CAN WE PLAY NOW?

The Meaning of Play
Throughout Lifetime Development

NADJA JULIA ROLLI

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First published in 2026 by
Karnac Books Limited
62 Bucknell Road
Bicester
Oxfordshire OX26 2DS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80013-423-2 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-425-6 (e-book)
ISBN: 978-1-80013-424-9 (PDF)

Typeset by vPrompt eServices Pvt Ltd, India

www.firingthemind.com

To my inner child—

thank you!

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Acknowledgements

The most important acknowledgement needs to go to all my clients and their families who have shown me courage and trust. I am aware that your journey was not simple. I cannot express in words how grateful I am that you allowed me to walk part of your path with you. To honour all of your contributions, I have maintained strict confidentiality to the best of my knowledge and ability to ensure that the client information is non-identifiable whilst trying to remain as truthful as I could to your journey.

I would also like to thank Tracey Tattersall, Helen Pitmann, Lucy Fuller, Asa Marks, and Di Gammage for their generosity in reading and discussing drafts of chapters, lending books, and helping me to reflect on my thoughts and the structure of this work.

A special thank you also goes to Cornelia Rolli Salathé, Christoph Salathé, Karmela Jones, Ian Scanlon, and Magda Raczynska for being there when I had the feeling of running out of energy and needed to have someone to lean on.

This book also holds the memory of Eunice Stagg, a wonderful mentor who supported me with her wisdom for many years.

Finally, I would also like to send out a thank you to the Child Psychotherapy Council (CPC) and Bozena Merrick at Terapia for providing me with the opportunity to test, explore, and teach the contents of this book and gain further clarity in the process.

About the author

Nadja Julia Rolli, MA, is an integrative child and adolescent psychotherapist with over twenty years of experience in working with vulnerable children and their families. Formerly a primary school teacher, she initially trained in Basel/Switzerland in psychomotor therapy, a somatic psychotherapeutic approach that integrates elements of play and art therapy into the clinical work, before completing a master's in integrative child and adolescent psychotherapy and counselling. Nadja has worked in special needs education settings, in numerous primary and secondary schools, and has been working in private practice since 2019. She co-founded the Child Psychotherapy Council (CPC), a charity established to promote and maintain the standards of practice, education, and training of child psychotherapy.

Introduction

Thinking back to my childhood, most of my memories involve play activities. I vividly remember living in a world of fantasy and magic, which often had little to do with the reality I grew up in. Everything around me was magical and had a soul, including my Barbies, soft toys, books, and my bicycle. I also remember staying awake for many hours as I was so worried that my bicycle would feel lonely and scared if I hadn't parked it in its usual place. It was not uncommon that, during my childhood, I lost myself in the world of fantasy, either by reading or pretend play. I often forgot the world around me in the world of imagination and did not hear my mother calling me when it was time to engage again with the real world.

For many years, when I spoke to others about my childhood, I told them how happy I was as a child. Only when I started my training to become a psychotherapist, later specialising in becoming a child and adolescent psychotherapist, did I realise that there was another side to my magical existence as a child. I used play and fantasy not only for enjoyment but also as a tool for escapism and defence against the reality of not being seen and not having enough emotional nurture during my childhood. It was a painful awakening to realise that I was a "wounded helper", as so many of my fellow psychotherapists are. There is a high

possibility that because of the attachment wounds of our childhood, we are predestined to embark on this career choice, as we have learned from a very early age to look at and soothe the minds of the people around us. Thus, it seemed to be a logical progression that I became not only a psychotherapist but one that uses play as the main medium in their work.

"Can we play now?" is likely the sentence I hear the most in my work as a child psychotherapist. It is said, with a strong hint of impatience, whenever I fall into the trap of engaging with the child and/or the parents too much through talking therapy, forgetting that the mind of the child knows exactly why they are in my room. According to Landreth (2012), not words but play is the child's symbolic language of self-expression. I couldn't agree more. So many times, I am moved by the significance and accuracy of the client's play for their healing journey. What often looks like fooling around and having a laugh has a deeper psychological and emotional meaning. Hence, "Can we play now?" is not only an invitation to engage in playful interactions but also a statement that the client is ready to start their emotional journey.

Literature about the meaning of play is still a rarity. I am hoping that with this book I can bring the language and symbolic significance of play into the awareness of every child psychotherapist, as well as champion the meaning of play to parents and other professionals alike so that "pretending" and "making believe" can enlighten us adults, too.

