

The Importance of Play for Preschool Children's Learning

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What is 'Play'?

Play is seen as the primary source of development in preschool aged children (McKeough et al., 2008), adding complexity to a child's imagination and creativity to his or her thought processes and actions (Mastrangelo, 2009, Göncü, 1993; Vygotsky, 1967).

Though seemingly natural, play is, in fact, a culturally mediated social practice, which involves children collaborating and learning from others in their surroundings, including their siblings, parents and peers (Wood, 2013). From a socio-cultural perspective, play allows children to act out basic behaviours, as seen in play fighting, and encourages social interaction, allowing children to develop complex thinking (Bodrova & Leong, 2003; Vygotsky, 1967). According to Wood (2010), play encourages the child's imagination and gives him or her considerable leverage to deconstruct the social roles given to him or her by adults. For instance, when children engage in socio-dramatic play and take on a pretend role, a boy could play a nurse or homemaker, thus subverting a stereotypical social role, while a girl could pretend to be a firefighter or construction worker. Therefore, through play, children are not necessarily confined by the power relations existing in greater society, further affirming play as an important process from the standpoint of cultural and social norms.

Although there is considerable research on 'play', no singular definition yet exists. Piaget (1962), a fundamental figure in play research, noted that children from infancy to late childhood engage in

three types of play: practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. In the same era, Vygotsky (1967) suggested that play was limited to the imagination, where children engage in imaginary situations by taking on roles they have created while following the social expectations of those roles. A more contemporary definition, however, suggests that "play involves collective, relational activity, which is always culturally, socially and historically situated: children can act more knowledgeably and more competently through shared activity in different contexts (home/school, indoors/outdoors, virtual/'real' worlds), and with different resources (human and material)" (Wood, 2010, p. 18). Recent research by Wood (2013) suggests that play is child-chosen, child-invented, done as if the activity was real, focused on the doing and requires active involvement by the child, and lastly, that play is fun.

Why is Play Important?

Many theorists have remarked on the importance of play in childhood. Piaget (1962), specifically, viewed play, or, as he termed it, "the language of childhood", as an important factor allowing children to socialize with others, as well as to pretend, and allowing children to understand the world from the viewpoint of another. He further believed that play was a way for children to imitate and assimilate new information (Inhelder & Piaget, 1958, p. 57). Furthering Piaget's initial beliefs, Smith (2009) suggested that play develops theory of mind, including a child's abilities to understand and represent the knowledge and beliefs of others, noting that play creates "a representation of a representation, a second-order

or metarepresentation ... [while] adapting objects for pretend purposes ... suggest[ing] some cognitive metarepresentational skills" (p. 15).

Within the realm of cognitive development, Erikson (1993) viewed play as an activity where children could take on roles, which would allow them to express themselves and handle negative emotions safely, resulting in developmental growth. Similarly, Freud (1905) stressed that play was a catharsis for children, in the sense that it was a way of expressing their thoughts and feelings. Similarly, from a socio-cultural standpoint, play has also been found to have an important role in power relations, and in how a child's identity is negotiated and perceived (Wood, 2010, 2013). As Wood (2010) suggests, "play enables children to contest and deconstruct established power structures and subjectivities they are assigned by adults (who holds power, where power is privileged, what rules and sanctions must be followed)" (p. 14). Inherent in this supposition is the importance of identity construction, which Cote and Levine (2002) note is an iterative process negotiated in social contexts as children participate in the discourses and practices of their social worlds. As Edmiston (2008) suggests, play creates an "authoring space" which allows children to imagine themselves within the context of every day experiences, occurring within a social, historical and cultural realm (Wood, 2013, p. 8).

As noted by Bodrova and Leong (2015), play also allows children to develop a system of goals, both immediate and long-term, and assess strategies to reach their goals: "Through the process of coordinating these short-term and long-term goals, children become aware of their own actions, which make it possible for them to move from reactionary behaviors to the intentional ones" (p. 209). Vygotsky (1967) likewise understood play as a way for children to make meaning in their lives by delaying gratification and acquiring knowledge. He notably remarked: "in play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself ... in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior" (p. 96). A reason this occurs is that in play, according to Vygotsky,

there is a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), or, an individual who has a greater understanding of the material and, through play, allows the child to grasp ideas more tangibly. An example given by Schaffer (1996) is that of a young girl attempting to solve a jigsaw puzzle. As her father (the MKO in this case) demonstrates and describes strategies used in solving the puzzle, she starts to work collaboratively, and eventually independently, as she acquires the cognitive means to solve the jigsaw. The role of the MKO has traditionally been assumed by a parent or teacher, however, it could be equally taken by a child in socio-dramatic play.

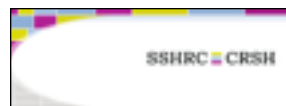
The benefits of play are many: play allows children to develop motivational goals, facilitates social understanding, provides the means to take other perspectives, helps build one's identity, advances the development of thinking skills, and widens the imagination, to name a few (Bodrova & Leong, 2015).

Author Biography

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