

## Rebuilding a Strong Society: Defining and Creating a Context for Pubescent Play

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*Given the importance of pubescence and adolescence for individuals and society, this pilot study explored the way preadolescents today view play. Results of a survey of 252 gifted preadolescents, ages twelve through fifteen, indicate that participants in this study view play in a way that both confirms and extends previous views of pubescent play. These findings suggest that we need to construct a more inclusive view of play that reflects cultural and ethnic variations.*

A child is beaten until brain damaged by another child. We are shocked. It happens again. We are appalled, and wonder what the world is coming to. How can we have gotten to a place where children are maiming and killing each other, apparently with no remorse? Is it caused by a lack of moral direction provided by parents and adults? Is it violence in the media, on television and computer games? Surely, this is a part of the picture, but it is not all.

We think a significant part of the answer is right in front of us, but we have given such short attention to this topic that we don't even recognize the relevance it has to the development of most adults. Due to significant changes, children now don't do it the same way, and, as a result, don't develop as we did (Healy, 1995). The **it** we're talking about is **play**. Children don't play the way they used to, and the result is having a chilling effect on what our future might be.

Research tells us that play aids cognitive development leading to such things as more creativity and imagination, expanded curiosity, more developed problem solving skills, an increased tolerance and understanding of the perspectives of

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others, and greater attention spans (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1932; Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983). Play also helps enhance social and emotional growth, which results in less aggression and more cooperation with peers, greater control over actions that are impulsive, and an increased willingness to work/play in groups (Erikson, 1985; Pelligrini & Boyd, 1993; Sluss, 1995). When you add the benefits that play provides to children's physical growth by making them more active rather than passive participants in their world, clearly play is something that needs renewed emphasis. We believe emphasis needs to be placed on pubescent play since little is known about play at this level (Hughes, 1995). Though pubescents do stop playing in the "child-like" sense; we think they should and do continue to play. Problems occur when pubescent "play" degenerates into the kind of activity that takes place in gangs (Sutton-Smith, 1984). Attempting to prevent this kind of activity alone should justify a study at this level.

#### What we know about play

Although studies of play among young children are voluminous, studies of pubescent play are sparse (Hughes, 1995; Pelligrini, 1995). Several factors have contributed to this state. First, play, in general, has been viewed negatively. In the past, teachers frequently said, "Don't play, do your work." Unfortunately, this view of play still exists. Even though research studies provide extensive evidence that play is a valuable tool for enhancing cognitive growth and development (Pelligrini & Boyd, 1993; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983); scholars of play for young children still find themselves frequently defending the child's right to play. For example, a conference held by the International Association for the Child's Right to Play featured the topic, "A Right to Play" (Guddemi & Jambor, 1993). A document of the proceedings did not feature even one article on pubescent or adolescent play. Given that this organization is committed to children, birth through adolescence, the need to include pubescent play is critical. Other conferences reflect the same ambivalence.

The basis for these views may be found in the belief held by many scholars that pubescent play is not truly play and that the games that older children engage in belong to a different category (Garvey, 1977; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983).

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This has led to a disproportionately low number of studies. An examination of the number of play studies on young children and adolescents suggests that play occurs only before the age of eight or nine (Glickman, 1984). More recent studies have investigated the play of middle school children, but even these studies of play have looked at nine- and thirteen-year-olds (Pelligrini, 1995; Sandburg & Meyer Bahlburg, 1994). Frequently pubescent play is listed under the umbrella of recreation. Viewing play as recreation diminishes the view of play as necessary for cognitive growth and development.

We believe there is a need to construct a new view of pubescent play. Play, especially pubescent play, must be viewed as valuable for human existence and as a life span phenomenon that occurs in all age groups (Erikson, 1977; Hughes, 1995; Mechling, 1991). In addition, the ways in which pubescent play manifests itself and the subsequent impact that it has on other aspects of life must be studied. A critical part of this investigation must include play as experienced by preadolescents themselves. This is the goal of this paper. We will combine what is currently known about pubescent play with the results of a pilot survey. In this way, we will begin to define pubescent play in order to guide future studies of pubescent play and provide direction for practitioners.

### Defining pubescent play

Past definitions of play have described it as an intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral behavior in which the child is actively engaged (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). This definition has been used to define the play of young children but should it also be used for preadolescents? Several scholars have stated that the play of the young child does not look like the play of the pubescent child and differs in style, form, and purpose (Hughes, 1995). Therefore, definitions, theories, and research applicable to the play of young children would not be directly applicable to preadolescents. To our knowledge, there are no definitions of play specific to preadolescents/adolescents. To complete our understanding of pubescent play today, we believe we must determine what constitutes play for today's middle school child.

