

Play as a Medium for Children's Learning from Parents' Perspectives

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Abstract: *Parents are children's first educators. Parents influence children's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development from an early age. This qualitative study explored parents' perceptions of children's play through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded and analyzed using open coding. Themes emerged related to the positive and negative aspects of play. Some of the positive aspects of play parents mentioned included play providing opportunities for exploration and creativity, social interaction, and a fun, worry-free, and relaxed learning context. Potential negative consequences of play included rough play leading to injuries. Other potential negative aspects of play parents mentioned were imitating bad behaviors during play and engaging in too much screen time play.*

Key Words: children's play; parents' perspectives; benefits of play; negative consequences of play

Play is important for children's growth, learning, and development. Early childhood educators and practitioners believe that play is an energetic, active, and constructive activity and an essential and integral part of children's learning and development across all ages, domains, and cultures (NAEYC, 2009; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Warash et al., 2017). Previous research studies support the premise that play provides an optimal learning context for children's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development (Frost et al., 2012). Play is a dynamic process that develops and changes as it becomes more varied and complex. It is considered a major facilitator of learning and development and reflects the social and cultural contexts where children live (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).

In play, the focus is on exploring rather than on accomplishing predetermined ends or goals, so there are few pressures to produce correct answers or final products. Play thus creates a risk-free context in which children do not have to worry about messing up or doing things correctly (McLane & McNamee, 1990). Moreover, children can advance their skills during play, practicing and exploring important cognitive and social processes in a non-judgmental environment within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is what children can do with scaffolding from a more knowledgeable person (Vygotsky, 1978). This means that play provides an optimal context for the emergence and continued growth of important cognitive and social processes of young children. Therefore, play is a powerful tool for children's learning and development (Nicolopoulou, 2010).

Although research supports the notion that play is an important and effective medium for children's learning and development, recent studies indicate that time for play, and less structured

forms of play appears reduced both at home and school (Grob et al., 2017). Despite the numerous benefits of play, children's opportunities to participate in play-based and exploratory learning experiences have been reduced (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Researchers warn that the impact of play deprivation during early childhood development may result in isolation, depression, reduced self-control and poor resilience. Play deprivation may also impair later social and emotional learning (Brown, & Vaughan, 2010). Studying parental attitudes about play can teach us how parents play with their children and what kinds of play activities are available in the home and community setting. In addition, parents' perceptions of play may influence their views of children's learning, development, and the degree to which they value playtime.

Although previous scholars such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson consistently emphasized the importance of play in children's development, play is very difficult to define due to not having a consensus or specific list of activities among researchers, teachers and parents (Luke et al., 2017). According to Fisher et al. (2008), parental beliefs influence parenting teaching practices, and mothers and child development experts differ regarding the extent to which they value play. For example, although child development professionals do not include extensively structured play (goal-oriented play) in their definitions of play, mothers emphasize academic learning through play activities in their definitions (Fisher et al., 2008). In another study, teachers used game-based learning to foster kindergarteners' positive self-esteem social communication, but parents didn't view games as an educational tool to enhance children's learning (Sverdlov & Aram, 2016).

Overall, parents who believe that play is important for children's development are more involved in play with their children than parents who do not hold this view (DiBianca Fasoli, 2014). Past research revealed that parents rated play as valuable but treated play as less important than academic skills. Therefore, parents tended to view play as a medium for children's academic learning and development rather than as an element of learning. Additionally, some parents did not believe that play provided a pivotal context in which to develop children's academic abilities (Kane, 2016; Shiakou & Belsky, 2013).

THE PURPOSE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to explore parents' perspectives on children's play by soliciting their views on the positive and negative aspects of play with their children. Although several studies have explored parents' attitudes toward children's play (Shiakou & Belsky, 2013; Warash et al., 2017), scant qualitative research has focused on parents' perspectives on children's play in detail. By asking parents about their own definitions of play, play activities, play type/duration, play into school curriculum, and positive/negative consequences of play, important information was revealed. Understanding parents' perspectives of play is meaningful, as these perspectives provide educators with information about how parents think about children's play and the practices of play at home.

METHOD

Upon IRB approval, researchers recruited participants via purposive sampling at a church and community in a Southwestern city of the U.S. To participate, individuals had to have at least one child under eight years old. Individuals who met these criteria received a package explaining the research process along with consent documents. After obtaining consent, researchers scheduled interviews with participants. Each interview session with mothers or fathers took 20-30 minutes.

