

Exploring Childhood
Seeing Development

Child's Play

Michael Semak



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Social Studies Program
15 Mifflin Place
Cambridge, Ma. 02138

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**How is play important
to a child?**

**How can you support
a child's play?**



Play is a chance . . .



Leonard Freed



Kosti Rudhomsaa

to pretend



Nancy Serkis

to imagine what you might become



Helen Levitt

to express strong feelings



Hsiao-Ti Falcone

to be in power



**to gain confidence through
doing things**



Edward Steichen

to get to know people



David S. Moy

to develop strength and agility



Lester Kinsing

to learn to do things with others



Ira Gavrin

to learn to do new things



Lou Bernstein

to learn to help



Lutz Dille

to gain skills



to figure out how
things work

to explore the world
around you



Wayne Miller - Magnum



R. Lebowitz

Play Is Many Chances . . .

Go back to that first photo of the child playing a game of hide-and-go-seek. At first glance, you could say that this is a chance to learn about playing a game by the rules. But might the game also

- develop strength and agility?
- let the child gain confidence?
- help the child understand something about other people?
- teach the child to handle feelings?

Play offers a player many chances all at once.



A Hunt for Play

Using the questions that follow, go on a “hunt” for play. Write up as many observations as you can, of people of all ages playing at any kind of play. Be sure to include yourself and your friends.

- Who played?
- What did the player do?
- What did the player seem to be feeling?
- What do you think the player was getting out of playing?

Sharing Observations

- Brainstorm words and phrases about the play you saw. (For example, you might list things like “Lots of laughing” or “messy.”)
- How did you decide what was play?
- What was the same in all the play you observed?

Who played: _____

What did the player do: _____

What did the player seem to be feeling: _____

What was the player getting out of playing: _____

What do you think play is?

Some Ideas About Child's Play

Why do human beings play? What do they get out of playing? Why do they enjoy it? People who have thought hard about these questions have described a number of important functions of play in the lives of children. These people see play as more than an outlet for extra energy, or as a way to “mark time” until the “serious” occupations of adult life can be taken up. They see play as a way for children to find out who they are, what they feel, what they can do. Through play children investigate the world and discover objects, events, and people. Children are often told how, when, and why — they must follow rules and patterns rather than create their own. Play can be a time when they are free from that.

Following are readings about the special importance that play may have for children. As you read, think about your fieldsite. Do your observations of children playing seem to support the ideas in the readings?

Play Is for Putting New Ideas Together

Imaginative play. What imaginative play does, in the first place, is to create practical situations which may often then be pursued (as if they were real). At any moment, a new line of inquiry or argument might flash out, a new step in understanding be taken by some or all of the children playing together.

James found a long pole, which led to a play of a butcher's shop, in which Mrs. I. bought "meat," and he hooked it down with the pole. When selling a small piece of meat, he asked her, "Will that be enough — how many children have you?" She replied "Fourteen"; he laughed and said promptly, "Well, then *that* won't be enough meat."

James came down from the carpenter's room holding a monoplane he had made in wood — a couple of feet long — and walked around the school room holding it in the air, saying, "It's flying across the Atlantic." Denis (his younger brother), watching this quietly, came running to Mrs. I. after a few moments, and said, "I want my gumboots on, and I want to make a biplane." Mrs. I. was puzzled as to any connection between his gumboots and a biplane, but made no comment on this. She said, "Do you mean that you want to go up to the carpenter's room and make a biplane of wood?" "Yes," and he took her hand to pull her up. They went up together, and he ran to Mr. H. saying, "I want to make a biplane." Mrs. I. left him there, after seeing him pick up a piece of wood and say, "This will be the propeller." About twenty minutes later, he came downstairs holding a well-shaped biplane, about 15 to 18 inches long. Flushed with victory, he walked across the school-room, trying to get the attention of James and the others, and saying with intense earnestness, "Because, look! *Because look!*" Then he ran to Mrs. I. with the repeated request for his gumboots, and when these were put on, ran out into the garden, filled the sandpit with water, and walked about in the water saying, "It's flying across the Atlantic."

... The garden bonfire was often turned into an "engine" or a "house on fire," with "the firemen coming to put it out." This, in turn, led to lots of talk about firemen and fire engines and hoses and ladders, etc.; and later on, to a visit to a real fire station.

