

Constructive, Purposeful Play

Purposeful, engaging play is an important vehicle for children’s learning. Children learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them by playing. As they play, children acquire language, learn to solve problems and control their behavior and feelings, and explore social roles. Infants and children from all socioeconomic backgrounds and cultures play.⁶¹ In fact, the United Nations honors play’s importance in the lives of children by “[recognizing] it as a fundamental human right, on par with rights to shelter.”⁶²

One of the first to recognize the importance of play and its role in cognitive thinking was Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist and developmental theorist.⁶³ According to Piaget, play serves many purposes and provides an excellent vehicle for learning. By handling many different materials, children learn to observe, sort, and sequence. Their knowledge grows as they experiment, make discoveries, and modify their current thinking to incorporate new insights.

Building on Piaget’s theory about how play helps children learn, Vygotsky argued that children think in complex ways as they play.⁶⁴ As children play, they make rules, use symbols, and create narratives. Vygotsky thought that interacting with adults and more knowledgeable peers enhances a child’s ability to learn through play. With the guidance and support of a teacher, children build new knowledge by fitting new information and experiences with what they already know. Their peers can model and encourage more advanced skills. Vygotsky found that in sociodramatic play, which is characterized by high levels of pretending, children talk to themselves and each other about what they are playing and how they are going to play. He thought that such talk enhances self-regulation.

Later research confirmed Vygotsky’s theory, linking complex sociodramatic play to the development of self-regulation and recognizing play as particularly beneficial for children who are impulsive or who are less advanced in self-regulatory development.⁶⁵ Adult-supported sociodramatic play gives children the best opportunity to develop their own regulatory skills in the context of a dynamic learning experience.⁶⁶ Laura Berk’s studies of children’s play found that pretend play “strengthens a wide variety of mental abilities, including sustained attention, memory, logical reasoning, language and literacy, imagination, creativity, understanding of emotions, and the ability to reflect on one’s own thinking and take another’s perspective.”⁶⁷

Private speech, or self-talk, is an important part of developing self-regulation skills. Berk and co-researcher Kerry Krafft⁶⁸ found that the private speech of 3- to 5-year-olds was more likely to occur during open-ended activities, especially dramatic play, than in closed-ended tasks with predetermined goals. One study found that when 4-year-olds were provided opportunities to engage in high amounts of child-initiated, free-choice activities supported by a variety of equipment and materials to explore, those children performed better on cognitive and language tasks at age 7 than their peers who did not have such opportunities.⁶⁹

More current research continues to confirm Vygotsky’s theories on children’s play. Researchers Sara Smilansky and Leah Shefatya found that children who engaged in high levels of sociodramatic play in preschool performed better academically in fourth grade than peers whose preschool play was less mature.⁷⁰ Children’s play positively influences not only their academic success in school but also their development as active, engaged, and lifelong learners. Children use play to refine their understandings and views of the

world around them and their experiences—inside and outside of the classroom. Play “fosters all aspects of the child’s development; emotional, social, intellectual, linguistic, and physical” and is central to children’s cognitive development (especially children’s approaches to learning, their ability to problem solve and be creative and think critically).⁷¹

The latest research also explores the different contexts of play. Joyce Hemphill, Laura Scheinholtz, and Heather Von Bank⁷² found that “undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child-driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue.” A learning environment that supports child-directed play encourages children’s learning and stimulates their imaginations and capacity to wonder and explore. Part of this supportive learning environment comes from teacher engagement and teachers’ guidance during child-initiated play.

In their work on guided learning, researchers defined guided play (child-directed with teacher support) as learning that is

- joyful (children engage in hands-on and “minds-on” play and exploration to make exciting new discoveries),
- meaningful (children follow their own interests and have an active role in pursuing their interests), and
- supportive (scaffolded by a teacher’s thoughtful responses, reactions, and interactions).⁷³

Children thrive when teachers actively engage with them in their play by describing what they are doing, asking questions, joining in, modeling new behaviors, and offering appropriate challenges. In a developmentally appropriate preschool classroom, play occurs throughout the day, with teachers encouraging and supporting the child-directed playful learning. The interactions between teachers and children during play are critical to this learning, as teachers carefully observe children’s play to determine the most appropriate levels and types of support to offer.

Play offers children opportunities to

- make choices;
- make decisions;
- solve problems;
- interact with one another;
- interact with adults;
- pursue their interests;
- experience learning as fun and exciting;
- experience themselves as capable, competent, and successful learners; and
- build language and literacy skills, discover mathematical relationships, explore science and technology concepts, learn about social studies, and engage in creative expression.

Play also provides a powerful and dynamic context for foundational learning in the content areas.⁷⁴ Through play, children explore mathematical ideas and construct literacy understandings. They develop understandings about science and technology and learn fundamental process and inquiry skills. Play is also an important avenue for learning in social studies and the arts.

For example, children playing with dolls gain knowledge in mathematics and literacy. Children might place the dolls and their various accessories into meaningful groups using recall strategies. They might assign the dolls the names of characters from a classroom book that was read aloud in the morning or reenact the story, which aids in narrative development and narrative recall.

According to the research of Elena Bodrova, Carrie Germeroth, and Deborah J. Leong⁷⁵, play also helps children learn “to cooperate with others and engage in socially appropriate behavior.” Play, especially social play, gives children unique opportunities to explain their ideas and their thinking to others, work creatively, and experiment⁷⁶. It leads to what Edwin Miller and Joan Almon⁷⁷ describe as “enormous growth in all aspects of the child’s development—cognitive, social, imaginative, and physical...it is the primary tool through which children explore their interests, express their joys, and process their fears, disappointments, and sorrows.”

Play-based learning motivates children to learn through their play and to view themselves as active learners. When children are able to play—to investigate, experiment, wonder, and explore—the concepts and skills they learn are significantly more meaningful and longer-lasting.⁷⁸ Despite the changes to expectations and standards for early learning, research from Miller and Almon⁷⁹ shows that “faster is not better when it comes to early education; young children need play and hands-on interactions for genuine learning to occur.”

Play is also associated with a range of immediate and long-term benefits. Constructive, purposeful play is positively related to

- cognitive development (memory development and symbolic thinking),⁸⁰
- positive approaches to learning.⁸¹
- positive social skills,⁸² and
- overall academic achievement in later grades.⁸³

References for “Constructive, Purposeful Play” Excerpt

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