

The Importance of Play

Play is a difficult word to define as there is no universal consensus regarding what it is. For some, play is best described as a recreational activity, something that is sought out for enjoyment or relaxation. For others, play describes activities that encourage children to engage in high levels of learning, despite the fact it often looks like nothing more than fun. For the purpose of this article the focus will be on the latter definition.

How play and learning are connected

In order for children to make sense of their world they reenact scenes familiar to them, for example playing mum and dad, looking after or being a pet, pretending to cook a meal, or being a teacher, etc. When playing, children do not just act out different situations, they also feel them. For example, they will pretend cry and reenact feelings of sadness when adopting the role of a tired, hungry baby. As such, using all of their senses allows children to better understand their own and others' feelings as well as make sense of the situation at hand.

Another benefit emerges from play because children, by exploring cause and effect relationships, develop an understanding of the consequences that result from their own and others' actions. The learning outcome of these experiences mean children will be better equipped to determine how they should or could act if a similar situation was to occur in real life. The overarching benefit of play means children are able to explore and better understand and sustain relationships as well as gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

Another advantage gleaned from play experiences is that they enhance children's ability to empathise and practice how to forego their own gratification to make others happy. Opportunities to practise making others happy by using and incorporating a blend of their own and others' ideas mean children discover the benefits of cooperative play and gain an insider's glimpse into how relationships are strengthened when they meet their own and others' needs simultaneously.

The difference between spontaneous play and influenced play experiences

Spontaneous play is typified by instances where children engage in unplanned play. These play experiences encapsulate ideas pulled from a child's world and are shaped by children's in-the-moment ideas. They are not fluent and they do not always follow a sequence of a beginning and end. Despite the lack of fluency the child or children involved in the play experience learn valuable lessons and gain a wealth of information about things they are pretending are happening to them.

When children engage in spontaneous play they will play symbolically, for example, use objects to represent other objects (i.e. sticks as candles), use their imaginations to recreate familiar experiences (i.e. speaking into a block for a mobile phone), engage others (if old enough), and role play familiar experiences to make sense of events (i.e. a father patting a baby to sleep).

Opposite to spontaneous play are influenced play experiences. Influenced play experiences utilise the ideas of themes or events found in things such as books, television programs or computer games. When children engage in play involving these types of themes it is argued that less learning occurs as children are no longer making life connections. Instead they spend a lot of their time reenacting action scenes or fantasy themes which have a limited connection to their everyday lives.

While it is not suggested to prevent children from engaging in play that uses the ideas of fictional characters or story plots it is important to understand that a deep type of learning only occurs when children link their play ideas to events and situations that somehow affect their lives (now or in the future) and their understanding of the world, the people and things in it.

Planned play experiences

There has been a lot of attention paid to the idea that negative consequences can arise when children are exposed to constant, planned play and learning experiences. There is no denying the benefits of planned play experiences, mainly because they help to target specific developmental domains, for example, easel painting helps to develop a child's fine motor skills (among others) as they hold and manipulate different sized brushes. Yet interestingly there have been indications that constant planned experiences lure the child into seeking support to complete tasks more than they would during free play. This suggestion leads to the idea that children who engage in only planned experiences are more easily bored, that they require adults or others to fill moments of boredom for them, and discourage children from persisting to overcome problems without explicit support. Worst-case scenario means that children who cannot entertain themselves will continue to rely on other people and/or things (such as technology) to fill any boredom voids or overcome developmental deficiencies.

Stages of play

Play for all children can and will look different. Culture, upbringing, age, temperament, safety and home stability factors (among others) will all play a part in how and if a child will play. Taking a western homogenous viewpoint the following stages of play can often be observed:

Sensorimotor stage – Approximately birth to two years old

Initially in this stage children will begin to explore their world through their senses. Play for babies is made up of random movements. As children get older, touching and mouthing objects is commonplace. Initially, children will play without being aware of others' presence as they play. Solitary (without others near) and parallel play (playing alongside others without noticing them) will continue to dominate during this stage.

