

## KICK THE TIN

**Richard E. McGarvie**

*Richard McGarvie writes of a game remembered from his boyhood in the 1930s. He grew up in a small dairying community near Lake Corangamite, mostly modest farmers, often on small soldier-settler blocks that contrasted sharply with the vast holdings of the neighbouring 'squatters' of the Western District of Victoria.*

Games started as soon as my brothers Bruce and Graham and I left for school. The three of us, riding bareback on our half-Shetland pony, Chessie, found short cuts which left the winding gravel road and, we claimed, speeded us on our way. They actually increased the distance and time of our ride, but also its adventure. On arrival at Pomborneit East State School, Chessie grazed with other ponies on the grass in the school yard for the day.

The close-knit dairying community never produced more than 14 or 18 pupils for the one-teacher school on the Hawks Nest Road in the Stony Rises near Lake Corangamite in Victoria's Western District.

Games were for the whole school, boys and girls together, except that sometimes the littlest of the 'littlies' had their own. I do not know where the games originated, they had been played long before I started school. The choice of game seemed to be a consensus decision. Until just before my last year there, 1937, when a new teacher persuaded the School Committee to buy a basketball, the school provided no sports equipment. Two former pupils, Wallace Yates and Ian Kelly, had each presented a cricket bat, one sawn from a piece of hardwood timber and the handle rasped smooth, and the other fashioned with an axe from a blackwood log.

A popular game was **kick the tin**. Jam in those days came in cylindrical tins of a good size, about 22cms high. A tin was the only equipment needed. There was

a shelter shed about 5 metres behind the school. The one who went 'He' stood the tin on the ground about the centre of that space. We will assume that Stan was 'He'. The others partly hid themselves from Stan behind corners of the school or shelter shed. Sometimes there would be several behind a corner with all but one completely hidden from Stan. Stan would manoeuvre to a position where he could see one of the others, say May, completely unhidden. The moment he did, he and May would race for the tin and if he got there first he would put his foot on it and say, 'One, two, three out May!'. May was then 'out' and went and stayed in a space near the shelter shed for those who were out.

If Stan was successful, a number would join May in the space but they were not without hope. If Stan's manoeuvring allowed the one he was trying to view, or another player, to get to the tin before him and kick it, all those who were out were back in again and had until Stan placed the tin back in position, to hide. Someone other than the one to whom Stan was giving attention, who rushed to kick the tin, say Mack, ran the risk that Stan would see him move from cover and race for the tin, get his foot on it first and say, 'One, two, three out Mack!' and Mack would go to the space for the outs.

There was no umpire, but public opinion exerted itself pretty sharply if Stan pretended to have seen May completely unhidden when he had not. It was a rule that the partial concealment had to be behind

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## NEWS AND NOTES

Andy Arleo, a folklorist and educator in France who has contributed to *Play and Folklore* previously, sends us a few items of international news.

He mentions a controversial new book by Judith Harris, winner of the George A. Miller award of the American Psychological Association: *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*. She claims that, after heredity, the peer group is the greatest influence on a child – much more than parents or family.

Is this a theory that can be supported by evidence from the playground? Certainly we welcome attention to the subcultures of childhood – usually ignored or undervalued. But how do we explain the adult-sourced enmities which can dominate children's play lives, such as the old Catholic/Protestant taunts and battles which once were a feature of childhood in this country? And how to explain the decline of such sectarianism without reference to the changing nature of the culture and ideologies of Australian adults?

Readers' responses welcomed.



Arleo and Julia Bishop, from Sheffield University, both draw our attention to recent news items about the dangerous decline, in both the U.S.A. and Britain, of children's playtime. (*The Express*, 4 November 1998 and the *International Herald Tribune*, 1-15 November 1998).

Research evidence quoted suggests that depriving children of their free-time play with their friends can cause serious emotional problems. Some researchers even suggest that such deprivation may help explain the rise in cases of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. Doubt is also cast on the old, flawed assumption that less playtime leads to better academic performance.

The evidence for the 'functional' importance (in adult terms) of play accumulates. But who among Australia's leading educators is listening?



One of our editors, Gwenda Davey, is temporarily interstate. She is in Canberra, working at the National Library until the end of June 1999.

Gwenda has been appointed Project Manager of the *Bringing Them Home* oral history pilot project.

This project is funded by the Australian government as part of its response to the inquiry conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their parents. The Commission's 1997 report is titled *Bringing Them Home*.

If the pilot oral history project recommends that a proposed larger study is feasible, then a four-year project will begin in 1999.

In Gwenda's absence, Judy McKinty has generously undertaken some of her editorial responsibilities.

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something fixed. You could not carry a box or a bag and claim to be partly hidden behind it. When the tin became so battered that it could not be kicked far enough to give the outs enough time to hide, the players called for a new tin. Tins those days were made of good stuff and lasted weeks.

At the end of the day we caught Chessie, put on the bridle, and the three of us leapt aboard. I had the reins. My second brother, Bruce, was at the rear and had to carry home a bag of mail or bread, one of which was left each day at the cream stand near the school. Pastimes on the ride home tended to be less carefree.

Disputes were apt to arise between Bruce and me. If they developed, I would lash at him with the green switch from a tree that I had to hit the pony and he would respond with the bag of mail or bread. Unfortunately our aim was not good and often the blows from both directions hit Graham, sitting in the middle, minding his own business.

*Richard McGarvie AC was formerly a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria, Chancellor of La Trobe University, and Governor of Victoria*



# Some observations on the effect of computer games on the play of a seven-year-old boy.

**Don Oliver**

The extent to which children in Australia play computer games is hard to determine exactly. According to the Australian Toy Association, the two top-selling games for 1997 were Nintendo 64 and Sony Playstation. A 1996 survey found 29% of boys and 18% of girls played computer games (*The Age*, 23/3/98). With increasing ownership of home computers, a proliferation of interactive CDs, and the increasing cross-promotion between these games, books, comics and popular movies, we can safely assume that play for a sizeable and growing number of children in this country now means, at least to some extent, playing computer games.

