

Play and Trauma in Young Children During a Pandemic

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Children learn through play and it is because of this optimal relationship that exists between the two that has categorized play and development as a complex phenomenon. Johnson, Christie and Wardle (2005) write that “play provides vital functions, such as general and skill learning strategies, as well as creative thinking, positive self-esteem and divergent thinking” (p. 199). The term play is hard to define and articulate because play is abstract and has multiple meanings for different groups and individuals. According to Vygotsky (1978), play was a vehicle for the child to behave beyond their chronological age. Vygotsky (1978) describes play as having three main components, one being the ability for a child to create an imaginary situation, the second taking on and acting out roles, and the third, following a set of rules that were determined by the roles children took on during play during social or group settings. Hence, supporting much needed social skills and processes that foster a positive social development. The ambiguities of play, specifically the intricate functions between what play entails and the aligned developmental outcomes of play, makes defining play challenging. Sutton-Smith (1997) defines the ambiguities of play as a progression through seven rhetorics: developmental play, risky play, sports play, cultural play, imaginary play, solitary play, and frivolous play. Moreover, play is existential, simple, complex, and “characterized by dualities that are genetic, affective, performative, experiential, and culturally relative” (Sutton-Smith, 2008, p.118).

Play in the lives of children is a form in which children learn to interact with one another in ways that are acceptable in social contexts established by society and history. It is the extent of the social competence that a preschool child holds that is used as an indicator for school readiness (Mathieson & Banerjee, 2010). But,

what happens to play and processes/skills it supports, when schools are closed and social settings are not an option? What happens to scaffolding play when teachers are behind a computer, and parents become stay-at-home educators? Moreover, what happens to play and to children when we are isolated? What does play look like during a pandemic? Looking at the type of play and how to support play to avoid further trauma from isolation is a time-sensitive topic. Sutton-Smith (2016) states that play is a representation

of human challenges and the behaviors needed for survival. Furthermore, play is not just a mechanism for supporting academic achievement in young children, but also a form of supporting emotional survival during a crisis (Sutton-Smith, 2016).

Play and Resilience

Imperative to the interrelation between play and psychological underpinning, is the development of resilience. Resilience is better defined as overcoming challenges and one’s adaptability to adversity that lead to positive developmental outcomes. Play allows children to reduce many of the stresses that they face while learning new skills. Specifically, play allows children to problem solve manage strong feelings, express thoughts, and feelings both verbally and non-verbally, and develop confidence in their abilities (UNESCO, 2019).

Hence, building a playful pathway towards resilience in children requires active engagement and scaffolding from educators and primary caregivers. More importantly, this playful pathway will allow young children to develop a sense of efficacy and control over their immediate environment. Building resiliency in children is a form of a “mediating process, that address a functional domain in a child’s development and enhances it. A pathway to resilience can be described as a process that is supportive of a child’s healthy holistic development” (UNESCO, 2019, p. 15).

Play as a pathway to resilience provides young children with active play participation from adults, adult modeling of positive social behaviors, a sense of autonomy, independence, and the ability to regulate their stress, and reduce toxic stress enabling

the ability for children to regulate their stress (UNESCO, 2019). Moreover, play as a pathway to building resilience will restore self-empowerment in children by giving them the opportunity to develop life skills they need to thrive as adults.

Play and Trauma During Isolation

Research has revealed that children who are in isolated environments, with reduced physical contact among peers of their own age, tend to have lower levels of academic achievements, and are more susceptible to long term psychological stress as they get older (Ammermueller, 2012; Lacey, Kumari & Bartley, 2014). Specifically, the trauma of isolation affects both the social and cognitive domains of development among preschoolers. Isolation, also takes a toll on the type of play children can engage in. The lack of play during a pandemic prevents children from feeling a sense of joy and familiarity. Creating a greater risk of trauma in young children. During play, children let out many feelings related to current anxieties over change they do not understand and emotions of sadness that they can best express through play scenarios. Much of a child's creativity takes place during play time which offers children a sense of being connected to others through the inclusive aspect of play.

Play's therapeutic role

Play is therapeutic as it allows children to mimic and engage in shared experiences. When young children are not able to play, their behaviors and emotions change. Often, aggressive behavior and/or lack of impulse control is observable in preschool children. The role that trauma, in conjunction with the lack of opportunity to play, influences the severity of the experience children go through (Weissbecker et al., 2008). Commonalities in symptoms of traumatized children range from repetitive behavior, fears, and negative attitudes about their environments (De Bellis & Van Dillen 2005). This leads young children to be anxious in new situations, have more challenges during unplanned times or transitions, and leads them to sense a lack of stability. While these effects can be the result of trauma in isolation, play can support young children's level of resilience. Play takes on a mediating role between adversity and resilience. Through different play forms, children process and understand their environmental adversities and develop resilience to function through a crisis. It is this concept of play and more accurately the type of play during a pandemic that is of key importance to building resilience and grit.

