Back to Basics

Play in Early Childhood

JILL ENGLEBRIGHT FOX, PHD

K yle plays with blocks and builds a castle. Tony and Victoria play fire station and pretend to be firefighters. Kenzo and Carl play catch with a ball. Children playact with playmates in the playhouse. Playgroups on the playground choose players to play ball. As an early childhood professional, you probably use the word "play" a hundred times per day.

Research indicates that children learn best in an environment which allows them to explore, discover, and play. Play is an important part of a developmentally appropriate child care program. It is also closely tied to the development of cognitive, socio-emotional, and physical behaviors. But what exactly does it mean to play and why is play so important for young children?

What Is Play?

Although it is simple to compile a list of play activities, it is much more difficult to define play. Scales, et al., (1991) called play "that absorbing activity in which healthy young children participate with enthusiasm and abandon" (p. 15). Csikszentmihalyi (1981) described play as "a subset of life . . . an arrangement in which one can practice behavior without dreading its consequences" (p. 14). Garvey (1977) gave a useful description of play for teachers when she defined play as an activity which is: 1) positively valued by the player; 2) self-motivated; 3) freely chosen; 4) engaging; and 5) which "has certain systematic relations to what is not play" (p. 5). These characteristics are important for teachers to remember because imposing adult values, requirements, or motivations on children's activities may change the very nature of play.

According to *Webster's Desk Dictionary of the English Language,* the word play has 34 different meanings. In terms of young children and play, the following definitions from Webster's are useful:

- light, brisk, or changing movement (e.g., to pretend you're a butterfly)
- to act or imitate the part of a person or character (e.g., to play house)
- to employ a piece of equipment (e.g., to play blocks)
- exercise for amusement or recreation (e.g., to play tag)
- fun or jest, as opposed to seriousness (e.g., to play peek-a-boo or sing a silly song)
- the action of a game (e.g., to play duck-duck-goose)

Why Is Play Important?

According to Fromberg and Gullo (1992), play enhances language development, social competence, creativity, imagination, and thinking skills. Frost (1992) concurred, stating that "play is the chief vehicle for the development of imagination and intelligence, language, social skills, and perceptual-motor abilities in infants and young children" (p. 48).

Garvey (1977) states that play is most common during childhood when children's knowledge of self, comprehension of verbal and non-verbal communication, and understanding of the physical and social worlds are expanding dramatically.

Fromberg (1990) claims that play is the "ultimate integrator of human experience" (p. 223). This means that when children play, they draw upon their past experiences—things they have done, seen others do, read about, or seen on television—and they use these experiences to build games, play scenarios, and engage in activities.

Children use fine and gross motor skills in their play. They react to each other socially. They think about what they are doing or going to do. They use language to talk to each other or to themselves and they very often respond emotionally to the play activity. The integration of these different types of behaviors is key to the cognitive development of young children. According to Rogers and Sawyer (1988), "until at least the age of nine, children's cognitive structures function best in this unified mode" (p. 58). Because children's play draws upon all of these behaviors, it is a very effective vehicle for learning.

Play and Cognitive Development

The relationship between play and cognitive development is described differently in the two theories of cognitive development which dominate early childhood education—Piaget's and Vygotsky's.

Piaget (1962) defined play as assimilation, or the child's efforts to make environmental stimuli match his or her own concepts. Piagetian theory holds that play, in and of itself, does not necessarily result in the formation of new cognitive structures. Piaget claimed that play was just for pleasure, and while it allowed children to practice things they had previously learned, it did not necessarily result in the learning of new things. In other words, play reflects what the child has already learned but does not necessarily teach the child anything new. In this view, play is seen as a "process reflective of emerging symbolic development, but contributing little to it" (Johnsen & Christie, 1986, p. 51).

In contrast, Vygotskian theory states that play actually facilitates cognitive development. Children not only practice what they already know, they also learn new things. In discussing Vygotsky's theory, Vandenberg (1986) remarks that "play not so much reflects thought (as Piaget suggests) as it creates thought" (p. 21).

Observations of children at play yield examples to support both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories of play. A child who puts on a raincoat and a firefighter's hat and rushes to rescue his teddy bear from the pretend flames in his playhouse is practicing what he has previously learned about firefighters. This supports Piaget's theory. On the other hand, a child in the block center who announces to his teacher, "Look! When I put these two square blocks together, I get a rectangle!" has constructed new knowledge through her play. This supports Vygotsky's theory.

Whether children are practicing what they have learned in other settings or are constructing new knowledge, it is clear that play has a valuable role in the early childhood classroom.

Play—Indoors and Out

Early childhood teachers have long recognized the value of play in programs for young children. Unfortunately, teachers often fail to take advantage of the opportunities play provides for observing children's development and learning. Through such observations teachers can learn about children's social interactions, cognitive and language abilities, motor skills, and emotional development.

Frost (1992) recommends that observing children at play be a daily responsibility for early childhood professionals. Regular observations provide teachers with assessment information for identifying children with special needs, planning future play experiences, evaluating play materials, determining areas of strength and weakness for individual children, planning curriculum for individual children, reporting to parents, and checking on a child's on-going progress. The increased use of authentic assessment strategies is making observations of children's play more commonplace in early childhood classrooms.

