



TOY PARADE

While the children are away, Mom will play—or at least gather up all the animals, vehicles, and robots she can find for a procession aimed at marching into a kid's imagination.

come play with me!



Does being a grown-up mean you've outgrown child's play?
C'mon, you know you have it in you. Here are some playful
ideas for outing your inner child. BY LYNNE BERTRAND

When I was growing up in the 1960s, every free-ranging kid in my New Hampshire neighborhood (everyone out of diapers) lived to get outside and play. A knock at the door—"You coming?" "Be right out"—was the rising of a velvet stage curtain. There was a great troupe of us. We mucked around in the polliwog pond, spied on each other's hideouts, skidded around on trikes and banana bikes, played school, played house, played kickball till it was too dark to run the bases.

Parents? I never met most of the other kids' parents. They worked behind the scenes, ready with extra cardigans and bologna sandwiches, ready to call little kids back into their yards or big kids offstage for supper. Our play, full of adventure and squabbles, ran brilliant and glorious alongside the adults' workaday world.

Fast forward to the early 1990s, when I became a mother. The theater looked different in one subtle way: The adults had come onstage. They. Actually. Played. They dug to China in the YMCA sandbox. They covered center field. In surreal moments, we mothers played house, pretending to be mothers. ©2006

THE PLAY GURUS

"Everybody can make a worm." Michael Dooney, toy designer



To eight nieces and nephews, and a slew of his

friends' children, Michael Dooney is known as "the fun uncle." One of the things that Dooney—who designs action figures for *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, to name a few—has in common with his kid friends is a love of drawing.

"I like to play the 'squiggle game,'" says Dooney. "You make a random squiggle on the page; the other guy has to make a picture out of it. It works to get people drawing. It's a weird little springboard."

However, Dooney is so good at drawing that the kids he's with sometimes will stop drawing so they can watch him. He'll then switch to sculpting. "Using clay takes the whole 'Oh, I can't draw' thing away,"

says Dooney. "Everybody can make a worm."

Dooney and his friends call these play times "Sculpey Days," named for their clay of choice. A bunch of kids and adults will hang out, inventing, playing, waiting in line for the oven to bake their clay.

Even for a toy guy, though, it's hard to abandon adult impulses. On one Sculpey Day, Dooney recalls, "I'm making an alien in a spacesuit, right? And

I'm being all precious about it. I'm working on the one ear. And I turn around and the kids are holding up their stuff. 'Look, it's a dog!' Then they moosh that up. 'Look, it's a dragon!' Moosh that up. 'Look, it's a giraffe with four arms and three legs!' Meanwhile, I'm going, 'Where are my calipers?' so I can get the alien's eyes perfectly aligned. I realize I've got it all wrong. I'm not playing, I'm working."



BLOCK TOWN

In this town, there's something for everyone: Mom can make the signs for everyone's shops while the kids race cars around winding roads, making pit stops at the garage, the zoo, and Superman's home. How could you *not* want to play here?

In the middle of noticing this cultural change, I discovered something, um, awkward. Despite all the years I had logged as a child in the land of pixie dust, I no longer had what it took to play. Of course, I could throw a ball around or cuddle a doll. But I lacked a kid's untethered imagination, a bottomless capacity for messing around. What does one say in the middle of pretending to be a baby dolphin? How do you sustain enthusiasm through 8,000 rounds of Go Fish? Why didn't kids get itchy, like I did, when their SuperBalls wonged down the driveway? I couldn't switch moods fast enough to go for a quick gallop on the hairy old horse, then orga-

nize Barbie's stilettos, then thunder up and down the slide till lunch.

"Come play with us!" my kids called.

"Be right out!" I said. *But how?*

Show me how to do like you. Show me how to do it.

Alice Walker put those Stevie Wonder lyrics on the opening page of *The Color Purple*. It's what I wished for too. My kids and I would have a lot of long years ahead together if I didn't figure out how to play again.

I became a keen observer—daresay, a spy—in the world of play. I noticed that the teachers at my kids' preschool organized tidy play spaces and brought out one captivating thing at a time. (Capti-

"What they need is company and hospitality." Bev Bos, preschool director



At Roseville Community Preschool, at any given moment, you can find Bev

Bos hanging out with children while they sink their toes into a bin of flaxseed and warm water, dye a few dozen eggs (even in November), or play hide-and-seek in a small forest of recycled Christmas trees. Bos calls these items the "loose parts" of the playground at the Roseville, CA, school where she

teaches and is director—the odd, plentiful, inexpensive supplies she sets out for play.

"Children require considerably more time, space, and materials than most adults allow," Bos writes in *Tumbling Over the Edge: A Rant for Children's Play*. Two of the playground's constant loose parts are sand and water. Not puny sandboxes and puddles: Imagine, instead, trenches of water and mountains of sand, water pumps, ladders over

shallow ditches, hoses, watering cans, PVC pipes, rocks, buckets, shovels, trucks, sticks.

