

The Effects of Play on Social Development among Young Children

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Abstract

A child's job is play. Play allows children to connect with who they are; their creativity; their voice; and how to interact with their peers. Play during early years is imperative as it prepares young children to engage with and interact with the world around them. Through play is how children build their character. Formal and informal play for young children is an important part of learning and growing. Jane Murray (2018) defines play as freely chosen and personally directed behavior that actively engages the child. Through play children gain a deeper knowledge about themselves and the world (Bento & Dias, 2017). The purpose of this research project is to determine if play increases social and cognitive development of young children. Researchers will observe indoor and outdoor play of young children utilizing the Play Observation Scale (POS) by Kenneth H. Rubin (2001). Researchers believe play has a direct impact on the social and cognitive growth of young children which aids in their development, thus children should spend more time in indoor/outdoor play than in any other type of learning setting. This research will provide knowledge of why play is imperative for children's cognitive growth and development.

Key Words: play, child development, early childhood

1.0 Overview

Play is such a vital part of a young child's development. According to Kennedy and Barblett (2010), the gratification connected with play and the freedom from pressure to perform in play supports the development of a strong sense of wellbeing among young children. When young children participate in make-believe, becoming such roles as police officers, physicians, nurses, teachers, and builders, they are participating in play that fosters empathy among their peers (Smith & Pellegrini, 2008). This type of play brings joy and usefulness to young children as they picture themselves in key roles in society (Smith & Pellegrini, 2008). "Researchers demonstrate that developmentally appropriate play with parents and peers is a singular opportunity to promote the social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation skills that build executive function and a prosocial brain" (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2018, p.1).

Play-based learning is imperative for the child and their developmental brain (Kessel, 2018). Most educators still believe traditional forms of teaching, the stringent process of memorizing facts is the most effective form of learning (Kessel, 2018). Research suggests that developmentally appropriate play among young children promotes social-emotional, cognitive, and language skills which aid in the development of executive function and prosocial brain (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, et al., 2018). When children are able to operate within a friendly, playful environment and play with those who handle this environment successfully, they are functioning intellectually and on a social basis (Broadhead, 2006).

Playing with peers allow young children to learn to interact with others; understand the importance of sharing and collaborating; and grow to learn to appreciate the viewpoints of their peers and people around them. The sense of connection through play via discovery influences meaningful learning and provides for the development of an emotional connection to children's environment (Bento & Dias, 2017). As Broadhead (2006) states, the more cooperative the play, the more likely it is that children will connect with and understand what other children know along with gaining a deeply fulfilling, emotive engagement with the world around them.

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Thus, connecting with peers, families and others who are involved with learning of young children to regularly assess their environment to ensure it promotes quality play-based learning experiences are important (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010).

As many educators have detoured to a more structured form of learning as a result of such large testing requirements, they have fallen from the one method of learning that has promoted a large amount of growth and development, play. Play is not just about having fun, but incorporates many learning benefits such as taking risks and experimenting with both adults and peers (Yogman, Garner, Hutchinson, Hirsh-Pasek&Golinkoff, 2018). Play can be defined as freely chosen, personally directed and internally motivated behavior which actively engages a child (Murray, 2018). The widely used constructivist approach to play, as influenced by Lev Vygotsky, is based on the theory that children learn from both their environment and their social interactions (Kessel, 2018). Kessel (2018) goes on to explain that meaningful play encourages social, language, and cognitive growth.

The overall purpose of this study is to determine if cognitive development among 3-4-year old's was increased during indoor/outdoor play as measured by The Play Observation Scale (POS) by Rubin (2001). With such a large world around us, there is yet so much we must continue to learn about children and play. Researchers must be intentional about understanding the impact play has on learning for both the young child and for parents and practitioners. Formative assessment through frequent opportunities for observations, interactions, and reflection could potentially place a significant advancement on development of play-based learning in early learning settings (Broadhead, 2006).

1.1 Categories of Play as Determined by the Play Observation Scale

Rubin (2001) places the types of play into various categories. The Play Observation Scale places play into two categories: social and cognitive (Rubin, 2001). The cognitive play categories (functional, constructive, dramatic and games-with-rules) are nested within the social play categories (solitary, parallel and group). One non-play behavior, exploration, is also nested within the three social play categories. The remaining non-play categories are unoccupied behavior, onlooker behavior, conversations with teacher and/or peers, transitional, aggressive, rough-and-tumble, hovering, and/or anxious behaviors.

