

Children at Play: An American History

Howard P. Chudacoff

New York: New York University Press, 2007. Photographs, notes, index. ix, 269 pp. \$27.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780814716644.

Richly researched and gracefully written, *Children at Play*—the first full-length history of American children’s play—could scarcely be more timely. There is widespread fear—evident in the popularity of such bestsellers as *The Dangerous Book for Boys* (2007) and *The Daring Book for Girls* (2007)—that imaginative, self-initiated play is disappearing from the lives of overscheduled and overprotected twenty-first-century kids. Many worry that violent, sexist video games are isolating and desensitizing children; that the Internet and new media are eroding childhood innocence at too early an age; that aggressive marketers are distorting children’s body image and material aspirations; and that a heightened stress on early academic achievement and a test-driven school curriculum have taken the play out of childhood.

Drawing on a wealth of children’s diaries and autobiographical recollections, supplemented by child rearing manuals, sociological studies, and market research reports, *Children at Play* advances a powerful argument: that the history of children’s play consists of an ongoing struggle between adults, who have repeatedly sought to improve and safeguard the young, and kids themselves, who have sought to create worlds of play that are truly their own. Chudacoff masterfully traces adult efforts to domesticate and rationalize children’s play, as well as children’s attempts to use play to assert their autonomy and distinctive identity. His overarching argument is that children’s ability to play independently has diminished over time, with damaging consequences for their creativity, social skills, and resourcefulness.

Highly attentive to class, ethnicity, gender, and place, *Children at Play* not only explores the play worlds of the middle class, but of working-class children, enslaved children, and immigrant children. The book lays out a compelling chronology. Prior to the nineteenth century, most children’s play was directed by children themselves. Adults frequently criticized children’s play as childish in a pejorative sense but made few efforts to organize or supervise these activities. After 1800, two contradictory developments shaped children’s play: a growing appreciation of children’s playfulness and a concerted campaign to domesticate and uplift children’s play. At the same time, the reconstruction of gender roles was accompanied by

diverging expectations about proper play for boys and girls.

After 1900, the contradiction between celebrating and regulating children's play intensified. According to a growing number of experts, play was the key to creativity and proper personality development; hence, children should not be forced to adopt adult standards of comportment prematurely. Meanwhile, there was a growing concern to ensure that children's play was wholesome and safe, evident in the playground movement and in the proliferation of backyard swings and sandboxes. Class became less important in differentiating childhoods, as mass production lowered the cost of toys and new mass media—radio, movies, books, comics, and ultimately television—shaped children's fantasies. It was during the first half of the twentieth century that play with peers (as opposed to siblings and other relatives) and sex segregation became prominent features of young people's lives.

Chudacoff identifies several long-term trends. There was a shift in the play environment, from outdoors to indoors, from woods, pastures, streets, yards, and empty lots to bedrooms and commercial and other formal play sites. There was a shift in playmates, from family members, including siblings and cousins, to the peer group, and especially same-sex peers, as well as an increase in small group and solitary play, with geographical proximity no longer the predominant way that play groups formed. There was a shift in playthings, as improvised items and toys sold to parents to impart useful skills gave way to fantasy toys marketed directly to children. The most important trends were the decline in intergenerational amusements, an increase in sedentary, isolated play, and a decline in free, unstructured play, as kids' lives were regimented by after school, weekend, and summer activities organized by adults.

Although Chudacoff does not explicitly advance a theory about the evolution of children's play, he does suggest that play activity has always combined two elements. It has been compensatory—serving to offset stresses or deficits in other realms—and preparatory, grooming children for adult roles. He also suggests that children's play, far from being “natural,” is invariably shaped by a host of social and cultural factors, including demography, especially the population's age distribution; children's responsibilities within the family economy; children's clothing (which allowed for freer movement after 1770); domestic architecture (as attics, cellars, and children's bedrooms provided arenas for play); parental employment patterns; and the consumer economy.

Chudacoff draws upon history to develop a nuanced critique of contemporary children's play. He argues that the resourcefulness of children's culture has eroded, as children appear to have become less skilled at transforming everyday objects into playthings. He expresses sympathy for the argument that consumer culture has colonized children's imagination by providing toys with back stories and packaged fantasies, and fostering an overfascination with sex, violence, and media celebrities. He contends that eluding adult supervision has grown more challenging as unstructured outdoor play has declined—and that contemporary children have less inclination to resist adult intrusions upon their play world. He laments the decline of camaraderie play with neighborhood friends, giving kids fewer opportunities to develop skills in cooperation, rule making, and empathy. But the changes, he adds, are not wholly negative. There have been increased opportunities for girls to participate in sports. Kids have used new technologies to sustain communities and maintain privacy. And the purported evils of television and video games are overstated.

Children at Play will be the indispensable starting point for future discussions of the history of American children's play. I would suggest three areas for future exploration. One involves the connections between play and the nature of adult society, whether this involves the growing resistance to hierarchy and deference evident in children's play in the pre-Revolution decades or the nature of children's electronically mediated play in today's technology-dominated, competitive, future-oriented culture. A second area involves the connection between children's play and their psycho-social development, including the construction of their ethnic, gender, racial, regional, and religious identities. A third area for further exploration involves the inner world of children's play culture: what can we learn about children's fantasies and attitudes through studying their make-believe and play activities?

Chudacoff ends his book with a message that I hope many will heed. In a society obsessed with risk and giving children a head start, adults need to offer kids more independence to explore their environment, to create their own playthings, and to enjoy being young.

—Steven Mintz, *University of Houston, Houston, TX*