

## Introduction

“WORK CONSISTS OF whatever a body is *obliged* to do,” Tom Sawyer lectured to his friends, and “Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do.”<sup>1</sup> Mark Twain’s definition of play seems so simple, so clear. Yet those who have observed and thought about the play of children have embellished the concept with a dizzying array of variations and qualifications. Articulating a single acceptable definition of play is almost impossible. In fact, the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* admits that “No one definition of play is necessary or sufficient” and that it is “a controversial and unresolved topic.”<sup>2</sup> An anthropologist’s concept differs from a sociologist’s, whose concept differs from a psychologist’s, and so on. Most agree that a child’s play has a purposeless quality—Tom’s view that it is not work—but they also agree that play does have a function that is immediate in its behavioral, social, intellectual, and physical rewards and in the development of the child into an adult.

For the most part, the theorists—all of them, of course, adults—link the play of children to another simultaneously simple and complex concept that probably would have satisfied Tom Sawyer: fun, meaning the feeling of bliss and amusement. Play, in this regard, is the spontaneous, joyous activity of children. But the experts also conclude that play has functional, utilitarian qualities related to a child’s development and learning. An individual, according to a common school of thought among educators, psychologists, and philosophers, acquires vital social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills through play, thereby learning how to prepare for a future role as a productive adult. At the same time, play is said to ease a child’s adjustment to the present and make life meaningful. Play, say the experts, inspires imagination and invention, helping children attain positive emotions and control negative ones.<sup>3</sup>

The dynamic factors that characterize play are legion. They traverse a spectrum from elation and freedom to tension, conflict, and

destructiveness. Along this path lie various intensities of behavior: fantasy, competition, risk, and mimicry.<sup>4</sup> Some kinds of play, including such competitive sports as Little League baseball and youth soccer, or the activities sponsored by commercial play spaces, such as Kids Sports Network and Discovery Zone, fall under adult supervision; they are formal and bound by rules, and they take place in predetermined environments. Other play activities—interactive experiments occurring in children’s museums, for example—are semiformal; adults facilitate play activity but do not directly control it. Still other kinds of play are completely informal, improvised, and “childish,” involving what some psychologists believe to be children’s innate biological impulses to investigate and engage with their world and to amuse themselves in unstructured ways.<sup>5</sup> Thus, daydreaming and exploring have been considered playful activities. But so, too, are child-instigated games and sports, such as playing “house” or pick-up baseball, that require memory, strategy, and dramatizing but transpire away from adult scrutiny.

Equally important, different children play in vastly different ways. Age, sex, social class, access to time, and other characteristics affect the preferences, style, and quality of play. And what might be deemed as “fun” play to one child might not be so to another, and what a particular child might consider as play one day may not seem so the next.<sup>6</sup> A condition of innocent joy is not the sole factor present in play, for what passes as playful activity may also be dangerous, cruel, destructive, or unpleasant. French philosopher Roger Caillois, for example, noted that play could involve “endlessly cutting up paper with a pair of scissors, pulling cloth into threads, breaking up a gathering, . . . [and] disturbing the play or work of others.”<sup>7</sup> Children who may be deficient in certain social, physical, or intellectual capabilities, whether from lack of maturity or from permanent developmental incapacity, may find no delight in a particular game or activity that is beyond their faculties. Physical or psychic injury can result from even innocent play, such as might ensue from climbing a tree, bicycling on a rough surface, or being the target of snowballs, and some activities that a child might enjoy, such as capturing insects or bullying other kids, could also be malicious and sadistic. Thus, as much as the concept of children’s play invokes positive reactions, it can have a darker side.<sup>8</sup>

As soon as childhood became a subject of serious social scientific study at the end of the nineteenth century, children’s play came under

close scientific scrutiny. Adopting a developmental model of childhood as a rehearsal for adulthood, many observers designated play as the “child’s work” and the “principal business of childhood.”<sup>9</sup> To these experts, play was not the opposite of work but, rather, another form of it, an activity so vital as to demand adult supervision.<sup>10</sup> But then and now, if asked, a child would probably offer a definition of play that is more akin to Tom Sawyer’s than to the serious qualities that are important to parents and scholars, for to a child play always has meant freely experiencing joy, independence, and, above all, as Tom avowed, not working.

