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The Role of Play in Early Child Development:

An In-depth View

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Abstract

Albert Einstein once said, "Play is the highest form of research." Play is a crucial component in a young child's overall maturation as it relates to the five domains of development. Through exploration, discovery, and opportunities to create and grow one's imagination, play fosters many learning experiences. Research of founding theorists such as Vygotsky, Piaget, Montessori, Frobel, Steiner, and Parten suggest that a direct correlation can be made between the influences of play and a child's overall development in the five domains. This review will define play and the five domains of development while looking at the various influences related to play (e.g., environment, culture, technology, trauma, and communication partners). Furthermore, this analysis will examine the benefits of play being considered as a sixth domain and the importance of play versus a sole focus on academics for a child's learning evolvement.

The Role of Play in Early Child Development: An In-depth Review

Most studies on child development, directly or indirectly, relate to the concepts of play. This can be seen in the renowned works of Piaget, Montessori, Vygotsky, and Axline. Based on the literature reviewed, Lifter et al. (2011, as cited in Lifter & Bloom 1998) provided one of the most specific definitions of play.

> Play is the expression of intentional states-the representations in consciousness constructed from what children know about and are learning from ongoing events-and consists of spontaneous, naturally occurring activities with objects that engage attention and interests. Play may or may not involve caregivers or peers, may or may not involve a display of affect, and may or may not involve pretense (p. 64).

Lifter et al. (2011) believed that this definition prioritizes play first to show what children know and secondly what they are thinking about during play (pp. 227-228).

The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights noted that play is essential to development and is considered a right for every child (Lillard, et al., 2013, p. 1). While play itself is a difficult concept to specifically define, through play children are able to actively construct new knowledge about objects, people, and events by integrating new experiences with what they already know (Burghardt, 2011, pp. 9-10). When Vygotsky examined the different components of play and the way it affects a young child's emerging functions, he concluded that play was the leading source of development in preschool years. Vygotsky and colleagues considered play to be a leading activity in preschool and kindergarten age children that led to the achievement of developmental accomplishments in one period of life that will prepare them for the next (Bodrova, 2008, p. 359). Play is a crucial component in a young child's overall

maturation as it relates to the five domains of development. Through exploration, discovery, and opportunities to create and grow one's imagination, play fosters many learning experiences.

There are twelve different types of play as specifically named by Miller and Almon (2009). Often these various types of play overlap in rich play scenarios. An understanding of these play types provides a tool for assessing development while providing opportunities for growth and higher cognitive functioning through a variety of materials. The twelve types of play include large and small motor play, mastery play, rule-based play, construction play, make-believe play, symbolic play, language play, playing with the arts, sensory play, rough-and-tumble play, and risk-taking play (p. 55).

Symbolic play is the process of converting an object into a toy or prop that can be utilized through a child's fantasy or imagination. Make-believe play, on the other hand, incorporates many types of play that involves language, problem solving, and curiosity. Often this play is prompted by the phrase "Let's pretend" and may include a child's experiences and/or what they have envisioned. Language play is demonstrated through the use of playing with words, rhymes, verses, and songs. They tell stories that are dramatic in nature.

Mastery play is repetitive in action and often involves perseverance from the child until mastery is achieved (e.g., practicing on a tricycle to become the next race car driver). Rule-based play involves children creating their own games, making their own rules, and engaging in social exchanges to adjust the rules for various play scenarios. In risk-taking play, children challenge themselves to engage in and learn through difficult and ambitious environments. As a part of this type of play, most children play in places that present fewer risks. Regardless, children have to have a general understanding of how far they can go without hurting themselves by setting boundaries.

Rough-and-tumble play is a fundamental form of play that can appear aggressive. However, children learn how to engage in this type of play without resulting in injury. Large-motor play involves the engagement and movement that incorporates such skills as coordination, balance, and a sense of one's body in space. Small motor play looks at developing one's dexterity through the use of small toys and activities.

Sensory play involves the development of the senses through the interactions with various textures, sounds, and smells. Playing with arts uses whatever materials are at hand to draw, create, perform, and model to express feelings and ideas. Lastly, construction play is a basic form of play that involves the skills and imagination to build structures (Miller & Almon, 2013, p. 55). Sussman (2012) used the following chart as a guide when selecting items to use during early childhood (p. 13).

Play materials in early care and education classrooms

Skills developed through play	Toddlers and 2-year-olds	3- to 6-year-olds
Problem solving	Puzzles (with 4-12 pieces); blocks that snap together; objects to sort (by size, shape, color, smell); materials with hooks, buttons, buckles, and snaps	Puzzles (with 12-20 pieces); blocks that snap together; collections of small objects to sort by length, width, height, shape, color, smell, quantity, and other features; collections of plastic bottle caps; plastic bowls and lids; keys; shells; counting bears; small colored blocks
Pretending and building	Blocks; transportation toys; construction sets, child-sized furniture (kitchen sets, chairs, play food); dress-up clothes; dolls with accessories; puppets; sand and water play toys	Many blocks for building complex structures; transportation toys; construction sets, child-sized furniture, play food and home-life tools; dress-up clothes; dolls with accessories; puppets and simple puppet theaters; sand and water play toys
Creativity	Large non-toxic, washable crayons and markers; large paintbrushes; finger paint; large paper for drawing and painting; colored construction paper; toddler-sized scissors with blunt tips; chalkboard and large chalk; rhythm instruments	Large and small crayons and markers; large and small paintbrushes; finger paint; large and small paper for drawing and painting; colored construction paper; preschooler-sized scissors, chalkboard and large and small chalk; modeling clay and play dough with shaping tools; paste, paper and cloth scraps for collage; musical instruments including rhythm instruments, keyboards, xylophones, maracas and tambourines
Listening and visual skills	Books and pictures with realistic images and clear, life-like detail	Books with more visual detail, more words, and new vocabulary; nonsense and realistic stories and songs; pictures that help draw associations between the known and the unknown
Listening Skills	Recorded and live sounds—both musical and environmental	Musical and environmental sound (recorded or real); stories with surprise endings, stories with predictable endings; rhymes; finger plays; puppets; opportunities to make up and repeat stories
Fine- and gross-motor development	Large and small balls for kicking and throwing, ride-on toys; push and pull toys; tunnels, low climbers with soft material underneath; pounding and hammering toys	Large and small balls for kicking and throwing and catching; ride-on equipment including wagons, wheelbarrows, and tricycles; tunnels, taller climbers and wheelbarrows; plastic bats and balls; plastic bowling pins; targets and balls or beanbags; a workbench with vise, hammer, nails and saw
Technology	Not recommended	Programs that promote interaction (the child can do something), can be understood by children (the software uses graphics, spoken instruction, and print), allow children to control the software's pace and paths, and provide opportunities to explore a variety of concepts on several levels

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Good Toys for Young Children*, Dec. 14, 2011.

(Sussman, 2012, p. 14)

Founding Theorists of Play

While many theorists were involved in recognizing the importance of play as it relates to development, six pioneers paved the foundation for the field of early childhood education. These theorists included Lev Vygotsky, Jean Piaget, Maria Montessori, Frederick Froebel, Rudolph Steiner, and Mildred Parten.

VYGOTSKY

Vygotsky believed in the importance of social interactions and the influence of a child's cultural background when considering development. Social experiences in Vygotsky's research linked higher-order cognitive processes such as language and cognition, being directly related to social interactions. Vygotsky is best known for the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as what a child can do independently and what the child is capable of doing within a supportive environment. This support often comes from the strategy of scaffolding. Scaffolding occurs when adults and/or peers provide assistance to a child, which allows them to not only function more independently but also provides for the opportunity to learn new concepts (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2019, pp. 1-3). Van Oers and Duiijkers (2013) elaborated on how play was a leading skill that qualified a child to enter the ZPD. Not only did the authors focus on Vygotsky's idea of role-play, imitating the adult world and creating opportunities that revolve around adult activities, but also stressed that play is the most developmentally productive context for learning, especially in children four to seven (pp. 513-514).

