

# Importance of Play

**Yukti Ahuja**

# Introduction

Play is a natural response to ones environment at a younger age. Children interacting with objects, nature or other adults and children automatically engage in play. Play is seen to be an important aspect to learning. Here one learns to develop creativity, imagination and a good sense of self through the concept of play. For children, play is more than fun games it is their way to learning social, emotional, physical and cognitive skills. Since play is so important, it must be incorporated in all areas of a child's life such as at home and at school; however, that is not the case. Today we find schools divided in the importance given to play. The pressure to provide academic learning diminishes the time for play. Most debates about what learning must take place in school settings is increasing, but play and learning are not mutually exclusive. This paper will look at the importance of play, what benefits come from play, how to enhance the playing time and how play can be part of a schools curriculum and aid in learning. Articles selected in this paper were those that looked at the benefits of play, looked at the impact of structured vs. free play learning and also those that looked at teachers' beliefs and behaviors towards play. These articles provided good insight into the topic of play.

# Body

Playing for children is more than fun and games; it is linked to a child's intellectual, social, emotional and physical growth as well. The benefits of play are so many, that each day of a child's life should be engaged in play. Play initiated by children involves interacting with others, to recognize and solve problems, and a sense of pride. Play helps children engage in active play which is a natural preventative of obesity an increasing epidemic today. Play is also linked to creativity, imagination and out of box thinking to solving problems. These skills lay the foundation for academics, reading, writing, math and science. However, despite the advantages of play, there are many trends in the education and family life that together rob children of healthy creative play. With lack of time, space and encouragement from home and schools to become creative in ones own creation of games and fun, children are easily given electronic devices to engage in play. These devices undermine the basis of play, the imagination and creativity of a child is threatened plus poses grim implications on the intellectual and emotional development of children.

Research done by Leong and Bodrova discuss the importance play mainly because today children have more academic pressures, because of these pressures, the need for these children to engage in play is even more necessary. "Children who miss out on play in their early years may have gaps in their social, cognitive, and linguistic development". Dramatic play offers children a way to act out various aspects of real life, here they get to play out various roles, different relationships, learn how to use emotions and actions, discover rules of playing and get insight into how others feel and act.

Children's' creativity is also stimulated through play by using play props with imagination, language and symbolic thinking. Another area of development via play is language. Children will often plan scenarios talking about what each will do, what role they will play and agreeing and disagreeing on using imaginary props through out the act. They are developing vocabulary, mastery of grammar and proper use of language. Because play is so natural to children, it extends to multi-age groups in family settings and friends teaching children how to play with all age groups, learning from one another and encouraging social norms of engagement. However, despite the many benefits, today's children are spending more and more time in front of TVs, video games and other gadgets which cannot replace the benefits gained from live play. To better promote play one must provide children with many real life experiences that can serve as themes in their minds. Activities like field trips, speakers, books, pet stores, fire stations, museums, and zoos are examples of such real life experiences that children take from to pretend and play. The more experiences a child has the more his imagination will grow and the more he will develop. Within each theme, introducing many different roles will give them more insight into different careers, different perspectives such as not only being a doctor, but also nurse, heart specialist, ear specialist, etc. Finally, providing proper toys and props for children to use, have children move from ready made to making their own props allows them to grow in creativity and imagination. Play is vital to the healthy development and growth of children, play cannot be replaced with any gadget or object, it is an experience that involves the natural interaction of children with each other, because it is so indispensable, we must give than an hour of play everyday (Leong and Bodrova, 2003).

Since play is seen as being so important do schools implement play in their curriculum? Research done by Cooney (2004) looked at the importance of play in two different Kindergarten programs. This study examined the socioeconomic level of the students, parent and teacher perceptions as well as conducted observations of classrooms to analyze the importance of play in the classroom and barriers to play. Two schools in Guatemala were studied through the use of surveys, both parents and teachers were asked about their views on play, importance given to play and benefits of play in the classroom. Following the surveys, researchers observed the classrooms as well. One of the schools consists of a higher socioeconomic class of clients, (CAG) and the other school is from a middle of low socioeconomic clientele (CL). Findings from the study revealed three themes that influence the importance of play; pedagogy and environment, benefits of play, and image of childhood.

