

**Christine L.**

Atlanta, Georgia

*Moving Day*

Watercolor, colored pencil, graphite, and origami stars

The focus of my research was children's toys and how they reflect society's values. I wanted to elaborate on a more personal view of my final paper's topic, so I focused on the aspect of growing apart from these toys and memories, and eventually moving out from that childhood room. One material I would like to point out are the origami stars in my piece, which were made by me and my friends at Oxbow. Although the stars are imperfect, the act of coming together and just laughing at the mistakes as you go along was what made me include this material in my piece.

While choosing the different toys and activities the children in my art piece were going to do, I wanted to depict activities that many people could relate to but also choose specific activities that detailed different aspects of myself. For example, I chose to include a child posing in the mirror with a costume and oversized shoes, because I vividly remember doing so in my childhood, and it eventually led to my interest in fashion and love for experimentation today. Although I will never be the same five-year-old looking in the mirror, I like to think that there are still some remnants of her still living on in the present. After reading this statement I would like for the viewer to look back on the piece and think: What parts of my child self are still a part of me today?

Children's Play:  
Innocence, Implications, and Environments



Christine L.

The Oxbow School

OS47

## **I. Children's Play From a Historical Context**

There are many things that define childhood, but one common factor in a child's development throughout the centuries is play. In the words of Joe L. Frost, "Except under insufferable conditions of poverty, abuse, and disaster, play prevailed." (Frost 1). Like in the toys I mentioned above, playing in general is and will always be an intrinsic part of a child's development, but it can also be seen as a projection of that current time/society's beliefs and expectations for that child.

In Ancient Greece, the general Athenian attitude towards children is described as simply naive, and not to be taken seriously. Children were meant to be "loved and enjoyed" (Frost 9). This is reflected in Plato's child development layouts, where for the first six years, the child is to be protected and cared for, with little to no pain in their life, and infrequent and mild punishments once they turn three (Frost 10). As children grew up however, their play was to be diverted into helping to identify aptitudes and prepare them for future occupations, slowly preparing them for adulthood, and societal expectations. For example, fables and myths told to children were carefully selected with well-written morals, or messages in order to warn or advise children on what was or wasn't socially acceptable.

After the fall of the Western Roman Empire, play for children drastically changed. Ariés, a French historian, studied the transition during childhood through paintings and diaries, described the medieval child as a "little adult" and childhood as "undiscovered" until the end of the Middle Ages. Ariés utilized pieces of art to make this conclusion, and because of the lack of pre-12th century art depicting childhood, he concluded that there wasn't a place for childhood during the Middle Ages.

Medieval children were also seen as "little adults" which was reflected in how more advanced play, or play that had to enhance a "useful skill" started from a young age. For example,

“Aristocratic children were taught to play musical instruments, dance, and sing as early as age two and participate in festivals by age three.” (Frost 13). For poor children, many died young due to sickness or other external circumstances, but if they lived through childhood, they were sent away to trading schools or to serve in other people’s homes, preparing them for a life of work at a young age. Despite this lack of simple children’s play, play was able to prevail in the medieval community through festivals, holidays, and celebrations, as *these* events were seen as “a natural part of life itself.”

## **II. Girls and Dolls**

There can be few toys that have been a staple for girlhood for as long as dolls. These miniature human replicas served as babies, representations of heroes and heroines, props for house and soldier play, and more, were also a symbol of *expected* gender roles, as seen in the Victorian era, where girls learned sewing, an important skill at the time. They were expected to learn how to become proficient seamstresses for these dolls, as a dolls outfit during this time could easily cost \$30, when the average laborer earned \$486 annually. Newly affluent families also encouraged their daughters to imitate rituals of high society with dolls through pictures, or stories from doll books and magazines.

## **III. Censorship and Lost Innocence**

The concept of innocence being related to children was not one that existed before the rise of Christianity. Ancient Greeks associated children with grossness and impurities, not innocence. “Youngsters had to be tamed and educated, but not kept ignorant of sexual realities. (Heins 45). Many forms of art and entertainment depicted sexual themes, and no effort was made to shield

children from this. Plato and Aristotle were rebels, in a sense, because they urged for “all unseemly talk” (Heins 46) to be kept away from youth.

Christianity greatly changed this nonchalant attitude, as, through the teachings of Jesus, children’s helplessness and ignorance of social rules were elevated to a state of grace. Despite this new development, children were also used for their innocence, as bargaining chips in economic alliance building through marriage during the Middle Ages and early Modern Europe. This was because younger children, girls in particular, were virgins, and thus more innocent and desirable for marriage. In addition, there was little chance for infertility being an issue; even if the girl’s health and life was often endangered during childbirth due to their age, getting an heir was often more important. The idea of the exploited child was further proven in working classes as early apprenticing remained prevalent.

Today, there are censorship laws to protect young children from violent or sexual themes, but whether these censorship laws are necessary or effective in protecting children is debatable. Albert Bandura, the “founding father of the social learning theory” (Heins 231), which suggests that social behavior is learned by observing and imitating the behavior of others,” started his Bobo Doll experiment with the hypothesis children are not born with aggressive impulses, as an individual’s response to frustration or annoyances is not limited to aggression. In these experiments children were first shown films of an adult hitting a “Bobo doll”. Then, they were provoked to be frustrated, in order to stimulate aggression, and given the opportunity to release this frustration, through aggression, against actual Bobo dolls. “Those who had viewed the violent films did so in larger numbers than children in a control group.” In addition, the imitative effect was “appreciably greater for boys than for girls.” (Heins 232) the predicted cause for it being the gender norms imposed on those children; for boys it was more socially acceptable to be quick to

anger. Despite the conclusion that violent media encourages violent actions, there was criticism, because hitting Bobo dolls was socially permissible, as seen in the previously shown videos to the children. In addition, children understand the difference between fantasy and reality; the results of punching a Bobo doll are very different from the results of kicking one's mother. "Children *do* learn by imitation, but selectively." (Heins 234).

#### **IV. Children's Toys and Bedrooms**

Like a child's collection of toys, a child's bedroom can also provide a deeper look into the child themselves, and how parents and other external forces play a role in their life. "The rooms and artifacts stored within [these bedrooms] become an expression of the children's own past, present and future; a place where their own history is inscribed, actively through mementos of their own rites of passage, but also passively through unconscious positioning." (Kühberger 2). Bedrooms serve as an official place for privacy, and it is a place designated specifically for the child.

Children's toys also provide a look into not only a child's interests but also how they play with them. For example, in a study conducted on toys with historical references, there was a case study on a boy, Thomas, who played with a mix of "historical" toys and fantasy-related toys. Through an interview, the researcher found out that Thomas "converted" his medieval knights into Star Wars soldiers, in order to fit with his current interest in Star Wars. Although he acknowledged that the medieval knights had historical references, he was imaginative with how he played with the toy, abandoning the "intended" purpose. In play, underlying meanings or understandings can be disregarded in order to correlate with an imaginary world created by the child.

#### **Conclusion**

The underlying meanings and implications of children's environments, both toys and rooms, are important because they cover a time when a human is the most impressionable and creates many of the memories that will stay with them for their entire life. Carefully analyzing these components of a childhood are crucial in creating a society that uplifts and supports its children into adulthood, thus protecting and preparing them to be adults.

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