Vygotsky believed that a child's knowledge of social construct was developed through interactions with adults and more capable peers. This allows for a child to utilize cognitive processes such as actively remembering, drawing on memories, contemplating, and

understanding perceptions. When Vygotsky defined ZPD he emphasized the importance that guidance be provided through a process of collaboration with more skilled partners so that a child's development, understanding and knowledge can be enhanced (Gupta, 2008, pp. 7-8).

One last theory that Vygotsky felt was imperative for cognitive and social-emotional development is that of socio-dramatic play. Vygotsky believed that children engaged in this type of play because they wished to imitate adults and make connections to activities related to real life. Vygotsky noted that a fundamental feature and result of socio-dramatic play is self-restraint or self-regulation skills. Finally, Vygotsky perceived make-believe play to be unique and influential to the ZPD because it allows children to advance themselves and increase control over their thinking and behavior while acquiring culturally valuable competencies (Elias & Berk, 2001, pp. 216-217, 219, 232).

PIAGET

Jean Piaget was credited as being an expert on the development of knowledge in children and young adults. His cognitive development stages would be based upon his observations while administering standardized assessments, where he determined that different types of errors presented were related to specific age ranges. Through Piaget's research, he focused mostly on how knowledge is acquired and what people do as they interact with their environment. He believed that learning came from a child's actions within and reactions to his or her world.

Piaget believed that a person's capacity to learn, especially in childhood, is derived from their experiences. He saw them not only as active learners but initiators in the acquisition and development of their own knowledge as it occurs through activity. The four stages of cognitive development, which include sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal

operational, all focus on a child's development and thinking. To enter a new stage, a child must attain the prerequisites at their designated level (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2019, pp. 9-10).

Piaget developed what is known as the constructivist theory. This theory has been found to influence play-based learning, research, and strategies. This theory emphasizes the importance of play and its construction of cognitive growth and development in a child. The constructivist paradigm, as related to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, is that children acquire an understanding of concepts through actively engaging and interacting in their environment to build their own knowledge base through exploration (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, pp. 127-128).

Lillard et al. (2013) noted that Vygotsky and Piaget were pivotal in determining the correlation between pretend play and child development. They determined that pretend play was necessary for optimal development and that it occurs with contributions from others (p. 3).

MONTESSORI

Maria Montessori began her career as a physician in a psychiatric clinic where she worked closely with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Often times she found intellectual disabilities were confused with those with mental illnesses. Through careful observations over time, she determined that educational interventions rather than medical treatments would be more effective in supporting these individuals.

Montessori believed that intelligence was not fixed but could be influenced by a child's experiences. She was convinced that children learned best by direct sensory experiences and believed that children have a natural tendency to explore and understand their environment around them. To promote a child's learning, Montessori believed in preparing the environment with enticing tasks and materials that were child-sized and accessible for a student's independent

use. Children were allowed to work at their own pace and make selections of their choice. She was of the opinion that children could teach themselves by engaging within a planned learning environment, which is why she developed the sensory education model.

The sensory education model involved using didactic or teaching materials that allowed for a direct sensory experience. Montessori noted that children passed through "sensitive periods" during early development when they were most curious and more easily able to learn specific behaviors or skills. As mentioned, prior, Montessori found that a child's learning was best promoted through a prepared environment with opportunities to interact with classroom materials both concrete and sensory while also engaging in practical life experiences in a play-based environment (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2019, pp. 7-9). Children participating in the sensory education model were free to choose their materials.

Montessori also felt strongly in the necessity of utilizing materials that were self-correcting in nature. This allows for a child to easily see their errors while providing an opportunity for the child to correct themselves while engaging in problem solving independently. Children neither received external rewards or punishments but naturally gravitated towards work that was challenging yet within their skill set. The children would repeatedly engage in activities or exercises until mastery was demonstrated.

Montessori's activities are considered to be practical life exercises that imitate the actions seen within a child's home or country where they reside. Montessori believed that children were happier playing with toys that allowed for the engagement of real activities while also promoting self-development. In Montessori's studies, instructed materials used at each age range were gradually replaced with books (Lillard & Taggart, 2018, p. 86).

FROEBEL

Frederick Froebel, the founder of kindergarten, saw play as the highest form of learning and a cognitive process for integrating knowledge. Froebel believed in the importance of helping adults understand a young child's need for learning in a natural pre-school setting. As a result, Froebel created and named the first kindergarten setting which he referred to as a "paradise garden". When translated from German it means children's garden or a garden for children. In this kindergarten, Froebel set out to provide children with an understanding and knowledge about their world while providing ongoing opportunities for learning while helping them develop an understanding of learning and their community (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 128).

STEINER

Rudolph Steiner was another influential theorist who emphasized the need for matching content and activity to support a child's learning and understanding. Steiner believed it was important that children utilize natural play materials based on items that can be found that were relevant to the child's geographic location. Such materials may include wood, cotton, and silk but not materials such as plastic or nylon. Steiner advocated that what children chose to play with and how they chose to play unconsciously met an individual need (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 128).

PARTEN

Mildred Parten was known for conducting one of the most influential studies on children's social play. To this day her study is still considered one of the most comprehensive

descriptions of the social behavior seen in young children. Parten's theory of social play has provided a general guideline to understanding the social interaction behaviors in young children.

Social play is considered an opportunity for children to engage with others and learn social skills. Specifically, social play provides a context in which children develop different skills in a variety of areas simultaneously (e.g., literacy skills, impulse control, and problem solving). Parten's theory related to social development, as seen in children, was organized into three levels. The first level is non-social activity. This consists of unoccupied, onlooker behavior, and solitary play (Xu, 2008, p. 490). Solitary play can be defined as a type of play that includes one person engaging with objects and separate from other peers that are playing in the same room (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 6).

The second level is parallel play. This is a limited form of social participation where children do not actively engage in a play activity together but utilize materials while playing side by side (Xu, 2008, p. 490). Parallel play involves two or more children utilizing the same type of objects within the vicinity of each other but showing little or no interaction (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 6).

The final level, true social interaction, encompasses associative play and cooperative play. During associative play, children are engaged in different activities but interacting with each other about the activity (Xu, 2008, p. 490). Associative play in early childhood is imperative to a young child's awareness of a social partner. By having an understanding of how to engage in associative play, children are demonstrating that they have the essential skills to successfully interact with their peers (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 6). Cooperative play is where children work together towards a common goal (Xu, 2008, p. 490). Cooperative play is a more advanced form of interactive engagement that may include structured peer interactions and role

play. In these interactions, each peer must participate in complex levels of play that requires them to demonstrate a joint understanding and the exchange of meaning to fully engage in a pretend play scenario (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 6).

Parten believed in hierarchical play and that the complexity and degree of participation in social interactions increases as a child ages. Hierarchical play can be defined as when a young child moves from a less complex, singular form of play to a more complex, partner-dependent type of play. Children with disabilities that impact their verbal, cognitive, and physical levels may have more difficulty achieving more complex levels of play (Jamison, et al., 2012, p. 5).

The table below shows the different levels of play as noted by Parten. Along with the various levels provided, a definition, the typical age range, and an behavioral example are given of the hierarchical play stages.

Table 1
Hierarchical Play Stages

Play Category	Definition	Age of Typically Developing Child	Behavior Example
Unoccupied	Singular behavior, not participating in any play activity	All ages	A child is staring out a window, not involved in any activity
Solitary	Singular behavior, playing with objects that are different than those other peers are using in play	1-2 years (may occur for brief periods of time at all ages)	A child is playing with a toy car on a beanbag chair away from the rest of the children
Onlooker	Acknowledgment of another social person, watching other children play	1-3 years	A child is sitting on a beanbag chair watching another group of children play in the block area
Parallel	Similar play behaviors as peers (i.e., same toys), little or no interactive techniques	1-3 years	Two children are playing with toy cars in a center area. Each has one car. They are doing separate actions with the cars although they might talk with each other about their separate actions
Associative	Peer interaction by sharing toys, working with the same object, or inquiring about the other peer's behavior, no specific play roles	2-5 years	Two children are playing with toy cars. Each has one car. The children are driving the cars around the same "race track"
Cooperative	Peer interaction by sharing toys and incorporating roles and complex interactive patterns that support structured pretend play	3-5 years	Two children are playing in the dramatic play center. One is pretending to be the mother and the other is the father. There is a baby doll asleep in the crib, and the "mother" is rocking the crib while the "father" is making dinner

Source: Based on Parten (1932) and Scarlett, Naudeau, Salonius-Pasternak, and Ponte (2005).