Pedagogy and environment theme revealed CAG parents and teachers supporting pedagogical teaching approach that combines teacher and child directed activities balancing play and academics to achieve learning. They preferred some structure via desks and tables but also an open learning center. Both parents and teachers defined play as a means of learning social skills, developing creativity and necessary to learn concepts and apply them through play. Results from the CL group also revealed similar preferences, and play too was seen as ways of spontaneously developing creativity and imagination.

Benefits of play by the CAG group were developing vocabulary, understand concepts, develop imagination, and learning how to play together as important social skills learning. However, the observations revealed more structure and less creativity

options in the environment. Very little child driven activities were done, very little spontaneity and imagination was seen via observations of these classrooms. Learning centers designed to build creativity were lacking in materials to build excitement or creativity. The CL group also defined play as means of developing vocabulary, expressing emotions, learning to get along with each other, appreciate differences, develop imagination, interacting without discrimination, and relax/release tension. Observations of these classes reveal a more teacher directed learning, limited hands on materials, and only finger play was activities seen as play.

Images of childhood from the CAG and CL group both resulted in parents and teachers agreeing that children at a young age must be given more time to explore, experiment, play, defining the early years as time to laugh, run around, and sharing toys and experiences. Findings from this study show that adults (parents and teachers) view play as an important means to learning. Therefore, the adult attitudes are not the barriers to play. Discrepancies are seen in the pedagogy and environment where the environment is not setup to invite free play, the teacher-child ratios are too large, and lack of professional development. In CAG, where they have lower teacher-child ratio, resources for an active learning center however they lacked in specific professional development for enhancing learning center activities. CL however, had issues with higher ratios, space, resources, and professional development.

Overall, despite the socioeconomic barrier, both schools lacked the much desired play centered curriculum due to lack of specific professional development. It was evident from surveys and both teaches and parents knew the benefits of play in the

classroom and both wanted to have a more child centered environment, but just lacked the knowledge in creating such an environment (Cooney, 2004).

With enough evidence of play being important in the development of children, can we move into a purely play based school? The answer still might be no, mainly because early academics such as formal instruction and rote learning are creeping into our school systems. As a result the controversy over free play and structured learning is on going; however play and learning are not mutually exclusive. Meaningful experiences and learning can and is achieved in free play settings. Research by Nel looks at the impact of formal academics on young children. Early education must teach children to handle real life situations (horizontal relevance) rather than teach them skills relevant in the future (Vertical relevant). Learning within the horizontal relevance is more in tune with what children can do; research shows that children are capable of grasping many aspects of reading like names, sounds, letters, and recognition of certain sight words without being subject to formal reading. By age three, children are able to distinguish writing from print, by 4 children can identify environmental print and become interested in shapes and sounds. Even reading some words out of context and being familiar with basic reading conventions by age 5. Only through firsthand experiences and meaningful contexts are children able to acquire horizontal relevant literacy. Providing formal reading instructions builds vertical relevance and more often children reading early are reading to please parents rather than intrinsic desires to read. Learning to please parents rather than ones own pleasure can lead to lifelong emotional disabilities. It is not until age 5 yrs that children are interested and intellectually capable of reading, before then the majority is simply not interested in the mechanics of reading. Even learning phonetic

