

## Perception of Parents towards the Play Activities of Children: A Study from Western Odisha, India

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### ABSTRACT

Play is considered to be one of the fundamental rights of children. The provision of play is equally important with other concerns like health and education. The present study is conducted in a small town of western Odisha, India to understand how do parents perceive the play activities of their children and according to them what are the constraints for children's play. It also tries to capture parents' understanding about the benefits of play. The study finds that children play within a socio-cultural context and plays are shaped by time, space and gender. Parents are highly concerned about the constraints of children's play and the changing nature of play. There has been a gradual shift from more outdoor plays to indoor plays mostly due to television and mobile phones. Reminiscing of their own childhood, parents feel that their children are passing through a phase of 'loss of childhood' in the contemporary society.

**Key Words :** Childhood, Play, Rights, Education, Space

### INTRODUCTION

The development of physical, mental, and creative capabilities of children is linked with the play activities of children. The play activities of children are equally important with other concerns such as provision of education and health services, protection from child labour, child abuse, child trafficking and exploitation. The importance of play is also recognised in Article 38 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 20, 1989. India is one of the countries who have ratified UN Convention and should follow the direction of the Convention to promote and improve play experiences of children. Through play, a child begins to develop a concept of self ("who I am"), including self-control and identification with adults as role models (Berk, 2006; Singer and Singer, 2005; Vygotskii, 1978). Experiential learning tends to be a natural process most likely to use all of the senses in pretend play; in creative expression through drama, art, music, and dance; in unstructured

sports; and in exploration of indoor and outdoor surroundings.

Children's participation in spontaneous activities and play has diminished as a result of many factors. These include the popularity of television programs, computer games, and other technological products; the competition for children's time from organized sports and other after-school activities; parents' fears about children's physical safety; parents' lack of awareness about the benefits of unstructured activity and play; the shortage of quality play spaces near children's homes; and the reduction in recess time at school (Singer and Singer, 2005; Singer, Golinkoff and Hirsh-Pasek, 2006).

While most paediatricians and child-development experts agree that unstructured activities and play are important to children's health and adaptive socialization, the emphasis on academic-test performance has resulted in severe cutbacks in children's freeplay time and in recess during the school day. A survey of paediatricians found that nearly all (96 %) believed that unstructured play helps build children's social skills and confidence.

The survey also indicated that 89 per cent believed that it helps prevent children from becoming overweight, and 82 per cent believed play helps children improve problem-solving skills (Farley, 2005).

Jean Piaget conducted extensive research into play and concluded that play was a vital component to children's normal intellectual and social development. Piaget also found that physical, outdoor activity not only stretched children's imaginations and social interactions, but also gave them a chance to exercise their muscles and lungs and learn about their physical limitations (Piaget, 1962).

"In play the child is always behaving beyond his age, above his usual everyday behaviour; in play he is, as it were, a head above himself" (Vygotskii, 1978, 74).

### Benefits of Play:

Past studies demonstrate the many benefits of playing. Play, for example, affords children practice in problem solving and subsistence activities, like food preparation and child care; practice in social skills, such as sharing, taking turns, helping others, and cooperating with peers and adults; and practice in cognitive skills such as developing a theory of mind or making distinctions between reality and fantasy. Play continues on into adulthood in more ritualized forms (Henderson *et al.*, 2004; Hirsh-Pasek *et al.*, 2008; Schwebel *et al.*, 1999; Singer and Singer, 2005; Smith, 2004 and Zigler *et al.*, 2004).

Frank Wilson (1998) has presented a critical analysis of the early significance of experiential movement and its role in cognitive and social development. Wilson points out that the brain of early man known as *Homo habilis* indicated a level of development suggestive of the beginnings of imagination, dreaming, and curiosity.

Pretend play also enhances cognitive and emotional development (Russ, 2004; Singer and Singer, 2005). Make-believe games have been shown to help a child expand vocabulary and link objects with actions, develop object constancy, form event schemes and scripts, learn strategies for problem solving, develop divergent thinking ability, and develop a flexibility in shifting between different types of thought—for example, between narrative and logical thought.

A number of researchers have explored the relationship between imaginative play and a child's development of language and communication skills. One recent study among preschool children—four- and five-year-olds—found that children talked significantly more

often, spoke more multiword utterances and interrogative and negative clauses, and used their language more complexly in symbolic functions when they were involved in free play than when they were engaged in routine or guided cognitive activities (Fekonja *et al.*, 2005). A survey of how teachers use play for language enrichment carried out by Singer and Lythcott (2002) indicated that the incorporation of socio-dramatic play in the school curricula for six- to eleven-year-olds encouraged a variety of adaptive language uses and creative expression.

