

## ACCOUNTING FOR VARIABILITY IN MOTHER-CHILD PLAY

David F. Lancy  
Utah State University  
[dlancy@cc.usu.edu](mailto:dlancy@cc.usu.edu)

### **Mailing Address:**

Department of Sociology, Social Work and Anthropology  
Utah State University  
Logan, UT, 84322-0730

**Running Head:** Mother-Child Play

**Keywords:** mother-child play, child

## Mother-Child Play

### ACCOUNTING FOR VARIABILITY IN MOTHER-CHILD PLAY

#### ABSTRACT

This paper highlights contrasting perspectives in the study of mother-child play. One contrast emerges as we look at the phenomenon using the lens offered by anthropology as opposed to the more commonly used lens of psychology. A second contrast is apparent from on-the-ground descriptions of childhood in the ethnographic record compared to observations of children in the upper strata of modern society. Psychologists and those public agents who adopt their perspective see mother-child play—from infancy—as both necessary for normal development and an unlimited good. Its self-evident value should be impressed upon those who are as yet, unenlightened. Anthropologists not only frequently note the absence of mother-child play, but, equally important, they provide culturally-nuanced explanations for why this is so. Psychologists see mother-child play as natural, anthropologists as cultural. The paper concludes with a call to cease the wholesale exportation of a culture-specific child-rearing strategy that may be quite incongruent with native belief and practice. [Keywords: mother-child play, child]

# Mother-Child Play

## ACCOUNTING FOR VARIABILITY IN MOTHER-CHILD PLAY

### INTRODUCTION

Much of what we “know,” authoritatively, about *child development* comes from observations of western bourgeoisie parents and children. Even when the field reports of anthropologists directly contradict this conventional wisdom, these “anecdotes” are treated as interesting variations on a theme, spice to make the stew a little zestier. This paper will take a prominent issue—mother-child play—and proceed to demonstrate the dramatic contrast between the normative view that dominates both scientific and popular literature in the West and a view constructed from literature in history and anthropology<sup>1</sup>.

Even a cursory review of websites and parent-oriented trade publications, will yield the inescapable conclusion that good, effective parents play with their offspring from birth and continue, through adolescence, to take an interest in and manage the child’s toy inventory, game and sports schedule and choice of play- or team- mates. Failure in this vital role sets one’s child lose in a minefield of potentially debilitating outcomes. On the other hand, not only does one rarely see mother-child play when looking beyond our own society, if we examine the broader context in which children, traditionally, grow to adulthood, we can readily see why this is so. That is, the “cultural routines” that one commonly observes at work in childcare (Lancy 1996) are simply incompatible with mother-child play of great variety, duration or frequency. The overarching theoretical argument is that, mother-child play in contemporary elite society is much better attributed to “nurture” or culture than to nature, coupled with, in the concluding section, a pragmatic plea not to impose our culture-bound views on play on the rest of the world.

The paper draws on several sources to construct the key arguments. First, there is a robust contemporary literature—from the US, Europe and Asia—that examines, in detail, patterns of

## Mother-Child Play

mother-child play during infancy and toddler-hood (roughly ages 3 months-4 years). There is a corollary body of literature and NGO-produced material which elevates mother-child play to the level of an exportable social good. The contrasting case will be built from an in-depth ethnography of child development in a very traditional Kpelle village in Liberia (Lancy 1996) and from a multi-year-long project to review published and archived (HRAF) reports on childhood from anthropology and history (Lancy, nd). Because the thesis hinges on two broad clusters of societies, those in which mother-child play is a given and those where it is largely absent, no operational definition of play will be offered<sup>2</sup>. If an observer describes what they are witnessing as play, I take it at face value.

Arguments will be laid out as follows: First, we will examine the rare cases of adult-child play in the ethnographic record, primarily among small foraging bands—which are shown as having unique adaptation patterns that impact childcare. The next section discusses several surveys that have explored cross-cultural variation in adult-child play, showing its infrequency. A broader view of mother-child relations will help us understand why, from an emic or folk perspective, mother-infant/child play does not seem either likely or valuable. We next look briefly at fathers, showing that, they are even less likely infant playmates than are mothers. The phrase “toddler rejection,” in the title of the next section, suggests that, as children age, they are less likely to be engaged with adults than during infancy. After mapping the distribution of adult-child play in pre-modern society, we will trace its historical development in the West, noting how very recent the idea is and how shallow its penetration. That is, extensive mother-child play is a “must” only in the strata of society that expects children to, eventually, function at the top of the information economy. It is diminished or absent outside this strata. Cross-national variation—the US vs East Asia—shows somewhat different patterns of mother-child play and

## Mother-Child Play

purposes. However, both regions share mother-child play strategies linked to the development of fluent literacy—which I argue is the *raison d'être* for the practice—among other parental goals. In spite of the lack of strong empirical verification for the direct influence of parent-managed play on child development, a virtual movement has grown up to foster its dissemination. In the concluding section, I critically examine this parent-child play "cause" that has led to attempts to train lower-class parents and to export the phenomenon as a fundamental child "right" to the rest of the world.

### **LOCATING ADULT-CHILD PLAY**

Play is a cultural universal. Children are observed playing in every society studied by anthropologists. Adults, while considerably less playful, nevertheless, enjoy game playing in nearly every society (Roberts et al. 1959) recorded. However, adults' playing with children is relatively rare. When it does occur there seem to be special circumstances at work. Among Inuit pursuing their traditional mode of subsistence, mothers indulge, play with and make toys for babies and early toddlers. But then, they're stuck indoors together for long periods. The weather is so harsh most of the year, and the communities so small that sending children off to play in the village with other kids is not an option<sup>3</sup> (Briggs 1970; Crago et al. 1993). Further, there is every reason to believe that modern living conditions in which infants and toddlers are isolated from peers in single parent or nuclear households produces a parallel effect (Uno 1991:394-395)<sup>4</sup>.

Ironically, the other demographic pattern that seems to foster adult-infant play (child-child play occurs wherever more than one child is present) is the tendency for an entire foraging band to assume a role in child-care. Among Efe of Central Africa, four-month-old infants spend only 40 percent of their time with their mother and are constantly passed around the band, an average of 8.3 times per hour (Tronick et al. 1987). Hewlett has documented extremely high levels of

## Mother-Child Play

play with infants in another Central African, forest-dwelling group, the Aka, notably by fathers (Hewlett 1991). Comparative research with Ngandu farmers, near neighbors of the Aka, shows them spending far less time interacting with their infants. The effort that forager parents make to insure their baby's health and well-being, including frequent physical contact and efforts to comfort and entertain, suggests the two groups are pursuing differing reproduction strategies. Foragers may provide high quality care to preserve the lives of the relatively few children they bear while, in farming communities like the Ngandu, high fertility is coupled with a less intense concern for a given infant's welfare (Hewlett et al. 2000).

One finds, then, adult-infant and mother-infant play more commonly in foraging groups than elsewhere, including, as examples, the Yahgan of Tierra del Fuego (Gusinde 1937), the Garo from Bengal (Burling 1963) and several groups studied by the ethologist Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1983), including the Eipo of Western New Guinea and the Himba of Southwest Africa. Play includes frequent kissing, holding babies *en fesse* while talking to them, games of peek-a-boo<sup>5</sup>, and fondling the infants' genitalia. Instances of mother and father-infant play are also reported from societies dependent on maritime foraging, including, as examples, the Trobriands (Malinowski 1927), Wogeo (Hogbin 1943) and Rotuman (Howard 1970).

### **THE ABSENCE OF ADULT-CHILD PLAY**

Even among foragers, mother-child play may not be universal. In Kalahari foraging groups, other band members actually talk to and play with babies more than their own mothers.

