4 Children Playing and Learning

Across cultures, with very few exceptions, early childhood is a time for play. Parents may vary in how positively they view this activity, but, at a minimum, they see its value for keeping kids busy and out of the way. Toddlers are supervised during play by explicitly delegated sib-caretakers, with adults in the vicinity alert to the sounds of trouble. However, virtually all scholars who've observed children at play in village settings cite a wealth of opportunities for learning the culture. And many would agree that play is a "form of buffered learning through which the child can make ... step-by-step progress towards adult behavior." I argued that learning through play was more efficient than learning from instruction for several reasons, not least because instruction is often boring to the young, while play is arousing, and because instruction "requires an investment by a second party, the teacher."

From my earliest fieldwork in the Liberian hinterland bush, I was struck by this enduring phenomenon—children are active, hands-on, engaged learners. And a great deal of their learning occurs in the context of play. Even when physically inactive, they are intently watching what the adults are up to, gathering material for later make-believe scripts. In the next essay, I describe boys watching from the periphery as a court case unfolds in the town chief's open-air courtroom. While watching, the boys discuss the case *sotto voce* and the chief offers up frequent homilies that lift some mundane element in the case to the level of moral imperative or customary practice. The boys absorb all these lessons, as evidenced by the re-enactment of the court drama in their make-believe play later on. A key element in the watching, discussing, and re-enacting is that it is entirely

child-initiated. This is one "classroom," among many in the village, where attendance is optional and there are no quizzes.

This laissez-faire attitude on the part of the elders regarding "teaching" children is consistent with four widely held beliefs about children. First, children want to learn their culture, so they strive for competence. Second, they learn best without adult direction and at their own pace. Third, they are motivated to learn useful skills in order to "fit in" and be accepted by their families. And fourth, expecting children to strive to "fit in" means that when they appear to lack this motivation, they will be called to account. In the chief's court, "fitting in" meant being quiet and not interfering. Contrast these views with our own beliefs that children learn little without teaching, and need to meet certain specific age- or grade-determined milestones in their learning. Nor are they really required to "fit in" as their parents give them a free pass—to the despair of their teachers.

As the essays in this chapter illustrate, within tightly defined limits, parents may accord autonomy to children—to acquire and use a large library of interactive media or to choose from a self-constructed menu of food offerings, as examples. But unlike the villagers anthropologists study, their lives are, otherwise, tightly managed, including their play.

Cowboys and Indians and the Origin of the Couch Potato

Many years ago, I undertook an ethnographic study of childhood in a remote West African village called Gbarngasuakwelle. Ethnography is the method used by cultural anthropologists. It involves living with the people they're trying to understand; speaking the local language; learning and respecting their customs; and, above all, observing and listening, recording faithfully what is heard and seen, then trying to make sense of it as a nonnative. One of the prominent themes in my report (published as *Playing on the Mother-Ground*) was the importance of

observation in the lives of children. As just mentioned, one venue where I hung out was the town chief's court.

With apologies to fans of Court TV, the average court case is just slightly more interesting than watching grass grow. And this was certainly true of the local court presided over by Chief Wolliekollie. Imagine a forty-minute debate about the failure to *promptly* return a borrowed lantern, or an even longer debate over the amount of compensation appropriate in the case of an adulterous liaison (the *juicy* details discretely glossed over). And yet the court never failed to attract a good crowd of juvenile spectators. While the boys watching the chief's court were quiet and blended in with their surroundings, it was obvious that the chief saw them as "pupils" in an open-air classroom. His rhetorical questions and judicial "opinions" often reflected basic principles of Kpelle morality. Most societies are keenly aware of the child as voyeur and fully expect to use public events for their didactic value.

Among the Yakutat of British Columbia, "Children learned a great deal by listening to the older people talk, especially when the old men gathered in the sweathouse to bathe and chat." Among the Tale of Ghana, "children learn who their . . . ancestors were by listening at sacrifices." Anthropologists note that little is private or off-limits to children in the village, and they learn about the birds and the bees quite early. For example, Australian Arunta children play at being husbands and wives, making separate windbreaks and fires and pretending to cook food. Sometimes they also play at adultery, with a boy running away with the "wife" of another boy.