Though Hughes (1995) did not define pubescent play, he identified three major characteristics in preadolescents and

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adolescents that influence play. These include: (a) a need for abstract conceptualization, (b) a need for communication, and (c) a need for identity. The need for abstract conceptualization can be observed when adolescents look at real situations and see possibilities. Evidence of abstract thinking is evident in positive play like chess or bridge. It can also be observed in games involving risk-taking which may lead to death. The need for communication is frequently a source of concern for parents as pubescents seek others either on the phone, through the Internet, or at the mall. This is positive for groups like boy scouts, negative for gangs. In addition, preadolescents and adolescents have a need to develop their sense of identity. Who am I? is the question that pervades this stage of development. Looking at changes in their bodies and their understanding of the world, they frequently have a need to reconstruct their own identity.

These three characteristics impact play; but, do they, in fact, constitute play? If so, in what ways? Csikszentmihalyi, who studied preadolescents and adolescents for over a decade, found that this age group focuses more on being together than on doing (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984; Rathude & Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). Definitions of pubescent play must therefore include a component of socialization and reflect the multiple dimensions of pubescent play. To accomplish this, we decided to construct a model that combines what is known about play with what we can learn from today's pubescent. The procedure used to gather the views of adolescents participating in this pilot study are described in the following section.

## Method

In an attempt to understand how preadolescents and adolescents' view play, we conducted a survey designed to elicit their views on play. Given the uniqueness of the sample, we designed this pilot study as a first step in redefining pubescent play.

The sample was composed of 252 adolescents attending a camp for gifted children in a rural Appalachian area. Ages of the adolescents ranged from twelve through fifteen. The composition of the responses represented the gender differentiation of the camp, that is, of the 252 children who participated, 95 were male and 157 females.

A play questionnaire was designed to provide answers to our questions about play. Based on our knowledge of play and adolescents, the play questionnaire included questions about not only how they defined play but also play partners and play spaces. Demographic data, i.e., gender, grade, age, and geographic location, were also included in the survey. Confidentiality was ensured by omitting all identifying marks. Survey questions are shown in Table 1.

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Table 1. Play questionnaire distributed to pubescents.

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1. What is play?
  2. How did you play when you were five?
  3. How did you play when you were ten?
  4. How do you play now?
  5. Where do you play now?
  6. Who do you play with?
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The play questionnaires required about ten to fifteen minutes to complete and were administered during evening sessions with counselors. Participants were given the option of nonparticipation, but the entire group agreed to participate in the survey. Nine surveys were excluded from the study due to illegible handwriting, incomplete information, and, in one case, obviously bogus information.

Qualitative methods described by Strauss and Corbin (1988) were used to analyze the data. The responses were read and read prior to coding different categories. Next, similar categories were combined together and themes were examined. Findings are reported in the following section. See Table 2 for details.

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Table 2. Play as defined by preadolescents/adolescents

	<u>Total</u>
<b>1. Fun</b> or pleasurable w/physical activities w/friends	70%
<b>2. Sports</b> physical activities games	16%
<b>3. Socialization</b> entertainment recreation	8%
<b>4. Pretense</b> drama	3%
<b>5. Communication</b>	3%

### Results

Participants responded in ways that confirmed yet expanded our views of pubescent/adolescent play. Six questions were included in the survey, but three of the questions provided little data of interest. Of most interest to us were responses to questions concerning the definition of play, context, and partners in play. Responses to these questions are discussed in the following section.

#### Defining pubescent/adolescent play

In order to understand how these preadolescents view play, we asked the question, "What is play?" Not unexpectedly, the majority of respondents, seventy per cent, viewed play as a fun or pleasurable activity. The following statements provide samples of how the word fun permeated the data:

- Having a great time; doing something you enjoy.
- A leisure activity which is fun.
- When you have fun with other people.
- It's having fun.
- Play is what you do when you are having fun.
- Fun or activity with other people or by yourself.
- Fun.

Pleasure is definitely a part of the definition of play for participants in this survey. Although this fits with traditional definitions of play for young children which defined it as being an intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, **pleasurable**, nonliteral activity in which the child is actively engaged (Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg, 1983). It does not fit with more recent definitions of play. Earlier definitions of play included references to the term **pleasurable**, but more recent definitions have substituted intrinsic motivation for **pleasure**. For example, Pelligrini and Boyd (1993) note that "the newer definition includes the following criteria: nonliterality, intrinsic motivation, attention to means—'What can I do with it?' vs. 'What can it do?';—, freedom from external rules, and active engagement" p. 108. This definition has been used in recent research studies of young children's play. These definitions do not, however, seem to **fit** with how pubescents/adolescents in our study view play.

