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The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education

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### Abstract

This literature review stresses the importance of play for all early learners. The review begins by discussing the history of play and its impact on the evolution of family dynamics over time.

Studies have shown that playing provides a safe and necessary way for young learners to be able to practice and experience a variety of life skills, including problem solving within a peer group while gaining and enhancing language skills. Through daily play, young children gain valuable life experiences through a variety of roles that will support growth and ultimately translate into adulthood. According to research, play is an essential aspect of the development of key skills including social, behavioral, language, and cognitive. These skills developed through play as young learners will grow into beneficial and essential skills used not only throughout childhood, but also into adulthood. Due to the essential developmental benefits that play provides children, it is critical that educators, administrators, and families are provided with specific research to support the need for play as well as the benefit provided by play to the young learner.

### The Importance of Play in Early Childhood

An early childhood education setting should be a place where children discover a love for learning through a variety of play experiences. Current research shows how play has changed and even been eliminated in many early childhood settings. The benefits of play are crucial to allowing a child to develop appropriately. Children's early years should be about fostering and developing their curiosity through a wide variety of play experiences. Understanding why play is important in early childhood development allows individual to understand the true meaning of play. The history of play has changed and decreased through out the decades. This decrease in free play has caused children to struggle academically. Through daily play, young children are able to gain valuable life experiences through a variety of roles that will support growth and ultimately translate into necessary adulthood skills. According to research, play is an essential aspect of the development; key skills including social, behavioral, language, and cognitive are all experienced through play opportunities. These skills developed through play as young learners will grow into adulthood. Families, educators and administrators need to become advocates for the importance of play for early learners.

#### **History of Play**

Throughout history, the idea of what play is has always sparked the interest of societies. Although the word play can be hard to quantify, it is very easy to recognize. Play varies from culture to culture. In ancient Greece, for example, adults treat children with gentleness and affection during play (Sarcho & Spodek, 1995). Conversely, early Europeans seemed to have less interest in children during play. Surprisingly, very little research can be found on play during the Renaissance period. It appeared to researchers during the Renaissance that adults could not separate the difference between their own activities and those of their children. During this time

period, children were expected to work in the fields and homes along side their parents. With lack of play and high adult expectations, these children quickly acquired adult skills. For example, boys learned to hunt alongside their fathers and girls learned skills from their mothers such as needlework, art, music and household skills (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Play creates a zone of proximal development in a child. During play, children tend to behave above their average age and above their daily behaviors. When children are given opportunities to play, the child improves in every developmental aspect (Berk, 1994). The ideas of the Russian developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who early in this century forged an innovative theory granting great importance to social and cultural experience in development (Berk, 1994). His research supports the idea that adults and peers naturally scaffold young children's play while nurturing situations that allow creativity and imagination throughout the preschool years and into early childhood. Vygotsky believes that play has two critical frameworks that when integrated together during playtime play an important role in early development (Berk, 1994). First, all representational play creates an imaginary situation that allows children to fulfill subliminal desires, such as playing in a parenting type role with a doll. Vygotsky believes that fantasy play occurs when children learn to postpone gratification of impulses. During fantasy play children realize that certain desires will remain unsatisfied during play situations (Berk, 1994).

As young learners age, acquire new skills and experiences they begin to be able to adjust to situations accordingly much easier. As they learn to adjust through play, such as taking turns and other socially accepted behaviors. Other important behaviors learned through play involve safety, respect for property, self-care (such as hand washing) and learning everyday routines. Vygotsky's research also indicates that imaginary play allows children to fulfill desires not

satisfied in real life. Imaginary and representational play contains rules for behaviors that children must follow to successfully act out the play scene: “Whenever there is an imaginary situation, there are rules” (Berk, 1994, p. 32). A child cannot behave in an imaginary situation without rules (Berk, 1994). Imaginary situations during play allow rules to organically support the play appropriately. According to Vygotsky, “play supports the ability to separate thoughts from actions and objects as well as the capacity to renounce impulsive actions in favor of deliberates self-regulatory activity”(Berk, 1994, p. 32).