Again, in their family play, the children often modeled elaborate telephone systems from one "house" to another, which gave rise to many discussions as to the real construction and arrangement of the wires and instruments, and the working of a telephone exchange; and was later on linked up with the visit to an actual exchange . . ."

—Susan Isaacs

Play Lets the Child Imagine He or She Knows How

Shouting "I can, I can," Michael climbs on a red tricycle. His feet dangle toward the pedals. He is sure of how to pump the pedals from watching older children. But his own feet can only catch the edges of the pedals occasionally. Much as Michael wants to go tearing down the walkway, he cannot.

But there are no tears or anger. Michael grips the handlebars tightly, leans forward and roars, "Watch out for me. I am fast." All the while he is only pushing himself along with his feet, going no faster than if he were walking. But in the world of play this small boy imagines control and success. In imagining, he practices what he knows, with a joy and intensity that will rapidly bring him the mastery he wants.

Self-confidence May Come from Play

In . . . play, children also find a sense of confidence in their own impulses. There are no directions to follow, no rules to stick to. Whatever they do will be good and right. Wherever their impulses lead them, that is the way to follow. This is the freedom children should have in their play, an absence of boundaries and prescriptions that we cannot grant them outside of their play lives.

Play Lets a Child Be "In Power"

Another important by-product of play is the feeling of strength it yields to the child, a relief from the feelings of powerlessness and helplessness that many children feel keenly as junior members of our well-ordered adult world. . . . Play is the child's chance to lay the plans, to judge what is best, to create the sequence of events. Dramatic play is one of the basic ways in which children can try out their talents for structuring life.

—Barbara Biber

Play Changes with Age

This portion of *Child's Play* looks at what play offers people of different ages: infants, young children, adolescents, adults. Play offers many chances to everyone.

We all play. It is how we play that changes.



Hsiao-Ti Falcone

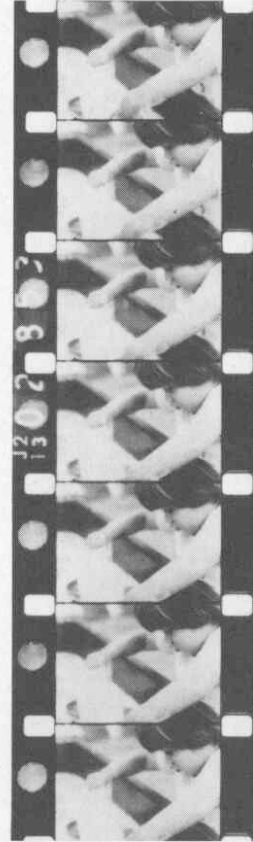


E. Trina Lipton

Half a Year Apart

The film “Half a Year Apart” contrasts the play of two children: one is two years old, the other is two and a half. The needs, interests and abilities of any child will, to a certain extent, be an expression of that child’s age. For example,

- Seven-year-olds would consider smaller building materials like Lego or Tinker Toys more challenging than big, wooden kindergarten blocks.
- Complicated rules could make a game frustrating for a four-year-old.
- Young children would have a difficult time cutting out a tiger or a Christmas tree; older children wouldn’t.
- A ten-piece puzzle might be easy for a six-year-old but difficult for a five-year-old.
- A sand table with containers, spoons, funnels, toys, etc., could be used in a variety of ways by children of different ages.



