

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY IN PROMOTING CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND STRONG PARENT-CHILD BONDS

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ABSTRACT

Play is essential for the overall development of the child as it contributes to cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being. Engaging children in various play activities, relationships and experiences from conception to age two lays the foundation to the essential brain connections. More than one million brain connections are formed per second at this time. It is also a period which offers an ideal opportunity for parents to engage fully with their children. Despite the proved benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been remarkably reduced for some children. This paper addresses a variety of factors that have contributed to reducing play activities in early childhood. They include a hurried parental lifestyle, changes in family structure, increased attention to academics and enrichment activities at the expense of recess or free play. It also offers recommendations on how early years' educators and caregivers can advocate for children by helping families, school systems, and communities consider how best to ensure that play is infused in everyday routine of the child as well as how to seek the balance in children's lives by creating the optimal developmental milieu.

Keywords: Early childhood, optimal development, play activities, parents, family bonds.

INTRODUCTION

Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). It emphasises the role of play in providing opportunities for the expression of creativity, imagination, self-confidence, self-efficacy, and for the development of physical, social cognitive and emotional strength and skills. It further highlights that, through play, children explore and experience the world around them, experiment with new ideas, roles and experiences, and in so doing learn to better understand and construct their social position within the world (Awopetu & Ossom, 2018). The right of every child to play is challenged by forces including uncondusive environment, violence and insecurity, limited resources, child labour and exploitation practices in developing countries. However, even those children who are fortunate enough to have abundant available resources and who live in relative peace may not be receiving the full benefits of play. Many of these children are being raised in an increasingly hurried and pressured style that may limit the protective benefits they would gain from child-driven play (Folorunsho & Yahaya, 2019). It is important to understand that every child deserves the opportunity to develop his/her unique potential. Therefore, child advocates must consider all factors that interfere with optimal development and press for circumstances that allow each child to fully reap the advantages associated with play.

Many factors may impact on children's play. Even children with adequate resources may be limited from enjoying the full developmental assets associated with play because of a family's

hurried lifestyle as well as an increased focus on the fundamentals of academic preparation in lieu of a broader view of education. Secondly, impact on free play for children with limited resources is worth of mentioning because it contributes to optimal development of this category of young ones even more as it could be the only opportunity for them. Therefore, professionals must advocate for the changes specific to the need of each child's social and environmental context that would enhance the opportunities for play. These guidelines were written in response to the multiple forces that challenge play. Although the advocacy in defence of play is important, it should not be interpreted as being against other forces that compete for children's time. Academic enrichment opportunities are vital for some children's ability to progress academically, and participation in organized activities is known to promote healthy development. It is essential that a wide variety of programming remain available to meet the needs of both children and families. Rather, any call for an inclusion of play should be seen as an opportunity to seek the balance in children's lives that will create the optimal developmental milieu to prepare them to be academically, socially, and emotionally equipped for the future.

This study, therefore explores benefits of free play, describes potential repercussions, identifies and discusses factors that changed the routines of contemporary childhood. Also, current trends affecting children's free play will be analysed and possible solutions/ recommendations would be suggested.

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY TO THE CHILD

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development (Reivich & Shatte, 2022). Simply put, play helps to develop neural structures which results in forming synaptic connections, creating significant number of neural links. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges (Hurwitz, 2020; Frost, 1998; Barnett, 1990; Tsao, 2002). Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. In contrast to passive entertainment, play builds active, healthy bodies. In fact, it has been suggested that encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is an important strategy in the resolution of obesity (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016; Burdette & Whitaker, 2020) Above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood.

Children's developmental trajectory is critically mediated by appropriate, affective relationships with loving and consistent significant adults (caregivers, parents, senior siblings) as they relate to children through play. When parents, for example, observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created just to fit his or her needs. The interactions that occur through play tell children that adults are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2014; Tsao, 2002; Henry, 2012). Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express

their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspective. Quite simply, play offers parents a wonderful opportunity to engage fully with their children. Play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviours, and problem-solving skills. Social-emotional learning is best integrated with academic learning; it is concerning if some of the forces that enhance children's ability to learn are elevated at the expense of others. Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning (Elias & Arnold, 2016; Zins, 2014).

