

The Heritage of Australian Children's Play and Oral Tradition

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The oral traditions of children are rich and varied, and encompass the songs, chants, rhymes, stories, riddles, insults, and lore of the playground. In Australia, though the collection of children's folklore dates from the nineteenth century, it was not until the 1950s that this field of inquiry attracted serious scholarly attention. Since then, there has been an increasingly vigorous interest in the collection and electronic recording of Australian children's verbal and performative play culture by academics, folklorists, and major collecting institutions (Davey 2011; Factor 2011; Darian-Smith 2012). Between 2007 and 2011, the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* research project conducted the largest nation-wide study of children's games and playground culture to date, resulting in a substantial archive of visual, oral, and written data. A significant amount of this research data is available on an open-access website (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/index.html>), where it has much to offer with respect to scholarly and community interest in exploring the dynamic heritage of Australian children's play.

The *Childhood, Tradition and Change* project was funded by the Australian Research Council and led by a team of academic researchers in collaboration with two internationally acclaimed public repositories of Australian children's folklore.¹ The National Library of Australia's Oral History and Folklore Collection (http://www.nla.gov.au/fishtrout/aus_children.html) has an extensive collection of oral recordings—undertaken mainly with adults—documenting the chants, rhymes, and games of childhood, and providing information about play stretching back to the early twentieth century. The Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria (<http://museumvictoria.com.au/discoverycentre/infosheets/australian-childrens-folklore-collection/>) has over 10,000 documents, recordings, and artifacts relating to children's play and oral traditions, and its significance has been recognized through its listing on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register.

The visual, textual, and aural documentation, as well as some 3D objects gathered from across Australia for the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* research project have been deposited in the separate collections of the National Library of Australia and Museum Victoria, where they supplement existing holdings on children's culture. This material includes descriptions of nearly

¹ Australian Research Council, Linkage Project LP0669282: "Childhood, Tradition and Change: A National Study of the Historical and Contemporary Significance and Practices of Australian Children's Playlore." The research team comprised Kate Darian-Smith (University of Melbourne), William Logan (Deakin University), Graham Seal (Curtin University), and Research Associates June Factor and Gwenda Davey, along with Project Officer Nikki Henningham.

400 different games and play activities, classified into 38 different categories; oral interviews with school principals, teachers, parents, and children; video and sound recordings of children describing and engaging in play; spatial play-maps of school playgrounds; and other relevant documentation. Bona fide researchers may apply to either institution for access to this data, which is for the most part in digital format. However, compliance with privacy legislation that protects the rights of children beyond the life of the project means that each application must be considered with reference to access conditions set by the parents or guardians of children who participated in the research (Darian-Smith and Henningham 2012).

Much of the raw data from the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* project was entered into a relational comprehensive database for further analysis by the research team but cannot be made available within the public domain. Nevertheless, it was always intended that the study would generate open-access resources for other scholars of play and the wider community. To address the necessary restraints set by the ethical and legal conditions under which the research was conducted, technology developed by the eScholarship Research Centre at the University of Melbourne was utilized to construct a de-identified and simplified relational database of selected textual and visual materials on play that is open to the public.² This public database can be accessed via the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* website's homepage that welcomes viewers to the site and lists categories of play for immediate exploration by users. Tabs titled "About," "Games and Play," "Gallery," and "Resources" provide detailed textual and visual information on the background and final report of the research (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/project-pubs/FinalReport.pdf>), access to searchable data on individual games, and a guide to further resources in the international field of playlore.

Background: The Historical and Contemporary Documentation of Play

One of the aims of the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* project was to trace the evolution of children's play in order to evaluate the adaptability of children's traditional games and verbal play in different historical and social moments. Thus the project's research design and analysis built upon several prior research investigations of play in school playgrounds. The first of these was by American folklorist Dorothy Howard, who visited Australia in the mid-1950s to study children's contemporary and historical play customs. Howard's large research archive is now held in the Australian Children's Folklore Collection at Museum Victoria. Her publications on topics from "ball bouncing customs and rhymes" to such games as marbles, hopscotch, or string games have been recently collected, interpreted, and re-issued in a single volume (Darian-Smith and Factor 2005).

Other historical research on children's folklore that framed the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* project included the path-breaking collections of children's games and rhymes by Ian

² The technology used to support the database is a modified version of the Online Heritage Resource Management (OHRM) system. The OHRM is a contextual information framework mapping system that integrates information from a wide range of sources—archival and published material, photographs, audio, and video. The system maps and manages highly complex networks of entities and relationships, presenting them as static and dynamic HTML pages, typically in the form of online encyclopedias or registers.

