

“Lessons in Play” Chalcedon Website Education Article

Ronald Kirk
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I discovered some time ago that imaginative literature often provides an excellent example of Biblical life- and educational principle in action. One story made me aware of how childhood play presents an interesting challenge to parents, since what a child practices, he becomes—his second nature.

Once long ago, I read of a group of young colonial era boys playing war. I believe the story was set at the time of the French and Indian War on the Western Frontier. One boy commanded the rest. No boy among the friends played the enemy. Rather, the boys found their enemy in a cantankerous old gander abiding in the village. Now here was a cagey, obstinate and unpredictable foe! They boys rallied, fell back, attacked, until the gander sought refuge in more peaceful quarters. Victory!

This seemingly insignificant scenario made this Christian educator pause.

Paul the Apostle says to take every thought captive to Christ. Why should we exempt child’s play from this command? Once more, what one practices in thought or deed becomes habit. What becomes habit becomes second nature. If all things in life ought to be for God’s glory, how can we countenance base or mean or mindless play?

First, is imaginative play a godly pastime? Many Scriptures condemn a vain imagination. Yet God made His people to be creative, in His image, as God’s choice of the Tabernacle architects by name testifies (Exodus 31:3-5). Timothy Dwight of Yale Seminary observes that the Bible teaches its truth, not primarily through the intellect or emotions, but through the imagination, through figures and metaphors.¹ Christian dominion over the earth, taking the raw material of life and crafting some of greater utility and value, requires a conception before the reality is possible. The cultivation of a *godly* imagination seems rather imperative than merely acceptable. The clearly natural disposition of a child toward imaginative play is a godly gift, then, which ought to be cultivated. Parents clearly ought not to quench or neglect a child’s imaginative play.

Second, should these boys have been playing war games? Clearly, Christianity aims toward the time when we should neither “learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4). In the meantime, the magistrate (civil government) holds the sword for good reason—the welfare of the community (Romans 13). Until the appointed time, Christians must be ready to practice defensive war. Men should be thoroughly prepared for their Christian duty in a federal republic, dependent as the Republic is upon the common support of the citizenry. Young men ought then to learn the principles and morals of war. They ought to harden and strengthen their bodies in anticipation of some possible service. Here is one argument for rigorous physical education and rigorous physical play.

If war is a legitimate play (reduced to a level of realism appropriate to the child’s impressionable imagination and level of maturity), other questions present themselves. Why didn’t the boys divide themselves so that some fought on one side, and the rest on the other, as was common in my childhood? Wouldn’t it be more interesting to fight a more intelligent, if not more stubborn adversary?

Of course! In this earlier age of clear right and wrong, no one would think of playing the bad guy or of killing the good guy. No one would wish to express lethal hostility against his friend. (Apparently the gander already had a reputation as a bad guy and was *no* child’s friend. It might be appropriate to add that Scripture also forbids cruelty to animals. In the case of this story, if the boys inconvenienced the gander, he was not harmed.) To play the adversary meant assuming the side of an evil aggressor. Such a thing was unthinkable!

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Why is it not unthinkable to play a bad guy today? Could it be our relative morality? In this age of anti-heroes, debased men, who though perhaps capable of some magnanimity, are fatedly, morally mixed creatures at best. (Such anti-hero concept reflects the ancient Greek and Roman gods, where for example, Mercury, the god of business, was also the god of thieves). Could it be that our appreciation of good and evil, of right and wrong, is so eroded that such a distinction doesn't even occur to us? What if a boy practices murder or larceny in his ordinary play? Do we wish our children, even in their recreation to entertain muddled principles of morality?

Girls, by the way, are not immune to such affections in play. Romantic (read unrealistic) desires for glamour, wealth, love, or power can create a habitual disposition of thought life which can lead to questionable or downright bad decisions in adolescence and beyond.

On the other hand, why shouldn't we parents and teachers govern the play and imaginative life of our children? We Christian parents and teachers possess a holy trust in our children with eternal consequences. Let us ponder the things which concern family life and activities which bear on the future of our children. Bad company corrupts good morals in whatever form it takes. May we work to check a vain imagination in our children. Let us consider what constitutes appropriate and godly play.

¹Verna Hall, *Christian History of the American Revolution* (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1975), p. 225.