2.0 Plan of Operation and Methodology

The overall purpose of this study is to determine if cognitive development among 3-4-year old's was increased during indoor/outdoor play as measured by The Play Observation Scale (POS) by Rubin (2001). This research implements a quantitative assessment using the Play Observation Scale to examine growth and development and interactions between children and their peers. Finally, this study integrates professional specializations, specifically how play impacts the growth and development of the individual child and how they will potentially interact with their peers (other individuals), their family, and community.

Convenience sampling method was applied by observing students currently enrolled in the Southern University Child Development Laboratory (SU CHDV Lab). Researchers collected data using the Play Observation Scale (Rubin, 2001). There is a total of 49 students enrolled in the SU CHDV Lab between the ages of 6 weeks to 4 years old. Of the 49 enrolled, 15 are between 3-4 years old. All 15 of the selected age group were selected to be a part of this study. Researchers observed selected participants enrolled in the SU CHDV Lab for a total of 15 minutes each between a five-month period. Using the POS (Rubin, 2001), researchers observed each individual child at 60 second intervals for a total of 15 times between the five months. The data was statistically analyzed using SPSS software. One-way ANOVA, chi-square, and cross-tabulation was used to test results of observations.

3.0 Products, Results and Measurable Outcomes

The Play Observation Scale (Rubin, 2001) measures Solitary Behaviors; Parallel Behaviors; Group Behaviors; Peer Conversations; and Double Coded Behaviors, which all had the same levels of play. Those levels of play included Occupied; Constructive; Exploratory; Functional; Dramatic; and Games with Friends. Conversation/Interacting was measured by number of peers study participants actually interacted with. Solitary, parallel, and group behaviors are all considered social play while peer conversation and double coded behaviors are considered non-play behaviors. Convenience sampling was employed to gather data from students enrolled in the child development laboratory.

Age was used as the dependent variable. A one-way ANOVA revealed there was significance between groups ($F=4.642, P=0.033$). This ANOVA revealed that among the 3-4-year old's, the 3-year old's would involve in conversations between 2-3 peers, whereas, the 4-year old group held more intimate conversations, preferring more closer relationships between themselves and only two other persons.

As time progressed during the observation period with the 4-year old's, they were more likely to participate in 1 on 1 conversations. When cross tabulating whether an independent variable had an impact on Age, there only a few that revealed statistical significance. When cross tabulating whether or not Age had an impact on students Parallel Behavior (students playing alongside their peer), results from the Pearson *chi*-square showed statistical significance at $\chi^2 = 15.085$, $p=.002$. Moreover, of the three- and four-year old's, majority of the students performed in functional play majority of their play time. Cross tabulation between Age and Group behaviors was statistically significant with at $\chi^2 = 26.499$, $p<.001$. Researchers found majority of 3-yearold's operated in exploratory, games with friends, and functional, while majority of 4 year old's preferred functional in all modes of social play. In all categories the actual number of students who performed in these categories were larger than the expected count.

4.0 Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to determine if cognitive development among young children increased with indoor/outdoor play. Research results revealed that majority of the students performed in functional play (a cognitive play category) majority of the time and as their age increased so did their functional play. It also showed that 3-year old's prefer playing in parallel play, meaning they preferred to begin playing alongside their peers. As time progressed researchers found that this particular age group eventually began to play together. The 4-year old's were more likely to begin playing with their peers upon initially engaging in indoor/outdoor play.

As a result, researchers believe these findings proved that as children progress in age, so does their social development in play as it progresses more from solitary play (playing alone) to more social play (playing with their peers) at a much quicker pace. Educators and administrators should place more focus on educating parents and learning communities on the values of indoor/outdoor play, the value of play in the community, homes, and in learning settings. Future research should include a larger number of subjects and collect data after a year to determine if changes occurred in the play behavior of this selected age group. Playing with others is a crucial way in which young children make sense of their environments; its how they build relationships; learn to negotiate; and overall learn how to develop positive interactions (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010). These positive interactions help them learn how to manage their feelings, manage their attitudes, and understand the feelings of themselves and others (Kennedy & Barblett, 2010).

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