

## Why Is Play Important?

Guidelines from the Association for Childhood Education International and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, two respected professional associations, affirm that play

- Enables children to explore their world.
- Develops social and cultural understandings.
- Helps children express their thoughts and feelings.
- Provides opportunities to meet and solve problems.
- Develops language and literacy skills and concepts (Bredekamp, 1987; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988).

In the following play vignettes, consider how play contributes to children's cognitive, language and literacy, social, emotional, and creative development.

### Cognitive Development

Kara, a 4-year-old, is in the housekeeping area. She dials the black toy telephone, holds the receiver to her mouth, and says:

Kara: Doctor, Speedy (the gerbil) is sick today. (She puts the receiver down, bounds over to the gerbil cage, and taps on the cage with her fingers calling) Speedy, Speedy, it's okay. I'm getting medicine. Doctor, Speedy is still sleeping, and he needs medicine. I'll go get him some. (She takes a purse and goes to the theme corner, which happens to be set up as a grocery store.)

Kara: I need some medicine for the gerbil. (A child says, "Okay", hands her a plastic jar and says, "That will be \$1.00. Give it to him right away. Bye.")

Kara demonstrates three salient play characteristics that parallel cognitive development:

1. Imitating a behavior detached from the present situation when she pretends to call the doctor's office from another setting.
2. Shifting from a focus on herself to a focus on others when she says, "Speedy, Speedy, it's okay. I'm getting you some medicine."
3. Substituting objects when she uses a plastic bottle for the gerbil's medicine (Piaget, 1962; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969).

Through her pretend play, Kara safely tests her ideas about caring for sick pets and about the doctor's role. She also practices social role behavior with the telephone.

The skills children use in pretend play are essential for their success in school (Smilansky, 1968; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). All subjects and problems include cognitive skills children use to pretend, yet many subjects (e.g., social studies) are those with which children have limited experience. If, for example,

## Social Development

During play, children also increase their social competence. Smilansky and Shefatya (1990) contend that children's school success largely depends on their ability to interact positively with their peers and adults. Through play, children:

- Practice both verbal and nonverbal communication skills by negotiating roles, trying to gain access to ongoing play, or appreciating the feelings of others (Spodek & Saracho, 1988).
- Respond to their peers' feelings while waiting their turn and sharing materials and experiences (Spodek & Saracho, 1988).
- Experiment with the roles of the people in their home, school, and community by coming into contact with the needs and wishes of others (Garvey, 1977; Rubin, 1980; Seefeldt & Barbour, 1990).
- Experience others' points of view. As children work through conflicts about space, materials, or rules, they build positive conflict resolution strategies (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990).

## Emotional Development

Play supports emotional development by providing a way to *express* feelings and a context to *cope* with them. Pretend play helps children to express feelings in the following four ways (Piaget, 1962):

1. *Simplifying events* by creating an imaginary character, plot, or setting to match their emotional state. A child afraid of the dark, for example, might eliminate darkness or night from the play episode.
2. *Compensating for situations* by adding forbidden acts to pretend play. A child may, for example, eat cookies and ice cream for breakfast in play, whereas in reality, this could not happen.
3. *Liquidating experiences* when children repeatedly enact unpleasant or frightening experiences to gain control over the resulting emotions. For example, when children have unpleasant feelings resulting from an accident, they often reenact the scene in order to gain mastery over it.
4. *Anticipating behaviors and events* by pretending that another character, real or imaginary, commits the act and suffers the consequences when children are concerned with the consequences of disobeying an adult often. Children who normally can watch only certain television programs can pretend to allow the doll to watch and be reprimanded for watching inappropriate programs.

In addition to expressing feelings, children learn to *cope* with their feelings as they act out being angry, sad, or worried in a situation they control (Erikson, 1963). Pretend play allows them to think out loud about experiences charged with both pleasant and unpleasant feelings (Fein, 1985). A good example is Alexander, a 4-year-old whose dog was recently hit by a car. In his dramatic play

in the pet hospital, his teacher heard him say to another child, "I'm sad because my dog was hurt by the car." Here he was trying to cope with unpleasant feelings from an unpleasant situation. Play enabled Alexander to express his feelings so that he could cope with his worry about his dog (Rubin & Howe, 1986).

### Creativity and Imagination

Play enables children to invent ideas and use their imaginations in risk-free environments. Research supports the notion that play and creativity are related because they both rely upon children's ability to use symbols (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987; Spodek & Saracho, 1988). Creativity can be viewed as an aspect of problem solving that has its roots in play. When young children use their imaginations in play, they are more creative, perform better at school tasks, and develop a problem-solving approach to learning (Dansky, 1980; Dansky & Silverman, 1973; Pepler & Ross, 1981; Singer, 1973; Sutton-Smith, 1986).

### Physical Development

Play contributes to children's fine and gross motor development and body awareness as they actively use their bodies. A good example of fine motor development through play is a young child's learning to use a writing tool, like a marker. The natural progression in small motor development is from scribbles to shapes and forms to representational pictures. Playing with writing tools contributes to children's refinement of small motor skills. Gross motor development, such as hopping and skipping, develop in a similar fashion. When children first learn to skip, they practice hopping on different feet or just for the pure joy of hopping. As school-aged children, their hopping skill is integrated into many games they create and play. Using their bodies during play enables them to develop and refine skills, and "to feel physically confident, secure and self-assured" (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988, p. 139).