In the absence of hard evidence as to the effect of this new element in children's play, hypotheses abound. Critics of computer games suggest playing them has adverse effects on a child's physical health, increases violent behaviour, discourages literacy, promotes a subservient role for women, and does not encourage thoughtfulness and reflection. Supporters of video play typically say it encourages an aptitude for computers and increases hand-eye coordination and attention to detail; they insist that the interactive quality of the games is a vast improvement on passively watching TV. While it is possible that playing computer games does all or any of the above, it is a dead certainty that computer games will influence and be adapted to the broader realm of children's play – in the playground, the park, and at home. My own observations of just such adaptations derive from watching Liam, aged 7.

Liam is in Grade One. When he and his friends are in the school playground part of their play involves their membership of a gang they call 'The Snuffies'. The Snuffies concept is based on the Gobbos, who are characters from a Playstation game, called 'Croc'. Although the main action in 'Croc' revolves around the efforts of Croc to liberate the Gobbos, Liam and his

friends took the minor theme of there being a kingdom of fun-loving creatures with outlandish rules and evolved a system of organising their own play. They instituted a self-appointed king of the Snuffies, an army of lieutenants and slaves and rules that had to be obeyed. The king dictated the play of the day, usually some sort of adventure.

Understandably, this degree of authoritarianism led to palace revolts and currently the Snuffies regime appears to be in decline.

What is not in decline is the less transient influence of computer games on Liam's schoolyard play, namely the impromptu playing out of the heroics of characters such as Croc, Sonic the Hedgehog, Hercules and Crash Bandicoot. The inclusion of Hercules in the list of Playstation heroes is indicative of the nature of the games. The structure is in every case Herculean. There is a quest; there are supernatural endowments which the hero must acquire in the course of his quest; there are adversaries with extraordinary powers and fatal weaknesses that the hero must exploit.

'We play Crash Bandicoot. You have to jump on their heads to get past them.'

'You really jump on them?'

'No, just like this (with his hands). And you have to do it three times.'

'Do all the kids have Crash Bandicoot at home?'

'No, but they know about it.'

In video games, the hero can often make his weapons and himself more powerful by touching or collecting an object that he passes. I watch Liam and his friend Paul playing with sticks in the backyard. If it had been me in the '60s, the stick would have been a gun or a sword. In the '70s the kid with the stick would have been wielding a Star Wars light-sabre. Today Liam's stick is still a sword, but if he hits it on the fence he will tell Paul it's now more powerful. If he does something



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else he will be in invincible mode (what he and Paul call 'god mode'), and before he is defeated he must be hit a particular number of times. This type of play is easily understood as a variant of the eternal love of children for rule-making and edge-gaining by the cunning manipulation of rules; however, it's fair to say computer games have heightened modern children's reverence for ritual and the magic of numbers.

**'DO ALL THE KIDS HAVE  
CRASH BANDICOOT AT HOME?'**

**'NO, BUT THEY KNOW ABOUT IT.'**

Apart from these ritualistic elements deriving from video games, another important facet is the concept of stages in play, and the transition between stages. I take Liam over to the play equipment in the park over the road and sometimes, crawling through the big plastic tube for instance, he'll treat it as one of the phases in a computer game. 'This is the Comet Wood', he'll say, and act out the way Crash Bandicoot behaves to survive that stage of the game.

The same thinking occasionally intrudes into his play with me. Wrestling on the couch, it becomes a struggle to avoid the floor, which has become a lava pit. I'm instructed to lie still and not retaliate on the grounds that he has got hold of an attribute that makes him all-

powerful. If he does end up in the lava I find he's suddenly in invincible mode.

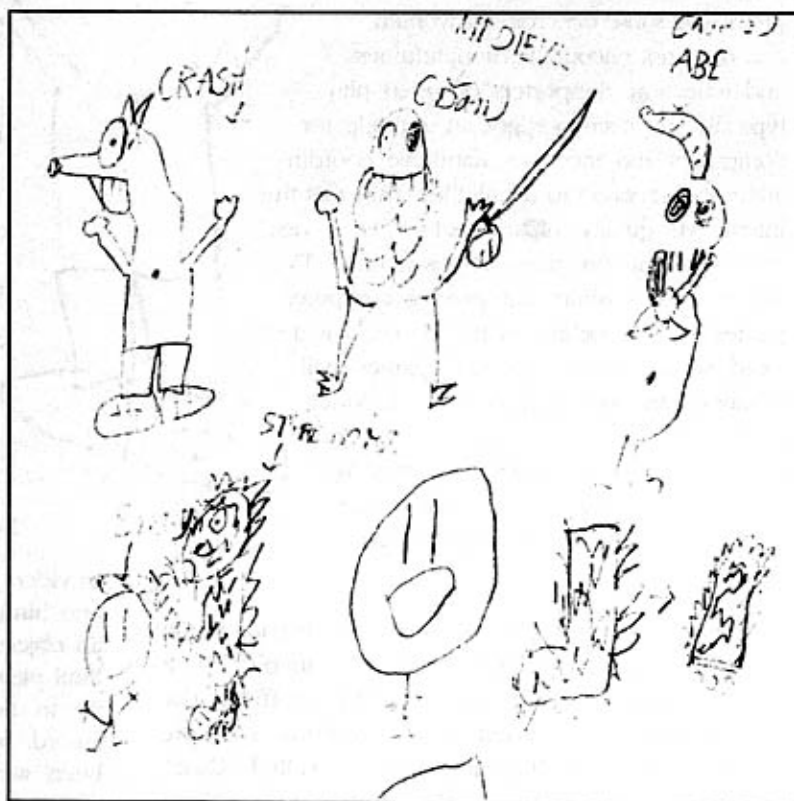
Finally, an observation regarding one of the criticisms of video games, namely that they tend very much to be a solitary activity. While this is undoubtedly true, and is a cause of concern to parents, the evidence of Liam's play suggests that kids work very hard at making them a social activity too. Much of what Liam does seems to be acting out characters and scenarios in public that he has encountered in private.

To say that there is a connection between the video games kids play and their general play is really stating the obvious.