Further,

Adults do not make toys for babies. Nor...encourage increasingly complex forms of object manipulation or object-focused language. Indeed, the folk view of development seems to emphasize a child's need for space to explore, a view that is revealed by the

## Mother-Child Play

!Kung phrase, *a n/tharo an/te* (he/she is teaching/learning him/herself). [Bakeman et al. 1990:796] these findings may challenge current theories of early communication development...that suggest that joint attention to objects with a nurturing language user is an important condition for the facilitation of language acquisition. [Bakeman et al. 1990:806]

Barry and Paxson's 1971 analysis of 186 ethnographies archived in the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) yielded wide variation in the amount of mother-infant play and display of affection. LeVine persuasively argues that mother-infant *attachment*, surely the bedrock upon which mother-child play must be built, is, on the evidence of his long-term study of Gusii mothers, not at all universal. Gusii mothers are:

extremely responsive to their infant's distress signals but quite unresponsive to their nondistress vocalizations (i.e., babbling)...mothers rarely looked at or spoke to their infants and toddlers, even when they were holding and breast-feeding them...They rarely praised their infants or asked them questions but tended to issue commands and threats in communicating with them. [LeVine 2004: 154,6]

Other research shows that the *en face* position where the mother holds the infant facing her—*de rigueur* for peek-a-boo—is common in westernized societies but rare elsewhere, as is the tendency of the mother to talk with the infant (Field et al 1981; Ratner and Pye 1984).

Beyond relatively egalitarian foraging societies, in the broader literature, we find little evidence to suggest that mother-infant play is universal or even very common. In the Whittings' cross-cultural studies of child rearing, only the middle-class American sample gave evidence of playful mother-child interaction. In the remaining 11 societies, the relationship was

## Mother-Child Play

“authoritative” (Whiting and Pope-Edwards 1988). This report from a Ganda farming community is fairly typical of what ethnographers observe or fail to observe.

If baby games were infrequent, so were hugging, nuzzling, and kissing. We saw no baby being coaxed to kiss or hug. I noted only three mothers who nuzzled and kissed their babies as they held them...Ganda mothers did not interact with their babies through toys...no instance of a mother trying to elicit a response from her baby by dangling a plaything in front of him. [Ainsworth 1967:94]

What is apparent from the literature is that there are many forces that work against the likelihood of mother-child play.

### **FACTORS MITIGATING AGAINST MOTHER-CHILD PLAY**

Unfortunately, quantitative studies of mother-child play that would yield a metric we might use in comparing incidence cross-culturally are rare. However, the argument that mother-child play is uncommon can be bolstered by a consideration of broader issues that impinge on mother-child relations. That is, I hope to show in this section that prevailing emic views (outside modern middle-class society) held of infants and toddlers are compatible with low expectations for observing mother-child play.

High infant mortality is an unfortunate fact-of-life that most societies must adapt to. In rural Guinea-Bissau, for example, child mortality between birth and five is over 33% and mothers are “not expected to engage in any kind of communication with [their] newborn” (Einarsdottir 2004:73). While few mothers react to the death of a newborn with apparent callous indifference—“without weeping” (Scheper-Hughes 1989)—still, a muted response to the newborn is widely expected. Among the Ayoreo, it is not unusual for the newborn to remain



## Mother-Child Play

unnamed for several weeks or months, particularly if the infant is sickly. The reason given is that should the child die, the loss will not be so deeply felt (Bugos and McCarthy 1984:508).

Babies are often threatened by the machinations of evil spirits and spell-casting neighbors. Folk theories about the infant's precarious existence may prescribe treatment that is anything but play-like. Ideally, they are tucked away and kept quiet through frequent nursing. For example, on the Malay Peninsula, Chewong—forest-dwelling bands—believe children's:

Bodies are not strong, their *ruwai* are not strong, their smell is not strong, and...the bonds between these various aspects of the person [are]...not yet stabilized...The fact that children are ill much more often than adults is taken as proof of the above assertions... Numerous...prescriptions and proscriptions exist to protect the child from a disintegration of the self and from the attacks of harmful beings [Howell 1988:153-154].

Aside from un-assisted mortality, infants are subject to the resource conserving decisions of their parents and the community at large. From South American nomadic foragers (Wagley 1977) to the ancient Greeks (Colón and Colón 2001) infanticide has been defined as acceptable—even mandatory. From changelings in Medieval Europe (Gies and Gies 1987) to snake children in Mali (Dettwyler 1994)—societies have provided a comforting rationale for infanticide. But, again, if there's some chance that the infant will be culled, what incentive is there to play with it?

## Mother-Child Play

As anthropologists slowly uncover emic or native theories of child development (Harkness and Super 1996), we find a rich variety of ideas. In many cases, the folk theory states, in effect, “a quiet baby is a healthy baby.”

The apparent goal of virtually every [Yucatec Maya] care routine is to produce a contented, quiet baby...The typical pattern of care contributes to the soothing effect. Infants are almost never stressed by overstimulation...To induce long naps in older infants so mothers can attend to household chores, mothers carefully and routinely give infants cool baths, powder and dress them in clean clothes, and then feed and rock them to sleep. [Howrigan 1988:41]

Mechanical aids, such as swaddling (Calvert 1992), cradleboards (Chisholm 1980), cradles, and carrying slings all contribute to keeping the baby in a kind of benign coma<sup>6</sup>. Consistently, then, the patterns we see in the treatment of babies are patently at odds with playful, stimulating interaction.

Meanwhile, although “they are vulnerable, babies are not thought to be perceptive or cognizant during this early period” [Platt 1988:274]. There seems to be a common belief that babies are, essentially, brainless, and that communicating with them, in any form, would be a waste of time. On Ifaluk Island,

Infants younger than two years of age do not have any thoughts/feelings—*nunuwan*— Without *nunuwan*, they are not intelligent and do not know right from wrong, so... it’s useless...talking to babies younger than two, because they cannot understand what you say. Children do not acquire adult-like intelligence—known as *repiy*—until they are about five or six years old. [Le 2000:216,18]

## Mother-Child Play

Others who have studied mother-infant relations in non-western societies, the Kaluli, for example, also note the absence of speech directed towards the infant who has, as yet, “no understanding” [Schieffelin 1990: 72]. Alternatively, when village parents do take the trouble to shape their baby’s behavior to some end, play, or speech, may not be a suitable medium. Among the Sepik-area Gapun, aggression and argumentation are highly valued, hence: “When mothers visit one another, they sometimes hold their babies close together and encourage them to fight...Babies...near a dog are encouraged to hit the dog, not pet it“ [Kulick 1992:119].

Not only are mothers, generally, not expected to stimulate the baby’s mental development through play or other forms of interaction, there is the sense that, to do so might interfere with the child’s in-born character and sense of autonomy (Rogoff 2003; Sorenson 1976). The child is expected to develop, unaided, a fascination with the activities of those older than herself and a powerful desire to emulate them (see !Kung example earlier).

As nursing mothers are also, typically, the most productive members of society, the actual care of infants, often falls to others. In an important HRAF survey, Weisner and Gallimore (1977) found that across nearly 200 societies, 40 percent of infants and 80 percent of toddlers were cared for primarily by someone other than their mother, most commonly, older sisters. In my observations of Kpelle infants, they were suckled by their mothers on demand, following which, they were passed back to a sister-nurse to tend, while their mothers resumed fieldwork (Lancy 1996). Among the Ibo:

When a baby is born it is given, after being washed, to a small child to carry into the house...Almost at once it will in part be looked after by quite small children. I have seen

## Mother-Child Play

a little girl of about five or six carrying a newly born baby over her shoulder, or sitting down and giving it water to drink. [Green 1964:80]

Babies may be played with by a diffuse array of caretakers (Morton 1996) and as the following observation from Fiji suggests, parents, because of their roles as disciplinarians (Wolf 1972), may be the least likely playmates.

The ties between the child and his grandparents grow closer...His grandparents become a refuge to him, for he knows that they will always welcome him and protect him from the scolding and ill temper of his parents. [Thompson 1940:38]

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that prosperity and a reduction of women's work automatically leads to the release of a natural and unfilled need on the part of mothers to play with their offspring. On the contrary, it seems that, repeatedly in history, one of the first signs of women's emancipation has been to turn over infant and childcare to wet-nurses, nannies and tutors<sup>7</sup> (Golden 1990; Janssen and Janssen 1996; Rawson 1991; Shahar 1990) and this was true well into the last century in the US (Beatty 1995).

