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Sand Play Is More than Child’s Play
According to Latest American Journal of Play

ROCHESTER, NY—Sand play is more than just child’s play. Sand—whether dry, wet, or by contrasting with mud—provides an open-ended vehicle for human play, but it can also be a symbolic material for exploring topics of creativity, fear, gender, culture, purity, and more according to Jay Mechling, professor emeritus at the University of California, Davis. In the latest issue of The Strong’s American Journal of Play (http://www.journalofplay.org), Mechling uses sand play to explore some of the social and psychological anxieties and questions that people face.

Mechling says that people are drawn naturally to sand because it’s a largely sensual experience, but he argues that simple, playful acts like burying oneself in sand reveal greater psychological complexity at work. He posits that being buried in sand provides reassurance on one hand (the weight of the warm, dry sand feels good and can be used therapeutically to calm a person), but that it also leads to a feeling of helplessness (and by extension fears about death). That helplessness provides its own form of pleasure, though. Mechling says that people like to be slightly, pleasurably scared, whether by being buried in sand or by watching horror movies, because it may tap into an older, more primitive part of the brain.

Adding water to sand creates more play opportunities and releases sand’s abilities as a construction material. Here, sand play starts to reveal gender patterns, Mechling says. During his observations at the beach over a five-year period, he noted that boys and girls displayed differing patterns in their sand construction which reveal “the convergence of biological, psychological, and cultural forces in the play of children.”

Mud (which Mechling distinguishes from clean, wet sand at the beach) prompts questions about cleanliness and dirtiness, and purity and pollution. Mechling notes the similarities between mud and feces, and argues its similarity in look and feel is part of what makes playing with mud so titillating and stimulating. He says, “…it seems clear that play with mud is the richest form of ‘sandwork,’ tapping the full range of psychological and social anxieties and addressing those anxieties directly through play.”

Additional articles in Vol. 9, No. 1 of the American Journal of Play (http://www.journalofplay.org) include:

“Free Choice or Adaptable Choice: Self-Determination Theory and Play” by Peter King, lecturer at Swansea University in Wales, and Justine Howard, associate professor at Swansea University. The authors investigate Self-Determination Theory—which is based on the tenets of competence, relatedness, and autonomy—and question whether or not free choice is required for children to consider themselves at play. They explore the idea that play does not need to be freely chosen and conclude that children’s level of choice must be adaptable.

“Mental Recreation in Wonderland,” by Kate Pendlebury, author and PhD in children’s literature. Pendlebury argues that children’s books provide “mental recreation” and learning opportunities through play. Using Alice and Wonderland by Lewis Carroll as an example, she analyzes the important lessons taught by juvenile literature. She posits that Alice in Wonderland and similar books teach things that cannot always be learned in a classroom—such as play with logic, language, and questions without answers.

“Playing with Ideas: An Interview with Lou Marinoff.” The American Journal of Play editorial team interviews Lou Marinoff, professor of philosophy at the City College of New York, about his “playful approach to philosophy; the rise of humorlessness and the decline of hilarity; censorship; virtue; and the counseling profession he helped invent—philosophical practitioner.”

The complete issue of the American Journal of Play can be accessed freely online at www.journalofplay.org (http://www.journalofplay.org). Printed editions are also available for subscription and single copy purchase.
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The Strong’s American Journal of Play is a peer-reviewed, interdisciplinary publication that serves as a forum for discussing the history, science, and culture of play. Published three times each year, the Journal includes articles, interviews, and book reviews written for a broad readership that includes educators, psychologists, play therapists, sociologists, anthropologists, folklorists, historians, museum professionals, toy and game designers, policy makers, and others who consider play for a variety of reasons and from various perspectives.