Play Behaviors During a Crisis

While young children engage in both structured and unstructured play in school settings, during unstable times, and when required to be at home while social distancing, the type of play children carry out serves as a vehicle children use to navigate their thoughts, fears, and to work through each feeling. Consequently, the focus of play as a means of expressing and coping during a crisis should be a continuum effort between the school and home setting. Adjusting when, how, and who can scaffold children's play during challenging times is imperative to create and develop a safe space for play, along with the processes and skills it supports. Preschool children who participate in associative and cooperative play will divert back to a form of independent play.

Accordingly, it is important that during independent play aspects of both dramatic and pretend play are embedded and emphasized in order for young children to learn to process through some of the emotions. Dramatic and pretend play can support key emotional processes children need to manage within a different environment and when faced by anxieties and fears.

Play serves as a mechanism for survival during times of crisis (Sutton-Smith, 2016). Specifically, play and the six distinct play forms proposed by Sutton-Smith (2016) allow for children to convey emotions. This allows children to modify their emotional state to meet the demands set by the current environment. Sutton-Smith (2016) framework suggests that shock, fear, loneliness, happiness, anger, and disgust align with six main play forms. Those play forms respectively being the following: teasing and hazing, games of risk taking, festivals, peak experiences, contests, non-sense and profanity. These play formats create a platform for specific types of play behavior to be displayed by young children. The functions of these behaviors have positive and real world application to young children's current living environments. For example, Sutton-Smith (2016) suggests that behaviors such as teasing allow for the development of resilience, risk taking allows for a sense of courage to be developed, contests can lead to vigilance. These processes allow young children to adapt and thrive during isolation and unfamiliar circumstances. These key skills can be observed in dramatic and pretend play.

Dramatic play allows young children to express their thoughts in feelings in ways that they are able to do without having to rely on their expressive vocabulary to communicate their needs and concerns. Dramatic play during a crisis can foster young children to make sense of their current home situations by understanding what is happening. Children can create a narrative and engage in the cause and effects of being at home without the ability to see and play with classmates. As a result, it is important that this type of play is supported by engaging children through art, puppets, story time, and role playing. Younger children often find it easier to work with their anxieties and emotions symbolically as this is a form of communication that is familiar to them. According to Korat, et al. (2003) most researchers of children's pretend play have linked social competence, socially appropriate behaviors and mental processes through role play (Roskos & Christie, 2001; Tsao, 2008; Vygotsky 1978). Children imitate behaviors and feelings that they observe. This process of observation and imitation is a result of the child acquiring contextual meaning through play, which is then needed in the development of metacognition. Contextual meaning influences how the metacognitive skills, how children begin to think about their thinking, is therefore understood and interpreted during times of crisis by young children.

Barriers for Play During a Crisis

Understanding the function play has on alleviating levels of toxic stress is as important as understanding some of the barriers that prevent the creation of optimal play scenarios during isolation. Acknowledging the challenges and barriers during a crisis, can help families accommodate for appropriate places and spaces for play. Fostering dramatic and pretend play requires caregiv-

ers and families to provide an uninterrupted setting for various themes and props that support each theme (Pratt Prairie, 2013). Finding a space during a crisis to allow for uninterrupted play is not necessarily feasible. The themes and props may also not be something families have access to or familiarity with on how to set up thematic play spaces.

Taking time to plan for play is perhaps more important than the play itself. The process of play planning develops representational skills as well as cognitive control (Pratt Prairie, 2013). Cognitive controls allow children to follow and comply with rules, manage emotions and carry out problem solving tasks on their own (Bronson, 2000). These skills are of particular importance to young children entering formal schooling. Yet, planning may be a factor that is difficult for many families faced with many responsibilities. Planning, themes, and materials for play are just a few barriers that can challenge the notion of an optimal play scenario. There are external factors that present themselves during a crisis that families and caregivers need to address and optimal play situations are not always feasible. There are many social factors within families and communities that contribute to situations of play inequities among young children.

Space. Defining play areas when families are sheltering in place can be a struggle. Lack of space for children to move and explore can allow young children to disengage in creative play. Sharing common spaces with other parents, siblings, and/or extended family members during shelter in place rules, reduces the freedom of expression and active play which plays a role in impulse control/emotional regulation (Rimm-Kaufman & Wanless, 2012).

Time. Time for play and time to plan for play is also a barrier for pretend and imaginary play. Families, for example, need to focus on issues of safety, shelter, and food for families, as well as financial burdens. These factors limit the time that families can devote to young children's play needs. Therefore, constraining much needed time for co-planning for play and observing play in young children.

