

PLAYFUL LEARNING AND TEACHING

*Integrating Play into
Preschool and Primary Programs*



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PREFACE

Placing play at the center of the curriculum for young children has historically been a major focus of early childhood education. No research exists that diminishes the importance of play to the learning and development of young children. However, current information regarding the development of the brain, multiple intelligence, learning styles, and the role of culture in play and learning creates a need to develop strategies that recognize and celebrate children's unique playing and learning styles. *Playful Learning and Teaching: Integrating Play into Preschool and Primary Programs* describes the relationship between play and learning in children from birth through age eight and outlines strategies for embedding opportunities for play into curricula and for creating a classroom culture that promotes playful learning.

This book is based on the philosophy that children construct knowledge while actively engaged in the process of understanding their world. One important context for this engagement is play. We define play as open-ended, self-chosen, enjoyable actions and activities that unite and integrate cognitive, language, social, emotional, and motor aspects of learning within rich, culturally sensitive, child-centered, and supportive contexts. Playful learning refers to the process of learning through play and the spirit that encompasses this process. Playful teaching refers to strategies that create the environment and support the process of learning through play and the spirit that encompasses these actions. We use the terms *playful learning* and *playful teaching* to draw attention to the reciprocal nature of play and learning in the lives of children and the adults who teach and care for them.

We develop the concept that teachers have three major roles regarding play. The first role is to plan for and create multiple opportunities for children to learn through play. The second role involves interacting with children as they play, scaffolding learning and promoting cognitive and social competence, creative expression, and the development of dispositions that promote healthy lifestyles. The third role is to develop a system for ongoing assessment that uses the rich context created through playful learning.

Embedded within each role are actions of advocacy. Teachers will need to advocate for children and children's right to learn through play. They must work diligently with families and administrators to explain and display the powerful relationship between children's play and their learning and development. One feature that distinguishes this book from others is its focus on advocacy as an essential role of early childhood educators. Each chapter contains activities that develop advocacy skills and help teachers demonstrate to parents and administrators the importance of play in the lives of children.

In this text, we present multiple perspectives on the role of play in learning and development. Included among these are multicultural considerations for playful learning. We also offer specific strategies for including children with special needs in the play experiences of any classroom. The perspectives of professional organizations that steer curricula development, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the International Reading Association, National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the National Research Council, are also discussed.

We ask readers to begin their study of each chapter by spending about ten minutes responding to a writing prompt designed to help them recall how a particular aspect of play

affected their lives. This writing and reflecting process provides an entry point into the material covered in the chapter. At the conclusion of each chapter, readers review their initial writing and reflect on how their understanding of the value of play and of the pragmatic aspects of creating a culture of playfulness has changed.

This journaling process represents a constructivist perspective on teaching and learning. This perspective is also demonstrated by the text's spiraling structure. Early chapters introduce major concepts that are revisited and then expanded in later chapters. In this way, each chapter creates a scaffold for the chapters that follow. This constructive learning theme extends to the Instructor's Manual, which provides the instructor with summaries of each chapter and also ideas for activities that will create a playful learning environment that gives adults the opportunity to reconstruct their understanding of the role of play in learning and development.

Each chapter is framed by Stories from the Field. These stories reflect the issues concerning the use of play as a teaching strategy as expressed by early childhood educators in the United States. We use these stories as a springboard to further the discussion of the real issues teachers face and as examples of creative solutions teachers develop to deal with their unique situations. Some voices are actual accounts expressed by individual educators; others represent a composite of ideas and experiences drawn from interactions with teachers we have worked with over the years.

The text is organized into three sections. Part One, *Connecting Theories of Play, Learning, and Development*, reviews current perspectives on the powerful connection between children's learning and their play. Chapters 1 and 2 provide the philosophical and theoretical basis for considering play as a vital element of the classroom environment. Part Two, *Connecting Play Theory and Practice in Preschool Programs and Primary Classrooms*, delineates strategic approaches useful to embedding play into curricula, routines, and transitions common to preschool programs and primary classrooms. Chapter 3 describes strategies for developing an integrated, thematic curriculum embedded with opportunities for children to pursue projects. Chapter 4 describes the process of developing and maintaining a learning center system that promotes optimal learning opportunities for all children. Chapter 5 describes the role of pretense in learning and development, as well as strategies for using pretense and dramatic play. Chapter 6 deals with ongoing assessment and describes strategies teachers can use to document learning within the context of play.

Part Three, *Connecting Play and Content in Preschool Programs and Primary Classrooms*, offers suggestions for fostering learning through playful engagement with concepts and ideas. Chapter 7 discusses the relationship between play and the development of dispositions for healthy living. Chapter 8 relates to the development of creative expression. Chapter 9 explains the relationship between play and literacy development, and Chapter 10 reviews the relationship between play and cognitive competence.

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Connecting Theories of Play, Learning, and Development

CHAPTER

1

Defining Play from Many Perspectives

Prereading Guide

First Impressions. Describe in your journal how you played when you were a child by considering these questions. What are your earliest memories of play? Approximately how old were you? As a young child, what materials did you enjoy playing with most? Who, if anyone, did you enjoy playing with most? What do you think you gained from your play?