(Jamison et al., 2012, p. 5).

Domains of Development

Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002), shows that play is needed for all ages:

The Association for Childhood Educational International (ACEI) recognizes the need for

children of all ages to play and affirms the essential role of play in children's lives. ACEI

believes that as today's children continue to experience pressure to succeed in all areas,

the necessity for play becomes even more critical (p. 2)

Play is seen as an essential and integral part of a child's development. Play ensures growth and

learning across all domains, cultures, and age groups. Theorists agree that play is a central

component in the lives of children and that the absence of play is a barrier to the shaping of

healthy, creative individuals. Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002) noted the following:

"Psychoanalysts believe that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or

disturbances; psychosocialists believe it is necessary for ego mastery and learning to live

with everyday experiences; constructivists believe it is necessary for cognitive growth;

maturationists believe it is necessary for competence building and for socializing

functions in all cultures of the world; and neuroscientists believe it is necessary for

emotional and physical health, motivation, and love of learning (p. 2)

As it relates to physical development, play often involves physical activity and is associated with

the growth and refinement of gross and fine motor skills as well as body awareness. Play has

been found to meet an individual's needs as well as developing their social and emotional life

skills. Playing with others allows children to match their behaviors with those around them and

consider the perspectives of other children. By learning social skills through play, children

become aware and sensitive to the needs and values of others, manage their emotions, learn self-

control, and share power and ideas with others.

Evidence also supports a strong relationship between play and cognitive development. Through play and cognitive development, children show improvements in attention, planning, attitudes, creativity and divergent thinking, perspective-taking, memory, and language development. According to Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002) play was explained as:

"Play is not only children's unique way of learning about their world, but also their way of learning about themselves and how they fit into their world, building on familiar knowledge and deepening their understanding through the recurring cycle of learning that is essential to what all children can understand and do. (p. 3).

Researchers have furthermore found evidence that shows play contributes to the advances in a child's verbalizations, language comprehension, vocabulary, imagination, concentration, problem solving, impulse control, cooperation, curiosity, empathy, and group involvement (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 50). There are five domains of development when assessing a child's overall growth. These domains consist of adaptive, cognitive, communication, physical, and social-emotional.

Adaptive skills, which can also be known as self-care skills, focus primarily on feeding and personal care while cognitive skills refer to a child's ongoing mental and intellectual development. Cognition has been found to significantly impact all growth in the other domains of development. In relation to communication, it can be defined as the exchange of messages between a speaker and a listener. Communication, generally speaking, encompasses language, both receptive and expressive, and speech/articulation. Physical development, also known as motor skills, is comprised of gross and fine motor. Gross motor skills relate to one's ability to physically move around their environment and involves the control of large muscles through body coordination, strength, balance, and agility. On the other hand, fine motor looks at one's

ability to use the small muscle groups found in the hands, feet, and face. Lastly, social-emotional skills relate to a range of behaviors that correspond to the development of social relationships and one's ability to identify, communicate, and act on one's feelings while respecting others (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2019, pp. 159-161).

In relation to domains and play, research supports that a child's play interactions increase in complexity with age. Preschool children, specifically, exhibit major gains in the amount of their peer interactions from ages three to five. This growth is often related to their growing social circle; in addition to, their increasing physical, cognitive, and socioemotional capabilities. As children develop in the preschool years, their ability to better converse and interact with others promotes the development and complexity in their play skills. While chronological age is considered to be an important factor related to play development, a child's developmental level may be an equal or greater factor in relation to play development with peers. For example, children with physical difficulties may be restricted by their limited mobility and children impaired cognitively may experience challenges related to the complexity of play with which their typically developing peers partake in within their environment. If children want to engage in play with peers who have a disability, he or she needs to be able to differentiate to select an activity where they both can participate (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000, pp. 230-231).

ADAPTIVE

Play has been found to impact growth in the various domains directly. Through observation, Maria Montessori determined that real-life experiences enacted through play promoted development in one's adaptive/self-help skills and independence (Gargiulo & Kilgo, 2019, pp. 7-9). Ginsburg (2007) found that play allows children the opportunity to use their

creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play has been found to be important to healthy brain development and overall development of skills (p. 184).

COGNITION

Lifter et al. (2011) found a strong correlation between play and cognition. This can be directly seen as a child learns more about an object, which results in the demonstration of more sophisticated play skills. Play development, in relation to cognition, has also been shown to promote a child's ability to self-regulate, problem solve and plan while improving metacognition and creativity (p. 229).

Numerous studies have shown the benefits of active play in relation to cognition. It has been found to improve both working memory and attention. These areas allow for a positive correlation between active play and academic achievement. (Becker & McClelland et all. 2014 p. 56). Many scholars specifically believe that pretend play improves a child's cognition. One way that it does so is by predisposing children to a more playful attitude which allows for more opportunities for creativity and problem solving through symbolic and abstract thought (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 5).

Lillard et al. (2013) suggests that there are five subdomains where pretend play assists in the development of cognition. These five domains include creativity, problem solving, intelligence, conservation, and reasoning. This thought process agrees with Vygotsky's firm belief that pretend play increases intelligence because it requires the use of the five domains (pp. 5, 8).

COMMUNICATION

      Correlations between play and communication show that children with higher levels of communicative skills demonstrate more pretend and symbolic play than those with lower levels of communication abilities. Furthermore, as play skills develop, vocalizations presented by a child are found to increase, in addition to, a more significant emergence of language (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 238). With early language skills, children must learn during play to use one object to stand for another. This is referred to as symbolic. Language is also considered symbolic and shows that with repeated practice of using symbolic representations, pretend play greatly enhances language development.

      Research has shown that children who are more advance in their play skills around one year of age also showed more sophisticated skills in one or more areas of language (Lillard et al., 2013, pp. 17-18). Additionally, research has determined that parents who engage in play opportunities with their children are better able to offer guidance in supporting their child's communication development. For example, children who demonstrate limitations in their verbal skills, may be able to show their understanding, experiences, and frustrations through play which allows a parent an opportunity to gain a better understanding of their child's perspective (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 184).

MOTOR SKILLS

      Stagnitti and Unsworth (2000) noted that motor skills can best be observed when a child engages in play (p. 125). During play opportunities children are able to explore and manipulate their environment through play while interacting with objects both large and small to activate

their fine and gross motor skills (Suggate et al., 2017, p. 1297). Physical therapists often use play activities within their intervention sessions to address various motor goals.

Research has found to support the use of play activities in relation to movement training, positioning, and conditioning (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 238). Active play has been shown to build healthy bodies when engaging in unstructured play. Through unstructured play, children are shown to increase their physical activity levels because the play is not controlled by adults. This active play also fosters creativity, leadership, and group skills (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 184). Furthermore, this type of play enables a child to participate in activities while also supporting their development in other domains (Lifter, 2011, p. 238).

Positive effects from motor programs such as physical education have been shown to improve pre-literacy skills in preschool aged children. Early physical activity not only promotes growth in gross motor skills but also the importance of an active lifestyle at a young age. Furthermore, physical activity in the educational realm considers the needs of a child's sensory, emotional, motor, social and cognitive development which is consistent with a pedagogic approach (Battaglia, 2019, p. 2)

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL

If a child has a deficit or is unable to take part in pretend play, that child is more likely to have restrictions in their ability to be an active participant in social interactions with peers (Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2000, pp. 121-127). Lifter et al. (2011) determined that the relationship between play and social-emotional development often revealed a child's attachment style, which was found to typically relate to their emotional development. Children who were engaged in social interactions during play were less likely to exhibit challenging play behaviors and

demonstrated increased social-communicative behaviors with greater length and complexity of verbalizations (p. 229).

