Theories of Play in Children Development

Eric Bianca
Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Play may seem simple, yet it is profound to a child’s development. Play makes learning something that happens naturally and joyfully, when a child laughs and wonders, explores and imagines. Play has been defined as any activity freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed. It stands outside ‘ordinary’ life, and is non-serious but at the same time absorbing the player intensely. It has no particular goal other than itself. Play is not a specific behaviour, but any activity undertaken with a playful frame of mind. Play is especially beneficial to children’s learning when it reaches a certain degree of sophistication. In other words, unproductive play happens not only when children fight and argue over who is going to be the mommy and who is going to be the baby, but also when the child who is mommy keeps performing the same routines with her baby day after day with no change.

Keywords: Play, Development, Children, Theories.

INTRODUCTION

The study of play through time and across cultures has consistently demonstrated two characteristic features of play in human societies. First, it is clear that play is ubiquitous among humans, both as children and as adults, and that children’s play is consistently supported by adults in all societies and cultures, most clearly in the manufacture of play equipment and toys. Second, it emerges that play is a multi-faceted phenomenon, with a variety of types that appear in all societies, but that there are variations in the prevalence and forms that the various types of play take in different societies. These variations appear to arise from differing attitudes concerning the nature of childhood and the value of play. Play is very significant for a child during the early childhood years. Therefore, knowledge of the development of different types of play gives educators and parents a foundation for proper teaching strategies. [1] reported that the preeminent teaching for young children happens at the midpoint of a continuum between play and work. Professional early childhood teachers who are aware of and comprehend developmental theories of play are better prepared to use play as a context for instruction and assessment. They also understand the importance of play in social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and motor domains of development. Therefore, it is extremely important that teachers of young children have a strong academic background in the study of play to best evaluate problems and offer appropriate support to children who have a hard time playing, such as children with physical disabilities [2] [3]. Play is an important element of a child’s life. It helps children achieve mastery in certain skills, and they learn to have control over their environment. The environment and play are important elements that support each other. Even though the concept of play seems very simple, in reality the study of play is quite complex.

Theories on Play

Within the last few decades, researchers have proposed important theories to support the understanding of the behaviors seen in children’s play. [4] described two types of theories: classical (pre-1920) and contemporary.
http://www.inosr.net/inosr-humanities-and-social-sciences/

Eric


on the nature of childhood and the perceived value of playful activities. These theories highlighted the biological and innate aspects of play, using both physiological and evolutionary explanations instead of focusing on the children’s variations of activities. Classical theories attempt to explain the reason that play exists and its meaning. [5], a researcher on play, summarizes the classical theories of play — surplus energy, relaxation, recapitulation, and pre-exercise — as follows:

**Surplus Energy Theory:** Friedrich Schiller (1878/2003), a German poet, suggested the surplus energy theory. This theory proposes that play is a method of removing from any living being the excess energy that is available after meeting the basic survival needs. He further explained that play is an activity that individuals use to replenish the energy lost. The idea with surplus energy theory is that play is the opposite of work; that is, when you are at play you are engaged in a recreational activity, and when you are at work you are engaged in some sort of labor, something that you may not enjoy [5] [6].

**Relaxation Theory:** The relaxation theory [7] proposes that, through play, individuals restore the energy that they exhausted during their work. Hence, after working for a period of time, individuals need to play to relax and to generate sufficient reserve energy for work.

**Recapitulation:** [8] an American psychologist, found and established his recapitulation theory from Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Recapitulation can best be seen as the psychological evolution and relaxation theory as the physiological evolution. In the recapitulation process, children repeat the human race's stages of development in their play. Play is an inherent manner of discontinuing primitive skills and drives that individuals have inherited from the time civilization began. When individuals use play to migrate through these primitive stages, they become prepared for the endeavors of adult life.

**Pre-exercise:** [9] a zoologist, studied play behavior first in animals and later in humans. He recognized many of children’s play behaviors in adult games, customs, and competitions. Groos, through his research created a system that grouped the different types of play, such as games with rules, rough-and-tumble play, and dramatic play. Play, according to [10] encourages children to emulate behaviors that are similar to adult roles, which in turn they will assume in the future. For instance, children enact parental roles in dramatic play (e.g., a child pretending to drive a car to go to work). The pre-exercise theory suggests that play is a natural way of preparing children for the endeavors of adult life because their play experiences are similar to those they will encounter as they get older.

These four classical theories are believed to be inadequate today because they are derived from philosophical principles rather than empirical research studies [11]. In addition, the classical theorists did not address the theoretical facts to inform their ideas. However, the classical theories are the foundations for the contemporary theories of play.

**Contemporary Theories**

Contemporary theories of play give emphasis to the psychological value and significance of a child’s social, cognitive and emotional development. In other words, they address the importance of higher levels of thinking and symbolic thought. Unlike classical theories, contemporary theories are supported by empirical research. Contemporary theories consist of psychoanalytic, arousal modulation, meta communicative, and cognitive theories [12].

**Psychoanalytic**

Sigmund Freud (1923/1973) hypothesized that play performed a special function in children’s emotional development. Play achieves a therapeutic effect; it enables children to relieve themselves of negative emotions and replace them with more positive ones. This therapeutic effect facilitates children's ability to play freely so that they can disengage themselves from any negative feelings brought on by traumatic experiences or personal confrontations. Play activities and explorations help the children to better
understand distressing events and to search for alternative meanings that embrace pleasurable feelings and forgo unpleasant ones [13].

