

Furthering our Understanding of Play to Promote Competencies in Head Start Children

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- **Play: A Route to Reading**
Sandra J. Bishop-Josef
- **The Mind's Development in the Development of Play**
W. George Scarlett
- **Play as a Metaphor for Healing**
Dottie Ward-Wimmer

Páez: Play continues to be a central aspect of a well-rounded early childhood curriculum. Play is the work of children as they develop symbolic functions, emotional regulation, and relationships with others. Three perspectives on play and the role of play in early childhood were presented.

Bishop-Josef: Play has had a checkered history in American preschool education, alternating between being viewed as the primary mode of learning and being devalued. The best child development research and sound educational practice support a balanced approach, pursuing simultaneous hands-on, play-based learning and direct instruction of academic skills. Head Start is a comprehensive, whole child program that recognizes the importance of play for child development. Those in Head Start understand that children's cognitive, physical, social, and emotional systems are closely intertwined.

In the 1950s, American attitudes toward education were seriously affected when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik. This launch was seen as evidence that the rigorous Soviet education system was superior to that of the United States. People began clamoring for a return to the three "Rs" of reading, writing, and arithmetic as a way to maintain American global superiority. A spokesperson for this perspective commented that while Soviet children were learning mathematics, American children were "busy fingerpainting."

In the 1960s, the "environmental mystique" focused on cognitive development with a belief that short interventions could produce dramatic increases in children's cognitive development. Another guiding principle about this environmental mystique was that interventions would be most effective if they were administered as early as possible. Play became suspect, and drill and exposure to educational gadgetry such as flash cards were seen as worthy of children's attention, rather than play. Head Start was also affected by this perspective.

Head Start was a comprehensive whole child program from its inception in 1965. However, researchers evaluating Head Start focused mostly on cognitive development, particularly IQ scores. It seemed that short interventions, even six to eight weeks of a summer Head Start program, could lead to dramatic increases in children's IQ. In 1969, the Westinghouse Report demonstrated the alleged fade-out effect, which showed that dramatic IQ increases were not sustained. In the early 1970s, the federal Office of Child Development (OCD) articulated everyday social competence as the overriding goal of Head Start, and encouraged broader evaluations to assess its impact. OCD also funded what was known as the Measures Project in 1977, a multisite study that developed a battery of measures to assess functioning of children in Head Start, including cognitive development and social competence.

Renewed appreciation of social and emotional development was seen by the early 1980s, with an accompanying appreciation for the value of play. In 1982, most funding for the Measures Project was cut, and only the site developing the cognitive development measure was continually funded. In the 1990s, the tide began to shift yet again, and the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start explicitly stated the program goal as school readiness. Head Start defined school readiness in terms of physical and mental health, social and emotional development, parental involvement, and preacademic skills. This focus beyond cognitive development left more room for play.

The National Education Goals Panel for K-12 education also defined school readiness more broadly than just cognitive development. But recently, play again has started to be devalued. For example, many preschools and elementary schools have reduced or even eliminated play and recess from their schedules. This renewed focus on cognitive development has focused primarily on literacy and reading, partly due to findings of poor academic achievement of American children compared to children in other nations. The change also reflects an attempt to eliminate the well-documented gap. Parents of young children also seem to be clamoring more for evidence that their children are "doing work" rather than play. This focus on cognitive development has found its way into policies and proposals for Head Start.

A balanced approach is needed based on knowledge derived from the best child development research and sound educational practice. Proponents of the whole child approach do not deny the importance of cognitive skills, including literacy. However, reading is only one aspect of cognitive development, and cognitive development is only one aspect of human development. Cognitive skills are intertwined with physical, social, and emotional skills. For example, reading involves mastery of phonemes, the alphabet, and other basic word skills. Good physical and mental health also facilitates literacy. Children who are absent from school because of illness, children who have hearing problems, dental problems, or post-traumatic stress disorder do not learn well. At the same time, a child who knows the alphabet but does not know how to listen, sit in a chair, or get along with teachers and peers may have problems learning. Quality preschool education requires pursuing both direct instruction of academic skills and play-based learning.