knowledge and decoding skills does not mean they understand the connection of these skills to reading. Miseducation is the name given to academic learning motivated by means other than ones innate interest. Therefore, developmentally appropriate preschool academics in regards to literacy do not require formal instruction; rather promote awareness to letters, words and numbers in meaningful contexts. Research also shows that another important variable in literacy acquisition is adult modeling. There is a correlation between the number of literacy events that children initiate to the amount of reading and writing that is modeled by adults. Modeling familiarizes children with the function of print, shapes and sounds of letters and numbers. ‘Children who enter school without knowledge of the form or function of print are likely to have problems with organized reading instruction. . Children who have few literacy experiences during the preschool years can be severely limited in attaining successively higher reading and writing levels’ (National Association for the Education of Young Children & International Reading Association, 1998). Finally, the benefit of literacy developing in a free play structure to that of structured settings shows that in the free play setting there was a partnership between the adult and child which made literacy events more meaningful. In the structured setting, the adult directed the lesson with specific purpose and outcomes in mind making literacy events out of context for the child. Therefore, children learn the best by exploring freely in their environment and exploring with all five senses in areas that interest them. Freedom to explore, to direct and build on skills that relate to everyday life make literacy learning more meaningful for children and naturally attracts them to such areas. It is for the adults to create literacy learning beyond the level of passive observation to that of active learning. Adults working with children

can provide a rich learning environment by making a large variety of materials available for children, providing colorful and inviting equipment at child's reach, promote print awareness with magazines and books, and modeling reading and writing to children. Literacy learning can be part of a preschool curriculum, but without formal instruction, rather giving them a free play setting, proper environment and good adult modeling, any child will be able to initiate his own literacy experience. Here learning will be achieved because children want to learn (Nel, 2000).

Learning through free play provides a child to use their own imagination and creativity as well as internal desire to explore. Adults working with children play a large part in creating such environments especially teachers in the early education field. To better understand teachers' beliefs about how they view their own role in the play of children and their thinking to what they practice, a study by Davis looked at interviews of Directors in eight preschools, 10 preschoolers, and actual observations of students. The interviews focused on beliefs, role of teachers and outdoor curriculum. Findings from interviews revealed that teachers believed that their role was to supervise children and allow them to freely engage in activities of their choice. Teachers believed that they provide emotional support, encouragement, and the right setting for children because children are self motivated and capable of choosing their activity. The teachers saw free play outdoors as time to socialize, learning to play together, and developing communication and negotiation skills. Observations of teachers' behaviors to that of their interviews were in line, teachers interacted with children only when a child needed redirection or assistance; majority of the time children played without adult interaction. Findings from this study reveal and consensus with developmentally appropriate

practices about teachers believing and allowing children to be free to play with little adult interaction (Davis, 1997).

## Conclusion

Play is a natural process of learning in children, given the right environment and materials, children are capable of self directing themselves with little adult presence benefiting in language, problem solving, negotiating and other skills. This paper looked at various articles in the area of play. It is evident that a free play environment is supported by teachers in a school setting as shown in the articles by Cooney and Davis, however what a teacher thinks and what she does sometimes vary. Indoors, teachers may want to provide a less structured setting but may not have the professional training to provide it. Outdoors teachers are better able to provide a free play environment. Also, structured classrooms vs. free play environments compared show that there is little benefit to forcing a child with formal instructions, even when children are taught to read and write early the motivation is mostly because they want to please others and not from within.

In the field of early education, teachers and parents need more understanding into the field of learning. Today, parents moving in fast paced jobs and technology driven lifestyles are imposing the same pressures on their children. We find gadgets for children as early as 6 months that promote TV watching which cannot replace the true benefits of play. Schools today have to stay true to the meaning of early education, but with pressures from parents, most schools adapt to the needs of adults rather than children. The need for academic learning is more emphasized because parents feel that learning is

identified by math and language development only, most parents fail to see emotional, social, behavioral skills as components of learning. Schools have to first bring parents in line with what children need, how they learn and together provide an environment for children. The need for child advocacy in early education geared towards the importance of play, bringing an understanding of how important emotional, social, behavioral growth is in a child's life in addition to just academic growth. The more parents and teachers collaborate and have a good understanding, the more we will let children enjoy being children, the more we will appreciate their natural tendencies to pretend, the more we will let them free to express themselves.

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