

The Power of Play - How spontaneous, imaginative activities lead to happier, healthier children  
by David Elkind, Ph. D. Da Capo Press: 2007. 240 pp. \$24.

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My mother takes credit for me becoming a Dalcroze Eurhythmics teacher: in desperation, with three children under the age of five, she handed us pots and pans, put on a record, and left us to our own devices. Delightfully unrestrained, we created [rhythm bands and parades](#).

It is a relief to read David Elkind's heartfelt new book in which he states, "play is the child's dominant mode of learning." With numerous anecdotes from his graduate students, personal life, [field-work](#) and literature, Dr. Elkind corroborates what music educators have known [for some time](#) - that children learn best when there is a balance between work, love and play. This is the book we wish would be required reading for parents. It would help them recognize the value and importance of play and the deleterious effects of substituting television, video, or computer for old-fashioned games of skill, role-playing, and socialization.

Heeding his own advice, Elkind [has written](#) a logical, approachable, compassionate book packed with information (i.e. which computer games to buy, misunderstandings about learning, parenting dilemmas) with a sprinkling of humor. Each stage of child development is meticulously described, showing how the proportions of work/love/play change over time. I can picture this respected child development expert sitting on the floor with toddlers, sharing riddles with elementary children, shooting marbles with middle schoolers, or reading poetry with adolescents. Playful energy abounds when writing about his work.

In the inner city where I spend most of my teaching time, I have had to explain to fourth and fifth graders what I mean by "pretend," then gradually coax them in that direction. Dr. Elkind paints a frightening picture of what we stand to lose if children are not given space to exercise "their inborn disposition of curiosity, imagination, and fantasy [which are] the mental tools required for success in higher-level math and science." He elaborates on the "psychological consequences of the failure to engage in spontaneous, self-initiated play," pointing out that "the sheer number of toys owned by contemporary children weakens the power of playthings to engage children in dramatic thinking," and offers suggestions to parents and educators for ways to support inquisitiveness and inspiration in children. He writes, "Like other human potentials, imagination and fantasy can only be fully developed through practice."

The Power of Play covers a deep range of resources for understanding how children build units of literacy, math and science and recommends ways to construct the optimum learning conditions for discovery and experimentation. In reference to parents and teachers trying to inculcate rules about such things as sharing toys, table manners, grammar, or clean up, Elkind notes, "If we appreciate that these lapses reflect intellectual immaturity rather than stubbornness or rebellion, we can handle them in a playful way. When we do this, the child is more likely to learn the rule than if we criticize the child for something he cannot help." As a musician, I am intrigued by the predicament of how to point out something you are listening to. It is a bit like trying to point out a bird in a tree - it takes an effort to get your companion to see what you see. Asking a five-year old to find two eighth notes hiding in between quarter notes depends on how ready he is, how he interprets the directions, and how obvious it is. It also requires that I put myself in his shoes (ears) and track [what](#) he hears. Elkind has provided a thorough foundation for us to appreciate how reasoning skills develop, [prompting](#) me to re-examine my own proclivities for listening and to fine-tune strategies for asking children to hear.

Elkind discusses how "it is vitally important to support and encourage self-directed activities . . . even if those activities appear meaningless to us, they can have great purpose and significance for the child. Allowing the child time and freedom to complete these activities to her personal satisfaction nourishes that child's powers of concentration and attention." It strikes me that this is more typical of a Montessori classroom than a music class, since most music study occurs in time. I have asked myself, is it possible or even practical to build in more unstructured exploration into the music class? Does the way I teach make space for and respect each child's pace, rhythm and style? Dalcroze writes, "In the game as he conceives it, which springs fresh and trim and sparkling from his own little life, itself so varied, agitated, and reckless, he plays for the sake of playing . . . For it is in his nature to prefer the games invented by himself to those imposed upon him." (quoted [by Marie-Laure Bachmann, Dalcroze Today, 1991.](#)) Perhaps we can agree with Einstein that "love is a better teacher than sense of duty" and remember that

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no matter how brilliant our lessons, the work must be balanced with love - for the children and the music. "Teaching, like parenting, is most effective and most pleasurable when the instructor shares his passions with the students" urges Elkind.

Elkind is concerned that lack of creative experimentation will promote conformity. He points out that when mechanical toys break, an inquisitive child can take it apart to see how it works or fix it, whereas if a computer game or toy with a microchip breaks there is no way to know what happened. He cautions, "... children's inability to figure out how their playthings work can dampen their scientific curiosity." This brings to mind the many ways we configure music activities, from solo/chorus to bordun/improvisation. We regularly construct and deconstruct forms, often with input from the students. We combine, contrast, balance, musical elements while supporting discovery in a nurturing environment. Through musical experiences children connect with real (not virtual) events and materials. Through a child's enthusiasm, parents can be informed on how important it is to make a relationship with the body and the physical world. I am grateful that in the music world, there are many ways for a curious child to explore. Elkind writes, "... craft skills reunite us with the real world. They also reunite play, love and work."

Elkind draws our attention to the role of play in socialization and takes us through all stages, from infancy to adulthood. He discusses how games get more elaborate, complex and socially interconnected, and how these games center on "rules and rule innovation." Here is a direct correspondence to the music room. When we structure lessons to allow children to improvise/experiment with musical material and make choices about form, we are encouraging individuation as well as socialization. Emile Jaques-Dalcroze also understood the value of combining challenge, humor and inventiveness: "Early childhood is the age of improvisation, i.e. of spontaneous creation. The task of the educator is to ensure to the child the possession of the greatest possible number of full sensations. . . . The best means of training the attention of children is to play intelligently with them. Games should be joy-giving; I look upon joy as the most powerful of all mental stimuli." (Rhythm, Music and Education, 1945)

When we encourage light-hearted, practical, cooperative games for students which balance solo/accompaniment, motive/improvisation, solo/chorus, same/different, we are not just teaching a subject, we are supporting growth in the whole person. Perhaps the educational trend towards standards and seeing humans as mechanisms can be reversed starting with the spirited learning that happens in the music room. Our music activities are living questions with action solutions - ways for the child to explore himself as well as the musical material. Elkind's triad of love - work - play is an eloquent message to rekindle what we know and feel to be at the heart of life, music and teaching.

References:

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