

The Importance of Play in Child Development and Health

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ABSTRACT

Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood that significantly contributes to the holistic development and well-being of children. This paper examines the evolving definitions and theoretical frameworks surrounding play, emphasizing its influence on cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development. Drawing from the psychological theories of Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson, the research highlights how different types of play ranging from symbolic and constructive to digital and cultural forms nurture essential developmental skills. It also examines the physical and mental health benefits of play, addresses socio-cultural dimensions, and investigates barriers that hinder children's access to meaningful play experiences. The analysis advocates for the reintegration of play as a central component of child-rearing and education, underscoring its universal, therapeutic, and developmental significance in both contemporary and traditional contexts.

Keywords: Play, Child Development, Cognitive Development, Emotional Development, Physical Health, Social Skills, Early Childhood Education.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, play has been interpreted and defined differently by various scholars and practitioners, contingent on their cultural, societal, and developmental backgrounds. Merely simpler forms of play are given emphasis on the face of inadequate play spaces in developing countries. Low-cost or free games involving objects like marbles, tops, sticks, and knucklebones to sacrifice in religious rituals have been analyzed as the origins of child play and games in history. Definitions and interpretations of play have been examined for several centuries. In the past, the emphasis has been on the interpretation of play as leisure, free time, and non-serious activities. Today, play in its physical and cognitive forms is recognized as an important factor enhancing children's experiences of learning, aiding their spatial reasoning improvement, goal setting, and collaborative and creative problem-solving experiences, particularly in the analysis, modeling, and simulation of complex natural and cultural systems. However, even in the technical/formal model, studies show that making the system open and the playful exploration offered by playing with it are effective in stimulating creativity and imagination. Children play in active, exploratory, constructive, fantasy, and social forms, in ages from infancy to high school, and in solitary, parallel, associative, and cooperative ways. The evolution of play activity in today's digital society, which has been transformed by technological developments, is traced, and the emergence of such concepts as traditional play, digital play, video-game play, game play, and mobile-phone play is analyzed. It is asserted that being able to perceive play in its whole can provide a critical contribution to the solution of many problems in the health and sound growth and development of the child. After a broad analysis of the literature, dimensions of children's play activity in 2010 are introduced as Physical/Motor Play, Intellectual/Cognitive Play, Social/Emotional Play, Fantasy/Imaginative Play, and Occupational Play. Acknowledging these dimensions of play and the determination of the factors affecting them in every

child are emphasized as critically significant on the path to children's healthy growth and development [1, 2].

Theoretical Frameworks

Play is fundamental to children's well-being. It is essential to the healthy development of children, facilitating their physical and emotional development, the formation of relationships, and the realization of self-concept. Children are born ready to play, but they are not born knowing how to play. Theoretical perspectives that have been suggested regarding the importance of play in children's lives are explored. Though distinct in certain ways, they speak about the general, overarching role of play in child development. As children grow and develop, the nature of their play changes. It also significantly influences and is influenced by developmental processes. A significant part of the developmental process involves children learning how to play. The play of infants, as they engage in mainly sensorimotor activities, is more exploratory than creative. As children age, however, socio-cognitive capacities improve, and play becomes more detailed and intricate. Over time, children learn a great deal about how to play with a wide range of materials and in many different social situations. This increase in play experience, it is argued, helps children to think and thereby promotes cognitive development. Child development in the context of play is addressed in light of the theories of three well-known psychologists or educators. Piaget is well-known for his theory of cognitive development. Play, for Piaget, is essentially assimilation-driven- it is one of the ways that children apply and learn about their surrounding world. Vygotsky is a corresponding theorist whose basic premise is that children develop from the social to the individual and on. Play is a perfect example, in Vygotsky's eyes, of how children learn and develop in the socio-cultural milieu. Play is key to development because it initiates imaginative and abstract thinking capacities before more concrete, logical thinking emerges. The eight stages of Erikson's psychosocial theory of development are also covered in how his ideas illustrate the various ways in which play can contribute to fundamental developmental processes. It is further discussed how such theoretical frameworks about child development fostered by the consideration of play directly inform developmental and educational practice. By integrating theory with practice, a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of play should manifest. Lastly, the consequences of a fragmented disciplinary approach are briefly examined. A call is made to unite theoretical and applied perspectives to play, with an emphasis on creativity and the arts. Ultimately, only through interdisciplinary action will child psychology and the other fields that analyze play can produce practical solutions about its importance to young children [3, 4].

