Play and the History of American Childhood

An Interview with Steven Mintz

An authority on the history of American children and families, Steven Mintz is a professor of history at Columbia University, where he also directs the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Teaching Center. Previously, he was a fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University and the Moores Professor of History at the University of Houston, where he founded and directed that university's American Cultures Program and served as an associate dean. He is the author or editor of thirteen books, including *Domestic Revolutions: A Social History of American Family Life* (1988) and *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004), which received the Organization of American Historians' 2005 Merle Curti Award as the best book in American social history and the Association of American Publishers' 2005 R. R. Hawkins Award as the best scholarly book. Among many other professional activities, Mintz is president of the Society for the History of Childhood and past president of H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences online. He has also served as national cochair of the Council on Contemporary Families, as chair of the Organization of American Historians' Teaching Committee, and on the advisory board of *Film and History*. He is the founder of the Digital History website (www.digitalhistrory.uh.edu), which is used by some one hundred thousand students and teachers each week. In this interview, Mintz discusses how Americans have regarded childhood and play, how our attitudes have changed over time, and how popular culture—particularly motion pictures but also other entertainment media—both reflect and affect our views of play.

American Journal of Play: Professor Mintz, how did you come to study the history of childhood?

Steven Mintz: It's an important subject. In American society, childhood is a key to understanding the transmission of class status, the construction of ethnic and gender identities, the development of a consumer economy, and the growth of a modern welfare state. In my view, childhood is one of the missing links between the personal and the cultural, between the discursive and the social. Childhood is a lived experience, an adult-defined status, and an ever-changing aspect of the life cycle.

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AJP: Did you have other reasons as well?

Mintz: Yes. In fact, I turned to the history of childhood less for abstract and theoretical reasons than out of personal motives. As my sons left childhood and entered young adulthood, I had questions I wanted to answer. I wanted to know how their childhoods had differed from mine and from those of preceding generations. I wanted to know if contemporary childhood was worse in some ways than childhood in the past. And I wanted to know what forces drive changes in the nature of childhood.

AJP: How do historians look for change in childhood and in children's play?

Mintz: We look for changes in play the same way we document other changes in life: through primary sources, such as diaries and letters; through other kinds of documentation, including sociological studies and government reports; and through visual sources, such as photographs. Then, too, there are useful artifacts of popular culture, including toys, games, children's rhymes, and folklore.

AJP: Did you worry early on that some of that evidence would be hard to find?

Mintz: Not really. A surprising amount of information about children's play has survived. Precisely because adults have long been concerned about children's play—often dismissing it as disorderly, devilish, or merely as a waste of time—we know a lot about how children spent their leisure time. Many material artifacts survive, too. What is hardest to get at is all the meanings that children have ascribed to play. Many children's games, jokes, and stories have surprisingly long histories, dating back to, at least, the Middle Ages. Yet while there are certain continuities in children's play, it also varies with circumstances—demographic, ideological, cultural, and socio-economic—and we need to understand that diversity. For example, children's play was never more diverse than in the late nineteenth century, when urban middle-class children played with manufactured toys in specially designated playrooms while rural children and working class kids tended to play outdoors with improvised playthings.

AJP: Do adult recollections help recover the history of childhood and children's play?

Mintz: Personal memories are notoriously unreliable. We forget, repress, and distort key aspects of the past, sometimes unconsciously and sometimes intentionally. Nostalgia often colors how adults remember childhood. For many, childhood stands out as a glaring contrast to adulthood, and, frequently, we summon memories to reinforce that view. Yet I've found that

even through this haze, it is still possible to identify the diverse forms that childhood play took in the past. So, yes, memories, along with artifacts and photographs, can help us recover a lost world of childhood and, to a certain extent, also reconstruct the meanings that children invested in play.

AJP: In addition to looking at *how* play changes over time, do you look at *what* changes play over time?