Tom’s definition of play as something a person is not obliged to do has particular relevance when it is considered from a child’s perspective—which is what Mark Twain, from his own view of childhood, was trying to express. A child’s viewpoint—and here I mean specifically a child from the age group six to twelve that is the focus of this book—might fit the model of psychologist Catherine Garvey, who split the concept of children’s play into four components. In her scheme, play first of all is pleasurable, and thus it has positive effects. Second, play has no extrinsic value, no large objectives; it is inherently unproductive. Third, play is voluntary; as Tom Sawyer noted, it is freely chosen, not obligatory. Fourth, play involves active engagement on the part of the player.<sup>11</sup> Mostly, as Brian Sutton-Smith, the most prolific and insightful play scholar, has pointed out, children consider play as “valued personal experience,” but otherwise it is “inexplicable.” Thus, he adds, “we don’t know why children play, even if they can’t help doing it.”<sup>12</sup>

My consideration of play as a component of children’s culture involves four contexts. First is the environment: the setting(s) where play activity takes place. Second involves the materials: the instruments (or absence thereof) that facilitate play activity. Third is the *dramatis personae*: how many and who is or are playing, as well as the relationships among those playing, including solo players. Fourth is freedom: how much control a child or children have over their play activity and what risk(s) that autonomy might entail. These contexts frame the analyses presented in the following chapters.

## Environment

The site of their play activity has always served as the most basic factor in children's abilities to assert their own culture. Though play theoretically can take place anywhere, the three main play settings for children have been and remain: nature (woods, fields, parks, etc.), public spaces (chiefly the street and the playground), and the home (including the yard and indoor space). As dependents and partially developed beings, children grow up in a world they have not constructed, a world ruled by their elders. Yet children have always sought to create spaces for themselves both within and outside the environment circumscribed by adult regulations. As they sought, co-opted, and sometimes were granted play spaces, children became connoisseurs of rural fields and woods; city byways and buildings; and indoor bedrooms, attics, and basements—places where they could keep adults at a distance.<sup>13</sup>

As the United States became increasingly urbanized, protecting that distance posed a special challenge for city youngsters, who of necessity had to incorporate and transform objects and settings of the cityscape into their play. Rural children often had more opportunities to claim unused spaces as their own; they could take over a hillside or enter the woods and engage in what both Silas Felton, growing up in Massachusetts in the 1780s, and R. L. Duffus, growing up in rural Vermont in the 1890s, called "roving" or "roaming."<sup>14</sup> Urban youngsters, however, more than counterparts in the countryside, had to negotiate and share their play areas with other kids and with adults. Both rural and urban children had to define and recognize safe zones and danger zones, marking or adjusting boundaries, but youngsters in cities had to do so as they confronted the changing dynamics of buildings, sidewalks, streets, and vacant lots.<sup>15</sup> Autobiographers frequently recalled using city streets as play environments. Bellamy Partridge, raised in upstate New York in the 1880s, labeled a nearby street a "family playground" for himself and his siblings. Sarah Bixby Smith, who spent her childhood in Los Angeles in the late nineteenth century, referred to a street corner as "our neighborhood playground." And Henry May cherished memories of converting public spaces in Berkeley, California, in the 1920s into "inexhaustible playgrounds."<sup>16</sup> To youngsters like these, the urban counterpart to rural children's "roaming" was

simply “hanging out,” inhabiting and exploring the environment for their own purposes.