### **Defining Play**

Play should be personally motivating by the satisfaction embedded in the chosen activity. The chosen activity should not be governed by basic needs or social demands. Individual players should be more concerned about the chosen activity than the goals of the activity. Goals should be self-imposed and the behavior of the player is spontaneous. Play should occur with familiar objects or if objects are new or unfamiliar, players shall be given an opportunity to explore new unfamiliar objects. Players shall be able to apply their own meaning of play activities as well as being able to control the activities themselves. Play activities can be non-literal. Play is free from the rules imposed from the outside and all rules that do exist can be modified by the players. Play requires active engagement from all players (Saracho & Spodek, 1998, p. 3-4). Play should be an experience, which brings joy to the individuals.

According to Education Sciences Journal, when asked to define play, children ages 3 and 4 described play as an activity that involved their participation in doing something, being with peers, and having agency and ownership of ideas. Play is a universally known concept and observed as a fundamental requirement for children’s development. Many young children associate play as a recognizable activity that extends over their lifespan, from early childhood

experiences into adulthood, and across a variety of cultures (Theobaldet, 2015). Play is most often associated within an educational setting, fostering the development of cognition, social development. Play is a critical element of early childhood curriculum standards. Play influences growth in social emotional, physical, and cognitive development. Allowing children to play encourages students to gain communication skills that allow them to communicate needs and emotions, as well as sharing prior knowledge of the world around them while gaining new experiences. Play is motivating and free of expectations.

### **Benefits of Play**

The benefits of play are complex and indirect. Play contributes to the development of a diverse array of capacities in the young child. From ages 2.5 until age 5, social dramatic play and make believe play emerges and evolves (Berk, 1994). As the child ages, the play also changes. The interactions begin to last longer, they show more involvement, and tend to interact with a variety of peers and become more cooperative. Children who are involved in social dramatic experiences are more advanced in general intellectual development, as well as an enhanced ability to understand the feelings of others (Berk, 1994). The list of benefits of make-believe play is extensive. The known benefits include strengthened mental abilities, improved memory, as well as promotes language and storytelling skills. In addition, make believe play allows the child to expand their vocabulary. Make believe play also allows children an opportunity to reason through seemingly impossible situations, which enhances their problem solving skills and allows them to gain confidence in their decision-making skills. All of these benefits combined have proven to lead to higher test scores compared to children who did not participate in make believe play experiences (Berk, 1994).

### **The Impact of Play**

Play is an essential part of early childhood development. Play contributes to cognitive, physical, social and emotional well being of young children. Allowing children time to play provides an opportunity for parents to engage with their child. Unfortunately, due to family's hectic lifestyles, young children are experiencing a reduction in the amount of playtime allowed. According to the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, play should be a daily occurrence and is right for every child. Many children are being raised in an increasingly hurried and high-pressure lifestyle that limits child-driven play. Every child deserves the opportunity to develop to their own unique potential, and the opportunity to play is an integral role in reaching that potential (Ginsburg, 2007).

Children, who are provided opportunities to play, tend to use their creativity while continuing to develop their imagination, dexterity, as well as physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is essential to brain development. It is through play that children begin to engage and interact with the world around them, while being able to create and explore the world they are able to master and conquer their fears (Ginsburg, 2007). As children begin to master the world around them, they begin to develop new competencies that can lead to enhanced confidence and resiliencies that they will need to face future challenges (Ginsburg, 2007).

When young children have the opportunity for undirected play, this opportunity allows children to learn how to work in a group together, to share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, and learn self-advocacy skills (Ginsburg, 2007). When the play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest and are able to ultimately engage fully in the passions of their choice. "Perhaps above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood" (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 183). Play also helps young children build active, healthy bodies and lifestyles.