Mintz: Yes. In our own time, for example, a sharp decline in the birthrate, the rebirth of feminism, the emergence of intense parenting, the growth of new electronic technologies, and heightened concerns for children's well-being have all had profound consequences for children's play. Free, unstructured, outdoor play has declined markedly, and it has been replaced to a striking extent by solitary play and adult-supervised activities.

AJP: Is play undergoing a long and inevitable decline in America?

Mintz: I think it would be a mistake to assume that children are losing their capacity for independent and creative play. Many adults do fear that children's culture is being colonized by an aggressive consumer culture and that video games are isolating, sexist, and violent. But remember that children have always drawn upon the adult world for the motifs, themes, and characters found in their play activities. Remember, too, that today's kids are able to achieve sociability through video games.

AJP: Does our experience with play in the present help us understand play in the past?

Mintz: In certain respects, yes. Childhood today resembles childhood in the more distant past. In other respects, our experiences diverge significantly. We no longer regard children as the polar opposites of adults, for example. And we no longer regard children as innocent and unknowledgeable. Adults no longer mediate children's consumption of toys, either. Perhaps the most striking recent development is that adults themselves also revel in play. By contrast, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, childhood was considered a time of play, and adulthood was a time of seriousness. But today's adults want to play, even if the form that play takes for them differs radically from those of their children.

AJP: Do you find other strong contrasts between past and present play?

Mintz: Yes, I do. In many ways, childhood today in no way resembles premodern childhood. It's significant that our society largely bars children from work. We isolate the young in age-graded classrooms too, and this changes play. Today's parents focus much more than their distant predecessors on

children's well-being; contemporary society is acutely conscious of children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. We listen to a host of experts who specialize in various aspects of childhood.

AJP: What do you say when asked if today's children grow up too fast?

Mintz: I try to frame the question historically because the issue itself arises from the special circumstances of the post–World War II era, as popular culture helped construct a conception of childhood innocence. The instructive question here should be why we became preoccupied with childhood innocence in the first place. And the answer is that it's likely we were striving to create a protected or sheltered childhood in the wake of World War II and in the face of the Cold War. The culture self-consciously sought to shield children from adult realities during that period. And so you see the first children's television shows like *Bozo the Clown*, created in 1946, and *Howdy Doody* and *Captain Kangaroo*, which followed over the next two years, reinforced a view of childhood as a stage of innocent wonder. In the 1950s, a profusion of child-oriented films—such as *Treasure Island*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, *Davy Crockett: King of the Wild Frontier*, and *Old Yeller*—advanced the notion of childhood as a stage of asexual innocence, fantasy, and carefree adventure. And then an outpouring of child-centered books, like the ones Dr. Seuss gave us in the same decade, helped sustain this concept as a cultural ideal.

AJP: What replaced the innocence of that era?

Mintz: Since the early 1970s in particular, the notion of a "prepared" childhood has partly supplanted the notion of a "protected" childhood, and contemporary society has developed a highly ambivalent view of children. Through the 1970s and into the 1980s, Americans experienced a series of panics over childhood: over stranger abductions, sexual abuse, latchkey children, youth violence, teenage pregnancy, and, most striking of all, satanic rituals in day-care centers. In part, these panics expressed parental guilt over the fact that fewer children had full-time supervision by an adult member of the family. To fill the gap between the time children got out of school and parents returned from work, many moms and dads began to enroll their children in adult-supervised activities. Today, we still strongly believe that children need protection, and parents express even more intense anxiety about the well-being and development of their kids. Yet, at the same time, our society views children as more competent than in the past. Many parents believe that even very young children can

participate in day-long day-care programs or take care of themselves after school or watch adult programming on television or accompany them to adult-oriented restaurants.

AJP: Does history show that parents have always worried about children's play?