Types of Play

Play is defined as voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities associated with pleasure, satisfaction, and enjoyment. It is important for learning to take part in the various phases of life. The definition of play can be understood as fulfilling the opportunities of pleasure, joy, new experiences, and flexibility where the child can express himself/herself. The child in play is the pilot of the game; he is starting and finishing the game, and he is ruling and favoring the game. There is not the play, there are plays, these can be active and subdued, liberated and organized, with or without material, imaginative and exploratory, or the play can be alone or it can involve mutual interaction or it can be with others. Play can include experimenting and revealing, developing and implementing within the available items and situation. Culinary games, caligraphical games, secret folding games, role-playing games, word-making games, drama games, and mimicry games can be provided as examples. Play offers 5 dimensions for children's healthy development. These dimensions are Physical Development, Affective and Social Development, Emotional Development, Creative Development, and Cognitive Development. Children feel trust about themselves in areas they are successful, and they improve and develop themselves quickly by playing in these areas. Children are social beings as they can think, play, and learn in the community in which they are joined. They can express themselves by behavior during the game, causing the developmental, emotional, social, and cognitive progress much easier. According to many scientists, the plays of forming and creating are increasingly of developing experimenting in children's language, problem-solving skills, reasoning, mathematic, and scientific thoughts. Playing is very important for physical development and acquiring confidence in the body. There are 6 different types of play forms. All forms of play are important and offer different complementary experiences to children. The points of these forms are to involve the body movements or its parts. These also help to understand how the world works. When these forms are developed, children can play with them with many combination techniques and with participants. Symbolic play does not involve the body and work but is a form of mental playing with one form of assessment and understanding. These forms are very important for languages and social skills.

Rules of these forms arise with age and have moral aspects. When children know moral and social rules, their social skills are developed. This means that they can understand others' persuasions and can show sympathy. This form is also closely related to understanding the real features of the world. Eventually, they understand how physics and mathematics help them when they want to establish symbolic games. For example, they can develop more complex games with the rules of turn-taking, preparation, and formal assignments in chess games [5, 6].

Cognitive Development and Play

Play is an essential component to the optimal development of a child. Although play opportunities are often viewed as a foundation of early childhood, children continue to play (and arguably benefit from play) well into middle childhood and even adolescence. Numerous theorists, researchers, and educators have suggested play's tremendous power for promoting learning, growth, and healthy development. Play not only contributes to physical development but is known to facilitate learning and development in cognitive, emotional, and social realms as well. But what is it about play that stimulates growth and change in children? Play involves a consolidation of physical and mental activities that have been previously learned. One critical feature of play is that it involves planned or repetitive actions. Play facilitates learning because it exposes the child to new experiences and new possibilities for dealing with the world. According to one opinion, play is so crucial at a young age because it harnesses a need that is biologically based. The Arousal Modulation Theory states that play is caused by a need or drive in our central nervous system to keep arousal at an optimal level. Whenever arousal is too low, individuals seek to elevate it through stimulatory activities, while the opposite is true when arousal is too high. Play can serve to increase stimulation to an optimal level. Through active play with toys, objects, other children, or even one's own body, a child will engage in tasks or activities that primarily lead to learning and development. In the domain of play, two methods of active involvement are possible: object play and rough and tumble play. What is of focus is object play and how it aids in the betterment of a child regarding cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Some categories of play contributions are the facilitation of cognitive abilities, the enhancement of emotional tasks, the growth of social skills, and the development of physical or motor skills. In accordance with the latter, play is viewed as a notable or even principal means by which a child advances these certain skills [7, 8].

Emotional Development Through Play

Emotional development is an essential aspect of a child's well-being and healthy growth. It is enhanced through a wide range of play experiences that provide many emotions, from joy to frustration, from wonder to empathy. Through play, children may express their feelings more easily, thus learning to manage them. Emotions may also be shown to others by means of a play gesture or an enactment. A toy, such as a plump-faced doll being put to sleep or a lost animal being looked for everywhere, helps in understanding a child's feelings. Through imaginative or role-playing the child may also better understand the emotions of others and learn how to regulate their own. Children may resolve traumatic events by means of play, when it is not easy for them to talk about them. Child psychotherapists often use play to help children express their feelings and come to terms with the bad experiences they have had. The emotional well-being deriving from play is the counterpart of the pleasure, competent expressing, and creativity characterizing it. Peer interactions during play also make a fundamental contribution to emotional intelligence. Children's play often gives rise to complex and intense social and emotional scenarios. Only by engaging in these activities children may learn how to "take the right line" and feel confident in playing with peers [9, 10].