## METHODOLOGY

The findings of the present research are based on the study conducted in a town called *Burla* of western Odisha, India. The sample town is known as the "Shikshya Nagari" (Educational Hub) of Western Odisha since three universities namely Sambalpur University, Jyoti Vihar, Burla, Veer Surendra Sai Institute of Medical Sciences and Research, Burla, and the third one Veer Surendra Sai University of Technology, Burla are located within an area of four kilometres. The temporary campus of Indian Institute of Management (IIM) is also functioning near by the town. Thus, the sample parents selected for the study are employees of these educational institutions. The sample area is located near the world famous Hirakud Dam which is one of the famous tourist places in India and the tourists route through the town affecting the children's play activities. Very recently a planetarium and a Science Park have been constructed nearby the town attracting many children for leisure time outdoor activities. Because of the establishment of the planetarium and Science Park many people including school children who come for picnic during November to February make the area crowded having repercussions on children's play activities.

The present research has used a range of research methods to understand and capture parents' concern about their children's play activities and use of public space. The research canvassed the opinions, views and suggestions of parents having children aged between 6-14 years. Usually at the age of six students are enrolled in standard-1 and venture beyond the home environment. An interview was prepared to collect data from 40 parents including 20 male (fathers) and 20 female (mothers) of different families. Only one parent is selected from one family and hence data have been collected from 40 households. Data through interview schedules have been collected from 10 households from

each of the sample four colonies of the town. The inclusion of data from each sample is determined primarily by the willingness of parents to participate in the present research. The interview schedule consists of questions regarding parents' attitude to: the local environment, schooling of children, provision of children's activities and their concerns and anxieties about children's play sports, and crafts, television, mobiles and computer use, pretend play, and playground visits. Personal interviews of both parents (father and mother) have been conducted to inquire into parents' complexities and contradictions regarding their attitude towards their children's play. Four focus group discussions have been conducted separately: two among the fathers of children and other two among the mothers of children to understand their views and to explore how their attitudes to children's play varies with respect to a child's age and gender. The children are observed in the selected colonies while playing outside the home. The researcher has also visited the Science Park during evening time to observe and capture children's experiences in the science park. Personal interviews were taken from parents who were willing to give their views, and opinions. With due consent, the interviews were recorded and translated later for the collection of qualitative data. Pseudo names have been used in this research paper to maintain confidentiality.

The present research primarily aims to examine sample parents' attitude towards the play activities of their children and their opinion on the importance of play. It also tries to understand what fears and concerns do parents report about the safety, security and health risks associated with outdoor play.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Gender, Age and Play :

It is an inevitable fact that there is close connection between gender and play. The present study shows boys and girls are allowed to play together till they attain a certain age. Though there are differences among the opinions of parents regarding this connection between gender and play initially during FGD, most of them agreed that they allow their children (more particularly girl children) to play with boys up to nine years. Discussing regarding the types of plays children play, it is found that there are plays that are played only by girls and there are plays that are played only by boys. Biswal (2015) in his study on children's play among the *Binjhal* tribe of Odisha has categorised plays into *boys-specific-plays* and *girls-*

*specific-plays*. Time for girls from nine to twelve years of age is more tightly scheduled than the time of boys of the same age (LEGO Learning Institute, 2002). Research conducted with preschool children suggested that girls engage in more make-believe play at a younger age than boys but that boys catch up in imaginative activity by the age of five (Singer and Singer, 1981). Seventy-three mothers and forty fathers, queried about their children's pretend play and their attitudes toward pretending, claimed that girls engaged more often in pretend play than boys. In the same study, mothers perceived pretend play more positively than fathers did (Gleason, 2005).

