

# Play: World of Children

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## ABSTRACT

Play is referred to as the language of children because they can communicate their thoughts and feelings in ways that they express verbally. The impulse to play is innate and its characteristics are fun, uncertainty, challenge, flexibility and non-productivity. All children have the right to play regardless of ability, ethnicity, or gender. Play can happen indoors or outdoors, with or without the oversight of adults, in everyday spaces, in environments designed for play and in places chosen by children. The right to play is child's first claim on the society because it offers an excellent opportunity to ensure that all children in an area of all ages, gender, and abilities, participate in fun activities. This paper deals with the comprehensive overview of play, types of play and benefits from different angles. Play is focal point to the early year's foundation stage and seen as a key way in which children learn and develop. It helps a child to develop physical skills, cognitive concepts, language and social skills. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and an integral part of wholesome development not only for particular children but also for the society. The broad category of activities that are covered by the term play include swinging, chasing, climbing, sliding, running, dancing, clay modeling, building with blocks, dressing up, and role playing. Everyone has a responsibility to ensure that children are able to play every day and have quality play environments in which to play.

**Keywords:** Play, types of play, benefits of play

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*We can be sure that all happenings, pleasant or unpleasant, in the child's life, will have repercussions on her dolls.* (Piaget 1962)  
Early pioneer of children's pedagogy and creator of the concept of kindergarten, Friedrich Froebel held a strong belief in play as a substantial part of a child's development.

Froebel (1903) wrote, "play is the highest development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in the child's soul.... children's play is not mere sport, it is full of meaning and import" (p. 22). The play process enables the acquisition of information about the world and the exploration of ideas which encourage the development of flexibility and creative problem solving. Play arises from children's innate need to express them, to explore, learn about and make sense of their world, and that its benefits for children derive from them. Play is biological, psychological and social necessity, and is fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individual's society.

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The United Nations developed its policy on children and play in 1989. On November 20, 1989, the General Assembly adopted Article 31 of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child. The article states that:

- ❑ States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
- ❑ States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.

## Play

Play is nature's training for life. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. Play is an integral part of early childhood development in which typically developing children learn social, emotional and language skills as well as appropriate behaviors, problem solving and a variety of other cognitive skills. Play is at the heart of children's everyday lives and experiences throughout childhood. According to Elkind (2007) through play, children learn about the world and engage in activities that encourage their cognitive, emotional, and social development. For example, when a child fluting, he learns and he can create a sound. Through play, he learns the important concept of cause and effect. According to Paley (2004) Play is the mechanism by which children practice new skills, experience their world, and internalize new ideas- and is therefore the essential "work of children". Play is considered to be a complex phenomenon that is not well understood (Sutton-Smith, 1997).

The prevalence of play and games since prehistoric times, supported by the existence of dice, gaming sticks, gaming boards and various forms of ball-play material made of stones, sticks and bones from the Paleolithic Era (Fox, 1977, Schaefer and Reid, 2001). Excavations

in ancient China, Peru, Mesopotamia and Egypt have revealed miniature models made of clay and metal, used as toys for children and drawings showing depictions of people playing and play objects such as tops, dolls and rattles (Frost, 2010). Wiedemann, (1989) and Golden, (1993), have found play to be the characteristic feature of childhood, with children enjoying great autonomy in the sphere of play in ancient society. Play is held widely as a universal phenomenon, one that is not even unique to humans (Lancy, 1980). Universal conceptions of the role of play in children's acquisition of developmental competencies have part of their foundations in this view of play as a dimension of the shared biological heritage of humans across cultures (Hughes, 1991).

Most sociologists, psychologists, and philosophers agree that play is not limited to humans. Play is well noted scientifically in the animal kingdom as well. The fundamentals of play according to Zondervan in 1928 as quoted by Huizinga in his book *Homoludens*, 1949, include the following:

- ❑ Play is a discharge of super abundant vital energy.
- ❑ Play is a satisfaction of some "imitative instinct".
- ❑ Play expresses a need for relaxation.
- ❑ Play is the training of the young creature for the serious work that life will demand later on.
- ❑ Play exercised in restraint is needful to the individual.
- ❑ Play is the innate urge to exercise a certain faculty.
- ❑ Play is incorporates the desire to dominate or compete.
- ❑ Play is an abreaction, an outlet for harmful impulses. It is the necessary restorer of energy wasted by a one-sided activity or a "wish-fulfillment".
- ❑ Play is a fiction designed to keep up the feeling of personal value.

