

**A Conversation between Nicolás Dumit Estévez and Jane Clarke,  
Director, Lower School, City and Country School, New York, NY.**

**NDE:** Jane, it is quite a challenge to think of playful ways to format a conversation about play. I suggest we talk about how we interacted with the world when we were six. I can tell you that my toys were rocks, found objects, and sometimes adult's tools that could be deemed as dangerous. What about you?

**JC:** When I was six and living in the suburbs of England, close to the countryside, my toys were also sticks and stones, soil and water, flowers and leaves. Climbing trees was a highlight; finding flint stones that could be imagined as tools to cut and hammer; using horse chestnuts on strings to compete with others to find the victorious champion, gathering flowers in the parks and woods to make imagined jewelry and home furnishings. Yes, the freedom we were allowed to have at that time could be deemed as dangerous today. It is much harder for parents, certainly of children in the city, to be able to allow their children to be independent in this way. However, the child's need to play and imagine remains the same in order for them to develop in healthy ways. To be able to play is a necessity for children, it is not an option!

**NDE:** What is the role of freedom in play and what are some of the limits we should keep an eye on? Please note that I am now approaching play not just as a children's activity, but as one in which adults engage as well.

**JC:** Children need the freedom to be able to think in authentic and meaningful ways. They need time to be able to solve problems, they need to be encouraged to take risks and to be trusted in this process. They also need materials that are open-ended and that can offer multiple possibilities. Obviously, safety is always something that should be monitored by the adult in this process, monitored but not suffocated. For example, if a child is being taught how to use a hammer safely under the guidance of a grown up, sometimes the child will bang his or her finger or thumb and it will hurt. That can be an important part of this learning process. For adults it is harder for some of us to return to this unbridled landscape of play; sometimes we need permission and encouragement to be able to open up to playfulness. Again, adults, not dissimilarly to children, need materials that can ignite possibilities, they need to be given encouragement and the time to open themselves to a process that may have become unfamiliar to them; they need to feel safe and respected in order to take this plunge.

**NDE:** Too much work and no play makes Jack and Jill a dull boy and girl. The project, for lack of a better word that I have developed for El Museo del Barrio, is entitled “Office Hours,” and it deals with the concept of play as work and work as play. For this I have been inviting the different departments of the organization to conceive of actions through which members of the staff can reveal their creative selves. Can work be play?

**JC:** Yes, children’s play is their work! Working in a progressive school that has honored this process for more than 100 years, it has been illuminating to observe the natural shift that happens for children and adults as they enter an environment with this philosophy. For children the shift is an easy one; they feel safe in the space that honors who they are and what they are capable of doing; for adults it can sometimes take longer: “When is my child going to really learn something?” Yes, I do believe that work can be play for adults also. However, the demands of the different aspects of the professional world we find ourselves in can sometimes cloud possibilities. The time pressure that so many of us find ourselves confronting in our professional lives can be suffocating; authentic play cannot be rushed, but has to be nurtured and given time to unfurl. It cannot be found by pressing a button. Being open to play can also sometimes be frightening for adults because it has become unfamiliar.

**NDE:** You work at the historic City and Country School in Manhattan, a place where play has a preeminent role in the curriculum. What do you have to say about the relationship between play and age? Do people tend to play less as they get older?

**JC:** An interesting observation for me has been the way in which seniors in our society are often able to return more easily to the creative practice that playfulness requires. Somehow, reaching a moment in their lives when they do not have the same pressures burdening them seems to allow them to experience the creative joy of, for example, playing with art materials and creating something that gives pleasure and a sense of spontaneity. These opportunities can offer new possibilities in life; different ways of knowing yourself and other people.

**NDE:** Back to “Office Hours,” and the jobs we pursue in the adult world, can you talk about the different kinds of play? I am asking because I am curious about how grown-ups may approach, for example, parallel play. In other words, I am trying to come up with activities we do in our daily jobs that could illustrate the different forms of play.

**JC:** I think almost everything we do in our daily lives as adults can offer the opportunity for play, we simply have to allow the space for this to happen. In a spontaneous exchange, for example, with someone we connect with as we travel to work on the subway, we share a smile, a look, a conversation; there can be a playfulness in this exchange. Where there is playfulness, there is always joy. As we go about our daily tasks in the workplace, no matter how routine our responsibilities may be, there are always different approaches to a task. If, for example, your job is a waitress in a restaurant, a doctor in a hospital, a driver on a bus, most often we are connecting with other people in this process. Spicing the routine with the unexpected has to be a key. There are always things that have to be accomplished in order for a job to be well done, but playfulness does not threaten the accomplishment of a task, it can simply make it more pleasurable. For example, if your work in a restaurant requires you to set tables in a specific way as part of your job, the action itself can be a routine, but what you think about as you do the work is controlled only by you. If you allow yourself to be playful in your thoughts as you work, a task can be transformed into a different experience. This playfulness can quickly extend and influence the people with whom you work. When you play with someone else, your relationship with them changes and you see each other in a different way.

As mentioned before, the process of play is not an option for children to develop into healthy beings. Even if children are raised in a more solitary context, they will find a way to be playful simply because they have to, they cannot choose another route. However, if this process is not valued and/or encouraged, it may be harder for them to lead successful and fulfilled lives as adults.

**NDE:** As an artist who works with art in everyday life, a field developed by art visionaries like Allan Kaprow and Linda Mary Montano, among others, I often seek opportunities to invite people to drop their preconceptions about who they may be and what the world expects from them, and to play with who they really want to be, or the world they want to bring about. Can art be play and can play be art?

**JC:** There is no doubt for me that art can be play and vice versa. To play is to imagine and to imagine offers endless opportunities for anyone. The image we present to the world is a façade for what lies beneath. When children play they often create things of beauty and create connections with each other. It is through that experience that they know themselves in deeper ways. If I imagine what it is like to be someone else, I have the possibility for deeper understanding. I also

have the possibility to control the image/person I am creating, therefore I can experiment with the knowledge that I am safe; I am ultimately in control of this experience.

**NDE:** Is there room in play for rehearsing or is play by nature spontaneous?

**JC:** I think we can also learn from children not only the spontaneity of play, but also the need that children have to repeat experiences in order to better understand how things work. It is not exactly a rehearsal because each time the experience is different, but the process can be practiced. For example, children are always intrigued to better understand family relationships and how the family works. They may consistently act out the same drama taking place within an imagined family in this process. Is this a rehearsal? Not exactly, there is no final show, it is the very moment of play that is significant. The experience itself, in the moment, is what is important; the memory of that experience, however, may affect how things play out in a follow-up.

**NDE:** How would you say time and play interact with each other?

**JC:** For young children the concept of time is obviously very different from our own understanding of time. In order to truly play in an organic and fluid way, children and adults need almost to exist in that timeless moment. We need to allow time for the natural engagement of play to develop and to grow, for ideas to develop and ignite, and for the ebb and flow of play to run its natural course. A hurried moment is not conducive to the seeds of play.

**NDE:** Can you give me and the staff at El Museo del Barrio a good reason to keep play alive, even as we grow older and our commitments become more demanding?

**JC:** The most important thing I can say is that the ongoing practice of nurturing our deeper and more playful, creative selves will certainly make us feel more fulfilled and, I believe, happier in our lives. Carving out time to engage in playful pursuit is important and like anything else requires a level of commitment. The experience of play feeds itself and once you have opened the door you will not look back!

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