### Time, Space and Play :

The timing regarding children's play is a multidimensional concept since the play timing of the children differ with the growing age of the children. The small children do not have much restrictions regarding play timing as such but when the children start going to school, the time for play also becomes gradually more scheduled. Of course, there is also specific time allotted for children's play in the school keeping in mind the benefits of play. For example, recess is a time to play and enjoy for many of the school-going children. Studies have shown that elementary school children became progressively inattentive when recess was delayed. Recess and playgrounds also have an important role in social development, helping children learn to make choices, develop rules for play, and resolve conflicts. Recess also benefits classroom learning and children's health and behaviour, improving both fitness and test scores (Bishop and Curtis, 2001; Jarrett, 2003; Pellegrini, 2005; Pellegrini and Holmes, 2006). In the contemporary society, the time for play is getting squeezed due to the overburden of children's academic activities at a tender age. Children have to attend school classes and separate tuitions due to the academic competitiveness. During the study 90% parents agreed that the children of the present generation are getting less time to play. They mentioned that the timing for play among the children has changed significantly compared to the earlier generation. Remembering his own childhood experience *Rabi* (father of a 9<sup>th</sup> standard student) says:

*"I correctly remember my childhood experience of plays. I used to play outside with my friends for hours together. Running, climbing, swimming was all part of the play activities. But I see that the children of present generation are mostly limited to play*

*activities within home, hardly they play outside. There is heavy competition in academics and they have to cope with it.”*

Space for play can sometimes seem a luxury. Research from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) program on London children aged five through sixteen revealed that children of ethnic minorities were more restricted in their use of open space and in opportunities for free, unsupervised play than those from more mainstream communities (Voce, 2003, citing the LEGO Learning Institute Web site). These days, parents fear for their children’s safety when they leave the house alone. Many children no longer roam their neighbourhood’s or even their own yards unless accompanied by adults (White and Stoecklin, 1998). Parents’ fears of traffic, strangers, Lyme disease, West Nile virus, and other concerns such as teachers’ emphasis on more homework, and more structured schedules in general, limit children’s access to and time for play spaces (Louv, 2005).

### **The linkages between 3 Ps: Play, Planetarium and Park:**

The study area is one of the famous places of western Odisha as it has famous Hirakud Dam near by it and it is one among the famous tourist places where people come with their children during holiday. Within a kilometre of radius there is Planetarium and Abdul Kalam Science Park which have greatly influenced the children’s play activity in the city. The researcher purposefully visited the science park on Sundays and interviewed personally to the parents and closely observes the play activities of the children. The parents reported during the study that taking their children to the park on Sundays has become an integral part of their weekly schedules. Children love to play in the science park and parents also perceive it to be learning for children as they get scope to playfully experiment with the scientific tools present in the park.

### **Organized Sports :**

Today’s children begin participating in structured sports at a younger age than in past generations. Children under the age of seven commonly engage in unstructured physical play either alone or with their peers. Such play usually occurs in their backyards, at parks, at playgrounds, or even in day-carecenters or kindergarten classrooms— at locations where they can be supervised. These physical activities help develop large motor skills as well as promote

a sense of cooperation through taking turns and sharing. Playing on swings and slides, climbing rock walls and jungle gyms, riding a tricycle, and playing ball introduce children to simple rules regarding safety while avoiding the problems and pressures of formal competition and team sports. A report from the American Academy of Paediatrics recommended that young athletes avoid specializing in a single sport at an early age. The report emphasized that children who participate in a variety of sports then specialize in one at the age of puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries, and play sports longer than those who specialize early (Gerber, 2003).

### **Health Issues :**

Because children of today engage in less daily physical activity, they increase their risk of obesity. One study showed that the prevalence of obesity in twelve to seventeen-year-olds increased as the number of hours of television watched per day increased (Gortmaker *et al.*, 1996). Children with obesity are less likely to participate in exercise and formal sports clubs, thus increasing the likelihood they will remain overweight. (Steinbeck, 2001). In 2001 Former Surgeon General David Satcher issued a call to action because type 2 diabetes - linked to being overweight and to obesity - has increased dramatically among children and adolescents (Almon, 2003).

### **Electronic Media:**

Over the last decade, play has changed dramatically. No longer engaged in active, outdoor activities, children have given up active, outdoor endeavours for more sedentary, small-screen entertainment activities such as watching television, playing video games, and using computers (Louv, 2005; Popkin, 2001). Children in the United States in the age group comparable to our study watch television for more than 3 hours each day. They spend another 1.24 hours watching videos and movies, one hour listening to audio, a little over one hour playing video games, and 37 minutes using computers (Roberts and Foehr, 2008).

