
Hurried Children and the Power of Play

An Interview with David Elkind

Best known for his parenting books *The Hurried Child*, *All Grown Up and No Place to Go*, *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*, and *The Power of Play*, David Elkind is currently professor emeritus of the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. Elkind's bibliography now numbers over five hundred items and includes research, theoretical articles, book chapters, and twenty-two books. He is a member of many professional organizations and is a past president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). In addition to having been a consultant to state education departments and government agencies, Elkind lectured extensively across the United States, Canada and abroad. **Key words**—child development; childhood play; Jean Piaget; *The Hurried Child*

***American Journal of Play*:** Much of your research and clinical work has centered on child development. Tell us about your own childhood and the ways in which you played.

David Elkind: I was born in Detroit in 1931, the youngest of six children, in the midst of the Great Depression. My parents were Russian Jewish immigrants. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood. Typical for the era, my mother was a homemaker. My father worked as a machinist in a machine shop. It wasn't an easy time, but because he was the foreman at the shop, his boss kept him working during the depression years, and so we had it better than many other families.

Like most children of the time, my friends and I made our own toys and games. One toy was a pistol or rifle made out of wood sawed to shape. We tied a clothespin to one end (the butt) of the gun and stretched a rubber band, made out of cut up car inner tubes, to the other end (the barrel). You pulled the trigger by opening the clothespin. As you can imagine, if you got hit with one of these, it really hurt! The other kids played pickup baseball, football, and basketball in a nearby empty field. They used whatever equipment they had. I have a lazy eye, and I wore a patch or glasses, so I was never good at ball sports.

In the winter, we built snow forts and had snowball fights. In summer and fall, a few friends would get together and have a potato roast, building a small fire in an empty field and roasting potatoes on sticks until the skins were black. We ate them cooled with a little salt. Hide-and-seek and Kick the Can were popular games. Some kids had checker sets and cards, so we played those games when we had the chance.

There was no television. The radio was the major form of entertainment, featuring series like *One Man's Family* and *Amos 'n Andy*, and the comedy shows of Jack Benny and Fred Allen. Our local movie theater had a show for kids every Saturday morning, presenting comics and series like *The Lone Ranger* and *Buck Rogers*, a space man.

A friend and I sold newspapers on Sunday mornings, spending our earnings on soda and potato chips. We ate and drank in our cellar while reading the "funnies," a special section of the newspaper devoted to comics that were printed in color.

Once I learned to read, it became my passion. There were few books in our house. But once one of my older brothers Jules, bought me a bike, I rode to the library and checked out books. As soon as I found authors I liked, I tried to read all of their books. I think I started with Edgar Rice Burroughs and the Tarzan series.

AJP: Looking back, did any of these experiences influence your research interests?

Elkind: My childhood play experiences made me appreciate how creative children can be if given the freedom to be so, but I only recognized this as an adult after studying the theories and research of Jean Piaget. I spent a lot of time in nursery schools and working with the early childhood educators I came to respect and admire. They taught me such things as how much science young children could learn from making soup. It is an obscenely underrated profession and even more obscenely underpaid.

AJP: Can you tell us about your training and education? Who influenced you most in your work?

Elkind: In retrospect I have had three careers. The first was as a clinician, the second as an academic, and the third as an author and lecturer. These careers are not mutually exclusive and have always overlapped, but each dominated a particular period of my life.

I got my PhD at the University of California—Los Angeles (UCLA) in clinical psychology in 1955, and in 1956 I was awarded a postdoctoral

fellowship with David Rapaport, a noted Freudian scholar then working at Austen Riggs, a residential treatment center in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Surprisingly, Rapaport, instead of having me read Freud, wanted me to study the work of Jean Piaget. I was intrigued because Piaget used clinical methods to do research with children on their own ideas about the world. I began replicating his studies, and I turned from a skeptic to an ardent advocate. From 1957 to 1959, I continued my Piagetian research while training in child clinical psychology at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston, and over the next two years, as an assistant professor, I taught child psychology at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. While I was at Wheaton, I continued my research on Piaget, now extending it to religious and perceptual development. Then, a position as an assistant professor in the adolescent unit of UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute took me back to California for a year. In 1962, an opportunity to combine my clinical and research interests opened at the University of Denver. So, as an associate professor, I took over the directorship of the Child Clinical Program of the Department of Psychology. I continued my work of replicating and expanding Piaget's studies and sent reprints to him.