The importance of play is well documented. It is the essence of how children learn and follows a developmental sequence that we examine in the following section.

### How Does Play Develop?

Ten-month-old Jessie plays pat-a-cake with her Grandma Marji.

Two-year-olds Ramey and Cassie pour sand back and forth into different-sized plastic containers.

Four-year-olds Lara and Michelle are pretending to make pizzas and are taking delivery orders over the telephone.



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these types of play peaks at a particular age, it continues in some form throughout life, has unique characteristics, and contributes to children's growing understanding of themselves, others, and their world. Table 2.2 is an overview of the four categories of cognitive play and describes typical behaviors of each one.

**Functional Play**

*Functional play* (birth to age 2) is characterized by simple, pleasurable, repeated movements with objects, people, and language. It is also referred to as *sensorimotor, practice, or exercise play* (Piaget, 1962; Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Functional play dominates the first 2 years of development and parallels Piaget's sensorimotor stage of development but continues in some form through adulthood.

Through functional or practice play, children begin to feel confident and competent with their bodies, like the

- One-year-old who stacks and unstacks rings on a pole.
- Four-year-old who incessantly repeats "I'm the king of the castle."
- Five-year-old who deliberately places pegs in a pegboard.
- Seven-year-old who practices bicycling skills at every available minute.

**Dramatic Play**

*Dramatic play* (2 to 7 years), also called *pretend, fantasy, make-believe, or symbolic play*, emerges during the second year and continues in different forms throughout adulthood. It reflects children's growing mental ability to make objects, actions, gestures, or words stand for something or someone else (Isenberg & Jacob, 1983; Piaget, 1962) and focuses on social roles and interactions (Smilansky

TABLE 2.2 Types and Characteristics of Cognitive Play

Type	Characteristics of the Child
Functional play (practice play)	Uses repetitive muscle movement, with or without objects (e.g., running, filling, hammering).
Constructive play	Manipulates objects or materials (e.g., blocks, wood, collage) to make something.
Dramatic play (pretend play)	Uses imagination and role play to transform the self and objects and to satisfy needs. Pretends to care for a sick animal (role play). Pretends to take a shower (arm movements). Note: Unless there is role taking or pretend behavior, it is not called dramatic play.
Games with rules	Recognizes, accepts, and adapts to predetermined rules that are goal-oriented (e.g., Rummy, Candyland, Jacks).

Source: Adapted from Piaget (1962), Smilansky (1968), and Smilansky & Shefatya (1990).

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& Shefatya, 1990). In dramatic play, children make mental and verbal plans of action, assume roles, and transform objects or actions to express their feelings and ideas (Garvey, 1977).

Infants and toddlers imitate actions associated with a particular prop in dramatic play, learn to substitute one thing for another, and act as if they were someone else who is familiar to them. As a young toddler, Naomi picks up her toy cup and pretends to drink from it. As an older toddler, she may offer her doll a drink from the cup. Her dramatic play shifts from pretense about herself to pretense about others.

Preschool and kindergarten children's dramatic play is more complex. They engage in both solitary and group pretend play, use nonrealistic objects, assume roles, and use objects as symbols in addition to what they stand for (Bergen, 1988). Three-year-old Miriam uses her hand as a pretend hairbrush for the baby's hair. Five-year-olds Jimbo and Celeste become firefighters as they collaborate to rescue people from a burning building. These transformations are essential for dramatic play to occur (Weininger, 1988). Dramatic play peaks during the preschool years, the golden age of make-believe play.

Elementary children's dramatic play is different from the play of children at other ages because now their thinking is less public. They can integrate their symbols into age-appropriate, socially acceptable mental games and language play. Riddles, number games, secret codes, and daydreaming form the structure of symbolic play for elementary school children (Bergen, 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1980). It is not uncommon to find 7-year-olds, such as Angie and Bud, talking in secret code, a form of dramatic play, near their lockers.

### Sociodramatic Play

When dramatic play involves two or more children who communicate verbally about the play episode, it is called *sociodramatic play*. Because sociodramatic play is person-oriented rather than object-oriented, it is a higher level of play behavior. During sociodramatic play, children exchange information and ideas during a jointly elaborated play sequence or theme; they can simultaneously be actors, interactors, and observers (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Repeated opportunities to engage in this type of play offer children a rich arena for developing and refining concepts, solving problems, and enhancing peer relationships. Sociodramatic play correlates highly with children's intellectual and social abilities (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990). Table 2.3 describes Smilansky and Shefatya's six criteria for determining dramatic and sociodramatic play.

It is the last two characteristics (interaction and verbal communication) that define play as sociodramatic. A discussion of the Smilansky scale for evaluating sociodramatic play elements is presented in Chapter Nine.

### Constructive Play

In *constructive play*, children create something according to a preconceived plan. Constructive play predominates during the preschool years (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). Let's look at the following example, which occurred during center time in Ms. Mitsoff's combined kindergarten and first-grade classroom.