A survey conducted by the National Association of Elementary Principals found that 96% of surveyed school systems had at least one recess period, but nearly a decade later around 70% of students had one recess period. Currently, many school age children are given less free time and fewer physical outlets throughout the school day (Ginsburg, 2007). Because students have experienced a decrease in free time, implications on the child's ability to store new information has also decrease. Reduced time for daily physical activity is a major contributing factor to the disconnect occurring in academic abilities especially between boys and girls (Ginsburg, 2007). This drastic decrease is in response to the No Child Left behind Act of 2001, by reducing time committed to recess, the creative arts and even physical education teachers have more time to focus on reading and mathematics (Ginsburg, 2007). This extreme change has shown many implications on children's ability to store new information. Children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by clear-cut significant change in activities. Between 1981 and 1997, the amount of time children spent playing had dropped by 25%. During this same time period, children ages 3-11 lost twelve hours a week of free time and spent more time at school, completing homework, and shopping with parents (Pathways, 2017).

### **Inquiry and play**

Gopnik (2011) investigated how imagination, desires and curiosity affects early learning approaches. A study was conducted with two different groups of four-year-old children. This study introduced a variety of new and intriguing materials that the four-year olds had never been exposed to before. The first group of children were given four different tubes that could each do something different. When the experimenter presented the new tubes to the children the tubes were presented with excitement and curiosity, with little adult input or modeling. The second group, the experimenter presented the tubes with a demonstration on how the new materials

work, with modeling on how to use materials. Both groups were able to explore and play with the tubes without adult assistance. Experimenters discovered from this study that the first group explored and played with the tubes longer than the second group. The first group of children spent a long time discovering the variety of special options that each tube had to offer. The second group, which received explicit adult instruction and modeling, demonstrated less interest and curiosity than the first group. This discovery questions if adult instruction had an impact on the children's curiosity and motivation, which made the children less motivated to discover new information and materials. Gopnik (2011) noted, "It's more important than ever to give children remarkable, spontaneous learning abilities free rein. That means a rich, stable, and safe world, with affectionate and supportive grown-ups, and lots of opportunities for exploration and play" (p. 3).

### **Adult's Role in Play**

Many specialized programs and apps have been introduced to parents as necessary enhancements for their children in order for their child to be successful. These programs convinced parents that they are necessary for their child to develop appropriately. Because of these heavily advertised enhancements, much of parent-child time is spent arranging special events, activities, and transporting to and from activities.

It is important for parents to judge the appropriate level of involvement for their child. Many parents seem to feel as though they are just trying to keep up, so that their child will not fall behind. Although most highly scheduled children are thriving, some are reacting to the associated pressures with anxiety and other signs of stress (Ginsburg, 2007). Children, who are living a highly scheduled life, have less time for free child-driven creative play. Allowing free time and child-driven play has been associated with the reduction of depression as the child ages.

A survey conducted by the American College Health association on college students who spent their childhood involved in a scheduled lifestyle, sixty-one percent of the college students surveyed experienced feelings of hopelessness. The results also identified forty-five percent felt so depressed that they had trouble functioning and nine percent suffered from suicidal ideation. Several other studies have linked anxiety and depression with that of perfectionism and overly critical self-esteem to reach high standards (Ginsburg, 2007).

More and more families are becoming single-family households. Parents have become better at balancing home and work life as well as busy daily schedules. This allows parents to use their time more effectively. Parents are constantly hearing conflicting messages as to what is best practice for early learners. Parenting magazines and media provide a variety of early learning enhancements that convince parents will produce super achieving children. Parents begin to compare themselves to other parents, stories from magazines and begin to raise their child's expectations even higher. Over recent years the admission process into college has become much more rigorous, many parents begin to feel that their child is not prepared enough; many parents feel pressure to help their child exceed their potential. The decrease in free play can also be explained by children being entertained by television, computer games and video games. Passive entertainment is not productive and can have many harmful effects (Ginsburg, 2007).