Despite the numerous benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for 21st century children. Too often, the centrality of play in children's lives is misunderstood and ignored, and perceived as "deficit" time, better filled by adult-directed, purposeful activities (Bodrova, 2008). This trend affects preschool aged children all over the world who have had free play reduced in their schedules to make room for more academics (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2015). Currently, many primary schoolchildren as well are given less free time and fewer physical outlets at school in an effort to focus on reading and mathematics. This change may have implications on children's ability to store new information, because children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity.

Some children are given less time for free exploratory play as they are hurried to adapt into adult roles and prepare for their future at earlier ages. Parents are receiving carefully marketed messages that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel, buy sophisticated toys and electronic gadgets, and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities. Children are exposed to enrichment videos and computer programs from early infancy as well as specialized books and toys designed to ensure that they are well-rounded and adequately stimulated for excellent development. These tools and programs are heavily marketed, and many parents have grown to believe that they are a requirement of good parenting and a necessity for appropriate development. As a result, much of parent-child time is replaced by special after school organised activities or transporting children between those activities. In addition to time, parents are ready to make financial sacrifices and invest to ensure that the children have what are marketed as the "very best" opportunities. It is clear that organized activities have a developmental benefit for children, especially in contrast to completely unsupervised time. Some research substantiates that for most children, benefits increase with higher levels of participation. In addition, it has been suggested that because this lifestyle is associated with middle-class families, it may have a benefit in maintaining social class or in creating upward mobility (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2023; Luthar, 2013). It is less clear, however, at what point a young person may be "overscheduled" to their developmental detriment or emotional distress. Free child-driven play known to benefit children is decreased, and the downtime that allows parents and children some of the most productive time for interaction is at a premium when schedules become highly packed with adult-supervised or adult-driven activities. It is left to parents to judge appropriate levels of involvement, but many parents seem to feel as though they are running on a treadmill to keep up yet dare not slow their pace for fear their children will fall behind.

A careful look at the Nigerian situation would reveal that a majority of Nigerian preschools adopted a dangerous trend of pushing small children too hard and too fast, using learning concepts well beyond their age and capacities all in the name to grow intelligent pupils (Elkind,

2001; Omoera, 2013). Although most highly scheduled children are thriving, some are reacting to the associated pressures with anxiety and other signs of increased stress. In this regard, highly scheduled children have less time for free, child-driven, creative play, which offers benefits that may be protective against the effects of pressure and stress.

As trusted child advocates, ECCE professionals are ideally suited to help parents consider the appropriate balance between preparing for the future and living fully in the present through play, child-centred organized activities, and rich parent-child interaction (Kadiri, 2022).

FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR DECREASED OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY

Researchers from different countries agree that free play of today's children is not simply different from the play of the past, but that it has declined in both quality and quantity. Level of involvement in play activities among preschoolers is drastically reducing (Bodrova, 2008 as cited in Awopetu & Ossom, 2018). Several key factors had been identified responsible for decreased time for free play in childhood.

Presently in Nigeria, there are more families with a single head of household or two working parents and fewer multigenerational households in which grandparents and extended family members can watch the children. Therefore, fewer families have available adult supervision in the home during the workday, which makes it necessary for children to be in child care or other settings in which they can be monitored by adults throughout the day.

Parents receive messages from a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages. They are deluged in the media with a wide range of enrichment tools and activities that tout their ability to produce super-achieving children. They meet other parents who go to extreme efforts, at great personal sacrifice, to make sure their children receive the best academic training at the expense of free play time.

The tertiary institutions' admission process has become much more rigorous in recent years. Parents receive the message that if their children are not well prepared, well balanced, and high-achieving, they will not get a desired position in the future. Even parents who wish to take a lower-key approach to child rearing fear slowing down when they perceive everyone else is on the fast track. The pressure for admission to select schools begins for some families long before secondary education. Selection for private preschool programs can even be competitive, and parents may need to consider how best to "package" their preprimary children. There is a current trend in Nigeria of nowadays to focus on the academic fundamentals of reading and arithmetic, and one of the practical effects of the trend is decreased time left during the school day for recess, creative arts, and physical activities (Omoera, 2013). This trend may have implications for the social and emotional development of children. Also, many after-school child care programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity.

