The Case for Make-Believe: Saving Play in a Commercialized World

Susan Linn

New York: The New Press, 2008. Suggested readings, notes. 231pp. $24.95 cloth. ISBN: 9781565849709

On reading the title of Susan Linn's new book, one might well ask: Why does anyone have to make the case for the benefits of make-believe play? More than a century ago, in his analysis of Little Hans, Sigmund Freud demonstrated how a child's make-believe could serve a therapeutic purpose. Since Freud's time, play therapy has become the most frequently used technique in the child psychiatrist's, and child clinical psychologist's, toolbox. More recently, Bruno Bettleheim in *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) took the benefits of fantasy outside of the clinic. He made a powerful argument for the role of fairy tales in the healthy development of all children. But times have changed, and with today's emphasis on academic achievement, testing, and accountability, play and fantasy are under attack as a waste of time and a luxury we simply cannot afford in this high-tech, global economy.

In response to the attacks on play—including the elimination of recess in large numbers of elementary schools—a small library of new books have addressed the importance of spontaneous, self-initiated play and fantasy. These books also point to the many factors currently encroaching on children's time for play. These include television, computer games, organized sports, and a focus on consumerism. In addition, Sharna Olfman's *All Work and No Play* (2003) highlights the way in which educational reforms are sidelining play in our schools. Vivian Gussin Paley's most recent book, *A Child's Work* (2005) argues that play is even being squeezed out of the early childhood curriculum. A number of other books, including my own, *The Power of Play* (2007), have also made the case for the importance of play while emphasizing that fantasy and make-believe are being increasingly silenced in our contemporary society.

In many respects, Linn echoes some of the same concerns of these authors in *The Case for Make-Believe*. What is unique about her approach is that she revisits Freud and the therapeutic use of play. Linn is a renowned puppeteer who has used her artistry to help troubled children. In this book, she gives many intriguing case histories of children who have been helped by engaging in fantasy play with puppets. Linn, however, goes beyond the therapeutic use of make-believe and argues for the importance of play in normal development. She also contends, as do the others, that engaging in fantasy play in childhood contributes to creativity and innovation in adulthood.

I have given only a few examples of the current outpouring of books that make the case for the importance of play in child development and that document the increasing disappearance of fantasy and make-believe from our homes and schools. Experts and journalists agree on the importance of play and on the forces at work that are bringing about its demise. But we are short on viable solutions. Linn offers many commonsense, practical guidelines and suggestions for parents who want to make room for play in their children's lives. The problem, of course—and it is true for all of the books with suggestions for parents—is that we are preaching to

the converted. Parents who buy our books are the very ones who believe in play and are looking for evidence to support their position.

The real challenge is figuring out how we reach those parents and educational administrators who see little or no value in a child's imaginative activities.

We need more than books if we are to push back against the erosion of play. We need to change the prevailing mind-set that sees play as the problem and not as the solution. To make this change requires the kind of national leadership that looks beyond the next four years. But this kind of leadership is rare. As a consequence, we always wait too long before we make needed changes. It may take the loss of our preeminence in scientific advances and innovations to teach us the value of our children's engagement in fantasy and make-believe.

—David Elkind, *Tufts University, MA*

Helping Children with Autism Become More Social: 76 Ways to Use Narrative Play

Ann E. Densmore

Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007. Notes, references, index. 272 pp. $49.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780275997021.

Ann Densmore's book is very much a distillation of her many years' experience with children who have autism. Her book is intriguing on several levels. As she describes in her numerous examples, Densmore has found creative ways to engage autistic children by using the natural world in which they live. I especially liked her descriptions of a farm setting for lively, preschool twin boys and a lakeside setting for quieter, young girls she worked with over longer periods of time. Densmore's love of nature and her talent for sharing her experiences with her clients and encouraging them to develop their own connections with nature are touching and compelling. Her clinical examples also are in keeping with current thinking about autism, which calls for developing children's social skills, play, and language as a whole at the outset, rather than using more discrete skills training. Densmore also demonstrates how she helped unrelated children develop their social interactions with one another by her skilled and intensive scaffolding of their play experiences in her presence over a long period of time. Densmore brings her speech therapy practice to her work with these children in productive ways, showing how play and social interactions are at the heart of the motivation to communicate and need to be addressed first for children who are more profoundly autistic. In these ways Densmore's book will be a valuable resource for everyone interested in autism and in ways to work creatively with children having serious developmental difficulties.

In other ways, however, the book is less satisfying. Densmore's approach of describing strategies to use for autistic children based on developmental levels is conceptually sound, but did not work very well for me in practice. Overall her book is fragmented and difficult to follow because some areas of conceptualisation and research in this field are not adequately discussed. For example, she does not link her work with the research literature in a satisfying way. These links are left entirely to the reader to make.