The environment, whether in a city, town, farm, or forest, functioned as more than just an imposed backdrop for play. Children interacted with and transformed the play setting in myriad ways. In the countryside, kids cleared brush and rocks to create campsites, collected and cut branches to build forts and playhouses, and dammed streams to create waterways for miniature boats. City kids scavenged and appropriated objects from streets and alleys, and they transformed the built environment into an active player for their games. Two girls wishing to play jump rope, for example, could tie one end of a line to a lamppost or protrusion from a building so that only one had to swing the rope while the other jumped. Boys used brick walls and stoops as inanimate competitors as well as boundaries in ball games, and their play often altered the environment drastically, as when an errant ball shattered a window or when some other destruction resulted from their active play.<sup>17</sup>

By transforming and incorporating the environment into their play, children also experienced the landscape as a battleground. While uninhabited nature might have lacked adult occupancy, plant and animal life sometimes got in the way and required forceful removal. Vegetation, insects, and small creatures not only acted as nuisances but also could be victims of kids’ destructive behavior. Several autobiographers, for example, recalled hunting and capturing an insect, tying a thread around it or removing one of its legs, and using it for sadistic play. The contest over space was more intense in crowded cities, where, aside from playgrounds—which adults officially designated as children’s spaces, though kids challenged adults for control of these sites<sup>18</sup>—territory had multiple users and multiple claimants. Occasionally, children could annex unoccupied urban sites such as a vacant lot or an unused alley, laying out boundaries by consent or formally with chalk, boards, or some other marker. More frequently, children had to struggle against adults and against each other over public spaces. On a given city block, urban folklorists Amanda Dargan and Steven Zeitlin have observed, “children, the elderly, automobile drivers, parents, store owners, strangers, the fire department, sanitation workers, and city authorities [have had to] negotiate use of spaces.”<sup>19</sup> When the young competed with each other (sometimes violently) or

with adults (such as with shopkeepers or police officers), disputes often arose over control of turf, and those children who succeeded in the contest won a sense of ownership and a right to free play. Youngsters, according to one observer, “seize the opportunity to play as the opportunity arises, inserting the game into the interstices of the city’s grid and schedule.”<sup>20</sup>

## Material Culture

In the modern era, the concept of play has connoted doing something with toys, and the concept of toys usually implies mass-produced, commercially marketed objects and games. But historically, both play itself and the meaning of a toy have been more complex than this assumption implies. The term “toy” as an artifact of childhood is of recent vintage. In premodern societies, literature on children rarely mentioned toys, and only a few depictions of children in artwork included toys. Many of the objects that today might be considered children’s toys—dolls and miniatures of various sorts—were often the decorative possessions of adults, especially of adults with means, as much as of children. Games also were as much an adult as a young people’s pastime. Some historians even maintain that before the modern era the most common form of children’s play occurred not with toys but with other children—siblings, cousins, and peers.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, at least until recently, adults have valued manufactured toys more than children have—with the exception of a few items that youngsters seem to have cherished, such as dolls, sleds, bicycles, and skates. Most formal toys owned by children traditionally were received as gifts given by adults, ostensibly as a means to provide happiness but also to promote education (blocks), comfort (stuffed animals), stimulus to the imagination (crayons), companionship (dolls), simulation of adult activity (miniature tools and tea sets), and more. Adults also have used toys as bribes, instruments for bonding and affection, and diversions to keep youngsters from interfering with grown-ups’ activities.<sup>22</sup> Modern consumer society has placed such high value on formal toys that anything else that children collect and play with often is labeled as “junk.”<sup>23</sup>

But the “junk” of childhood has always carried more significance than most parents and child-study experts assumed. Indeed, the term