Internationally, “TV is still the most used media (*sic*), but the internet and mobile phones are rapidly increasing as communication tools among children. . .” (Ekstrom and Tufte, 2007, 14). Some observers suggest that children today seek in a variety of new media and toys—iPods, cell phones, Game Boys, and others—novel play outlets

to replace the free play, outdoor play, and less structured activities more common to earlier generations (LEGO Learning Institute, 2003a). Electronic media in moderation can enrich children's creativity and play and actually promote school readiness (Singer and Singer, 2001). However, electronic games need to be built on earlier hands-on experiences. Not all games enhance school readiness. Parents should select games for their children that best foster language and imagination, avoiding especially games with a narrow range of perceptual motor skills like those in some violent video games.

Numerous studies point to significant hazards for children who watch violence on television or who play violent video games like *Grand Theft Auto*, but Singer and Singer (2001) believe that "there are many potentially constructive uses of television . . . when judicious TV viewing is combined with the exploration of learning materials especially prepared for the computer" (724). A study of the attitudes, beliefs, and values of more than three thousand parents and their children under age twelve in the United States, Great Britain,

France, Germany, and Japan suggested that video games, television and, most prominently, the Internet have become standard in most households and are frequently viewed as play products. The study showed that 86 per cent of Japanese parents consider the use of video games to be play activities. Further, both

Japanese and French parents characterized shopping as play, 58 per cent and 53 per cent, respectively (LEGO Learning Institute, 2002). Another survey examined fifth- and sixth-graders at six elementary schools in both rural and metropolitan settings in Tokyo. Of the 492 students, 40 per cent preferred playing indoors to playing outdoors, and 70 per cent reported watching television as a popular pastime (Benesse Corporation, 1999). A study that asked 830 U.S. mothers about their own childhood play and their children's play indicated that their children played outdoors considerably less than they did as children. Ninety-six per cent of their children watch television regularly, and 85 per cent of them identified their children's television viewing and computer-game playing as the primary reason for the growing absence of outdoor play (Clements, 2004).

Initially it was expected that there would be differences in how children spend their free time when not in school in case of school going children and attitude of parents about their children's experiences among different colonies. However more homogenisation of

children's activities and parent's attitude are found during the study. Children's participation in spontaneous activities and play has been diminishing due to multiple factors. Some of these include the popularity of television programmes, access to mobile phones and the technological product.

### **Children's Activities Outside of School:**

With the influx of technology, it is no surprise that children from every colony in the study watch television regularly. Watching television and playing mobiles as reported by the mothers are the most common activity equally among boys and girls, while outdoor play was less often reported. The mothers reported that television provides them opportunities to bond with their children and encourages healthy child development. More than 80 per cent of mothers report that children watch television often. Boys, significantly more than girls, in all countries use electronic games (34 % to 22 %). More than 50 per cent of all the children surveyed also play with toys, and nearly half paint, draw, and play music. Only about one fourth (27 %) of the total sample of children engage in imaginative or pretend play. The frequency of television viewing varied depending on the age of the child. Specifically, mothers of older children (seven to twelve years) were significantly more likely than mothers of younger children (one to six years) to report that their child watches television often.

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### **Outdoor Plays :**

With respect to playing outside, according to the research significantly more number of boys play outside or on a playground than girls. More boys than girls also take part in organised sports.

The size of the family plays an important role in the activities children choose. The study shows that larger the family, the more frequently children play outside. Mother with more than two children in the household are significantly more likely to report that their children frequently play outside at playgrounds than mothers with one child Mothers with one child report that their children often watch television, mobiles or play video games. Only

a few mothers of younger children report that their children often play with toys, play outside and undertake more artistic activities.

### **Parents' Report of Children's Enjoyment of Activities:**

It was commonly agreed among majority of the mothers that playing outside is their children's most enjoyable activity (80%). It is noted that there is lack of proper space for the children of Sambalpur city to play outside. The rapid urbanisation of the city and growing industrialisation in nearby cities like Jharsuguda remain constrain for children's free play.

Younger children (children between the age group of 1 to 5 years) are significantly more likely to play with toys compared to their older counterparts. Girls are more likely to play with toys compared to boys. Mothers of the children tend to rank specific activities such as painting, drawing, singing, dancing as more enjoyable for their children.

While children most often watch television and mobiles, sample mothers place more value on outdoor play and believe that their children are happiest when play outside at playgrounds or at parks. The parents of sample town report that hardly any children engage in exploration of nature as part of their play. There is less interaction between the children and nature.

