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ABSTRACT

Research on play and its positive effect on children's development is abundant. Adults can ensure that children receive the full benefits of play by becoming effective playleaders and by guiding children through enriching play experiences. Adults need to let children know that play is an important part of their educational experience. This can be accomplished by encouraging play and allowing sufficient time for children to play, both at home and in early childhood programs. Adults also need to realize that much can be learned about children from observing their play behavior. Adults should plan, create, and maintain an appropriate physical and social environment conducive to play. They also need to know when and how to intervene in children's play, and how to successfully enter and exit children's play episodes. (Contains 24 references.) (MDM)

Needed: Playleaders

The Adult's Role

in Children's Play

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Introduction

Research is abundant when it comes to play and its positive effect on children's development. Isn't it exciting that something children naturally engage in can reap them such extraordinary benefits in all areas of development? Play is enjoyable for all but often underestimated for its unique way of positively influencing physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Children especially can become consumed in the magnificent world of play. This world of play offers a child vast opportunities to learn about themselves, others, and the environment in which they live.

Today experts agree that play is beneficial to children and their overall healthy development. Adults are encouraged by the recognition that the quality of children's play is related to their acceptance by peers (Hughes, 1991). This conveys the fact that children need play to help them socially interact with their peers, which is a critical lifelong skill. Wolfgang (1981) confirms the importance of play for social, emotional, intellectual, and physical development. Through dramatic play, children learn to assert themselves in a way to build their competence in later adult roles (Elkind, 1987). Developmental psychologists, such as Piaget and Sutton-Smith, consider play as specific behaviors involving divergent

thinking (Kleiber & Barnett, 1980). These are only a few of the widely recognized professionals who acknowledge the vast benefits of play, especially sociodramatic play.

Realizing the magnitude of play in a child's development, what can adults do to ensure that children receive the full benefits of play? What things must an adult know and do to foster a playful spirit in children that results in high levels of sociodramatic play? How can adults lead children through the appropriate avenues that promote higher level thinking skills involved in play? This article intends to give adults ideas and suggestions for becoming playleaders, thus guiding children through years of successful play, resulting in years of healthy growth and development.

To accomplish this task, caregivers must focus on the value of play, observe and learn from play, allow sufficient time for play, plan appropriate physical and social play environments, as well as know when and how to intervene in play episodes. The final section of this article gives results of adult interventions and how they have affected children's play. Though all play is valuable, this article's focus will be on sociodramatic play, which is a high and mature level of play. The emphasis remains on adult involvement which can positively affect play.

Value of Play

The Association for Childhood Education International has stated that play is a natural behavior that is related to children's development and that no adult instruction can take the place of children's own activities and experiences through continual play (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). Bredekamp (cited by Frost, 1992) acknowledges child-initiated, child-directed, and teacher-supported play as a valuable element of developmentally appropriate practice. When viewing the rese .rch, it's obvious the many positive results that appear from children's involvement in play. Recently, the value of play is increasing in its regard to positively shaping children's lives.

Smilansky (1968) pioneered the idea of a positive correlation between children's sociodramatic play and their success in school. Her study was one of the first that began to tutor low socioeconomic children to play in hopes that they

would make academi. progress. She found children who were unsuccessful with sociodramatic play tended to have parents with little or no formal education. These children came from environments where play was discouraged as being unrealistic. From her study, she encourages adults to value play by providing a context where the play can be supported.

When deciding whether to intervene, adults let children know what their attitudes are about play. Children realize how adults feel about play by adult actions and words. If they themselves cannot be playful, then children may not recognize the value of play. Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey (1987) conclude that adults let children know play is worthwhile by showing an interest in their play and at times being an active participant in play.

After realizing the value of play, the next step is to share that information with other adults. It is up to educators, parents, and others concerned with children's development to broadcast the benefits of play. Christie & Wardle (1992) stressed the importance of working with parents on understanding that play is not "just play" but has extensive educational value. There is an immense responsibility to spread the news about the relevancy of play in children's healthy development.