“plaything” is perhaps more applicable than “toy” to the material culture of childhood: not only could play take place anywhere, but also a child could use practically anything as a plaything.<sup>24</sup> Thus, children have transformed space to enhance their play, and they have transformed objects as well. For example, historian Bruce Catton, recollecting his humble boyhood in Benzonia, Michigan, in the early 1900s, wrote about fashioning a “Kentucky rifle” from a broomstick. Growing up in Oklahoma in the 1930s, Estha Brisco Stowe “improvised with whatever became available.” African American youngsters on the lowest end of both the socioeconomic and the social scales needed to be especially inventive. Ruby Berkley Goodwin, born in 1903 and raised in DuQuoin, Illinois, remembered how her friends “salvaged rubber-tired wheels from broken Christmas wagons and made bullet-headed expresses that raced with incredible speed.” And, lacking a wagon or bicycle to transport her, Elizabeth Laura Adams, a black girl growing up in Santa Barbara, California, transformed her living-room carpet into a “magic rug” that could carry her to the moon.<sup>25</sup> In many ways these informal artifacts, which children had to purposefully seek out rather than receive as gifts, and their imaginative uses reveal more about children’s culture than do manufactured toys, because the formal toys—dolls, vehicles, board games—as goods purchased mostly by adults, more accurately have reflected adult culture, at least until the onset of the television era in the latter half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup> Thus, like the meaning of “play site,” the meanings of “toy” and “plaything” have been contested between children and adults.<sup>27</sup>

The differences of meaning often have revolved around the perceived function of toys. Parents, educators, and psychologists have generally favored toys that they believe promote their version of children’s creativity and knowledge, scorning toys that, to them, appear as nonutilitarian indulgences. For much of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first as well, so-called educational toys—sturdy objects and games designed explicitly to expand intellectual, motor, or adaptive skills—were seen as the most suitable for children, and companies such as Playskool (founded in 1928) and Fisher Price (founded in 1930) profited heavily by marketing wooden<sup>28</sup> pull toys, blocks, puzzles, and games that won applause from educational and child-safety experts. The goal was to extend the function of schools into children’s free time and impose parental control of play as a bulwark against crass consumerism. The ideology of educational play and toys

resulted in play being labeled the “child’s work” and toys as children’s “tools.”<sup>29</sup>

From a child’s perspective, of course, “work” and “tools” rarely exist on the conceptual horizon. As the Swedish sociologist Birgitta Almqvist has noted,

Children do not say “Now I’ll improve my thinking by means of constructional play.” Or “Now I’ll play something that can develop my creativity.” They just play, and usually they do not do one instead of the other. Rather, they say, “Let’s take all the blocks and pretend we build the highest house in the world.”<sup>30</sup>

Even though mass popular culture and the media have, to a considerable extent, overtaken parents as arbiters of children’s toy tastes, the experts overestimated the importance of toys. Research has demonstrated that kids usually play with most commercial toys for only a short time, and, when not relegating a toy to the back of the closet, they rebel against adult intentions in various ways by creating their own styles of amusement. They assert independence, for example, by inventing their own rules for a board game or by taking miniature people out of a dollhouse and stuffing them into a toy vehicle that was never intended to be used in conjunction with the dollhouse or its figures.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, as suggested by the testimonies above, the most popular playthings have been those informal objects that children fashion or discover themselves. It is within this form of children’s material culture that the imagination is stimulated to productive (and destructive) ends, and where, as Sutton-Smith has argued, “toys are meant for the empowerment of play rather than as teaching machines that can replace what parents want their children to learn.”<sup>32</sup>

Individual and cultural variations strongly affect choices and uses of toys. According to child psychologists, young children, below age six, seem to need more structured, realistic toys to assist their pretend play, while preteen youngsters more easily transform ordinary objects into playthings. In addition, children from disadvantaged socioeconomic groups usually own fewer and less elaborate toys than those of more affluent groups. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, American Indian and African American slave children, as well as white children on subsistence farms, owned almost no formal toys; they or their family members made most of what they played with. By



INDIAN BOYS AT PLAY. This sixteenth-century engraving reveals Indian youths grouped together away from adults, amusing themselves while also practicing hunting and warrior skills they would need as adults. *Library of Congress*

the twentieth century, expanding consumer culture enabled children of all socioeconomic groups to have access to at least some commercially produced toys, though, of course, family means limited the quantities and quality of products.