Jean Piaget argued that children actively acquire knowledge of the world through interacting with the physical environment, and that play provides these opportunities. Lev Vygotsky similarly claimed that play serves as the primary context for child development and cognitive development. In play, children interact with others, including more skilled peers, parents, and teachers. Vygotsky also argued that when children use objects to represent other objects in play, they set the stage for abstract thought. Play allows children to separate the actual physical object from its meaning. Once children have developed representational skills through play, they can use these abilities to develop reading and writing where sounds are represented by symbols. In addition, Vygotsky argued that following the rules inherent in all play, whether child-directed or teacher-directed, allows children to develop emotional self-regulation, which is essential for success in structured classroom environments.

Although play is often thought of in terms of “free play” dictated by the child, play can also be educationally focused to reach specific goals, directed by the teacher or parent. Through both forms of play, children can learn vocabulary, language skills, concepts, problem solving, perspective taking, representation skills, memory, and creativity. Play has also been found to contribute to early literacy development, skills necessary for school readiness, and social skills such as following rules, empathy, self-confidence, impulse control, and motivation. These factors, although not cognitive in nature, have an important impact on cognitive development and are just as important in learning to read and do math.

Curricula have been designed using play to enhance cognitive development and to teach preliteracy and literacy skills. Most Head Start programs use either the Creative Curriculum for Preschool or the High/Scope curriculum. Both curricula focus on children’s active learning through play. Another example, “Tools of the Mind,” uses sociodramatic play to foster literacy in preschool and kindergarten classrooms. Teachers support children’s play by helping them create imaginary situations, providing props, and expanding possible play roles. Children, with teacher assistance, develop written play plans, including the theme, roles, and rules to govern the play. Converging evidence shows that Head Start, designed to provide comprehensive services for the whole child and the family, including a focus on play in curricula performance standards, significantly impacts children’s cognitive development and school readiness, including preliteracy and prenumeracy skills. Four decades of research and practice offer unequivocal evidence of the critical importance of play for children’s development.

Scarlett: Imagination continues to develop throughout one’s lifetime and is essential to higher order thinking, understanding historical events, and understanding phenomenon that one cannot see. Schools depend upon imagination as seen in children’s play. This new appreciation for the development of imagination and the joining of imagination and language can help make children ready for school. On the other hand, direct assessments look at cognitive development as opposed to play. Some developmental psychologists assert that imagination is cognitive development. Why is there continuing doubt about play’s value, and why is there uncertainty about explaining play’s value as an indicator

and motor of cognitive development? Why is research on play's development often misunderstood, ignored, or treated as irrelevant?

American culture has a rhetoric that puts play on a pedestal, as the source of cognitive, social, and emotional development. However, people meddle in children's play, thinking that it needs to be cleaned up, and that children must be taught how to play. There seems to be confusion over the distinction between structure and content. Hence the relative misuse or ignoring of the ordinal scales that define play's development. Play develops and yet the conversation is rarely about what that means. Ordinal scale research helps broaden that discussion. Most of these scales focus on the structure of play rather than content. These ordinal scales are also often overlooked in informing interventions and teaching.

For example, the cognitive development measured by Parten's scale is often overlooked because the scale itself is categorized as measuring social development. It focuses on parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. The ordinal scale for replica play uses props, contact narratives, stage-managed narratives, and autonomous story worlds. Microdevelopmental analyses of play in specific play media are so specific as to seem trivial. In both examples, however, the main problem for understanding has to do with the developmental analyses focused on structural development. Understanding of ordinal scale and developmental analyses rest on understanding the distinction between structure and content.

Support for children's play comes in many forms. Parents and teachers provide materials, time, and space to support play's development. Less obvious are the ways that thoughtful parents and teachers support play's development by attending to the content of children's play to discern children's interests and to follow up with activities and experience that fuel the development of play, such as book reading, film viewing, conversations about specific topics, and field trips related to the child's interests. Structure needs content, and for this children need rich and relevant experience outside of play.

In the development of children's story worlds, children give their characters problems and solutions. Children create new worlds, and they often do that in cooperation with one another. Children go into these worlds to speak for the characters, then step out of the worlds into what is called metanarrative, to figure out how the storyline will progress. They show ability to create story worlds that show understanding between fantasy and reality. Children do not need to be taught how to develop their play structurally, but they may need encouragement, validation, and material support. With such support and experience, their play will develop structurally, and with that structural development, their minds will develop as well.

Ward: It is important to recognize that play is a child's native tongue. Long before people had the capacity to speak, to cognitively recognize a feeling and articulate it, they probably experienced a host of possible feelings from love to fear to loneliness to confusion to hunger. Play is important because it provides an entrée. Play is the most natural thing in the world. People often imagine outside of themselves, it is the most

natural place to go. Play is where people rehearse life, it is the theater in which anything is possible.