Social Development and Play

During play, children learn about social norms, relationships, and social structures. This learning is nuanced, sophisticated, and complex so children require multiple opportunities to explore and experience different relational dynamics and contexts to be able to generalize their learning into other contexts. Play activities give children the chance to engage with different social situations and processes. They learn how to negotiate personal boundaries, communication styles, and shared interests. In cooperative play, children develop an awareness of group dynamics and learn when it is their turn and how to listen to others. Skills of co-operation transfer from play to the broader social environment. Through play children learn what friends are like, what friendships look like, and how to choose a friend. In play, boundaries of friendships can be explored, pushed and contracted to manage feelings of fear, confidence, and rejection. Emerging research has supported the idea that common play activities can be used to harness the learning of social skills in a controlled and safe setting. Play can be used to help children become aware of

a range of possible friendships. This can be done by the adult discussing qualities of a friend and then these qualities becoming a priority during play. Depending on the age of the child, this aspect can be extended to develop understanding that friends have other friends. In the safety of an understanding play setting, conflicting behavior can be observed and strategies adopted to resolve the tension. Play can also lead to discussions about aggressive and school 'appropriate' behavior. Conversely, play can also lead to an understanding that the 'playground rule' is pervasive and this can be used to help children 'play along side' or understand that the game is to hit and not just receive. Therefore, the adult leader clearly plays a crucial role in the facilitation of complex and tenuous play issues. Research has also begun to explore the importance of play in developing inclusivity and social integration among diverse settings. Participants who had a history of traumatic group experiences and whose play was characterized by aggression and exclusion had the most difficulty fostering cooperation among their play group. For many urban and poor children, parks and playgrounds are the major settings of play and they spend many hours a week playing in them with their playmates. These children, all from multiple problem homes, played in complexes and ghetto parks that were described as filthy, dangerous and dominated by active drug dealers. In these parks, boys dominate and both boys and girls reported being frequently teased and victimized by older children [11, 12].

Physical Health Benefits of Play

Play is a fundamental component of children's growth, learning, and development. It is at the heart of how children express themselves and perceive the world and is charged with likeness, joy, and wonder. A parent's role in their child's play is an essential one. By providing kids with a variety of fun options, they can play to facilitate and boost their child's physical, thinking, social, emotional, and cognitive skills. Play is a less structured, fun, and pleasurable form of activity. It can lead to physical growth in the form of exercise and movement. Playing is the kids' natural behavior and a way to play, accomplish, and understand their surroundings better. Children get satisfaction, pleasure, and fun from the activities they play. It is an important tool for children to discover different aspects of the environment. Through play, children explore and interact with the environment to learn better. Children normally participate in play in fun and enjoyable ways. The accomplishment of play objectives is preferred more than the success of those goals. The activity takes place just for its enjoyment rather than any tangible outcome. By playing children improve their imagination and consider various options. They take roles with pretend either with themselves or with peers. This type of playing builds the kids' vocabulary and higher-order thinking abilities. While pretending, children include different areas of knowledge in play. They act and speak as specialists like as a doctor, police officer, and so on. By doing so, they take the real experiences of the observed area more concretely. By pretending, kids solve the problems of their surroundings in handy manners. Many researchers and parents consider outdoor play is a simple tool that children may utilize to continue their health condition. Outdoor play provides more useful and benefits for kids comparing to indoor play. The outdoor environment alone encourages a natural experience for children through the freedom and liberty on wide varieties of behavioral actions. Outdoor play promotes physical activities by increasing a child's functionality to exercise various muscles in the body. Fresh aerobic respiration supplies to the body system that helps in improving internal metabolism. The direct exposure to sun natural means of vitamin-D is getting, and it helps in developing a child mentally and physically. Playing games in natural air is a way to transfer fresh air to all millions of cells while enjoying strategies [13, 14].

