

The Importance of Being Playful

With the right approach, a plain white hat and a plate full of yarn spaghetti can contribute to a young child's cognitive development.

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Educators have always considered play to be a staple in early childhood classrooms. But the growing demands for teacher accountability and measurable outcomes for prekindergarten and kindergarten programs are pushing play to the periphery of the curriculum. Some proponents of more academically rigorous programs for young children view play and learning as mutually exclusive, clearly favoring "serious" learning and wanting teachers to spend more time on specific academic content. But do play and learning have to compete? Research on early learning and development shows that when children are properly supported in their play, the play does not take away from learning but contributes to it (Bergen, 2002).

As researchers studying the ways to scaffold the development of foundational skills in young children, we have never met a teacher—preschool, Head Start, or kindergarten—who disagreed with the notion that young children learn through play. At the same time, many teachers worry that children's play is not valued outside of the early education community. These teachers must increasingly defend the use of play in their classrooms to principals, parents, and teachers of higher grades.

Early childhood teachers admit that the benefits of play are not as easy to understand and assess as, for example,

children's ability to recognize letters or write their names. Teachers also tell us that they feel obligated to prove that play not only facilitates the development of social competencies but also promotes the learning of pre-academic skills and concepts. We believe that a certain kind of play has its place in early childhood classrooms and that the proponents of play and academic learning can find some much-needed common ground.

Effects of Play on Early Learning and Development

Play has been of great interest to scholars of child development and learning, psychologists, and educators alike. Jean Piaget (1962) and Lev Vygotsky (1978) were among the first to link play with cognitive development. In a comprehensive review of numerous studies on play, researchers found evidence that play contributes to advances in "verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy, and group participation" (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Recent research provides additional evidence of the strong connections between quality of play in preschool years and children's readiness for school instruction (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2000; Ewing Marion Kauffman Founda-

tion, 2002; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Further, research directly links play to children's ability to master such academic content as literacy and numeracy. For example, children's engagement in pretend play was found to be positively and significantly correlated with such competencies as text comprehension and metalinguistic awareness and with an understanding of the purpose of reading and writing (Roskos & Christie, 2000).

How Play Evolves

Make-believe play emerges gradually as the child moves from infancy to preschool. In the beginning, children are more focused on the actual objects that they use when they play. Later, they focus on the people who use the objects in social interaction. Whereas a toddler might simply enjoy the repetitive action of rocking a baby doll, an older child engaged in the same activity would call herself "Mommy" and add other mommy behaviors such as using baby talk when talking to the doll. These preschoolers depend heavily on props and may even refuse to play if they think that the props are not sufficiently realistic:

By the time most children turn 4, they begin to develop more complex play with multiple roles and symbolic uses of props. Many preschool- and even kindergarten-age children, however, still play at the toddler level. We



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define this kind of repetitive, unimaginative play as “immature play” to distinguish it from the “mature play” that is expected of older preschoolers and kindergartners. Mature play contributes to children’s learning and development in many areas that immature play does not affect (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

As children grow older, they tend to spend less time in pretend play and more time playing sports and board or computer games. In these activities, children have to follow the established rules and rarely have a chance to discuss, negotiate, or change those rules—an important skill that contributes to the

development of social competence and self-regulation. When learning to play games takes its natural course (see Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978) and builds on the foundation of well-developed pretend play, children get an opportunity to both develop and apply their social and self-regulation skills. When pretend play is completely replaced by sports or other organized activities, however, these important foundational skills might not develop fully.

Characteristics of Mature Play

Teachers often disagree about what constitutes mature play. Some think that

the play has to have more sophisticated content, such as playing archaeological dig or space station; others believe that children play in a mature way when they don’t fight with one another. We, however, consider play to be mature only when it has the following characteristics, which we have extracted from research and best practices.

Imaginary situations. In mature play, children assign new meanings to the objects and people in a pretend situation. When children pretend, they focus on an object’s abstract properties rather than its concrete attributes. They invent new uses for familiar toys and props when the play scenario calls for it. Sometimes children even describe the missing prop by using words and gestures. In doing so, they become aware of different symbolic systems that will serve them later when they start mastering letters and numbers.

Multiple roles. The roles associated with a theme in mature play are not stereotypical or limited; the play easily includes supporting characters. For example, playing “fire station” does not mean that the only roles are those of firefighters. Children can also pretend to be a fire truck driver or a phone dispatcher.

When children assume different roles in play scenarios, they learn about real social interactions that they might not have experienced (not just following commands but also issuing them; not only asking for help but also being the one that helps). In addition, they learn about their own actions and emotions by using them “on demand.” (I am really OK, but I have to cry because I am playing a baby and the doctor just gave me a shot.) Understanding emotions and developing emotional self-control are crucial for children’s social and emotional development.

Clearly defined rules. Mature play has clearly defined rules and roles. As children follow the rules in play, they learn to delay immediate fulfillment of their desires. A child playing “customer” cannot take an attractive toy if the toy—a scale or a cash register—is the prop for the role of the “checker.” Thus,

mature play helps young children develop self-regulation. To stay in the play, the child must follow the rules.