In 1963 I was surprised and honored to receive a personal letter from Piaget inviting me to spend a year at his Centre International d'Epistémologie Génétique in Geneva, Switzerland. The following year, as a National Science Foundation Senior Postdoctoral Fellow, I headed off to Geneva with my young family. My attendance at the institute, including interactions with the students and international faculty, enriched my understanding of Piaget's epistemology.

That year in Geneva effectively ended the clinical phase of my career. When we returned to the United States in 1965, I decided to leave clinical work and devote myself full-time to teaching and developmental research. Accordingly, in 1966 I accepted the position as professor and head of the Child Development Division of the Psychology Department at the University of Rochester. While there, I pursued my research but also had appointments and taught in the departments of psychiatry and education. This was my academic period.

In the late 1970s, changes in the administration at the University of Rochester made it politic for me to leave. So, in 1978, I accepted a post as chair of the Child Study Department at Tufts University. Based upon what I had learned about child development from Piaget's theory, my research,

and clinical experience, I became increasingly troubled. Educators, parents, and society at large continued to ignore what we knew about child development. Consequently, I began writing for popular magazines and newspapers to voice my concerns.

The Hurried Child, probably my best-known book, was printed in 1981 and became a best seller. This led to a great many media and lecture presentations and to writing books for teachers and parents. I felt I could do more for the cause of children by being an advocate than by doing research. Consequently, it was during this period that I divided my time between teaching and being an author and lecturer. Since my retirement from Tufts, I have continued to write and am grateful for the opportunity to respond to requests such as doing this interview.

There were four major influences in my intellectual development. Sigmund Freud, David Rapaport, and Jean Piaget are the obvious ones. But the first was my father, a gifted machinist. I recall the many times he came home from work frustrated at having to deal with blueprints made by college-trained engineers who had no idea how their drawings could be machined. To execute their designs, he had to improvise, but he never received credit for his adaptations. What he taught me was that there always had to be a connection between theory and practice. This is why, in my teaching and in my writing, I always try to give concrete examples of the general point I am making. I believe my father's lesson was as important as those gifted to me by the three academic influences of my life.

AJP: Your earliest research did not focus specifically on children's play. How did your views on the importance of play evolve?

Elkind: During the 1970s and 1980s, the Asian influence began to affect education and child rearing. Japan was becoming a major auto-manufacturing country, and there were advances in technology. Its rigid schooling and tutoring programs led to a belief that Americans were falling behind because we were being too easy on kids, particularly preschoolers. It was argued that we had to follow the Asian model of rigorous early education. Books like *How to Teach Your Baby to Read* and rote learning theories of reading for preschoolers became popular, as did academic preschools. Montessori schools were in high demand because some thought them to be more rigorous than traditional play preschools.

All of this was so contrary to what Piaget taught us about young children and was also in conflict with the writings of earlier educational theo-

rists like Rousseau, Froebel, and Pestalozzi. That is when I began writing and lecturing about the need for young children to play, because that is their way of learning. For young children, play and work are one and the same. However, it was, and continues to be, a hard message to get across. It remains a battle we can never win, but one we can lose unless we keep on fighting.

AJP: One of your best-known works is the 1981 bestseller *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*. How and why were schools, parents, and the media, placing unprecedented levels of pressure and stress on children?

Elkind: The same academic pressures I noted earlier were magnified by negative comparisons of U.S. student test scores with those of European students. These comparisons were aided and abetted by the media, leading to elementary schools' more rigorous teaching of math and science at the expense of allowing for recess and teaching the arts. Perhaps the most negative of these influences was an emphasis on academic testing and the pressure on instructors to teach to the test. Parents felt the need to latch on to the movement. Summer camps became, in effect, summer schools, and after-school tutoring programs became the norm.

At the same time, clothing, toy, and food companies came to see children as a lucrative market, even expanding their "needs." Clothing and accessories for children began to resemble those of adults. Computer games took the place of reading and board games. Snack foods and sugared drinks proliferated.

From my Piagetian point of view, this all just seemed wrong. Although U.S. students didn't go as fast as those of Asia and Europe, they went further. The percentage of American students who continued on to higher education was far greater than that of the percentage of students of other countries. Indeed, our colleges and universities became magnets for students from the very same countries we were comparing ourselves to, and American scholars routinely won more Nobel Prizes than those of other countries.

I became so concerned we were moving in the wrong direction, that I wrote *The Hurried Child* in one summer. I didn't expect it to be a best seller, but I guess a lot of parents, without realizing it, were aware of the same contradictions that I was pointing out.

AJP: In the last chapter of *The Hurried Child*, you identify play as "an antidote to hurrying." What was it about play that could help hurried children?

