

## How Children Learn Through Play

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### Abstract

This paper lays emphases on how play can enable children to learn for proper functioning in societal challenges and adjustment. Play opens the window of learning in a child's life and acquaints him or her with movement, observation, relationships, emotions and much more. Play time is learning time for young children as they build towers, dance, read, sing, paint, run and laugh together and watch learning unfold. Learning through play is a term used in education and psychology to describe how children can learn to make sense of the world around them. Through play children can develop social and cognitive skills, mature emotionally and gain self confidence required to engage in new experiences and environments. Play enables children to make sense of their world and possess a natural curiosity to explore and act as medium of realizing life goals. Play is mostly a self chosen activity by the child. In order for an activity to be considered in play, the experience must include a measure of inner control, ability to bend or invent reality and a strong internally based motivation for playing. If parents and educators try to label experiences as play, but in reality have specific requirements for the activity then it becomes work not play. Play is not wasted time but rather time spent in building new knowledge from previous experience. Play changes young children's experience and substantially affect their development and learning especially when intervention starts early in life and not a breed-ganged set of strategies. This research is expected to provide parents, guardians and teachers the right skills to handle children play activities in school and non-school setting. Play provides the children with the way withal to explore the world and acquire knowledge bank for societal functioning.

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**Keywords:** play, learning, play time for children and parents, culture learning and playground.

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### INTRODUCTION

Children love to play. Play time provides children with opportunities for learning. It is the most important way that children learn about the world around them. Play helps children to grow and develop in many ways – physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually. At times, parents might worry that children are “just playing” and not learning things they need to learn. Structured guidance and teaching of young children is essential; however, parents and other caregivers need to remember that play is learning for young children (Sharman 2012 & Rogers & Sawyers 1998).

Children learn in the process of playing through the following ways:

- Smiling and cooing at people let children learn how to engage others in interaction.
- Shaking of a rattle – their actions produce results to distinguish sounds.
- Throwing toys on the floor – principles of gravity; cause and effect.
- Looking at picture books – pictures represent real objects; words label objects.
- Rolling a ball – how to gain control of muscles; round stuff rolls.
- Cuddling a stuffed animal – applying their own ability to seek comfort; to nurture.

- Building with blocks – concepts of size, weight, symmetry, number and balance; muscle control and coordination.
- Drying up and playing horse – small muscle, self help skills, to recreate their own world.
- Pretending to be fire fighter – social roles, to work with others, share materials and communicate with other children (Kaunfman, Scott, Jerome, Singer, 2013).

If play is so important in the lives of young children, then parents and caregivers need to write down “play” on the daily schedule and make sure it happens every day rightly. This work is limited to the experiences of children from 0-6 of age

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Play by children often times is misconstrued by parents, guardians and relatives for the simple reason that, it leads them to emptiness of literary skills and content knowledge for improper adjustment into society. The following concepts harmonize playing variables for holistic child development.

#### a. Properties of Play

Play provide a medium for children to posses a natural curiosity to explore and act to enable them make sense of their world. Play exhibits the

following elements as observed by Lilard, Lemer, Hopkins, Doze, Smith and Palmquist (2012).

- Play must be pleasurable and enjoyable
- Play must have no extrinsic goals; there is no prescribed learning that must occur
- Play is spontaneous and voluntary
- Play involves active engagement on the part of the player
- It involves an element of make-believe.

The way children play is centrally specified as a result of differences in child rearing beliefs, values and practices. Play influences and reflects the way children from different cultures learn. Play in the western culture agrees with Lilard et al (2012) that play has no extrinsic goals; it is spontaneous and voluntary and sometimes pretend based play is encouraged. Whereas in Africa instead of having imaginary circumstances and friends, children play through various pre-scripted real life situations. They often have a set list of circumstances they can react. All of these circumstances reflect everyday life of the African man or woman.

Different age groups have different cognitive capabilities. Their culture also emphasizes learning through observation and modelling activities that are useful to the whole community. It is inherently integrated into the daily activities of the representations of the adult world. Adult life is represented through their play.

#### **b. Play activity/experiences for children**

Play has been recognized as a specific right for all children. Children need the freedom to explore and play. It also contributes to brain development. Evidence from neuroscience shows that the early years of a child's development from birth to age six set the basis for learning, behaviour and health throughout life (Winterbreed, Colman, Jameson & Lander 2009). During play, children try new things, solve problems, invent, create, test ideas and explore through the following activities as observed by (Sheridan, Harding Meldan-Smith 2001):

- Music and dance is a wonderful experience for children hence they enjoy this activity immensely and it provides opportunity to talk about feelings, learn rhythm and differences in sounds, expands imagination and self esteem.
- Arts and crafts activities: while you may recognize the drawing and painting, your child can tell you a whole story behind the colours and shapes and placement of certain lines. They mean something in the child's world. The amount of pride a child shows in art work is a boost to a developing sense of self. Engineering in arts and craft activities help children learn and develop creativity, social skills, self esteem, emotional expression and exploration.

