

## Winning

What is winning? In all sports there is a victory to be gained, but does that victory depend on the outcome of the event?

This article is not a smarmy comment on sportsmanship, nor a defense of trivial euphemisms like “winning isn’t everything.” In fact, winning is everything. The question that’s never asked, especially about sports and children, is “What is the prize? What is the real payoff for the participant?”

The answers—yes, there are several answers and I am fairly certain that they will surprise you—can only be known when the needs and aspirations of the children are understood. Winning means different things to children of different ages. If the adult’s agenda of winning and losing is imposed the learning available will be missed. Everyone loses.

So take a walk with me through the eyes of the child as they play games. By the end we will see that every game can be a significant win. And as parents and coaches, we will have the satisfaction of doing our job very well, indeed.

George Bernard Shaw, a most perceptive and serious man, said, “We do not stop playing because we grow old, we grow old because we stop playing.” And several brilliant anthropologists and psychologists have suggested that rather than naming our species *homo sapiens*, (the being who knows), we should be called *homo ludens*, (the being who plays). In other words, play is natural; it is inherent in us. Successful play is critical to happiness and to life long learning.

Why do we play? The answer is simple: to learn. Play, as the renowned child developmentalist Jean Piaget said, is for the pleasure of mastery. Margaret Lowenfeld, writing in 1967 as the psychological director of the Institute of Child Psychology in London, points out that play is critical to emotional maturity. Adults who lack this maturity often play in harsh and aggressive ways and most important, mistake the game for reality.

It is of great importance that play allows us to represent ourselves unbound by mundane constraints. Plato believed that humans were God’s playthings and that is what made us good. Vedanta, the philosophical foundation of Hinduism, speaks of *lila*, meaning that life is God’s play. Some philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, saw the basic dynamics of the universe as a form of play. Play allows us to connect with the whole of ourselves and our world. It is the natural movement of non-alienated people, an expression of health and, given full support, a way to optimal learning and well-being.

While play has numerous definitions in every culture, there are surprising similarities in the way it is understood. For example, play is often seen as a necessary contributor to the development of character. The act of playing is spontaneous, and play itself is an

aesthetic expression. Play is never confined to a specific age group, although it is well recognized that age helps determine the way people play.

When your child plays there is so much at stake. They are expressing their profound nature. They are developing character. They are learning about themselves and the world. They are engaging their culture and redefining it by how they express themselves as players.

What does play mean to different age children? And how can every game event be a win—be a learning moment in which character develops, self knowledge increases, social skills improve; one in which families and teams bond, in which the ethics and aesthetics of the culture grow? This is winning and it transcends the score of any event.

Children below age eight play in order to map their world. They are deciphering the physical and social landscape which they inhabit. They need to know where it's safe so that they can explore and learn. Most importantly, they need to know their place in this world. Where and with whom do I belong? And how is this world shaped so that I can know my Rightful Place?

For children of this age, the primary information is received through the mode of sensation. The cognitive psychologist and pediatrician Daniel Stern makes the point that the synthesis of the senses creates a perceptual mode that is beyond the value and meaning of any one sense. As Stern attempts to describe the social and interpersonal world of the young child, he emphasizes that this unity of the senses is what allows affective (emotional) states to be commonly shared by parent and child. Children hone in on the underlying sensorial dimensions of intensity, time, and shape and then move toward pleasant sensations and away from unpleasant ones. These two qualities of sensory perception—that it occurs as a whole and that she seeks the pleasant and avoids the unpleasant—become the tools by which the child maps the world.

Mapping their world is a delightful game for the child. Everything, including and especially words, are toys for the child. Rules have little meaning. Play is to learn the topography and their place in it. A good example of this happened in our Family Camp program.

On the morning of the sixth day of camp, I happened to meet three year-old Heidi near the water cooler at the end of breakfast. She greeted me with a smile and, as so many young children are wont to do, ran away with a giggle while looking back over her shoulder—an unmistakable invitation to chase her. I ran, she ran, and after three steps she stopped abruptly, raised her hand with the palm facing me, and commanded me to *stop*. I did. She turned to run, looking back invitingly, and I chased her again. This time she let me come much closer and then turned with the same voice command, but abandoned the hand gesture. I stopped. She ran far ahead and then repeated the game.

A cocoon seemed to envelop us. Her body was completely relaxed, her eyes were bright, and her attention was focused. We played many times, with Heidi varying the distances dramatically each time. She played with the boundaries continuously. Sometimes I could reach out and touch her; other times she was twenty yards away. She modulated the volume and intensity of her voice—sometimes it was loud and commanding, other times soft and insistent. She tried to talk as quietly as possible, barely mouthing the word, and was delighted when I stopped. Other times she shouted as loudly as she could, hardly stopping to notice if I responded.