### **WHAT ABOUT FATHERS?**

In only a very few societies are fathers expected to play a role in infant care, notably among Central (Fouts 2005; Hewlett 1991) and East (Marlowe 1999) African foragers, who are reported to play with and entertain babies. More commonly, father-child aversion is enshrined in well-established customs. Klamath fathers who attend to children are chided as "unmanly" (Pearsall 1950). Ifaluk fathers may be quarantined from their wives and new offspring from birth (Le 2000). Kipsigis fathers are often considered a direct or indirect (via intercourse with the mother) threat to the infant (Harkness and Super 1991). "The Enga believe that a baby will die should the

## Mother-Child Play

parents cohabit, because it may drink the father's war magic with its mother's milk. [and]...

Accidental exposure to the gaze of a man who has "strong" war magic is believed to kill the new born" (Gray 1994:67). And, vice-versa, in many areas of Papua New Guinea, association with women (and their offspring) is seen as debilitating to men (Herdt 1982). On Tonga, specific *tapu* proscriptions separate children from their father's person as well as his possessions (Morton 1996).

In a search of the Human Relations Area Files, we found a few additional references to father-infant interaction but they all followed a curious pattern we've labeled "baby parading" (Lancy and Grove 2006). Here are two examples:

...among the Eipo, fathers pick up their baby at the women's area and carry it...for half and hour or so, getting friendly attention...[Eibl-Eibesfeldt 1983:208]...His [Fijian] father does not play with him...,but occasionally he takes the child on his back to attend a meeting or to visit a neighbor [Thompson 1940:39].

This behavior probably makes neither a significant contribution to childcare nor to the child's play experience. What it may fit is the "show-off" model where conspicuous success and largess in hunting increases a man's reproductive fitness (Hawkes 1991). A man who parades a healthy infant and demonstrates his own nurturing personality may, similarly, improve future mating prospects.

Overall, even when the society places a high value on shared infant-care, fathers find better things to do. In a comparative study of Utah Mormon society, where father involvement with children is prescribed and Japan, where it is not expected, the investigators were surprised to find no appreciable difference. Father involvement (compared to mother-involvement) in childcare was low in both cases (Shwalb and Shwalb 2005). Still, studies show that mainstream US

## Mother-Child Play

fathers, while playing less with their offspring than mothers, nevertheless behave as if this is a natural and appropriate part of their role, a view not shared in all modern societies (Kagitçibasi and Sunar 1992; Lamb 1987; New 1994; Uno 1991).

### **TODDLER REJECTION AND ADULT ANTIPATHY TOWARDS PLAY**

If mother-infant play is uncommon, mother-toddler play is virtually non-existent, even in societies where play with infants is observed, e.g. [Efe]...mothers play little with their 1-year-olds” (Morelli and Tronick 1991:104). The mother of a toddler not only faces potential conflict between child-care and work, she’s likely pregnant as well. Once again, Central African foragers (Bofi) anchor one pole of this dimension, with long inter-birth intervals (IBI) and relaxed weaning thus extending the period of infancy and of mother-child play. Fouts documents the contrasting pattern found among Bofi-speaking farming communities where IBI are much shorter, and weaning is forced—“mothers usually covered their nipples with... a bandage to resemble a wound” (Fouts 2004:138).

More commonly, the mother applies hot pepper to her nipples to hasten weaning and this is reported to be quite efficacious (Culwick 1935). But the net effect is to abruptly terminate infancy—much to the child’s chagrin. Custom fully supports abrupt weaning following the onset of pregnancy. For example, any signs of illness is attributed to the nursing child imbibing breast milk that has been contaminated by the new fetus (Cosminsky 1985).

Clearly, however, denying the child the breast is only one among many signs of rejection. Long term observers of the !Kung (Ju/’hoansi) have noted the dramatic transformation in childhood as the foragers settled down to mixed farming. The IBI shortened, fertility increased and the formerly loving, indulgent mothers had to ruthlessly separate their toddlers from

## Mother-Child Play

themselves (Draper and Cashdan 1988; Konner and Worthman 1980; Lee 1979). Here's the Hawaiian version of this common story:

Hawaiian mothers are indulgent of infants...to the point of fostering extreme dependency. After...the next child is born...The [toddler's] overtures are increasingly punished and he is forced to rely...on...older children. [Gallimore et al. 1969:393]

These are not the kind of conditions that foster mother-child play. On the contrary, I would argue that the mother's greatest ally, at this point in the child rearing process, is the magnetic attraction of the sibling or neighborhood play group (Parin 1963). The last thing a pregnant mother wants is for her child to see her as an attractive play partner,

With the arrival of the next sibling, *dénanola* (infancy) is over. Now, play begins...and membership in a social group of peers is taken to be critical to *nyinandirangho*, the forgetting of the breast to which the toddler has had free access for nearly two years or more. As one [Mandinka]mother put it, "Now she must turn to play." [Whittemore 1989:92]

However, "toddler rejection" (Weisner and Gallimore 1977:176) is by no means limited to the mother, a common theme suggests that the rejection is community-wide (Field 1970; Gallimore et al. 1974; Levine 1965; Levy 1973; Van Stone 1965). And aside from an unwillingness to play with children themselves, adults may harbor doubts about the value of play in general (Lancy 2001; Gaskins et al, 2006.). On Malaita, parents rely on child messengers to accurately report community news and gossip and, hence, discourage fantasy and inventive story-construction (Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo 2001). Among forest-dwellers, parents may condemn play as exposing children to potentially fatal dangers (Kaplan, and Dove 1987).

## Mother-Child Play

But the primary reason adults are likely to take a jaundiced view of children at play is because they'd rather see them working (Bock and Johnson 2004; Munroe et al. 1984). "The ideal [Mayan] child is hardworking, obedient, and responsible; he does not waste his time in play" (Modiano 1973:55). "Overworked [Yoruba]...mothers, attempt to get more work out of children by prohibiting play, which they perceive as manifestation of indolence and hedonism that will be maladaptive in the future" (Oloko 1994:211). "[Hadza]...children are assigned many chores and errands...Adults, not surprisingly, are largely intolerant of children's play" (Blurton-Jones 1993:317).

To sum up, what I've found is that, outside the educated elite in contemporary, urban societies, parents see play as affording them relief from the care of children beyond infancy. At best, they look appreciatively on play as something that keeps their youngsters distracted and out of the way so that they can get their work done (Gaskins 1996, Lancy 1996) or relax from their labors.

### **RE-VALUING CHILDREN'S PLAY**

The idea of mother-child play as an essential component of normal child development seems to be quite recent, even in complex, literate societies (Manson 1975). The Puritans, credited by historians with being the first society to propose specific responsibilities for parents in child-rearing, publishing over a hundred tracts for parents before the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Sommerville 1992), but they strongly condemned play, in general and, especially, parent-child play (Pollock 1983). As recently as 1914, the *Infant Care Bulletin* of the US Department of Labor's Children's Bureau warned against the dangers of playing with a baby because "it produced unwholesome [erotic] pleasure and ruined the baby's nerves" (Wolfenstein 1955:172). It wasn't until the 1940



## Mother-Child Play

edition that “Play, having ceased to be wicked, having become harmless and good, now becomes a duty” (Wolfenstein 1955:173).

Adriana Zelizer details the gradual change that transformed children from future farmers or factory workers—adding their critical bit to the household economy—to economically worthless but emotionally priceless cherubs. “While in the nineteenth century a child’s capacity for labor had determined its exchange value, the market price of a twentieth-century baby was set by smiles, dimples, and curls” (Zelizer 1985:171). And, in a more recent history, Gary Cross asserts: “Today, as perhaps never before, we are obsessed with kids. We come close to worshipping them” (Cross 2004:4).