All a child's experience will inform his or her play. What is not obvious and is worthy of future investigation is the quality of the connection. Is there anything intrinsically different between the impromptu games that are inspired by computer and the games that derive from other sources? Do other parts of children's play and folklore suffer, or indeed are they enriched by the increasing use of computer games? These are questions that require further study. Play and Folklore will welcome readers' comments.

*Don Oliver teaches  
at Swinburne University.*

*Liam's drawings  
of characters he plays*





## Home-Made Treasures

Home-Made Treasures celebrates the power to make-do or improvise, particularly with regard to children. Whether because of the tyranny of distance, wartime or depression conditions, the privations of pioneering life or simply the desire to create, parents, grandparents or others with an interest in children have created all manner of things for them. These range from school desks of kerosene packing cases to toy stoves from scraps of wood, from intricate model locomotives to simple paper and wooden toys, from an elaborate metal canoe able to sail the Swan River to rag dolls sold on street corners in Perth to raise an income during the 1930s depression, from home-made toys made during the war when commercial toys were not available to finely embroidered christening gowns fashioned with pride and care. Of course some items have been made by children themselves.

This exhibition is concerned with an important segment of our national folk life as expressed through its material culture. In contrast to commercially produced items, all objects in this exhibition have been produced through genuine need or desire in particular places and circumstance. The human values revealed by the objects and their stories are important to today's audiences as they provide something of an antidote to the often too pressing insistence by the advertising media that we succumb without question to the mass-produced items for a consumer society. Whilst it is not intended to turn this exhibition into a didactic statement it is important to see it as more than a collection of the "quaint and curious".

The Home-Made Treasures exhibition stems from the very rich collection of

improvised items made for children held by the Edith Cowan University Museum of Childhood. For over twenty years this collection has been one of the major areas of interest of its curatorial staff. Items have been collected for their obvious visual appeal and testimony to human ingenuity as well as for their provenance. Hence the challenge in this exhibition is to both allow the objects to be enjoyed in their own right and to interpret them in the light of their recorded history. They may evoke in the viewer strong perceptions of past eras, of the nurture of children and patterns of daily life once known but now vanished.



## Book Review

*John Evans*

**PETER BLATCHFORD, *SOCIAL LIFE IN SCHOOL: PUPILS' EXPERIENCE OF BREAKTIME AND RECESS FROM 7 TO 16 YEARS*. FALMER PRESS, LONDON, 1998. ISBN 0 7507 0742 9 PAPER**

Despite the fact that for many of us, our school days are only distant memories, the one aspect we seem able to recall most vividly is what we did at recess times. If you were like me, morning recess and lunch times were the best part of the school day. In fact they were the reason I went to school. A chance to catch up with friends, play games and generally take a break from class work and the ever-present teacher made these times precious indeed. So it comes as a surprise to hear that there has been little research on the day-to-day experiences of students at recess and little recognition of the possible social and even educational value of informal and undirected activities that took place during this time.

Peter Blatchford's book sets out to change all that by providing a comprehensive insight into the way in which children and adolescents (he uses the generic term 'pupils') perceive playtime. Blatchford takes the view that 'activities and social relations at breaktime are important because it is during this part of the school day that pupils are relatively freed from the attention of adults and the structure of the classroom' (p1).

The book is based on data gathered in England (where the term 'breaktime' is more commonly used than playtime or recess) over a ten year period. The central feature of this book is a longitudinal study in which the author asked boys and girls at age 7, 11 and again at 16 their views about many aspects of schooling including their perceptions of recess. As Blatchford states, the book had two main aims:

1. to better understand pupils' experiences, activities and peer relations at breaktime
2. to discuss the implications of these findings for school management and policies on behaviour.

The longitudinal nature of the study meant that he was able to document changes in attitudes to recess across time. It was interesting to see that older pupils said that what they enjoyed most about playtime was having a break from work and being free from teachers. He was also able to record changes in the choice of things pupils did at breaktime. Blatchford observed a noticeable change from the physical activities and games played in the primary years to the more sedentary activities at secondary level. He

noted a reduction in fighting with age. Secondary students, he found, had come to learn the serious consequences of fights and they only arose as a reaction to threat or humiliation.

Throughout the book, Blatchford makes extensive use of extracts from interviews to bring to life the way in which pupils describe recess and their school playground. What clearly emerges is that, while breaktime is still one of the favourite parts of the school day for most children, it is a period which has gone, or is going, through a number of changes in response to developments in education generally. He identifies two factors which have led to changes in the way schools view and manage breaktime. The first is the increasing pressure to devote more time to teaching, to time in class, and to the academic curriculum. Throughout the Western world there is a pervasive view that what is learnt is taught and teachers are now being held increasingly accountable for pupil's academic achievement. The term 'breaktime' in itself reflects a popular perception about recess – that it merely serves as a 'break' from the 'real' purpose of schooling. Consistent with this attitude is the view that recess, or breaktime, is that period when children are let out of the classroom to 'blow off steam', 'release surplus energy', thought to be built up while sitting in class. Advocates of this view fail to acknowledge or even recognise the importance of these breaks for the cognitive, social and physical development of the child.

The second factor leading to change arises from an increase in reported incidences of misbehaviour in the form of bullying, teasing, fighting and harassment in the playground at breaktimes. We live in a society which is increasingly sensitive about the safety and well-being of children in and out of school. According to Blatchford, we are suffering from a sense of 'moral panic' fuelled by the media and politicians which is bound to affect teachers' and parents' views on children's social lives. Parents are less and less willing to accept teasing and fighting as part of the rough and tumble of playground life. As Blatchford points out, such things may simply be part of the verbal texture of everyday relationships and to label such behaviour as bullying may be over-reacting. Schools, however, are



likely to face the threat of litigation if they don't take steps to prevent anti-social behaviour in the playground.

So what was once a period of relatively unrestrained fun, freedom and activity has increasingly become something of a 'problem' for schools and, as Blatchford reports, this situation is by no means confined to England. He compares his findings with those in Australia and America where research has shown that similar problems are occurring. According to Blatchford, in an effort to deal with these problems some schools in England have reduced the length of recess breaks, devised rules which restrict play and demanded closer supervision of pupils' behaviour. Here in Australia we are seeing precisely the same steps being implemented by schools.