Playing at Different Ages

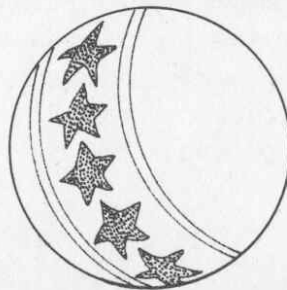
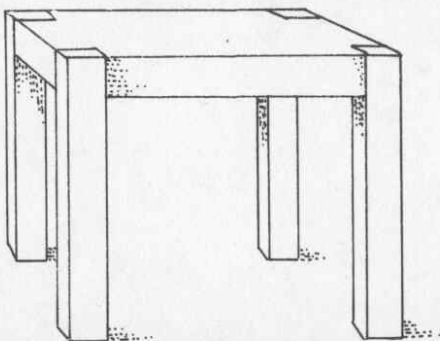
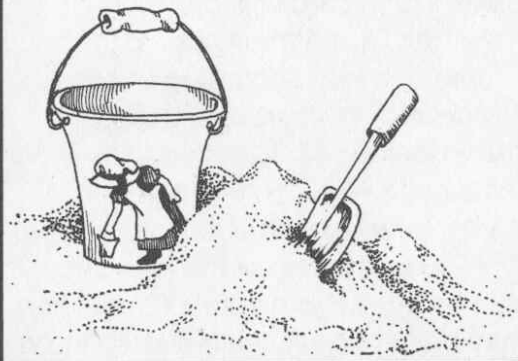
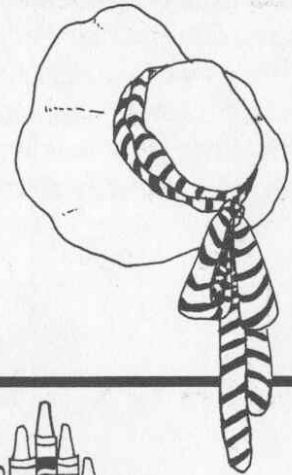
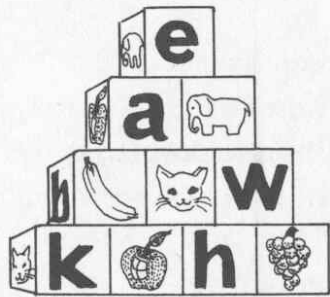
Age makes a difference in the way people play. There is a world of difference in what an infant and a school-age child do with friends and toys.

On the next page are some common items that children might play with. How would you expect an infant to play with them? a toddler? a pre-schooler? a first grader?

Divide into small groups of two to three students. Each group selects one toy to think about. Imagine how children of different ages — six months, two, four, six — might play with this toy. Think about your own childhood, casual observations of brothers, sisters, neighbors, actual fieldsite experience.

Share your ideas with one another.

Now go back to your “*Hunt for Play*.” If you compare your own play to that of young children, what changes do you find? Are there any similarities between adult play and, say, that of infants?



A Play File

Look at the data poster category “Relating to Other Children ” and you will find the play of young children described. The poster has examples of the earliest infant and toddler play as well as the play of older children.

In the previous activity, you discussed how preschoolers might play. During your next week of visits to the field-site, try out your ideas. Collect examples of the play of young children and put down your information on 4×6 index cards, using the list at right. Collect six to eight such examples.

When all class members have their observation cards ready, put them all together. One person should then order the cards according to age. Divide into small groups, with each group looking at all the cards for a particular age — all the three-year-old cards, for example. Then, as a group, write a description of the kind of play that seems to go on at this age. This may be hard because not all children of the same age have the same skills or interests. But look for the ways in which most of the children seem to play. Your description should suggest what interests children of this age and what is possible in their play.

Child

Age

Sex

Materials Used

What he/she did

What he/she seemed to be feeling

What he/she seemed to be getting from this play

What adults did

Using Your Information

Your play file and the data poster offer a wealth of information about how children play at different ages. Using this information, complete the following chart and develop some general ideas about what happens to a child's playing as he or she develops. Later you can use the chart to help you in filling out your data poster. If you don't know any children of a certain age, leave that age blank.

	Materials children like to use	What they do as they play	What they seem to get out of it
The children you work with:			
at 2			
at 3			
at 4			
at 5			
at 6			
at 7			

Share conclusions with the class, and use the information to fill out your data poster.

Summary

Look at the information you have added to the data poster in relation to the play of infants and older children. How does play change? Fill out this summary chart:

With development a child's play becomes more: _____

and less: _____

But some things remain the same no matter how old the child is: _____

Sample

Supporting Children's Play

Before you try to extend or enrich a child's play, think about some questions:

What is the child's own play like?

What materials does the child enjoy playing with?

What does he or she do well? What gives him or her a hard time?

At the same time, what you do depends on what role you are playing and what you want the children to gain through this activity.

What role will you take?

A fellow player?

A supplier of materials?

A resource for information?

An instructor?

A combination of these?

What do you want children to gain?

A specific skill?

An opportunity to work together?