With modernization, fertility dropped, demand for child workers dried up, and suburbia mushroomed. Gone was the extended family, the “mother ground” where children played under the casual supervision of adults in the vicinity (Lancy 1996:84-6) and the large brood of sibling playmates. In their place we have an image of the carefree young mother pushing her toddler on a swing in the back yard. An image that owed as much to mass media and marketing became enshrined in academic discourse as well (Trevanthen 1983:159).

### **PARENT-CHILD PLAY IN MODERN SOCIETIES**

In this and the next section, I’d like to situate mother-child play in the precise cultural milieu in which it thrives<sup>8</sup> and, further attempt to account for its perceived adaptive value. The mother-child play described in contemporary textbooks (Scarlett, et al 2005) is largely an artifact of modern, middle-class society where parents have relatively high levels of formal schooling. Artin Göncü and colleagues have done cross-national research on the phenomenon. Middle-class mothers in the U.S. and Turkey along with village mothers in India and Guatemala were given some guidance and encouragement to play with their children. Like Taiwanese and U.S. mothers

## Mother-Child Play

(Haight, et al 1999; Morelli et al 2003; Rogoff, et al, 1993), the middle-class, urban Turkish subjects showed considerable facility in playing with their children<sup>9</sup>. In sharp contrast with these middle-class urban mothers, village mothers:

Appeared to interpret...exploring novel objects, as an appropriate context for children to play with the objects independently, not as a context for adult-child interaction or play... [while children played with the objects, mothers]...returned to their chores. [Göncü et al. 2000:322]

Even in acculturating societies, parent-child play is absent. Of the Lebou in Senegal, Bloch writes: “collaborative play...between parents and other adults and children was indeed rare” (Bloch 1989:145). And in the United States, ethnographers have noted the reduction if not complete absence of mother-child play in lower-class households (Heath 1990; Ward 1971).

However, as researchers have observed play between middle-class mothers and their offspring cross-nationally, the influence of differing values is apparent. In practices that may be related to aspects of Chinese culture of great antiquity, Chinese mothers go to considerable lengths to bind their infants to themselves emotionally (Potter 1987) and play is used as a means to this end. This powerful attachment is fundamental to two inter-related goals that all Chinese (and Japanese (Lebra 1994) and Korean (Cho 1995) as well) parents share. First, the mother is the child’s first and most important teacher. She is responsible for socializing the child to restrain its own desires and adopt a cooperative and deferential attitude towards others. Failure to do so brings scorn on the parents and humiliation for the mother.

The Chinese mother is also responsible for insuring that the child strives to be successful in school (Stevenson et al. 1992). China and, by extension, Japan and Korea, has operated, since the time of Confucius, as a meritocracy. One’s political and economic standing are determined, to an

## Mother-Child Play

extraordinary degree, by one's success in national examinations. And, society charges the mother, quite specifically, with insuring that offspring, especially male, are steadfast in pursuing their studies.

Until quite recently, Asian parents had a very direct stake in their child's success as their future well-being depended on the caretaking zeal and largess of their grown children. Hence the mother works extremely hard to insure that her child will respond to her direction as teacher as well as to feel deep filial piety and gratitude towards both parents for the remainder of their lives and beyond (Kim and Choi 1994; Lebra 1994; Uno 1991; Wu 1995).

Wendy Haight and colleagues (Haight 1999; Haight et al. 1999) have conducted extensive observations of Chinese (Taiwanese) mother-toddler play. Influenced by Confucian principles, mothers take considerable pains to use pretend play as a vehicle to promote an awareness of social relations and of appropriate vocabulary and manners for social interaction—especially with various adults including sales clerks. Mothers also use didactic means to familiarize their toddlers with the kind of academic routines typically found in preschool.

Values projected by Euroamerican mothers are, as Haight suggests, somewhat different. Curiosity, creativity, virtuosity and the ability to hold one's own in a mixed social group may be stressed. In the United States and Europe, social welfare programs have lessened parents' dependence on their offspring for financial support. Nevertheless, I have a sense that, among the intelligentsia, mothers cultivate their children for their future value as social capital—as friends, correspondents and confidants. Mothers, in playing with and reading to their children, may be establishing a lifetime relationship of enormous value—especially when we consider our high mobility and the socially isolating effects of suburban sprawl and urban angst. Taylor's (1983) case studies of mother-child interaction in highly educated families illustrate this phenomenon.

## Mother-Child Play

The common theme in these reports of high levels of mother-child play and verbal interaction is that children are being groomed for success in academic settings and, eventual participation in the information economy. Where children are not seen as having such futures, because parents equate current social class with destiny, their mothers may not spend time playing with them (Kusserow 2004; Lareau 2003; Martini 1995; Morelli et al 2003). Indeed, parent-child play joins a regimen of expensive and time-consuming activities that parents contribute to their child's development, including: setting challenges for the child and praising effort and persistence ("Good job!" [Rogoff 2003:307]); bedtime story reading and other literary activities (Lancy 1994); organized sports (Fine 1987; Sokolove 2004) and private lessons in music, art and academic subjects (Schneider et al. 1994).

### **MOTHER-CHILD PLAY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF NARRATIVE**

Beyond sociability and general school readiness, the one purported benefit of mainstream U.S. mothers' play intervention that has received much attention in the literature and seems intuitively compelling is the development of narrative competence (Pellegrini and Galda 1994). Infants need no incentive or guidance in order to play with objects; they are programmed to do so. Nevertheless, the educated mothers we're concerned with do invest a great deal in managing the baby's interaction with objects. The typical American nursling is surrounded with manufactured toys that represent a range of colors, textures, sounds and shapes. They are designed to stimulate visual search and examination, auditory acuity and tactile sensitivity. Mothers actively guide the baby's exploration leading him or her to discover attributes they might otherwise overlook. But a prominent feature of these interactions is the parent labeling objects and holding two-way (where parent supplies both parts) conversations with the baby about them (Thiessen et al. 2005).

## Mother-Child Play

Mothers encourage fantasy and make-believe even before the child begins to pretend on its own. They do this by providing character toys and dolls and the props to go with them. Special play spaces in the home are common. With infants, mothers may model pretending for the child, by holding up and making a stuffed animal or doll talk. With toddlers and pre-schoolers, they provide play scripts and embellish their children's early fantasy constructions (Howes and Matheson 1992)<sup>10</sup>. Not limited by make-believe that merely incorporates the reality around them (characteristic of village children's make-believe), middle-class mothers actively lead children into realms of fantasy where a wide vocabulary can be brought into play and the child can experiment with hypothetical characters, relationships and situations. Studies repeatedly show that imaginative, playful mothers successfully "push" children to higher levels of symbolic play (Bornstein 2006). These children seem to demonstrate enhanced symbolization abilities (Haight 1999). They learn to "talk like a book" (Martini 1995:58) before they learn to read. The play space is populated with a continuous stream of new toys, adjusted to expand on various active story-lines, and to reflect a developmental progression as the child's play narratives become more sophisticated (Haight and Miller 1993).

However, verifying the long causal chain between pretend play with infants to rapid acquisition of reading has been difficult. Careful review of experimental research shows only a very tenuous relationship between play and enhanced cognitive functioning (Smith and Cowie 1991), for example, probably due to the fact that the positive studies "exhibited several methodological drawbacks" (Smith 2002:131). A healthy skepticism by researchers regarding the instrumental value of play dates at least to the 1980s and "has continued into the 1990s, [while] research activity has waned"<sup>11</sup> (Power 2000:xi).