Hymes (1981) recommends that children have two classrooms—one indoors and one outdoors. The outdoor play environment should be used as an extension of the indoor classroom. It should be a learning environment as carefully planned as the indoor activity centers and should encourage motor and social skills as well as help children refine existing cognitive structures and construct new ones. Used in this way, the outdoor play environment provides a basis for observational assessment in all areas of development.

Fox (1993) researched the practicality of observing young children's cognitive development during outdoor play. Her observations of four- and five-year-old children during outdoor play found examples of addition and subtraction, shape identification, patterning, one-to-one correspondence, number sense, sequencing of events, use of ordinal numbers, knowledge of prepositions, and identification of final and initial consonants. Fox's outdoor observations also found multiple examples of problem-solving, creative thinking, social competence, language use, and gross and fine motor skills. Although outdoor observations do not replace classroom assessment, they can provide valuable information for teachers of young children. As Fox stated, "These observations can be performed unobtrusively, without intruding upon the children's activities and without placing children in a stressful testing situation" (p. 131).

Parten's Five Types of Play

Play for young children assumes many different forms. Mildred Parten (1932) was one of the early researchers studying children at play. She focused on the social interactions between children during play activities. Parten's categories of play are not hierarchical. Depending on the circumstances, children may engage in any of the different types of play. Parten does note, however, that in her research with two- to five-year-olds, "participation in the most social types of groups occurs most frequently among the older children" (p. 259).

Extra playtime allows children to become involved in more complex and productive play activities

- **Onlooker behavior**—Playing passively by watching or conversing with other children engaged in play activities.
- **Solitary independent**—Playing by oneself.
- **Parallel**—Playing, even in the middle of a group, while remaining engrossed in one's own activity. Children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other's toys, but always maintain their independence.
- **Associative**—When children share materials and talk to each other, but do not coordinate play objectives or interests.
- **Cooperative**—When children organize themselves into roles with specific goals in mind (e.g., to assign the roles of doctor, nurse, and patient and play hospital).

How Much Should Children Play?

Indoors and outdoors, children need large blocks of time for play. According to Christie and Wardle (1992), short play periods may require children to abandon their group dramatizations or constructive play just when they begin to get involved. When this happens a number of times, children may give up on more sophisticated forms of play and settle for less advanced forms that can be completed in short periods of time. Shorter play periods reduce both the amount and the maturity of children's play, and many important benefits of play, such as persistence, negotiation, problem solving, planning, and cooperation are lost. Large blocks of time (30 to 60 minutes, or longer) should be scheduled for indoor and outdoor play periods. Christie and Wardle remind teachers that extra playtime does not result in children becoming bored. Instead, it prompts children to become involved in more complex, more productive play activities.

The Teacher's Role

The early childhood teacher is the facilitator of play in the classroom. The teacher facilitates play by providing appropriate indoor and outdoor play environments. Safety is, of course, the primary concern. Age and developmental levels must be carefully considered in the design and selection of materials. Guidelines for selecting safe and appropriate equipment for outdoor play environments are available through the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's Handbook for Public Playground Safety and the Playground Safety Manual by Jambor and Palmer (1991). Similar guidelines are also available for indoor settings (Torelli & Durrett, 1996; Caples, 1996; Ard & Pitts, 1990). Once appropriate environments and materials are in place, regular safety checks and maintenance are needed to ensure that the equipment is sound and safe for continued play.

Teachers also facilitate play by working with children to develop rules for safe indoor and outdoor play. Discussion about the appropriate use of materials, the safe number of participants on each piece of equipment, taking turns, sharing, and cleaning up provides the children with information to begin their play activities. These discussions need to be ongoing because some children may need frequent reminders about rules and because new situations may arise (e.g., new equipment).

By providing play materials related to thematic instruction, early childhood teachers can establish links between the children's indoor and outdoor play and their program's curriculum. Thematic props for dramatic play can be placed in the dramatic play center or stored in prop boxes and taken outside to extend the dramatic play to a new setting. An art center in the outdoor play environment may encourage children to explore the possibilities of using leaves, twigs, pebbles, and sand in their three-dimensional art productions. Painting easels and water tables may also be moved outside periodically for children's use during outdoor play periods. Finally, a collection of books stored in a wagon to be taken outside during play time may offer some children a needed alternative to more active play.

As facilitators of children's play, teachers should closely observe children during play periods not only for assessment purposes, as stated earlier, but also to facilitate appropriate social interactions and motor behaviors. It is important that children be the decision-makers during play, choosing what and where to play, choosing roles for each player, and choosing how play will proceed. Occasionally, however, some children will need adult assistance in joining a play group, modifying behavior, or negotiating a disagreement. Careful observation will help the teacher to decide when to offer assistance and what form that assistance should take.

Conclusion

Although play is a difficult concept to define, it is very easy to recognize. Children actively involved in play may be engaged in a variety of activities, independently, with a partner, or in a group. Because play is closely tied to the cognitive, socio-emotional, and motor development of young children, it is an important part of developmentally appropriate early childhood programs.

JILL ENGLEBRIGHT FOX, PhD, is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Virginia Commonwealth University. She taught kindergarten and first grade in the Texas public schools for eight years, and is currently an active member of the International Play Association-USA. Her research interests focus on play and aesthetic development in young children, and professional development schools.