

The Importance of Play

Supporting Kindergarten

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Play is essential to healthy development. During engagement in social play interactions with their friends and families, children's language, social skills, and problem solving abilities are developed.

Children's play has been documented throughout history by writers in literature and by artists in pictures. Play is evident across cultures and in games still played by children.

Defining Play

Hughes (2003) offers three criteria that may help to define play:

- freedom of choice
- personal enjoyment
- focus is on the activity itself rather than its outcomes.

These three criteria are foundational to the play process and in connecting children's development with their learning. Building on these foundations of play are the characteristics of play.

Characteristics of play:

- self-directed
- self-selected
- open-ended
- voluntary
- enjoyable
- flexible
- motivating
- individual or group

Play is the most natural of childhood activities and one of the most frequently observed.

(Hughes, 2003, p. 21)

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History of Play

More than 150 years ago, Froebel's kindergartens incorporated play materials to support his view that play is a natural activity reflecting the cultural context of the child's life (Wolfe, 2002). Later, the MacMillan sisters in England introduced open-ended play as an essential part of preschool programs. The arrival of kindergarten programs in North America stimulated questions about the nature of play and the contributions of play to children's learning. Contemporary theories view play as a process that supports young children in making sense of their environment and in expanding their understanding of their world within a cultural frame.

Functions of Play

Research has demonstrated that play enables children to:

- make sense of their world
- expand social and cultural understandings
- express personal thoughts and feelings
- practise flexible and divergent thinking
- encounter and solve real problems
- learn to consider other people's perspectives
- negotiate play roles and plans
- develop self control
- extend language and literacy skills
- enhance brain and motor development.

(Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005; Isenberg & Quisenbury, 1988; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Pellegrini & Smith, 1993).

Play and Brain Development

Brain research confirms the importance of play in children's development (McCain, Mustard, & Shankar, 2007). Parents and educators are encouraged to interact with children, substitute play opportunities for passive activities such as television viewing, and provide simple play materials that stimulate investigation and learning (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005).

Types of Play

Children's play ranges from simple physical play with objects such as baby rattles to more complex cognitive play in games with many rules such as cards or chess.

Many early childhood educators have studied children's play. Parten (1932) observed children's social behaviour during play. From her observations she developed a continuum showing levels of children's participation in social play, which includes types of social participation.

Passive Play

Passive play behaviours are:

- **uninvolved** in which the child moves about but does not participate in any type of play
- **onlooker** in which the child may watch or speak with players but is not involved in the play.

Involved Play

Involved play behaviours are:

- **solitary** in which the child plays alone
- **parallel** in which the child plays beside or near other players but does not play with anyone
- **associative** in which the child plays and talks with other players but the purposes or forms of the play may not be the same
- **cooperative** in which the play is shared and negotiated with sharing and turn taking.

Pretend Play

There are several benefits of pretend play. Pretend play:

- encourages language and vocabulary growth (Pellegrini, 1984a)
- increases memory abilities (Pellegrini, 1984b)
- enhances reasoning and problem solving abilities, especially in situations when contradictory facts are considered (McCain, Mustard, & Shankar, 2007)

- fosters flexible and inventive thinking (Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Peplar, 1986).

Imagination is to children what problem solving is to adults.

(Weininger & Daniel, 1992).

Cognitive Play

Piaget (1962), Smilansky (1968), Pellergrini (1982), and Smilansky and Sheftaya (1990) describe several stages of cognitive play. Smilansky builds on Piaget's stages, defining characteristics of the **four stages of cognitive play**:

- **functional/practice play**: repetitive muscle movements such as running, banging, or stacking
- **constructive play**: use of blocks or materials to make something
- **dramatic/pretend play**: use of imagination and role play
- **games with rules**: accepts predetermined rules to play games such as rummy or jacks.

Knowledge of the stages of play helps educators provide appropriate environments that support children's development. It enables them to enjoy, encourage, and appreciate age-appropriate play behaviour.

(Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997, p. 60).