There is a variety of solutions for parents to use to make sure that their child is receiving time for uninstructed play. It is very important for parents to feel supported and accepted when making suggestions to not follow media influences about their child. It is important for parents to research the benefits of both structured and unstructured playtime. Continued additional research is being conducted about the importance of play and the direct impact on academic growth, exposure to social situations as well as exploring their environment.

### **Curriculums and Assessments that Support Play**

Teaching Strategies GOLD is based on thirty-eight objectives for development and learning that include predictors of school success and are based on school readiness standards. The objectives are aligned with the Common Core State Standards, state early learning guidelines, and the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework. These objectives are at the heart of the system; teachers use them to focus their observations as they gather information to make classroom decisions (Bickart, Burts, Berke, & Heroman, 2010a).

Creative Curriculum is a comprehensive, research-based curriculum designed to help educators at all levels of experience plan and implement a developmentally appropriate, content-rich program for children with diverse backgrounds and skill levels (Bickart, Burts, Berke, & Heroman, 2010b). GOLD assessment is an authentic, ongoing observational system for assessing children from birth through kindergarten; new updates extend objectives to third grade. GOLD encourages teachers to observe children in the context of everyday experiences, and is an effective way to learn what children know and can do in a classroom setting.

The HighScope Preschool Curriculum is based on the principles of active learning and support of a child's positive interactions with adults and peers. Longitudinal studies show that the HighScope Preschool Curriculum promotes children's development and provides lasting benefits into adulthood. Dickinson and Tabors conducted a study that followed seventy-four children from low-income homes from the age three through middle school. The research shows a relationship between the child's uses of language during play experiences (Almon, 2013). HighScope Curriculum is a comprehensive model that addresses all areas of development through eight content areas and fifty-eight key developmental indicators (KDIs) the skills and behaviors at each stage of development that pave the way for school and adult success. Each

KDI is connected to and reinforced by scaffolding strategies to support and gently extend children's learning.

Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program is defined as a program that gives all four-year-olds the opportunity to have a preschool education. The program is state funded so that children will be part of a quality preschool program. Any preschool programs that are part of the Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program must use GOLD Assessment, a research-based curriculum HighScope, Creative Curriculum follows Iowa Early Learning Standards/Child Standards, and follows one of the following program standards: Head Start Program Performance Standards, National Association of Education of Young Children Standards and Criteria, Iowa Quality Preschool Program Standards, or High Quality Preschools Issue Brief. (Iowa Department of Education, 2015). Many preschool programs that are state funded required preschool programs to pass accreditation standards. These accreditations help fund many preschool classrooms.

### **Instructional Approaches**

Teachers need to focus on providing necessary materials that will spark a child's interest. It is important for early educators to remember that the purpose of preschool is to encourage children to explore, wonder, create, fail, discover, manage conflicts, solve problems, try, persevere, help, and learn to love to learn through a variety of experiences through play. Teachers need to reflect on their own experience with learning and providing play experiences in their classroom (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). There is a variety of appropriate approaches that are often implemented in an early childhood setting. One of these approaches is teacher-based instruction. This approach focuses on teaching specific skills sets to children. As best practices and new research are discovered and shared, many early childhood programs have begun to develop

student-centered and play-based instruction, in place of teacher-directed instruction (Saracho & Spodek, 1998).

In classrooms where student-centered instruction is occurring, students become involved in the investigation and discovery of their own knowledge and learning (Iowa Core, 2010). Students in student-based classrooms become active participants in cooperative learning. Student-center learning is similar to play-based learning and overlap in a variety of aspects. Many preschool programs implement play-based learning because the primary focus is on the individual child's play and learning. This type of learning allows the child to build and extend their prior knowledge and experiences, as they are able to interact with their environment. Play-based learning allows students to create, adapt, explore, experiment, learn, communicate, socialize and problem solve in a familiar environment with peers and individually (Vygotsky, 1978).