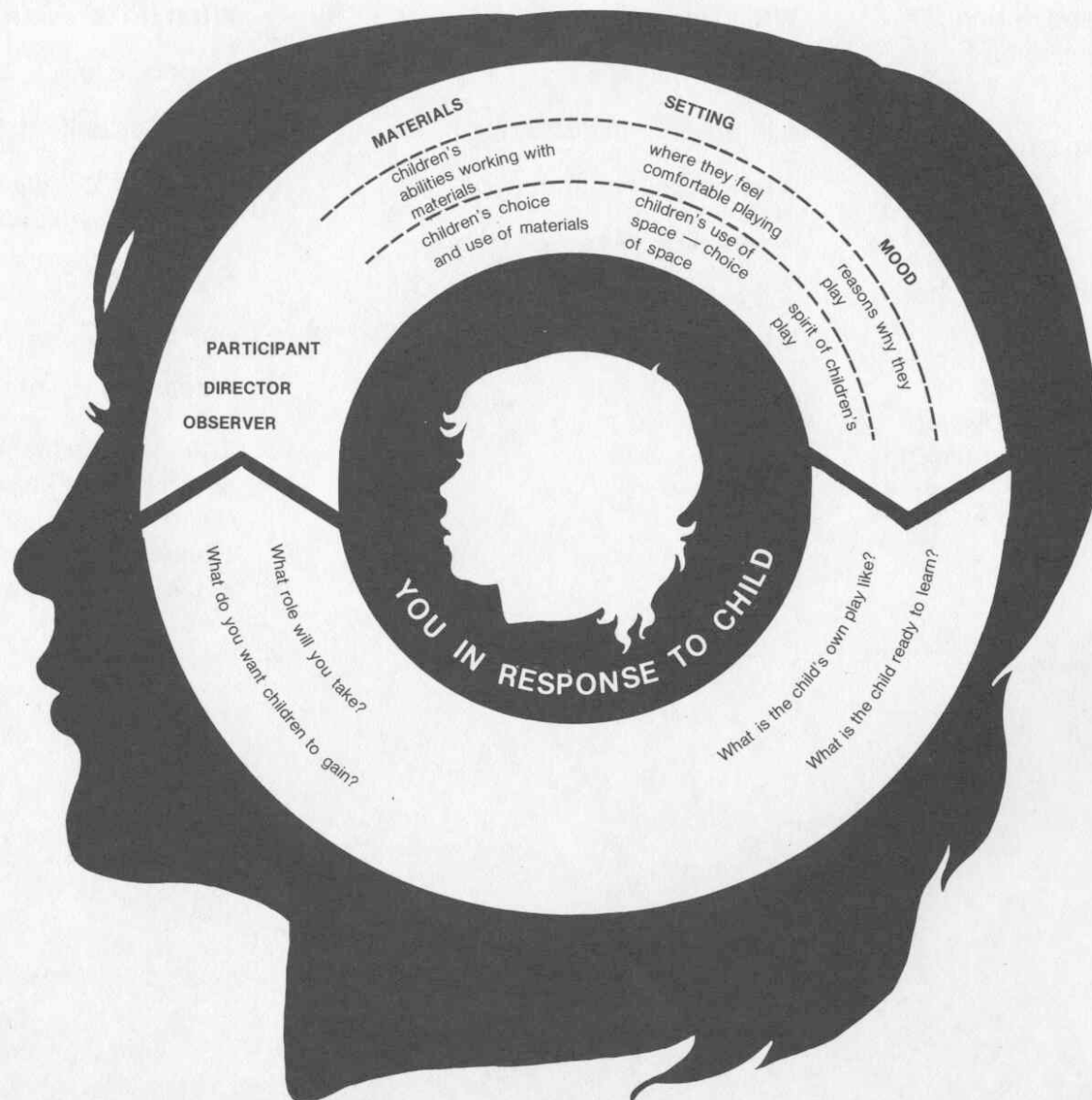
A chance to answer some of their own questions and curiosities?

A good time?

Any others?

A combination of these?

The plan you make will include ideas about the materials to be used, the place you will use, the mood you want. One way of looking at all these considerations is through a chart like this:



Experimenting with Color

Suppose you are working with a group of children who are just learning about colors and who seem to have a fascination with color naming and color mixing. You want to encourage their pleasure in color. What can you do?

How will you create a mood of learning and exploring?

How can you teach about colors and still respect the children's desires and plans?

Following are several suggestions. What others can you add?

You might set up a collage-making activity during which the children make large designs from scraps of colored paper. This would let them focus on combining and comparing colors. But what of your role? What do you see yourself doing for the children? Suppose you have two hopes: You want them to understand something new about colors, and you want them to have enough fun to go on being excited about colors. How will these aims affect your planning?