This rather gloomy scenario has to be set against the knowledge that school recess may be more important than ever, in part because children's lives outside school have changed so much. According to Blatchford, for a growing number of pupils breaktime may be the main opportunity for them to interact and develop friendships. Children need opportunities to take risks, make decisions, assess motives and accept consequences. As Hillman (cited by Blatchford, p163) observes, 'these are basic elements of growing up best learned when children are on their own'.

A common theme through the book is that most adults simply do not understand the value of play. To many adults, play is associated with idleness and idleness is seen to be the precursor to mischief. Teachers are concerned when they see children at recess simply 'hanging around'. They don't understand that 'hanging around' can be an important part of peer social relations.

This book makes it very clear that recess or breaktime is still a central part of school life for all children but it

is going through a period of significant change. Each chapter concludes with a section looking at the 'implications for schools' in which findings are summarised and comments and suggestions made. One recurring piece of advice is that schools should be involving students when contemplating changes to the playground environment or to rules which affect what, where and with whom they can and cannot play. It makes sense that, if we are teaching children the importance of negotiation and consultation, we should be setting an example by inviting them to be part of any discussions concerning playtime and the playground.

In summary, I found this latest book by Peter Blatchford to be both readable and relevant and I would love to see it as required reading in all teacher education courses. As the book makes clear the playground at recess is an important part of every child's social life in school. If you want an insight into what children think about school and recess today then this book has much to offer.

Other relevant texts on this topic:

Blatchford, P. *Playtime in the primary school: Problems and improvements*. NFER Nelson, Berkshire, 1989.

Blatchford, P. & Sharp, S. (eds), *Breaktime and the School: Understanding and Changing Playground Behaviour*. Routledge, London, 1994

Pellegrini, A. *School Recess and Playground Behaviour: Educational and Developmental Roles*. SUNY Press, New York, 1995.

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Education Faculty at Deakin University.*

**Know someone who would enjoy**

**Play and Folklore?**

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# KIDSTALK: AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE AND THE LITERACY DEBATE

*June Factor*

Observe a father leaning over his three-month-old baby. The infant is not wearing a nappy and kicks her legs energetically. Gently the father grasps a small foot and, pressing each toe in turn, sings *This little piggy went to market, This little piggy stayed home...* The baby appears to listen, she stops wriggling, she looks at her father and smiles. Encouraged, he repeats the movements and the song two or three times. When she is a little older he will bounce her on his knee and chant *Ride a cock horse to Banbury Cross, To see a fine lady on a white horse...* It is usually the adult rather than the child who calls a halt to these enjoyable activities.

Language enters our lives from our beginnings, not as instruction but as play, play with sound and sense. Rhyme, rhythm, repetition, melody and metaphor are introduced to babies who know nothing of pigs or markets, yet respond enthusiastically to the thousand songs, nursery rhymes, finger games and other traditional child lore found among all cultures.

University libraries have scores of shelves holding books, journals and theses devoted to the language development of young children. Newspaper files, on the other hand, favour the subject of the supposed linguistic incompetence of adolescents. What happens to the language skills of youngsters between early and late childhood that gives rise to such concern?

We know that infants and toddlers learn the complexities of language – vocabulary, grammar, syntax, pronunciation, inflection – largely through their everyday interaction with family, friends and the television. School-age children learn to read and write from a specially trained segment of the community, in an organised and more-or-less planned fashion. According to some assessments, the schools are not succeeding as well in their task as the untrained, improvising parents do in theirs.

Teacher-bashing is an old and unprofitable activity. It is generally based on a combination of ignorance and frustration, together with a potent pinch of nostalgia for the 'good old days when I was a boy/girl...' and a *soupçon* of envy for the seeming easiness of contemporary school life (the final two years excepted). Certainly we are, on most international comparisons, a highly literate society<sup>1</sup>. Considering the

range and number of languages which are mother-tongue for so many of our young<sup>2</sup>, we can congratulate our schools on their broad success in the transmission of English-language skills to their pupils.

In the sometimes acrimonious debate about literacy / illiteracy, the 'speaking voice' is often overlooked. It is as if the early childhood language experiences, centred on verbal play, having served their initiating function, no longer warrant serious study or consideration. Yet I believe there is a powerful case to be made for re-examining the informal learning patterns of early childhood (which are not restricted, of course, to language learning) and discovering what becomes of these processes in later childhood. We might find clues to help us better understand the diversity of language use common to developing young humans, and the place of reading and writing in this continuum.

*This little piggy went to market* is just one of a multitude of rhymes and songs which adults use to entertain and delight the very young. These poems and melodies are passed down over generations and centuries, part of an ancient, perhaps eternal and certainly ubiquitous pattern of adult-child interaction. Initially it is not meaning but sound, rhythm, repetition, movement, and the enjoyment of shared activity which catches and holds the little ones. *Hey diddle diddle, the cat and the fiddle* enthralls infants who haven't the faintest notion of what the words mean.

When she comes to understand that cows are earthbound and dishes and spoons inanimate, the child has a new reason for loving such rhymes: their nonsense quality. Verbal playfulness, the deliberate turning upside-down of everyday reality, appears to be a central feature of children's language development. It is through verbal play that children come to recognise, learn, repeat and invent language conventions. When the Russian poet Chukovsky's twenty-three-month-old daughter insisted: 'Daddy, 'oggie meow!', she was making her first joke – although it took her father a few minutes to recognise her bold diversion from the everyday. Once he responded in kind – 'And the rooster meows!' – she laughed delightedly and proceeded, 'realising the mechanics of her joke...to enjoy it again and again, thinking up more and more odd combinations of animals and animal sounds.'<sup>3</sup>



School-age children continue this pattern of linguistic subversion, but with greater sophistication. Australian school playgrounds are full of running, shouting, laughing, arguing youngsters, their *lingua franca* verbal rituals including parodies, riddles and jokes – oral narratives whose point turns on puns or other forms of momentary deception:

*Ding dong dell  
Pussy's in the well,  
If you don't believe me  
Go and have a smell.<sup>4</sup>*

*What's the difference  
between a well-dressed  
man and a tired dog?*

*The man wears a suit,  
the dog just pants.<sup>5</sup>*

*This drug addict went to  
visit a friend, another  
drug addict. The friend  
was just sticking an old  
needle into his arm.*