Participants were asked open-ended questions about children's play. Researchers asked parents about definitions of play, play activities, and the possible positive and negative aspects of play using semi-structured interviews (Berg & Lune, 2012). Participants also answered demographic questions which included participants' age, marital status, income, education, and age of children. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. 24 individuals between the ages of 31-44 (8 fathers, 16 mothers) participated in 20-30-minute interviews. Parents were all married and most of them were White except for one Asian American father and one Native American mother. Researchers transcribed the audio recordings and analyzed the data using open coding. Each researcher then read transcribed audio recordings to find and analyze themes. After finding themes, the researchers refined themes and categorized them into common themes through consensus.

Results

Research reveals that one of the benefits of play is that it is holistic in nature, where cognitive, physical, social and emotional dimensions intermingle (Frost et al., 2012). In the present study the holistic nature of play was reiterated. Three themes related to the benefits of play were interconnected: play provides opportunities for exploration/imagination, play offers social interaction, and play provides learning opportunities. Parent interviews demonstrated that play provides an optimal learning and developmental context for children through exploration and imagination while also providing opportunities for engagement with others.

Benefits of Play

Exploration and Imagination.

Play is about exploration and learning. I don't mind whenever he gets older. I don't mind him running off into field of the backyard and finding out what's out there. As long as he's safe, you know...When I was a kid, my playing was I would leave the house and I would go and have an adventure...something like that. (Kevin, father of one child)

Parents pointed out that one of the key features of play is exploration: exploring with real objects, exploring with imaginary materials, and exploring with other people. From a young age, parents noted that children were curious about the world and explored it by touching, running around and playing with imagination. Parents believed that playing was children's way of exploring the world with curiosity and imagination. In addition, parents mentioned that play is *freely chosen* exploration. They believed that children should be given the chance to choose their own play topics and activities. Noted Susan: '*...let them choose their topic and...activities, and even though there is conflict, you let them kind of solve together and don't jump right in...play is just imagination...they use their imagination and think*' (Susan, a mother of three children).

Supporting our parents' beliefs, researchers find that play is something that must be freely chosen (King & Howard, 2014). Although free choice is not the only defining feature of play, it is considered one of its most important qualities and one of the attributes that distinguishes play from other types of activities. King and Howard's (2014) research revealed that parents believe choice in play can lead to improved confidence, empowerment, and self-esteem in children. Mandy (a mother of four children) stated that '*play was an activity that someone would choose to do for fun.*'

Elizabeth (a mother of three children) added that *'playing is doing something with your hands, with your mind, and with your body together with imagination, toys or tools.'* Parents noted that children's play did not necessarily include a specified way to behave, rather it may include running outside, creating something, or using their minds to explore just for fun. Children appeared to learn who they were, who other people were, and what the world was like around them through active exploration with imagination.

SOCIAL INTERACTION. In interviews, parents emphasized that one of the most important benefits of play was social interaction. Social interaction included socializing with other people (peers, parents, and teachers) and self in order to fit into society. Moreover, children could learn to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts in a safe way while they engaged in play. Therefore, results suggest that play eventually helps children to have an open-mind and build trust with other people while allowing for deeper conversation to emerge. Among the numerous benefits of play, this social aspect of play was heavily emphasized by participants.

There are things that play teaches you that school doesn't: how to interact with others; helps you learn about society, culture, personal space, things like that. It helps you learn how to work with others who may be a little bit different than you. And the reason I think the play will kind of mimic life in a lot of ways. (Bill 1, father of three children)

Noel, a mother of two children also stated: *'Play is social, it's interactive, it is open-ended, it's fun, it's time where we get to know each other better and it's time we built trust each other.'* Most parents agreed that play provides excellent opportunities for social interaction among friends, teachers, and parents. In fact, they viewed this as one of the most important benefits of play. Parents mentioned three components of social interaction during play: 1) interacting with other people and self for socialization in our society; 2) communicating, negotiating, and resolving conflicts in a safe way; and 3) having an open-mind and building trust for deeper conversation.

First, parents noted that play provides a context in which to interact with friends, siblings, parents, and self for socialization in our society. Practicing daily life activities through play such as bonding with each other, teaching routines, and reading & labeling letters, allow children to explore their future roles as adults in a fun way while recognizing the differences and commonalities among individuals.

