

Play and its importance to healthy development and as a response to children's emotional distress



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Importance of Play

- Often dismissed by adults as not important and something to be engaged in when the really important things have been finished.
- Our language about play often reflects this e.g. 'stop playing about' 'there are chores to be done, no time to play', 'you're only playing'
- Without opportunities to play, children do not develop in a healthy way
- Play is a child's work!

Importance of Play

- Fundamental right of all children and enshrined in United Nation Convention of the Rights of the Child
- Crucial to healthy development
- Piaget believed that the development of play was closely linked to a child's intelligence and his theory on how intelligence develops is linked to his descriptions of the types of play children engage in (Piaget, 1951)
- Kenyan Early Childhood Development Policy (ECD) is based on play

How it contributes to healthy development

- Children are intrinsically driven to play because it is fun and satisfying
- It allows them to find out and make sense of the world and is driven by curiosity, the need to explore and the need to manipulate – both things physically and the sense they make of their world
- It helps to consolidate recently acquired skills and aids the development of cognition (the ability to think) and social skills (Gross, 1996)

Theories on who we play with

- **Solitary Play (0-2ish)**
- **Parallel Play (2-3 years)**
- **Associative Play (3 +)**
- **Co-operative Play (3+)**



Photo by Rona Talcott

- Each stage of play does not necessarily replace the previous one and children can engage in solitary play, associative play and co-operative play all in the same stage

Theories of development of play: Piaget's Stages of Play

Age (Approximately)	Characteristics
Early to late infancy	Non-symbolic practice games- repeated movements to consolidate, perfect or elaborate a skill e.g.
Early childhood (before age 6)	Make-believe & symbolic games - play in which something stands for something else -toys represent something else, pretending to be someone else
Late childhood (before age 12)	Games with rules e.g. hide and seek, find the lion

Play as the basis for therapeutic work with children

- Play is the way children make sense of their experience
- If we can offer them a safe, contained 'play space' we can allow them to process difficult experiences
- Through engaging in play with them, we can begin to understand their world and look through the 'windows to our children' (Oaklander, 1988)



As a response to post election violence

JOSEPHINE ATIENO OCHIENG' and 'Linda'.

Importance to play therapy in Kenya of understanding the ways children play naturally

- All theories of play are based upon observations of western children playing.
- Maybe Kenyan children play differently and the stages of play development may be different?
- Small grant from the Nuffield Foundation to collect a rich description of children's play

The Project

- 8 observers were trained to collect the descriptions and worked in pairs
- 8 children, 4 from Nairobi and 4 from rural areas were observed 4 times for approximately 45 minutes each time:

2 different times in school

2 different times at home

Findings:

- Observations suggested that children from the poorer areas of Nairobi and from the rural areas tend to have to 'make' their toys and use their imagination to make up games – often from traditional sources
- Children from more affluent areas in Nairobi tend to have more toys that have been bought and access to technology
- Examples from observations

What does this mean

- None of the different ways of playing are worse than the other – just different
- Demonstrates the intrinsic need to play and children will utilise anything that is at hand!
- All the children can be described as engaging in what Piaget would describe as concrete play and as all the children observed were between the ages of 8 and 10 years this would fit in with the Western category of ‘age appropriate play’

Differences in roles children played

- Rural children and those from poorer urban homes appeared to take on much more adult responsibility than children from the more affluent urban homes
- Examples from observations

Implications

- Children who take on adult roles at an earlier age have less time to play but this is an economic necessity in some families as it is in some European families
- Children, nevertheless, find opportunities to play and sometimes combine work and play – e.g. Creating a fantasy about being attacked and defeating a lion while going for water!

Limitations

- Small sample – need to collect more rich descriptions and collect descriptions of play from children of different ages
- Because the observers were asked to observe children playing, some of the play situations were contrived as everyone was keen to comply with the research. This means that a true reflection of children's activities outside school may have been missed
- Observers were strangers to the children and this could have affected the way the children behaved

Implications for Play Therapists

- In order to work therapeutically with children we must have the ability to play and value it
- Trainee play therapists inhibitions!
- Therapeutic value of play both for children and adults

Finally!

- All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!
- So..... Go play!
- Thank you

References

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