*The first drug addict said,  
'Aren't you afraid of  
getting AIDS?'*

*'Oh no,' said the other  
addict, 'it's quite safe.  
You see, I'm wearing  
a condom.'<sup>6</sup>*

Oral traditions of this kind are largely the province of children, both in transmission and in use. They encode quite complex paradoxical perspectives. Form and subject matter are taken directly from the surrounding culture: family life, political figures, television stars, sexual controversies, advertising jingles, Christmas carols – the ordinary and the outrageous coexist comfortably in childhood folklore. The mode of treatment of this subject matter is, however, consistently mocking:

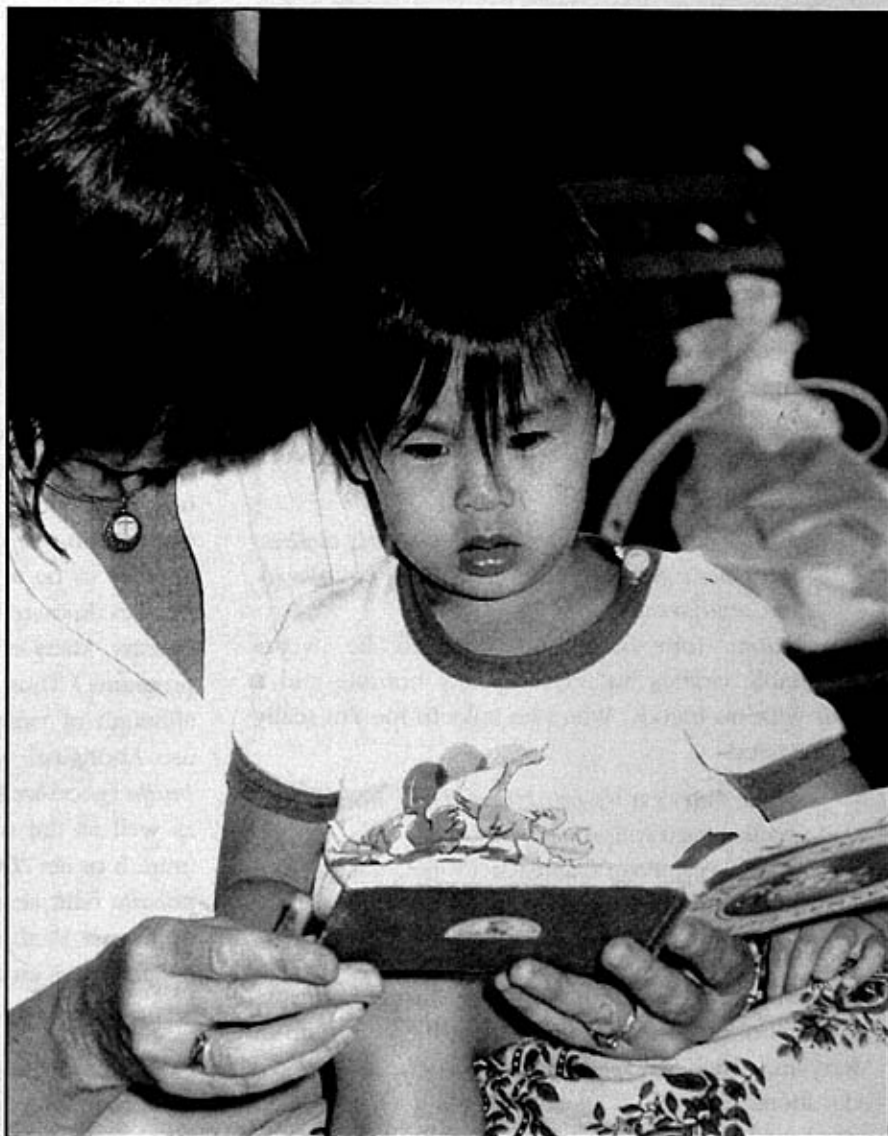
*Father, Son and Holy Ghost,  
Who eats the fastest eats the most.<sup>7</sup>*

*The Adams Family started  
When Uncle Festa farted...<sup>8</sup>*

*Old King Cole had a forty foot pole  
And he showed it to the lady next door...<sup>9</sup>*

It is as if the communal, ritual language of children operates as counterpoint to the official melody of the adult world. Verbal play permits a dissident, occasionally raucous and vulgar, commonly

disrespectful voice. Protected by 'We're only playing' or 'It's just for fun', the powerless young assert themselves through language and laughter. As one writer comments, much of children's verbal play



'reduces adult order to humorous disorder'.<sup>10</sup> Youngsters are simultaneously strengthening their grasp of the intricacies of their common tongue as they 'cock a snoot' at their culture's precepts and taboos.

As well as such ritualised poetic and narrative forms, there are other kinds of 'antilanguages' among children.<sup>11</sup> They deliberately separate themselves linguistically, inventing codes, nicknames, passwords and secret languages. Sometimes these ingenious verbal inventions label (aptly) but do not divide, as Hal Porter observed when recalling his schoolmates in Bairnsdale after World War I:

*With faultless malice we...nicknamed our  
class-mates and friends – Dopey, Skinny,  
Fatty, Monkey, Shitty, Stinko, Ferret, Pisser  
and Twitchy.<sup>12</sup>*

At other times, the language forms are not meant to be understood by adults or children outside the 'in-group'. Parents and teachers have generally forgotten their Pig Latin, a 'secret' language which has had wide distribution among Australian youngsters. (The first letter of a word is put at the end and the syllable AY added: *My heart pants for you becomes Ymay earthay antspay orfay ouyay*.) Cow French, or Duck Language as it is sometimes called, is less well-known, perhaps because of its greater difficulty. (The vowel is repeated, each repetition separated by the letters L and F: *'Balfang! balfang! went the rifle. Flalfap! flalfap! went the dulfucks.'*)<sup>13</sup>

Then there are words and phrases, commonly known as slang, which function in conversation to differentiate the speakers from those – adults, smaller children, anyone not 'us' – who do not understand or are not welcome to speak in this way.