Though pretense or nonliteral play has been the dominant criteria of play for young children, it assumes a less important role for preadolescents. Few respondents, three per cent, indicated that play involved imagination. Those who did referred to the imaginary aspects. For example, "play is imagining in my room." The definition provided by participants in our study does not fit the description of play typically used to study the play of young children.

Adding this component to identified characteristics, a definition of pubescent play begins to emerge, a definition that includes fun activities conducted with other people. The results of this study support the contention that play and fun are synonyms for pubescents. In addition, they view sports, sixteen per cent, and games, eight per cent, as play. These results provide support for Csikszentmihalyi and Larson's (1984) study, they do not, however, completely support Hugh's view of how the characteristics of this age group impact play. In addition, there was no mention of identity seeking. The other two

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characteristics that emerged as definitions of play were drama (three per cent) and communication ( three per cent).

Based on the characteristics of pubescents, it was expected that pretense or abstraction would play a dominant role in the definition. This did not occur. Definitions fell into five main categories, (1) fun, (2) socialization, and (3) recreation/ sports /games, entertainment, (4) drama, and (5) communication. Preadolescents in our study viewed play as activities that mainly involve fun, socialization, and games.

It is worth noting, "at least as our respondents defined it," that pubescent play diverges from the definition of play for young children in two ways: (1) the emphasis on play as fun and (2) the inversion of play as pretense. Though pretense is the dominant characteristic of play among young children, few respondents viewed drama as an important aspect of play. Of these, eight were female and two were male. There appears to be a real difference between the play of young children and the play of adolescents.

### The context for play

In an attempt to understand where preadolescents play, we asked the question, "Where do you play?" Overwhelmingly, participants in this study indicated that they played either outdoors or indoors around their home. Seventy per cent said they played in their rooms or inside their home, eighty said they played at school. Rathude and Csikszentmihalyi (1993) found that most preadolescents/adolescents in their study spent time at the mall; participants in this study, however, preferred playing outside or in their home. When asked where they played, responses included:

- In my barn
- In the park
- In the house
- In the backyard
- My neighborhood
- At school or home

Less than one per cent of those surveyed indicated that they played at the mall. These results differ from those obtained by Rathude and Csikszentmihalyi (1993). The answer may be

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found in the geographic location of the sample. The study conducted by Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi focused on urban children while the sample in this study was composed of pubescents who were identified as gifted and living in rural areas of Appalachia. Our findings suggest that both the physical and cultural setting affect the play of pubescents.

### Play partners

We also wanted to know who pubescents identified as playmates so we included this question in the survey. Play companions fell into four categories, (1) family, (2) friends, (3) anyone at school, or (4) anyone available. It is worth noting that fifteen participants stated that they played alone. One pubescent responded to the question, "What is play?" with the comment, "Play is something you like and enjoy," yet responded to the question about who she played with by saying, "I don't play, I daydream with friends." Obviously, she did play with friends, but her activity (abstract thought/pretense) did not fit her personal definition of play.

Based on the information provided by participants in this study, we believe there is a need to reexamine our view of pubescent/adolescent play. We must begin with a more inclusive definition of pubescent/adolescent play. In addition, we must attempt to understand the multiple dimensions of pubescent play as well as how culture and location affect pubescent play. While we acknowledge the limitations of this study (that is, relatively homogenous sample, data collection limited to surveys, etc.), we think it serves as another step in expanding our knowledge of pubescent play.

### Summary

Play for the participants in this study, gifted preadolescents in Appalachia, is viewed as fun that occurs at home, at school, and outdoors. Is this view common to other preadolescents? Do preadolescents in Montana or Florida view play in the same way? Understanding pubescent play requires not only understanding the definition, but also understanding the impact of culture and context on play. Based on the results of this study, the following questions need to be examined:

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1. If play is viewed as a fun, pleasurable activity, how can we increase opportunities for play in ways that are beneficial and safe?
2. If physical and cultural influences affect the context of pubescent /adolescent play, how can we best support the play of all middle-schoolers?

Answers to these questions will lead to an increased understanding of pubescent/adolescent play. If we are truly interested in providing better environments for pubescents and, in turn, a better society, scholars and practitioners must join forces to work together to create settings that encourage appropriate play among middle school children.

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