Above all, gender has enveloped age differences and has had numerous consequences in play. For example, toys can control children's play culture differently according to gender: a Barbie doll, whose "story line" revolves around fashion, governs how girls talk about their object of play, while the once-popular *Transformers* television show, with its specific heroes and villains, determined how boys related to and played with Transformer toys. Alternatively, gender can influence attitudes about a toy: a boy would have different kinds of interaction with Barbie than a girl would. Diverse studies by psychologists have shown that at young ages, girls are more likely to play pretend games with toys, especially dolls, than boys do, while after about age seven the pattern reverses as boys, who by the time they are pre-teens possess vehicles, machines, and military toys that girls generally

do not receive, have more paraphernalia around which to structure their play.<sup>33</sup> Though some research argues, debatably, that, at least in part, biological factors of gender determine toy preferences, there is no doubt that social and cultural influences create gender differences in choices as early as age two. Parents and same-sex peers have traditionally established whether a toy is appropriate for a boy or girl, and in the modern consumer age advertisements portray girls and boys much differently in their relationship to toys. Girls are often shown interacting with—that is, adopting an identity separate from their toy—while boys are shown identifying with their toys: that is, assuming the character of the toy as their own.<sup>34</sup>

Whatever the variations, there is strong belief that toys have some kind of effect on children. But just exactly what that effect is has provoked extensive debate. Some writers decry the power of certain toys to reinforce sex stereotypes (dolls and action figures, for example), teach violence (guns and video games), promote sexual promiscuity (physiological realism in dolls), stifle imagination, suppress creativity, and serve as opiates for purposes of social control. Others see toys as promoting socialization, building confidence (as a youngster masters a skill), and abetting autonomy. To adults, the “best” toys are those that stimulate “healthy” imaginative thought and simulation of an ordered society. But, as I suggest in the following chapters, to a child, toys are mostly objects of fun, vehicles to fantasy, and objects that need not be taken too seriously. For example, as Elizabeth Laura Adams proved as she sat on a carpet and pretended to be carried to the moon, children do not need toys to imagine.<sup>35</sup> And, as Sutton-Smith has written, “It is not so much what the toy does by itself, but in what way it gives the child an instrument with which to express and manipulate the cultural forces that bear upon him or her.”<sup>36</sup>

## Dramatis Personae

Parents and other child specialists have long believed that children learn special skills of socialization by playing with other youngsters. In addition to the ways that these abilities serve the needs of adult society by making kids adults-in-training, children acquire “play skills” that enable them to interact more pleasurably with each other and to

cultivate friendships. Though over the past two centuries children seem to have spent increasing amounts of time in solitary play,<sup>37</sup> they have always fostered their own culture within communities of those who share their same values and activities. Through their play, children form what sociologists Schlomo Ariel and Irene Sever have called a “mini society,” usually determined by similarity of age, residential proximity, and social interaction of parents. (Similarity of gender must be included as well.) Within these societies, which are often spontaneously created, children follow a system of unwritten convention regarding the sharing of playthings, the boundaries of play territory, and the qualifications for membership in the playgroup. Though Ariel and Sever observed Arab Bedouin children, they concluded that there are customs and languages to social play that are universal, a finding that has been supported by other social scientific studies. Thus, as anthropologist Douglas Newton has asserted, “The world-wide fraternity of children is the greatest of savage tribes, and the only one which shows no signs of dying out.”<sup>38</sup>

In their text on the psychology of childhood and adolescence, L. Joseph Stone and Joseph Church have validated the power of a preteen (or, as it is currently known, “tween”) children’s culture in America:

Among his friends, the middle-years child lives in a special culture with its own traditional games, rhymes, riddles, tricks, superstitions, factual and mythical lore, and skills, transmitted virtually intact from one childhood generation to the next, sometimes over a period of centuries with no help from adults and often in spite of them.<sup>39</sup>

The peer culture of children, however, is far from homogeneous. How a child plays depends on what qualities he or she brings to the play situation. As with toy choices, playgroup associations are heavily influenced by age (intellectual and emotional age, as well as biological age), sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location (urban, suburban, or rural).<sup>40</sup> Perhaps even more than with toy choices, gender has proven to be the most important factor in determining play partners. Though exceptions have existed and continue to exist, such as when a brother might be enlisted to play house with his sister and her friends or when a “tomboy” girl engages in sports contests with

some neighbor boys, most kids have adhered to a strictly sex-segregated play world. Whether in Indian villages, plantation slave quarters, small-town America, urban ethnic neighborhoods, public playgrounds, or suburban yards, preadolescent boys and girls very seldom have played jointly.