*John is so lush and he's got such snarly clothes but Peter's gross, a real Nigel. When he talks to me...embarrass!*

[Translation: John is wonderful and he wears fashionable clothes but Peter's really horrible and a loner with no friends. When he talks to me I'm really embarrassed.]

*Yeah, Peter's a try-hard, a real egg, but his brother's exceptionally awesome!*

[Translation: Yes, Peter's a teacher's pet, a complete idiot, but his brother is amazing!]<sup>14</sup>

According to the journalist who recorded these remarks, the first came from Roseville College, a private girls' school on Sydney's north shore; the second from Merrylands High School, a Sydney western suburbs co-educational school. 'The Merrylands teenagers had only heard of one of the words used by the Roseville girls who thought much of the Merrylands teenagers' vocabulary was out of date.'<sup>15</sup>

Such variation in colloquial expressions among adolescents is commonplace in Australia. One survey in Sydney in 1990 found that even teenagers from neighbouring areas used distinctive terms, not always understood by youngsters in the next suburb:

#### *Good*

Northern beaches: *Kowabunga; mondo-weirdness*

Western Sydney: *Narly*

Southern suburbs: *Narlin'*

Eastern suburbs (Paddington): *Mad; hot*

Inner-city: *Radical*

North Shore: *Rad-calamity-toad; deadly*

#### *Bad*

Northern beaches: *Nip*

Western Sydney: *Drop-kick*

Southern suburbs: *Breatb*

Eastern suburbs (Paddington): *Sad*

Inner-city: *Bodgie*

North Shore: *Bogus*<sup>16</sup>

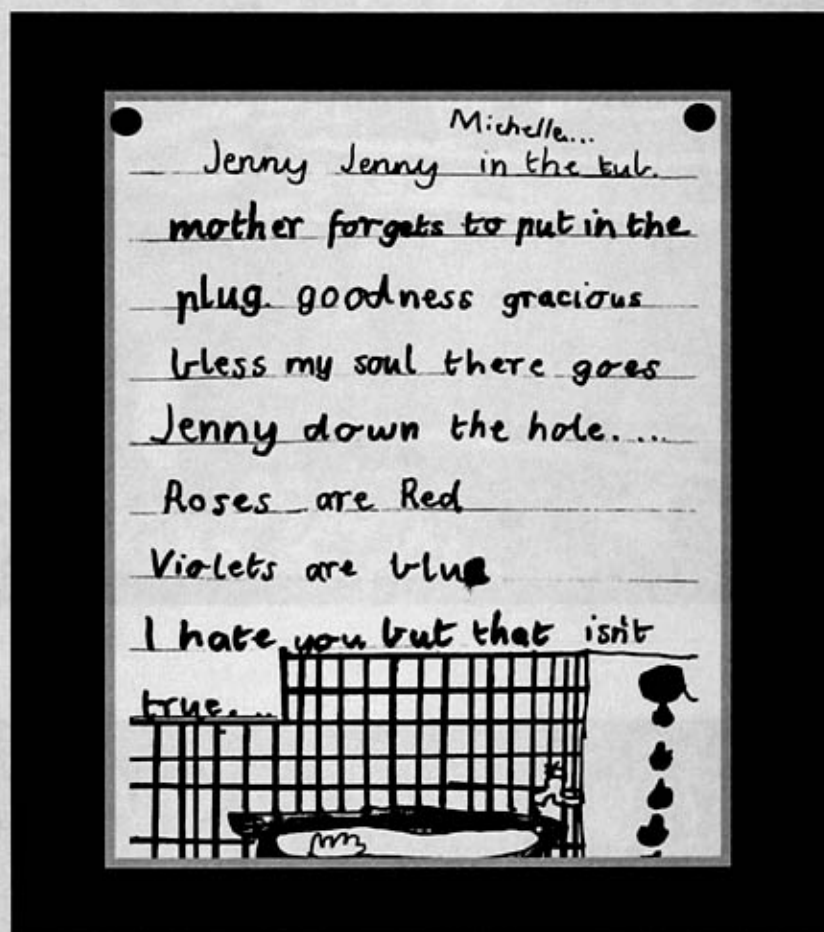
As in the Roseville/Merrylands instance, this extensive vocabulary operates to mark identity and status. Verbal performance (among teenagers, language within the group is distinctly performance-oriented) indicates clearly whether you are part of a surfer subculture, or one of the shiny-haired girls from a 'top' school, or identify with an Aboriginal community. Adolescent vernacular is apt to accentuate belonging, but activity, class, gender, ethnicity, even age are conflated or subsumed by geography. Indeed, children's district or neighbourhood may be the best predictor of the distribution of particular slang expressions. (There appears to be a core vocabulary of slang words and phrases known and used by youngsters across the country. Many of them derive from popular television programs.) Thus students from a Darwin high school, although of varied ethnic and regional origin, freely use Aboriginal words common in their area such as *budju* (good-looking boy or girl) and *nunga* (black), as well as the old Pidgin English *gammon* to mean untruth or lie: *'Don't gammon about that.'*<sup>17</sup> *Packing polenta* (shit scared) is a phrase found in an area of north-east Victoria where there are many families of Italian origin; among those who use this expression are teenagers with no Italian background.<sup>18</sup>

Does the language of the 'uncovered school'<sup>19</sup> – the playground – and of the street, park, shopping centre, bowling alley and disco, the language of children and adolescents among themselves, offer any guide to those concerned to improve literacy? If we believe that human beings learn as integrated wholes, not segmented sections, then the linguistic subcultures of childhood cannot be ignored. At the risk of being called a *nerd* (dumb), *napper* (someone who should be in preschool), or *stud* (stupid total utter dumb), I suggest that some attention be paid to the verbal play and 'common speech'<sup>20</sup> of the young.