So one of the first clues an anthropologist might note as evidence of children's autonomy to learn on their own is that the culture is displayed like an open book. There is no censorship and children can browse at will. In contemporary society, we seem to embrace a philosophy of "do as I say, not as I do." Because we focus so narrowly on children learning through explicit lessons, we ignore the many lessons we teach without intending to. Sociologist Peter McClaren recorded this scene some years ago:

> Georgette and Wendy picked up some dolls at the activity center. Georgette chose G.I. Joe and Wendy picked up a Farah Fawcett doll. "Let's pretend we're married," Georgette said. "Okay," Wendy agreed. Georgette took G.I. Joe and promptly slapped the Farah doll across the face with it, shouting: "That's what you get for talkin' to me like that."

Years after recording the African scenes of children as spectators, I had an epiphany and realized that what I had witnessed in Gbarngasuakwelle was the fertile field in which couch potatoes might grow. It turns out to be a small step from watching interesting things happen in the village, to watching television. In the village, however, the court case eventually ends and the juvenile spectators disperse for new, usually more active, adventures. By contrast, in many contemporary homes, the television/video game/iPhone is never off. While village children's prolonged and intense observation and eavesdropping on adults may be vital in learning their culture, interest is bound to fall off once they've "mastered" particular aspects of the "curriculum." Older boys do not hang around the court; it is all too familiar. The boredom that comes with overfamiliarization and lack of challenge is all too common in our classrooms, in contrast to the perpetually novel and challenging interactivity found in contemporary recreational and social media. Unfortunately, attempts to hybridize academic content with video game interactivity have not been notably successful.

Boys in Gbarngasuakwelle were also enthralled by their elders' success in hunting and trapping, and spent countless hours in chasing games and "play" hunting that evolved into the real thing. In my childhood, I was a cowboy. I grew up without a village; my windows on the world were books and television. But I didn't become a couch potato either. As exciting as those Saturday morning westerns were, I took equal or greater pleasure from *replicating* the heroic exploits of the Lone Ranger or Hopalong Cassidy. My parents could not afford, nor did they approve of, building a toy treasury for me. But they believed that fantasy play stimulated the imagination, and contracted with Santa one year to provide me some "props," including a cowboy

hat and six-shooter. We do, occasionally, see village parents supplying cast-off or scaled-down tools and weapons as toys, to encourage children to use play as a learning medium. Even more important is the belief that, while playing and learning outdoors, children are distracted and don't get in adults' way.

This is a belief my mother shared. So I spent hours each day "roamin' the range." In the process, I remained lean and healthy, and hence, according to Nigel Barber (blog = *The Human Beast*), would have more easily evaded predators in an earlier incarnation during the Paleolithic.

In contrast, television and video games, and the comfortable environment in which they are situated, may be so compelling that the child never shifts from observation to replication. Couch potatoes not only miss out on physical exercise, but may be short-changed in their mental exercise as well. In fact, there are numerous studies showing a strong inverse correlation between time spent with video games (current average = thirteen hours a week) and school grades. So parents may need to intervene (minimally) to nudge children from passive receptors to active creators and, above all, to get them off the couch and into the backyard or the neighborhood at large. Recent studies highlight how few families spend any time at all outdoors in leisure activity in the typical week. "Children not only don't wander through their neighborhood playing with peers; three-fourths of them don't even play in their own backyards." Parenthetically, on the subject of toy guns and modern derivatives, many child advocates worry about the impact of violent video games on aggressive behavior. And this is one parental anxiety that is justified. A thorough survey of the huge literature on the relationship between violent video games and later aggressive behavior found that the "evidence strongly suggests that exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behavior, aggressive cognition, and aggressive affect and for decreased empathy and prosocial behavior." At least some of these negative effects may be due to diminished face-to-face (see the "Gamesmanship" essay below) social interaction that is associated with children who are absorbed in media for hours on end. That said, if children

use guns to harm or kill themselves or others, the culprit is far more likely to be the careless gun owner who often justifies ready access to a lethal weapon by the need to "protect" themselves and their family. Virtually any day of the week in the US one can find a minor news item of the "Boy, 4, shot by sibling while waiting in car" variety.