## **THE PROMOTION OF MOTHER-CHILD PLAY**

## Mother-Child Play

In spite of the absence of strong experimental verification for the value of mother-child play in reading readiness, the child's overwhelming need to play—almost from birth—seems to offer a window of opportunity to jump-start academic preparedness. Even a casual perusal of popular literature (Auerbach, 1998; Mikelson n.d.; Sargent 2003; Singer 2003) and the internet yields a plethora of individuals and well-funded organizations (Alliance for Childhood 2004; Australian Childhood Foundation 2005; Earth Easy 2005; Nemours Foundation 2005; Playing for Keeps 2005) that aim to promote and guide parent-child play. MacDonald argues: "...the movement to encourage higher levels of parent-child play among lower-class-families ...is...an attempt to modify parenting practices towards a high...investment parenting style...ideally suited to life in an advanced postindustrial society." [MacDonald 1993: 128-129]

A well-informed, conscientious parent in the United States, Europe or East Asia would have a difficult time not accepting the charge to carefully orchestrate their child's play curriculum<sup>12</sup>. Don't we all now "know" that, left to their own devices, children can injure themselves in play? We fear that their innocence can be compromised by violent or sexually suggestive images that filter into much of the commercial successful children's media (Sternheimer 2003). Inappropriate playmates threaten the trajectory we've carefully set for them. Without a rich play life, our children's emotions may be blunted. But what about less-well-informed parents?

So powerful is the influence of the parent-child play movement (which includes teachers and parent organizations) that policymakers have embraced various schemes to alter the behavior of parents<sup>13</sup> who may not otherwise play with their children. Considerable sums have been spent by anxious governments to teach parents how to play with their offspring. This is undertaken at least in part to "level the playing field" in terms of better preparing poor children for school<sup>14</sup>

## Mother-Child Play

(Greenspan 1990; Laosa, 1980; Levenstein 1976). Here's an example from the state of Massachusetts:

Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) emphasizes the parent-child verbal interaction critical to early brain development...Home Visitors help parents to realize their role as their child's first and most important teacher, and generate excitement about learning and verbal interaction in the home through books, toys, and play. [PCHP 2004]

In the developed countries, this campaign may have some utility but an extremely influential organization, The International Association for the Child's Right to Play would take the parent-child play movement to the entire globe. Founded in 1961, the organization has campaigned through the United Nations to define children's opportunity to play as one of the fundamental human rights. At their 2005 annual meeting, attendees were welcomed by the President of the Federal Republic of Germany with these words:

Children at play not only require the understanding of adults but also their active support and participation. Parents must find the time to play with their children...I am especially happy when adults regard the noise of playing children as the music of the future.

[International Play Association 2005]

This statement is tantamount to a condemnation of the child-rearing beliefs and behaviors of three-fourths of the world's parents and completely unjustified by either the experimental literature in child development or, especially, the ethnographic literature. There are plentiful examples throughout the ethnographic record where mother-child play is not valued and this should not be viewed as a sign of deficiency or neglect. Parents in these societies can, when pressed, cite numerous reasons why playing with children might not be a good idea<sup>15</sup>. As a final

## Mother-Child Play

caution, we must be wary that efforts to promote parent-child play are not driven by the desire to use play to "...civilize the irrational natives." [Sutton-Smith1993:27]

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the editors and to Suzanne Gaskins, Wendy Haight, Barbara Polak and Peter Smith for critical feedback on earlier drafts of this paper. The tremendous assistance of Annette Grove is also gratefully acknowledged.

### REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, Mary D.  
1967 Infancy in Uganda: Infant Care and the Growth of Love. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Alliance for Childhood  
2004 <http://www.allianceforchildhood.net/projects/play/index.htm>, accessed July 15, 2005.
- Allison, Ann  
1991 Japanese mothers and obentōs: The lunch-box as ideological state apparatus. Anthropological Quarterly. 64, 195-208.
- American Association for the Child's Right to Play  
2005 [http://www.ipausa.org/ipa\\_un.htm](http://www.ipausa.org/ipa_un.htm), accessed July 15, 2005.
- Auerbach, Stevanne  
1998 Dr. Toy's Smart Play : How To Raise A Child With a High PQ. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Australian Childhood Foundation  
2005 <http://www.kidscount.com.au/info/play.asp>, accessed July 15, 2005.
- Bakeman, Roger, Lauren B. Adamson, Melvin Konner, and Ronald B. Barr  
1990 !Kung infancy: The social context of object exploration. Child Development 61:794-809.
- Barry, Herbert L., III, and Leonora M. Paxson  
1971 Infancy and early childhood: Cross-cultural codes 2. Ethology 10:466-508.
- Beatty, Barbara  
1995 Preschool Education in America: The Culture of Young Children from the Colonial Era to the Present. New Haven: Yale University Press.



## Mother-Child Play

Bloch, Marianne N.

- 1989 Young Boys' and Girls' Play at Home and In the Community: A Cultural-Ecological Framework. *In The Ecological Context of Children's Play*. Marianne N. Bloch and Anthony D. Pellegrini, eds. Pp. 120-154. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Blurton-Jones, Nicholas

- 1993 The lives of hunter-gatherer children: Effects of parental behavior and parental reproduction strategy. *In Juvenile Primates*. Michael E. Pereira and Lynn A. Fairbanks, eds. Pp. 309-326. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bock, John and Sara E. Johnson

- 2004 Subsistence ecology and play among the Okavango Delta peoples of Botswana. *Human Nature* 15(1)63-82.

Bornstein, Marc

- 2006 On the significance of social relationships in the development of children's earliest symbolic play: An ecological perspective. *In Play and Development: Evolutionary, Sociocultural, and Functional Perspectives*. Artin Göncü and Suzanne Gaskins eds. Pp. 101-120. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum

Briggs, Jean L.

- 1970 Never in Anger: Portrait of an Eskimo Family. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, Jerome S. and Virginia Sherwood

- 1976 Peekaboo and the learning of rule structure. *In Play—Its Role in Development and Evolution*. Jerome S. Bruner, Allison Jolly and Kathy Sylva, eds. Pp. 277-286. New York: Basic Books.

Bugos, Peter E. and Lorraine M. McCarthy

- 1984 Ayoreo infanticide: A case study. *In Infanticide: Comparative and evolutionary perspectives*. Glenn Hausfater and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, eds. Pp. 503-520. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Burling, Robbins,

- 1963 Rengsanggri: Family and Kinship in a Garo Village. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Calvert, Karin

- 1992 Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900. Boston: Northeastern University Press.

Chisholm, John S.

- 1980 Development and adaptation in infancy. *New Directions for Child Development*. 8:15-30.

## Mother-Child Play

Cho, Hae-Joang

- 1995 Children in the examination war in South Korea: A cultural analysis. In Children and the politics of culture. Sharon Stephens, ed. Pp. 141-168, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press,

Clark, Cathleen B.

- 1977 A preliminary report on weaning among chimpanzees of the Gombe National Park, Tanzania. In Primate Bio-social Development: Biological, social, and Ecological Determinants. Suzanne Chevalier-Skolnikoff and Frank E. Poirier, eds. Pp. 235-260, New York: Garland Publishing.

Colón, Angel R., with Colón, Patricia A.

- 2001 A history of children: A socio-cultural survey across millennia. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Cosminsky, Sheila

- 1985 Infant feeding practices in rural Kenya. In Breastfeeding, Child Health and Birth Spacing: Cross-cultural Perspectives. Valerie Hull and Mayling Simpson, eds. Pp. 35-54. London: Croom Helm.

Crago, Martha B., Betsy Annahatak, and Lizzie Ningiuruvik

- 1993 Changing patterns of language socialization in Inuit homes. Anthropology and Education Quarterly, 24:205-223.

Cross, Gary

- 2004 The Cute and The Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture. New York: Oxford University Press.

Culwick, Arthur T.

- 1935 Ubena of the Rivers. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Dettwyler, Katherine A.

- 1994 Dancing Skeletons: Life and death in West Africa. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland

Draper, Patricia, and Cashdan, Elizabeth

- 1988 Technological change and child behavior among the !Kung. *Ethnology* 27: 339-365.

Earth Easy

- 2005 [http://eartheasy.com/play\\_pc\\_activities.htm](http://eartheasy.com/play_pc_activities.htm), accessed July 15, 2005.

Edgerton, Robert B.

- 1992 Sick Societies: Challenging the Myth of Primitive Harmony. New York: The Free Press.