*June Factor's dictionary of Australian children's colloquial words and expressions, KIDSPEAK, will be published by Melbourne University Press late in 1999.*



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## FROM THE MOMENT WE WERE AWAKE

Edel Wignell

*THE CHILDREN'S LETTER TO THE HEADMASTER OF ST THOMAS'S PREPARATORY SCHOOL, LONDON ('FROM THE MOMENT WE ARE AWAKE', REPRINTED IN PLAY AND FOLKLORE JULY 1998) STIRRED MEMORIES. UNLIKE THOSE CHILDREN, EDEL WIGNELL AND HER SISTERS, WHO LIVED ON A FARM IN NORTHERN VICTORIA IN THE 1940s, ENJOYED A HUGE AMOUNT OF FREE TIME AT HOME AND AT SCHOOL.*



*No time to play - children working in the hop fields in Tasmania, early this century*



As farm girls we had jobs to do, both indoors and out, and a baby to mind, but there were four of us to take turns and to share, so our spare time seemed endless, especially in the summer.

We often walked to the irrigation channel and searched for life along the banks, in the water, the water wheel and the smaller channels. Once we took the cat with us, thinking it would be fun to watch her sail.

'Sit still!' we ordered as we placed her on a board and pushed it away, but she sprang off and swam to the bank, swearing at us.

The irrigation channel was deep and dangerous, so we swam in it only when an adult had time to accompany us. All summer we swam in the dam behind the house. We often yabbied at the edge, using string and pieces of rabbit flesh cut from the rabbits which my father shot for family and dog meat.

The ladder of the windmill was a constant challenge. 'Dare you to go to the top.' At ten or twelve rungs we chickened out, so none of us knew the giddy thrill of standing on the platform.

The 'timber paddock' which hadn't been cleared by our ancestors was a favourite place for walks, for we always found something to take to school for 'observations' – the first session of the morning. Sometimes we found part of a snake skin, and marvelled at its strength and beauty.

We went barefoot all summer, and watched where we put our feet. We often saw snakes. They were regarded as vermin then and were not protected. Farmers killed them and draped them over their fences for everyone to see.

Sometimes when my father killed a snake, he put it on an ants' nest. After a while, if the snake wasn't taken by birds or animals, the flesh was eaten by ants and all that remained was a skeleton.

We took the tiny bones at the end of the tail, and persuaded our mother to boil them in red, blue and green dyes. Then we threaded a darning needle with coloured wool and made necklaces and bracelets by pulling the wool through the central holes in the bones.

In autumn we took billies and gathered mushrooms from the paddocks, and our mother cooked them for a 'big feed' for lunches and breakfasts. Often, when the weather was fine, we took a picnic lunch on our excursions, our busy mother being glad to 'get us out from under her feet'.

My earliest memories are of a wheat farm. A few years later, when irrigation from the Waranga-Mallee Channel arrived, we changed to sheep. Therefore we had machinery and sheds appropriate to two kinds of farming.

We liked exploring the sheds at the back of our grandparents' house which was 100 yards away. We clambered on the machinery – plough, drill, stripper-harvester... – and pretended to drive the horses. We climbed a ladder to explore the tattered thatch of an old machinery shed – a great place for nests. We searched for mice in the barn, played shearing and wool-classing in the shearing shed, and horse teams in the stable.

The tip contained generations of throw-aways which we endlessly sorted and discussed for possible use and adaptation.

Close to home, we observed spiders and insects and practised a little cruelty. Sometimes we collected sugar ants in a bottle, corked it and watched the ants' frantic search for escape. Soon they became feeble and died for lack of air.

We searched for trapdoor spiders which sat at the openings to their burrows. If we found one, we hurried away and returned with a kettle of boiling water. Sneaking up on tip-toe, we hoped that the spider wouldn't feel the vibrations of our tread. If it was still there, we poured the water into the hole. But usually it was aware and, with one clawed foot, pulled the trapdoor closed over itself.

We had a special activity for wet days. Our mother brought Scrap Books and old magazines into the kitchen. Carefully we cut out pictures and pasted them in with flour-and-water paste. Other kids had Clag, and we wished we had 'proper paste' too. All the year round, we completed dozens of Colouring-In Books – a mindless activity which improved our physical dexterity and filled in the time.

Every girl knitted in winter. Flat iron, pot and kettle holders were popular as they were the most straightforward to knit. As we 'used up the scraps', they cost nothing, and we gave them away to adult female relatives. We also knitted singlets for babies and, as we became more proficient, socks, caps, cardigans and jumpers for ourselves.

We had home-made rag dolls which we dressed, undressed and put to bed. We had piano lessons and practised twice a day, and we collected stamps. As our parents corresponded with preachers in India, Burma, Ceylon, Borneo, Malaya and other countries overseas, we acquired interesting stamps, but we didn't show them to the kids at school.

*continued on page 14*

Birthday by birthday, our mother and our aunt gave us the 'Billabong' books by Mary Grant Bruce. We woke early in summer, and I read aloud to my sisters in bed. We swapped with our fourth cousins who had the 'Anne of Green Gables' and the 'Pollyanna' series.

We also read from the Gillies Bequest Library – a box of books sent by train once a month to the railway station in town seven miles away. Our teacher retrieved and returned them. These were dreary looking books by today's standards, but I devoured the whole boxful in a week, and re-read after that.

The population at our rural school was usually 12-16 children – Little Kids (Grades 1-4) and Big Kids (Grades 5-8). Our teacher lived in The Residence, and went home for lunch, so we supervised ourselves for most of the lunch break, the Big Kids being in charge.

We played Kick the Tin, Drop the Hanky, What's the Time, Mr Wolf?, skippy, marbles, rounders, football... When the School Committee set up two bat tennis courts, the game was popular with the Big Kids. The teacher enjoyed it, too, and spent more of the lunch time with us.

All December, lunch time (after eating) was devoted to Concert Practice. The End-of-Year Concert was organised by the Big Kids, with the most senior girl or boy announcing the items.

On wet days we played in the shelter shed which was also the repository for extra desks (some broken) and forms and trestle tables which were needed for Mothers' Club and School Committee activities. The big boys moved some items so that it was possible to circle around the inside of the shed, leaping from one piece of furniture to another, without touching the floor. Furniture wobbles and crashes contributed to the excitement.

We also played a form of tag. One kid – blindfolded – went 'he' in the middle of the floor, and the rest sprang down, one at a time, and tried to cross without getting tagged. A kid who was tagged went 'He'.