What is healing? Healing is the return to balance. Play can be a metaphor for healing, and it dovetails with the capacity to learn. For traumatized children, the capacity or lack of capacity to imagine is a direct assessment tool to analyze the degree of trauma. Healing is about coming back to the center, into a place of confidence. Where can children better heal than through play? Loss is about adapting, and grieving children are dynamic. They are like little snowballs rolling down a hill. Their journeys of grief include knowing, experiencing their feelings, adapting, and moving on. The experiences of four children can illustrate this relationship between healing and play.

One young girl with divorced parents was sexually abused by her mother's new boyfriend. Using play therapy, she acted out scenes using a dollhouse as metaphor for actual themes in her own home. Shifts in play could be tracked with behaviors at home and in school. As internal tensions resolved, the characters became stronger. Empowerment themes emerged in her stories as she also received cognitive behavioral therapy tailored for sexually abused children. She learned how to use her voice to say, "No, stop!" in order to protect herself. Her teachers report that she is now doing well in kindergarten.

Another child was 3 years of age when he entered Head Start. He had separation anxiety and resisted leaving his parents, and he stopped speaking or sleeping in his own bed. He was silent during the entire first year of Head Start. He was enrolled in play therapy during his second year of Head Start. His play started out in the sand, with repeated scary scenes. Eventually, good characters entered the play. He now selects puzzles, art, and engages the therapist through eye contact and other nonverbal cues. His teachers report similar strides in classroom participation, though it remains nonverbal. However, he speaks freely at home.

A third child came into play therapy because he was depressed and his school performance was falling. His father had a brutal temper, and his mother finally left the marriage after being hospitalized four times. Because this 6-year-old child was never himself the direct recipient of violence, the judge allowed the father unlimited weekend visitation. This child's play centered around taking sand out of the sand tray and throwing it on the dollhouse until it was destroyed. He received cognitive therapy to empower him to devise plans to protect himself. He began to sleep at night, do well in school, and engage with friends.

Finally, a 4-year-old's home was destroyed in Hurricane Katrina, and her grandfather was killed. Within four months, she lived in three states, three relatives' homes, one motel, and one shelter. Her mother described her as a normal little girl, but when she went into Head Start, she literally tore the place up. Her play was filled with chaos. She demanded that the therapist follow directions. She also asked that the playroom door be locked, and she frequently checked on her mother's presence. After her first play therapy session, she had a wild tantrum and had to be carried by two people to the car. Her Head Start teacher

now reports more ability to engage and articulate. Play is every child's birthright. It is the bridge that brings them into tomorrow.

Watson: Play is a channel for children to try to make sense of their world. Children's play has a lot of meaning and is a way for them to express themselves. The described ordinal scales on play can help measure how children are developing. Cognitive development is important in Head Start programs, with a focus on preliteracy. Through play, children learn and develop, and they get the language, social, and emotional skills that will help them develop later in life. Cognitive skills can also be addressed through children's play.

In the Creative Curriculum used by many Head Start programs, children have time for free play where they direct their own play. They take the lead in the play and teachers take guidance from the children. At other times, play is teacher-directed, to help children learn certain skills or concepts that they may not acquire through their own free play. Playgroups help children channel their emotions to self-regulate, socialize with their peers, take turns, and share.

Comment: Large national data collection efforts are underway such as the Head Start Impact Study and the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), which collect data on thousands of children, but they do not have a play-based assessment. Many assessments ignore play though ordinal scales exist to analyze it.

Ward: Time must also be spent educating parents about the importance of play. Educating the world around the child is vital so that as the educational world compresses the child into a cognitive being, the world around him or her offers support such as storytelling, and time for talking and listening.

Scarlett: In terms of a definition of play, it is an experience. Play transforms. Humor is a form of play. Playing with words is a form of play. Play should be valued, not simply as a means to an end, but valued as an end to itself. There is an aesthetic to play that is about the human spirit. Head Start should talk about play and its role in cognitive development or, for example, literacy development. Play is part of being a human being, and it is beautiful.

Ward: Play is like breathing, it is natural. It is one's spirit bubbling up and coming out. When children are referred to play therapy, they are engaged in their own expression, joy, experience, and breath. It is a gift.