The things you set out for children to use can excite them. You might place boxes for green, blue, red, brown, black, and yellow scraps, then talk for a moment about the different colors. You might say things like,

"Look out the window. Can you find other colors to use?"

"There are lots of paintings. Do you see colors there that you like?"

"Could you make a collage with just the colors of grass and sky?"

"Could you make new colors in your collage by using the tissue paper?"

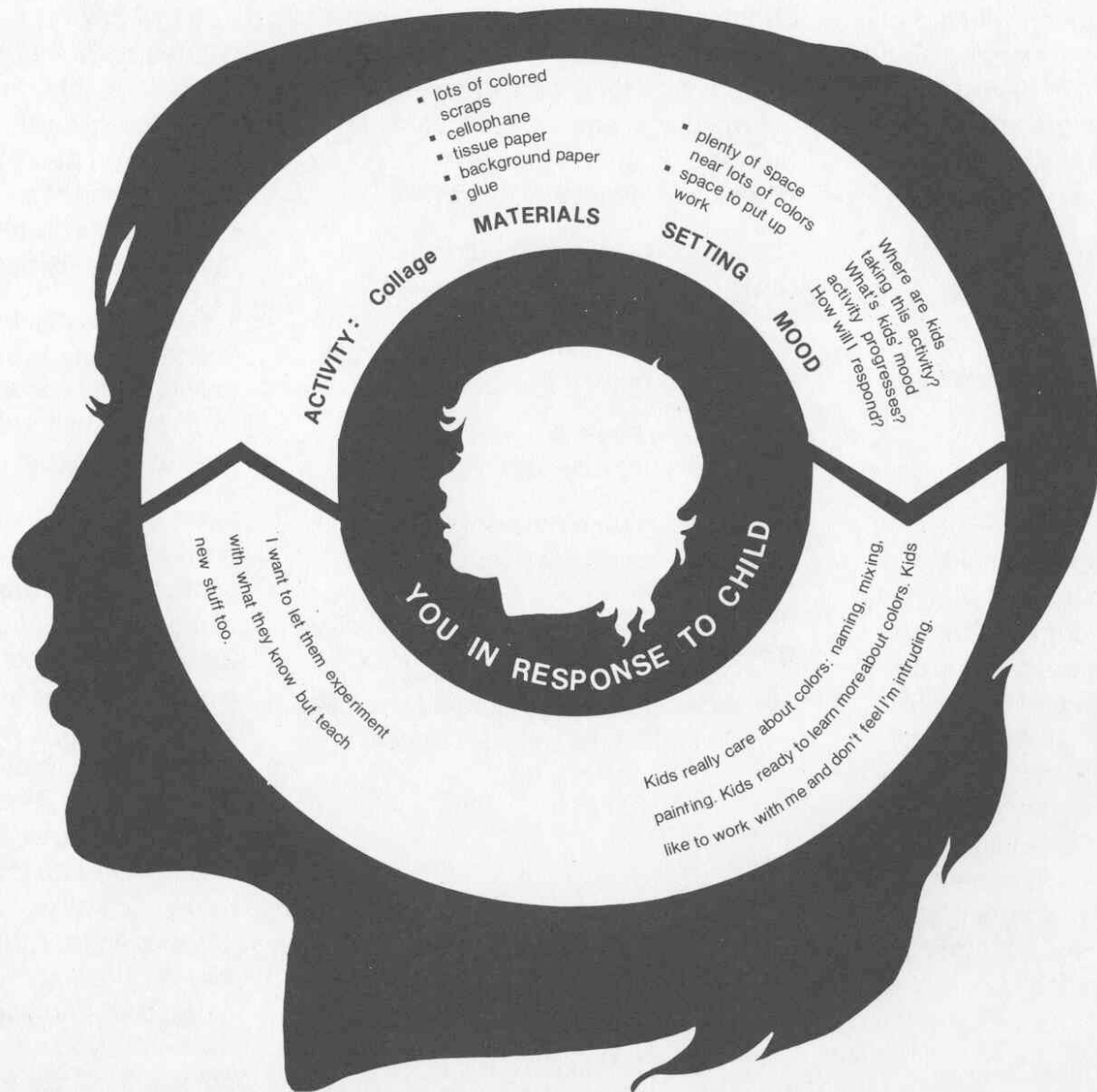
"Would some of you like to work together on a great big collage?"