What can we take away from all this? Children are endowed with several predilections that facilitate their learning culture with little or no direct instruction. Those predilections can still be useful today in helping a child learn to construct narratives (stories) and to learn many aspects of the culture. However, in the village there is no lens through which the culture is distorted on its way to the child's brain, except for their own naivety. But if electronic media represent the window *our* children have on society and history, it is "through a glass darkly." Product advertising dominates the cultural "lessons" conveyed. Other "lessons" seem almost anticultural, gaining their audience through the egregious violation of cultural standards and mores—think *The Simpsons*. In the village, common "child-produced" content emerges in make-believe play in which children take pride in replicating the skills and pursuits of those older. In contemporary society, child-constructed narratives may be telegraphic, barely literate prose, sexting, and cyberbullying.

Toys or Tools?

Archaeologist Bob Dawe was intrigued by a puzzle. His field is the prehistory of the Plains Indians, which he reconstructs from studying early sites that were utilized by these people. Many of the sites contain the remains of large mammals that were hunted as a staple of the diet. These "kill" sites include buffalo jumps, where large numbers of animals were killed and butchered. Among the bones are the tools used by hunters, including stone arrow points. The puzzling thing is that these often include large numbers of small, poorly knapped arrowheads that would have made no more impression on a bison than a mosquito bite.

Dawe's hypothesis is that the points were quickly and crudely made to give to children, who would use them in "toy" arrows. He buttresses his argument with material from ethnographic studies and travelers' recollections. Many observers of the Plains Indians (including John James Audubon) took note of adults giving children scaled-down tools—especially for hunting—which they were expected to use to gradually perfect their skill. Dawe writes, "Toys should not be considered nonfunctional. Rather they are small-scale tools which functioned and suffered the same tool use-life as their adult-sized counterparts."

While not universal, in many societies tools are made for children to play with and/or they are given cast-off tools to convert into toys, and/or the raw materials to make their own. Franz Boas—one of anthropology's founding fathers (and mentor of founding mother Margaret Mead)—described how Inuit (Eskimo) boys played a game that simulated the hunting of ringed seals through the ice. The materials used in the game, such as pieces of sealskin and miniature harpoons, were often supplied by parents to encourage this kind of learning through play. Similarly, Inuit "girls make dolls out of scraps of skin, and clothe them like real men and women. Their mothers encourage them, for it is in this way that they learn to sew and cut out patterns." Girls from the Conambo tribe in Ecuador will, as their mothers before them, become potters. While quite young, they can be found playing with balls of clay donated by their mothers. They turn the clay into snakes, miniature animals, and hollow vessels, all baby-steps on the way to learning to produce useable ceramics. In a Chiga farming village, a small child is given a gourd to play with, to balance on his/her head and, trailing after older siblings, takes it "to the watering-place . . . brings it back with a little water in it."

Even more common, I've found many cases where children are free to handle and play with adult-sized tools. Most striking are children literally "playing with knives," a few examples of which follow (all referenced in D. F. Lancy, "Playing with knives: The socialization of self-initiated learners," *Child Development*, 87, 2016):

- "[An Amazonian Pirahã child] was playing with a sharp kitchen knife, about nine inches in length. He was swinging the knife blade around him, often coming close to his eyes, his chest, his arm and other body parts, when he dropped the knife, his mother—talking to someone else—reached backward nonchalantly without interrupting her conversation, picked up the knife and handed it back to the toddler."
- "[A Tanzanian Hadza] infant may grab a sharp knife, put it in its mouth, and suck on it without adults showing the least bit of concern until they need the knife again."
- "'I don't like it when our children play with machetes, but if the baby decides to play, I leave it. And if the baby cuts themself and if they see the blood, they themselves will decide not to play with the machete.'" (Aka (Central Africa) mother)

