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Integrating Free Play as Developmental Trajectory among Children

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ABSTRACT

The present paper pinpoints on not-so-very-important activity in today's competitive era i.e. free play. There is a tremendous amount of change seen in today's child in comparison to children almost a decade ago. Most importantly, the population for whom the paper is emphasized is children, which are particularly invaluable as they transit from one stage to another and that too so swiftly that their play time has declined, and how this lack of play affects their cognitive, physical and emotional development, eventually leading to rise of anxiety, depression and problems of attention and self control. Hence, there is a need for parents, child psychologists, paediatrics as well as school management to play a pro-active role in extending the time spend on play i.e. simply free play in order to produce effects such as cohesion, harmony and well-being among children.

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Introduction

Children's play has fascinated parents, educators and child psychologists since ancient times as it is a cherished part of childhood. Play makes constructs easier to explain to children which otherwise is not so easy to teach. Generally, it is seen that boys enjoy rapid speed, rough and tumble, kite playing, dangerous elements and girls like to play 'ghar-ghar', 'teacher-teacher', colouring etc. Play elucidates a vital fact that kids who need love will ask for it in the most unloving ways but also clarifies to parents 'When more is not better and that their child is not a report card'.

Play can be said as something that engages children in recreation and underlines the importance of concepts such as what sinks and floats (Ginsburg, 2006); example: children make paper boats and knows it will float in rain water along side roads; mathematical concepts like how to balance blocks to build a tower; example: children are better able to learn and recall opposite counting because of their experience at red lights with their parents and literacy skills such as trying out new vocabulary or storytelling skills as children "act out" different roles; example: narrating dadi and nani ki khaania.

Play as Developmental Achievement and Hallmark of Emotional, Social and Cognitive Maturity

The value of play is increasingly recognized by researchers and within the policy arena, for adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional well-being. But to begin with, Parten (1932), developed a system for classifying participation in play. Till date, it is considered as one of the best descriptions of how play develops in children. Parten's Classification of Play is as follows:

- Unoccupied Play - The child is not actually "playing" but watches anything that happens to catch his interest. He may play with his own body, move around, remain in one location, or follow a teacher.
- Onlooker Behavior - This stage is termed "behavior" instead of play because this child is content in watching other children.

- Solitary Independent Play - Children prefer to play by themselves and are not comfortable interacting with other children. They may play apart with chosen toys, yet within speaking distance, and demonstrate little interest in making contact. Contact may consist of grabbing other children's toys when the opportunity exists.

- Parallel Play - This stage is also known as adjacent play or social coaction. Children occupy space near others, but seldom share toys or materials. They may talk, but each has their own conversation and there is no attempt to communicate with each other. As an example, one child may talk about going to the circus while another interrupts about going to a fast food restaurant.

- Associate Play - Children lend, borrow, and take toys from others. At this stage, children are beginning to engage in close personal contact, however, they still consider their own viewpoint as most important. Children are not yet ready to participate in teams or group work, but there should be opportunities for group work so they can gradually learn how to communicate their needs.

- Cooperative Play - This stage is the highest form of children working and playing together. They share, take turns, and allow some children to serve as leaders for the group. For example, one child may be the policeman, another a nurse, while another is the mother. In cooperative play, three-year-olds play best with approximately three other children; five-year-olds can play successfully with approximately five children.

Also, Piaget, (1951) in his theory on child's cognitive development, believed that children do not develop new cognitive structures in play, but merely try to fit new experiences into what they already know. He upheld the importance of 'Nature' to explain play development and that teachers and parents have opportunities to observe children as they grow physically, emotionally, socially, and intellectually.

Further, Vygotsky 's theory of cognitive development (1962) posits that information from the external world is transformed and internalized through language. Since language is both a symbolic system of communication and a cultural tool used to transmit culture and history, play is an essential part of both language development and a child's understanding of the external world. According to him, 'Nurture' explains that when a child is at play, he or she is in a constant dialogue either with self or others.

Two Major Types of Play

Children engage in physical play, play with objects, symbolic play, pretence/socio -dramatic play and games with rules and according to Morris (2005), Tassoni (2006) it can be broadly classified in the following two types of play.

- **Unstructured Free Play-** This is play that just happens, depending on what takes your child's interest at the time. Free play isn't planned and lets your child use her imagination and move at her own pace. For instance, creative play alone or with others, including artistic or musical games; imaginative games – for example, making cubby houses with boxes or blankets, dressing up, playing make-believe; exploring new or favourite play spaces such as cupboards, backyards, parks, playgrounds and so on.
- **Structured play-** It's more organised and happens at a fixed time or in a set space, and is often led by a grown-up. For example swimming lessons for older children, dance, music or drama classes for children of all ages, card games. Structured and unstructured play can happen indoors or outdoors. Outdoor play gives the child the chance to explore, be active and test physical limits thereby cutting down obesity as an upcoming health issue amongst children.