Turner, Wendy Lowenstein, and June Factor (Turner 1969; Turner et al. 1978) and Factor's historical account of children's playlore (1988). These publications emerged from a revived interest in the oral traditions of Australian culture, and by the 1980s were influenced by the emerging practices of oral history and its capacity to record previously marginalized experiences, including those of children.

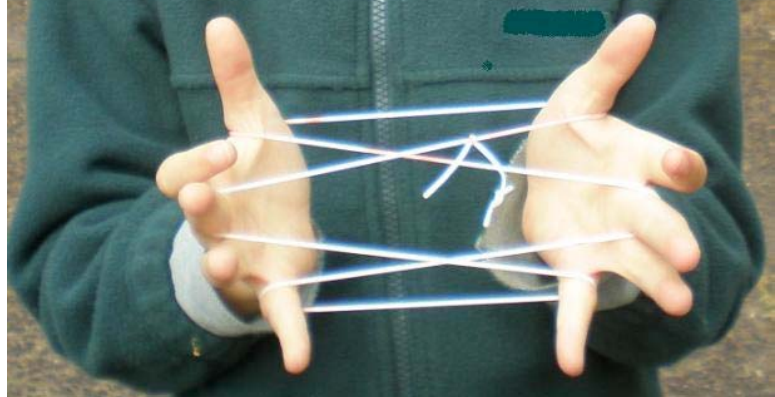


Fig. 1. Some children still learn the skills attached to the traditional string games. Image reproduced (with permission) from <http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/D00000036.htm>.

Educationalists also became interested in children's play culture from the 1970s. Peter Lindsay and Denise Palmer (1981) observed nearly 5,000 children in Brisbane primary schools and documented 255 different playground games for a study of physical well-being. In Melbourne, Heather Russell (1986) examined the influences of immigration and cultural diversity on play activities and schoolyard friendships in an inner-city multicultural school. Gwenda Davey's research (1996) on children's games in a country town in Victoria was part of a larger study of rural life.

The *Childhood, Tradition and Change* website has summaries of these and other previous studies under the "Resources" and "About" tabs. An extensive bibliography of related publications about the history and practice of play internationally is located under the "Games and Play" tab. In addition, publication by the research team based on aspects of the project's research findings, as well as a final report (Darian-Smith and Henningham 2011) are also available on the website under the "Resources" tab.

The research for *Childhood, Tradition and Change* involved the close observation and documentation of children's play during lunch and recess breaks at 19 Australian primary schools whose pupils were aged 5-12 years. These schools were selective case studies, rather than comprising a statistically representative sample, and included a diversity of children's play experiences. Several schools were selected because they had been involved in the previous studies by Howard, Lindsay and Palmer, Russell, and Davey, thus allowing for longitudinal analysis of children's play in specific school locations across several decades to the present. While the research team has surveyed the provision of playground space and its use by children across time at some school sites, there is considerable potential for more in-depth investigations of such historical comparisons drawing upon the project's data.

Overall, all of the primary schools that were visited comprised a range of educational contexts, with a geographical reach into all Australian states and territories. They included schools with single-sex and co-educational student cohorts, and non-government (private) and government (public) institutions. The majority were located in cities, but there were some in country towns and one small rural school with a single classroom. The selected schools incorporated a range of socio-economic locations, including schools in economically

“disadvantaged” areas and one school with a high population of children who were new migrants to Australia.

The documentation of play was undertaken by a team of eight experienced fieldworkers, who were sent in pairs to each school for periods of one to two weeks where their task was to observe children’s activities at lunchtimes and recess breaks. The fieldwork, as a whole, was spread across the year so as to capture seasonal variations and their influence upon games and other forms of play. The conduct of researchers at the schools required clearance by university Human Research Ethics Committees and approval by the government education departments, the Catholic education office, and individual schools in each Australian state or territory. This process was lengthy, often taking up to a year.

One of the implications of a regulatory framework for research with children was that fieldworkers could not record interviews, capture video, or take photographs without the written consent of parents (and in one state, of the children)—although they could observe and take written notes of children’s activities in the playground. Children who were identified by the fieldworkers to be playing in interesting and creative ways, and who had parental consent, were then interviewed in a semi-structured format and also filmed while talking about their play and demonstrating various games and verbal lore.



Fig. 2. A game called “The Greatest” that involves a lot of physical challenges. Image reproduced (with permission) from <http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/D00000038.htm>.