Mintz: Yes, in two main ways. Adults have long expressed concern not only about the disorderly characteristics of play, but also about the simple fact that children seemed to be "doing nothing" or "hanging out." Many worried—and still worry—that "idle hands are the devil's playground." Of course, doing nothing is often just the opposite: it's a time for daydreaming, fantasizing, and playing casually and informally. This contempt for idleness, in fact, reflects a particular ideological outlook: all activities must be uplifting or productive. And despite the claim that our society is particularly child friendly, in truth, our culture also worries about activities that seem driven by nothing more than a desire for pleasure.

AJP: Some might say such an attitude is reminiscent of our Puritan forbears. Is it?

Mintz: We have to be somewhat cautious here—the Puritans have gotten a bum rap as a cold, emotionless, and humorless people. But one of the reasons they came to be seen this way was their attitude toward children. The Puritans saw children as sinful, even bestial creatures that needed to grow up as quickly as possible. As the most famous Puritan, the Reverend Cotton Mather put it: "Are they Young? Yet the Devil has been with them already. . . . They go astray as soon as they are born. They no sooner step than they stray, they no sooner lisp than they ly [sic]." The Puritans regarded crawling as animal-like, toys as devilish, and play as totally lacking in value.

AJP: Yet, you say the Puritans have been misunderstood?

Mintz: In a sense, yes. The Puritans were obsessed with children. They regarded children as a trust from God and the key to creating a Godly society. In secular form, this deep concern remains the American attitude today.

AJP: In colonial times, did Puritan theology keep children from playing?

Mintz: No. Even though colonial adults frequently condemned children's play as devilish and expected even surprisingly young children to engage in productive labor or to work as servants, children in colonial America found many ways to play—rolling hoops, racing, wrestling, climbing trees, or even, like the preadolescent girls in Salem whose activities helped ignite a witchcraft scare, seeking to predict the future. In fact, compared to con-

temporary American society, the median age was much lower in colonial times. As a result, there were fewer adults to supervise children or regulate their lives. Their play reflected the realities of a predominantly rural society. Kids roamed through woods, explored the natural environment, played with various animals, and swam.

AJP: Outside rural-urban contrasts, what is the most striking difference between children's play then and now?

Mintz: There were no competitive team sports then.

AJP: And what is the greatest difference between play now and the play of Native Americans in that earlier period?

Mintz: Many early Native American societies allowed or encouraged play that inured children to physical pain and helped prepare them for an outdoor life.

AJP: Is it ironic that play should be so weighty?

Mintz: No, that's not so remarkable. Play may look innocent, yet it rarely is. Today's video games prepare children for a highly technological future, and the play of Indian youth was valuable preparation for adult roles such as hunting, farming, and other tasks.

AJP: As the Puritan view began to falter, did children become freer to play?

Mintz: Yes and no. The early stages of the Industrial Revolution enhanced the value of children's labor in many farm and working-class families, even as a growing number of middle-class children were able to attend school and take part in play activities. But—as I said before—at no time in American history was children's play experience more varied—along lines of class, gender, and region—than during the nineteenth century.

AJP: Did early apprenticeship and other features of the industrializing era prevent children from having a childhood and thereby limit play?

Mintz: Children are surprisingly resilient and inventive. Lucy Larcom, a Lowell, Massachusetts, mill girl, wrote in her memoir of playing games alongside the textile mill's spindles. Enslaved children, too, succeeded in stealing a childhood and engaged in a host of games that—as I have written—mirrored their surroundings. Many of the games that children in bondage played—such as mock auctions—were ways to work through profound anxieties. That play can persist in such circumstances underscores children's capacity for creativity even under extreme adversity.

AJP: How else did the play of enslaved African American children differ from that of their white counterparts?

Mintz: Children in slavery were apparently far less likely than Southern and Northern white children to engage in games involving competition and winner and losers. While some forms of play transcend class, ethnic, gender, and regional lines, play has also long been an important marker of cultural, class, and gender differences.

AJP: What about the impact of gender on early play? Nineteenth-century literature provides many portraits of girls as fragile. Were there also tomboys then?

