

BOYS AND GIRLS COME OUT TO PLAY!

NO one takes half enough notice of children at play. We are all preoccupied with the application of the latest clamp, crab, crouch, kick, scissors, bar, or other monstrosity of wrestling; with the latest perversion of what used to be Rugby; with the injustice of the selection of the representative cricket team; with the seconds Beau something will gain on Belle something given an ounce less of lead under the saddle flaps; with the iniquity of the management committee; or the price of shuttlecocks.

For children, sport is much simpler. They play. We work. And we work ruddy hard, as a pick and shovel expert might say to the driver of a bull-dozer. What's more, we put all our work into one or two days at the end of the week, and manage to get to work on Monday and last out the first awful day of the week only because earning our living after the strenuous exploits of the weekend is comparatively easy meat.

Meddling With Playing

But children distribute their enjoyment. If they are handled right, in fact, everything they do is play. If the school teacher can approach $2+2=4$ in the same spirit of camaraderie as the parent gives to placing one painted block on top of another, then arithmetic can be far more amusing than snakes and ladders. Few teachers, of course, reach this stage of fine art in teaching. Few parents, when they meddle with children's playing, meddle to any good effect; and meddling, badly managed, gives play the false status of a lesson. It works like propaganda. The child (and the public) will rebel if they are conscious of being taught. If they are inveigled into learning, there is a different story.

However, the technique of seducing the young mind away from animal lusts and into the Elysium Fields of civilised thought, is hardly fit matter for this Page. Teachers and parents alike so often make such a mess of the classroom, whether it appears as such or in disguise, that we shall be happier occupying ourselves with the child in the playground.

Playground does not mean that oblong of turf bounded by white lines and decorated by posts between which "players" are expected to direct a ball of ridiculously inadequate shape. That is preparation for after-life, and therefore work. There is even a career in it, if you know how to get on with a firm that has branches where the Ranfurly Shield is required next season, according to the financial situation of the local Rugby Union.

But careers are taboo. No child should be occupied with them until he has first attained proficiency at: Bows and Arrows, Bill Cody and the Red Indians, Marbles, Tops, Hop-Scotch; and sliding on his (or her) pants down the needle-strewn slopes of a grove of insignis (or radiata).

To-Day It's Marbles

Go into a school playground now. What are they playing at the moment? If you are a parent, you will know from the house accounts that it is tops, or marbles. Young James has probably wanted a new taw lately, having lost



Boys (not girls) come in from play

his own to Young Bill. Bill is always successful, by the way. If you want your child to succeed, call him Bill. If it is a girl, make the best of the situation and call her Betty. Bills and Betys grow up plump, rosy, dominant, good-tempered, and beautifully middle-class. Stanleys often become dustmen. Cecils never succeed. Erics are always a bit too little by little. Colins are often belligerent, but this is a name you cannot trust. Bill you can rely upon. And if your son is a James, then we shall probably be correct in assuming that he needs a new taw.

If you are not a parent, if James has not been wanting a new taw, or if he has and mother has hidden this fact of life from father by buying it out of her own purse; then we shall bet our bottom and solitary dollar that you have not the faintest idea what they are playing now at school.

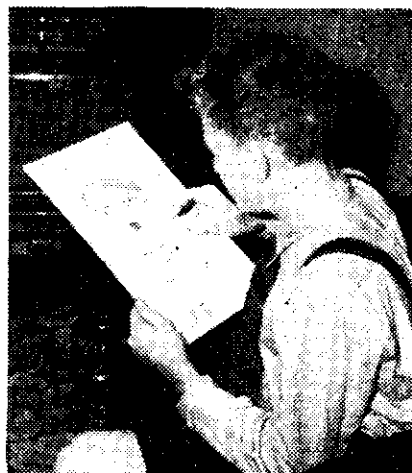
Try It For Yourself!