Bos sums up her role in play as "planner, custodian, consultant, scrounger, inventor, play partner, and gatherer who provides riches." Her method is to be extraordinarily well prepared so she can relax with the children. "I spend all day Sunday establishing the environment at school," she says.

When the children arrive for play, Bos says, "what they need

is company and hospitality, someone to hang out with them." Bos might be overheard asking, "Is anybody hungry?" "Do you need anything else?" or, one of her favorites, "How can I help you?"

Being a presence can be subtle. "We were at the water pumps one day, and one boy, Grady, was pumping like crazy," Bos says. "I'm watching him for five or six minutes. He looks over at me and says, 'We're doing this together, huh, Bev?'"



vating even to the adults.) I listened in as one of our babysitters, Liza, played make-believe in the same attentive way she talked with her girlfriends, asking questions she genuinely cared about. I watched my parents pour themselves each a cup of coffee and sit down on the floor with the kids, not up on the couch.

Taking the Plunge

Accumulating little epiphanies in this way, I gradually remembered and redefined how to play. It wasn't always pretty. I was having trouble playing dollhouse with my daughter, Georgia, who was 3 years old at the time. She had firm

ideas of how the script should read; I didn't feel like being baby Star-Flower anymore. Every day for a week, I gave up and slunk off to get my chores done, leaving us both feeling blue. Then one night, after she fell asleep, I tidied up the zillions of toys strewn all over the house and, drawing on what I'd seen at preschool, I set up one captivating thing: a festive parade of little people, cars, and animals lined up across the living room floor. In the morning, you'd have thought it was Christmas. Georgia and my then-6-year-old son, Nick, found this scene enchanting. They played all morning with the characters in it. I just sat between them, with my cup of



A Good Read

Flow by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (HarperPerennial). This book is not geared to parents, but its depiction of flow—unburdened, fulfilling immersion in an activity—will sound familiar to anyone who has seen kids at play.

"Let's go and cook dinner outside." David Sobel, nature educator



"Let's go on a little adventure." This was the invita-

tion David Sobel used to extend to his kids to get everyone outdoors. This way of thinking about being outside was in every way more enticing than, say, an invitation for a walk.

"The whole idea of 'going for a walk' is tedious. It's too goal-oriented," says Sobel, who has written several books

about children in nature, including *Children's Special Places: Exploring the Role of Forts, Dens, and Bush Houses in Middle Childhood*.

For the Sobels, even stepping into the backyard could be an adventure. They need go no farther to build fairy houses. Their favorites were created on beds of moss, with sticks, leaves, spruce cones, berries, pine needles, stones, and acorns. The kids would fill the tiny houses with furniture and

architectural details—chimneys, walkways, gardens. At night, the adults would return to add trinkets, so that the next day, to the children, it was like the fairies had left things.

When Sobel and his kids ventured farther from home, the possibilities for adventure expanded. They would make tails out of kelp at the beach. Collect tiny garnets in the sand at the lake. Take the fox puppets for a walk. Or, a constant motif: build forts. "The woods

behind our house are littered with forts, built at different times by me or Eli, or by all of us together," Sobel says. "On rainy days, if we were home together, we'd say, 'Let's go and cook dinner outside.' We'd go to the fort, a simple shelter of stacked sticks, and have a little campfire. Cook hot dogs or those aluminum foil potatoes. Being in the fort—just 100 feet from the house—changed the whole character of being together."

"A billion, jillion games."

Ari Epstein and Joan Silberlicht Epstein, parents



"Noah loves games," Ari Epstein says of his 7-year-old son. "We have a houseful of them. A billion, jillion games. Unless you're just plain not a games player, there's a game for you."

The games, says Noah's mother, Joan Silberlicht Epstein, are kept out where everyone can see them—while the TV "is away in our bedroom."

In lieu of parents' losing on purpose, there's the Switch Rule. "My dad came up with it," says Ari. "He'd say, 'I'm going to play my hardest and you're going to play your hardest. And anytime it's your move, you can just switch sides.'" The rule can be invoked by whoever is the novice—which can mean the adult, if the child is the one teaching the game.

"By the way," adds Ari, "I don't play games I don't like. Noah lists what he wants to play. I'll list what I want to play. We choose something we both like. Kids have to learn that playing with people means *they're* having fun too."

coffee, relaxed and inspired enough to "be" both a tiny red fox and a white Camaro.

Life went on like this, scene by scene, till the difficult play times were outnumbered by days full of ease.

Now, nearly 10 years later, I'm wondering if it's possible to name the elements of good play, possible even to be intentional about putting them in place. I made a list of the best play times with my kids that I could remember off the top of my head. And I made another list of the hard ones. (That was a little painful.) To my surprise, there were noticeable differences.