Mintz: In fact, tomboys were widespread, both in literature and in real life. In their memoirs, many young women described a crucial moment in their early or midteens when they pulled up their hair and began to dress like adult women. But all the same, there was a special word, *hoyden*, that Americans used to describe high-spirited, bold, boisterous, and saucy girls. We mustn't allow cultural caricatures—for example, the illusion that girls' play took place exclusively indoors—to impede our understanding. The fact is that in the past—and today—boys and girls participate in many of the same play activities.

AJP: Is the romantic view of childhood a middle-class phenomenon?

Mintz: During the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, childhood, middle-class childhood in particular, came to be seen as the mirror image of adulthood. As I noted earlier, this view extended well into the twentieth century. Whereas adulthood involved maturity and responsibility, childhood involved dependence, organic wholeness, and asexual innocence. One might speculate that the celebration of childhood as a time of fantasy reflected growing dissatisfactions with the stressful adult world.

AJP: How did Progressive attitudes affect American views about play?

Mintz: Well, let's start with Theodore Roosevelt. Along with many of his contemporaries, he feared that modern society was emasculating. He and other Progressive reformers expressed alarm at reports that many kids spent their free time doing nothing. Play, in their view, especially strenuous play, was needed to revitalize competitiveness, aggressiveness, and physical vigor—traits that dwindled as living standards rose. So the reformers responded by trying to replace unsupervised street play with supervised playgrounds and to supplant casual activities with organized sports. Competitive team sports, too, were a crucial innovation during the era of rapid industrialization and urbanization. These sports were seen as a way to cultivate virtues important to a modern society—such as teamwork—and to foster and channel competitiveness and

aggressiveness. One of the most striking developments in this period was the rapid growth of summer camps, which provided an environment where kids could engage in play with minimal adult intervention. For those of us who spent two months every summer away from home at summer camp, those memories of play remain indelible.

AJP: You alluded earlier to the influence of popular culture, films in particular, on American attitudes toward play. You are known for your interest in film history. Tell us more about the impact of motion pictures on our sense of childhood.

Mintz: Hollywood has been our society's most important educator for more than a century—shaping public ideas about masculinity, femininity, sexuality, and even childhood. Cinematic images include heart-warming infants, wide-eyed waifs hungering for a home, curly-haired cherubs, and savvy street urchins. Among girls, we have had an assortment of Pollyannas, princesses, tomboys, bobby soxers, and prepubescent Lolitas and prostitutes, not to mention an endless stream of Cinderellas. Among boys, we've had mischievous scamps, rambunctious ragamuffins, little rascals, angry and alienated adolescents, and, more recently, a parade of pranksters, burnouts, stoners, and homeboys.

Consider, in particular, the Great Depression, which sparked fears of a lost generation of children. In that era, Hollywood gave us the street-smart Dead End Kids, who might fall into crime and be susceptible to demagogues. But there were also efforts to sentimentalize boyhood, like the Little Rascals, the urban offspring of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, and there were idealized versions of girlhood, notably the March sisters in *Little Women*. Then there was Shirley Temple, who topped the box office every year from 1935 to 1938. She was America's little darling, tap-dancing and singing through the Great Depression in fifty shorts and features by the time she was eighteen. Part of her attraction was her cuteness, charm, dimpled cheeks, and bouncing curls. She was adults' ideal girl—athletic, flirtatious, independent, even tempered, and infectiously optimistic. And she was undeniably talented: she could sing, dance, act, and melt the heart of the grouchiest sourpuss. Escapist fantasy, too, was part of her appeal. Lacking a mother in almost all of her movies, she was free from domestic constraints. But her appeal went beyond escapism. In many films, she served as a "spiritual healer" who resolved family disputes and restored adults' confidence in themselves. Plus,

she was oblivious to class and racial differences: she moved easily between poor and wealthy homes without ever becoming greedy or envious.

AJP: Walt Disney got his start around this same time. How did he help shape our views of childhood?