By providing opportunities through play experiences and interactions with peers and others, a child's structure of conversations and oral vocabulary are utilized. Play has also been shown to improve a child's self-regulation skills by helping them learn how to regulate their emotions and behavior while engaging in play with peers. Play opportunities directly teach children various social norms and the rules of play. Examples of these rules or norms include but are not limited to turn taking, sharing, helping others, and transitioning. Through play, children are able to build confidence and problem-solving skills, collaborate with peers, and learn how to express ideas and feelings while also regulating their behaviors and emotions (Taylor & Boyer 2019, p. 129).

Through play children develop social competence. This can be seen in their ability to express interests, understanding, and emotions throughout interaction with peers and adults. Furthermore, social competence is shown in a child's ability to join in play with others and participate in goal-oriented activities (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 4). Social skills are supported by pretend play even when play is solitary. When children engage in solitary play, they often pretend about issues that deal with emotions or problem solving and challenging situations which generally enhances one's social skills. Pretend play requires competency in negotiation as children often participate in real-life settings or events (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 16). Unstructured play; furthermore, permits for peer interactions which are important components of social emotional learning (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 184).

Social skill acquisition has been found to be an essential step in a young child's development and can have lasting effects as it relates to the quality of their social interactions
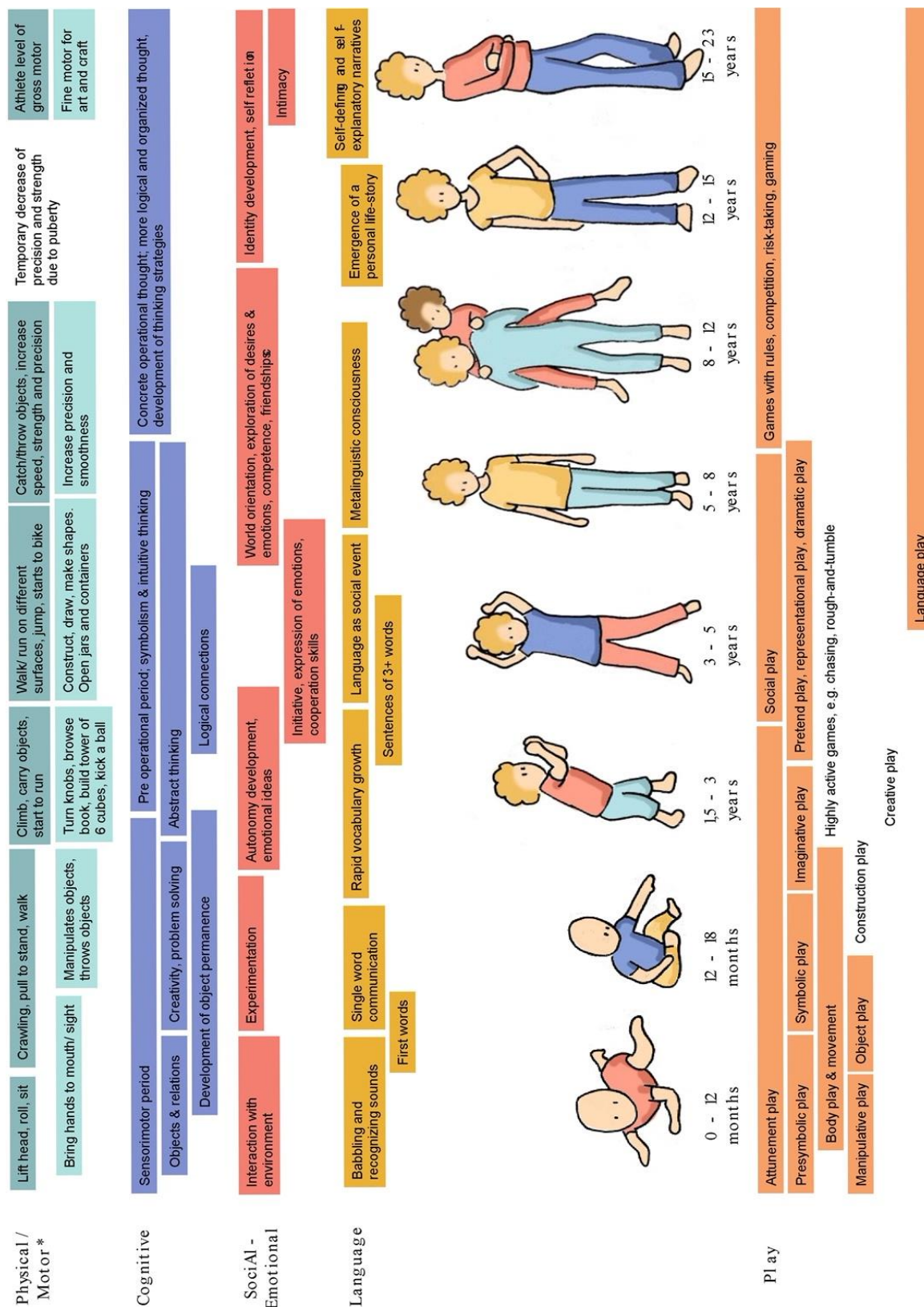
throughout their life. Interactions with peers allows the opportunity for positive communicative exchanges that assist in shaping a young child's experiences with the social world.

Delays or limitations in the area of social skills can result in young children falling behind their same age peers as early as birth. Issues with communication impediments, attention, poor attachments, or identifying others as communicative partners may also impact a child's social skills even in relation to their parents or caregivers.

Children with disabilities may lack the foundational skills needed to participate in peer related play activities that are considered essential to advanced social development. Teachers can directly influence a student's complexity of play which, in turn, may lead to increased social competence. Social competence involves the ability to express interest, understanding, and emotions through interactions with other peers and adults. Two major components related to social competence are a child's ability to utilize appropriate proximity and engage in joint attention during play. By creating play opportunities that directly influence joint attention and proximity, teachers can better create an environment that promotes increased complexity in play which may lead to a rise in later social competence abilities (Jamison et al., 2012 pp. 3-4).

PLAY DEVELOPMENT FROM INFANCY TO ADULTHOOD

The chart on the following page is an example of play development across the various domains from infancy to young adulthood. While this research study does not explore past the age of five, the information provided is a solid foundation for understanding the importance of normal maturation in play.

Developmental milestones chart (ages: 0–12 months · 12–18 months · 1,5–3 years · 3–5 years · 5–8 years · 8–12 years · 12–15 years · 15–23 years)

Physical / Motor*
- Lift head, roll, sit
- Crawling, pull to stand, walk
- Climb, carry objects, start to run
- Walk/run on different surfaces, jump, starts to bike
- Catch/throw objects, increase speed, strength and precision
- Temporary decrease of precision and strength due to puberty
- Athlete level of gross motor
- Bring hands to mouth/sight
- Manipulates objects, throws objects
- Turn knobs, browse book, build tower of 6 cubes, kick a ball
- Construct, draw, make shapes. Open jars and containers
- Increase precision and smoothness
- Fine motor for art and craft

Cognitive
- Sensorimotor period
- Objects & relations
- Development of object permanence
- Pre operational period; symbolism & intuitive thinking
- Creativity, problem solving
- Abstract thinking
- Logical connections
- Concrete operational thought; more logical and organized thought; development of thinking strategies

Social-Emotional
- Interaction with environment
- Experimentation
- Autonomy development, emotional ideas
- Initiative, expression of emotions, cooperation skills
- World orientation, exploration of desires & emotions, competence, friendships
- Identity development, self reflection
- Intimacy

Language
- Babbling and recognizing sounds
- First words
- Single word communication
- Rapid vocabulary growth
- Sentences of 3+ words
- Language as social event
- Metalinguistic consciousness
- Self-defining and self-explanatory narratives
- Emergence of a personal life-story

Play
- Attunement play
- Presymbolic play
- Body play & movement
- Manipulative play
- Object play
- Symbolic play
- Construction play
- Imaginative play
- Highly active games, e.g. chasing, rough-and-tumble
- Social play
- Pretend play, representational play, dramatic play
- Creative play
- Games with rules, competition, risk-taking, gaming
- Language play

(Nijhof, et al, 2018, p. 424)

Educational Implications, Interventions, & Strategies

Play is integral to the academic setting because it ensures that the school environment attends to the social-emotional and cognitive development of children. When considering play versus an academic focus, the concern noted is that children within schools have less time committed to child-driven play because it is believed that an academic focus is needed to promote the areas of reading and mathematics. Research has shown that play actually enhances a child's learning readiness and problem-solving skills. Without play, it has been observed that a child's ability to store new information may be impacted and the likelihood for stress and anxiety increased (Lifter et al., 2011, pp. 225-226).