Socio-dramatic play

Socio-dramatic play relates strongly to children's cognitive and social abilities. It offers rich opportunities for children to:

- develop abstract thinking (Piaget, 1962)
- refine their understandings about the world (McCain, Mustard, & Shanker, 2007)
- solve problems in a safe context (Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990)

- have a sense of control over what they experience or are doing (Piaget, 1962)
- learn how to relate to their peers in a positive way (Saracho & Spodek, 2003).

Children's social behaviours may vary for several reasons:

- temperaments
- personalities
- needs
- growth patterns
- home environments
- family settings
- past experiences (McClellan & Katz, 1992).

Socio-dramatic play is most typical of three, four, and five-year-old children. In this type of play, children represent their growing understanding of the world through their body language, spontaneous oral language, and vivid imagination. Adults contribute to the play by modelling oral language and simple literacy as well as providing materials and resources to enrich the play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Characteristics of Dramatic and Socio-dramatic Play

Play Behaviour	Characteristic	Example
Dramatic play includes:		
Imitative role play	Child assumes make-believe role with imitative actions or verbalizations.	Child walks with arms outstretched, pretending to mow the lawn.
Make-believe with objects	Child substitutes actions, words, or materials that are not the real objects.	Child picks up a short stick and pretends to dial a telephone and begins to talk to father.
Verbal make-believe with actions and situations.	Child provides verbal descriptions for actions and situations.	Child holds a small block and makes car sounds. Child narrates the action as the 'car' rolls along the floor.
Socio-dramatic play adds:		
Interaction	At least two players interact in the play episode.	Child describes the 'family' story that s/he will play with a play partner.
Verbal communication	Verbal interaction occurs in play.	As the family story unfolds, the play partners suggest new actions and events to insert into the story.

(adapted from Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997, p. 57).

Embracing Inclusion and Diversity through Play

Early childhood environments serve all children. Children bring diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as differing abilities to the learning environment. Each early learning program must demonstrate an understanding and responsiveness to children's wide range of strengths, cultures, and linguistic capabilities. Play offers multiple opportunities for children to come together as learners, in a stimulating and inclusive setting. In their play and interactions, children learn about and practise their roles and responsibilities as members of a learning community.

When educators offer appropriate support to children's play, they establish an environment that nurtures holistic learning. Adult roles and responsibilities are essential in encouraging children's confidence to learn through play, in maintaining an environment that invites a positive self image in play, and in enhancing the opportunities to expand positive relationships among the players.

Adult Roles and Responsibilities in Play

Adults who interact with children during play increase their understanding of children's play interests, knowledge, and language development. Educators have roles and responsibilities before and during play.

Responsibilities of educators during play include:

- valuing play
- ensuring children's safety
- observing, documenting, and interpreting the learning
- engaging in meaningful conversations
- establishing a positive, intentional learning environment.

The educator's role during play consists of:

- creating the environment (physical space, materials, resources, emotional climate, length of time for play)

- mediating conflict
- supporting and scaffolding learning
- encouraging and extending play.

The educator's guidance is important as children learn through play in a positive environment that includes having meaningful and relevant conversations.

When is an Activity a Play Activity?

Only some of children's activities can actually be labeled as play. Children move in and out of play situations depending on the expectations and routines in their settings. Answers to the following three questions will provide insight into whether or not the activity is a play activity.

1. Who is in charge? When the children are in control of the situation and they have the freedom to choose an activity from a wide variety of options, it is a play activity. If an adult is in control, few choices are offered to children, and limited responses are permitted, it is not a play activity.

2. Why are the children engaged in this behaviour? When children are engaged for the sake of the play experience, without the offer of an external reward, it is a play activity.

3. What are the constraints of the setting on the child's behaviour? When children are free to pretend and use the materials as they want without having to conform to reality, they are playing. Children who are freely engaged in creative expression and behaviour instead of being manipulated or forced into particular behaviours are partaking in play activities.

(Adapted from Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997)

Play is an important part of learning in the kindergarten program. Children will have opportunities to explore, wonder, inquire, and learn through play.

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