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### Review of *Forming ethical identities in early childhood play* by Brian Edmiston

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BOOK REVIEW

## Forming ethical identities in early childhood play

by Brian Edmiston

(London: Routledge, 2008), 213 pp., £21.99 (paperback), ISBN 9-780-415435-482

What do parents and educators do when a child pretends to be a roaring T. Rex who devours his victims or becomes a dragon that burns fields and houses? Does allowing young children to engage in violence during pretend play negatively influence their moral and ethical development? In Edmiston's book *Forming ethical identities in early childhood play* (2008), he boldly addresses this question using both experiential as well as scholarly evidence to support his proposition that children can develop an ethical identity through violent or what he describes as mythical adult-child play. The foundation of his proposition stems from a long-term case study in which he engages in mythical play with his son Michael (from 18 months to seven years of age). He continues his discussions with Michael to age 17. Edmiston presents Michael in discontinuous snapshots; in one section he may be three and another 13. Therefore, by the end of the book, we long to know more about the process of transformation Michael goes through in his development as a moral being. Although the methodological procedures of this case study are described only briefly, the author provides multiple examples of Michael as both villain and hero to demonstrate how adults can engage children in a reconceptualised version of play as ethical pedagogy and the long-term effects of such engagement.

To activate and advance readers' prior knowledge, Edmiston begins his discussion of ethical identity development by defining terms such as identity, ethics, play, moral development, power and caring adult-child relationships. To support his arguments, he references and challenges the work of seminal scholars and theorists such as Noddings, Paley, Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson and Bakhtin. One of Edmiston's main arguments is that children's play is analogous to a workshop or dress rehearsal for life for the many ethical and moral decisions they will have to make.

Edmiston argues that an adult's role is to co-author with children through dialogic interactions as they consider multiple perspectives together during mythic play. He further explains that, during these interactions, children must be encouraged to express freely appropriate and inappropriate emotions and actions. Edmiston posits three reasons why this could be a challenge for adults. First, in order to engage authentically in adult-child play, adults must release their hierarchical power and positioning and instead be willing to learn and see through the eyes of the child as well as co-construct meaning and knowledge during the pretend play experiences. Also, adults must veer from Piaget's and Vygotsky's positions, respectively, of teachers as observers and facilitators of children's learning and become more active participants by engaging in co-authoring experiences with children. In other words, Edmiston argues for an equal focus on the adult as learner and constructor of knowledge and on the growth, development and meaning-making of the adult - as well as the child - during play experiences. Lastly, he argues that ethical pedagogy is maximized when adults make an ideological shift towards allowing children to see through the lens of "evil" characters even though such mock violence "threatens adult authority" and our belief in children as innocent beings (p. 185).

Edmiston's approach to writing can be metaphorically described as a walk through a dense forest. Scholars, knowledgeable about child development and theories of play, will be enchanted by the author's ability to synthesize the work of noted scholars and theorists. Just as attending to each tree is difficult, the scholarly rhetoric can leave the reader exhausted. However, like a brilliant stream through a dense forest, Edmiston uses examples from Michael's adventures, comic strips, philosophy, and excerpts from mythic narratives to engage readers on their walk. His writing clearly represents an impressive use of multiple and diverse sources of knowledge. Without a doubt, he summons a diverse range of voices in his rationale for why early care educators, parents and child development scholars should consider the role of mythic play and ethical pedagogy in children's development of ethical identities.

One of the strengths of a case-study approach is the context it provides for understanding the findings. We argue that the context we live in today provides urgency for considering how we become answerable for our actions. Because terrorism, war and violent acts are prevalent in our global societies, we find that his argument for more scholarly conversations on this matter is timely and socially relevant for parents and early childhood educators. Therefore, to further the con-

versation, we end with questions of our own. What are the next steps in helping caregivers learn to co-author ethical identities with young children? What research could further inform our knowledge of children's development of ethical identities? Finally, we ask what are the consequences for ignoring Edmiston's plea for educators and parents to think more critically on how we develop young children's moral and ethical understandings?

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