Appearances to the contrary, I do not think this nonchalant attitude reflects indifference or callousness toward the fate of one's children. Rather, this extreme laissez-faire attitude reflects a bedrock belief in the power of children to learn autonomously. More than this, parents often express the view that parental intervention of any sort, including teaching, is a waste of time (children will learn without it) and may even be harmful if children become reluctant to explore and learn on their own. This "folk" wisdom was recently confirmed in a series of experiments, undertaken by psychologists in the US, using a multi-action toy. Four- and five-year-old subjects "who were taught a function of the toy performed fewer kinds of actions on the toy and discovered fewer of its other functions" than children who were not taught anything about the toy.

Village children not given toys made by adults, or not finding any full-scale tool available, make their own. These constructions often display enormous ingenuity, persistence, and skill. An unusual case is found in Kutch, where Rabari boys start their education in animal husbandry by creating a "flock" out of dried camel and sheep droppings, and then moving the flock, corralling it, taking it to water, and so on. I have observed dozens of toys

Figure 4.1. Bara boys playing with clay figurines they've made

that were created from recycled materials, many quite elaborate, such as wire cars or trucks made throughout Africa. Even when toys have no obvious connection to useful skills or knowledge, children may learn a great deal through the *process* of invention and construction. I was enthralled by a youngster during a trip to Yemen. He had scavenged a cast-off plastic jerry can, modified it to use as a sled, and proceeded to launch himself, repeatedly, down a stone parapet.

Figure 4.1 shows a pair of boys from the Bara tribal area of south central Madagascar playing with clay figurines they've made themselves. The author of the photo, Gabriel Scheidecker, writes,

> The boys are playing with vehicles made from clay. The toys are modeled after *sarety* (borrowing from French charrette, ox cart) and mainly used for transporting the harvest (rice and manioc). The toy versions are called *kisarety*. The prefix ki- signifies small, not serious, and is used for all children's games and toys that reflect adult activities/things. The boys have "loaded" one cart with "rice" (sand) pulled by a Zebu (note the hump) ox. Humans are depicted with their arms bent in a way that suggests they may be engaged in an "ox fight."

In 2010, I visited a Vezo fishing village in southwest Madagascar. The community depends, for its livelihood, almost entirely on collecting marine resources. From adolescence, villagers will venture out into the Zanzibar channel in colorful outrigger canoes to fish and hunt turtles. The wide expanse of beach fronting on the sea—from which these expeditions are launched—serves as a kind of mixed-age, teacherless classroom. Babies are placed in tide pools to splash around and grow accustomed to saltwater; three boys around age five clamber over a beached canoe, learning an agile dance from thwart to gunwale; six-year-olds convert discarded planks or logs into "canoes" they ride on and paddle. The first lesson in sail-handling probably occurs as the boy maneuvers a miniature sailboat he has made himself. In short, a significant part of the "canoe curriculum" can be acquired through play with "toys."

Am I suggesting that *our* children be given free rein in the garage, workshop, barn, kitchen? Hardly, but most parents and teachers could widen the safety zone for them and provide many more opportunities to explore and learn independently. My own childhood was greatly enriched by having many opportunities to "build" things with cast-off construction materials, using my father's tools—unobserved by an adult. Ultimately, I'm not sure which practice is more harmful for children—playing with knives or the opposite. A Korean-American journalist remarked, "I was surprised in the United States when a nine-year-old asked me to butter his bread because he wasn't 'allowed to use a knife,' even a butter knife."