Playmates have powerful influence over the kinds of roles children assume, even beyond those related to gender. Child psychologist Fritz Redl pithily made the point—to which many parents would subscribe—when he suggested that preadolescence was the time in which “the nicest children begin to behave in the most awful way.”<sup>41</sup> He was referring to the “split personality” of school-age children: their “nice” behavior in front of and with adults (usually not in front of their parents, however), and their “awful” behavior with friends and away from adult attention. Though Redl and other observers applied the distinction mostly to preadolescent boys, girls could and do fit the model, too. For example, Louise Dickinson Rich, raised in rural Massachusetts, recalled following her parents’ restrictions on where she could play one hour and breaking into her town’s stables and horsing around on the wagons and snowplows the next; Caryl Rivers reminisced from her suburban Baltimore childhood that she did the expected “girl” things some of the time but also was “daring and resourceful” when she accompanied her girlfriends on invasions of her town’s sewer pipes.<sup>42</sup>

In a larger sense, the assumption has always been that adults—mainly parents but also teachers and helping professionals—were, and are, the only people capable of molding children into proper (well-behaved), productive citizens. Left to their own devices and in the company of peers, children supposedly pursued “childish” instincts and behaved badly, if not evilly. To be sure, the dramatis personae of play sometimes did engage in acts that were inappropriate, dangerous, and destructive. But adults who observed or theorized about children at play often overlooked the ways that kids, alone and with peers, might have used their seemingly aimless play to achieve a positive result by different means. Humorist Robert Paul Smith expressed this point succinctly: “When I was a kid, there was a lot of loose talk . . . about how a father was supposed to be a pal to his boy. This was just another of those stupid things grownups said. It was our theory that the grownup was the natural enemy of the child. . . . What we learned we learned from another kid.”<sup>43</sup>

## Freedom

For much of the time, adults have used their superiority in age and status to prevail in the conflict over what the younger generation should do and how they should act, and children have peacefully acquiesced. It is their nature to obey and want to please. For purposes of safety, education, socialization, and family mutuality, children have always needed adult supervision. Yet, there is a powerful tradition that maintains that the pleasure derived from play is the basic freedom of childhood.<sup>44</sup> Children have always strived to gain control over their play, while adults have endeavored to define the “right way” and “wrong way” for playing.<sup>45</sup> In some circumstances, adults used guilt and sin as means to regulate children’s playful behavior; at other times, they applied physical punishment or the threat of such punishment; and at still other times, they used instruction, persuasion, or material inducement. In general, the older generation has always wanted play to be rational so that it will lead a child to some beneficial end such as wisdom and proficiency.

But often youngsters have employed their guile to cultivate an underground of self-structured and informal play that they did not care to talk about and that the older generation undervalued or did not approve. Preadolescent children, especially, were and are often willing to defiantly accept risk and to “offend against their status.”<sup>46</sup> What youngsters tried to do on their own did not always result in fun in an idealized sense; as mentioned previously, it may have been irrational, hazardous, or antisocial. And, what to a child might have appeared to be free choice may actually have been manipulated by educators, television programming, advertisement, and the constraints of a computer program.<sup>47</sup> Regardless, preadolescent youths have always used their play as a means of seeking and asserting independence from adult constraints.

