

Play is a Child's Work - or is it?

I can see the reasoning behind saying play is the child's equivalent of work but it isn't, and saying it is doesn't help.

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Have you ever heard the saying, 'Play is a child's work'? It is a very well-known, well-intended saying that is often cited as a quotation in writings about children's play. But what does it actually mean, where did it come from and does it help?

As a concept it seems to make sense at first glance because adults, generally speaking, take the consequences of their work and their profession seriously and although they might also take their recreation and leisure pursuits seriously as well, work and leisure are somehow different – especially in the eyes of other people. If, therefore, we want to persuade 'other' people to take children's play seriously then the idea is that maybe we should equate work and the play of children together. That's how most people seem to understand the phrase.

But I think it misses the point.

The concept is often credited as being a relatively modern idea that has come from a desire to elevate the importance of play as learning and thus as being something valid in kindergartens and school classrooms.

Many people also believe that the idea can be credited to a specific individual but pinning down quite who that person might be may be more challenging than expected. But let's try. I've seen it written that the originator is the American educator and TV host Fred Rogers (1928-2003) who said in his book *You Are Special: Words of Wisdom for All Ages from a Beloved Neighbor*, "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood." His name on this quotation seems to rule the internet.

It's a brave person that challenges ideas relating to the great Mister Rogers but it appears that he was repeating an already established concept rather than originating it, and yet we find the above quotation as evidence that he is the originator of this idea in many books and webpages.

In recent decades a number of other relatively modern writers have been credited with this quote too but if we push back a little further in time the idea is still there. If we give it, say, 100 years or so we find the German neurologist and founder of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) credited with the concept which some people feel is linked with his idea that human life is made up of an interweaved combination of work, love and play.

There are yet others who quote Jean Piaget (1896-1980) the massively influential Swiss child psychologist as the originator, which might seem to make more sense than Freud because of his very explicit link with education and children. "Play is a child's work" we see in meme's across the internet with Piaget's name alongside. But try and find the original quotation where he says that. Go on, try and find it.

Maybe it is not Piaget, then. Maybe he said it but not because he was personally originating this idea but instead was just quoting the Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870-1952). In fact, she is possibly the most often cited originator of the idea as, "She felt that children would instinctively rather choose to acquire knowledge than to engage in senseless play. Thus, when given the opportunity to choose the activity, what can be seen as play to some

because of the freedom involved, is actually considered work for the child to Montessori?" as it says on her entry on [pgpedia](#).¹

Well, ok, maybe it's not her idea either but instead it originates, as yet others claim, with her contemporary, Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925) the Austrian educationalist and philosopher and creator of the Waldorf-Steiner system of schooling. Steiner schools often quote him saying, "Play is the work of childhood. When children play they are experiencing the world with their entire being..." Just have a look at some of their school websites.

Are we getting closer?

No we are not. Both Montessori and Steiner are still well-known and significant figures in the field of early education largely because their respective philosophies have survived intact and there are still schools around the world that bear their name and follow their basic system of schooling. Yet they were both following in the footsteps of another – Frederick Fröbel (1792-1852) the acknowledged originator of the kindergarten concept. Not surprisingly he too is often credited with creating the concept of play-equals-work saying, "The play of children is not recreation; it means earnest work."

Except he didn't originate the idea.

Surely it must have been Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) of whom Montessori, Steiner and Fröbel were followers and advocates. Guess what? Not surprisingly Pestalozzi is sometimes named as the originator. His famous book (actually a collection of letters) *How Gertrude Teaches her Children*² launched the career of many an early education pioneer around the whole world and so he seems to have as good a reputation as any to have coined a phrase that has survived through generations of playing children. And yet he very rarely mentions 'play' specifically in his writing. Again, go and have a look at what he wrote.

It does not end there, though. We have to go further back still to Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) the Swiss-French philosopher (of whom I remember lecturers in my early university days saying, 'it all comes back to Rousseau in the end, you know, absolutely everything comes back to Rousseau').

In his book *Emile*³, Rousseau says, "Work and play are alike to him; his plays are his occupations, and he sees no difference between the two". Seems compelling evidence. Until we realise that Rousseau was heavily influenced by the English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704) and we have to look to him before we start to get anywhere near the source of this concept.