What lessons do *our* children learn from toys? It could very well be that they are primarily learning to be avid consumers. In my view, "Black Friday" is aptly named. It is a black day on the nation's calendar. A few years ago, while watching the nightly news, I was treated to a horrific scene of a crowd bursting through the doors of Toys "R" Us. I watched as a cute blond cherub got knocked down in the crush and, for all I know, trampled. The announcer's commentary—completely upbeat—extolled the social and economic benefits of this phenomenon,

ignoring the anarchic behavior on the screen. One study relevant to my question looked at "Dear Santa" letters in the UK versus Sweden. The latter bans television advertising aimed at children, the former offers no such prohibition. The results, unsurprisingly, showed that British kids had longer wish lists and requested primarily "branded" toys. Another study in Britain reported, anecdotally, about eleven-year-old Philip, who was particularly pleased on his birthday because his auntie had followed his directions and made the right choice. He proudly declared, "I wanted a Huffy [scooter] because they're the best at the moment and so I gave her the product code number and price and everything in case she got it wrong." Eric Clark has reviewed these studies and notes, sardonically,

> Kids get bored with their toys before they break them, sometimes even before they have played with them. In fact, many toys are no longer created for play. They are designed to be purchased, to be possessed, to be a badge of status. The more toys, the happier the child. A survey in 2005 showed that 80 percent of children under 12 were given more than 10 toys a year, but 60 percent of those toys were soon thrown out even though there was nothing wrong with them . . . For most toy companies, the role of children is clear: they are cash cows to be milked.

It turns out that childhood observers saw this coming from a long way off. In a history of American childhood, published in 1917, the author laments, "two days playing with [contemporary toys] exhausts the pleasure. They are too complete—the fun of making them has been taken away from the child."

Whatever lessons are being learned, they are different lessons. Historian Gary Cross charts the steady decline in popularity of construction sets and other toys that can serve as tools. As he says, "Toys that prepare children for adult life seem harder to find." Five years ago, Stinky the Garbage Truck was hot. I noted three salient attributes of this toy. First, it was expensive (seventy dollars) but available at a discount. Second, and lamentably, it promised to fill the void for a friend- or siblingless child. "Who

could believe a trash-gobbling garbage truck could be SO loveable? There's a ton of fun surprises in store with your new pal: Chats, joke telling, exercise partner and sing-along silliness, too. Friendship with Stinky™ never smelled sweeter!" But Stinky's central lesson seems to be that toys are trash: "He can 'eat' garbage. [And the] garbage your child feeds him can consist of anything from other toy cars to several tiny toys your child is sure to have lying around his or her room." By 2015, it was passé and no longer in production.

Unfortunately, manufacturers of traditional, sturdy, creative, and constructive toys have not fared well. My favorite company, now deceased, was Back to Basics Toys. Instead, children and their parents seem to prefer toys that come with a narrative already provided (via television, video games, or commercials). But I'm being overly pessimistic. Fine construction toys are still made (although I'd buy the more generic Lego block set over the single-purpose "movie-themed" sets). Lincoln Logs is celebrating their 100th anniversary. Venerable board games like Monopoly still have valid lessons to teach, including the meaning of "friendly competition." Most of the tools of the domestic kitchen are harmless and should be accessible to children, especially when they want to "help" make dinner. The same is true for garden tools. Parents and prospective parents may need to re-examine their leisure time—first by increasing it! Can one's hobbies be selected with eager-to-learn children in mind? Cooking? Gardening? Sewing? Volunteering at the Humane Society? Taking up a musical instrument? Learning a foreign language? How about the "urban farming" movement? Williams Sonoma has lovely chicken coops ranging from $300–$1,500.

Gamesmanship

In his study of "moral" development, the great Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget observed children of different ages playing marbles, and used the game to illustrate the child's passing through

numerous stages before arriving at a mature (fully moral) understanding of social conventions.

In watching players, we first see the refinement of manual dexterity. Humans are tool users, and young humans, as a consequence, are object manipulators. In its most refined form, using perfectly polished and round orbs, playing marbles calls forth tremendous small motor skill and digital finesse. Then we see "gamesmanship," where children manipulate the rules and each other to enhance the quality of play as well as their own success. Lastly, we see the development of social understanding, of an appreciation of rules qua rules.

By at least the Roman era, and probably earlier, children used knucklebones as projectiles to try and dislodge each other's stationery targets. In other words, the basic pattern of marbles—whereby a player shoots a hard object at one or more similar objects to drive it, or them, out of a demarcated area—is probably quite old. Marbles, as we know the game, is clearly shown in Breughel's 1560 painting *Children's Games*. In Adriaen van Ostade's *Children and Dog* from 1673, boys are playing marbles outside a tavern. More recently, I have found marbles (and its kin) being played all over the world.