### **Perceived Risks and constraints about Outdoor Play:**

Sample mothers of children believe that play can have physical benefits. 90% of the mothers agree that play is key to children's health and fitness. Mothers also indicate that their children's getting dirty during play is beneficial. More than half of the mothers (80%) agree that getting dirty and being exposed to germs can actually be good for a child's health. 50 out of 60 mothers' state that given the choice, their child would choose to play outside rather than inside. When asked about a particular question "why don't you allow your child to play outside? The mothers agreed upon lack of space in the Sambalpur city and risks involved in giving freedom to the children to play outside. There is no common playground in neither of the selected colonies for children where they can play freely. While interacting one of the respondents who is a teacher by profession (a mother) says:

"I know that outdoor play is very much beneficial for my child and he should play outside at least for two

hours a day. But there are risks allowing my child alone outside. The environment outside is not safe."

The above statement made by the respondent clearly indicates that the mothers understand the importance of outdoor play and its benefit for the physical and mental development of the children. However, somewhere in the mind there is a sense of fear among the mothers in allowing their children to play outside which remain as a constraint in the children's outdoor free play.

The small children between the age group of 1 to 5 years get more play time in their house than the younger school going children. The school going children have to attend school and at the same time they have to do the homework and assignments in their home. In the tough competitive world, every mother wishes her child to come first in the class. Besides school, homework, some mothers mention that their children also attend dance and song class. Hence the children are deficit of enough time to play outside. Whatever free time they get, they spent it either watching television or playing with mobiles. During the study one of the respondents of Padhan pada mentions"

"Sir, you know, today we are living in a competitive world and in school where my child study there is heavy competition among the students, so I want my child to spend more time in doing homework and assignments given by his class teacher and tutor. She attends dance class during free time"

The statement made by the respondent of the study area shows that the mothers want their children to be top competitors and they are more serious about their study than about play. The children are burdened with doing homework given by the class teacher as well as the personal tutor. If the child gets some free time after that then s/he has to attend either a song class or a dance class which is considered to be pass time activity by the mothers. Hence school going children are overburdened with the tasks and homework assigned to them. The study shows that while younger children are restricted to play outside due to safety reasons, the school going children do not get enough time to play outside and prefer to spend free time in watching television and mobiles inside the home.

### **Parents views towards Loss of Childhood:**

One of the most interesting findings of the study is the high degree of agreement among the parents of four sample colonies that "childhood as they know is almost

over". They feel that the children are overburdened with school and tuition tasks and remain under pressure most of the time. The examination time is the most crucial time for the children during which they do not get any time to play. They just remain engrossed with their study and strategies to secure more marks. The children are seen to be becoming more competitive day by day. It is a wish of the parents that the children must get time and opportunities to interact and play with their fellow mates. Parents understand and agree that without enough social play, children may not learn fully how to form relationship with others and may hamper their developmental tasks during adulthood.

Many of the parents have hopes and desires for their children's future and their own parental roles. They wish that they had more time to spend with their children. Since all sample fathers are working and are in different professions, it is a common agreement among all that they do not have sufficient time to spend with their children. Some mothers mention that getting a good house maid is becoming difficult day by day and hence they do their household chores themselves. Hence, they find it difficult to balance between the job life and home life.

As primary protectors of their sons and daughters, mothers are deeply concerned that their youngsters are somehow missing out on the joys of childhood, free play and natural exploration. Children seem to be rushed too rapidly into the rigors of adult life. For lack of safe outdoor play, spaces, study related homework and assignments and unstructured free time, children are deprived of the excitement and social interactions of a healthy life.

### Conclusion :

The play activities of the children have been an attraction for research by the academicians and researchers of social sciences. Plays of children are considered to be one of the prime modes of socialisation. It also creates scope for children to interact with nature particularly in the context of outdoor plays. The children play within a context; the context of social and cultural environment as well as the context of time and space. Children play within a socio-cultural context and each play is related to time and space. The study shows that the play activities of children have changed over a period of time. Parents recalled their own childhood experiences and compare those with that of their children. Though parents are highly in support of the outdoor plays and understand the benefits of play, due to the involved risks

of the town, they restrict children to some limited outdoor plays. Gender plays a seminal role in creating "boys-specific games" and "girls-specific games" after attaining a certain age depending upon the socio-cultural milieu. The loss of childhood is a major concern of the contemporary society and plays need to be constructive and contributory for the personality development of children.

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