In the corner of the school paddock, next to the Horse Yard, was a dry dam. In winter it was muddy, but it had huge cracks and water never gathered in it. When it was dry, it was a great place for drama and games. Now and then, the Big Girls organised a game of Mothers and Fathers or Doctors and Nurses which we played either in the dam or in the school porch.

In spite of being farm children, we were an innocent lot. Religious parents told their children that babies came from heaven, and the others, that they found their babies in the cabbage patch. One day a big,

mature girl, aged fourteen, whose mother had lots of male visitors, arrived in Grade 8. Before long she had enlightened us with information that was shocking and unbelievable.

The porch had a large folding table used by the Mothers' Club. Two senior girls set it up to be a double bed for the Mother and Father. Nine months later it was the hospital bed for the delivery of the baby.

The Little Kids were allowed to participate only as Little Brothers, Sisters and Cousins visiting the hospital to see the new baby. One day, the teacher arrived at the height of the activity and banned it.

With three other families, we belonged to a fundamentalist Christian group. Sometimes we were a majority in the playground. One day, when the school population was depleted, the two eldest Big Girls formed a Fundamentalist Mafia. They grabbed a little kid, took him around to the back of the shelter shed and interrogated him.

'Are you saved?'

'I don't know,' he whimpered.

'Well, you're not saved,' said one.

'You're going to Hell,' said the other.

Together again, 'Are you saved?'

Weakly – anything to get away: 'No.'

'Where are you going?'

'To Hell.'

They allowed the victim to run away, and grabbed the next. In Grade 6, I was amongst the hangers-on – watching, fascinated. It happened again a few months later.

I try to fathom why I didn't do it myself when I was in Grade 8. Surely I was cruel enough! But, now I remember: the other Grade 8 girl was totally good, and at least two are needed for this kind of satisfaction.

*Edel Wignell has more than 50 titles, mostly for children, the latest being The Look-alikes and Co-co, Sam and the Swimmies (Macmillan), The Midnight Monster (Era) and Hands Up! (Addison Wesley Longman).*

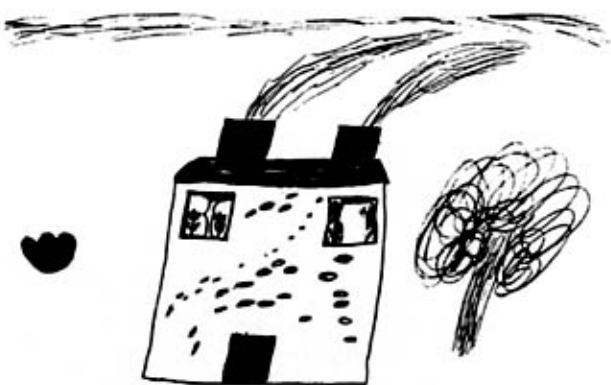


# THE PLAYGROUNDS AND RECREATION ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA

## WHO WE ARE

PRAV is an association whose membership comprises professionals, groups and individuals committed to promoting the value of play.

We aim to collect, disseminate and exchange information about play and play environments, encourage consultation with organisations and individuals on issues relating to play, carry out research into the use of playgrounds and their value, promote better design of playgrounds and encourage the better planning, design and development of play opportunities.



## WHAT WE DO

We provide a telephone advisory service and consultancy services to the early childhood sector, schools, local government, state government, playground manufacturers and community-based organisations on specialist aspects of planning, design, evaluation and development of play opportunities. We co-ordinate special projects, including the conduct of seminars and forums, and we have a keen interest in policy development and research.

PRAV represents the play sector on the Australian Standards Committee.



## CURRENT ACTIVITIES

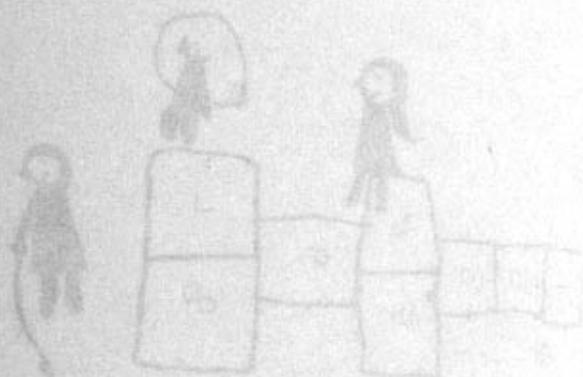
- PRAV has been engaged by the Department of Education to produce a manual for schools on the management of playgrounds, to be available early in 1999.
- PRAV is working with representatives of playground manufacturers to develop an industry group to ensure that producers of playgrounds and/or playground equipment have access to current advice on Australian standards.
- PRAV plans to work with representatives of the early childhood sector to develop financially sustainable mechanisms to support playground safety in playgroups, childcare and kindergarten centres.
- PRAV is developing a system to accredit people to audit playgrounds and/or playground equipment in accord with Australian standards and best practice advice.

## PRAV WISHES TO WORK WITH ALL SECTIONS OF THE COMMUNITY TO PROMOTE THE VALUE OF PLAY

For further information contact  
Barbara Champion, Executive Officer  
(61 3 9388 1066 FAX 61 3 9388 1838)



# THE PLAYGROUNDS AND RECREATION ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA



What are the aims of the Association? The Association is a non-profit organisation which aims to promote the development of play and recreation for all children and young people in Victoria. It does this by providing information, advice and support to parents, teachers and the community. It also organises play sessions and events for children and young people.

## CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

The Association provides a range of play and recreation activities for children and young people. These include play sessions, play equipment, play spaces and play resources.

The Association also provides information and advice to parents, teachers and the community about play and recreation. This includes information about play equipment, play spaces and play resources.

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MEAN WHILE TO WORK  
WITH ALL SECTIONS OF THE  
COMMUNITY TO PROMOTE  
THE BIRTH OF PLAY

For further information contact  
Dr June Factor, Executive Director  
Tel: 03 9344 7235 Fax: 03 9347 7731



## WHAT WE DO

We provide a range of play and recreation activities for children and young people. These include play sessions, play equipment, play spaces and play resources. We also provide information and advice to parents, teachers and the community about play and recreation. This includes information about play equipment, play spaces and play resources.



# Play and Folklore

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