Observing Play

How can play be examined if time is not taken to observe play in progress? "Play is a window on a child's understanding of the world (Bowman, 1990, p. 105)." If adults would take time out to sit, listen, and really observe a child engaged in sociodramatic play, exciting discoveries could be made about

that child and his/her perceptions of life. Bowman (1990) adds that by observing play, adults can have an alternative to spoken language. Often observers of play hear things the child wants to say but may not be able to express. Emphasis needs to be given to observation so adults can gain closer insights into possible difficulties a child may be experiencing (Smilansky, 1968). These insights could make a major difference in our ability to structure an appropriate play environment for the child. Griffing (1983) emphasizes answering certain questions while observing the child's play to heighten awareness of children's individual play styles and development. She suggests asking questions about the content of the play, the verbal interaction, types of pretend episodes, social context of dramatic play, and the duration of play. Answers to these questions bring adult awareness of children's individual development and needs to a higher level.

There are several scales that can be used for observing and identifying play behaviors in children. The Parten/Piaget scale is used to categorize play socially and cognitively (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987). When looking at sociodramatic play, Smilansky's (1968) Sociodramatic Play Inventory deserves attention. This inventory allows the observer to identify the maturity level of the play. There are

six crucial elements involved in successfully engaging in sociodramatic play. They include imitative role play, make believe in regard to objects, make-believe in regard to actions and situations, persistence, interaction with others, and verbal communication (Smilansky, 1968). Observing these elements is meaningful to the observer in that they can focus on the missing elements. Before intervention can be made successfully, it is undoubtedly wise to be an astute observer.

To improve observational skills, adults may keep an anecdotal record of each child in play for 5-10 minutes over a week (Blalock & Hrncir, 1980). Record keeping such as this better focuses observational time. It's important to continue record keeping since observational skills improve with practice.

Time for Play

When striving for a balance among the differing aspects of a young child's curriculum, play cannot take a back seat to other academic areas. As the testing and back-to-basics movements push toward skills, worksheets, and textbooks, play time can get minimized to the point of little or no play. It has been found that larger amounts of play time can produce higher achievement scores for children (Glickman, cited by Blalock & Hrncir, 1980). Christie & Wardle's (1992) findings

conclude that longer play periods encourage children to engage in higher social and cognitive forms of play. On the other hand, shorter periods reduce the amount and maturity of children's play. Frost (1992) recommends at least 30-50 minutes for four and five year old children, increasing that time to one hour of free play for kindergartners. He stresses that given an appropriate environment and freedom from adult intrusion, children's dramatic play seems to increase in intensity.

Considering the complexity of sociodramatic play, it makes sense that children would need appropriate time to recruit co-players, select roles, find props, play story lines, work out differences, talk over ideas, and carry out dramatizations. Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey (1987) suggests that if you're short of time, it's preferable to have a few, long sessions of play in a week rather than daily, short sessions.

Appropriate Physical Environment

As adults observe and learn from play and provide ample time for play, it becomes obvious the increasing influence of the physical environment. Is it conducive to play? How can more involvement in play result from the physical restraints of the environment? Rogers & Sawyers (1988) give one of the first requirements of the environment in that it be safe but without

unreasonable physical and verbal restrictions. Once assured of a safe environment, then creation of an optimal play environment can begin. When working on this optimal physical environment, it need not be sterile or non-changing, which will limit the children's involvement (Frost, 1992).

One of the first items to consider is the use of space. To provide adequate space, consideration must be given to the number of children, their age and developmental level, type and range of play themes, materials and equipment available, and time allotted for play (Frost, 1992). If limited space is a problem, remember the outdoors could easily be an extension to the classroom. Materials and equipment should be set up outside to extend the play environment. Benefits are inevitable if you integrate play indoors and outdoors.

Other items needed for an optimal environment would be appropriate materials and equipment. Play materials influence children's play behavior as well as different forms of play (Brown & Briggs, 1990). Wolfgang (1981) suggests a variety of materials ranging from fluid (hardest to control) to more structured (easiest to control). This accounts for individual abilities and learning styles. A wide variety of toys need to be offered that provide sensory stimulus and feedback (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). Children are very creative in using all kinds of materials in their pretend play sessions. However, to

encourage sociodramatic play, include large, moveable materials, such as cardboard boxes, telephone spools, and hollow blocks (Frost, 1992). Always select creative and imaginative materials that are stimulating to children.