As recommended as part of The National Association of the Education of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practices, play skill interactions are encouraged between peers to promote social skill development and later social success in children with disabilities (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 15). Through play children most naturally express their inner selves which allows for developmentally appropriate means for communication and growth (Ray et al., 2007, p. 97). Play therapy studies; furthermore, have shown effectiveness in reducing problem behaviors that may be demonstrated by children. Play therapy interventions, when provided in the early school years, may reduce the negative long- and short-term impact of children with a diagnosis of ADHD. It was found that children exhibited fewer statistically significant problems as it related to emotional instability, anxiety, withdrawal, and negative student characteristics as a result of play therapy techniques (Ray et al., 2007, p. 107-109).

Play therapy also promotes executive functioning development. Executive function skills are based in the prefrontal cortex which controls one's working memory, attention, and inhibitory control, problem solving, and planning. In order to improve executive function skills,

children benefit from structured, rule bound games such as "Simon Says". This requires the

child to attend to the command and inhibit their actions to only respond when a command

includes the words, "Simon Says". This is another example of how play interventions often focus

on explicit cognitive motor tasks (Rice, 2016, pp. 1-2).

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices for child focused

interventions notes the importance of implementing goals in natural settings for children where

play activities are of primary importance. Play activities have been utilized to implement goals in

a variety of developmental domains. For example, play allows for a child to frequently use

language in their environment. Toddlers specifically demonstrated improved communication

skills during free play interactions which was an intervention program that worked towards

enhancing a parent's communication with their toddler, especially those children with language

delays. Furthermore, research supports that a preschooler's communication increases when

teachers have applied language interventions during play activities (Lifter et al., 2011, pp. 234,

237).

Interventions related to social skills have also utilized play to support increased

opportunities for appropriate social interactions in children who were at risk or exhibited delays

in this domain. Using different play context and activities such as socio-dramatic play,

researchers have determined the effects of play interventions on preschoolers with social delays.

Through the use of role play, dramatic play, and manipulative play activities, researchers were

successfully able to show an increase in social communicative interactions based on a child's

descriptive statements and requested responses. Play context is shown to be integral to the

increase in social behaviors and early intervention research because it has allowed for the easy

generalization of play into a natural, least restrictive environment where social interventions can be implemented (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 237).

Dramatic play has been shown to enhance child development in four major areas which includes social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language development. Dramatic play involves "setting the stage" for children to be inspired creatively and initiate their imaginations. In many classroom settings, dramatic play involves props and creating scenes (e.g. housekeeping) to allow children to fully absorb the learning opportunities presented. As part of incorporating dramatic play into the classroom setting, educators need to be mindful about changing materials regularly so that children can have new experiences, exposure to novel vocabulary and play situations, and make connections to and apply what they have observed in their real-life experiences. Cecchini (2007) explains dramatic play as follows:

Dramatic play engages children in both life and learning. Its real value lies in the fact that it increases their understanding of the world they live in, while it works to develop personal skills that will help them meet with success throughout their lives (pp. 1- 2)

Play is considered a natural activity for young children and allows observers an opportunity to view development. Play contributes to growth in areas of cognition, language, social-emotional, and academic skills. Play is a useful means of assessment and intervention because children enjoy and are motived to engage in play. Furthermore, play follows a regular developmental sequence during childhood which can provide indications of maturation and social-competence or the lack thereof (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004, p. 173).

Research has shown that play develops according to its own developmental sequence. Focus on a child's progress in play should be monitored and considered so that the play requirements of intervention can be better understood (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 238). Although

growth as it is related to play assessment is evident, the measures of play are rarely incorporated into assessment batteries. Knowledge about the relationship between play and the various areas of development would enhance the information gained during evaluations and contribute to treatment validity as it relates to young children (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004, p. 173).

Play based assessments not only provide information on developmental skills, but also looks at the relationship between a parent and a child and its significance to a young child's learning and development (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004, pp. 174-175). Play based assessments which factor in naturally occurring play behaviors often measure the developments in the five domains as specified in federal law by assessing young children and the context of their everyday activities. When in the context of a child's everyday environment, their abilities across all domains can be better observed and evaluated for planning purposes. By observing play during assessments and having an understanding of the sequence of development, educators can better determine when deficits exists by having a grasp on typical or normal maturation as it pertains to the five domains of development. When having knowledge of where limitations may exist, one can better plan on how to support a student/child to meet specific standards and foundational skills that are required for continued growth (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 231).

The charts on the following pages are a cumulative list of play-based assessments that address specific developmental domains. These charts were created by Lifter et al. (2011, pp. 232-233).

Table 1. Summary of Play Assessment Instruments

Assessment	Reliability Reported	Validity Reported	Age Range	Type of Play
Use of play as an activity base in assessment				
Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment (TPA; Linder, 1990, 2008)	Friedli (1995)	Friedli (1995) Myers, McBride, and Peterson (1996)	0-72 months	Use of a play environment to observe all domains of development
Assessment of play as a developmental domain				
Assessing Play and Exploratory Behaviors of Infants and Toddlers (Wagner & Frost, 1986)	Wagner and Frost (1986)	Wagner and Frost (1986)	0-36 months	Symbolic play
Child Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChIPPA; Stagnitti & Unsworth, 2004)	Stagnitti and Unsworth (2004)	Swindells and Stagnitti (2006) Uren and Stagnitti (2009) McAloney and Stagnitti (2009)	36-84 months	Conventional-imaginative play Symbolic play Pretend play
Developmental Play Assessment (DPA; Lifter, 2000)	Lifter, Ellis, Cannon, Anderson (2005)		8-60 months	15 categories
Play Assessment Scale (Fewell, 1986)	Stone and Yoder (2001)	Finn and Fewell (1994)	2-36 months	Manipulation of toys in a sensory, functional, or symbolic manner Focused on more cognitive aspects of play
Play in Early Childhood Evaluation System (Kelly-Vance and Ryalls, 2005)	Kelly-Vance and Ryalls (2005)	Kelly-Vance and Ryalls (2005)	19-46 months	13 exploratory and pretend play behaviors
Symbolic Play Test (Lowe & Costello, 1988)	Gitlin-Weiner, Sandgrund, and Schaefer (2000)	Gitlin-Weiner, Sandgrund, and Schaefer (2000) Power and Radcliffe (1989) Cunningham, Glenn, Wilkinson, and Sloper (1985)	12-36 months	Functional-Conventional play Symbolic play

(continues)

Table 1. Summary of Play Assessment Instruments (*Continued*)

Assessment	Reliability Reported	Validity Reported	Age Range	Type of Play
Test of Pretend Play (ToPP; Lewis & Boucher, 1997)		Clift, Stagnitti and DeMello (1998)	36 months and above (verbal assessment) Up to 8 years (nonverbal)	Symbolic play (1. substituting object for another object/person; 2. attributing imagined property to object/person; 3. making reference to absent object/person/substance) Pretend play
Transdisciplinary Play-Based Assessment (Linder, 1990; 2008)	Friedli (1995)	Swindells and Stagnitti (2006) Uren and Stagnitti (2009) McAloney and Stagnitti (2009)	0-72 months	Interpersonal Exploratory/Sensorimotor Functional-relational Constructive Dramatic Games with rules Physical activity/rough and tumble
Westby Symbolic Play Scale (Westby, 2000)			9-60 months	Considers cultural and environmental factors that affect type and themes of symbolic play
Assessment of social play Parten-Smilansky Play Scale (Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978)			36-72 months	Solitary, associative, parallel and coordinated play
Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (Fantuzzo & Hampton, 2000)	Gitin-Weiner, Sandgrund and Schaefer (2000) Fantuzzo et al. (1995)	Coolahan, Fantuzzo, Mendez and McDermott (1998) Gresham and Elliot (1990) Hampton and Fantuzzo (2003) Fantuzzo, Coolahan, Mendez, McDermott, and Sutton-Smith (1998) Fantuzzo et al (1995) Fantuzzo, Mendez, and Tighe, 1988	Preschool children	Three subscales: 1. Play Interaction Scale (social play strengths) 2. Play Disruptive Scale (aggressive and antisocial behaviors) 3. Play Disconnection Scale (withdrawn behaviors and nonparticipation in peer play)
Preschool Play Behavior Scale (PPBS; Coplan & Rubin, 1998)	Coplan and Rubin (1998)	Coplan and Rubin (1998)		

ACADEMIC VS PLAY

When considering an academic focus vs play in early intervention and early childhood educational environments, the National Association for the Education of Young Children's (NAEYC) 2009 position statement on developmentally appropriate practice noted that play provides significant learning opportunities (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 239). Furthermore, the position statement noted that it was imperative for early childhood settings to provide opportunities to engage in sustained high-level play while teacher activities further enhanced their progress (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 239). Research in US schools have shown that child centered learning environments are more positive as it related to development than adult centered learning settings.