Renowned British folklorists Iona and Peter Opie document three basic versions of the game, but the variation in rules of play is staggering. What was critical, from Piaget's perspective, was that the game could be played at various levels so that very young children might play, even without understanding most of the rules. He wrote, "Children's games constitute the most admirable social institutions. The game of marbles, for instance . . . contains an extremely complex system of rules, that is to say, a code of laws, a jurisprudence of its own." After documenting the primary dimensions of the game, Piaget begins to probe the players' cognitive representation of the rules.

> You begin by asking the child if he could invent a new rule . . . Once the new rule has been formulated, you ask the child whether it could give rise to a new game . . . The child either agrees to the suggestion

> or disputes it. If he agrees, you immediately ask him whether the new rule is a "fair" rule, a "real" rule, one "like the others," and try to get at the various motives that enter into the answers.

Piaget teases out distinct age-dependent styles in children's approach to marbles. Initially the child plays with the marbles as interesting objects, but there's no game per se. By about age four, the child can play the game, knows how to make the right moves physically, and understands the necessity for turn-taking. "The child's chief interest is no longer psycho-motor; it is social." He is able to imitate the model provided by a more mature player, but he really has no sense of strategy or of what to do to increase the likelihood of winning. Then, around age seven, players focus on winning, even though their grasp of the rules—as revealed through questioning—is still vague. By age eleven, the child is an expert on marbles and can explain every rule and exception. Nevertheless, the child still hasn't grasped rules qua rules. He still sees them as immutable. But, by thirteen, boys understand that the rules are arbitrary and conventional.

There are hundreds of illustrations of children's games from history and anthropology. Unfortunately, relatively few describe children actually in the process of playing, as opposed to a dry catalog of the rules and mechanics. But we can make a number of generalizations from the descriptions that are available. First, because toddlers are usually under the care and supervision of their older siblings, games are flexible enough to permit their participation. Older, more expert players will *handicap* themselves, for example, to ensure that learners can enjoy some success. Complexities in the rules are introduced gradually. Games are played in a neighborhood playgroup of mixed age and gender. "Winning" is far less important than maintaining amicable relations. Players, in their roles as child caretakers, do not want the cries of an unhappy charge to attract the scrutiny of an angry adult.

The playgroup is hardly awash in a constant flow of good feelings, however. We have vivid accounts of protracted arguments about rules and their application. Particularly in the groups

of older children—which tend to be homogeneous with respect to age and gender—games are not so much about learning and adhering to rules as about a running exercise in negotiation. As the Opies document for marbles, and Candy Goodwin for hopscotch and jump rope, there is a constant alteration between individual attempts to gain an advantage, cries of "foul" by opponents, and negotiated agreements that permit the game to proceed. Collectively, I've referred to these diplomatic skills as "gamesmanship."

In many cases, games support particular cultural ends. Aymara boys in the Andes play marbles—girls play jacks—while herding their flocks far from the village. Ben Smith's careful description of these games complements his in-depth analyses of speech and social-interaction patterns during play. Smith discusses the importance of *qhincha* (bad luck) in marbles. By confronting and enduring *qhincha* in the game, boys successfully fend off accusations of being feminine or homosexual. By implication, a boy who keeps control of himself when something goes wrong (a pebble in the path deflects his shot, say, or a toddler tramps through the ring of marbles) demonstrates the "chacha-ness" or "toughness" that reflects masculinity.

The very ethos of the culture may dictate the nature of play. In the emerging Israeli state, the kibbutz was created as a utopian alternative to the competition and status differentials inherent in Western society. Not surprisingly, a study of children's games revealed a bias toward egalitarian outcomes—no winners, no losers. In Oceania, one finds examples of societies that are so egalitarian that, in children's play, "Competitiveness is almost never in evidence." Among the Tangu of Papua New Guinea, children in teams play a game called *taketak*, which is designed—in keeping with local values—to end in a tie.