What materials would be best for encouraging dramatic play? Dodge & Frost (1986) found that thematic props were especially useful for promoting sociodramatic play. They also found that creative playgrounds with moveable equipment and action oriented themes were most popular during play. This study also verified the dependence of younger children on more realistic props, declining in importance in later years. It would be advisable to provide toddler and preschool classrooms with more realistic props. Proper settings continue to affect children's development of sociodramatic play. Much time, planning, and attention is needed to provide a setting that promotes higher developments of play.

Manipulating certain environmental variables can modify play behaviors in young children (Teets, 1985). Teets (1985) gives several suggestions from her studies that improve classroom organization for play. These include keeping clear paths throughout the environment, considering where to put specific interest areas, making clear definitions of interest areas with boundaries, displaying materials for self-selection by students, and leaving 1/3 to 1/2 of your floor space for free play space. One other aspect

of the environment is to create complexity which keeps children's interest level high (Teets, 1985). From these studies, one can't underestimate the power of the physical environment to enhance play bringing it to a higher level and a longer duration.

Positive Social Environment

To provide favorable opportunities for play, there first needs to be a playful atmosphere. Parents and educators need to establish an environment that encourages a sense of freedom in children. Children need to feel they have some control over what happens around them. Rogers & Sawyers (1988) found that appropriate choices should be given to children to achieve this playful atmosphere. When children are allowed to make these decisions, they experience the freedom and intrinsic motivation associated with play and leisure (Kleiber & Barnett, 1980). As an adult promoting play, direction and intrusion would need to be limited to assure children the opportunity to assert themselves and avoid a feeling of vulnerability.

To ensure a positive social environment, make sure that children have had adequate experiences to be able to play. Providing a broader base of experiences for children to be able to express themselves through play is recommended (Isenberg & Quinsenberry, 1988). Field trips, quality literature, television and other media can provide an avenue for these experiences.

When using themes in a classroom, it would be necessary for children to be fairly familiar with the theme. Children may experience frustration if they are less familiar with the roles they are attempting to play. Adults must make sure children are exposed to a variety of stimuli that familiarizes children with the theme being used (Woodard, 1984).

While allowing for individual choices and providing appropriate experiences, three other major areas of the social environment must be considered. These include are significant others, community institutions and organizations, and inventions and creations (Aguilar, 1985). The significant others would include family members, friends, teachers, and others in a child's daily experiences. They can affect play by modeling playfulness, giving children a sense of freedom, and giving children opportunities to express themselves in their own unique way. Community resources include the school's attempt to put excessive control on children, which inhibits play and creativity. Other resources might include amusement parks which promote play through various ways. Last, the inventions and creations are attempts to amuse the society in general. Computers and video games are prime examples. The most successful inventions for children are those that allow manipulation, challenge, and variety (Aguilar, 1985).

Aguilar (1985) also gives some interesting recommendations for

creating a playful atmosphere. She suggests providing outlets for self-expression, encouraging children to "play with" ideas, providing risks and challenges, incorporating the arts, being flexible, encouraging and demonstrating good humor, and allowing for fantasy and imaginative behaviors. All of these suggestions increase the chance that children will respond in a positive way. Once children see their ideas are valued as part of the class, they are more likely to engage in playful behaviors. Other suggestions for creating an environment supportive of sociodramatic play include being supportive (not forceful) of pretend play, turning control of the play over to children, resisting temptation to direct play, acting playful, and being the constant encourager of children's involvement (Rogers & Sawyers, 1988).

When realizing the responsibility adults have in creating a positive, playful social environment, barriers to this process must be addressed. Some barriers are the inflexibility of rules, norms, and social expectations (Aguilar, 1985). Aguilar (1985) also notes that propaganda and advertisements have their own way of forcing a social control upon all adults and children alike. When adults feel under the constant scrutiny of the social environment, they are less likely to "let loose and play." The need for social approval should be limited to create a positive, fun atmosphere where children are willing to take

chances and try new challenges through play (Aguila, 1985).

Play Intervention

Should adults ever interfere in children's sociodramatic play? Should children be allowed to direct their own play? Can one answer yes to both questions? When dealing with these questions, the first problem is knowing when and if intervention is necessary in children's play. The next problem is focusing on the quality and the quantity of intervention in children's play. When adults decide to intervene, what are the best methods and techniques? How would adults intervene to encourage play rather than inhibit play?