Sjoedrma (2016) conducted a study in several Midwestern schools, that included a group of early childhood educators; preschool teachers, transitional kindergarten teachers and kindergarten teachers, as well as elementary administration. The survey was sent to twenty-five schools and forty-two educators responded to the survey. The participants that responded were thirteen preschool teachers, and three preschool administration, five transitional kindergarten teachers, thirteen kindergarten teachers and eight elementary administrators. Fifty-seven percent of the participants have eleven or more years of teaching experiences, twenty-one percent have five to ten years and, 9.5% have three to five years experience. This study was designed to determine the attitudes and beliefs towards play-based instruction in preschool. The surveys were based on the three early childhood teaching approaches; teacher-directed instruction, student-centered instruction and play-based instruction. There were twenty-four statements on

the survey. Eight of the statements were teacher-directed, eight were student-centered, and eight were play-based. All answers were analyzed and compared within each grade specific group. Results of the play-based statements was 57% of educators strongly agreed that hands on learning experiences are best for students and should be used 90% of the time. The best learning environment must promote discovery and exploration agreed 76.92%. Students learn best through, tasting, touching, smelling, hearing and seeing according to 54%, the best learning activities are guided by student interest according to 50% of participants. Fifty percent agreed that students, rather than teachers should find their own answers to their own questions. Student's experiences are essential to build understanding 57% agreed with this statement (Sjoedrma, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to investigate and compare the attitudes and beliefs about play-based instruction in a preschool classroom, among a variety of early childhood professionals (Sjoedrma, 2016). The results of this study were aligned with current research on beliefs on play-based instruction. Kindergarten teachers and elementary administrators have mixed beliefs. Pressure from state standards as well as stress of meeting all teaching requirements influenced how Kindergarten teachers responded. An academic shift where kindergarten has become more academically rigorous and teachers may have felt that preschoolers were not academically ready for kindergarten.

The results showed agreement on student-centered statements among all participants. Play-based instruction and student-center instruction overlap. Many preschool classrooms are specially geared towards play-based instruction where play is the focus. This teaching method allows children to learn cooperatively with their peers, the teacher is a facilitator and guide to

individuated learning, while allowing children to be directly involved in their own discovery and knowledge (Sjoedrma, 2016).

An influential scholar named Maria Montessori was an Italian educator who believed that play is “child’s work,” meaning that children are working when they are learning to eat with utensils. They are playing when they are provided the opportunity to create their own utensils out of a variety of materials (wood, glue, string, tape). In many preschool classrooms, center time is also called work time. When children are learning a variety of new skills, they are at work. When children are building knowledge, values, and additional skill sets this is considered work (Elkind, 2003). According to Elkind (2003), play truly becomes play when the activity of play has no other aim except for the sole pleasure of the activity. Researchers know that play builds stamina for future life skills (Elkind, 2003). Play can also become a form of therapy for many young children, using materials for outlets when language skills are lacking. Using a toy to release feelings of frustration does not mean that the child will grow up to have anger issues rather that the child has found a productive way to express their emotion. These types of actions are not considered play because the actions have a deliberate goal where real play does not have any goals attached to the action.

### **Academic Readiness**

A study conducted by preschool curriculum comparison study (PCCS) researcher’s assigned sixty-nine at risk children to one of three different preschool programs (Almon, 2013). One classroom used HighScope curriculum, the second classroom was a play-based classroom and the third was teacher directed with heavy focus on academics and the use of scripted programs. At the end of the school year, it seemed that all students advanced equally. The youngest set of students was followed until they were twenty-three years old. Over time, the



children who were placed in the heavily focused academic class with less play 47% of those students needed additional supports while the other play based classrooms only 6% needed additional supports (Almon, 2013). Students who attended the highly academic focus class were also more likely to commit felonies 34% versus 9% who attend play-based classrooms. Of the highly academic classroom 27% of the students were more likely to be suspended from work.

State and district standards continue to increase causing, educators to shift their classroom focus to higher academic achievement. The pressure to exceed these learning standards has had an impact on educators and how they are able to fit play into their daily classroom schedule. Play is more often an activity that is teacher scheduled than an integrated daily routine (Theobald, 2015). Teachers are faced with day-to-day tensions, expectations and standards as well as required daily implementation of curriculum.

