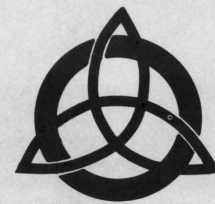


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Meaning and Value of Play

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"Play is the most complete education process of the mind...nature's ingenious device for insuring that each individual achieves knowledge and wisdom."* Therefore, it would seem that play and play materials are natural and necessary parts of any child's life. Through play, children learn about themselves, others, and the world around them. As children grow and develop they begin to organize their play and become more cooperative, learning with and through others. Play involves the ability to reason, perceive and understand. It includes the feelings and the concepts, habits, skills or behaviors of a certain cultural group.

Three Theories of Play

Papalia and Olds in their book, *A Child's World*, explain play according to three theories: psychoanalytic, cognitive and learning.

The psychoanalytic theory (Freud and Erikson) says play helps a child develop ego-strength. Through play, a child works out conflicts. Motivated by the pleasure principle, play may be a source of gratification. It is a cathartic response that may lessen tension and give a child mastery over overwhelming experiences.

Barbara Biber in her book, *Play As A Growth Process*, says "we know that children are full of feeling—deep and good, hard and strong feeling. They get mad and glad with intensity. Their feelings are as quick and volatile as they are deep. This vital aspect of their life experience needs outlet through play quite as much as their developing curiosities and their effervescent energies."

Using the cognitive theory (Piaget), play is seen as a way to learn about new and complex objects and events. In play a child may consolidate and enlarge concepts and skills and integrate thinking with actions.

The way children play is dependent upon the stage of cognitive development. In the sensorimotor stage, children play in a concrete fashion, moving their bodies and manipulating objects. When children reach the symbolic



stage, they can pretend that something exists when it does not; they can play mentally rather than with the whole body. For children, play in the symbolic stage may also be characterized as a research activity—the urge to discover ideas and relationships for themselves.

*N. V. Scarfe, Dean Emeritus of Education, University of British Columbia, Canada.



According to the learning theory (Thorndike), play is learned behavior and follows the "law of effect" that says when a response is reinforced, the probability of its occurring again is increased, and conversely, when a response is not rewarded it decreases the probability of a recurrence. Play is different from work in that it is not crucial for survival. But it is influenced by learning, the same as work. In this context, play depends on reinforcement by adults, and therefore, may have a measure of cultural control. Each culture or subculture values and rewards different types of play.

Although it is beneficial to consider these three theories of play, each with its own emphasis, in actual practice it is unlikely that the play of a child can be interpreted by purely one theory. In the play of a child, in our observations of a child, and in our relationships with a child, all three theories would be interacting. This would depend on the type of activity, the needs of the child, and the needs of the adult.

Observing Play

If one observes carefully, it is possible to discover many aspects to children's play. One is that through play children learn to deal with their emotions in a safe time and setting. Children need a safe time and place to be happy, sad, angry, disagreeable and loving. These are all honest but confusing feelings that children will learn to understand and handle. If a child is frustrated by a new baby in the family, playing with a baby doll can help express some of the confused feelings. These play experiences give children a chance to act out strong feelings.

Another aspect of play is that the materials provide endless experiences with size, shape, color, numbers and conceptualization. There will be challenging problems and puzzles to solve. Since children are curious, the materials and equipment should encourage thoughtful

approaches and provide exploration.

Through these experiences, children begin to make sense out of something. When children are mixing cookie dough, what happens to the egg they stirred in? Is the egg still there? What form is it in? Can they get the egg back? When the cookies are placed in the oven and heat is applied, does the dough change form? How?

Through play children also discover the magic of fantasy. For children the world can be an overpowering place, but in fantasy big people's roles can be tried. Children can make believe they're anything they want to be. Is the lion at the zoo frightening? A child can become a fierce lion. Do children feel they have to eat certain foods? They can become the parent who decides what to eat and when.

An adult will also discover that through play children will become more social. When children are ready, they begin to share in the world of their peers and to share their own world with others. Play situations should provide moments for children to be alone or with someone. A child may wish to be with someone to explore different techniques of leadership or getting along with others. True cooperative play develops slowly. Feelings of security about things that are their own and skills they have help children grow and develop confidence in themselves and other people.

Adult Responsibilities

In the realm of play, adults do have some responsibilities. One is to provide an environment with appropriate stimuli and props. Secondly, the adult must set some boundaries or guidelines for the safety and welfare of the child; and finally the adult should supply some feed-back to the child that will give support and encourage further exploration of emotions, fantasies, ideas and social relationships.

Boundaries or guidelines for children can be set implicitly or explicitly. Implicitly the adult may set guidelines for behavior by the way the environment is structured, or explicitly it may be with the adult verbally giving specific instructions or limits. Provide feedback for the child by a pat on the back, a smile, a look of acknowledgment as the child checks with you, a verbal response of praise, or further questions. As play is better understood and encouraged, and as adults appreciate this activity, it will have more value for all concerned.

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- Biber, Barbara, *Play as a Growth Process*, Bank Street College of Education Publications, New York, New York.
- Papalia, Diane and S. Olds. *A Child's World*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1975.