

Commentary: Coronavirus Restrictions as Opportunities for Children's Play

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For many years I have been observing and writing about children's play and its great importance for their healthy development (1988, 2013, 2015). More recently, however, I have discussed my deep concerns about how many of today's children have lost the time and space to play independently, and I have speculated about the potential negative effects of this loss of self-designed, extended-time play that most children in the past experienced [1,2]. This is because many children today are often "scheduled" extensively. In addition to daycare, preschool, and school time, the rest of their time usually also is filled with structured activities. During the past few months, however, as restrictions on families have been imposed in an attempt to stop the extensive spread of the coronavirus, many of the typically scheduled activities of children, which are adult planned and controlled (e.g. school, sports, music/art lessons, etc.) have not been available to them.

There is much evidence that when adults are asked to remember their childhood play experiences, they typically and easily recall some type of pretense or game-like play that they engaged in either in their basement, in a private room, or outside [3-5]. The most interesting aspects of such play is that it tended to be child motivated and controlled, occurred over extended time periods, and was engaged in without supervision, direction, or often even the knowledge of the adults in their lives. Although during this pandemic the adults in children's lives have probably planned and supervised some of their at-home time, with online school lessons, new/special activities, video games, and other types of "entertainment", I think many children may have had a significant amount of "down time" during which the adults have had their own activities in which to engage, and thus, they could not be managing all of their children's time. That is, many children may have had their

first opportunity to experience longer periods of time either alone or with siblings of different ages in which the children had to "find something to do".

Not only may they have had to engage in some type of self-chosen activity, but they also may have had to think about and decide what type of activity to engage in during these non-adult-directed time periods. They may have had to decide on activity themes (e.g. building "castles", "fighting fires", "cooking dinner", "teaching school"), get the materials they needed, decide on roles to take, plan scripts for behavior, and engage either siblings, stuffed animals, dolls, or pets in the activity. Or they may have had to invent games to play with younger siblings (for example, small car races; five-turn checkers). Typically, such types of activity in the past were called "play".

Finding one's own play activities, even in the confines of bedroom or balcony is completely possible, as examples from the lives of my own children and grandchildren can illustrate. One of my children played board games with her "Doggy" when her older siblings were at school by "helping" Doggy with his turns (she usually won!). My grandson played solitary games of basket-baseball with a wash-basket hung over his bedroom door, keeping scores for the imaginary "teams". Another grandson and granddaughter created elaborate block houses and towns and played out many "scripts" with their small figures who lived there (and even wrote down many of these scripts!). At elementary age, my children often played "school" and they also planned, rehearsed, and performed many "plays", with their family members as an appreciative audience. Planning and creating such plays took up many hours of time.

At the beginning of this recent isolation period, since children may not have been used to engaging in self-directed and imaginative activity, they may have whined and complained to the adults about “not knowing what to do,” especially if they have been used to relying on adult-designed computer games or television shows. However, during this at home time, if the adults had other responsibilities such as “working at home” on their regular job responsibilities, they may have made a few suggestions but been more likely to tell their children that they should just “find something to do”. That is, of course what parents in the past often said to their children when they were busy or just engaged in some activity that the parent wanted to do, since parents in the past did not really feel that it was their responsibility to plan every moment of their children's lives.

It is my hope that one of the unexpected positive aspects of having this very unusual experience for today's children may be that they have at last had some extended times for self-directed play, which has always been one of the most important activities of childhood. There is evidence that the relatively private “small worlds” play of childhood has often been the catalyst for extending human creativity, empathy, and purpose [6,7]. Play enables humans to find the resources they need to cope with unexpected and even frightening events and to find solutions to problems, no matter what their source [8]. Although there are many terrifying and discouraging aspects of our present situation, perhaps there will be some positive aspects of children's “stay at home” time, and one of them will be that they finally had time for child-directed play. I think that the children who have had to rely on their own imaginative, playful, and creative resources during this frightening and uncertain time will be more able to meet whatever challenges the future may bring. They may even bring a more playful perspective to dealing with life's unexpected problems and that special perspective will be helpful in enabling our species to survive whatever other unexpected crises or pandemics may occur in the future [9,10].

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