First, there tends to be some discrepancies on the extent to which adults should intervene in children's play. Frost (1982) believes there are times when children should play without any intervention, but when children have difficulty, adults should offer encouragement and support. Smilansky (1968) takes adult involvement a key steps father. She feels very strongly that adults should take an active part in aiding children's development of higher forms of play. Her research shows that children will not make progress in their play if only given facilities and an inviting atmosphere. Thus adults need to take a more active role.

Other researchers will dispute this direct role of adults. They tend to agree that if adults guide the play continuously, it ceases to be play (Frost,

1982). Wolfgang (1981) supports the notion that adults usually do not belong in the child's world of play. However, if they do become involved, he outlines specific steps and precautions. It's very important not to interfere in the creative processes of young children's minds. Brown and Briggs (1990) describe the adult's responsibility as facilitating play, not participating or showing children

how to play. The adult's role is more of onlooker giving support and encouragement, making sure not to interfere, teach, or overpersuade children (Jameson & Kidd, 1974). When deciding to intervene, it is crucial to remember the adult's role is of an encourager, facilitator, and supporter. The ownership of ideas needs to be avoided (Blalock & Hrncir, 1980). Adults must realize that students may or may not accept their suggestions. The majority of the control needs to be in the hands of the children. However when play is becoming repetitious and children are losing interest, adults may choose to intervene.

The next step is to decide how to intervene successfully. Frost (1992) recommends adults consider the potential consequences on the child before intervention. There are several ways adults can successfully enter and exit children's play episodes. Smilansky (1968) used two different types of intervention in her classic work. She helped children to develop more

thorough observations and to better understand their daily life experiences. She also taught the children how to successfully convert these experiences into sociodramatic play themes. In her research, she also used a combination of these two intervention techniques, which received the most positive results for improving children's play. Frost and Sunderlin (1985) expand on Smilansky's ideas of intervention. Examples of outside intervention include making suggestions, commenting, questioning, and probing children in order to extend sociodramatic play. Another type of intervention, inside intervention, is when the adult enters the play by assuming a role or modeling the desired play behavior (Frost & Sunderlin, 1985). The primary concern is that adults plan intervention carefully, take on minimal control, always encourage children's ideas, and know when to exit when no longer needed.

Results of Adult Intervention

Research looks very promising for assisting children in attempts to extend their play. Collier (1985) found in his work that preschool teachers, without a lot of extensive training, could positively affect their students' cognitive level by attempting to foster and encourage play. Smilansky (1990) cited several studies, including Udwin (1983), which shows increases in children's imaginative play through adult intervention and guidance.

Intervention is sometimes referred to as "play tutoring." Many studies

have been conducted using play tutoring treatments to improve quality of play as well as other developmental gains. Christie (1983) found that gains in mental age and ideational fluency were a result of adult contact with children during tutoring more than the play itself. This and other studies suggest that adult contact with children generates positive strides in development. Play tutoring can promote students' cognitive development (Christie, 1983). Dansky (cited by Frost, 1992) also found peer tutoring improved the quality of children's play. To conclude, if intervention is planned and used wisely, it seems children can benefit tremendously from adult input and occasional participation in play.

Summary

Much information is available about the benefits of play on children's development. As believers in play, adults need to take a more active role in promoting play for the welfare of children's growth and development. Many suggestions have been given that prove adults can make a difference in the quality and quantity of a child's play life. First, adults must really value play and let it be known to children as well as others. When real value is placed upon play, it should gain back its well-deserved place in early childhood curricula.

Second, adults should realize the importance of observing and learning

from play. When children play, this is an opportune time to take advantage of information children are providing about themselves. Adults should also be willing to allow adequate time for play. Longer play periods should be supported in all early childhood programs.

The environment is another crucial element in a child's play life. An adult should plan, create, and maintain an appropriate physical and social environment conducive to play. Adults then need to know when and how to intervene. Much research has been done about the positive and negative effects of intervening in children's play. It's a question of just how much intervention is needed. Adults need to make sure they are not too directive, rather allowing children to be their own playleaders. It's also very important to know how to intervene to encourage the duration of play. Lastly, adult intervention on children's play development has produced successful results. From the increasing literature on play, it seems obvious that adults can make a difference in a child's world of play. Our future looks bright with more players in sight!

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