Second, play gives children a chance to learn how to communicate, negotiate, and resolve conflicts in a safe way. Several parents mentioned that when their children played with others, they had to learn to sacrifice, compromise, and exercise patience. Stacy (a mother of three children) noted the myriad ways that play provides social interaction opportunities and promotes children's prosocial development: *'...from play, especially if you're playing with others, you can learn to sacrifice, you can learn to be patient, you can learn to compromise.'*

Third, play encourages an open-mind and facilitates the development of trust between parents and children so that deeper conversations can occur. Children may have more courage to open their mind and share problems with parents while they engage in play because they believe that there is no right or wrong way to think or behave in a play context. Noted Stacy (a mother of three children):

So, it's play and you can just be goofing around and also you can feel free to tell what you're talking or thinking about...anything else...play makes it easier to open communication. So it can be a really great tool and maybe open their mind and heart and maybe go to a deeper kind of relationship through play.

Noel (a mother of two children) also mentioned that play was social and interactive, giving parents and children occasions to get to know each other better and build trust. Parents who forge a bond with children during play may increase the likelihood that their children will come to them to talk when they have serious issues.

Fun and Relaxing Learning Context.

Because I know that for children especially young children play is learning. Because whenever they play, they're learning you know fine motor skills. They're also learning a lot of other things...So I know in kindergarten, Pre-K they do a lot of that (play). They'll have the kids engaged in a lot of centers. They'll be using beans to make letter shapes and things like this and for them that is play. They get to play with beans and make stuff...they're also learning while they do it and I wish we could be, could have, more of that...more levels. Not just Pre-K and kindergarten but also for older kids, too. (Mandy, mother of four children)

According to parents, play is a good medium for children's learning. Children are having fun in a relaxed environment, but they are also learning literacy and numeracy without worrying about making mistakes. Play is clearly important for young children's learning and development, but it also can be important for older children. During interviews, parents mentioned that children learned through play naturally while also having a great time. Anna (a mother of three children) stated simply 'Play is learning.' Nina (a mother of two children) echoed Anna's sentiment noting that 'Play is learning, learning, learning...but play is fun, you are laughing and playing and having a great time.' Parents also noted that play is doing anything that is enjoyable, including physical activities such as running around, playing tag, and jumping on a trampoline. Noted Stacy: '*...Play is anything that is enjoyable...it should be enjoyable for both the kids and maybe adults and each other*' (Stacy, mother of three children).

NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF PLAY

Potential negative consequences of play included *rough play* which might lead to an injury. However, it was also seen by parents as a potential learning context for practicing children's self-control and problem-solving skills with other people. Other concerns were behaving inappropriately in certain cultural and social contexts, including imitating bad behaviors. Lastly, parents talked about too much screen time as a possible negative aspect of play.

NO NEGATIVITY: IT'S A DISADVANTAGE BUT AN ADVANTAGE. Many parents were very positive toward children's play, so it was difficult for them to think of negative consequences of play. Some parents mentioned injuries resulted from rough play could be one of negative consequences of play because children might hurt themselves and others. However, paradoxically, these parents noted that as long as their child was not badly hurt, the child could learn from the experience. As Kevin said: '*...if you give them too much freedom, they could get hurt...if it's a*

social environment, maybe bullying and maybe fighting...but that's him learning about the world...maybe a disadvantage, but it's also an advantage. (Kevin, father of one child)

NOT APPROPRIATE WITHIN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT. You've got to know when it's appropriate, um...and that's the good thing in schools as well to where, you know, what if there's not time set aside for this is time to buckle down and learn. As opposed to I would always want to play or be entertained or have a good time all the time, you can't do that either. (Bill 2, father of three children)

Although parents did not see many negative aspects of play, they emphasized that children should play at an appropriate time, in an appropriate context and in socially acceptable places. Parents stated that children also needed to know when to play and when to do serious schoolwork. Overall, parents agreed that play was good and beneficial for their children's learning and development, but they believed that play should be culturally appropriate based on the situation and context. For example, children should be encouraged to play actively with balls and other toys in and outside of their home but not in the middle of church service or in the aisles of a grocery store. Several parents also mentioned imitating inappropriate behaviors as one of the negative consequences of play such as throwing a toy or pushing another child during play.

TOO MUCH SCREEN TIME.