Eibl-Eibesfeldt Irenäus

## Mother-Child Play

- 1983 Patterns of parent-child interaction in a cross-cultural perspective. *In The Behavior of Human Infants*. Alberto Oliverio, ed. Pp. 177-217. New York: Plenum Press.
- Einarsdottir, Jonina  
2004 Tired of Weeping: Mother Love, Child Death, and Poverty in Guinea-Bissau. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Field, Margaret J.  
1970 Search for Security: an Ethno-psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Field, Tiffany M., Shostak A. Marjorie, Vietze, P., Leiderman, Phillip H.  
1981 Culture and Early Interactions. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Fine, Gary Alan  
1987 With the Boys: Little League Baseball and Preadolescent Culture. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fouts, Hillary N.  
2005 Families in Central Africa: A Comparison of Bofi Farmer and Forager Families. *In Families in Global Perspective*. Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, ed. Pp. 347-363. Boston, MA: Pearson.  
2004 Social Contexts of Weaning: The importance of Cross-Cultural Studies. *In Childhood and Adolescence: Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Applications*. Uwe P. Gielen and Jaipaul Roopnarine, eds. Pp.133-148. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gallimore, Ronald, J. W. Boggs, and Cathie Jordan  
1974 Culture, Behavior and Education: A Study of Hawaiian-Americans. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Gallimore, Ronald, Alan Howard, and Cathie Jordan  
1969 Independence Training Among Hawaiians: A cross cultural study. *In Contemporary Research in Social Psychology*. Henry Clay Lindgren, ed. Pp. 392-397. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Gaskins, Suzanne, Wendy Haight, and Lancy, David F.  
2006 The cultural construction of play. *In Play and Development: Evolutionary, Sociocultural, and Functional Perspectives*. Artin Göncü and Suzanne Gaskins eds. Pp. 179-202. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum
- Gaskins, Suzanne  
1996 How Mayan parental theories come into play. *In Parents' Cultural Belief Systems*. Sara Harkness and Charles Super, eds. Pp. 345-363. New York: Guilford Press.
- Gies, Frances and Joseph Gies  
1987 Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages. New York: Harper and Row.

## Mother-Child Play

Golden, Mark.

- 1990 Children and Childhood in Classical Athens. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Göncü, Artin, Jayanthi Mistry, and Christine Mosier

- 2000 Cultural variations in the play of toddlers. International Journal of Behavioral Development 24(3)321-329.

Graburn, Nelson H. H.

- 1987 Severe child abuse among the Canadian Inuit. In Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children. Nancy Scheper-Hughes. Ed. Pp. 211-226. Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel,

Gray, Brenda M.

- 1994 Enga birth, maturation and survival: Physiological characteristics of the life cycle in the New Guinea Highlands. In Ethnography of Fertility and Birth. Carol P. MacCormack, ed. Pp. 65-103. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Green, Margaret M.

- 1964 Ibo Village Affairs. New York: Praeger.

Greenspan, Stanley

- 1990 Floor Time. (VHS) New York, NY: Scholastic, Inc.

Gusinde, Martin

- 1937 The Yahgan: The Life and Thought of the Water Nomads of Cape Horn. Mödling, Austria: Anthropos-Bibliothek.

Haight, Wendy L.

- 1999 The pragmatics of care-giver-child pretending at home: Understanding culturally specific socialization practices. In Children's Engagement in the World. Artin Göncü, ed. Pp. 128-147, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Haight, Wendy L. and Peggy J. Miller

- 1993 Pretending at Home: Early Development in a Sociocultural Context. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Haight, Wendy, Xiao-lei Wang, Heidi Han-tih Fung, Kimberly Williams, and Judith Mintz

- 1999 Universal, developmental, and variable aspects of young children's play: A cross-cultural comparison of pretending at home. Child Development 70(6)477-1488.

Hall, Nancy

- 1991 Play and the emergence of literacy. In Play and Early Literacy Development. James F. Christie, ed. Pp. 3-25. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

## Mother-Child Play

Harkness, Sara and Charles M. Super

- 1991 East Africa. *In Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds. Pp. 217-239, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Harkness, Sara, and Charles M. Super, eds.

- 1996 Parents' Cultural Belief Systems: Their Origins, Expressions, and Consequences. New York: Guilford Press.

Hawkes, Kirsten

- 1991 Showing off: tests of another hypothesis about men's foraging goals. Ethology and Sociobiology 11: 29-54.

Heath, Shirley Brice

- 1990 The children of Tracton's children. *In Cultural Psychology*. James W. Stigler, Richard A. Shweder, and Gilbert Herdt, eds. Pp. 496-519. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Herdt, Gilbert H., ed.

- 1982 Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in New Guinea. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hewlett, Barry S.

- 1991 Intimate Fathers. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Hewlett, Barry S., Michael E. Lamb, Birgit Leyendecker, and Axel Schölmerich

- 2000 Parental investment strategies among Aka foragers, Ngandu farmers, and Euro-American urban-industrialists. *In Adaptation and Human Behavior: An Anthropological Perspective*. Lee Cronk, Napoleon Chagnon, and William Irons, eds. Pp. 155-178. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Hogbin, H. Ian

- 1943 A New Guinea Infancy. Oceania 13:285-309.

Howard, Alan

- 1970 Learning to be Rotuman. New York: Teachers College Press

Howell, Signe

- 1988 From Child to Human: Chewong Concepts of Self. *In Acquiring Culture: Cross Cultural Studies in Child Development*. Gustav Jahoda and Ioan M. Lewis, eds. Pp. 147-168, London: Croom Helm.

Howes, Carolee and Catherine C. Matheson

- 1992 Sequences in the development of competent play with peers: Social and pretend play. Developmental Psychology, 28:961-974

Howrigan, Gail A.

## Mother-Child Play

- 1988 Fertility, Infant Feeding, and Change in Yucatan. New Directions for Child Development 40:37-50.

International Play Association

- 2005 <http://www.ipa2005.de/main.php?language=english>, accessed July 15, 2005.

Janssen, Rosalind, M., and Jac J. Janssen

- 1996 Growing up in Ancient Egypt. London: The Rubicon Press.

Kagitçibasi, Çigdem, and Sunar, Diane

- 1992 Family and Socialization in Turkey. In Parent-Child Socialization in Diverse Cultures. Jaipaul L. Roopnarine and D. Bruce Carter, eds. Pp. 75-88. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Kaplan, Hillard, and Dove, H.

- 1987 Infant development among the Ache of Eastern Paraguay. Developmental Psychology 23:190-198.

Kim, Uichol and Choi, So-Hyang

- 1994 Individualism, collectivism, and child development: A Korean perspective. In Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development. Patricia M. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking, eds. Pp. 227-259. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Konner, Melvin and Carol Worthman

- 1980 Nursing frequency, gonadal function and birth spacing among !Kung hunter-gatherers. Science 207:788-91.

Kulick, Don

- 1992 Language Shift and Cultural Reproduction: Socialization, Self, and Syncretism in a Papua New Guinea Village. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Kusserow, Adrie S.

- 2004 American Individuals: Child Rearing and Social Class in Three Neighborhoods. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lamb, Michael E.

- 1987 The Father's Roles: Cross-cultural Perspectives. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Lancy, David F.

- 1994 Introduction. In Children's Emergent Literacy: From Research to Practice. Lancy, David F., ed. pp. 1-20. Westport, CT: Praeger
- 1996 Playing on the Mother Ground: Cultural Routines for Children's Development. New York, NY: Guilford
- 2001 Cultural constraints on children's play. Play and Culture Studies 4:53-62.

## Mother-Child Play

ND Cherubs, Chattel, Changelings: The Anthropology of Children. Manuscript in progress.

Lancy, David F. and Grove, M. Annette

2006 "Baby-parading:" Child care or showing off? Paper presented at Symposium "Defining Childhood: Cross-cultural Perspectives," Annual Meeting of the Society for Anthropological Sciences, Savannah, GA., February

Laosa, Luis M.

1980 Maternal teaching strategies in Chicano and Anglo-American families: The influence of culture and education on maternal behavior. Child Development 51:759-765.