**Arousal Modulation**

This theory describes how play lets individual children find sources of stimulation to capture certain information to learn about the world around them. [14], a researcher in this area, speculated that there is a need in children’s central nervous system to keep arousal at an optimum level. Too much stimulation (e.g., seeing a strange object) increases arousal to distressingly high levels, steering children to participate in activities that reduce stimulation (e.g., looking at an already familiar object). Lack of stimulation reduces arousal to lower levels, creating monotony and boredom. The child then strives to seek more stimulation, which [15] calls “diverse exploration” (p. 797).

**Metacommunicative**

Children’s play is found when children interact among each other to create a make-believe behavior [16]; [17]. When playing make-believe, children are imitating real-life behaviors. Consequently, children learn about (a) the make-believe play with objects, often forcing reality to conform to their own point of view, and (b) the real life play behavior, which is a transition between pretend play and nonplayful play activities. Play is the metacommunicative (connecting the thought processes of two people and using language to describe events) perspective of what people consider their cultural and personal reality, meaning that play and pretend are important for children’s intellectual growth.

**Cognitive**

[18] [19] are the principal originators of cognitive development theory. The theory is about the construction of thought processes and intelligence. In other words, as humans we are able to acquire knowledge, to reason, and to make decisions. Piaget states that children acquire knowledge though the dual processes of assimilation and accommodation. In assimilation, children learn new material from the outside world and fit it into their existing knowledge. For accommodation, children adjust their knowledge to the new information being presented. For example, children will adjust the newly incorporated knowledge, compare it, and notice that it does not match with the information that they already know. Usually, assimilation and accommodation will occur at the same time, creating a state of balance or equilibrium. Both assimilation and accommodation are to maintain a balance between the structure of the mind and the environment. We tend to balance assimilation and accommodation to create a stable understanding of the world around us. For play, assimilation takes dominance over accommodation; that is, children assimilate new intellectual materials or ideas [20]; [21] instead of accommodating to the realities that they have seen and heard about. [22] cognitive theory consists of three stages of play: 1. Functional play, also known as sensorimotor (2). Symbolic play (3) Games with rules. Children progress through these stages in a conforming sequence. As children advance through the stages, they acquire new skills and move from one level of mastery to another An infant playing with a rattle (functional play) will learn eye-hand coordination, and will improve this skill to the point of moving to the next level of mastery (symbolic play). [23] believed that conflict and problem solving are the essential characteristics of development. His primary focus of research was the belief that individuals need social interactions in order for learning to take place.

**Play and Children Development**

Over the past few decades, researchers in the fields of education and child psychology have amassed significant evidence for the necessity of play in children’s lives. There is no denying that play is fun, and certainly fun is its biggest draw for children. However, as children play, they also develop critical cognitive, emotional, social, and physical skills. Play even contributes to proper brain development [24]. In this way, play is an important end in itself; it is also a means to other ends.
The skills children learn through play in the early years set the stage for future learning and success from the kindergarten classroom to the workplace. Play presents children with a particularly strong opportunity for growth because it meets the needs of the whole, individual child. All domains of children’s development - cognitive, social, emotional, and physical – are intricately intertwined. Play benefits each of these skills in direct and indirect ways. Children learn and practice cognitive skills including language, problem solving, creativity, and self-regulation. Socio-emotional growth can be seen in children’s ability to interact with others, negotiate, and compromise. They also practice strategies to cope with fear, anger, and frustration. Moreover, block building, drawing, running, and jumping all contribute to the development of fine and gross motor skills. When children have the chance to direct their own learning through play, they are able to address their own immediate and developmental needs and find activities that are most conducive to their individual learning styles.

In play, children develop a lasting disposition to learn. Having control over the course of one’s own learning, as in free play, promotes desire, motivation, thinking, mathematics, and language. They learn to negotiate social relationships, regulate their emotions, and control their own behaviors. Play also fosters the development of fine and gross motor skills. When play is fun and child-directed, children are motivated to engage in opportunities to learn.

CONCLUSION

Play is learning. As [24] noted, it contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. In the short and long term, play benefits cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Children learn cognitive skills such as creativity, problem solving, divergent and mastery [25]; [23]. Children also learn how to seek out knowledge; play involves exploration, hypothesis testing, and discovery. What is more, all this is done in a safe, anxiety- and risk-free environment where children are free to test the limits of their knowledge and abilities with relatively few repercussions [3]. They learn to have confidence in their ability to solve a problem, and they become resilient in the face of a challenge [4]; [5]; [6]. Play builds the foundation for a lifetime of learning.

Many of these skills, first developed through play, are crucial for success in the 21st century. There is no doubt that amassing knowledge of the world around us continues to be important in our society – and playful learning can help children to learn content-based lessons, too. Increasingly, however, to achieve success in a global economy, the individuals that make up our workforce must also be socially adept and highly creative. The “6Cs” – Collaboration, strong Communication, knowledge of Content, Critical thinking, Creative innovation, and Confidence to fail and try again – will be essential to our children’s future success. Many of these skills are not easily taught in the classroom; however, they are readily learned through play [7]; [11]; [17].

REFERENCES


