

**THE CONSTRUCTIVE  
INTERESTS  
OF CHILDREN**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649352678

The Constructive Interests of Children by Ernest Beckwith Kent

Except for use in any review, the reproduction or utilisation of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including xerography, photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, is forbidden without the permission of the publisher, Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd, PO Box 1576 Collingwood, Victoria 3066 Australia.

All rights reserved.

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.  
Cover @ 2017

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form or binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

[www.triestepublishing.com](http://www.triestepublishing.com)

**ERNEST BECKWITH KENT**

**THE CONSTRUCTIVE  
INTERESTS  
OF CHILDREN**



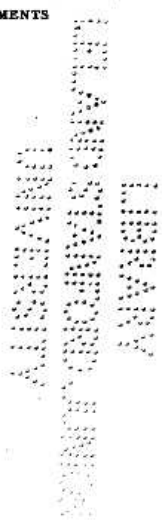
THE CONSTRUCTIVE INTERESTS  
OF  
CHILDREN

BY  
ERNEST BECKWITH KENT, A. M.

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE  
FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY  
COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NEW YORK  
1903

*Education*



## PREFACE

---

The school's obligation is no doubt to society first, and only afterward to the child; so that the curriculum in its broader outlines must be determined with a view to what society will require rather than to what will please the child. But in developing the details, interests need to be carefully reckoned with. This is especially important with all of the more expressional subjects, whether manual training, design or English composition. Society is certainly demanding acquaintance with industrial life, and any mere tool practice, no matter how formal, which will give the pupil some notions about industrial life and his fitness for it, is probably worth having in the school. But practice in *inventing* is worth infinitely more—in inventing new uses for old tools and machines, new economics of material, new applications of old principles. A child's inventiveness is never either trained or tested except while he is deep in some absorbing problem. The following study was a quest for additional data upon the question of what problems are the most likely to prove absorbing to children in the latter half of the elementary school period. It is the writer's hope that some of the suggestions which it developed may be found applicable and helpful in practice.

# THE CONSTRUCTIVE INTERESTS OF CHILDREN

## I THE FREE CONSTRUCTIVE WORK OF 150 SCHOOL CHILDREN

### Introduction

A large number of studies upon children have given data which bear upon the subject in hand. The instincts and reactions of infancy and early childhood have been studied intensely by Baldwin, Perez and many others. Studies by Bryan, Burk, and Hancock have traced the general course of motor development and have shown the degrees of motor control normal to the different stages of childhood. (Children's plays and games, as their most spontaneous form of expression, make the best single index to the general trend of interests during any given period) and extended reference to certain studies of these will be necessary as we proceed. Most directly valuable of all is Dewey's account of the constructive interests which grow out of three successive mental attitudes or modes of attention.

(James makes constructiveness a special instinct) which he says is as genuine and irresistible in man as in bee or beaver.

"Whatever things are plastic to his hands, those things he must remodel into shapes of his own, and the result of the remodelling, however useless it may be, gives him more pleasure than the original thing. The mania of young children for breaking and pulling apart whatever is given them is more often the expression of a rudimentary constructive impulse than of a destructive one."<sup>2</sup>

However important this constructive instinct may be, it clearly does not in any sense explain or constitute the motive of the bulk of that construction which forms so large a part of the

<sup>1</sup>*Elementary School Record*, Vols. 1-9

Direct attention, focused wholly upon the outgoing activity itself;  
Voluntary attention, directed to the accomplishment of certain practical ends;  
Reflective attention, concerned with ends which persist in the form of intellectual problems.

<sup>2</sup>*Principles of Psychology*, Vol. 2, p. 426.

world's work. (While constructive instincts may determine in a measure which men are to work in constructive lines, the actual motive for doing the work is an ulterior one; it is the utility of the things made and their power in satisfying human needs that causes their production. In other words, most construction is carried on as work and it is only within the limits of construction-play that we can class the constructive instinct as an important motive.) But these instinctive activities to which James refers are constantly observed in small children and we need to trace through the years of childhood the general development of constructive motive from this instinctive one to a motive which, having little to do with processes and materials as such, rests in the distant purpose to be subserved by the product.)

Between these two extremes we may distinguish two intermediate stages. Following the instinctive activities with materials comes a time when certain forms of construction are attempted by the child not—or at least not wholly—because of the "besoin de créer"<sup>1</sup> but from mere impulse to imitate the activities of adults. This results in his reproduction of constructive activities among others—possibly more of these than of most others, but if so not necessarily because of reinforcement by "constructive instinct." For while this may count somewhat, the presence of certain tangible and dramatic elements in the constructivities of his elders would sufficiently explain the partiality which he shows for them at certain times.

(Gradually, however, this imitation construction ceases to satisfy and the construction comes to be carried on for definite ends, though not ordinarily of course for the utility ends of the adult, but the various play ends of childhood.) The worker's point of view here is that of the adult so far as separation of means and end is concerned, for with both there is a definite need to be satisfied irrespective of any pleasure involved in the constructive process as such. On the other hand, it is generally very close to the earlier stages of imitation activity in that the ends themselves are often of an imitative sort. That is, while the construction is merely a means of obtaining play apparatus,

<sup>1</sup>Which Ribot says corresponds in the mental sphere to the "besoin de la generation" in the physiological. *Psychologie des sentiments*, p. 323.



the play itself gets its main meaning and interest from the fact that it in turn is an imitation of some phase of adult life, the imitation element being simply pushed a little further away. We have then these four stages in the development of constructive motive:

1. The instinctive.
2. The imitational.
3. The play-utility.
4. The adult-utility.

We may now study these more in detail to determine as clearly as possible (1) just what forms of activity belong to each stage, (2) how definitely and how exclusively different purposes and their forms of expression belong to children of a certain age, and (3) what materials are best adapted to the realization of these purposes, the abilities of the children being considered. Any data gained regarding these points will be of direct assistance in determining what lines of constructive work best fit the different stages of elementary education.