Child centered classrooms offer more opportunities for pretend play which allows for free choice, hands on activities, where children are more intrinsically motivated and provided opportunities for peer interactions (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 26). Implementation of a child centered approach as opposed to a teacher facilitated approach provides opportunities for children to mature in the areas of cognitive, language, personal, emotional, artistic, and kinesthetic development through dramatic play. Furthermore, a child centered approach can assist children in better understanding themselves, their classmates, their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, while also gaining confidence. Additionally, this child centered method promotes learned skills such as organizing and negotiating, demonstrating an understanding of how to wait their turn, while also showing acknowledgement and respect to other ideas and perspectives (Gupta, 2008, p. 12).

Providing roleplay materials seems to increase the frequency of pretend play in children; however, adult involvement is crucial in developing the quality of social pretend play. This is in line with a child-centered educational approach where adults provide time and space for a child

to play and engage with peers while enriching a child's play through the provision of materials, prompting and modeling (Kalkusch, et al., 2020, p. 15).

As it relates to early intervention, ongoing concerns between time for play versus a focus on pre academic activities continues to raise concerns (Lifter et al., 2011, p. 240). As children enter more structured classrooms, it is important that they continue to have carefully designed, challenging hands-on activities to support learning rather than instructional methods that involve children only sitting at desks and listening to teachers. Research has found that recess assists in restoring attention and improving cognitive function. Teacher centered instructional approaches have clearly shown to be less than ideal for young children. Instead, children thrive on hands on educational methods that are sometimes referred to as "playful learning". Playful learning is shown to be the most positive avenue yet to support a young child's development (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 26-28).

Vygotsky's approach further supported the importance of play versus academic skills through the use of intentional scaffolding during opportunities of make-believe play. Through scaffolding play in a social context, it supports a more mature form of play and improves the most critical components of play to improve language, cognitive, and social-emotional skills (ZPD). Furthermore, make-believe play, when scaffolded, promotes the basic foundations for learning academic skills in a formal school environment, specifically literacy and early writing skills.

Through the use of scaffolding, we are ensuring that a child reaches the most mature form of play. As a result, not only is the development of play positively impacted but also growth in early academic skills (Bodrova, 2008, p. 367). When scaffolding a child's literacy development, a correlation was made that best results were achieved when supporting children through mature

play. As a result, a child in these classrooms showed mastery of literacy skill concepts at a higher rate, demonstrated more developed language and social skills, and exhibited the ability to better regulate their physical and cognitive behaviors through learned opportunities. Furthermore, pretend play was found to correlate with competency, text comprehension, and metalinguistic awareness and in an overall understanding of the purpose of reading and writing. Research shows that when children are properly supported in their play, that play does not take away from early learning and development, but instead has been shown to contribute to these areas (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 50, 53).

Teachers often find themselves defending the importance of play, especially as it related to make-believe experiences, because parents, colleagues, and administrators focus is placed more on their child's academic learning. Evidence has shown that the link between socio-dramatic play and self-regulatory skills suggest that play is an effective way to prepare young children for academic and social challenges (Elias & Berk, 2001, p. 230).

Links between play and achievement showed that socio-dramatic play was found to elicit a higher syntactic language while also supporting variability in vocabulary output. Active play in a preschool population promotes executive and self-regulatory skills that are related to academic proficiency. Growth in self-regulation skills over the course of an academic year can significantly predict gains in not only emergent literacy skills, but also math abilities in prekindergarten children (Becker et al., 2014, pp. 65-66).

While there is a push for academic readiness in young children through the direct teaching of skills such as knowing the alphabet, numbers, colors, etc., play in the preschool setting is greatly impeded by a more academic focus. As a result, this negatively impacts social

pretend play which requires an extensive amount of uninterrupted time periods in order to develop complexity (Gmitrova et al., 2009, p. 341).

On the other hand, many educators believe that learning only comes as a result of direct instruction and that play is for the purpose of enjoyment. Currently, many school children are given less time for play and few physical outlets while at school. This was the direct response from districts as it relates to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. By reducing the time committed to forms of play such as recess, the creative arts, and physical education, negative implications such as a child's ability to store new information and their cognitive capacity is impacted (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 185). Research shows that significant academic gains can be achieved through play. This can be seen through play opportunities that can extend to academic learning by allowing students to utilize their prior knowledge experiences and skills through interactions with others in their environments and apply it to learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, pp. 129-130).

PLAY-BASED LEARNING

Play based learning (PBL) was designed to combine play and educational teaching. PBL focuses on a child's development, interests, and abilities through the engagement in developmentally appropriate academic learning opportunities that are child centered. The main purpose behind PBL is to support a child's learning through play. PBL allows for children to freely explore their environment, make mistakes, investigate, and engage in trial and error to further their knowledge in learning. Through PBL children grow in their understanding of the world and their ability to develop abstract thought (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, pp. 127-128).

Through play-based learning children must learn skills such as cooperation, sharing, helping, and problem solving to establish and maintain positive peer relationships that are crucial to the development of social-competence. Furthermore, by young children engaging in give and take activities, opportunities for the growth of social-competence and emotional regulation are provided. The establishment of effective and appropriate peer relationships has direct implications on a child's cognitive, communicative, and social development. It is imperative for educators to have an understanding of early peer interactions in children and the role that these relationships play in a child's overall development.

Children with better play skills especially as it relates to social competence are typically more liked by peers, have positive perceptions of school, and demonstrate more school success academically (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004, p. 174). Within the context of play Vygotsky found that children develop an understanding of social norms and expectations and learn to act against immediate impulses (Gagnon & Nagle, 2004, p. 174). Higher levels of dramatic play have also been found to be a significant contributor to a child's cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development (Lillard et al., 2013, p. 1).

"Play-based learning activities provide multiple ways for children to learn a variety of different skills and concepts. They allow children the opportunities to learn relevant skills and feel competent about their ability to learn. When children are concerned about their competence or adequacy, they cannot make sense of their learning because emotions drive attention, create meaning, and forge their own memory pathways. Children are more likely to feel successful when they can experience active, meaningful learning; use complex, challenging, and varied materials; learning in a safe, nonthreatening environment; and receive accurate and timely feedback." A child's play depends largely on the play materials and equipment provided; in

addition to, the role models available to them. According to Isenberg & Quisenberry (2002),
"Primary age children need plenty of opportunity to move and to engage in recreational activities
such as recess, classroom breaks, group games, and physical education" (pp. 6-7)

When implemented into the classroom, PBL is considered to be an intentional and
purposeful type of learning through play where an educator introduces and scaffolds
developmentally appropriate experiences for children while also supporting a child's social
emotional learning. Furthermore, skills that are not explicitly taught behind a desk such as social
norms can be taught through collaborative group play. Finally, by considering a child's interest,
children are more active learners in play opportunities (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, p. 132).