Once the data was collected, the fieldworkers completed their notes, labeled photographs, and submitted sound and video recordings for processing and entry into the database by the research team. The fieldwork archive at each school included maps of the playground and detailed descriptions of activities and games: when and how these occurred, who participated, and where the play took place. The project’s findings indicated that children’s playground activities were shaped by climatic and seasonal factors—from the monsoonal summer rain in tropical northern Australia to the relative cold of a Tasmanian winter. In addition, there was an extraordinary range of playground attributes, from expanses of natural bushland to schools with little more than an asphalt quadrangle.

School philosophies about play were also important in how play was acknowledged and experienced by both children and teachers. In some schools, children were encouraged to climb trees and use tools to build cubby houses, while

at other institutions an array of rules restricted these very same activities. In all these physical and educational environments, however, children generally played games of their own choosing. The research concluded that despite the different circumstances and rules governing each school playground, there were a great many similarities in the play activities of children across the nation.

Exploring the Public Database

The homepage on the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* website lists 18 different browsable categories of play, with an indication of the number of sub-categories within each noted in parentheses. The categories are as follows:

- Ball Games (34)
- Card or Board Games (4)
- Chasing Games (27)
- Clapping Games (24)
- Collecting Games (4)
- Construction Play (9)
- Elimination Games (10)
- Equipment Play (10)
- Games Using Computer Technology (2)
- Hiding Games (5)
- Imaginative Play (60)
- Language Play (29)
- Miscellaneous Activities (61)
- Miscellaneous Physical Play (103)
- Play on Equipment (2)
- Play with Toys (7)
- Teacher Organised Activities (1)
- Wet Weather Play (3)

Access to the profile of each participating school is also available from the site (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/gamesandplay.html>). The 19 schools are assigned an identifying number, and the database provides a school profile that includes location by state, the fieldwork dates, the size of the student body, whether the school was a government or independent institution, and so on. This profile includes a description of the playground, the variables shaping play activities such as school rules or inclement weather, and a qualitative overview of the response from staff and students to the fieldworkers.

There is a search option for the database, although the material can also be explored through browsing either by category of play activity or by school. Selecting from the list of schools will take the user to the school profile and a list of the games played by children at the school. Selecting from the list of play activities will take the user to information on these. There

is considerable nuance within each play category; for instance, within the Chasing Game category (http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/browse_chasinggames.htm) there are 34 different variants described.

By browsing the lists of schools and the play recorded at each location, it is possible to gain a sense of which games are ubiquitous, which regional variants were recorded, and the gender and age of the participating children in particular games. For instance, upon selecting School 01 the user might be interested in a clapping game called “My Boyfriend Gave Me an Apple” (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000096b.htm>). Selecting that link will lead to information about six different variations of this clapping rhyme, played at six different schools across Australia. Notably, the New South Wales version is the only one that refers to a recognizable local landmark, the Sydney Harbour Bridge.



Fig. 3. Playing a clapping game “Miss Moo.” Image reproduced (with permission) from <http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/D00000027.htm>.

Not surprisingly, the Imaginative Play category has many sub-categories, because by definition the likelihood of consistent activities across location was considerably less than with more formal games with prescribed rules such as chasey (tag) or handball. Nevertheless, versions of play involving “Mummies and Daddies” (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000216b.htm>) were observed at five schools, including at School 04, an all-boys independent school. Games of varying levels of complexity based on characters drawn from popular culture, such as Indiana Jones (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000360b.htm>), Harry Potter (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000365b.htm>), and Doctor Who (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000384b.htm>), were very popular. Such imaginative play was often augmented with objects, as in a case where children used Lego figures in a role-play game (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000158b.htm>).

The public database also documents imaginative responses from children to the natural world. Boys “made pizza” from rocks and plants (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000358b.htm>); girls made sushi rolls out of leaves and flowers (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000326b.htm>). For children of Sudanese background at a school in an inner urban setting, natural elements were incorporated into the “Sim” chanting game (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000202b.htm>), performed in Sudanese language using small flowers on a bluestone wall. A similar game was played by Sudanese children at a non-metropolitan school over 1,000 kilometers away, only in this instance their tools were rocks, not flowers (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000226b.htm>).

Researchers were interested to note that game types observed in previous studies, such as skipping, elastics, and, of course, chasey and its running and “tagging” variations, were still played and still popular (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000276b.htm>). However, some games witnessed by Howard in the 1950s, including marbles and knucklebones (jacks), were no

longer played widely and in some instances were only taken up when introduced to children by teachers.

