From the Editor

Study of folklore and folklife among children brings serious attention to purportedly marginal activities and social arenas, and this issue of Children’s Folklore Review demonstrates how folklorists continue to step with confidence over the triviality barriers that plague much study of childhood.

In our lead article, Jay Mechling brings the theoretical apparatus of depth psychology, an impressive collection of historical photographs, and his own extensive experience working with the Boy Scouts of America to a study of the traditional contest known in English as tug of war. Search a scholarly database for the term, and you will find numerous metaphorical usages of “tug of war” related, for example, to politics, interpersonal relationships, or finances. But you will find few academic studies of the truly cross-cultural play form. Additionally, Stephen Lochetto, a winner of the American Folklore Society, Children’s Folklore Section’s 2022 W.W. Newell Prize, provides ethnographic viewpoints on children’s and youths’ experiences in their 4-H animal projects, which culminate with competitive showings at regional country fairs.

I find it pertinent that this issue presents children’s perspectives on [1] ancient, emergent aspects of human experience (e.g., play, kinesthetic actions of tugging/pulling, human-animal relationships) and [2] socialization into a contemporary culture of competition. In fact, both articles remind us that competition, itself, can lift play up over many triviality barriers (consider the prizes, both tangible and intangible, awarded by adults to winners of children’s competitions) just as it can move play away from the margins of human experience to its centers (consider the number of adult spectators who show up to support young competitors). But more importantly, both studies seek to understand children’s individual experiences in traditional (and traditionalized) competitive spaces. Juxtaposing individual and community in the youthful worlds of competition and play, Mechling foregrounds gender differences and youths’ experiences of pain associated with the physical demands of tug of war. Likewise, Lochetto seeks to investigate the life lessons that accompany raising an animal through the agricultural cycles of birth and death. Taken together, these articles remind us that children remain capable of simultaneously pursuing play for play’s sake while capitalizing on the dynamics of given play forms to investigate lifelong perplexities.

K. Brandon Barker
Indiana University
Bloomington