And there we hit a problem. Locke would not have agreed with the play-equals-work analogy. As a staunch advocate that 'liberty' in all forms of life, including education and in children's play, is essential, Locke wrote specifically about work and play saying in his essay, *Some thoughts on education*,

"Children should not have any thing like work, or serious, laid on them; neither their minds, nor bodies will bear it. It injures their healths; and their being forced and tied down to their books in an age at enmity with all such restraint, has, I doubt not, been the reason, why a great many have hated books and learning all their lives after. 'Tis like a surfeit, that leaves an aversion behind not to be removed."⁴

1 'The Play and Playground Encyclopaedia' <http://www.pgpedia.com/m/aria-montessori>

2 Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1781) *How Gertrude teaches her children: an attempt to help mothers to teach their own children and an account of The method*, translated by Lucy E. Holland and Francis C. Turner (1894) London: S Sonnenschein.

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) *Emile*, Translated by Barbara Foxley (1921) New York: E P Dutton.

4 John Locke (1693) 'Some Thoughts Concerning Education', in *The Harvard classics*, Charles W. Eliot (ed) (1909-14) New York: P F Collier.

Ah. The trail seems to have gone cold, at least in the naming of a single originator. Or maybe not. Because there is a single, named person who we really could accredit this idea to, albeit indirectly. And that is John Calvin (1509-1564) the originator of the branch of Christianity that bears his name.

Locke and Rousseau faced the prevailing 17th century idea of the Protestant, or more accurately Calvinistic, work ethic of their day – the idea abounded that success is earned by hard work and that any diversion from that should be discouraged. Frivolity and idleness were the roots of damnation and were thus to be avoided at all costs; work, on the other hand, was the root of salvation into the next life. This is a central tenet of Calvinism. It means, basically, that play-equals-work is about saving souls.

Locke rejected this idea and perhaps not insignificantly also moved away from his early Calvinistic roots, though he was still heavily religious; Rousseau, despite also personally rejecting Calvinism, was clearly still influenced by some elements of it and so was attempting to justify an apparently negative and purposeless activity by giving it some positive purpose. It would appear that Calvinism is the start of a pattern, the effect of which can still be felt today.

As the modern-day play theorist Brian Sutton-Smith (1924-2015) points out in *The Ambiguity of Play*, "... the puritan ethic of play has been the strongest and most long lasting of all the rhetorics of play in the past four hundred years." It survives to this day in the well-meaning idea that we justify children's frivolous play-life by equating it with adult's serious work-life. We see this as a positive thing but unfortunately what we are actually doing with this play-equals-work analogy is unconsciously promulgating the Calvinist idea that work is good and play is not.

Well ok, if we want to take this play-equals-work analogy seriously maybe we should go full blast at equating the two together: maybe we should take a lesson from the Welsh social reformer Robert Owen (1771-1858) who campaigned for a maximum working week for British workers in the early 19th century coining the slogan, "Eight hours' labour, Eight hours' recreation, Eight hours' rest" and from whom we get our modern version of the working week and contracted working conditions.

Maybe, if we really see play as the work of children, we should look at it in the same way and protect it in the same way. Maybe we should guarantee a maximum time in which they should be playing – not as recreation but in addition to their recreation and rest – 'Eight hours' playing, Eight hours' recreation, Eight hours' rest'. Maybe we should enshrine that in a written contract and, dare I say it, even pay them a fair wage for it.

Perhaps adults would then begin to take time for playing seriously because a contract and pay really does equal work. To do anything less seems very unfair. And yet for many I suspect that this, the logical conclusion of the play-equals-work analogy, is a step too far.

I can see the reasoning behind saying play is the child's equivalent of work ... but it isn't, and saying it is doesn't help. It's a distraction. It is belittling play and giving in to the adult world idea that play is only of worth because it has product, an end-result. If we want to hold up a quotation that mentions the words 'play' and 'work' together I think we would be much better suited to choose one by the American writer, Mark Twain (1835-1910) who wrote in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, "Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do. Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."

The very fact that children spend so much energy and time on a behaviour that has no overt obligation to doing it is the very thing that makes it so important and the very reason that should be uppermost in our minds whilst we advocate for it.

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