Elkind: From a biological point of view, play is the assimilation of the world to the self and work is the accommodation of the self to the world. There is a constant interaction between the two: there is no nature-nurture conflict. Breathing, seeing, hearing, and sensing are good examples of this necessary interaction. Usually, these basic interactions are in balance. But if the balance is broken, say when it is too noisy for us think, or when one is too mentally engrossed to hear, there is a temporary imbalance. An accommodation imbalance holds true when children are spending all or most of the time adapting to the demands of an external adult world.

Basically, the problem is that parents have been sold on the idea that children cannot be trusted to use their free time in socially and personally beneficial ways. But in fact, children from an early age who are given free time to play, either by themselves or with others, will make up their own games, set their own rules, and abide by them. Such free play is not only enjoyable, but also fosters a sense of independence and, as Piaget has shown, a sense of moral justice.

AJP: In your 1994 book *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance*, you identified a shift in the family's ability to meet the needs of its members in favor of adult needs over the needs of children and youth. Why was this such a troubling trend?

Elkind: First of all, it is easy to overgeneralize in a society as large and diverse as our own. In addition, the shift toward putting adult needs ahead of those of the children became prominent toward the end of the last century when I wrote this book. It was aided and abetted by the then-popular theories of self-realization and personal identity. These contributed, along with other social phenomena, to a need-reversal trend. This focus on the individual led to the recognition, if not always acceptance, of divorce and single parenting. The resulting family configurations sometimes led parents to put their needs ahead of the children.

When parents do this, it can have serious consequences. For example, if one divorced parent uses a child to pour out grievances regarding the other parent, this undermines the relationship of the child to the maligned parent. In addition, it is an emotional abuse of the child. There are also parents who failed to realize their own self-realization and put that expectation on their children. They may expect the youngsters to excel at sports or to become the writers that the parents never did. This is not for the benefit of the children's self-esteem, but to provide the parents with bragging rights

or to fill their own void. The children can feel both guilt and resentment at such treatment.

Certainly, parental needs are important, but so too are those of the children. Weighing parental and child needs is always a difficult balancing act. Nevertheless, it is the parents'—not the children's—task to carry it off.

AJP: You spent much of the 1980s and 1990s examining the emotional health of children, teenagers, and families in books such as *All Grown Up and No Place to Go: Teenagers in Crisis*; *Miseducation: Preschoolers at Risk*; *Ties That Stress: The New Family Imbalance*; and *Reinventing Childhood*. What led to you to focus your last book, *The Power of Play: How Spontaneous, Imaginative Activities Lead to Happier, Healthier Children*, solely on play?

Elkind: I shifted the focus for all of the reasons I have already given. I believe we have increasingly made work and play polar opposites. In fact, an integration of play, love, and work, the model that I introduced in *The Power of Play*, is a balance that brings richness to the individual and contributes to the greater society. All great achievements in science, literature, and the arts are the result of this combination. For those who are born with a specific talent and have the opportunity to realize it, the fusion of play, love, and work happens naturally. Likewise, this is true for those who are lucky to find an occupation that allows them to enjoy their work.

It seemed to me, that we have increasingly lost the desire to combine work and play and put a little of ourselves into the most onerous tasks. The work ethic of our society instilled that work sits at the top of the pyramid of success, even at the expense of sleep, family, and, of course, free time and relaxation. The most disturbing trend was that this exaggerated work ethic filtered down to children. I wrote *The Power of Play* hoping to get at least some parents and educators to appreciate that play is an essential part of life, the constant assimilation of the world to the self, and not simply a respite from it.

AJP: You describe play—along with love and work—as essential elements in a good life. How do play, love, and work operate and vary throughout the course of our lives?

Elkind: Play, love, and work can be combined at all age levels. Yet, as I point out in my book, there is a developmental rebalancing of the three components over the early years of life. Play dominates the three in early childhood, work in childhood proper, and love in adolescence. In adulthood, every life is different. In many circumstances, it may seem impossible to include

play in the balance. But play can take many different forms. A joke heard on the job, a shared memory with a family member, or a pleasant surprise can bring a moment of relief and enjoyment, serving the same purpose that play can bring to a younger person.

AJP: What are the social and emotional benefits of play in early childhood?

Elkind: It is more than a little frightening to be a little person in a big person's giant world. Playing with children who are the same size can be emotionally reassuring in that you are not alone in your size and limitations. One of the gifts of the Montessori model was the introduction of child-sized furniture and eating utensils. These allowed children to do many things that big people do—enabling them to do more things on their own and adding to their self-confidence.