In small-scale, band societies, the playgroup, necessarily of mixed ages, must allow all players, no matter how inept, to participate; the playing field is always level, so to speak, and supports the prevailing egalitarian ethos. !Kung children throw a weighted feather in the air, and, as it floats down, they strike it

with a stick or flick it back up into the air. The "game," called *zeni*, is played solo, and children make no attempt to compare skill or success. Aka foragers are highly egalitarian, and Boyette notes the absence of rough-and-tumble play and competitive games. *Ndanga* is a popular game in which "there is no winner in the game and there is no score kept."

In contemporary, middle-class, Western society, marbles and similar amusements are rapidly becoming extinct. The Opies blame this decline on the rise of adult-managed games and sports, but we might also cite video games as a major factor. Should we be at all concerned about this? Is a fondness for old-fashioned games purely sentimental? I don't think so. As opportunities for children to "negotiate" through rule-governed play dwindle, scholars are increasingly excited by the possibilities of Machiavellian intelligence (MI). There is a revolution under way in our thinking about the *sapiens* part of *Homo sapiens*. One useful starting point is Richard Byrne's *The Thinking Ape*. He writes,

> the essence of the Machiavellian intelligence hypothesis is that intelligence evolved in social circumstances. Individuals would be favored who were able to use and exploit others in their social group, without causing the disruption and potential group fission liable to result from naked aggression. Their manipulations might as easily involve co-operation as conflict, sharing as hoarding.

The theory has garnered a steady stream of empirical support. Extrapolating from it, I would argue that, if children have Machiavellian brains and, further, that brains need to be exercised to fully develop, marbles and the like are the perfect mental gym. The key elements here are rule-governed play, flexibility in applying the rules, and an absence of adult umpires. That is, children must be free to construct successful gaming sessions without adult guidance or interference. That's the essence of gamesmanship.

Unfortunately, current child-rearing practices have largely expropriated the opportunities for children to exercise gamesmanship and MI through unsupervised play. Adults now thoroughly manage and script most children's activities. Gary Fine's

Figure 4.2. Team players

ethnography of Little League has become the definitive study of adult-managed play. He notes that the official Little League rule book ran to sixty-two pages in 1984 (and to 100 pages as of 2009) and that, in dramatic contrast to games organized by children, in "Little League, negotiation by players is unthinkable." Indeed, when players attempt to protest an umpire's call, for example, coaches and others call them "unsportsmanlike."

In addition to adult management of what were once child-initiated games and pickup sports, growing evidence indicates that parents—at least those among the contemporary intelligentsia—are taking control of make-believe play as well. This recent change in the way parents behave arises from their attempt to fill in for the siblings and peers their increasingly isolated children do not have, especially in urban settings. Parents also seem to feel that a child's unguided play will not yield the kind of academic

payoff that parent-directed play yields. And, importantly, parents fear their offspring may suffer physical or psychological harm if they play with "neighborhood" kids. Parents may view marbles as dangerous because a child might swallow and choke on one. Despite such worries and good intentions, curtailing play initiated by children seems likely to attenuate—if not destroy altogether—opportunities to develop the skills associated with gamesmanship. One unintended consequence, for example, may be the rise in bullying as children lose opportunities to nurture and develop the ability to bargain and argue their way through disagreements.

But we can fight back. For starters, we can weigh in on the debate regarding the overly academic atmosphere in many preschools and the shift toward a more play-based curriculum. We should get behind the drive to restore recess to the elementary-school program. Some school districts and municipalities hire playground or recess coaches "who hope to show children that there is good old-fashioned fun to be had without iPods and video games and [who'll help] students learn to settle petty disputes, like who had the ball first or who pushed whom, not with fists but with the tried and true 'rock-paper-scissors.'"

Social critics warn parents to allow children greater freedom, particularly in play. As evidence that further decline is not inevitable, consider that March was declared Marbles Month at the Horsham Primary School in western Victoria, Australia. The game, school officials promised, would be vigorously promoted.