As they grow up, children participate in what one historian has called “the dialectical dance of generations,” an exercise that involves stepping in, out, and around a whirl of authority, morality, and tradition. Whether it takes place inside or outside the family, that dance has contained inherent intergenerational conflicts, and children have confronted those conflicts in diverse ways. Their expressions of their own culture—whether in games, songs, jokes, or hobbies—are tied tightly to values and behaviors that have been transmitted from an

older generation. In premodern America, religion and the family sanctioned (and in many places still sanction) games, books, music, and general playtime. In more recent eras, schools, public agencies, private organizations, and marketers have joined (and sometimes replaced) parents in infusing children's culture with seemingly contradictory themes of social purpose and meaningless fantasy. In modern American society, teeming with experts, adults impose on children forms of play to achieve therapeutic, academic, and economic goals. And at all times, the cultural orientation of parents has guided what children say and do.<sup>48</sup>

The influential Swiss child psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget once suggested that children's culture consists of "complementary" interactions with adults and "reciprocal" interactions with peers. The former relationship involves a one-way imposition of authority on children. How free children are in this relationship became a matter of debate. Piaget believed that interactions only with adults, because of their unilateral nature, could inhibit emotional growth, especially in areas such as moral development. Sociologist Erving Goffman took this conclusion further, likening children to prisoners and mental patients, whose playtime (Goffman focused on what he called "game time") was completely constrained by adult authorities. While not wishing to remove the "complementary" role of adults from children's lives, Piaget reasoned that the reciprocal and negotiated behavior that characterize the freer qualities of peer interaction encourage children to assume more varied roles and to use more varied language that, in turn, would aid their adjustment to society.

Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, in contrast, believed that child-adult interactions are critical in enabling the young to develop intellectually and morally. To Vygotsky, problem solving should be mediated by adult help, and freeing children to act in isolation of that supervision hinders their ability to acquire new skills. To be sure, Piaget and his followers understood that not all peer relationships are reciprocal; at times, one child can teach, lead, or bully another in a unilateral, complementary way. At other times, such as when a son and father compete in playing a video game, a child and parent can enter a reciprocal or even reverse complementary (son teaching father how to play) relationship. Thus age, materials, and situation can affect how peers and adults interact.<sup>49</sup>

The debates over children's interactions illuminate the bifurcated culture of childhood and play: adult-structured in one dimension, peer-structured in the other. And while never isolated from myriad external, generational, and gender influences, preadolescents by themselves and with peers operate in a separate society: one that is not anarchic but is freer than the society that includes their elders as arbiters in children's lives. As anthropologist Gary Alan Fine has observed, "Children, particularly with their peers, behave more in accord with the world as they observe it than with the world as professed by adults."<sup>50</sup> Thus, in this autonomous world, kids resist adult pressures while at the same time, in the presence of adults, they are willing to buy into, or at least accept, the rewards of attempts to convert—read: socialize—them to the moral verities of the older generation.

This is not to say that children deliberately exploit their status (though they sometimes do); while kids profess a desire for freedom, they often simultaneously complain about lack of adult guidance. In his analysis of preadolescent boys playing Little League baseball, Fine found that coaches who failed to apply some measure of discipline and allowed team members only to have "a good time" were blamed by those same players for not giving them that good time.<sup>51</sup> Still, the inventiveness of youngsters when they are released from an enforced adult regimen can be not just vital but astonishing. Educator William Wells Newell, who was one of the first Americans to apply scientific method to the study of children's play in the late nineteenth century, was also one of the few to realize how parents and other adults overlooked the importance of free play. One of his observations is worth quoting at length:

Observe a little girl who has attended her mother for an airing in some city park. The older person, quietly seated beside the footpath, is half absorbed in reverie; takes little notice of passers-by, or of neighboring sights or sounds, further than to cast an occasional glance which may inform her of the child's security. The other, left to her own devices, wanders contented within the limited scope, incessantly prattling to herself; now climbing an adjoining rock, now flitting like a bird from one side of the pathway to the other. Listen to her monologue, flowing as incessantly and musically as the bubbling of a spring; if you can catch enough to follow her thought, you will

find a perpetual romance unfolding itself in her mind. Imaginary personages accompany her footsteps; the properties of a childish theatre exist in her fantasy; she sustains a conversation in three or four characters. The roughness of the ground, the hasty passage of a squirrel, the chirping of a sparrow are occasions sufficient to suggest an exchange of impressions between the unreal figures with which her world is peopled. If she ascends, not without a stumble, the artificial rockwork, it is with the expressed solitude of a mother who guides an infant by the edge of a precipice; if she raises her glance to the waving green overhead, it is with the cry of pleasure exchanged by playmates who trip from home on a sunshiny day. *The older person is confined within the barriers of memory and experience; the younger breathes the free air of creative fancy.*<sup>52</sup>