A study was conducted by Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder (1970) where fifty children were chosen from kindergarten classrooms that used play-based instruction. They used the same number from cognitively oriented kindergartners. These children were followed until they were ten years old. This study revealed that the children from the play-based kindergarten classrooms excelled over those in the highly academic driven classrooms in creativity, oral expressions, and industry. This study prompted a shift to switch back to the play- based classrooms (Almon, 2013).

The availability of time and space for play is decreasing due to the increasing use of technology. According to studies conducted by Pathways, Social changes and new technologies have greatly affected the way children play and the amount of free time they are given. Children's playtime continues to decrease because of these new technologies; thirty percent of all American kindergarteners no longer have recess time. Children between the years of 8 to 10

are spending eight plus hours a day engaging on a variety of different media devices; seventy-one percent of children have technology available in their bedrooms. Researchers have found that children under the age of thirteen spend less than thirty minutes outside a week. Only twenty percent of all US homes are located within a half-mile of a park, and ninety-four percent of parents express safety concerns with their child playing outside (Pathway, 2017). Between 1981 and 1997, the amount of time children spent playing dropped by twenty-five percent. During this time period, children ages 3-11 lost twelve hours of free time and spent more time at school, completing homework, and shopping with parents (Pathway, 2017).

Teachers must also have a realistic view on how play should look in their classrooms. In order for teachers to become effective play-based teachers, it is important for each teacher to connect with their own experiences with play. Sandberg, Samulesson and Pramling (2003) conducted a study with a group of preschool teacher's exact number unknown, asking the preschool teachers to relate their personal play experiences to students play experiences then and now. The researchers asked teachers to recall their memories of play as a child, perceptions of children play today and compare their own childhood experiences as well as their classroom perspectives. Groups of teachers were interviewed during this study. Many of the teachers believed that children's play today is no different from the play that they experienced. They believed that the play is expressive and may look different during a variety of situations. All teachers need to understand the value of play. All children want and need play.

Lynch (2015) conducted a study on kindergarten teacher's views on play-based instruction. This study compares findings from an ethnographic study of seventy-eight discussions boards about play in kindergarten. The results of this study support previous research that kindergarten teachers feel pressures to solely focus on academic goals which has led many

kindergarten classrooms to limit and eliminate play (Lynch, 2015). Many kindergarten teachers shared that they valued play-based instruction, but due to the pressures of the required state standards as well as meeting additional requirements many kindergarten teachers felt this method could not be used in their classroom. Kindergarten has become more academically rigorous and teachers feel additional pressures to prepare children for required standardized testing (Bowdon, 2015). Many kindergarten classrooms have eliminated play. The focus has shifted from developmentally appropriate play to focusing on academic proficiency. With pressure from state and district to have 80% of students be proficient. Current research has proven that play is learning, and has multiple effects on early development (Bowdon, 2015). “Play lets children engage in extended interactions that build oral language, imagination, critical thinking, and social skills. And, recent evidence suggest that, at least for some skills, playful learning is more effective for producing student learning than direct instruction” (Bowdon, 2015, p. 33).

### **Summary of Findings**

The researcher recommends further research and investigation into what is considered best instructional practices in an early childhood setting with a focus on play- based instruction. The researcher believes as an educator, it important to share with colleagues, administration, superintendents, and state level decision makers the educational impact that play has on early childhood development. The researcher feels that additional research could be done on what play should look like in a preschool, transitional kindergarten and kindergarten classroom.

Preschools and all elementary teachers are required to meet state standards and regulations which put additional pressure on teachers and administrators to eliminate play, but what are the students missing out on because of this decision needs to be the focus. As a team, discussions need to include how required standards and curriculum can be altered and adjusted to

include time for free play. The benefits of play for children are benefits that will follow them into adulthood. As educators, parents, and administrators we must advocate for the need of play for children in all early educational settings. It is important that all educators understand that when children are playing they are learning to become well-rounded students.

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