Getting the Ball Rolling

The good times inevitably started with an inventive idea. "What if we make tiny mice out of felt and they come visit each other for sleepovers?" was way better than "So, what's there to do?" Usually we had to shape an idea together till it felt inspired enough for us all. One time we made a big spread of a village across our living room floor and called it Block Town. There were little houses, shops, farms,

and garages. The genius of it was that you each could do whatever you felt like doing. I could make the signs for everybody's shops. My son could race tiny sports cars around town. My daughter could groom horse manes all day.

Good, fresh materials and plenty of them inspired us all. We had friends who were house-sitting in a mansion. There were so many rooms they didn't know what to do with them all, so they set up one just for building with Lego pieces. There was nothing but a low table, a soft rug, and scads of plastic pieces. You could play all day in that little room, and we did. I don't know who had more fun, the kids or the adults.

I've also learned that a foul mood does nothing for play. Get a snack. Call a friend over. Put some music on. Cozy up the house. Take a nap. Go outside. This goes for kids too.

Surprisingly, none of the good times I could recall happened in our home's playroom. Most occurred outside or in unexpected places. And many involved water—a stream, a tidal pool, the garden hose.



It helped to mix things up. The best days were when we spent some time inside, some out. Some days it was just us chickens; others involved a steady flow of good friends and their ideas. Some days I had time to play; some days I helped the kids set up for play, then got my work done. We thrived with time apart and time together. If my to-do list was more than three inches long and dinner wasn't even an idea yet, forget playing. I began to accept the fact that I couldn't play every time I was invited. And to quit feeling guilty about being human.

When you play with your kids, you're giving up the role of parent and taking on the role of,

as the Australians put it, mate. The rules of engagement are distinct to each partnership.

My kids are 12 and 15 now. What used to be child's play between us has matured. It's conversation. It's reading together or telling jokes. It's a game of spit or gin rummy. It's hanging out, watching a movie, making pies, singing or playing music. It's biking or playing Frisbee. It's having their friends and mine over at the same time. What we learned as playmates is helping us to be good friends. What makes the difference between our good times and our hard ones now? An inventive idea, a common interest, a manageable to-do list . . . I think it may be all the same stuff. T

Lynne Bertrand loves to play Jenkins Up, Guggenheim, and gin rummy. She is an avid stone skipper.



"You treat it like a primitive theater form." Vivian Gussin Paley, author and grandmother



Vivian Gussin Paley's books are filled with

stories—of love and sorrow, joy and silliness, grief, hope, and heroics. These are not novels, but nonfiction titles such as *The Boy Who Would Be a Helicopter* and *Bad Guys Don't Have Birthdays*, each a record of fantasy play from Paley's years as a teacher in early-childhood classrooms.

Over the years, observing children at the work of make-believe became, for Paley, like reading a novel or watching theater. The more she listened, the more she recognized deeply human efforts to face life's toughest questions and explore, in drama, a host of answers.

"I wish I'd known, when I was a young parent, what I know after writing all these

books," says Paley. "My conversations with my children would have been very different."

How did Paley take in so much? "I always carried a little notebook," she says. "I thought I was collecting anecdotes. I jotted down a story or a couple of lines of dialogue. But I began to realize they had a much, much deeper meaning. Later I would copy that into my journal, with interpretive material and commentary. It was all dated. I would write down what I might have said. It was the very best training for the next day with the child."

Paley also likes to join the play by offering questions and comments like a Greek chorus. What does she recommend in a rough spot—such as when a child insists you stick to the same one line of dialogue? "This depends 100 percent on the parent's knowledge of the

child," she says. "If it proves your love, you could keep doing it. Or you could say, 'You know, I'm getting tired of saying that. Tell me two other things it would be okay for the mom to say here.' Or you could say, 'You know your character that I'm playing? She gets to say, 'Uh huh, okay.' I want to write that down: 'Uh huh, okay.' What else can she say?' In this way, you treat it like a primitive theater form."

Stories and conversation are also play. Paley was at a Hanukkah party at the home of her brother, and when she saw his granddaughter sitting by herself, she sat down with the 3-year-old to talk. "So I said, 'I've been thinking about Goldilocks.' She looked at me, studying my face. I said, 'I can't figure out why she walked into the bear's house when nobody asked her to come in.' And she said, 'She

must have been hungry.' And we talked about this for awhile, about whether it was wise for Goldilocks to walk into a house that was not her own, and she said it probably looked like Goldilocks's own house.

"Do you see? I'm not asking her how old she is, or how she likes her new baby brother. We're in the world of stories. Then we sat for awhile, watching people. And then she said, 'And what about Red Riding Hood?' 'Yes! Yes!' I said. 'What about Red Riding Hood?' Later, when I had to go, I told her, 'I'm going to think about Red Riding Hood. The next time I see you, let's talk about Red Riding Hood.'

"It is my years of teaching children that tells me it makes perfect sense to start a conversation wondering about Goldilocks. And, quite frankly, I do wonder about Goldilocks."