From the social perspective, when young children are playing freely with other children, they learn to take turns, to share toys, and to work cooperatively (most times!) with one another. They create. They build. When they play “house” or “school,” children are learning roles. Re-creating familiar settings and modeling adult behaviors help them feel a part of and have a better understanding of their real-world experiences.

AJP: Is it important to continue to play as we get older?

Elkind: I believe it is. The coffee break, for example, is the recognition of the necessity for a time, however brief, to attend to the needs of the self. It is truly remarkable, how refreshing taking even a few moments for silent meditation can be during a busy day. At all age levels, a sense of humor is perhaps the easiest way to retain a balance of play, love, and work. In fact, one might even say, “A joke a day keeps the stress away.”

AJP: You noted that adults have often exploited children's need to play for commercial ends. Are there particularly troubling examples of this?

Elkind: What is prevalent today, and has become increasingly more so over time, is the recognition that children's playful attachment to movie stars, real and animated, offers a huge market. As a child, I remember having a Shirley Temple glass mug with her picture on it. She was a child star of the 1930s and perhaps the first to be merchandized.

The desire for children to have such items has been met with an overwhelming onslaught of such memorabilia. Television escalated exploitation of child play for commercial ends when, in the early 1980s, the ban on advertisements in children's programming was lifted. Skilled marketing and media moved in quickly, shifting the dynamic away from parents; tar-

geted children became the consumers. Unfortunately, today, with so many avenues to reach children at any age, it is hard to imagine it any other way.

AJP: Are concerns about toys being adapted from the adult world of high technology and media justified? Haven't children always drawn on the adult world for stories, themes, and characters to infuse their play?

Elkind: While it is true that children have drawn upon the adult world for stories, themes, and characters, these all came from their experiences, their environment, the printed page, and pictures. These sources encouraged imagination and dramatic elaborations. Even when a commercial toy was produced imitating the adult world, such as a toy race car, the child could engage with it physically, create the venue, and imagine a storyline.

But the new technologies have reduced many toys and games to a matter of pushing buttons and swiping screens for young children or adolescents using a gamepad to shoot down airplanes or sink ships. These games have become a matter of predominantly visual acuity and fine motor skills, with little encouragement of imagination and physical activity.

The use of new technologies has raised many questions, such as whether playing the violent war games might have a dehumanizing impact on the young people who play them. We also need to know if tablet play by preschool children takes away time that should be devoted to emotional development and social learning. These questions are now being explored, but not with the vigor they need to be addressed.

AJP: You wrote *The Power of Play* nearly two decades ago. Is hyperparenting still a problem in the 2020s?

Elkind: I have really not kept up on the literature. But I do believe helicopter parenting is a new form of hyperparenting, made more achievable by current technologies. Most children are never a phone call away from parental surveillance. I saw the beginnings of this in the years just before my retirement in 2007. I was getting calls from parents questioning their sons' or daughters' assignments and grades in my introduction to child development course.

From a developmental perspective, hyperparenting is bound to affect a young person's self-confidence. It also promulgates what Erik Erickson called the sense of initiative—the willingness to start things on one's own and take nonharmful risks, like trying out for a new sport or asking for a date. One reason so many young adults continue to live at home is not only because of financial reasons but also because they have not developed a healthy sense of initiative that would give them the impetus to go it alone.

AJP: What are the potential benefits and drawbacks of parents becoming involved in their children's play? Is there a right way for parents and kids to play together?

Elkind: Both the benefits and drawbacks of parents playing with their children depend upon the parent's ability to adapt the play to the children's level of development, as well as their personal likes and dislikes. To take an extreme example, playing peekaboo with a baby, who is just learning that objects exist outside the self, is age appropriate and fun for both the parents and the child. Although reading a story to a child of this age may be comforting, it is not really playful for either party.

One form of play that can be engaged in at all ages is "silly play." All humor is based on the failure of expectation. That is why a bunch of clowns climbing out of a tiny car is funny. At all ages, when parents use age-appropriate humor with their children, they show another lighter side of themselves. Parents, who of necessity are authority figures setting rules and regulations, often seem stern and humorless. When parents act silly, they put themselves unexpectedly at the children's level. This is both amusing and endearing. The authoritarian figure is momentarily forgotten and the joy of a shared amusement is experienced.