(Huizinga, 1949, p. 2)

In the Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, play is defined as any spontaneous or organized activity that provides enjoyment, entertainment, amusement, or diversion (American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), 2002). Guilick (1920) states that, “for the activities of play are not merely preparation for life; they constitute actual living at the time, and the process is a real one” (p. 179). The definition used in the National Play Policy to provide an understanding of play is: ‘Play is freely chosen, personally directed, intrinsically motivated behaviour that actively engages the child.’ (NPFA, PLAYLINK & CPC, 2000, p. 6).

### Characteristics of play

Krasnor and Pepler (1980) developed a model of play that involves four components: nonliterality, positive affect, intrinsic motivation, and flexibility. They believed that “pure play” involves all four components, to varying degrees. They also presented three basic views of the relationship between play and developmental skills. First, play reflects the developmental level of the child and, therefore, can be used as a diagnostic tool. Second, play provides an opportunity to practice skills. Third, play is a causal agent in developmental change. Play is a way of ‘doing things’. The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2011) summarized characteristics of play on the basis of its outcomes in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Showing characteristics of play

Characteristic	Description
Active	Children use their bodies and minds in their play. They interact with the environment, with materials and with other people.
Adventurous and risky	Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks.
Communicative	Children share information and knowledge through their play. Their communication can be verbal or non-verbal, simple or complex.
Enjoyable	Play is fun and exciting, and involves a sense of humour.
Involved	Children become deeply absorbed and focused in their play, concentrating and thinking about what they are doing.

Meaningful	Children play about what they have seen and heard, and what they know. Play helps them to build and extend their knowledge, understanding and skills in a way that makes sense to them.
Sociable and interactive	Children play alongside or with others. Sometimes they also like and need to play alone.
Symbolic	Children imagine and pretend when they are playing. They try out ideas, feelings and roles. They re-enact the past and rehearse the future. This can involve them ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ long before they develop these skills.
Therapeutic	Play helps children to express and work through emotions and experiences.
Voluntary	Children choose to play. Their play is spontaneous. They shape it as they go, changing the characters, events, objects, and locations.

Source: Adapted from *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (2011).

Miller, Tichota & White (2009) have identified five key elements of play after reviewing extensive literature given as follows:

1. Play must be pleasurable and enjoyable. It has inherent attraction and is pure fun for children. The pleasure children derive from play feeds their desire to play more.
2. Play has no extrinsic goals. It is not task or objective oriented or initiated out of obligation or duty. It is process rather than product oriented. Children engage in play simply for its own sake.
3. Play is spontaneous, flexible and voluntary. It is child-initiated and absorbs children’s attention. It is based on children’s experiences.
4. Play involves active engagement on the part of the child. It provides freedom from time and when engaged in it, children are fully in the moment.
5. Play contains an element of make believe. It is non-literal in that it uses symbolic representations for needed objects and is composed of flights of the imagination. Play has great improvisational potential.

Blanche (1999) summarized characteristics of play as a process-oriented occupation that includes: Play is spontaneous, exciting, energy producing or expending, physically and mentally active, relaxing or somewhat stressful. It may result into creativity, imagination, and a sense of freedom; may not have a clear purpose; and is performed for oneself.

### Types of play

Children's play ranges from simple physical play with objects such as baby rattles to more complex cognitive play in games with several rules. Parten (1932) observed children's social behaviour during play. She developed a continuum showing levels of children's participation in social play, which includes:

- Passive Play
- Involved Play
- Pretend Play
- Cognitive Play
- Socio-dramatic play

Piaget (1962) and Smilansky (1968) have categorized children's play in the exploratory, constructive and dramatic play. Sara Smilansky (1990) provides a model presenting five basic forms of play:

**Functional play** or exploratory play. This type of play is a sensorimotor approach in which a child learns the nature of his or her surroundings. Such examples include dumping, filling, stacking, water play, and outdoor play.

**Constructive play** describes children combining pieces or entities, such as with blocks. The purpose of this type of play is to make something and/or work out a problem.

**Dramatic play** entails pretending. The child pretends to be someone else, for example the teacher or a fireman. This type of play does not require any social interaction with other children.

**Socio-dramatic play** is a form of dramatic play with more than one player socially interacting around a theme and a time trajectory over which the play continues and evolves. Children enact real-life types of play activities.