#### **c. Outdoor**

This provides children with the opportunities that develop their muscles while interacting with others in playing. Using their muscles while running, jumping or throwing develops large motor skills. Children learn creativity during outdoor play as they invent games of tag or hide and seek, build social awareness and risk taking skills, use their sense of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving etc.

#### **d. Playing with blocks**

Children are bound to talk with each other and learn variety of life skills as they build with blocks. Playing with blocks help children to learn as posited by (Johnson, Christie & Wood 2004) through the following:

- Scientific principles and concepts (balance, gravity, cause and effect).
- Mathematical concepts (symmetry, geometry and shape)
- Feeling of competence and self esteem.
- Life skills concentration, abstract thought.
- Social interaction with others.
- Creativity and organization of materials.

**e. Dramatic Play** – often times you would observe children taking care of babies, going to market, or going for shopping. This signifies a child's way of pretending to engage in activities that parents do on a daily basis. Sometimes they assign everyone a role and explain who has what duties (Cohen 2001). Through such pretend play and interaction children learn;

- Practicing situation from the grown up world in a setting that is safe and sure
- Understanding of the world around them and daily living activities.
- Concentration and attention skills.
- Sequential acts and story writing/telling.
- Flexibility, cooperation and compromise.
- Empathy and consideration for the feeling of others.
- Abstract thinking.

#### **STRATEGIES AND WAYS OF FACILITATING PLAY TO ACHIEVE LEARNING**

Play develops children content knowledge and provides children the opportunity to develop social skills, competences and disposition to learn. When children engage in real life imaginary activities, play can be challenging in children's thinking (Fisher, Hirsh-Pak, Gloinkoff, Berk & Singer, 2010). To extend the learning process, sensitive intervention can be provided with adult support when necessary during play-based learning. There are several ways educators, parents, guardians can facilitate children's learning during play;

- Adults can role-model positive attitudes towards play, encourage and provide a balance of indoor and outdoor play through the year. When adults

join in they should guide, shape, engage in and extend it rather than dictating or dominating the play.

- Orchestrate an environment by deciding what toys, materials and equipment to be included in that environment. It is important to offer a variety of materials and experiences at varying levels of difficulty. The choice of materials provide the motivation for children's exploration and discovery and allow the making of choices and play possibilities.
- Observation helps to identify ways adults can build on and guide the learning, provide information about the child's interest, abilities and strength.
- Help children recognize the concepts that emerge as they grapple with the environment, make hypotheses, recognize similarities and differences and solve problems.
- Provide sufficient time for play; children need time to explore an activity and wrestle with a playmate.
- Arrange for variety in play experiences; different kinds of play lead to different learning experiences.
- Response to a child's play invitation helps him/her to develop as he/she learns to sing, listen to stories, play catch etc.
- Ensure toys safety – the concern of parents should be to screen children's toys by checking for break, cracks, sharp edges and other potential concerns to actualize toy safety.
- Help children have positive play interactions with others; assist children engage with each others and begin play experiences, provide guidance if need be and aid them in resolving concerns or disagreements if necessary.

#### **Learning Activity in Play (the little-a finger play)**

Finger plays that use fingers and hands are simple rhythmic activities that children enjoy. Lets have the following as a child's activity with fingers.

- There was a little turtle (make a fist like a turtle)
  - That lived in a box (draw a square in the air)
  - It swam through the puddles (swimming motion)
  - And climbed on the rocks (climbing motions)
  - It snapped at a mosquito (snap your fingers)
  - It snapped at a flea (snap your fingers)
  - It snapped at a minnow (snap towards yourself)
  - It caught the mosquito (tickle your child)
  - It caught the flea (tickle again)
  - It caught the minnow (tickle again)
- But it didn't catch me  
(point at self, shake head no)

#### **CONCLUSION**

Play helps children learn by connecting which their senses and new language that contributes to their learning. The true value of play is not that it can teach children facts, but it can help them acquire important

procedural knowledge which is beneficial in acquiring declarative knowledge. Research by McCracken & Brown (2000) shows that children who are active in pretend play and other types of play are usually more joyful and cooperative, more willing to share and take turns, more creative in their activities and have larger vocabularies than children who are less involved in imaginative play or other play activities. Play provides the foundation for learning in a child's world and opens the door to a world of learning opportunities. Support your children in their play to understand the importance of play and how much your child is learning. Engage in play with your children and provide opportunities for them to interact with other adults and other children in play.

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