Mintz: Disney became synonymous with children's movies, and his films developed trademark traits. The Disney studio self-consciously reworked fairy tales, myths, and classic children's stories, erasing elements that it considered inappropriate for kids and making the stories more didactic and moralistic. For Pinocchio to become a real boy in the 1940 Disney film, he had to prove himself brave, truthful, and unselfish. And *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* three years earlier emphasized proper gender behavior. This picture foreshadowed later Disney films in that the heroine found fulfillment in housework and made marriage her life's ultimate goal. Yet if Disney films were moralistic and reflected rigid gender roles, these movies also contributed to a view of childhood as an age of innocent wonder and adventure—an ideal that persists even today, despite far-reaching transformations in the realities of American childhood.

AJP: What about all the 1930s and 1940s movies that featured wholesome teenagers? What sense do you make of them?

Mintz: These movies offered an extremely sentimentalized view of childhood. At a time when many young people had to grow up quickly and assume adult-like responsibilities at a very early age, these films provided a space where adults could romanticize the childhood years. By the end of the decade, a new cinematic stereotype appeared that supplanted even Shirley Temple in popularity. This was the all-American teen personified by Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland in the Andy Hardy movies, which focused on middle-class teenagers' crushes, infatuations, and humorous and embarrassing mishaps. Such Kleen Teens as Deanna Durbin, Roddy McDowell, Dickie Moore, Lana Turner, and Jane Withers provided the caricature that the troubled, misunderstood, and alienated teen characters of 1950s films rebelled against.

AJP: Despite those rebellious movie images, weren't the 1950s particularly friendly to play?

Mintz: Yes, they were. Unlike many golden ages that reside in the distant or mythic past, the golden age of American childhood lurks within living memory and serves as the vantage point from which many adults criticize the realities of contemporary childhood. Spurred in part by the hard-

ships of the Great Depression and the upheavals of the Second World War, many 1950s parents sought to nurture a carefree childhood. The prevalence of vacant lots, the lack of traffic in suburban subdivisions, and the high birthrate made it relatively easy for the young to engage in free, unstructured play with peers.

***AJP*:** Did teenagers and movies about them help reinvent play?

Mintz: They certainly had an important impact. In the 1940s, the term *teenager* was applied to a stage of life and to a distinct youth subculture organized around the peer group, high school, and such activities as dating. During the 1950s and 1960s, specific genres of movies were, for the first time, marketed directly to the young, including science fiction films, motorcycle and juvenile delinquent movies, and beach blanket and surfer films.

***AJP*:** Can those hot rod and surfer movies, which now seem hokey to many, tell us anything important about how teenagers lived?

Mintz: They can to some extent. Today, the transition to adulthood typically doesn't end until young people reach their late twenties or even their thirties. But during the 1940s and 1950s, and even into the 1960s, most young people achieved the markers of adulthood identity at a much younger age—moving out of the parental home, marrying, bearing children, having a full-time job. This gave the teen years an intensity and significance that has since been lost. In an environment where young people had to grow up fast, all the joys and risk taking of young adulthood had to be squeezed into a very few years. These movies captured that sense of youth as an extremely transient, highly fleeting passage.

***AJP*:** What do more recent films say about how we view children?

Mintz: A new trend began gathering strength after 1970, when the targeting of children and adolescents became much more intensive and self-conscious. One recurrent formula involved a teenage outcast, who, mocked by her popular, style-setting classmates, has a makeover and ends up going to the high school prom with the handsomest boy on the football team. Yet there were also deeply disturbing images of youthful depravity. The earlier, wholesome teens were replaced with demons in such films as *Carrie* and *The Exorcist*, as prostitutes in *Pretty Baby* and *Taxi Driver*, and, later, as incipient murderers in *Basketball Diaries*. Portraits of indifferent, uninvolved, unobservant, and uncomprehending teachers and clueless, disconnected, self-deceived, and self-absorbed parents became much more common too. The impact of family breakdown and disconnection was a

particularly popular theme, apparent in movies as diverse as *War Games*, *E. T. The Extra Terrestrial*, and the Home Alone films.

