

The Oxford Handbook of Jane Addams

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Chapter 16: Jane Addams on Play, Education and Ethical Teaching

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This chapter addresses Addams's contribution to childhood education. In *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), Addams claims that the cause of many of our problems is a lack of imagination that prevents us from understanding the experience of other people. Boronat focuses on the development of relevant imagination skills in Addams's publications on education. Although Addams never wrote a treatise on education (with the exception of *The Spirit of the Youth and the City Streets*, 1909), notes on play, arts, and educations are scattered in all her main works. Her development of the concepts is inspired not only in John Dewey's work in the Chicago's Laboratory School. She was acquainted with the advances of play and education theorists such as Friedrich Frobel, Karl Groos or Maria Montessori, and she expanded those ideas in ways that could be useful for today's educational challenges. Addams's revolutionary views are presented regarding (a) the social value of children's experience and its relation to democracy, (b) the conceptual interdependence of play, arts, and recreation for children and adults: (c) the criticism of college education and the possibility of "ethical teaching" with special focus on service-learning.



Fig. 1. "Children's Games" (1560), Pieter Bruegel the Elder, currently exhibited at the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna

2. The social value of children's play and its relation to democracy.

The recovery of Jane Addams's works and legacy from oblivion is to thank to the alternative genealogies of pragmatist constructed by feminist pragmatists, in particular the seminal books of Mary Jo Deegan (1990, 1999) and Charlene Haddock Seigfreid (1996). In her book *George Herbert Mead. Play, School and Society* (1990), Deegan reconstructed the context in which classical pragmatists and progressive leaders like Mead, Dewey, Mary Mc Dowell¹ and Addams addressed children's play. As Deegan sees it – and I agree with her impression – the concept of play in Mead's philosophy and social psychology has been barely discussed in the literature on Mead despite having such a central role in the reciprocal constitution of the self and what he called *the generalized other*². But Deegan makes another asseveration that I found very intriguing concerning Addams and her being the actual promoter of “the scholarly study of play and the professionalization of workers trained to play.” (1999, p. xciii). In this section I would like to explore Addams's contributions to the study of children's play, and I will defend that in doing that, she detaches herself quite genuinely of a stream of thought that sees play only as a preparation for the adult life. For this I will focus on her literary production prior to WW1, the years in which Jane Addams acquired her maturity as philosopher and social reformer³.

¹ Mary Mc Dowell (1854 – 1936) published *Recreation as a Fundamental Element of a Democracy* in 1913.

² This process is described in the section “Play, The Game, and The Generalized Other” in which Mead relates children's games with the need of “hav[ing] an attitude of all others involved in that game”. In this, the organized game reproduces the organized community, or a social group “which gives the individual his unity of self [that] may be called ‘the generalized other’. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community.” (Mead, 1967, p. 154). Deegan correctly identifies the gendered bias in this theoretical neglect: “reason scholars failed to adequately assess the rôle of play in Mead's writings is the gendered definition of play as women's work in sociology” (1999, p. lii). See also García Dauder (2010).

³ There is no doubt that Jane Addams became at some point familiar to other European play traditions such as the advancements made by Friedrich Froebel (1782 – 1852) in the *Kindergarten* philosophy, the philosophy of education of Johan Henrich Pestalozzi (1746 – 1827) or later, the pedagogic revolution due to Maria Montessori (1870 – 1952). I have restricted my reconstruction in this chapter to the German Schiller and Groos for the following reasons: (a) they seem to be the strongest influence in the time in which Addams forms her own thoughts on play and education apart from Dewey and Mead; (b) the connection to the German romanticism serves to understand the extension of the play instinct to leisure, rest, recreation or the arts, and Addams refers in *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1906) directly to Karl Groos's ideas, as it will be explained in section 3 of this chapter; (c) after 1909, there are less notes on play to find in her books and public texts, her attention was directed towards many other topics. We can know she got to know Maria Montessori and her school program thanks to her correspondence, but the first mentions are around 1913, when Addams was travelling in Europe and spent some time in Tuscany (“Jane Addams to Sarah Alice Addams Haldeman”, <http://digital.janeaddams.ramapo.edu/items/show/6487> last accessed 06/10/2021). I would like to thank Marilyn Fischer for having drawn my attention to the existing occurrences of Montessori in the digital edition of the Jane Addams Papers Project.