Stories from the Field

Participants attending “Get-Acquainted Night” at a public elementary school in a southwestern community were asked to define play and describe their beliefs concerning the role of play in an early childhood classroom. The group in attendance represented a diverse population in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and educational background. Participants included students’ families, the principal, and teachers of preschool, kindergarten, and first through third grades. Here is a sample of their responses (Kieff, 1994).

What is play?

“Play is a child’s work.”

“Play is the way children express themselves.”

“Play is fun.”

“Play is the way children learn about their world.”

“Play is the way children learn motor skills.”

“Play is the most important thing children do.”

“It’s running off all that energy.”

“Play is how children learn to get along.”

“After school, and on weekends, that’s when children can play.”

"Play is painting and building with blocks."

"Messing around and having fun with other children, that's play."

Describe the role play should have in early childhood classrooms.

"Play supports academic learning by giving children a chance to practice what they have learned."

"In school, children should be engaged in serious learning tasks that prepare them to achieve. Play is a socialization activity that is best left to recess or physical education periods."

"Play should be confined to recess and lunchtime breaks."

"Play is the basis for the curriculum in the classroom."

"I know children need to play, but I don't understand why they play at school. It seems like they are just wasting time."

"Play should be a reward for work well done."

Multiple Perspectives Regarding Play

How many ways are there to define play and describe its importance to the learning and development of young children? As illustrated in this small sample, the range of definitions for play is extensive, and the values assigned to the role of play in educational settings represent a broad spectrum of opinions. Because there is no single or comprehensive definition of play, there is often confusion concerning the use of play in educational settings. Is play the way young children learn? Or is it a way to release energy so that learning can occur? Should it be the basis for curriculum in early childhood programs? Or should it be confined to recess or excluded completely? Indeed, do we need to define divergent positions regarding the use of play in programs for young children, or can we work toward a compromise that supports all those concerned about children and childhood development? These are important questions to consider as we begin to develop our understanding of the role of play in the lives of children and develop strategies for its use in early childhood programs.

Why is it so difficult to find agreement about play among adults, even among a small group of adults such as those described earlier, who confirm a shared interest in the well-being of children by attending a Get-Acquainted Night? The answer, like play itself, is both complex and dynamic. The meaning and value of play are embedded in one's knowledge about play, past experiences with play, and cultural values regarding play. This meaning changes and evolves as one encounters play in new circumstances and contexts. Therefore, to better understand what play is, how it affects learning and development, and its role in early childhood education, we first need to examine the historical, theoretical, and cultural perspectives that underlie each individual's personal definition of and belief about play.

Classical Perspectives of Play

Theories that explain the role of play often conflict with each other. Until about 1920, classical theories influenced beliefs about play. These theories emphasized a biological basis

for children's play. Although these theories are not strongly supported by modern psychologists, they may still be affecting the way we think about play (Hughes, 1999). Some of the classical perspectives of play are surplus energy, recapitulation, practice for adulthood, and renewal of energy; a summary of each follows.

Surplus Energy. According to the surplus energy perspective, first proposed by Herbert Spencer in 1873 (in Hughes, 1999), humans are naturally equipped with energy needed for survival. If this energy is not used for the purpose of survival, it must be discharged in some way. Therefore, the purpose of play is to allow children to use up this excess energy. Letting children go out to recess to run off steam is an example of a modern extension of this belief. Some children do seem more relaxed after play and may be better able to concentrate on specific learning tasks. However, other children may play to the point of exhaustion or may even build up more energy during recess and therefore find it more difficult to concentrate when they return to the classroom.

Recapitulation. The theory of recapitulation was first proposed by G. Stanley Hall, a leading figure in early American psychology (in Hughes, 1999). Recapitulation is the idea that humans follow, from birth to adulthood, an innate sequence of development that mirrors the development of the entire human species. Play is the retracing of the developmental progress of our ancestors, and children progress through play in stages similar to the stages of human evolution. Furthermore, through play, the undesirable traits of humanity can be eliminated. In other words, children's play prepares them for more sophisticated activities necessary in the modern world. A modern extension of this theory is the tendency for adults to assign, arbitrarily, ages after which certain play behaviors are no longer acceptable. For example, some believe that it is inappropriate for preadolescents to continue to play with dolls or action figures.

Practice for Adulthood. According to the practice for adulthood theory, children play to practice and perfect their instincts for survival and tasks they will need to perform as adults (Groos, 1901). This theory might explain why children like to play with building materials, trucks, dolls, dishes, and other housekeeping toys. They may be practicing for adulthood. A modern extension of this theory is evident when parents and teachers choose representational toys and models such as toy lawn mowers, vacuum cleaners, and doctor's kits for young children.

Renewal of Energy. The renewal of energy theory was proposed by G. T. W. Patrick (1916) and states that work puts unnecessary strain on the brain and fine muscle coordination. When this happens, a person is prone to accidents. Play is therefore a way to release tension and fatigue and restore energy needed to maintain competence. The use of motor activities to offset fatigue and restore competency is a modern application of this theory. Children become fatigued during the process of concentrating on academic tasks. Recess or playtime is used to restore their energy so they can return to the "work" of learning. Therefore, this theory directly opposes Spencer's surplus energy theory. A modern extension of this theory is the idea that summer vacation is needed to reenergize students (and teachers) for the upcoming academic year. Another extension of this theory can be seen in the alternation of intense work and free play in daily classroom schedules.