Chapter 1, "From the beginning", focuses on setting the ground for the rest of the book by defining play and exploring its history, especially from the perspective of child psychotherapy. Furthermore, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Erikson's (1964) psychosocial development theory will be introduced, as these theories provide a unique insight into the growth of different play stages.

Chapter 2, "The system around the child", sets out to discuss initial and newer findings related to attachment theory and how the parent's ability to play is one of the key determinants for attachment security, brain development, and the development of self-awareness, self-confidence, trust, mentalization skills, and self-esteem. The chapter also addresses how a mother, a father, having siblings, or being adopted impacts the sense of security of a child.

Chapters 3 to 7 explore the five different play development stages, starting with "Physiological needs—sensory play". There, I connect Maslow's (1943) reflections on physiological needs with the realms of sensory processes and sensory stimuli (conscious or unconscious). Sensory play is highly dominant in the early years of a child and aims to support brain development, cognitive development, emotional regulation, and motor skills development. Difficulties in sensory processing are also often linked to many forms of neurodiversity.

Chapter 4, "Safety needs—attachment play", discusses the importance of feeling secure and internalising a sense of safety. This chapter highlights that through the sense of touch, the child establishes the capacity to connect with others and ideally experiences the skin as the container to feel safe. Being physically held is the stepping stone to internalise not only feeling safe but also feeling confident enough to explore the topic of separation and test how secure the relationship is through play.

"Constructive play and the need to belong" are addressed in Chapter 5. It builds upon Maslow's (1943) idea that humans have a fundamental motivation to be accepted into relationships with others and to be a part of social groups. However, from a psychotherapeutic perspective, the sense of others develops out of the sense of self (Piaget, 1951; Stern, 1985). As the young person begins to internalise the object and starts to create things, a sense of self and social identity develops. Emotional experiences are projected into various toys and media so that the toys are carrying different roles to allow the child to gain an idea of who they are and who they would like to be. Furthermore, this theme repeats itself during adolescence.

Chapter 6, "Need for esteem—fantasy play", talks about the use of symbols, archetypes, and the process of the emerging ego (Jung, 1964; Kalff, 1980; Neumann, 1973), in which the child dares to become something greater than his current identity. This is the time of fantasy play, which is often the play of princesses and superheroes. Vygotsky (1967) believes that through fantasy play, the young person learns to overcome their impulsiveness and develop thought-out behaviours that will help them with more complicated cognitive functions.

The last stage of play development is explored in Chapter 7, "Need for self-actualisation—competitive play". The theorists see self-actualisation as becoming close to one's essence and the authentic self. In this stage,

play moves to competitive play and games and can be experienced as the rite of passage into adulthood. Frost, Wortham, and Reifel (2011) state that by initiating their games with rules people learn how to negotiate with each other and develop a sense of fairness so that the game is enjoyable for everyone. Motivation, gratification, effort, and ability are parameters that are tested through games with rules and allow a person to experience significance, fulfilment, and spirituality.

When working as a child psychotherapist, play is a tool to support the emotional well-being of a client and many of them have experienced trauma. In Chapter 8, "Developmental trauma and its impact on play", the reader will be introduced to the "deadly", monotonous, and repetitive play (Terr, 1990), which may be a form of dissociation through which the child tries to gain control or find a resolution of the experience. The themes of loss, bereavement, intergenerational trauma, and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic are discussed, and it is shown that by gaining an understanding of the internal processes, play can help the child manipulate the external reality to integrate traumatic experiences without being at risk of feeling overwhelmed and dysregulated.

Chapter 9, "Technology and play development", examines the ongoing discussion about the impact of digital technology and gaming on the social, emotional, and mental health development of young people. It is known that the use of technology has become one of the biggest challenges in parenting (Dias et al., 2016) and has changed the play behaviour of children tremendously—not always for the better, as the rise of teenage addiction to social media or the internet shows.

In Chapter 10, "Where do we go from here?", I am taking play away from childhood into adulthood. This chapter addresses the inner child and the need to keep the play alive, even for grown-ups, as it has a positive influence on stress management and physical health, as well as mental well-being. Finally, the chapter closes with the exploration of using play as a therapeutic intervention in adult therapy, breaking the idea that play is solely an intervention for young people.