I don't consider playing on, computers or tablets play though... cuz it's just not active enough I think and even though they might choose to do it because they think it's fun having to be and sitting at the computer is just not it's not physically active and a lot of it is very passive and I think a lot of it is negative play if that's possible. (Mandy, mother of four children)

Several parents stated that too much screen time would hinder children's social interaction, outdoor activities and creative play. Parents also pointed out the importance of balancing screen time with other types of play activities. Although children spent time playing video games alone or with friends, some parents did not necessarily include this screen time in their definitions of play.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

From interviews with parents in this study, parents described play as fun, open-ended, enjoyable, explorative, imaginative, creative, stress relieving, and a way to interact and bond with their child. Play was also a time when children could build trust, get to know each other better, and find a balance between work and rest. Among these descriptions, *play was exploration & imagination*, *play was social interaction*, and *play was learning* were the most consistent themes among all participants. These results aligned with a previous study revealing that play fostered experimentation through exploration, taught social interaction, increased motivation to learn, and improved imagination (Grob et al., 2017).

In addition, according to Sherwood and Reifel (2010), preservice teachers had individualized meanings of play with multiple descriptions used to define play. Although these teachers identified the same activities as play, their reasons for listing these activities were different. The findings of this study paralleled those of Sherwood and Reifel (2010)'s study, which

found that although there were common themes related to parental play perceptions, each parent has his/her own definition of play and use of play differently in a positive or negative way. In this study, parents addressed their unique perspectives on play as a medium for children's learning and development.

By exploring parents' perceptions on children's play, most findings of this study supported the NAEYC's professional play research statement (2009). According to NAEYC (2009), there are five elements that make play meaningful; 1) children make their own decisions, 2) children are intrinsically motivated—they have natural desire to understand the world, 3) children become immersed in the moment—free play atmosphere, 4) play is spontaneous, and 5) play is enjoyable (Nell & Drew, 2020). The findings of the current study reflected the five elements that can make play meaningful: play as fun, open-ended, enjoyable, explorative, imaginative, creative, stress reliever, a way to bond with their child and interact. In addition, play was also a time where children could build trust, get to know each other better, and find a balance between work and rest. Although social interaction was not included in the NAEYC's list of five elements that make play meaningful, based on the findings of this study, the social and emotional aspects of play were the most emphasized. Most parents talked about the social benefits of play for a large portion of each interview. Parents pointed out the important aspects of play with other people within a community. Importantly, when parents discussed the benefits of play, they frequently mentioned several different benefits within the same statement even though each parent expressed a unique perspective of play during the interview. This result supported the idea that play had holistic aspects: themes were interconnected and emphasized the value of play as part of a whole child education focused on balanced physical, cognitive and social learning (Ernest et al., 2019).

Parents responded that rough, unstructured, culturally inappropriate, and too much video game play were negative consequences of play. Although some types of screen time, including educational TV programs, may benefit children's learning, too much screen play was perceived as negatively influencing their development. Specifically, parents felt it contributed to children's passive learning, aggression, reduced physical activity, and increased the risks of being obese (Lissak, 2018). Although parents mentioned rough play as one of the negative consequences of play as it could lead to injuries, they also restated that it could be an advantage for children by offering a lifetime lesson. These results support previous research that parents had ambiguous perceptions about risky play. They wanted to keep their children safe but also wanted them to experience adventure and build confidence through play (Savery et al., 2016).

There are several limitations of the study. Although researchers interviewed 24 individuals between the ages of 31-44 (8 fathers, 16 mothers), the sample was fairly homogeneous due to utilizing purposive sampling at a local church and community. In addition, there were more mothers than fathers. Recruiting more fathers' opinions on children's play could provide a more balanced perspective. Lastly, all participants were married and most of the participants were White. Recruiting individuals from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, interviewing more non-White participants, and capturing single parents' perspectives would add valuable insight.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through exploring parents' perspectives on play as a medium for children's learning and development, several themes emerged related to the positive and negative aspects of play. Based on the results, we suggest that educators encourage parental involvement of play, emphasizing the benefits of play, such as providing an outlet for exploration and creativity, social interaction, and

a fun, worry-free, and relaxed learning context while considering the negative consequences such as rough play and too much screen time. Findings support early childhood educators' and practitioners' beliefs that play is an energetic, active, and constructive activity and an integral part of children's learning and development. Since parents are concerned about children imitating bad behaviors in a play context, teachers should be encouraged to not only facilitate children's play but also mediate their play by stressing culturally appropriate behaviors. For example, preschool teachers may coach parents on how to engage with their children, facilitate play behaviors and use play context for educating their children to become good citizens in our society. Thus, children's free play and teacher guided play for educational purposes should be balanced.

Future research may examine parents' perceptions of play for younger children versus older children, male versus female children, and play with fathers versus mothers, adding observations of parents and children engaged in play activities. These parents' perspectives on play could provide insight and might influence teachers' practice of play with children in a classroom.

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