A number of recent American films dealing with childhood paint particularly unsettling portraits of the psyche and culture of the young. Take, for example, *River's Edge* (based on a true story), which looks at how a group of working-class Northern California teens responds after one of the boys murders his girl friend. It depicts emotionally numbed kids disconnected from the adults around them. There's also *Thirteen*, which shows an adolescent world of body piercing, self-mutilation, tattoos, sexually provocative clothing, underage sex, and casual drug use. And then there is the Columbine-inspired *Elephant*, which portrays high schools as a brutal Darwinian world of cliques where taunting and tormenting culminate in violence.

AJP: Does the violence in these latter films harm the concept of children's play as necessary and good?

Mintz: There is a grimness to the films I mentioned: the playfulness of childhood is conspicuously absent. Surely popular movies often leap over parents' heads, reach children directly, and display behavior that adults find misguided or alarming. So naturally, films have long aroused anxiety among adults. At the same time, the lives of middle-class children have become more constrained in crucial respects, and the free-floating world of film fantasy has become ever more important in allowing kids room to imagine alternatives to the rule-bound, adult-monitored world they inhabit. And yet we must be wary of creating a fantasy world in which style, material possessions, and violence are the sole definitions of freedom that children might absorb.

AJP: Why are all these films so popular?

Mintz: These days children's entertainment is a cornerstone of the American movie industry. Movies catering to the young are Hollywood's most profitable product. Popular children's films range from cheery animated musicals to shadowy fantasies making extensive use of intense, cutting-edge computer graphics. If one wishes to move beyond gender-stereotyped, Disneyfied films or sanitized versions of Roald Dahl's subversive novels or John Hughes's portraits of growing up suburban or big-budget magical fantasies like the Harry Potter movies, one must turn to foreign films. For example, *Innocent Voices*, a wrenching documentary-like exploration of the effects of El Salvador's civil war on an eleven-year-old, shows broader historical events through the eyes of children. Earlier foreign films like *Pather Panchali*, *Small Change*, *The Wild Child Pixote*, *Fanny and Alexander,* and *Innocent Voices,* address

themes crucial for the study of childhood—such as the gendered experience of childhood and coming of age—and do so in an insightful and nuanced way alien to contemporary Hollywood film.

AJP: Video games rival movies in sales. How do you regard the impact of video games on play?

Mintz: Today's children have never lived in a world without DVDs, CDs, PCs, video games, the Internet, cable television, and other forms of multimedia. Computer games, which 80 percent of boys play regularly, have evoked particular alarm, and many recent criticisms echo those from the 1950s directed at television and the movies: that video games desensitize children to violence, undercut their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and diminish the development of children's imagination. Video games have been blamed for fostering hyperactivity among the young and for diminishing children's social skills by isolating kids from one another.

Defenders of video games quite rightly respond that the games enhance children's cognitive development, manual dexterity, and motor skills, and they foster visual acuity. The defenders also point out that these games are cathartic, allowing kids to release tensions and express feelings and impulses that must usually be repressed. In addition, video games give girls and boys a chance to master and manipulate reality and create and control a fantasy world in which they exercise power. And, further, the video game aesthetic is only one example of the highly stylized, hyperbolic forms of expression that pervade contemporary entertainment.

Still, it's not surprising that new media forms have generated anxiety, apprehension, and alarm. Even young children have ready access to imagery that is more sexually explicit, misogynist, and brutally violent than was available to preadolescents in the past. Adults find it increasingly difficult to monitor and regulate what even young children see.

AJP: Is it possible to know what children have on their minds as they're playing with these new media?

Mintz: A proper Victorian child, it was said, was to be "seen but not heard." We need to reverse that adage and listen much more closely to children's voices. A few sociologists, including Barrie Thorne, William Carsaro, and Gary Alan Fine, have demonstrated that it is indeed possible to tease out the meanings that children ascribe to their play activities in elementary schools and on playgrounds and ball fields. We need to do the same with the new realms of children's play.