Over the last two decades, a new category of play activities has emerged as schools increasingly employ information technology in their pedagogical practices and a growing proportion of students have access to computers outside school, particularly in the home. In a minority of schools visited, students in the upper primary years had individual laptops or tablet devices, although this is not commonplace in Australian primary schools. Some schools



Fig. 4. A Fairy Cough. Image reproduced (with permission) from <http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/D00000007.htm>.

provided students access to computers during lunchtime, though this was usually a “wet-weather” activity. The category of Games Using Computer Technology (http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/browse_gamesusingcomputertechnology.htm) demonstrates the evolution and adaptability of play. The pervasiveness of computers in everyday life was also observed in imaginative play. For instance, a group of girls playing on the monkey bars drew upon the language of cyberspace when they hung upside down and created “chat rooms” to communicate with each other (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000056b.htm>).

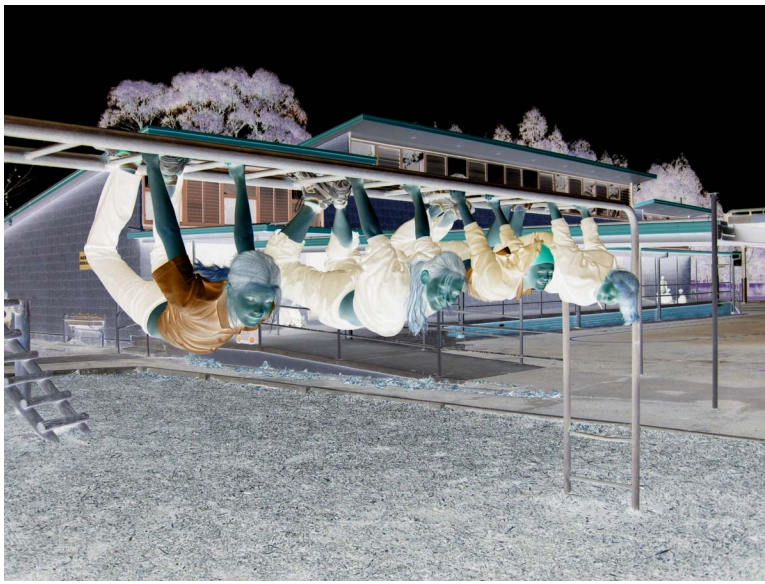


Fig. 5. Playing Baby's Cradle on the monkey bars. Image reproduced (with permission) from <http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/objects/D00000003.htm>.

The data also recorded “forbidden games” that were played and described by the children. Most schools prohibit children from climbing trees, but children still manage to find ways of doing so (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000311b.htm>). Additionally, the study revealed discrepancies between children and teachers in their knowledge of school rules. At one school, children were convinced that handstands were forbidden, but the teachers were less sure this was the case (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000119b.htm>).

However, a browse of the database highlights that at the majority of schools the official attitude toward play is both informed and relaxed. Deeper analysis undertaken by the research

team indicated that most teachers were aware of the importance of experiential learning. School 17, for example, a non-government co-educational institution in a middle-class urban area, is explicit about the centrality of play and children's creativity to the way all teaching is structured (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000017b.htm>). This approach is very different from that taken by School 08, a government school in an economically disadvantaged urban-fringe suburb, where play is used to build student self-esteem and socialization and to enforce the school's strategies for discipline (<http://ctac.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/biogs/E000373b.htm>). The distinct historical and socio-economic profiles and the differing educational philosophies of these two schools provide an explanation for their contrasting practices. However, despite localized differences, children at all schools were encouraged to explore and experiment in play activities, and to use the interactions and lore of the playground to find their own meaning and to develop an independent voice. On the whole, principals and teachers achieved a balance between providing a safe environment and creating a situation where children could build resilience and be encouraged to respond positively to social and physical challenges.

In conclusion, the *Childhood, Tradition and Change* public database is an important archive for examining children's culture and play within Australia, as well as in an international comparative context. As the analytical work and publications undertaken by the research team have demonstrated, much has been learned from this fieldwork-based study about play in Australia. This knowledge includes enhanced understandings of the use of language and the importance of popular culture in influencing play activities; the role factors such as gender and age may have in determining play preferences; the nature of social networks of the playground; the significance of the physical, educational, and cultural environment of each school in shaping its playlore; and the evolving traditions, adaptations, and inventions in children's games across time (Darian-Smith and Henningham 2011; Darian-Smith 2012). However, there is more to discover, and the public database has been designed to enable other researchers to explore multiple lines of inquiry drawing on the documented material. With increasing scholarly interest in children's cultures, the *Childhood, Traditional and Change* website thus offers both a resource and a springboard for further research into the complexities and evolving heritage of contemporary children's playlore.

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