CHILDREN AT PLAY

FOR the last 50 years or so children's games have provided a fertile field for the speculations of the historian, the social scientist and the ethnologist, and even parents have found themselves wondering why some games come and go, what has happened to the ones they played as children, why marbles are here to-day and gone to-morrow. In May, 1947, in an article, "A New Game and an Old Puzzle," *The Listener* tried to cast some light upon the apparently irrational appearance of the new fortune-telling paper game that appeared out of the blue to sweep the Wellington schools, and is only now dying a lingering death.

Considerably more light is being cast on the why and wherefore of children's games by the work at present being done by Brian Sutton-Smith, an education graduate of Victoria College, who has been awarded a two-year research scholarship to study the subject and is at present touring New Zealand to collect material on children's activities. He traces the demise of many once-played games back to the early 1900's, which saw the beginnings of adult interest in children's playground activities and the beginnings of teacher-organised sport. The Education Act of 1877 had provided for physical drill if the teacher desired it, but it was the Boer War and the beginnings of cadet training that focussed attention on children's physical activities. Then the spectacular success of the All Blacks in 1905 led to a desire on the part of teachers and the community in general to train children for proficiency in sport. To-day most children's games are directed towards the development of speed and of the ability to handle a ball, and play has become more standardised.

Mr. Sutton-Smith thinks this a bad thing, in so far as it militates against the development of alternative and more spontaneous forms of play and provides less scope for those children who are not proficient at the accepted activities. The hopeless duffer at football might previously have earned distinction as the marbles champion or the owner of a prize conker, but even in schools where these activities have their place their prestige value is steadily sinking.

"Marbles and tops are tending to 'go down' the school," said Mr. Sutton-Smith. "Not long ago the big boys played them, but now in most cases they are relegated to Standards 1 and 2."

Supply and Demand

"What laws govern the periodic reappearance of games like marbles?" *The Listener* wanted to know.

"There's nothing abstruse about it," said Mr. Sutton-Smith. "You'll find that the less important games come in during off-seasons between, say, the end of football and the start of cricket. Generally speaking, you won't find them flourishing during the peak periods of the main sports, but at the present time the law of supply and demand is making the position a little more complicated. One small boy I was talking to told me his mother had bought him marbles because she saw some in a shop. By playtime four other boys had been home to get theirs and at lunchtime almost everybody had them. But it's fairly hard to get marbles now, so I think the game is on the way out. Which would be a pity.

"I don't think there are any principles underlying the appearance of new games or the reappearance of old ones. Games are as unpredictable as fashions, and like fashions may catch on or not. New games have more chance of catching on between seasons when there's nothing much doing.

"That fortune-telling game? I expect some child got it out of a magazine. That's where most of the notions come from."

Mr. Sutton-Smith thinks there has perhaps been too much standardisation in the recent past, but now there is an increasing tendency to recognise that the only criterion should be the child's own satisfaction in the game. Games with fixed rules definitely have their place in the playground, but the child needs as well the educational experience of hammering out the rules for himself. When children invent a new game there is a terrific amount of squabbling and fighting about how it shall be played. This to the outsider may look like poor sportsmanship compared with the acceptance of rules shown at cricket or football practice, but actually it is much more vital that the child should have the experience of making the rules he plays under. Each child goes through the battle of sacrificing some of his own wishes to the good of the group. He gives more to the game and gets more out of it.

"Girls have more scope at home"

Individualism in the South

Mr. Sutton-Smith has so far covered only part of the ground necessary for his investigations. He has been to Christchurch and Dunedin, and is at present back in Wellington for a short time before going on to the West Coast, where he thinks there may be some interesting survivals of once-popular games. He was struck by the fact that Dunedin children are much more individual in their games than Wellington children, possibly because the population is more static and there is therefore more continuity. In Christchurch conkers are still popular during the chestnut season, and the champion is duly oiled between bouts and goes into honourable retirement when its score reaches a thousand or so.

"In games like conkers there appears to be some survival of the atavistic belief that the conquering spear drew mana from its victim. Perhaps it's the same idea that led airmen to make a mark on the side of their own aircraft for every enemy aircraft shot down."

The part that continuity plays in the survival of games is illustrated by the fact that at Alexandra District High School Mr. Sutton-Smith found a game called "Eggs in a Basket" which is apparently played nowhere else in New Zealand. This is partly, he thinks, due to the fact that primary school and high school exist side by side at Alexandra, and tradition is therefore a more potent factor. One of the causes of the high mortality among traditional games in the larger cities is decapitation, in that Forms 1 and 2 are transferred to intermediate schools. The children concerned are anxious to make a good impression in their new environment, and their anxiety to conform leads them to put what they consider childish things behind them and concentrate on more conventional activities.

One of the things Mr. Sutton-Smith has already noticed is the difference in their approach to games between primary school boys and girls. The girls are just as keen to excel as the boys, but are more concerned with individual skills. Thus you find that girls spend more of their time practising handstands, for example, and that they are usually more proficient. The boys do not appear to concern themselves much whether they can do handstands or not, but are quite happy to be playing footfall. In the schoolground the girls' play is much more conventional than the boys. They invent very elaborate rules for their skipping and give each other skipping examinations, whereas the boys are quite content scuffling or kicking a ball around. At home however the position is reversed, because the girls have more scope for free play in such activities as dressing-up and keeping

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"Boys are quite happy to be playing football"