The decrease in free play can also be explained by children being passively entertained through television, computer/video games and many other electronic gadgets. In sharp contrast to the health benefits of active, creative play and the known developmental benefits of an appropriate level of organized activities, there is ample evidence that this passive entertainment is not protective and, in fact, has some harmful effects.

In many parts of the world, children cannot play safely outside of the home unless they are under close adult supervision and protection. This is particularly true in areas that are unsafe because of increased insecurity, violence or other environmental dangers (Reivich & Shatte, 2002)

PARENT-CHILD BONDS/ ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP

As parents prepare their children for the future, they cannot know precisely which skills each will need for the workforce. With added anxiety over their inability to adequately predict the future, they become susceptible to the promises of success and full preparation offered by all of the special enrichment programs and vulnerable to the belief that if their children are at least exposed to everything, they will have the best chance to be prepared. Because of the pressures parents feel to meet every one of the child's needs, they perceive (or are told) their child requires to excel, they may feel inadequate and ultimately have less personal satisfaction in parenting. For that, parents lose the opportunity for perhaps the highest-quality time with their children. Some of the best interactions occur during downtime: just talking, preparing meals together, and working on a hobby a project, playing sports together, or being fully involved in child-centered play.

Although no one can be sure what skills will be needed in child's future, certain character traits will produce children capable of navigating an increasingly complex world as they grow older. These traits include confidence, competence or the ability to master the environment, and a deep-seated connectedness to and caring about others that create the love, safety, and security that children need to thrive. In addition, to be resilient—to remain optimistic and be able to rebound from adversity— young people need the essential character traits of honesty, generosity, decency, tenacity, and compassion. Children are most likely to gain all of these essential traits of resiliency within a home in which parents and children have time to be together and to look to each other for positive support and unconditional love. Many families are successfully navigating a wide variety of commitments without sacrificing high-quality parent-child time, but some families' ability to maintain essential parent-child time may be compromised by this hurried lifestyle (Folorunsho, & Yahaya, 2019, Kadiri, 2014). In these families, overscheduling may lead to less emotionally competent, well-buffered children.

Because there are several causes for the decreased amount of child-directed play, there is no single position that ECCE professionals should take. For example, in the case of a child who is economically disadvantaged and does not reside in a safe neighbourhood, it may be unwise to simply propose more child-centred play. Although parents can be encouraged to optimize conditions for this kind of play in the home, there must be broad societal responses that address poverty, social inequities, and violence before we can advise parents to allow unsupervised play. In addition, for children in poverty, enhanced and affordable child care services are warranted.

Professionals from various fields (Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) educators, child psychologists, paediatricians) need to promote the implementation of those strategies known to promote healthy development and resiliency from early years. Some of those strategies are community based, and others are school based, but many reside within the family. They are rooted in the deep connection that develops when parents engage with their children. Play remains an ideal venue for parents to engage fully, and child professionals must reinforce the value of this play. Some play must remain entirely child driven, with parents either not present or as passive observers, because play builds some of the individual assets children need to develop and remain resilient. Parents need to feel supported to not passively accept the media

and advertising messages that suggest there are more valuable means of promoting success and happiness in children than the tried, trusted, and traditional methods of play and family togetherness. Initiators of these special programs should be encouraged to produce long-term evidence that define how their products/strategies produce more successful children. In parallel, independent researchers need to evaluate both the benefits and problems associated with these enrichment tools. Researchers should also continue to explore the type and quantity of activities that are likely to be enriching for children with different needs.