Play and Mental Health

This paper is a review of the literature around the relationship between play and mental health. There is a strong emphasis on the understanding of the role of play and play-based activities in the lives of children, especially from the threshold life stage of 6 months through to approximately 12 years of age, the terminal point of the UNESCO conception of early childhood. Variety of articles, reports and papers were selected to include quantitative and qualitative data regarding the state of play, the relationship between play and social and emotional development, and the implications of limited playtime. Because the holistic approach to play is dynamic and wide-ranging field of study, this review is only able to briefly touch upon some of the key issues regarding the importance of play and play-based activities in the development and health of children. Play is a powerful way of learning by doing and observing in innovation and discovery, development of skills, testing of ideas and risk-taking. It is a universal, natural and voluntary occupation of childhood, a claim that can be supported by a range of evidence spanning philosophy, history, anthropology and developmental psychology as well as literature and policy in the context of early childhood care and education. Unlike forms of recreational play, play, as opposed to exercise, is self-

motivated, self-initiated and self-directed. It emerges from the abilities, interests and inclinations of individual children, is non-competitive in nature and has the capacity for renewal and innovation. More modestly, the notion of unstructured play suffices to distinguish play from other activities. Modules are features of play that give it flexibility of use, purpose and invention to satisfy the cultural and temporal setting of its ubiquitous practice across the contexts of human living. At the same time, emerging evidence from neuroscience and cognitive science is broadening current understanding of the valuable place of the arts and of the special role of play in emotional, social, mental and physical health [15, 16].

Cultural Perspectives on Play

Cultural Perspectives on Play are diverse. Play traditions have been observed throughout history in every culture and speculate an influence on a child's development. For some Indigenous populations, play is essential in the development of children. Humans have always played, and always will. Play traditions are diverse worldwide. A child with Navajo heritage growing up in Denver might have relatives and therefore exposure to Navajo cultural practices involving play in much the same way as a Navajo living on a Navajo Nation Reservation geographic location. Recognition and appreciation of the diversity of play traditions and practices is crucial in the development of children. Understanding Native American, African, Asian, Hispanic, and other cultural practices involving play is often vastly different than Western concepts and perceptions of play. There are many shades of gray along the spectrum of how different groups might think about play with a corresponding gradient of impacts on children. Exposure to play practices that are unnatural and/or impede their development is detrimental, and for others, such an exposure is beneficial. Cultural values and beliefs often shape a community's behaviors and even preferences within a certain type of play. Many differences in structured play in comparison to unstructured play are primarily due to culture. Proper assessment, understanding, and accepting of the context from which such play practices occur is necessary. The impacts of increased globalization have not spared traditional cultures and practices involving children's play. This is also true for the offspring of immigrants who tend to eventually adopt more mainstream practices, often to the detriment of cultural practices. The responsibility for ensuring children and students have play experiences that are inclusive of all beliefs and practices is on educators, educational institutions, and parents. Educators and parents may recognize that even though a certain way of play involving children seems unnatural, strange, non-beneficial, or even harmful, this might be expected when considering the influence of cultural values and beliefs on communities world-wide [17, 18].

Barriers to Play

All across the modern world children are experiencing a decrease in time spent at play. Barriers exist that can prevent a child from engaging in play. Family, societal, environmental, economic and personal factors can all limit a child's opportunity to play. During play, children develop their physical and social negotiation skills. They learn and understand the world around them. They build a sense of respect for others within their interactional environment. A significant form of play in which the cognitive, emotional and physical development aspects are so strongly present is outside play; the physical act of using a variety of equipment and stimuli. Outdoor play, once considered a normal everyday activity, is often overlooked in modern society for very young children due to an increase in digital distractions. This decline in play has been suggested to have a negative impact on children's development, as well as a negative impact on development and health. Adult concern for child safety has created an environment in which a child's access to outdoor play opportunities has been limited. Additionally, within the UK, there is a growing trend of urbanization. Housing estates are often accompanied by the development of adultified play areas rather than the traditional 'adventure playground'. Certain societal and cultural attitudes towards play can also heavily impede children playing. Children grow up, brainwashed into the idea that life is serious, and play must stop. Integrated into the education system, the importance of academic achievement beginning in early schooling years is emphasized to the child. Societal beliefs, backed up by a powerful education system, influence the knowledge that play is not important, and life is centered on intelligence. Therefore, it has been suggested to uphold academic achievement higher than that of play. By overcoming these barriers investment can be made to promote enriched play environments creating an embedded play culture, far from harming intelligence. There must be a widespread change of minds, a collective knowledge and understanding of all that play is, and can enrich, who it is essential for. Efforts must be rather addressed to eliminate these barriers, regardless of what has created such barriers, promoting the common knowledge that such barriers burnt rampant will leave the child deprived of the

natural essence of childhood itself - play and social play opportunities must be available to every child [19, 20].