Sussman (2012) used the following chart as a guide when selecting items to use during
early childhood (p. 13)

Play materials in early care and education classrooms

Skills developed through play	Toddlers and 2-year-olds	3- to 6-year-olds
Problem solving	Puzzles (with 4-12 pieces); blocks that snap together; objects to sort (by size, shape, color, smell); materials with hooks, buttons, buckles, and snaps	Puzzles (with 12-20 pieces); blocks that snap together; collections of small objects to sort by length, width, height, shape, color, smell, quantity, and other features; collections of plastic bottle caps; plastic bowls and lids; keys; shells; counting bears; small colored blocks
Pretending and building	Blocks; transportation toys; construction sets, child-sized furniture (kitchen sets, chairs, play food); dress-up clothes; dolls with accessories; puppets; sand and water play toys	Many blocks for building complex structures; transportation toys; construction sets, child-sized furniture, play food and home-life tools; dress-up clothes; dolls with accessories; puppets and simple puppet theaters; sand and water play toys
Creativity	Large non-toxic, washable crayons and markers; large paintbrushes; finger paint; large paper for drawing and painting; colored construction paper; toddler-sized scissors with blunt tips; chalkboard and large chalk; rhythm instruments	Large and small crayons and markers; large and small paintbrushes; finger paint; large and small paper for drawing and painting; colored construction paper; preschooler-sized scissors, chalkboard and large and small chalk; modeling clay and play dough with shaping tools; paste, paper and cloth scraps for collage; musical instruments including rhythm instruments, keyboards, xylophones, maracas and tambourines
Listening and visual skills	Books and pictures with realistic images and clear, life-like detail	Books with more visual detail, more words, and new vocabulary; nonsense and realistic stories and songs; pictures that help draw associations between the known and the unknown
Listening Skills	Recorded and live sounds—both musical and environmental	Musical and environmental sound (recorded or real); stories with surprise endings, stories with predictable endings; rhymes; finger plays; puppets; opportunities to make up and repeat stories
Fine- and gross-motor development	Large and small balls for kicking and throwing, ride-on toys; push and pull toys; tunnels, low climbers with soft material underneath; pounding and hammering toys	Large and small balls for kicking and throwing and catching; ride-on equipment including wagons, wheelbarrows, and tricycles; tunnels, taller climbers and wheelbarrows; plastic bats and balls; plastic bowling pins; targets and balls or beanbags; a workbench with vise, hammer, nails and saw
Technology	Not recommended	Programs that promote interaction (the child can do something), can be understood by children (the software uses graphics, spoken instruction, and print), allow children to control the software's pace and paths, and provide opportunities to explore a variety of concepts on several levels

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children, *Good Toys for Young Children*, Dec. 14, 2011.

(Sussman, 2012, p. 14)

CONCLUSION

PLAY AS A SIXTH DOMAIN OF DEVELOPMENT

Lifter et al. (2011) noted the importance of play being considered a sixth developmental domain. This perspective comes from the influence of play in correlation with the other domains as well as the attention needed to specifically monitor progress in play while determining intervention goals. If play were regarded as a developmental domain, then focus could be directly placed on a child's progress in the area of play, which can, as a result, be used to enhance and not compete with goals in other domains.

As noted, prior in this review, assessment instruments have been developed to focus specifically on the development as it relates to play in children (Lifter et al., 2011, pp. 231, 240). It is imperative in future research that studies begin integrating various measurement tools available to fully capture developmental progression. This research should focus on holistic, naturalistic and lab-based measurements, various materials and things for play, an examination of solitary dyadic group play that is specific to culture, socio-economic status, language development, executive functions, theory of mind, and other factors that may be related to play development (Thompson & Goldstein, 2019, p. 8).

Over the past fifty to sixty years in the United States, there has been an ongoing, well document, significant decline in a child's opportunity to engage in free play with other children and without adult interference. This decline is most likely a result of societal changes such as parental and public fears which results in children being less able to play away from adults. These societal changes may also be related to an increase in time spent in school and completing homework, the tendency for children to be enrolled in adult led activities, the decline in neighborhood play, and smaller family sizes. Along with these studies, declines in the mental

and social well-being of young children are also well documented. As a result of reduced free play, children often fail to gain a strong sense of control over their own lives which has shown to increase the likelihood for depression and anxiety (Gray, 2017, pp. 225-226).

FACTORS THAT HAVE CHANGED CHILDHOOD

There are many contributing factors that have led to decreased play that have become current trends in our society today. To begin with, the family structure has been dramatically altered. Currently there are more families with a single head of the household or two working parents instead of one. Furthermore, households no longer typically include grandparents or extended family members which means fewer families have the option for adult supervision in the home during the workday. As a result, it is necessary for the children to be placed in childcare or other settings throughout the day. Many parents have learned to balance work and home schedules; however, children's lives have become highly structured in the home setting. This limits the number of opportunities for parents to engage in high interactions at home through activities such as reading or playing with their children (Ginsburg, 2007, pp. 186-187).

Play has also showed a decrease in the home setting as parents receive messages from the media, magazines, or other sources about the importance of building their child's aptitude and skills at the earliest age possible. Parents will go to extreme efforts and make personal sacrifices to ensure that their children can participate in a variety of academic, athletic, and/or artistic opportunities. Over burden schedules have become the culture and the expectation of parents (Ginsburg, 2007, pp. 186-187).

The national trend to focus on academic fundamentals such as reading and arithmetic was also a result of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This act was developed as a result of the

limitations found in America's children as it relates to educational performance. The practical solution to America's poor achievement in academic subjects was to reduce the time in the school day for children to engage in recess, creative arts, and physical education. In addition, many after school programs have further prioritized the extension of academics and homework completion over opportunities for organized play, free play, or in general physical activity. The significance of this trend may result in the negative impacts on a child's social and emotional development.

The decrease in free play can also be explained by the increase in children being entertained through television and/or computers/video games. At one time, children reaped the benefits developmentally and as it relates to health by engaging in active, creative play. However, now there is ample evidence to support that this passive entertainment found in television and other media sources results in more sedentary children that are not protected and may experience a variety of harmful effects. To further complicate these matters many communities do not provide safe environments where children can play without the supervision and protection of an adult close by as a result of violence or other environmental dangers.

Recently with the push of testing in schools, direct instruction has been increased in the preschool environment. Even outside of the school setting, children's activities are more organized which reduces opportunities for play and real-life activities, which are characteristic of Montessori learning. Furthermore, with increased watching of television and engagement of other forms of media, the time that would have once been used for children to be engage in play or real activities have now become more limited (Lillard & Taggart, 2018, pp. 88-89).

A final factor that has influenced play within childhood is a parent planning for their child's future. In recent years the college admissions process has become increasingly more

rigorous. As a result, parents are focused on ensuring their children are well prepared and high

achieving if they are going to have a coveted spot or opportunity in higher education. Parents

feel pressured to help their child build a strong resume with academic excellence, a wide variety

of activities, and volunteer efforts beginning at a young age to increase the likelihood of college

acceptance. Students have been encouraged to carry more rigorous academic schedules which

included advanced placement courses, in addition to, taking preparation classes for standard

entrance examinations (Ginsburg, 2007, p. 187).

CULTURE

When addressing the play in young children, professionals should keep in mind that

cultural norms and interests significantly influence the type of play and the extent in which peers

participate (Jamison et al., 2012, p. 14). Various cultures, even in the present day, have their

children continue to work with adults when gathering food and engaging in domestic tasks. For

these cultures, children often incorporate their play forms into these activities.

In more Western cultures, however, as child labor laws were enacted there was a change

in the daytime activities of children and adults (Lillard & Taggart, 2018, pp. 88-89). Diversity

and complexity of children and their families today have also impacted the way educators should

view developmental theories related to specifically social play. Although children may follow

the overall developmental sequence that early theorists reported, factors such as cultural or

linguistic backgrounds of children and their families may influence how young children interact

and play in their environments.

The USA today is considered to be a nation of people with a wide variety of cultural and

ethnic backgrounds that often desire to preserve their native heritage. Furthermore, parental

expectations for children in relation to a child's play behavior may differ significantly from one ethnic group to another. For example, Asian cultures often place more value on a teacher directed instruction as opposed to one that views play activities as a productive learning experience. In other words, they prefer a more traditional formal education where the children spend most of their time on academic oriented activities during the day.