What is silly humor to children depends on their level of mental development. Preschool children, who are just learning to distinguish words and things, believe words belong to objects. That is why asking if the new family dog should be called "Carrot" seems funny to a young child. At this age, the name belongs to a specific thing, a carrot (object), and cannot be used to name anything else. Likewise, if you read a story to a child of this age and change your voice, that is funny because it is so unexpected.

School-aged children who have attained the age of reason are amused by jokes and riddles. "Why did the tomato blush? Because it saw the salad dressing." At this age, children are beginning to understand that the same word can have more than one meaning; now the unexpected context makes it funny.

Once young people reach adolescence, they can deal with symbols for symbols, such as the x in algebra. At this stage, satire and irony are amusing and the failure of expectation is at an even higher level. Mentioning to a teen that you have just read *The Key to Success*, by Barry Insecure" will elicit a chuckle, but only from those teens who have attained some abstract and symbolic level of thought. Sharing humor at this level of ability reinforces

the teenager's growing mental power with the benefit of bringing the two generations together on the same conceptual plane.

On the other hand, it is embarrassing and unwelcome when parents try to enter into or manage play or games that children are doing well with on their own. As in hyperparenting, it undermines a children's discovery and pride at their own accomplishment and sends an unintentional message that they are doing it wrong.

AJP: What advice would you give to new parents today?

Elkind: For new parents, the anxiety that all new parents experienced is amplified by the awareness of our rapidly changing world. They may worry that they have to prepare their children for an increasingly unpredictable future.

Given this reality, the best preparation is to expose children to as much variety and change as possible. My advice is to take them to museums, parks, zoos, and theaters. Travel, even if it's to a neighboring town, and introduce them to new social situations. Variety is the spice of life, but it also serves as preparation for adapting to change.

I would also try to alleviate new parents' apprehension of always having the right answer to a lifetime of child questions. The right answer always depends on a child's age and development. And the easiest way to discern where that is and what is really being asked is simply to turn the question back with, "What do *you* think?" You might be surprised and relieved at the response. A six-year-old, whose friend just welcomed a baby sister and asks, "Where do babies come from?" may only be inquiring if she just came from the hospital.

If I may, I'd like to expand your question of my advice to all parents today. We no longer believe, as we once did, that we will have "better living through chemistry"—the belief that the world was getting to be a better place thanks to science. What do you say to children who are growing up in a world facing climate disaster and new health hazards?

Prior to adolescence and the attainment of abstract symbolic thought, children cannot really understand the meaning of these complicated issues. Most children don't really understand the concept of death until middle childhood. So, I don't believe it is necessary to talk about these problems with young children or even school-age children unless they bring them up.

If they do, as I have suggested, one can first ask, "What do you think?" Most children will answer with something they have heard at school or from their friends. The answer can then follow their direction and level of

understanding. To most answers, you can reply honestly that it is a problem that many are trying to fix. If they come up with something unexpected, be concrete in your response. If adolescents want to deal with these issues, it is best to be truthful and to discuss what is and what is not being done to deal with the problem to the best of your knowledge. Most importantly listen to their opinions, even if you disagree, and encourage further investigation. Young people are optimistic and should continue to plan for the future. New discoveries may hold back the rate of climate change, and bright young minds will introduce solutions that we can only dream of.

AJP: Are there particular areas of research that you find especially needed today?

Elkind: I so wish I was still able to do research today. Technology has brought new research methods and tools to make research faster and easier. But the world of media and the internet raise a whole new set of issues that needs to be addressed. I would be particularly interested in those that affect children and youth. For me, sex and age differences in media use would be a fascinating area to explore. I am really amazed at how little, comparatively, is being done in these areas.

AJP: One last question: Can you share an example of the power of play in your life today?

Elkind: After I retired, I discovered that aging, of necessity, requires changes in the forms, but not the pleasures, of play. Thanks to that bully arthritis, I had to give up sailing and a great deal of my gardening. And yes, you can teach an old dog new tricks. At about that time, on a visit to a pottery studio, I was encouraged to throw a pot on the wheel. Much to my surprise, because I thought I lacked the manual dexterity, I not only made a pot but enjoyed doing so. After a few years learning the craft in pottery classes, I became proficient. At that point, my wife built me a studio in the garage, and my sons bought me a kiln. We now use many of the pieces I have made.

I have now had to give up pottery, thanks to that relentless bully. But ever adjusting, I am still able to grow tomatoes, now in an elevated planter, and can read books in large print. I do the on-line *New York Times* mini-crossword each day, and the large ones on Mondays, Tuesdays and sometimes on Wednesdays. So yes, I have continued to combine play, love, and work in my life today, albeit in age-appropriate ways!