Heidi was shaping the space, creating boundaries with a carefree wisdom. Other parents were watching our antics, and several of them knew that in that moment Heidi realized the importance of words for defining her place. Knowledge had emerged in her and for all to see about her innate capacities of language, boundary creation and a playful supportive relationship. The entire event was organized to optimize her Rightful Place. The event was mediated within sensory perception. If her parents continue to play with words, they will likely facilitate a lifelong appreciation of the many uses of language.

From Heidi's perspective, nothing unusual or special occurred. She played, and the learning was effortless.

A major developmental transition occurs between eight and nine and often leads to confusion for both parent and child. The relationships in the child's social world become paramount. New capacities for feeling the feelings of himself and others flood the child. He needs to know what trust is. Community and friendship take on much, much greater importance. During this transition children will often be awkward in their social interactions. Many will have difficulty with team sports out of concern for the feelings of others. I know of one champion T ball player who quit the team because he was uncomfortable with the reactions of the players when he hit home run after home run. These feelings are new for the child. Watching the deep expressions of loss and confusion when the score is against their friend can be very dismaying.

The next five years, from 9 to 13, will be spent learning the social and interpersonal rules, with discerning who is trustworthy, and with deciphering her feelings and the feelings of others. Rules become very important for the child realizes they are the way society organizes itself. Cheating of any sort violates the child's sense of fairness and her trust in her world.

Team sports are very important. They are microcosms of society. They are a critical place in which rules are learned and which character develops. Everything in the game and everything that surrounds the game—including the behavior of family and friends, the rituals before and after the game such as putting on the uniform or going for pizza, and especially, the way that each person interacts with one another--informs the child of our social values and the importance we attach to relationship. Act like a cur and you are saying that the rule of society supports curs. Act like a responsible, relational, respectful,

caring human and you reinforce all that is great about family, extended family, community, team and social world.

The enjoyment of playing as a team should be the center of play. Loss of the game is an opportunity to explore the feelings of loss. Children can quickly learn that losing a game does not mean they lose self esteem. They learn that the friendships they develop carry great meaning. They know there is another game. They love to learn in games as long as the winning is about camaraderie and relationship. Patient parents and coaches help them work on improving their skills, but never at the expense of human support and companionship. Gratefulness for the opportunity to play together leads to strong communities.

There is an important place in these years for Cooperative Games and Activities. Growing in popularity in the last decade, these exciting and engaging games bring boys and girls together and allow children of varying skill levels to appreciate and enjoy one another. They are used increasingly in classrooms to promote interpersonal skill building, to enhance self esteem and for academic excellence. They are excellent for building team spirit and cohesiveness.

It all changes in the teen years. Rather than relationship, the importance of games is that they encapsulate situations of life, which means that they include ambiguities, mystery, confusion, and unpredictability. Each of these is fraught with tensions. Will there be success or failure? A greatness of play is that players have the opportunity to participate in the tensions of the game, unencumbered by any boundaries except those that are accepted voluntarily. Play occupies its own space and in that space teenagers learn about bringing order to a world teeming with contradictions, urges, and nothing less than the need for a new definition of who they are.

Again, the transition years of approximately 13 and 14 are difficult for both parent and child. Stepping away from being embedded in family and community, the child organizes their world to self govern, to find their identity. Games take on the new meaning of exploration and expression of self. They are an ordeal in which autonomy is discovered. Games are intended to bring forth honor and nobility.

Discovering honor and nobility in oneself is critical to a happy and successful life. Honor and nobility morally confirm the right to be free and to choose. They confirm the willingness and capability to be responsible. They confirm that the ordeal has been successfully met and that order can be created.

The field of play is unimportant. Sports, academics, peer relations, problem solving, the arts, crafts, and many other challenging, focused endeavors can be the fields of playful discovery. But when the honor and nobility are subverted, autonomy is thwarted. The enemy is taunted, not respected. Addiction to individual glory saturates the psyche and all that counts is the next fix. Teens never grow up.

I recall trying out for high school football team. Like many children who have watched football on television the call to glory was irresistible. And then came the first real hit from another player. I knew then that I didn't want to have these violent collisions as part of my everyday life. Unfortunately I had no coach to help me understand that this was simply not who I was and to help me find those engagements in which I could be victorious and bring order to my life by providing the opportunity for expression of my competence and skill. Such an opportunity is desperately needed by the teen as she copes with the insecurity of autonomy and identity exploration.

Perhaps you can see that the psychology of play is the dominant learning during the teen years. Attitude is everything. If the exploration of attitude between coach or parent and teen supports self discovery then everyone wins. If that exploration is only to score more points then the opportunity to learn self government is lost. No child should be shamed for playing and every teen should be encouraged to keep playing until they find the game which matches their sense of self and in which they will flourish. Greatness is finding and expressing your gifts and talents and has little to do with fulfilling agendas imposed by others, no matter how glitzy the social rewards may be.

Children change radically in the 17-18 range. There is no room in this article to describe what play and games are to people in their late teens and twenties, nor how adults play throughout life. But as George Bernard Shaw pointed out we either play or ossify. And whether we continue to play throughout life depends upon whether we won, in the real sense of winning, when we played as children.