21st century young generation appeared to be manifesting increased signs of depression, anxiety, perfectionism, and stress (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006). Every society certainly seeks physically and emotionally healthy youths with the character traits that support learning. Schools could reduce the stress levels of young people and their parents if they offered clear, more realistic expectations about the type of students they seek and helped families to understand that there is a match for each reasonably prepared student. In addition, higher institutions should address the myth that desirable students are those who excel in every area. In the adult world, people rarely excel in more than one or two areas, while well-balanced individuals enjoy several others. Educationists should recognize the possibility that when children believe that they must excel in all areas to gain admission, they might respond to those perceived and unrealistic expectations with stress and anxiety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the midst of so many conflicting messages about what parents should do to prepare their child for what is perceived to be an increasingly complicated, competitive world, educators have a natural role to serve as caring, objective child professionals with whom parents can discuss their approach to child rearing and reflect on their own desires for their children. Because ECCE professionals have a unique and important role in promoting the physical, emotional, and social well-being of children, it is important that they educate parents more, promote family bonds and strategies that will support children's right to free play. Specifically, they are expected to:

- promote free play as a healthy, essential part of childhood. They should recommend that all children are afforded ample, unscheduled, independent, no-screen time to be creative, to reflect, and to decompress. They should emphasize that although parents can certainly monitor play for safety, a large proportion of play should be child driven rather than adult directed;
- emphasize the advantages of active play and discourage parents from the overuse of passive entertainment (eg, television and computer games);
- emphasize that active child-centered play is a time-tested way of producing healthy and fit children;
- emphasize the benefits of “true toys” such as blocks and dolls, with which children use their imagination fully, over passive toys that require limited imagination;
- educate families regarding the protective assets and increased resiliency developed through free play and some unscheduled time;
- reinforce that parents who share unscheduled spontaneous time with their children and who play with their children are being wonderfully supportive, nurturing, and productive;
- discuss that shuttling their children between numerous activities may not be the best quality time. Children will be poised for success, basking in the knowledge that their parents absolutely and unconditionally love them. This love and attention is best demonstrated when parents serve as role models and family members make time to cherish one another: time to be together, to listen, and to talk, nothing more and nothing less. Educators can remind parents that the most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare their children for success

arise not from extracurricular or academic commitments but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modelling, and guidance;

- remind parents that the cornerstones of parenting—listening, caring, and guiding through effective and developmentally appropriate discipline—and sharing pleasurable time together are the true predictors of childhood, and they serve as a springboard toward a happy, successful adulthood;

- help parents evaluate the claims made by marketers and advertisers about the products or interventions designed to produce super-children.

- strongly emphasize to parents the proven benefits of reading to their children, even at very early ages;

- help parents evaluate the specific needs of their child in terms of promoting resiliency, developing confidence and competence, and ultimately enhancing that child's trajectory toward a successful future;

- support parents to organize playgroups beginning at an early preschool age (approximately between 30 to 36 months), when many children move from parallel play to cooperative play in the process of socialization;

- advocate for developing “safe spaces” in “underresourced” neighbourhoods, perhaps by opening school, library, or community facilities to be used by children and their parents after school hours and on weekends;

- educate communities about appropriate resources in their environments that foster play and healthy child development and have this information available to share with parents;

- support children having an academic schedule that is appropriately challenging and extracurricular exposures that offer appropriate balance. What is appropriate has to be determined individually for each child on the basis of their unique needs, skills, and temperament, not on the basis of what may be overly pressurized or competitive community standards or a perceived need to gain university admissions;

- encourage parents to allow children to explore a variety of interests in a balanced way without feeling pressured to excel in each area. It is essential to encourage parents to avoid conveying the unrealistic expectation that each young person needs to excel in multiple areas to be considered successful or prepared to compete in the world. In parallel, they should promote balance in those youth who are strongly encouraged to become expert in only 1 area (e.g, a particular sport or musical instrument) to the detriment of having the opportunity to explore other areas of interest;

As parents choose child care and early education programs for their children, educators can reinforce the importance of choosing settings that offer more than “academic preparedness” They should be guided to also pay attention to whether the settings attend to the social and emotional developmental needs of the children. They can join with other child professionals and parents to advocate for educational settings that promote optimal academic, cognitive, physical, social, and emotional development for children.

CONCLUSION

Play is a cherished part of childhood that offers children important developmental benefits and parents the opportunity to fully engage with their children. However, multiple forces are interacting to effectively reduce many children's ability to reap the benefits of play. As we strive to create the optimal developmental milieu for children, it remains imperative that play be included along with academic and social-enrichment opportunities and that safe environments be made available to all children. Additional research is needed to explore the appropriate balance of play, academic enrichment, and organized activities for children with different temperaments and social, emotional, intellectual, and environmental needs.

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