Lareau, Annette

2003 Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race and Family Life. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press

Lawick-Goodall, Jane van

1968 The behavior of free-living chimpanzees in the Gombe Stream area. Animal Behavior Monographs 1:161-311.

Lebra, Takie Sugiyama

1994 Mother and child in Japanese socialization: A Japan-U.S. comparison. In Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development. Patricia M. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking, eds. Pp. 259-274. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Levenstein, Phyllis

1976 Cognitive Development Through Verbalized Play: The Mother-Child Home Program. In Play—Its Role in Development and Evolution. Jerome S. Bruner, Alison Jolly, and Kathy Sylva, eds. Pp. 286-297. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Levine, Donald N.

1965 Wax and Gold: Tradition and Innovation in Ethiopian Culture. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

LeVine, Robert A.

2004 Challenging expert knowledge: Findings from an African study of infant care and development. In Gielen, Uwe P., & Roopnarine, Jaipaul (Eds). *Childhood and Adolescence: Cross-Cultural Perspectives and Applications.* (pp.149-165), Westport, CT: Praeger

Lee, Richard B.

1979 The !Kung San: Men, Women and Work in a Foraging Society. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press

Le, Huynh-Nhu

## Mother-Child Play

- 2000 Never leave your little one alone: Raising an Ifaluk child. *In A World of Babies: Imagined Childcare Guides for Seven Societies*. Judy DeLoache and Alma Gottlieb, eds. Pp. 199-220. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Levy, Robert I.

- 1973 The Tahitians. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

MacDonald, Kevin

- 1993 Parent-child play: An evolutionary perspective. In Parent-Child Play: Descriptions and Implications. Kevin MacDonald ed. Pp. 113-146. Albany: SUNY Press.

Malinowski, Bronislaw

- 1927 Sex and Repression in Savage Society. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace.

Manson, Roland

- 1975 Le droit de jouer pour les enfants grec et romains. Recueils de la Societé Jean Bodin 39 :117-150.

Marlowe, Frank

- 1999 Showoffs or providers? The parenting effort of Hadza men. Evolution and Human Behavior 20:391-404.

Martini, Mary

- 1995 Features of home environments associated with children's school success. Early Child Development and Care 111:49-68.

Mead-Ferro, Muffy

- 2004 Confessions of a Slacker Mom. Cambridge, MA: DaCapo

Mikelson, Pat

- N.d. Highlights Jigsaw. <http://www.highlightsjigsaw.com/importanceofplay.cfm>, accessed July 15, 2005.

Modiano, Nancy

- 1973 Indian Education in the Chiapas Highlands. New York, NY: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston

Morelli, Gilda A., Barbara Rogoff and Cathy Angelillo

- 2003 Cultural variation in young children's access to work or involvement in specialized child-focused activities. International Journal of Behavioral Development 27(3):264-274.

Morelli, Gilda A. and Edward Z. Tronick

- 1991 Parenting and Child Development in the Efe Foragers and Lese Farmers of Zaire. *In Cultural Approaches to Parenting*. Bornstein, Mark H. ed. Pp. 91-113. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum



## Mother-Child Play

Morton, Helen

- 1996 Becoming Tongan: An Ethnography of Childhood. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.

Munroe, Ruth H., Robert L. Munroe, and Harold S. Shimmin

- 1984 Children's work in four cultures: Determinants and consequences. American Anthropologist 86:369-379.

Nemours Foundation

- 2005 <http://kidshealth.org/parent/growth/learning/learn12yr.html>, accessed July 15, 2005

New, Rebecca S.

- 1994 Child's Play—una cosa naturale: An Italian perspective. In Children's Play in Diverse Cultures. Jaipaul L. Roopnarine, James E. Johnson, and Frank H. Hooper, eds. Pp. 123-147. Albany: SUNY Press.

Ochs, Elinor and Schieffelin, Bambi B.

- 1984 Language acquisition and socialization: Three developmental stories and their implications. In Richard Shweder & Robert L. LeVine (Eds) *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Society*. (pp 276-320), New York: Cambridge University Press

Oloko, Beatrice Adenike

- 1994 Children's street work in urban Nigeria: Dilemma of modernizing tradition. In Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development. Patricia M. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking, eds. Pp. 197-224. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Parent-Child Home Program

- 2004 <http://www.collaborative.org/earlychildhood/echoodfamprog.html>, accessed July 15, 2005.

Parin, Paul

- 1963 The Whites Think Too Much: Psychoanalytic Investigations Among the Dogon in West Africa. Zurich: Atlantis Verlag.

Pearsall, Marion

- 1950 Klamath Childhood and Education. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pellegrini, Anthony. D and Lee Galda

- 1994 Early literacy from a developmental perspective. In Children's Emergent Literacy: From Research to Practice. David F. Lancy, ed. Pp. 21-28. Westport, CT: Praeger

Platt, Katherine

- 1988 Cognitive Development and Sex Roles of the Kerkennah Islands of Tunisia. In Acquiring Culture: Cross Cultural Studies in Child Development. Gustav Jahoda and Ioan M. Lewis, eds. Pp. 271-287. London: Croom Helm.

## Mother-Child Play

### Playing for Keeps

2005 <http://www.playingforkeeps.org/>, accessed July 15, 2005.

### Plooij, Frans

1979 How wild chimpanzee babies trigger the onset of mother-infant play-and what the mother makes of it. *In Before Speech: The Beginning of Interpersonal Communication*. Margaret Bullowa, ed. Pp. 223-243. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

### Pollock, Linda A.

1983 Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500 to 1900. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

### Potter, Shulamith Heins

1987 Birth planning in rural China: A cultural account. *In Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children*. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ed. Pp. 33-58. Dordrecht, Netherlands: D. Reidel.

### Power, Thomas G.

2000 Play and Exploration in Children and Animals. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

### Ratner, Nan Bernstein, and Caroline Pye

1984 Higher pitch in BT is not universal: Acoustic evidence from Quiche Mayan. Journal of Child Language 2:515-522.

### Rawson, Beryl

1991 Adult-child relationships in Roman society. *In Marriage, Divorce, and Children in Ancient Rome*. Beryl Rawson, ed. Pp. 7-30. Canberra: Clarendon Press.

### Roberts, John M., Malcom Arth, and Robert R. Bush

1959 Games in culture. American Anthropologist 61:597-605.

### Rogoff, Barbara

2003 The Cultural Nature of Human Development. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

### Rogoff, Barbara, Jayanthi Mistry, Artin Göncü, and Christine Mosier

1993 Guided participation in cultural activity by toddlers and caregivers. Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development 58(7)Serial No. 236.

Roopnarine, Jaipaul L., Hooper, Frank H., Ahmeduzzaman, Mohammad, and Pollack, Brad  
1993 Gentle play partners: Mother-child and father-child play in New Delhi, India, In Parent-Child Play: Descriptions and Implications. Kevin MacDonald ed. Pp. 287-304. Albany: SUNY Press.

## Mother-Child Play

Sargent, Laurie W.

2003 The Power of Parent-Child Play. Wheaton, IL: Tynedale House.

Scarlett, W. George, Sophie Naudeau, Dorothy Saloni-Pasternak, and Iris Ponte

2005 Children's Play. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy

1987 Cultures, scarcity, and maternal thinking: Mother love and child death in Northeast Brazil. *In* Child Survival: Anthropological Perspectives on the Treatment and Maltreatment of Children. Nancy Scheper-Hughes, ed. Pp. 187-208 Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Company.

1989 Death without weeping. Natural History 98(10)8-16.

Schieffelin, Bambi B.

1990 The Give and Take of Everyday Life: Language Socialization of Kaluli Children. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Schneider, Barbara, Joyce A. Heishima, Cehahn Lee and Stephen Plank

1994 East-Asian academic success in the United States: Family, school, and community explanations. *In* Cross-Cultural Roots of Minority Child Development. Patricia M. Greenfield and Rodney R. Cocking, eds. Pp. 323-350. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Shahar, Shulamith

1990 Childhood in the Middle Ages. London, Routledge.

Shwalb, David and Barbara Shwalb

2005 Fathers and pre-schoolers in Japan and the US: Daily life settings, relationships and activities. Paper presented at 34th annual meeting of the Society for Cross Cultural Research. Santa Fe, February 2005.

