

Role of Play in Enhancing Cognitive and Language Development of Children

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Abstract

The article explores the importance of early childhood play in the natural environment to engage children in concrete and meaningful activities that enhance physical, linguistic, emotional, social, and cognitive development. Modern research in the field of 'affective neuroscience' has uncovered important links between playing and neurogenesis in the brain. The early childhood years could well be renamed the golden age of fantasy/pretend play in which we can see the beginning of multiple intelligences and many cognitive strategies such as joint planning, negotiation, problem-solving and goal seeking. Children exhibit an instinctual choice in their fantasy play preferences which vary according to their gender and subtle cultural divergences. Learning through fantasy play activities rooted in other cultures will also be a positive factor in helping children for an early exposure and understanding of the rich diversity of other cultures. If children lack opportunities to experience fantasy plays, it would abate their long-term capacities related to metacognition, social-cognition, and problem-solving skills. The article establishes the need to understand and frame policies and courses of action to provide such infrastructure, curriculum, teaching-learning materials and trained teachers which promote the natural-creative play preferences of the children.

INTRODUCTION

The primordial relation of all living organisms is play, be it humans or any other living organism. And for humans as Froebel says, "Play is the highest expression of human development in

childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul." Play refers to voluntary and intrinsically motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment (Garvey, 1990). Play interlaces all the

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experiences of childhood life and therefore, it is an essential factor for culturing humaneness and developing a mature world view. It is through play that children understand and personalise life. It is a channel for releasing children's creativity and their unique expressions.

Play is commonly perceived as a frivolous and non-serious activity, yet when watching children at play, one can observe the transfixed seriousness and entrancing absorption with which they engage in it. Play provides children with a natural environment to engage in concrete and meaningful activities that enhance physical, linguistic, emotional, social and cognitive development. During play, children construct and develop their knowledge and understanding of the self, others and the physical world around them.

Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, adopted on 29 November 1989 recognises the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

Modern research in the field of 'affective neuroscience' has uncovered important links between playing and neurogenesis in the brain. It stresses that children learn best through an integrated approach combining physical, emotional, cognitive and social aspects.

The early years of a child are marked with rapid physical, emotional, intellectual and social growth, but a distinguishable characteristic of this phase of child's life is play which dominates the social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains of his/her life. The children are born with the most wonderful urge to grow and learn and they continually develop new skills and capacities through play.

Engaging in play activities helps to nurture socio-linguistic skills, mathematics concepts and also to develop self-esteem. Play helps in developing a healthy and long-lasting relationship between a child and his/her parents. Play also helps the parents to gain an insight into the thought process of their child. Engaging in outdoor games helps in preventing childhood obesity. Outdoor games also help to nurture and coordinate the sensory-motor development of a child. Problem-solving skills are essential for social and academic success, and children develop most of their early problem-solving abilities through play. Play provides a way for children to integrate all their new experiences into their rapidly developing mind and thus to develop norms and axioms (ethical, moral) later to guide their lives.

When children are at play, they constantly observe the world making predictions, testing outcomes, and drawing conclusions which become critical to the development of the cognitive domain of the child. Cognitive

psychologists, Bruner and Smith considered children's play as an instrument of cognitive development. Reynolds and Jones (1997) and Anandalakshmi, S. (1990) conclude that there is a positive relationship between play and cognitive development. Vygotsky pointed out that it is through play that the child creates the zone of proximal development.

Fantasy Play: Scaffolding Child Development

The early childhood years could well be renamed the golden age of fantasy/pretend play (Scarlett et al., 2005). It often appears at the age of about 18 months and reaches a peak at the age of 4 to 5 years. Fantasy play helps young children to understand reality and serves to accommodate and digest information. The main thinking tool developed by fantasy play is that of *symbolising*. In children's fantasy play one can find the beginning of multiple intelligences. According to Hurlock (1987), fantasy play is a form of active play in which children through overt behaviour and language deal with materials of situations as if they have attributes other than those they actually have.

Fantasy play is the continuum of amorphous potential that supports child's ability to separate thoughts from actions and objects and supports the capacity of the child to renounce impulsive actions in favour of deliberate and self-regulatory activity. Bergen and Coscia (2001) conclude that fantasy

play engages many areas of brain because it involves *emotion, cognition, language and sensory motor actions* and thus it may promote the development of dense synaptic connections.