Not only alone but also when with each other, out of adult sight and out of adult mind, children have always displayed remarkable capacity to create their own pleasure, sometimes in conspiratorial ways. Beyond the instrumental play that is defined and governed by adults, children engage in two kinds of unsupervised play: “real” or self-directed activities that are adult sanctioned but carried out without adult intervention; and illicit, unauthorized play that defies adult rules and that kids are careful to conceal. Slave children became particularly adroit at eluding supervision, pilfering objects for their games or slipping away, as Mississippi slave Prince Johnson did, to play in orchards and fields. But white children also practiced what immigrant daughter Kate Simon called the “hypocrisies” of being a good child while at the same time indulging in taboo acts of fun and excitement on her neighborhood’s rooftops.<sup>53</sup>

Beyond simple hypocrisy and deviltry, illicit sorts of play like those of Johnson and Simon have provided preadolescents with ways to extend their sense of autonomy and power. Whether creating a secret language, exploring forbidden sites, or engaging in dangerous games, children reveled in freedom. Thus Frances Parkinson Keyes, describing how she and her friends challenged each other to navigate along the top rail of a cemetery fence or how they explored an underground cavern, recalled that in these and other similar activities, “We did not seek . . . advice from any of our elders; however, in fact, none of us felt it necessary to inform them of our decision.”<sup>54</sup>

British folklorists Ilona and Peter Opie, whose studies resulted in



*Severall Young men playing at foote-ball  
on the Ice upon the Lords-day are all Drownd*

DANGERS OF PLAYING FOOTBALL. Defaming the Lord's Day by engaging in a frivolous and dangerous game, these boys were depicted as falling through the ice and drowning, a severe reminder of Puritan proscriptions against idle play. *Picture Research Consultants and Archives*

the most extensive catalog of child-structured games in the twentieth century, concluded that the games most in decline over time were those that adults knew about and were most inclined to endorse. Those games that continuously flourished or increased in popularity were those that adults either did not understand or disapproved. And when parents and child-study professionals have lamented, as they have been doing for decades, that without adult guidance children are unable to develop creativity, kids have retreated into their autonomous peer society and have proved them wrong. Thus, as anthropologist Helen Schwartzman has remarked, "Often when children are followed out of their houses or schools and into the streets, backlots, and alleys of their lives, their behavior is observed to be highly creative,

self-sufficient, active, and resourceful." Herein lies the true autonomy of childhood.<sup>55</sup>

The fact remains: There has never been a time of carefree childhood in American history. In spite of the belief that childhood was every person's birthright, in every era children have been deprived of that legacy by necessities of the family economy, tragedies of parental death and desertion, and the evil of predatory and brutal adults. The uninvited intrusions of poverty, disease, injury, bondage, and bigotry have robbed kids of essential opportunities, including those for play. As I argue in subsequent chapters, adults increasingly tried to restrict and control children's pleasure by obliging them to follow adult rules, presumably for reasons of rationality and safety. The result was a constriction of autonomous, unstructured, or self-structured play.

In many non-Western cultures, parents have considered children competent at an earlier age than Western children, permitting play to take place without strict supervision or organization; "free" play is considered and tolerated as "natural." The play of American youngsters, growing up in a technology-dominated, competitive, future-oriented culture, has required both adult guidance and adult protection lest children's, and society's, healthy development be jeopardized. This nexus between generations, and the resulting contest over the site, materials, participants, and autonomy of children's play, has resulted in both benefits and costs.<sup>56</sup>