Addams wrote a whole book on play and education entitled *The Spirit of the Youth and the City Streets* (1909), but scattered notes in children's play are already found in her first authored book *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902), thus it is to deduce that Addams was concerned with the situation of children since the foundation of Hull-House. Addams wrote: "The child who is prematurely put to work is constantly oppressed by this never ending question of the means of subsistence, and even little children are sometimes almost crushed with the cares of life through their affectionate sympathy." (2002, p. 23). The sensitivity of Hull-House residents towards social vulnerability had a direct impact on the life of the neighborhood. One of their first concerns was the protection of children of the harms of the rapid industrialization, especially child labor. Thanks to the *social survey* conducted by the residents of Hull-House, Florence Kelley and Alzina Stevens could publish the short report "Wage-Earning Children" in the collected essays known as *The Hull-House Maps and Papers* in 1895. Despite the strict regulations of Illinois and other federal states, the census of 1880 gave a total number of 1.118.258 children under fifteen employed in factories. Precisely the 19th Ward of Chicago, according to the authors, was relevant to the study of child labor because there were boys and girls engaged in all lines of industrial activity. They were, as the authors verified, "ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-clothed, illiterate, and wholly untrained and unfitted for any occupation. The only useful thing they learn at their work in common with the children who learn is school is the rapid calculation of small sums in making change; and this does not go far enough to be of any practical value." (V.V.A.A., 2013, p. 55). The recommendation of the authors is clear: attendance to school and effective care are the best remedies against the skill's atrophy and severe health issues that come together with hazardous forms of work.

The conclusion of the report may sound something remote for us, citizens of the Western welfare societies. But if we think globally and look to the current situation of children in the world, the numbers are still terrifying. The data collected by UNICEF inform that 1 in 10 children around the globe – that makes 152 million – are subject to child labor. Migrant children and refugees are the most vulnerable since they are most in risk of "being forced into work and even trafficked, especially if they are migrating alone or taking irregular routes with their families".⁴ Much must be done to ensure that international regulations concerning children's rights is achieved in this century. We should keep in mind what has been approved by the Convention of the Rights of the Child

⁴ "Child labor" by UNICEF: <https://www.unicef.org/protection/child-labour> (last accessed 06/06/2021).

in 1989 says about the conditions in which every single child should live “[...] the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”. The article 31 of the resolution is very specific in the connection of children’s rights with play and leisure:

1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

This means that Jane Addams was part of an international movement whose main preoccupation was to ensure children and their rights, that means to recognize children as moral subjects. We forget that perception of childhood as a good to preserve is quite new in history: the League of Nations adopted the first still vague promises to protect young people only in 1924 (Marten, 2018, p. 77). For James Marten, the declaration reflected the manifold efforts of different countries to improve the lives of children and the common sentiment, echoed by Florence Kelley assertion that young people “[had] a right to childhood” (Marten, 2018, p. 78)

In addition to the municipal regulations against child labor, Jane Addams and the residents of Hull-House were convinced that the joys of childhood deserved a central space in the organization of modern cities. Hull-House inaugurated the first open playground in Chicago in 1894 with huge success and in few years the city had the most ambitious program of playground construction (McArthur, 1975, p. 377). The Playground Association of America was founded in 1906 and Hull-House hosted the first national convention in 1907. As Benjamin McArthur puts it, the different play traditions, and educational theories at the eve of 20th century were present in the conference:

Prominent among them was that of Friedrich Froebel who concerned himself particularly with children between the ages of three and six. At this age, “play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man”. [...] G. Stanley Hall proposed another influential theory. He held that games are remnants of earlier activities of the race. What may now be just a simple footrace heartens back to times when man had to run down his prey. Philosopher of the play movement, Luther Gulick, asserted that the individual reveals himself completely when at play. And, conversely, play has a greater shaping power on the character and nature of man than any other activity. (McArthur, 1975, p. 386)

In his writings published posthumously as *A Philosophy of Play* (1920), Gulick stated that having studied play and knowing the most literature on play written in English, French, and German, he concluded that play “affords the best and most profitable way of studying humankind itself, both individuals and races. Play consists of that which people do when they have food, shelter, and clothing, are rested and free from worry [...] Then man is at his best.” (Gulick, 2001, p. xii).



Fig. 2. Sculpture and children in fountains, Jane Addams Houses
Photography by Edgar Miller, Available at the Library of Congress

Gulick’s plea for free play spaces for children in cities emphasized its relation to democracy and postulated that “playground is our great ethical laboratory” (Gulick, 2001, p. 249). Addams had used the same line of argumentation in *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1906): “Only of late years has an effort been made by the city authorities, by the municipality itself, to conserve the play instinct and to utilize it, if not for the correction of industry, at least for the nurture of citizenship.” (2008, p. 98). Only if the city recognizes play as legitimate, continues Addams, and “provides playgrounds and athletic fields, is the development of that self-government and self-discipline [...] which forms

the most natural basis for democratic political life later [accomplished].” (Addams, 2008, p. 99). Bringing this with its full consequences to our ordinary life would mean to organize the city in a way that is radically different. That would imply to overcome our adultocentric comprehension of urban interactions to try the figure out the distribution of spaces and interactions from the child’s perspective.

Jane Addams on Play, Education and Ethical Teaching

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