You should find out. It is very instructive. What is more, when you have found out, you should try your hand at it. You will find that your hand is very shaky. Take that blue taw of James's, for instance, and have a crack at plunking Bill's dake over there. Bill being Bill, you will miss. You being you, and old, and worn and knocked about by Rugby, golf, and the other sins of Mankind, will probably miss by anything from one yard to five. Worse, you will scratch your thumb on the concrete, fill your nails with sand, wear out the knees of your pants, and lose your temper.

To-Morrow It's Tops

Go to school again the next day, and you will be surprised, most probably, to find that there is not a marble to be seen for miles. To-day it is the craze, to-morrow the game will be Tops, or Tig (in Otago only), or Chasing (in less favoured parts), or Bar-the-Door, or Rounders. In all of them you will be equally inefficient.

Sometimes even these stand-bys fade out of the picture. It is in such periods



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of comparative inaction in the playground that teacher is hit on the nape of the neck by bent matches flung from well-made miniature shanghais, or finds pen nibs broken off to act as barbs for paper darts, or sees the ink-wells bubbling over with carbide, or discovers kittens in his desk, or his chalk soaked in water, or (best of all, and no charge for the tip), the blackboard finely painted over with egg white, or even carpenter's glue.

What The Papers Miss

Heaven knows how much space is given by the newspapers of this country to such effervescences of modern life as Rugby and Racing, and Wrestling.

No space is given (or has been, until now) to the vastly more intricate, and tremendously more important, sports of the playground.

For this the Playground must be grateful. This article will not attempt to disturb the cloak of anonymity sheltering it from the destroying acid of adulating publicity. The Playground has no National Management Committee to standardise the rules. You make them up as you go along, in the Playground; and if any player refuses to recognise

them it is simple enough to: stone him out of the grounds; send him to Coventry; swipe his homework; lock him in the lavatory; push him under the drinking fountain; or simply blood his nose. By these means are the rules most effectively preserved and sanctified.

The Playground has no Press to come out on Mondays with its panegyrics and pusillanimity. A good spinner of tops, an expert maker of darts, a fast runner between bases, is known and recognised for what he is without a column under three headlines in the Late Edition. He supports himself as long as he can, only by virtue of his own continued prowess. When he declines, there is someone to replace him, even at the expense of a black eye or a torn shirt. It is not necessary to explain the situation in next week's Notes on Sport.

No Advertising

Neither is advertising considered essential, nor a gate, nor free passes for the friends of members and the worst seats for their enemies. If James and Bill have disagreed about the ownership of a knife with an attachment for taking stones out of horses' hooves, for instance, they simply retire to a suitable position and have it out. Shortly, the whole school will be there, with no expenses per column inch, no hire for halls, no special seats for reporters, and absolutely no doubt that the better man will win.

This is clean sport. It may be different now, but 15 years or so ago, or more, there was a tradition that fights could not honourably include striking an opponent on the face or in the stomach. Anything else was o.k. He could be strangled. He could have his face rubbed in the dirt. His hair could be pulled. His pants could be brought down to embarrass his pride and impede his action; but nothing calculated to put him out of action quickly, like a punch in the diaphragm, was allowed. There were people who compensated for their deficiency in strength and size with a resolution that overcame such conventions; but afterwards they either became Radicals, Boose-Artists, Petty Thieves, or Sports Writers. Draw the blinds.

With just these few exceptions, the whole business was, and no doubt is, entirely clean and wholesome.

The Modern Way

Perhaps these remembered precepts still hold their own against the movie and the radio. Perhaps they don't. Times change, and children with them. This story comes from England now:

Sonny came home, flushed face eager behind sword and shield. "How did the battle go to-day?" asked father. "Battle! We won, of course. We fight in a new way now." "And what way is that?" "Haven't you heard? It's economic war now. When they're away in school, we run along and tear down their fort. When they come back, it's gone, and we're gone, and they have to build another."

If any parents ever had any doubt about the virtues or vices of Red Indians, they must now be thinking how very much more civilised they were than Hitler.

If there appears to be any other moral, it is disowned.