**Games with rules** encompass cooperative play, often with winners and losers. These games are distinguished

by child-controlled rules and thus are different from the competitive games usually called "sports." Children begin the games with rules stage at about age 6.

Moyles (1989) divided play types that are used in schools on the basis of physicality, sociality, emotionality, and cognitivism. Kieff and Casberque (2000) define a context for meaningful learning on the basis of following points: play is focused on process; it is intrinsically motivated; it does not necessarily require literal interpretation; it allows for experimentation with rules; and it promotes mental activity. Other researchers define and name play in accordance with certain types of play activity, such as constructive play (Forman, 2006). Van der Kooij (2004) distinguishes *sensory-motor play* (function play or repetition play), *imitation play* (symbolic play), *construction play* (putting meaningless objects to a meaningful whole) and *world play* (grouping play: putting (toy) objects together to create an own world).

### Benefits of Play

The importance of play in a child's healthy development has long been appreciated, before the 1900s play was seen as auxiliary to developmental activities. Play has always been considered an essential part of childhood. Throughout the ages, play has always been viewed as a natural childhood activity. Play is critical to growth and development of children. As children play, they learn to solve problems, to get along with others and to develop the gross and fine motor skills etc. needed to grow and learn.

Ginsburg (2007) stressed that play is "essential" to children's cognitive, physical, social, emotional wellbeing, and children's healthy brain development. Some of the essential benefits are as follows:

- Important to healthy brain development
- Allow children to use creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength
- Allow children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles
- Help children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and resiliency to face future challenges

- ❑ Unstructured play allows children to work in groups, share, negotiate, resolve conflict, and learn self-advocacy skills
- ❑ Child-driven play allows children to practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover and engage in their own areas of interest
- ❑ Builds active, and healthy bodies
- ❑ Is integral to the academic environment help children adjust to the school setting and enhances children's learning readiness, learning behaviours, and problem solving skills
- ❑ Unscheduled play that allows time for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning
- ❑ Children with verbal difficulty express themselves through play, giving parents (not teachers) a better understanding of their perspective.

The benefits of play and the areas of development that can be impacted by play in the typically developing child are numerous. According to Piaget (1962), play and cognitive development are inseparable. Other investigators have associated play skills with development of emotional, social, communication, and physical/motor development (Athey, 1988; Curry & Bergen, 1988; Kaplan-Sanoff, Brewster, Stillwell & Bergen, 1988). Piaget's emphasis on the explorative capacities of young children combined with the suggestion that learning experiences were most appropriately matched with children's play-based stages of development had significant implications for the pedagogical strategies associated with many early childhood programs over the past 50 years (Hatch, 2010). John Dewey believed it was important to provide many different experiences to enable children's learning through play "as a lifelong process in which children grew and learned along the way" (Platz & Arellano, 2011, p. 56). According to Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff (2003, p. 208) suggested that based on research examining the benefits of play, "a new equation is in order: PLAY= LEARNING." Play is a point at which many ideas in early childhood education converge. It can be a point of cohesion and friendship,

of marginalization and exclusion, a place of pretense or of quiet solitude (Ailwood, 2011).

### Conclusion

Plato, the renowned ancient philosopher, spoke about the power of play: "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation" (Goodreads, 2012, p. 10). Play reinforces and helps to develop a child's physical stamina, fine and gross motor skills, problem solving, social awareness, and personal morality formation (Alderson, Howard, & Sheridan, 2011; Parenting Healthy Children, 2007; Edmiston, 2008). Current child psychologists are now on a mission to change the minds of parents and teachers because of the mounds of research confirming the beliefs that play is satisfying, healthy, and developmentally beneficial for children (Dix, 2013). Froebel believed that children would learn through their play, and therefore, "learn to live in harmony with others and nature" (Platz and Arellano 2011, p. 60). The development of cognitive skills, including dispositions for learning (such as curiosity and persistence), memory and thinking skills, and language and literacy skills, have strong links to play (Bodrova and Leong, 2005).

Good play opportunities promote good social, mental and emotional state, giving people the chance to try out and experience a range of emotions in a 'safe' way. Play supports and consolidates learning from both formal and informal school setting, and is widely seen as having an important role in children's cognitive development and ability to concentrate. Stakeholders should ensure that children could enjoy a healthy balance of both structured and unstructured play activities in their leisure time.

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