

Child's Play? A History

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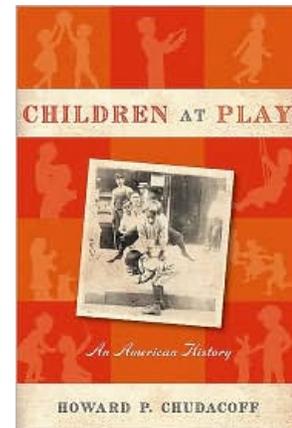
Howard P. Chudacoff has done what someone needed to do — write a history of children's play. In *Children at Play: An American History*, Chudacoff, who teaches at Brown University, traces how play has changed over time. These changes reflect everything from the development of new technologies to big shifts in the understanding of childhood itself.

The fact is that children will play. As Chudacoff remarks, "Kids still find ways to be kids." In the colonial era, children were more likely to be involved in "roving about" the outdoors and improvising games. Later generations of parents encouraged more formal play and childhood itself was more celebrated. Over time, play would be transformed by efforts to keep young boys off the streets, to teach adult roles through gender-specific play, and to free the natural creativity of the child.

More recently, play has been redefined by the development of technologies like computer games, by concerns about gender and child safety, and by changes in family structure and parenting. The book is thought-provoking and insightful.

This excerpt suggests how changes in family life lead to changes in play — and in the relationships between parents and children:

In the twentieth century, two related forces converged to alter the playtime of preadolescents in significant ways. First, the extension of compulsory schooling filled much of all children's daytime hours, regardless of social class, incidentally strengthening peer cultures that increasingly socialized young people in play choices. A partial reduction in a child's family responsibilities, resulting in part from smaller family size and the spread of labor-saving electric appliances, helped create time after school and in the evening during which youngsters could interact with their peer group or play alone with a new cornucopia of commercial playthings. And during the first half of the century, at least, this playtime often took place away from adult supervision in private bedrooms and other secluded areas of the home.



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