(1) It may be questioned whether the purely instinctive handling of materials should be called constructive in the ordinary sense of the word. James in the passage quoted suggests a fundamentally constructive motive for even the so-called destructive acts of early childhood. Groos takes exactly the opposite view, looking at these as responses to the fighting instinct.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it would be safer to call most of these efforts mere random responses to the general impulse to activity reacting in the easiest way upon the most convenient material. This we may call the manipulative instinct as distinguished from either the constructive or destructive. In the following pages we shall use the word manipulation for activity of this sort, while the word construction will mean work (ordinarily synthetic in nature) carried on with reference to some end other and more remote than that of the mere sensations involved in the process itself. Along with this wholly sensational pleasure of pure manipulation there is probably the beginning of an intellectual pleasure, and from this side the activity might be called experimentation as well as manipulation the child wants

<sup>1</sup>*Play of Man*, pp. 97-8.

to see what will happen. But this shows no such strength as the other. (Groos mentions another element, "pleasure in being a cause," which he thinks appears very early and which is responsible for the way in which "moist sand is heaped up or dug away, snow tunnelled through or rolled into a great ball, sticks of wood piled, water collected in a pond, etc.")<sup>1</sup>

As to the period of this manipulation interest: Groos suggests no dates whatever in connection with the list of activities just quoted. With Miss Shinn's niece the "era of handling things" began in the sixth month.<sup>2</sup> How "synthetic" or at least how "analytic" the acts of that period might be would probably depend a good deal on the materials at hand. Perez says that they appear in all children from the age of eight or ten months.<sup>3</sup> (Probably only isolated cases will be found in which the activity is due wholly to this manipulation impulse, for the imitation factor begins to count very early.) But the former persists for several years as an important factor in the child's relation to concrete materials and indeed many adults are affected by it in a degree, as is shown by their tendency to handle, modify aimlessly and play with any new material which may be presented to them. With the adult, however, this tendency is a mere survival and cannot be strong enough to influence perceptibly his work, though perhaps it does his recreation. At what age it loses its influence on a child's more serious voluntary activities it would be difficult to say.

(2) The "mud pie" is perhaps the most typical representative of the transition to the imitation stage, or rather of the infusion of the imitation motive into the one preceding. Here is clearly a double pleasure in manipulation and imitation. Heretofore he has been contented to "heap and dig away" his sand, but now

<sup>1</sup>*Play of Man*, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>*Biography of a Baby*, pp. 141-161.

<sup>3</sup>A child of nine months, seated on the floor in the middle of a room, seemed like a creating and despotic deity in the midst of his playthings, and anything else that was given to him or that he could get hold of by crawling along,—trumpets, drums, balls, paper, books, cakes, fruit,—were piled up together, ranged side by side, separated, put back higglety-pigglety, pushed away, fetched back again, hugged, kissed, gnawed, etc., etc., and all with bursts of joy which showed his imperative need of exercising his physical powers, of satisfying an ever new curiosity and of imitating. *The First Three Years of Childhood*, pp. 276-7.

he adds to the pleasure of modifying a plastic material, that of reproducing a household occupation. The pie is clearly not an end in itself.<sup>1</sup> It is demolished as soon as completed or at least set aside to make room for another and another.<sup>2</sup> Building with blocks is perhaps the line of work that depends most exclusively upon the imitation motive—manipulation pleasure would seem small compared with that obtained from plastic materials, and the product is still nothing. This work retains the interest for a long period, probably because of its imitative adaptiveness—because of the variety of things and activities which may be reproduced by means of blocks.

Common observation and the general tendencies of kindergarten practice combine in pointing to the kindergarten period of childhood as the one in which this motive has the longest and most direct connection with handwork. No one seems to have ventured any sharper definition of this stage. (The gifts and occupations, so large a part of the kindergarten program, seem to be motivated almost entirely by the combination of this manipulation and imitation interest.) With the gifts there is no permanent product, and while occupation work does issue in a permanent product, this does not seem to be a large center of interest—except perhaps near the end of the course, when their occasional utilization in play forms the connection with the next kind of activity.<sup>3</sup>

(3) The play-end stage comes when these very crude imitations of adult activities cease to satisfy the child. To be sure, many if not most of the plays of the whole preadolescent period are directly imitative in

<sup>1</sup>The object has no conscious existence at the time save in the activity. The ball to the child *is* his game, the game is his ball. Dewey, *Interest in Relation to Will*, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>See Dewey, *Elementary School Record*, p. 49. Also p. 50 for suggestion as to how the realization of ends should at first be developed.

<sup>3</sup>Compare Dewey: "The work of children of ages six and seven includes activities which combine an immediate appeal to the child as an outlet of his energy with leading up in an orderly way to a result ahead. It thus forms habits of working for ends and controlling present occupation so as, by a sequence of steps, to accomplish something beyond. These habits may be gradually transferred to ends more consciously conceived and more remote." *Elementary School Record*.