

Play and Sport

In the development of an individual, both as a person and as a member of society, there is no agency more potent than Play turned into Sport.

What is play ?

Play is a spontaneous expression of life. All living beings are impelled by their nature to play. Other benefits may emerge from play, yet it has its own justification, and has its own satisfaction. The human child learns much through play — by the crawling to which he is impelled by his own urges, it learns to stand and walk and later on to run and jump. Yet he crawls about not with any intention to do the other things later on, but just for the fun of crawling. Later on too, the grown up child loves to prance about, to shout and to dance just for the fun of it.

The « fun of it » is the intrinsic spirit of Play. Play has no ulterior aim, no further objective than itself. And it is a “must” in life.

Deprive any living being of play — a bird, a cat or dog or monkey, or any living creature — and you deprive it of the essential spirit of living.

And yet how often do we not find parents and elders interfering with the play of children, thus creating feelings of uncertainty and insecurity in them ?

In connection with the play-spirit, I am reminded of a story told me by a Y.M.C.A. worker after the First World War.

One day in a Y.M.C.A. Camp in Mesopotamia he found a convalescing young Sikh soldier shouldering his way about and barging into others as if of set purpose. When remonstrated with for this, the young man answered :

“O, it is great fun. I am so immensely enjoying this.”

This shouldering about expresses the convalescent's elan and joy of mere physical activity — the joy in Play.

At the same time, it also shows that the play of one, however much enjoyable to him, may become a nuisance to others. How often have we not been disturbed by the love-sick outpourings, or by the noisy thumpings in dance, of a neighbour?

Human beings have to live with and amongst others, and valuable as the spontaneity and elan of Play is, it has to be curbed in the interest of social-living, especially among the grown-ups.

Sport

Yet the curbing must not be so much as to destroy the fun of Play and thus to deprive the person of all joy. Here comes in the function and value of Sport (or of Games). Sport is Play, with Play's spontaneity and elan and verve, yet shorn of Play's nuisance element. This element is cut out of Play, by Play being subjected to some rules and a code of conduct.

The Rules of the code of Sport no doubt, curb some of the spontaneity and therefore the enjoyment of Play — of doing what one liked and as one liked — but they also make for greater enjoyment.

On one side an orderliness is introduced into the game, which makes the game more enjoyable.

And on the other side, by tabooing some kinds of actions, the rules call forth greater skilfulness and the exercise of skill is enjoyable in itself.

(How rules call forth greater skill may need some explaining. At hockey, for instance, if you are forbidden to use the back side of your stick, you have to learn to be more skilful in the use of the front side. At football if you cannot push the other player from behind, you have to be more agile to come up by his side for shouldering him and so on.)

From the rules also follow other good consequences — consideration for others, and acceptance of ideas of fair-play and sportsmanship.

Not only this. Playing together, in an orderly manner, under the rules of the game, produces some other highly desirable results, as bye-products — co-operation, team-spirit, give and take, and best of all the spirit of law-abiding.

Thus Sport becomes a most valuable agency for promoting good social-living and good citizenship.

Yet, Sport, like Play, must be for its own sake only, and not for other rewards, otherwise the temptation of money, privileges or honour may lead to unfair play and unsporting conduct. And anyway, the saddling of other purposes on to Sport will reduce the spontaneity and therefore, the joy from Sport.

However, the good consequences of Sport will follow automatically if the game is played in the spirit of the game. These, as said above, are mere bye-products, though extremely valuable.

Why sport ?

It may be said and is often said, particularly in India, “Why waste money on sports-fields and sports-equipment and why waste time on sports — time which can be used in more serious things like studies and earning a living ?”

The same purpose, it is said, can be served at much lesser expense and in shorter time, through sermons and talks and lectures.

A deep fallacy

Behind such objections lies a deep fallacy. Human beings, especially at the young and tender age at which character must be developed in them, do not learn by being “told”. They learn only through other senses, through feeling, touching, seeing and smelling i.e. through « doing » and participating and experimenting. Just as no

one can learn weaving or carpentering through merely oral directions, but only through actually doing, so also is the case with character and citizenship. Only when actually behaving and acting can children and grown-ups be taught to behave better and act properly. Self-development and social-consciousness are not possible without active and full self-participation.

Not only this. It is when "doing" that one feels the romance of work, the joy of discovery, the thrills of innovation and the sense of competence. No amount of mere oral lecturing and advice-giving can be substitutes for the joys of actually doing, participating and experiencing. So, to enhance the joy of living, doing, participating and experimenting must be encouraged.

Learning through joy

Now we come to a fundamental fact of the nature of living beings and to a cardinal principle of education : living beings can learn best and can be taught most easily through activities which are pleasurable and interesting and not so much through commands and threats. Sport, being based on the joyous foundation of Play, is thus the most potent means of developing decent behaviour and self-control, co-operation and sportsmanship and citizenship.

Then there is the voluntariness of Sport. It is activity voluntarily accepted and voluntarily participated in, and yet accepted and participated in under rules. Thus freedom and discipline are joined together ; and discipline comes to be self-accepted. From all this it follows that, if we want to have a healthy and self-disciplined people, we must have more and more of Sport and self-accepted activities like hobbies, camping and

hiking, etc. Money and effort spent on these will yield a thousand-fold result.

But not compulsion

But let it be understood that compulsory Sport is no Sport ; and automatised and dull activities, like drill and route-marching are not Sport either. Neither compulsion nor automatism are truly developmental.

A freedom-loving and freedom-desiring citizenry can be brought into being only through participation in joyous activities — activities the restrictions in which are self-accepted.

The secret of the Greeks

In the short space of 300 years, the Ancient Greeks plumbed the depths of philosophy, art, drama, politics and physical development. What was the secret ? The secret may be found in the remark made to Solon by the Egyptian priests : "You Greeks are only boys."

It is the boyish spirit of Play, of self-activity for the sake of activity, and yet Play turned into a self-discipline through Sport, that can enhance life, give a spur to imagination and innovation, to daring and adventure, to self-development and social-consciousness. "Play the game in the spirit of the game", Nehru has said. Play the game of life in the spirit of the game, we may add to it. Enjoyment i.e. the Play-spirit is the secret and spur to life. Enjoyment, within self-accepted limitations of rules i.e. Sport, is the secret of and spur to good citizenship.

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