Be enthusiastic;** model positive energy; recognize events of cooperation and perseverance.
- **Recognize initiative:** narrate inventiveness; make intrinsically phrased remarks, such as tricky or clever.
- **Maintain clear, consistent boundaries and expectations,** established beforehand. If new problems arise that must be dealt with, honor the children's input and negotiate new boundaries and expectations in a community meeting.
- **Trust children to fix their own mistakes.**