Importance of Play

Also, play helps in overall development of children. According to Isenberg and Jalongo (2014), Play supports Emotional Development by providing a way to express and cope with feelings. Pretend play helps children express feelings in the following ways (Piaget, 1962):

- 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.
- Controlling emotional expression by repeatedly reenacting unpleasant or frightening experiences. For example, a child might pretend to have an accident after seeing a real traffic accident on the highway.
- Play contributes to Physical Development of children's fine and gross motor development and body awareness as they actively use their bodies.
- Learning to use a writing tool, such as a marker, is an example of fine motor development through play. The natural progression in small motor development is from scribbles to shapes and forms to representational pictures. Playing with writing tools helps children refine their fine motor skills. Gross motor development, such as hopping and skipping, develops in a similar fashion. Using their bodies during play also enables them to feel physically confident, secure, and self-assured (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002).
- Recess in schools has traditionally been the time for children to "take a break" from the sedentary academic activities of the classroom and engage in active, free play. Further, Play also shed light on children's **Creative Development** in the following ways:
- Nearly 50 years ago, Sigmund Freud (1958) suggested that every child at play "behaves like a creative writer, in that he

creates a world of his own, or, rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him. The creative writer does the same as the child at play. He creates a world of fantasy which he takes very seriously—that is, which he invests with large amounts of emotion".

- Creative thought can also be viewed as an aspect of problem solving, which 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; Frost et al., 2001).

Benefits are many, but to name a few as per Isenberg & Quisenberry (1988), the ensuing section elucidates on it:

- Play lays the foundation for literacy- Through play children learn to make and practise new sounds. They try out new vocabulary, on their own or with friends, and exercise their imagination through storytelling.
- Play is learning- Play nurtures development and fulfils a baby's inborn need to learn. Play takes many forms, from shaking a rattle to peek-a-boo to hide-and-seek. Play can be done by a child alone, with another child, in a group or with an adult.
- Play encourages adults to communicate with the children in their lives- Adults support play by giving children the opportunity to engage in play, by knowing when not to intervene, and by knowing when to intervene.
- Play gives children the chance to be spontaneous- You may think your child should be rolling the truck on the ground but that doesn't mean that truck is not equally useful as a stacking toy.
- Play gives children choice- Having enough toys or activities to choose from will allow children to express themselves.
- Play gives children space- To practise physical movement, balance and to test their own limits.
- Play teaches adults patience and understanding-If you do choose to join in your child's play make sure that you do not try to take it over and force incorporation of your ultimate learning objectives into their play. Structured adult-led activities have their time and place but remember to allow for time for children to control and decide their own play.
- Play is fun- Learning to play well, both by themselves and with others, sets children up to be contented and sociable.

Methodology

The researcher conducted Survey on 200 school-going children (fifth to seventh class) from the tri-city of Chandigarh, Panchkula and Mohali using Interview as a technique on parents of school going children. A detailed probe into the analysis of the survey reveals the following major observations.

Results and Discussion

According to the researcher, it is imperative to firstly differentiate between 'Work and Play'. So, an answer to this query which was the highlight of the present study was that work is something that a child is obliged to do where as play is defined as something which a child is not obliged to do. Secondly, no learning takes place unless we have significant relationships. Further, concepts such as self-esteem and self-confidence are developed from a type of an activity which is unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose.

It is an old saying that "all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy". But these days, there is a growing National trend of placing an emphasis on academic fundamentals and curriculum over and above everything. With an advent of a novel approach i.e.

Continuous comprehensive evaluation (CCE), a child has to perform well in almost all subjects incessantly throughout the year. Studying well, being academically good, holding first or second position in class or unit test, pat on back on parent teacher meeting – children imbibe all such attributes from the education system. Being a meritorious student today will eventually prove to be a successful adult tomorrow.

Looking at the scenario from psychological perspective, it can be simply said that “Flynn Effect” is witnessed amongst students with increasing marks and grades in academics nowadays, display of cut-offs in newspapers for admissions makes it much more evident (Flynn, 1994). The focus on “Here and Now” which was one of the assumptions of Humanistic psychologists like Abraham Maslow (1967) and Carl Rogers (1961) seems to be negated. The prevailing ethos is – we are forgetting today in want of a happy tomorrow.

There is no denial to the fact that grades are extremely important to proceed and succeed in life but this race has led to many repercussions. It is true that children score very good but an in-depth analysis reveal that their knowledge is superficial and short lived. They do not understand the meaning and concept per se. All that matters is that they score well and they get a badge of a meritorious student.

Keeping in mind the analysis of interview and the prevailing ethos thus, an attempt has been made by the researcher to present different reasons/psychological perspectives in form of ‘Cognitive Perceptions, Value Inputs and Developmental Perceptions’ that have received attention for children.

- More impulsive
- Make extensive use of Defense mechanisms
- Reduced recess time
- Physical education class is also formal and structured
- Videos and compute games have replaced free play
- Decline in play or any activity even in evenings due to pressure of completion of homework and preparation for tests
- Retaliate back
- Develop letting-go attitude
- Experience anxiety, stress and frustration
- Emotionally unstable
- High on Narcissism
- Lowered Empathetic component
- Hurried lifestyle
- Type A personality
- Striving for the tag of avoiding being a loser

Final Remark

Children learn social skills and values like co-operation, trust, team spirit, happiness, and perseverance through play but over the times, children’s play has been declining and childhood mental disorders have been increasing. Not just this, DSM –V talks about disorders among children and a significant number suffers from Tired All The Time (TATT Syndrome), which makes the brain work all the time even if you are not talking, keeping them mentally occupied (Tribune, 2016).

Thus, in order to have optimal development of children, free play must fit in our mindset as a balance between their present and trajectory towards successful future. Paediatricians, teachers and child counsellors can help parents realize that our children’s achievement and happiness can be achieved from providing them with 3 A’s i.e. acceptance, attention and affirmation through not holding and dictating but - free play.

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