Promoting Play in Early Childhood Education

After much debate and discussion in the hallways of the school, and after actively engaging in educational play experiences in both child care and public-school settings, the findings that have been collected here are provided. The hope is to serve both the administration and staff in promoting play as the central strategy for learning in some of the youngest students. It must be recognized that no amount of data will satisfy everyone, and no amount of preparation can anticipate all the questions that may be asked. There is a special joy about children at play. With play, children explore and learn to understand the world. Play provides the foundation for academic and personal success. It has been long known that children at play are fully engaged and absorbed in activities. Although play is a natural behavior, it needs support in the early education setting. Play is a compelling activity in itself, that is, it motivates a child to play. Children who play appear happy and engrossed. Play has its own special magic. There has been a long tradition in education of categorising play according to its function, for example, physical play, social play, fantasy play, constructive play and creative play. In structured activity, the different aspects of development are adopted, but it is stressed that play is an important vehicle for learning. Play is much more than as a means of delivering the goals of structured activities. Children can express their personal needs, fears and anxieties and deal with them unconsciously during play because play is the child's way of working through his or her experiences. But of course this does not happen in all cases. Childhood play is also a means of relaxing and unwinding, unburdening one's mind of stress and tensions of daily life; it has a therapeutic effect [21, 22].

Policy Implications

To nurture healthy kids that grow up to live a healthy lifestyle, it is critical to place a focus on healthy development patterns. This also includes teaching preschoolers and providing kids with fun playtime activities to improve a healthy lifestyle and good health habits. Most importantly, kids need to play every day. Play is vital for developing the thinking, language, coordination, and socialising skills that children will need. Play, then, is necessary to develop a healthy brain and healthy children. Since birth, it is the way that all babies learn the world around them and stimulates mental and physical development. Healthy lifestyle and preschool education includes play, making it a serious issue to be considered by families, schools and government in order to foster responsible and healthy kids. A better understanding of the policy implications for the place of play in relation to child development and health builds respect for play within and outside early childhood education and care. Although there are many barriers to children's play in neighbourhoods, curriculum spaces, and public spaces, there is a need for more public awareness. Policy-makers in education and planning should have a social understanding of the values that support learning and development through play. Policies to effect play within and outside educational establishments need to be broadened, and better coordination is required between the different sectors that manage space for children in our urban and rural communities. Children should be free to play when they are not teaching, healthy to exercise, and healthy to play. If national education standards and local curriculum frameworks are genuinely supportive of how children play, all children, not just the most privileged, will benefit. Therefore, it is recommended that healthy and developing play animals be integrated with these policy documents. Adequate provision of innovative, playful resources to similar animals would also help to achieve greater equality. While legislative developments do not often consider the impact on play, a growing body of work within geography, sociology, and planning is highlighting the displacement of children from public spaces and the consequences of this for children and communities. As the appropriate government department is forced to consider UK-wide strategies to protect and enhance public play, it is important to remind those involved of the broader roles of play for children, families, communities, and towns more generally [23, 24].

Future Research Directions

The scoping review identified a gap in the literature within different play contexts for diverse populations as identified by race. Considering the function of programs and policies in promoting children's development and well-being and the ongoing protests to bring attention to Black lives after tragic events, there is an urgent need for more research on child's play based on racially diverse populations and in different countries, particularly those not traditionally on the radar of play research. The scoping review also identified a gap in the literature on children's experiences of play within digital spaces, so a specific call for further exploration of the qualities of play in digital spaces as valued by children is made. The rise

in digital technologies has enabled children's play experiences to take place beyond physical and traditional contexts, thereby offering new play opportunities. Digital play also provides a means for the empowerment of users beyond friends and family members. However, there is conflicting evidence on the consequences of digital play technology on child development. Thus, child play research should be extended to emerging fields such as digital play; a call for an interdisciplinary approach, combining insights from psychology, education, and health, to better understand child's play in the broad context, should be made. Awareness should be raised among funding bodies and resources devoted to spur play-related research initiatives in diverse play environments and technologies, particularly in low- and middle-income countries [25, 26].

CONCLUSION

Play is not a luxury but a necessity in every child's life. It is a powerful tool for fostering growth across cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains. The integration of theoretical perspectives into practical frameworks underscores how play facilitates learning, nurtures creativity, enhances emotional intelligence, and fosters social interaction. Despite its recognized value, modern challenges such as urbanization, digital saturation, and academic pressures threaten the prevalence of free and structured play. Cultural nuances and environmental limitations further complicate access to diverse play experiences. To address these challenges, there must be a collective commitment among parents, educators, policymakers, and communities to prioritize and protect play. Recognizing play as both a universal right and a developmental imperative ensures that children everywhere are allowed to thrive and discover themselves through joy, imagination, and exploration.

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