Flexible themes. Mature play usually spans a broad range of themes that are flexible enough to incorporate new roles and ideas previously associated with other themes. When children play at a more mature level, they negotiate their plans. For example, when playing "hospital" or "store," children can create a new play scenario in which a doctor goes to the grocery store to buy medicine for the hospital or a cashier in a grocery store gets sick and is taken to the hospital. By combining different themes, children learn to plan and solve problems.

Language development. A mature level of play implies an extensive use of language. Children use language to plan their play scenario, to negotiate and act out their roles, to explain their "pretend" behaviors to other participants, and to regulate compliance with the rules. In doing so, they often need to modify their speech (its intonation, register, and even choice of words) according to the requirements of a particular role or as they switch from talking in a pretend way to talking for real. As the repertoire of roles grows, so do children's vocabulary, mastery of grammar and practical uses of language, and metalinguistic awareness.

Length of play. Mature play is not limited to one short session, but may last for many days as children pick up the theme where they left off and continue playing. Creating, reviewing, and revising the plans are essential parts of the play. Staying with the same play theme for a long time allows children to elaborate on the imaginary situation, integrate new roles, and discover new uses for play props.

How Teachers Can Support Imaginative Play

In the past, children learned how to play at a mature level simply by being part of an extended multi-age group within their own family or in their neighborhood. Unfortunately, with children spending more time in age-

segregated groups, that is no longer the case. TV shows and computers, even with carefully selected educational content, cannot replace live play mentors. The teacher needs to take the primary role in helping children develop and maintain mature play.

Some teachers go overboard and become too involved so that the play loses its spontaneous, child-initiated character and changes into another adult-directed activity. Other teachers prefer to limit their interventions in play

stand for many objects. For example, instead of placing specific dress-up costumes in the dramatic play area, stock it with bolts of differently colored and textured fabrics. Children can then use the same piece of lace to play Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella, wear the same white hat when playing a nurse or a chef, and drape themselves in a piece of fabric with an animal print when playing different animals. Instead of buying plastic food for a pretend restaurant, teachers might use generic



Photo courtesy of Elena Bodrova

Preschool students use clay to make props for their pretend bakery.

to the situations in which children get into fights or fail to communicate. They do not intervene when children's play remains stereotypical and unexciting day after day. Thus, children miss opportunities to expand the scope of their play. Teachers can maintain a balance between supporting mature play and keeping it truly child-initiated. To do so, they need to provide specific support for each of the key characteristics of mature play.

Create Imaginary Situations

A good way to guide children in the development of imaginary situations is to provide multipurpose props that can

paper plates and have children draw food on them or use other objects to represent food (for example, packing peanuts look like marshmallows, and pieces of yarn make great spaghetti).

Some children may not be ready to make their own props and will not play without realistic props. If many children are at this stage, teachers can combine multipurpose props with realistic ones to keep play going and then gradually provide more unstructured materials. At the same time, teachers can use additional strategies to help children create and maintain the imaginary situation. During small-group time, teachers can show the children different common

objects and brainstorm how they can use them in different ways in play. For example, a pencil can be a magic wand, a thermometer, a space ship, a stirring spoon, or a conductor's baton. Teachers should always encourage children to use both gestures and words to describe how they are using the object in a pretend way.

Integrate Different Play Themes and Roles

Left to their own devices, children rarely come up with truly imaginative play scenarios because they lack knowledge about the roles and the language needed. As a result, play themes in most classrooms are limited to family, hospital, or store, with few roles to play.

Teachers should use field trips, literature, and videos to expand children's repertoire of play themes and roles. Children rarely incorporate the new themes into their play scenarios, however, if these resources are not used properly and the teacher focuses children's attention on the "things" part of the field trip or video—what is inside a fire station or what happens to the apples when they become apple cider. Instead, teachers should point out the "people" part of each new setting—the many different roles that people have and how the roles relate to one another. Learning about the new roles, language, and actions will help children reenact them later in their play.

Sustain Play

Teachers can support mature play by helping children plan play in advance. Planning helps children communicate about the roles and describe what the person in each role can and cannot do. Children benefit most from advance planning when they record their plans by drawing or writing them. By using these records later as reminders of their play ideas, they may be stimulated to create new developments in their play scenario.

Children who put effort into planning their future play tend to stay longer with their chosen play theme and get less distracted by what is happening in

other areas of the classroom. Teachers see fewer fights in the classrooms when children draw pictures of what they want to play first. For instance, when Monica wants to be the cashier in a pretend bakery, Isabella shows her the plan in which she drew herself at the cash register, so Monica agrees to choose a different role.

Positive Effects of Mature Play

As we worked with preschool and kindergarten teachers on scaffolding children's literacy development (Bodrova & Leong, 2001; Bodrova,

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Leong, Paynter, & Hensen, 2002; Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, & Hughes, 2002), we noticed that teachers achieved the best results when they focused on supporting mature play. Children in these classrooms not only mastered literacy skills and concepts at a higher rate but also developed better language and social skills and learned how to regulate their physical and cognitive behaviors (Bodrova, Leong, Norford, & Paynter, in press). By contrast, in the classrooms where play was on the back burner, teachers struggled with a variety of problems, including classroom management and children's lack of interest in reading and writing. These results confirm our belief that thoughtfully supported play is essential for young children's learning and development. ■

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