Elements of Fantasy Play

Three elements are found in almost all of the fantasy plays: *prop, plot* and *roles*. Children can play with all sorts of things. They will use whatever they find as play props. Pretend play requires the ability to transform objects and actions symbolically. Most fantasy plays have a plot though the storyline may be quite simple. These themes often reflect what children see going on in their family, school or any other immediate context. It is furthered by interactive social dialogue and negotiation which lead to development of language skills. It also involves *role taking, script knowledge* and *improvisation*. Through fantasy play children create a world for themselves which accommodate everything related to them by imaginative representational play and thus transforming their experiences to definite forms, for them concrete realities. Many cognitive strategies are exhibited during pretence play such as *joint planning, negotiation, problem-solving* and *goal seeking*. During fantasy play increased social interactions (Imaginative and real) are observed which in turn propel *language development* and *literacy*. There is an unparalleled concentration

when children are engaged in fantasy play. This is beginning of *developing concentration*.

Fantasy Play Preferences

But not all children show interest in all types of fantasy play. They exhibit an instinctual choice in their play preferences which vary according to their gender and subtle cultural divergences. That is to say, sex, physical and socio-cultural contexts influence play preferences of the children. Children almost innately choose their fantasy play themes and play materials from their own physical and socio-cultural contexts, which are gender specific and culturally defined.

We have conducted non-experimental research with naturalistic observation on 40 pre-school children in Kerala between the age group of three and a half to five years to find out the home indoor fantasy play preference of pre-school children. Significant gender difference was noted in the choice of the children in which the girls were more interested in fantasy food play (It refers to food in various ways and occurs in conjunction with representative props), with special propensity towards cooking, while boys were more inclined towards representational object play (It is the simplest form of fantasy play where child uses an object in the way for which it was intended; John Hutt, Stephen Tyler, Corinne Hutt, Helen Christopherson, 1990) with motor play equipment. It is important to note that

the play preferences continue to influence all developments – physical, intellectual, social, emotional and moral– later to occur in the life of the children (Suresh and Subhash, 2005). Educators should, therefore, understand and frame policies and courses of action to provide such infrastructure, curriculum, teaching-learning materials and trained teachers which promote the natural creative-play preferences of the children.

Cultural Delineations of Fantasy Play Preferences

Another very important aspect of the early childhood play behaviour of children is its culture-specific character. Culture serves as the ground for beginning of all developmental processes, physical, intellectual and emotional developments, although later developments may show meta-cultural signs. Cultural context may arouse the interest of children in learning because their activities are primarily characterised by cultural ethos and values. A culturally-rich environment keeps our children active and happy in the learning process at pre-schools where they can enjoy and define their identity, the concept of the self (the within). Learning through fantasy play activities rooted in other cultures will also be a positive factor in helping children for an early exposure and understanding of the rich diversity of other cultures to successfully form a world view (the without).

Early childhood play environment in our pre-school settings needs to be enriched with the outdoor and indoor play activities based on children's preferred play themes from their own cultural context and with the play materials like flowers, water, sand, mud, etc. It should be rich with a wide variety of play opportunities of every imaginable type to ensure developmentally appropriate and optimum learning for children.

Evaluation and Conclusion

There is a growing body of evidences supporting the many connections between the high quality fantasy play and cognitive competence. If children lack opportunities to experience fantasy plays, it would abate their long-term capacities related to meta-cognition, social cognition, and problem-solving skills. These complex and multi-dimensional skills involving many areas of the brain are most likely to thrive in an atmosphere rich in constructive and fantasy play. Early childhood practitioners should be sensitive to the patterns, styles, dispositions and characteristics which children reveal and represent during their play.

Early childhood play grooms the ground for children to blossom and flourish. The unabated importance of play and its sweeping influence are supported by multitude researches and studies. In spite of new findings and their importance, in spite of growing body of evidences to support the findings, children's play-world is

diminishing. The demise of play will certainly have serious consequences for children and for the future of childhood itself. Educators, psychologists and parents have raised their anguish about this deteriorating situation. While some children do not find space to play in their educational environment, some are seriously affected by educational policies and practices. A number of reasons are cited for such laxities right from educational policies to schools without outdoor play facilities, narrow academic goals of the 'school businessmen', unreasonable parental wishes, and undue importance given to academic skills (counting, writing, and reading), and to the modern flat life; and the list is long. For some, children are guinea pigs for set institutional goals over the natural choice and development of genuine talents, be it academic or athletic.

Added to this damage are the hours spent sitting still in front of TV, video games, and computer, gulping readymade imaginations. It has far-reaching defects of debilitating and stunting their imagination, creativity and innovation. Given the sweeping body of evidences of the importance of the early childhood play for social, emotional, intellectual and physical growth and development, it is high time to go back to the freedom to explore natural environment. We may have to think of school settings with natural environment to enhance children's play that stimulates emotional, social and

intellectual growth in the child, which, in turn, affects the child's success in school to form a mature concept of the

self and that of the world. Only then can education become inclusive, holistic and humanising.

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