AJP: Critics often say that these new media encourage passivity. Is that a fair criticism?

Mintz: The critics have it wrong on this score. Kids are not passive receptacles, instead they are active agents who play with and reinterpret what they see. Since the early twentieth century, children have constructed their identities and formed their culture out of symbols, images, and stories that they have adopted from the raw materials provided by popular culture. While many adults assume that children's consumption of media is purely passive, mind-numbing entertainment, in fact, many interactions with media are playful—spontaneous, unstructured, and exploratory.

AJP: Do we need to look for free play in new and different places then?

Mintz: Historians of film contend—convincingly in my judgment—that the western, the genre that dominated American popular film for half a century, hasn't disappeared. Rather, it was transported to new environments—to the city or to outer space. Somewhat similarly, children's free play has moved to a new environment, particularly to cyberspace.

Media scholar Henry Jenkins has persuasively argued that video games serve a compensatory role in a society in which children's freedom to roam has been constricted by nervous parents, allowing "home-bound children . . . to extend their reach, to explore, manipulate, and interact with a more diverse range of imaginary places than constitute the often drab, predictable, and overly-familiar spaces of their everyday lives." He maintains that video games give expression to a new kind of narrative that is becoming increasingly common in various cultural genres: narratives that "lack the focus on characterization, causality, and linear plot development which defines classical storytelling and instead focus on movements through and the occupation of narrative space." Jenkins has also made the insightful point that children's increasing use of electronic media has heightened adults' awareness of aspects of children's play and fantasy lives—especially the violent, the sadistic, and the scatological—that have long existed but were previously hidden from view.

AJP: Talking about free play calls to mind the No Child Left Behind initiative and the correlation many see with the disappearance of recess in schools. What is your take on that?

Mintz: I will only say that the contemporary United States is a child-obsessed society. No other society spends as much money on children. But whether it is a child-friendly society is open to question. Our obsession with protect-

ing and perfecting our own children has contributed to a restriction on the geography of childhood and a decline in free, unstructured play.

AJP: How have changing parental appraisals of reasonable risk affected how children are allowed to play?

Mintz: The increasing awareness of risk has transformed child rearing and led parents to take a variety of steps to protect their kids' well-being. Anxiety is the hallmark of contemporary parenthood: from the moment their children are born, parents worry. They worry about crib death, about physical and sexual abuse, and about a host of other threats. A major reason for the sharp decline in unstructured outdoor play involves parental fears of a dangerous environment. But the concern for avoiding risk has also had unexpected side effects. For example, the requirement that children wear bicycle helmets seems to correlate with a decline in bike riding, because many kids don't want to look like geeks.

AJP: So, Professor Mintz, as a historian of childhood who has looked back at all you discussed with us, how do you regard the future of play in America?

Mintz: One can't understand contemporary children's play without recognizing the way that two seemingly contradictory attitudes have come together. One is the notion that play is children's work—that play serves invaluable developmental functions. Thus, certain kinds of play are prized: forms of play that encourage children's cognitive, social, and physical growth. The second attitude is the notion that in today's work-oriented world where many adults feel themselves on call 24/7, play is, at least partially, for adults' convenience—a way to keep kids busy and preoccupied so not to interfere with their parents' lives. This concerns me.

I find the play-is-children's-work chestnut quite misleading. Work is a job. It is purposeful. It is performed out of necessity. It is serious. Play is quite different. One isn't required to play. It is playful: that is, it involves improvisation, inventiveness, and creativity. It is joyful. Studying the history of childhood has made me fear that we are leaching the play out of children's play. We are quite literally transforming play into a form of work. We are in danger of forgetting Mark Twain's admonition in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*: "Work consists of whatever a body is OBLIGED to do, and. . . . Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do."