

Leave those kids alone

The idea that adults should be playing with their kids is a modern invention -- and not necessarily a good one



(Illustration/ Aaron Meshon)

By Christopher Shea | July 15, 2007

WHAT COULD BE more natural than a mother down on the rec-room floor, playing with her 3-year-old amid puzzles, finger-puppets, and Thomas the Tank Engine trains? Look -- now she's conducting a conversation between a stuffed shark and Nemo, the Pixar clown fish! Giggles all around. Not to mention that the tot is learning the joys of stories and narrative, setting him on a triumphal path toward school.

A "natural" scene? Actually, parent-child play of this sort has been virtually unheard of throughout human history, according to the anthropologist David Lancy. And three-fourths of the world's current population would still find that mother's behavior kind of dotty.

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"Adults think it is silly to play with children" in most cultures, says Lancy, who teaches at Utah State University. Play is a cultural universal, he concedes, "but adults aren't part of the picture." Yet middle-class and upper-middle-class Americans -- abetted, he says, by psychologists -- are increasingly proclaiming the parents-on-all-fours style the One True Way to raise a smart, well-adjusted child.

There is now a concerted effort to spread adult-child play beyond its stronghold in the upper- and middle-classes of wealthy countries. To this end, many cities and states support programs of some sort. Massachusetts will give the Parent-Child Home Program, which has 33 sites in the state, \$3 million this year (up from \$2 million last year). Through the program, staff members visit the homes of low-income residents and offer tips not just on good books for toddlers but also on "play activities" for parents and kids. Likewise, the eminent Yale psychologist Jerome Singer has partnered with a media company to devise imaginative parent-child games (examples: "My Magic

Story Car" and "Puppets: Counting") that librarians and social workers can teach to low-income parents.

Lancy is concerned that specialists behind the movement -- psychologists, social workers, preschool teachers -- are too aggressively promoting this intense, interventionist parenting style to low-income parents, and that they are too quick to claim that adult-child play is crucial for human development. He doesn't quite rule out that some interventions may improve literacy -- though the data are murkier than the psychologists admit, he insists. But the programs, with their premise (as he sees it) that a whole class of people is simply parenting badly, leave their advocates "open to charges of racism or cultural imperialism."

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One inspiration for the article, Lancy says, was that he kept coming across accounts of parents who felt guilty that they did not enjoy playing with their children. The psychologist Daniel Kahneman and the economist Alan Krueger, both at Princeton, have found that parents routinely claim that playing with their kids is among their favorite activities, but when you ask them to record their state of mind, hour by hour, they rate time spent with their children as being about as much fun as housework.

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In his article, Lancy draws on decades of ethnographic work to show how rare parent-child play has been in the world. The Harvard anthropologist Robert LeVine, for example, observed in a 2004 paper that among the Gusii people of Kenya, "mothers rarely looked at or spoke to their infants and toddlers, even when they were holding and breast-feeding them." (So much for the universality of peek-a-boo.) On Ifaluk Island, in the South Pacific, tribespeople believe that babies are "essentially brainless" before age 2, so there is no point in talking to them.

The goal of the Yucatec Maya is to keep babies in a "kind of benign coma," through bathing and swaddling, so that parents can leave them and get work done. As recently as 1914, the US Department of Labor's Child Bureau advised parents not to play with babies, for fear of overstimulating their little nervous systems.

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To be sure, there are exceptions. Some African foraging tribes display striking examples of parental playfulness. And the Inuit make toys for their toddlers and get goofy -- but they're cooped up for months at a time in igloos, bored witless. Lancy suggests that the American milieu -- caregivers stuck, without a community, in oversized homes -- is not entirely dissimilar.

Alison Gopnik, a developmental psychologist at Berkeley, agrees with parts of Lancy's argument: In much of the world, parents are unlikely to be the main caregivers, and Americans go overboard with structured parent-child play which has explicit academic goals. But she says that Lancy vastly understates the interactions between parents and children. In many cultures, mothers hold their babies much, much more than American mothers do, and holding and cuddling a child can be as stimulating and playful as peek-a-boo, she says.

"The fact that non-Western parents do not interact with their babies like Western parents doesn't mean they aren't interacting with them," Gopnik says.

And if African children learn from older siblings how to use a bow-and-arrow in a playful way, she asks, how different is that from American parents (or nannies) playfully teaching kids practices useful in American culture, such as verbal agility?

Tribal practices aside, the real source of contention is what sort of child-rearing advice low-income Americans should be receiving from social workers, psychologists, and other people interested in improving the academic readiness of poor kids. Yale's Singer, co-author (with his wife, Dorothy) of "The House of Make-Believe: Children's Play and the Developing Imagination" (1990), says his data show that children who played versions of "My Magic Story Car," in which a parent pretends to drive with the kids to various locations, having adventures along the way (with a subtle vocab lesson or two thrown in), do better on literacy tests than their peers.

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"I'm not clear what's bothering this guy," he says, referring to Lancy. "We are not talking about the parents playing all day long with the children. We're just saying that children need to play, and particular kinds of play -- imaginative play that has a storytelling element to it -- are very useful" in our culture.

Still, the proselytizing on behalf of playful middle-class approaches vexes many anthropologists. A crystallizing moment for their concern came with the publication of a lengthy article in The New York Times Magazine last November by Paul Tough, an editor at the magazine, on efforts by some educators to erase cultural differences between low-income and middle-class students. Tough leaned on the work of the University of Maryland sociologist Annette Lareau, who has described the dominant middle- and upper-middle-class parenting style as one of "concerted cultivation": scheduled time, interactive banter and play, and the encouragement of the child to challenge the parent's opinions. In contrast, she summarizes the low-income parents' approach as "the accomplishment of natural growth": less direct involvement with the kids, more unsupervised play, and more enforcement of rules.

More controversial than the sociological work was Tough's summary -- that poor parents fail to deliver "everyday intellectual and emotional stimuli" or to impart "character," "self-control, adaptability, patience, and openness."

Mica Pollock, an associate professor at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, says it's one thing to encourage low-income parents to read to their kids or tell them stories. But "it's a huge and dangerous overstatement to say that low-income parents don't stimulate their children." In fact, some research, she says, suggests that the approach used by some low-income parents teaches virtues such as patience and adaptability better than more freewheeling parenting styles. And let's not idealize middle-class kids: "Some of those children are being raised to be spoiled, demanding, requiring constant adult attention, and inclined to argue with their parents," Pollock says.

This debate is unlikely to sway the convictions of the pro-play crowd. Stevanne Auerbach, the author of "Smart Play, Smart Toys: How to Raise a Child with a High PQ" -- play quotient -- says her goal is to "encourage parents to understand that they are their children's first big toy." But for the parents not energized by the prospect of all those hours in the playroom -- parents who would rather be doing something else -- Lancy's article offers the solace that comes from knowing you're not alone, globally or historically. Goodbye Thomas the Tank Engine, hello sports pages?

Christopher Shea's column appears biweekly in Ideas. E-mail criticalfaculties@verizon.net ■

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