"Would you like to go outside and take a good look at the colors all around you before you start?"

See to it that there is a variety of shades in each box. You could provide paper for backgrounds that will contrast strongly with the colors of the scraps. You could even provide scraps of tissue paper and cellophane, and show the children how to overlap these to create new colors.

Talk with the children about their work. You might say something like, "That yellow really shows up against that red," or "Can you find another color that is like the brown shape?"

What sort of setting would help? You want to provide lots of space, enough so that there is room to try out combinations and not be crowded or confused by a neighbor's work. You might even want to be near a window or a wall of paintings so that there would be lots of colors to talk about or take suggestions from. You want to be out of the way, in a place where the children's work will not be jostled or bumped. If there is a wall or bulletin board nearby, it is exciting for the children to hang up their work as soon as the scraps are glued on. Then you and they can talk over what you see happening with color in their collages.



Re-sorting the Play File

When you first used the play file, it was organized by age. But the file could just as well be sorted in a number of other ways and so tell you a number of different things.

Suppose you wanted to look at how materials affect children's play. How might you re-sort the file? Try it.

Choose several different materials and compare the kinds of play they encourage in children. For instance, you might look at:

**Wheeled toys
(trikes, trucks, etc.)** _____

**Crayons or
clay or play-dough** _____

Blocks _____

If children differ in their reactions to the materials, you could go on to discuss:

- What different kinds of materials could you provide?
- How could you encourage children to try a range of materials?
- What should adults know about the materials children use?

The play file might also help you to consider such questions as: Do boys play differently from girls or not? Are some materials more interesting to children of one age than to children of another age?

Joining Children's Play

Not all support of children's play needs to be a planned activity. The information on the chart is for thinking through activities, but it could help even your casual interactions with children in the fieldsite. Here are two ordinary situations that could happen any morning at the fieldsite. Using the ideas presented in the chart, how might you support these children's play:

I. Four small boys — Michael, Peter, John, and Alex — come outdoors to play and rush over to a large sandpile. When they reach the pile, these four-year-olds talk excitedly about the roads they are going to make:

Alex: Mine is going to go to Boston. It's great big.

Peter: Mine's going to go round and round, down a hill to the market.

John: This road has trucks on it that have horns. They go real fast.

Peter: Yeah, the horns are loud, more than car horns.

Michael: Alex, put your road here with me . . .

Michael and Alex connect their roads and call their longer road a "freeway." Each boy finds something — a block, a sand toy, a skate, a small spool — that they pretend are cars and trucks. As they play they make traffic noises of starting up, driving, and stopping suddenly.

II. Just on the other side of the sand pile, Tracy and Chris, two two-year-olds, play side by side. Each plays alone. They notice each other only when they both reach for the same red shovel. Tracy scoops up sand with a bucket and pours it into several small cups. Chris makes wiggly lines in the wet sand with a stick. Then as he pushes the stick in and out of the damp sand he sings to himself, "In, ouch, in, ouch, . . ." Tracy remarks, "It goes," and dumps the bucket of sand out from high in the air.

Credits

CHILD'S PLAY

Developers:

Lucy Lyons
James McMahon
John Nove
Judith P. Salzman
Susan C. Thomas
Dennie Wolf

Editor:

Marcia Mitchell

Designer:

Myra Lee Conway

EXPLORING CHILDHOOD PROGRAM

Director:

Marilyn Clayton Felt

Curriculum Coordinator:

Ruth N. MacDonald

Module Head:

Susan Christie Thomas

Project Manager:

Kathleen L. Horani

Senior Scholars:

Jerome Kagan, Professor of Human Development, Harvard University

James Jones, Assistant Professor of Social Psychology, Harvard University

Freda Reblsky, Professor of Psychology, Boston University

Consultants:

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Urie Bronfenbrenner, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Cornell University

Jerome S. Bruner, Watts Professor of Psychology, Department of Experimental Psychology, Oxford University

Betty H. Bryant, Nursery School Director, Center for Child Care Research, Educational Testing Service, Princeton, New Jersey

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Norma Arnov
Wendy Johnson Barnes
Ellen Grant

Rogier Gregoire
Toby Grover
Patricia Hourihan
Margaret Janey

Peggy Lippitt
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Karlen Lyons
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