Children whose parents have European backgrounds believe in the importance of developing independence at an early age where children can express their ideas and function socially. Furthermore, European families also believe that child-initiated play and other social experiences are intertwined with a child's development in later academic achievements. Overall, they value social play as a way for children to develop skills (Xu, 2008, pp. 492-493).

Cultural norms and interests may have a significant influence on the type of play that children engage in with peers. For example, some children may choose to engage in solitary or parallel play when a child uses a more direct method of initiating play which may seem rude or unwelcoming. Individual characteristics of a child may play a significant role in play patterns and social competence. As a result, cultural and individual characteristics should be considered when implementing social intervention strategies. Jamison, et al. (2012) stated the following:

> Play skills that encourage interactions between peers are recommended as part of the National Association of Young Children's Developmentally Appropriate Practices and interventions targeting these play skills have been shown to influence social skill development and later social success in children with disabilities (pp. 14-15)

TRAUMA

Wright & Ryan (2014) pointed out how trauma affects children:

> Trauma frequently affects the way children see themselves and shapes what they expect
>
> from other people and the world around them. In the midst of traumatic circumstances,
>
> children's sense of security and safety may be undermined, replaced by anxiety, anger, or
>
> fear...If a child thinks that the world is out to get him or that his guardians are unable to
>
> keep him safe, growing up becomes very scary indeed (p. 91)

The classroom setting can provide opportunities for children who have experienced trauma to

interact with supportive adults and peers that can provide a buffer against the negative effects of

trauma. Children who have experienced trauma tend to have fewer skills socially. As a result,

these children benefit from allowing structured opportunities for group and individual play in

one's daily schedule. Furthermore, modeling strategies and role-playing can help children learn

to join in play and resolve conflicts as they arise.

Trauma can also negatively impact a young child's capacity for creative play. Creative

play is seen as an important way for children who have experienced trauma to cope with

problems that occur in their everyday lives. Teachers can provide emotional support for these

specific students through the materials they select for engagement (Wright & Ryan, 2014, p. 91)

Research has reported that 71% of children in the United States have been exposed to at

least one potentially traumatic event in the past year; with 70% of children having experienced

multiple exposures to trauma. This trauma can range from large scale events such as war,

terrorism, or disaster to smaller scale experiences such as, a house fire, chronic illness, family

death, or abuse. Nevertheless, even when experiencing devastating trauma children have the

potential to demonstrate resiliency, courage, and the ability to move forward. Though trauma is

shown to affect a young child's physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development in early

childhood, educators can play an important role in helping children develop coping skills

(Berson & Beggerly, 2009, p. 375). These coping skills can be found through play, which is essential to childhood.

Children who have experienced trauma may have impairments across the domains of development to include physical, cognitive, social-emotional, and language and literacy. These could be manifested by challenging behaviors seen in the classroom. Trauma can impede a child's capacity for imaginative and creative play. These types of play are important ways that children build their cognitive, social, and emotional skills that are imperative for school success (Statman-Weil, 2015, p. 74). Statman-Weil (2015) expressed that children that have had traumatic experiences may not develop certain skills:

Through play, young children learn how others experience the world and how to develop control and competence in dealing with scary feelings, individuals, and circumstances. Children who have experienced trauma may not develop these skills because the feelings that arise during play may overwhelm them (p. 75).

Play is essential to childhood. Play allows children to work through their concerns and provide a context for children to play out traumatic events. By playing out these traumatic experiences, the children are able to take charge and put themselves in a position of power and control over their circumstances that may have made them a victim prior. With the involvement of adults in these play activities, it further provides the child with different ending options or the ability to take on the role of a helper in the community. Teachers can provide positive coping strategies through playful activities such as, deep breathing by pretending to blow pin wheels, drawing or coloring pictures of happy or safe places, role playing to learn how to ask for affection or engage with friends, and focus on positive thoughts through music and stories (Berson & Beggerly, 2009, p. 377-378).

TECHONOLGY

In early childhood education, teachers disposition toward the role of technology in early childhood education is one of hesitancy. Teachers tend to side with play-based pedagogy in the belief that children enjoy active firsthand experiences in their environments. Professionals often see digital devices as "static" and controlling to a child's creativity, motivation, and exploration. Furthermore, teachers often have the impression that digital devices tend to limit language interactions and opportunities that are considered playful. Teacher concerns related to technology are influenced by a child's well-being, safety and health, and the risk of social isolation. Devices are seen to socially and linguistically limit a child's opportunity for developing skills needed in peer interactions, such as turn taking, sharing, and negotiating (Palaiologou, 2016, p. 315-316).

In some cases, technology has been successfully incorporated in some PBL environments to support gains in student achievement. For example, iPads are often used by children to support their learning through taking pictures, videos, or recordings. Other forms of technology that have been integrated in to the PBL environment may include Chromebooks, iPods, interactive white boards, and cameras. In a PBL setting, technology has been utilized to teach direct concepts or skills, support collaboration and independent learning while also providing opportunities for extended learning (Taylor & Boyer, 2019, pp. 131-132).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC

A child's family socio-economic status may also support the development of a child's social play. Research has shown that children who live in communities that are higher in poverty are at a more significant risk of developing social and emotional difficulties. While children in higher poverty areas may have more social emotional difficulties, findings are inconsistent in

relation to socio-economic backgrounds and play. While some research supports the negative impact of poverty on a child's play behavior, other studies support that children from middle income classes were more impacted than those from lower income families as it relates to socio-dramatic play.

In general future research is needed in this area to further determine the impact on a child's socio-economic status in relation to play skills. Furthermore, risk factors related to poverty such as parental education and family involvement should also be investigated to determine the various levels of impact on a child's development and learning (Xu, 2008, pp. 495-496).

TEMPERAMANT

Temperament involves the ability to inhibit impulsive behavior. When children are unable to restrain impulsive behavior, externalizing behavior problems may occur. Child temperament should be considered in the play styles of young children. Children who are shy and quiet may require different intervention techniques than children who are outgoing. As a result, the level of prompting and encouragement may vary based on a child's personality to ensure that the child is engaging in the most complex levels of play while participating with peers. Overall, individual characteristics of a child, play a pivotal role in social play patterns and the development of social competence (Jamison et al., 2012, pp. 14-15).

Research has explored comparisons in the temperament of shyness and social disinterest in early childhood. Conflicted shyness is often associated with fear and negative emotions. As a result, children who were more shy tended to be more reserved in nature when responding to social situations and would engage in parallel play instead of directly playing with peers.

Children who exhibit more shy tendencies are often seen as anxious and withdrawn; however, their lack of a pro-social behavior may strictly be related to their temperament and not their ability or lack thereof to initiate social interactions (Coplan et al., 2004, p. 250). Furthermore, children who exhibit a social disinterest typically prefer solitude or engaging in solitary passive play (Coplan et al., 2004, p. 253).

It is important to address difficulties with temperament early on because preschool behavior problems may continue, if not addressed, into middle childhood and adolescence. Children with less social temperament are at an increased risk for peer rejection and school failure. Socio-dramatic play has been shown to be a viable source of intervention to support children in early childhood by learning self-regulation strategies (Elias & Berk, 2001, pp. 219-220).

Based on the literature reviewed, it is evident that play is an essential component of childhood that offers limitless opportunities for development. Gray (2017) pointed out:

If play is how children learn to create their own activities, solve their own problems, take control of their own lives, get along with peers, overcome narcissism, and learn to deal with fear, then the lack of play would be expected to have serious consequences. There is good evidence that it does (pp. 225-226).

By understanding the importance of play and its relationship with the domains of development, educators and caregivers can learn to distinguish between typical and atypical patterns in child development and how to intervene to promote successful growth in the acquisition of skills. Many believe in the importance of play and its impact on a child's overall development and learning, in addition to, its ongoing relevance in early childhood. We are reminded of this by researchers within the field and influential leaders such as Fred Rogers (Mr.

Rogers), who sought to encourage a child's evolvement in and out of the classroom setting

through play. He left us with this quote to remind us of the direct correlation between play and

learning and the importance of play as a means to maturation. "Play is often talked about as if it

were a relief from serious learning; but for children, play is serious learning. Play is really the

work of childhood."

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