Singer, Jerome

2003 Play is a critically important activity for the healthy development of young children. Presentation to Workshop: The Promise of Play: Cornerstone of Literacy and Learning. New Haven, March 2003.

Sokolove, Michael

2004 Constructing a Teen Phenom. The New York Times Magazine, November 28:80-85

Sommerville, John C.

1992 The Discovery of Childhood in Puritan England. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

1982 The Rise and Fall of Childhood. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Sorenson, E. Richard

1976 The Edge of the Forest: Land, Childhood and Change in a New Guinea Protoagricultural Society. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

## Mother-Child Play

Smith, Peter K.

- 2002 Pretend play, metarepresentation and theory of mind. *In Pretending, and Imagination in Animals and Children*. Robert W. Mitchell, ed. Pp129-141. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Peter, K. and Helen Cowie

- 1991 Understanding Children's Development. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.

Sternheimer, Karen

- 2003 It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children. Boulder, CO: Westview Press. (p. 63)

Stevenson, Harold W., Chuansheng Chen, and Shinying Lee

- 1992 Chinese Families. *In Parent-Child Socialization in Diverse Cultures*. Jaipaul L. Roopnarine and D. Bruce Carter, eds. Pp. 17-33. Norwood, NJ: Ablex

Sutton-Smith, Brian

- 1993 Dilemmas in adult play with children. *In Parent-Child Play: Descriptions and Implications*. Kevin MacDonald ed. Pp. 15-40. Albany: SUNY Press.

Taylor, Denny

- 1983 Family Literacy. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Thiessen, Erik D., Emily A. Hill and Jenny R. Saffran

- 2005 Infant-directed speech facilitates word segmentation. Infancy 7(1)53-71.

Thompson, Laura

- 1940 Fijian frontier. San Francisco, CA: American Council, Institute of Pacific Relations.

Trevarthen, Colwyn

- 1983 Interpersonal abilities of infants as generators for transmission of language and culture. *In The Behavior of Human Infants*. Oliverio, Alberto, ed. Pp. 145-176. New York: Plenum Press.

Tronick, Edward Z., Gilda A. Morelli and Steve Winn

- 1987 Multiple caretaking of Efe (Pygmy) infants. American Anthropologist 89:96-106.

Uno, Kathleen S.

- 1991 Japan. *In Children in Historical and Comparative Perspective*. Joseph M. Hawes and N. Ray Hiner, eds. Pp. 389-419. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Van Stone, James W.

- 1965 The Changing Culture of the Snowdrift Chipewyan. Ottawa, ON: National Museum of Canada.

## Mother-Child Play

Wagley, Charles

- 1977 Welcome of Tears: The Tapirape Indians of Central Brazil. New York: Oxford University Press.

Warner, Judith

- 2005 Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety. New York, NY: Riverhead Books.

Watson-Gegeo, Karen Ann and David Welchman Gegeo

- 2001 That's what children do: Perspectives on work and play in Kwara'ae. Presented at the Annual Meeting, The Association for the Study of Play, February 2001, San Diego, CA.

Weisner, Thomas S., and Ronald Gallimore

- 1977 My brother's keeper: child and sibling caretaking. Current Anthropology 18(2)169-190.

Ward, Martha Coonfield

- 1971 Them Children: A Study in Language Learning, New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston

Whiting, Beatrice B., Edwards, Carolyn Pope

- 1988 Children of Different Worlds. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Whittemore, Robert Dunster

- 1989 Child Caregiving and Socialization to the Mandinka Way: Toward an Ethnography of Childhood. Ph.D dissertation, Department of Anthropology. University of California.

Wolf, Margery

- 1972 Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan. Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press.

Wolfenstein, Martha

- 1955 Fun Morality: An Analysis of Recent American Child-training Literature. In Mead, Margaret and Martha Wolfenstein. Childhood in Contemporary Cultures (eds) pp.168-178. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Wu, Pei Yi

- 1995 Childhood Remembered: Parents and Children in China, 800 to 1700. In Chinese Views of Childhood. Anne B. Kinney, ed. Pp 129-156. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Zelizer, Viviana A.

- 1985 Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children. New York: Basic Books.

## Mother-Child Play

---

<sup>1</sup>An earlier, parallel analysis (Ochs and Schieffelin 1984) of adult-child language interaction also concluded that ethnographic studies in non-western societies should be used to “de-universalize” claims made in the mainstream developmental psychology literature.

<sup>2</sup>In other words I am not trying to uncover some subtle differences in play patterns cross-culturally. That would require a very precise definition of the variable of interest.

<sup>3</sup>On the other hand, the same isolation also breeds child abuse among the Inuit and in urban ghettos (Graburn 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Several observers of chimpanzees in the wild (Clark 1977; Lawick-Goodall 1968; Plooij 1979), have noted the isolation of mother-infant pairs and the increased likelihood—compared to other primates—of mother-infant play.

<sup>5</sup>Consistent with the theme of this article, we find a noted developmental psychologist claiming the universality of peek-a-boo and its importance in the early cognitive development of the child (Bruner and Sherwood 1976:277), whereas no such universality is apparent in the ethnographic record.

<sup>6</sup>Or, perhaps, not so benign: “In the late 1800s opium was traditionally used to soothe babies. Packaged in a variety of elixirs, opium-laced preparations were widely available (from grocers!)...an Australian Royal Commission estimated that 15 thousand babies a year were killed by overdoses of opium contained in these ‘soothing’ preparations” (Edgerton 1992:107).

<sup>7</sup>During the Renaissance, “Even the wives of skilled laborers, many of whom worked, preferred to hire wet-nurses rather than suffering the inconvenience of nursing their own children. Nursing was work for peasants, and sending infants out to nurse was one of the first luxuries women demanded” (Sommerville 1982: 80).

## Mother-Child Play

---

<sup>8</sup>As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, my argument that mother-child play is the norm in our society must be tempered by the fact that multi-tasking mothers must exercise ingenuity in getting their children to play independently or to get fathers to entertain them. Busy mothers use their time strategically and that includes time spent playing with infants and children.

<sup>9</sup>However, a quantitative study of parent-infant play in a highly educated, middle/upper-middle class sample from Delhi found "...low levels of play interactions with...infants." [Roopnarine, et al 1993: 298]

<sup>10</sup>Hall (1991) points out that the scripts children use in make-believe play closely resemble, structurally, the stories they will soon be asked to read in school.

<sup>11</sup>For example, parents who foster and guide pretend play in their two-year olds also read lots of picture-books to them, so how can one separate out the unique impact of play?

<sup>12</sup>Although, recently a backlash against "Supermomdom" has begun (Mead-Ferro 2004; Warner 2005).

<sup>13</sup>A strikingly parallel situation is reported for Japan. Only an outline can be provided here.

When Ann Allison placed her son in a private Japanese nursery school (*de rigueur* for a successful academic and professional career) she learned that she'd need to spend hours each day preparing a home-made, beautifully arranged, thoroughly Japanese, multi-item lunch-box. This meal is called *obentō* and it serves as a test of the child's rapid acquisition of school culture—eat your whole lunch quickly without grumbling—and of the mother's dedication to her child's academic success. "*Obentō* guidelines issued by the school and sent home...[mean that] Motherhood is not only watched and manipulated by the stare but made by it into a conduit of ideological indoctrination" (Allison 1991: 202, 6).

## Mother-Child Play

---

<sup>14</sup>In Utah, local Family Assistance Centers (FAC) routinely provide mother-child play instruction as a core element in their Parent Education curriculum. M. Annette Grove, personal communication 7/18/05.

<sup>15</sup>The ethnocentrism inherent in such promotional campaigns goes beyond mother-child play. In middle-class, post-industrial society, parents look on their children as "projects," and, as such, they are extremely attentive and responsive to "evidence" driven advice on how to improve their projects. Parenting improvement campaigns mistakenly assume that all parents are similarly motivated.