Preoperational stage – Approximately two years to seven years old

As children progress through this stage they will begin to play in symbolic ways, for example, making a cake out of sand. Children will progressively graduate from playing parallel to each other before starting to observe other's play. Once aware of others around them, children will move towards something known as associative play. Associative play occurs when children play together but no set rules exist, meaning that play is less fluent and has fewer beginnings and ends. When this type of play occurs children can participate in games or role plays whereby there is a general shared idea despite each child typically allowing their own ideas to dominate their actions and decisions.

As children get older they will develop more complicated play plots and begin to include others in their play, although they will not always adapt their own play ideas to make way for another's ideas. Around the age of three or four (although it can vary) children will begin to develop friendships and

peer preferences. It is during this stage they will learn to navigate the ever-changing face of friendship whereby one minute they are friends with someone and then suddenly estranged.

Concrete operational stage – Approximately seven years to eleven years old

The ability for children to think logically about concrete events grows during this developmental stage. They also start to fine tune their ability to think outside themselves and act and think more empathetically. While they come to understand that others do not agree with their thoughts and ideas they will not always be able to accept it. Sophisticated play ideas emerge in this stage and children will use their acquired knowledge of the world, people and things in it to help their play to evolve in mature ways. Social play dominates during this time, whereby children play co-operatively and acknowledge the existence of common rules and social expectations. Games with rules and often interests and activities such as sport may start to take over informal play.

Formal operation stage – twelve years on

Thinking and learning combine during this stage, allowing children to problem solve and come up with solutions to complex problems. Thinking and interactions are sophisticated and the ability to consider other's perspectives evolves in this stage. Like the previous stage, interests and activities will continue to dominate the child's play worlds.

The differences in children

While the above stages of play indicate when children may be likely to enter and exit different play stages, it is important to recognise there will be differences between all children. As such, some children may traverse these stages in a typical manner while others may remain or exit a stage more quickly or slowly than their peers. Regardless, the rate which children enter each stage does not determine a child's social and emotional competencies. For example, a four year old child who prefers parallel play does not automatically raise red flags in regards to any developmental delay. Temperament and personality, as mentioned earlier, will influence a child's play decisions and preferences. As such, some will more naturally gravitate towards activities that can be completed without interruption while others will move towards more socially inspired experiences. Future years frequently show how children often stay true to their preferences, meaning the child who preferred solitary experiences may only develop one or two close friendships as opposed to the socially motivated child who may surround themselves with a hoard of friends.

Summing it up

Although play cannot be universally defined this article has focused on the idea that play is a purposeful act whereby children enact events and situations from their life to learn about their world, people and things in it. Play from this perspective adopts an important role and enhances children's learning opportunities when they feel and experience events as if they have lived them first-hand. Spontaneous play is typified as unplanned play. Spontaneous play uses knowledge of real-life and fanciful events and situations. The uneven tempo of spontaneous play means that multiple children's ideas may interrupt the flow of play, influencing the common lack of beginning and end in play. Despite this lack of fluency children are able to learn a lot and adapt this learning to real-life events if and when they occur. The opportunities children have to recreate experiences (whether fantasy or real) help them to develop an understanding of how they fit into the world. The opposite

of spontaneous play is structured play. Structured play has many benefits, including supporting the development of children in specific ways. A mixture of spontaneous and structured play is believed to be beneficial to prevent children from becoming reliant on others to entertain them or fill boredom voids. Children's play typically progresses through stages, although it is important to recognise that an array of factors can influence children's development and play preferences. The progression of play includes the sensory motor, preoperational, concrete and formal operation stages. Within these stages children start out playing by themselves before they slowly develop more interest, appreciation and acceptance of social rules and expectations. Naturally all children are different, meaning they will not progress in the same ways or at the same rate.

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