

Books

The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood

By Sally Jenkinson
Hawthorne Press, U.K. 2001



Reviewed by
Terry Boyarsky

Much of my teaching for the last few years has been in the inner city where listlessness, passivity, disrespect and lack of contact with the body are rampant.

I savored this deceptively provocative book while "in the field." That experience has since made me reflect on the essence of play, and on the dangers of its deprivation.

The background for the persuasive stance Jenkinson uses comes from her long association with Waldorf Education, which is based on Rudolf Steiner's spiritual-scientific research. Waldorf schools foster the ability to relate learning to personal experience.

Jenkinson challenges the reader to reexamine the social, emotional, physical and spiritual value of play. Play is not to be taken lightly; play is a child's way to learn to "work" things out.

The author presents evidence and poignant detail, juxtaposing psychological theories of childhood with current child advocacy research. Anecdotes from her classroom and children weave through astute professional observations. Eloquent photographs are interspersed throughout the book, as are interviews with elders who grew up in poverty and had to "make do" creating games, toys and worlds of their own.

With a gentle, yet convincing

touch, Jenkinson reveals how critical these issues are. When a child has neither time nor space in which to play, when toys represent status, power and control, a child's inner world is stunted. Dependence on television or video games deprives the child of the opportunity for visualization and discourages physical exercise. The future of society is determined by the quality of early play. The insights provided in the book will help.

In addition to a generous bibliography, there are five appendices, including: a Declaration from the International Association for the Child's Right to Play, proposals for change, television as a public health issue, statistics, and suggestions for weaning a family from television. For those seeking more information, numerous resources, associations and Web sites are provided.

Noting in her students their apathy, lack of imagination, lack of boundaries and their inability to negotiate, one teacher assigned them homework: to go home and build a

den! I won't spoil the ending for you here, but it's worth reading.

"The genius of play helps children meet their futures: it prepares them for a changing world and engages them absolutely with the present," writes Jenkinson.

"Let us honour childhood, and give our children a chance to play," she concludes.