Culture. Cultural aspects can also reduce the amount and type of play young children choose to engage in. For example, there are families whose perspective of elicit and active play is messy and loud. When families are sharing spaces, and older members co-exist some play activities that are considered loud or disruptive are discouraged. Religious practices also play a role in the type of play that is encouraged. During times of religious practices, families may choose for the play to cease or take a more structured form of play. Families' perspective on "right" and "wrong" types of play, shape what and how children decide to engage in play and playful activities. Families may consider active play to be wrong when a child is indoors, hence limiting that time young children devote to active play.

Parental involvement. Finally, parental involvement is also based on families' practices and perspective of play. Some families may engage in play with young children, while others delegate the role of play to be carried out by other siblings. Both approaches can allow young children for adult-child interactions and peer-sibling interactions balancing the type of play plan-

ning, skills, and language used during play with different family members. However, it is critical to note the importance of adult interactions to observe and scaffold play.

Creating Optimal Opportunities for Play During a Crisis

The lack of play during isolation can have traumatic effects on young children (De Bellis & Van Dillen 2005). Play functions as a complex interdisciplinary model (Figure 1) with psychological underpinnings (Sutton-Smith, 2008).

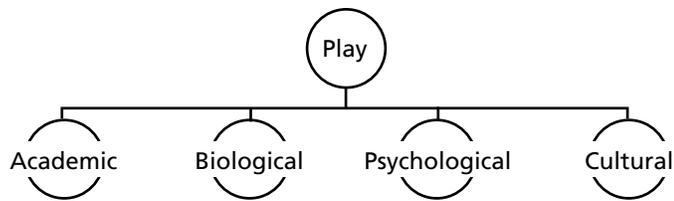
Within the discipline of psychology, play, foremost serves a system of communication such that children can express their thoughts and feelings nonverbally. Hence, serving as an emotional outlet to reduce distress. Secondly, it serves as a system of cultural assimilation and understanding; young children can create play situations that resemble their current environments to create meaning and coping skills. Lastly, the dualities of play serve as a system of teaching young children emotional self-regulatory skills through a cause and effect relationships within the six aforementioned play forms (Sutton-Smith, 2008; 2016). Consequently, some environmental factors that can be manipulated to facilitate play constitute around the concepts of time, space, and type of play needed for survival.

- *Making space for play.* Having a physical space where young children can play in during periods of much instability creates a sense of routine and safety. Children identify designated places for play as their personal areas. Leading to a sense of control and freedom to express their feelings in their own spaces.
- *Making flexible times for play.* As families live and work in shared spaces with time schedules, having the flexible times for play rather than set schedules can help children engage in play. Child-initiated play allows children to direct their own learning and understanding through the dramatic, and pretend play.
 - Play planning is an important factor when nurturing the type of play that is needed for children in crisis. Specifically, as planning the type of play scenario with a child can enhance imaginative play. Through dramatic, and pretend play children acquire coping skills through causal forms of play (Sutton-Smith, 2008)
- *Tools for children to use to stimulate pretend and dramatic play.* Materials and props for children to use during imaginative play can help children enhance their play. Simple props that are versatile can support creative play as it would allow for the materials to take on a multifunctional role. Props can support role play which allows children to build resilience and problem solving skills during critical times. Playing with siblings and/or any member of the family can incorporate some of the social components of socio-dramatic play.

Discussion

Play and the effects on academic achievement have been of recent focus in the field of early and elementary childhood. The present global pandemic and the infringements set on children's freedom to play will need to be observed to gain a greater understanding of the complexities of play and developmental do-

Figure 1: Play as a Complex Interdisciplinary Model



Source: Guirguis & Longley (2020)

mains. The long-term effects of isolation and the time children are in a state of perceived struggle, the greater impact it has on their social and emotional processes and skills.

It is critical that time for play is made so that children learn to acknowledge, identify, and cope with different feelings. This allows young children to problem solve through role play and can reduce the anxieties and toxic stress they face. Conceivably, the significance of play during a crisis, pandemic, or times of adversities is the therapeutic effects it bares on young learners developmental domains. Explicitly, contributing to strengthening a child's resilience through the type of play they engage in. Pretend and dramatic play that involves taking risks, problem solving, coping skills, embracing mistakes, emotional regulation, and developing a sense of self in young learners.

The challenges during a crisis to create play opportunities range from a family's view of play, sharing spaces with other families members, financial burdens, emotional and stress experienced, and death in families. Though these obstacles are just a few that can halt play and the functions that it has on young children, fostering the accessibility to play is the challenge that must be undertaken during a crisis for children's well-being. Time for play planning is essential for creating these play opportunities. As well as the physical space for children to feel free and secure to play in. Finally, having caregivers take some time to facilitate play without over scaffolding is important to gather what and how a child is feeling and/or thinking. While there are many factors that present a challenge for creating safe spaces for play, it is imperative that time is made for play to help children become self-aware and develop both mental adaptability and flexibility. Play during a crisis is a survival mechanism and in the long term, it serves as a support system for the development of resilience.

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