



The Importance of Play

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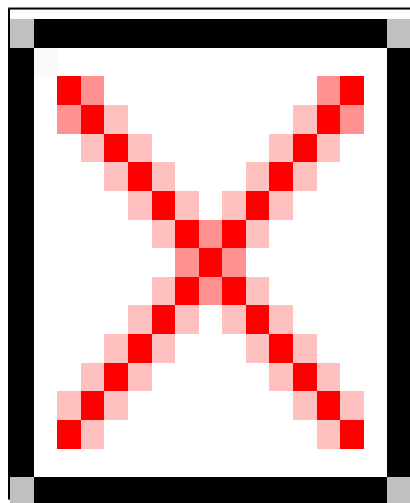
[Gill Lewis](#) [1]

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Byline:

Make believe is crucial says **Gill Lewis**

Gill Lewis remembers exploring the land of make-believe.



When I was a child I had a wonderful horse called Clarence. He was an iron grey stallion with a proud arching neck, and a flowing white mane. In reality he was a broom handle with a horse's head made from an old grey towel and a mane made from a mop, but the moment I held onto the shoelace reins, we galloped together across daisy pastures, the wind blowing in our faces. We picnicked beneath the apple tree and I loved the cloppety sound (of his broom handle body) he made when we trotted down the road. The imagined world blurred effortlessly with the real world. They were one and the same. When I went to play with my friends in the scrubby patch of council-owned land that we called The Woods, it became our Jurassic Park filled with child-eating dinosaurs at every turn. It was our jungle full of tigers and tribes that wanted to capture us and eat us. It was a place full of wonder and curiosity. It was a place where the physical world stretched and time itself seemed to occupy another dimension.

I remember it well.

I can also remember the moment I realised I could not play imaginatively anymore. I was eleven years old, and at a friend's house where we tried to play one of the games we had always played as children. We knew we were pretending. We could not slide effortlessly into that Land of Make-Believe. It eluded us. I was at the cusp of growing up, where part of me wanted to fast-forward into exciting uncharted territory, and another part sought the safety of childhood. I remember a sadness, a sort of grief that comes with self-awareness, knowing that I was unable to return to this part of my life, that I would never enter that Land of Make-Believe again, and that we possess this unique ability for a finite time.

Writing and reading books comes close to that immersive experience in being part of an imagined world, but it is not quite the same. It never will be.

Play is important for many species. Lots of young animals play. It's a time to test physical and social boundaries. It's a

time to experiment how to survive in the world of adulthood. It's a time to safely get things wrong. Humans are an extraordinary species with the ability to imagine and to empathise. If imaginative play is key to our survival as a species, then surely it is because it allows us to explore and test our relationships with others. It's a time to minutely observe and notice the world around us. It can be done in isolation, or with friends. Both have their benefits. To play alone is important for independence and to be comfortable in one's own skin, to have time to think and simply be. Imaginative play in a group allows children to share ideas, to collaborate and communicate. Imaginative play, unlike structured play, is open ended. There is no set purpose.

Structured play has a place and there are many useful games developing different skills. But structured play has a fixed end-point and fixed rules and is often supervised by adults. Structured play has a goal to achieve. Having a goal immediately sets up play where children compare themselves with others.

Children's lives are being increasingly tested and evaluated. They are comparing themselves to others in school work and in social media. Constant comparison has the potential to undermine confidence, to lower self-esteem. It can be divisive and damaging.

Open-ended imaginative play does not compare. It has no fixed rules. The rules are constantly changing and created by the children themselves. It is collaborative. It allows freedom of thought and creativity. It allows infinite journeys to be taken and retaken, and multiple outcomes to be explored. It also allows children to engage in non-competitive exercise and explore social and physical boundaries.

Yet, imaginative play requires certain conditions that modern life is constraining. To find that Land of Make-Believe, children have to have physical and mental space to think and dream. Sometimes boredom is the greatest precursor of this. But boredom can be alleviated too readily at the flick of a switch and increased screen time. The so-called luxury of constant entertainment may come at the expense of creativity. Some virtual reality games afford children an imaginary world, but it is not one of their making. It is decided for them. They are the recipients of another person's creativity, not the creators. Although children can engage in imaginative play indoors, many have restricted access to outdoor space where imaginary worlds can merge with the natural world, the greatest inspiration for curiosity and wonder. Children today have less time and space to play.

Because imaginative play cannot be evaluated, it is often seen as time-wasting and purposeless. Testing a narrow set of skills is an infectious and damaging dogma that has spread through the education system and our society, and it is virtually impossible to avoid. Anxiety is becoming an increasing problem in young people and it is little wonder when their lives are constantly tested from a very young age. They are being set up to fail.

Maybe imaginative play is essential for survival in our modern world to ensure children can be happy in their own company and also enjoy the company of others, without relying on purpose and fixed agenda. Imaginative play also builds empathy and gives children insight into what it is to be another person. Imaginative play does not test. It does not compare. It is one of the few times where children can simply be children.

Whilst I might not ride Clarence, my iron grey stallion anymore, I still am happy in my own company. I love to walk alone and think and dream. I still retain that wonder and curiosity of the world most of the time. But it is friendships that sustain me through the ups and downs of life. My happiest memories are of times with friends and family, with no fixed purpose other than to enjoy each other's company, to be accepted as who we are, with all faults and foibles.

If there is one gift we can give children in childhood, then I think it is to give them time to play, time to imagine and explore the Land of Make-Believe to ensure the world of adulthood can be just as magical.

Gill Lewis [3] is the best-selling author of books such as **Sky Hawk** [4] and **Gorilla Dawn** [5]. She has won the **UKLA Children's Book of the Year**, the **Leeds Book Award**, the **Little Rebels Book Award**, and many others. Her latest book, **Willow Wildthing and the Swamp Monster**, illustrated by Rebecca Bagley, is published by OUP.

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