

Developmental Significance of Play in Childhood

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the history, across cultures, children have spent most of their childhood playing with parents, siblings, peers and other people in their immediate environment. However, in the recent years the level of indulgence in playful activities has reduced significantly. Researches have time and again elaborated upon the relevance and significance of engaging in play for healthy development. The present paper aims to explain importance of play in healthy development of a child and the functions it serves across domains of development. Owing to the developmental and therapeutic properties of play, the conclusion of the study will also list down implications of the same in order to foster healthy development during formative years.

Key Words : Childhood, Across cultures, Siblings, Peers

INTRODUCTION

Children have their own way with things which often seem to be immature from an adult perspective, however for them it is their very reality. In order to gain an understanding of a child it is important to do so by placing the child in the developmental context. Children are not miniature adults and so is their understanding of the world around them. Their inner world is filled with vivid, concrete realities and experiences and is often reflected in their play. Play comes naturally to children, it is their way of understanding the world around them and a medium of exchange information, knowledge and feelings. The play zone is like a child's own territory where they can assume to be whatever they want to be, have as much control on events and people as they want, something that is very difficult for them to attain in an adult driven world. Play allows children to create their own parallel world where they are free for exploration and conquering their own weaknesses and fears.

Value of play cannot be understated as it has been recognized as a right for every child by United Nations High Commission for Human Rights. When engaged in natural self-driven play children use their creativity to

engage in a range of activities all of which aid in healthy brain development. During the early years of life, play is the most commonly used tool used to facilitate an understanding of the environment and is often the only way to foster interactions. As the young minds master their skills in the play territory they extend and generalise them to real life setting. It is not a rare site to watch children attain a feeling of being competent on successfully accomplishing the task. This sense of gaining competence across wide range of skills during formative years has been found to be closely related to their self-esteem in later years of life.

Perhaps the most important aspect of play is that it the only source of pure joy during the childhood and the most striking element of childhood that sets it apart from rest of the stages across the lifespan.

Functions of play:

With the description of relevance and importance of play it would be appropriate to state that play is an indispensable part of development during childhood. It not only promotes development during childhood but is also a reflection of a child's developmental stage. Hence, the relationship between play and development is two

way. Play as a term might seemingly be very simplistic but it of great functional value in fostering development across psychomotor, cognitive, socio-emotional domains. We will now review some of the functions that play serves in detail.

Physical development:

Physical play is considered the earliest form that evolves. It includes activities ranging from fine motor skills such as grasping, picking up and manipulating objects, playing with construction blocks, colouring, cutting and beading to reaching out for things, running, jumping, hopping, climbing, dancing, skipping, bike riding and the like. Acting upon objects is the first form in which children begin to explore their environment, develop an understanding and interact with the world around them. Sometimes they engage in an action by hit and trial and then go on repeating those body movements for the sake of pleasure. But this serves a bigger purpose in the sense that they learn to develop control over their body parts which leads to development and coordination of both gross and fine motor skills. For example an infant at first may seek pleasure out of dropping a toy again and again, then might try grasping it and then eventually may be able to pick it up and then if need be might throw it intentionally for the purpose of communication. In this manner the infant moves from very simple accidental movements to well defined, intentional and complex gestures.

Cognitive development:

As mentioned earlier play helps broaden their world view and gain knowledge. While playing, cognitive functions like, thinking, recalling, remembering, problem solving, decision making and the alike are put to use. Play gives them opportunities for trial and error which in turn helps them testing and modifying existing schemas and formulating new ones. Existing literature on cognitive development, lays emphasis on importance of make belief play to foster language development, gain an insight into relationship dynamics and engage in story narration. Different games demand different skill set. For example, playing with blocks helps in fine motor skills as well as helps in their understanding of size, shapes, colors and texture. Puzzles require critical thinking and problem solving, games like ludo require turn taking, one to one correspondence and planning the move. Educational media for very young children primarily helps in vocabulary building. Sound and light

Emotional development:

Children witness and experience a range of emotions while engaged in the play activity. Basic emotions like happiness, sadness, fear, aggression, jealousy and competitiveness as well as self-conscious emotions like pride and shame all are experienced during the play activities. Play therapy has proven to be an effective way of entering a child's world. Inhibited emotions or anxiety can be helped by engaging the child in play activities. Children feel a sense of control as play is their territory and hence open up the best, provided they are approached with a facilitative skill set. Studies have shown, children who go out to field with their peers or siblings have better interpersonal skills and resilience. Parents who become playmates aid in fostering child's emotional development. When they are praised for their accomplishments they seek pride in it, which makes them feel worthy and boosts their self-esteem. On the other hand children who are anxious, get a safe haven for venting out the inhibited emotions. While playing with others, children also learn self-monitoring and

Social development:

As an infant begins to engage with toys, the notion of him or being separate from the objects starts developing. The concept of self as distinct from others primarily develops upon interaction with objects and significant others. Positive interactions with mother while playing, helps the infant distinguish primary caregiver from others. As the child grows and engages in play with siblings and peers they learn perspective taking, taking turns, the concept of private space and boundaries. They also learn gender roles, team work, making negotiations, complying to rules and most importantly the concept of friendships.

Moral development:

While engaging in play children learn norms that is the range of acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. Story listening and enactments help children in learning universal moral implications. When parents mediate in the play, children learn how to regulate emotions, acceptance of their mistakes and value of prosocial behaviours. Playing with peers teaches children empathy and altruistic behaviours like helping others in need (Berk, 2010; Cochran *et al.*, 2010; Landreth, 2012 and Mahon, 2009).

Conclusion:

With the range of contributions of play in a child's development, it becomes imperative to adopt the psychological principals in life. The review of significance of play can help in designing better parenting coaching material. In times of digitalisation of educational media and rather over emphasis on it, schools can adopt the findings and engage children in optimal amount of play, specifically during preschool and early childhood period. The nature of play material has a significant impact on the development, these findings can help parents, play schools select the right kind of play material to foster multi-domain development.

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