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*Play & Playfulness:
Definitions & Conceptions*

by
David S. Ramsey

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DAVID S. RAMSEY

Play & Playfulness: Definitions &
Conceptions



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Play and Playfulness: Definitions and Conceptions

We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity. - Brian Sutton-Smith

Introduction

What is play? How can play be defined? How should play be understood? As the above quote from Sutton-Smith notes, these are questions that lack easy answers. Despite the challenges attendant in answering these questions, it is necessary to grapple with them at the outset in order to pursue a grounded discussion about this elusive activity called play. It is the purpose of this paper to explore the major theories and research that presently contribute to definitions and understandings of play.

A quick look at definitions of play in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary (www.merriam-webster.com) illustrates the varied landscape that unfolds when we attempt to conceptualize

the word, play. Play, according to Merriam-Webster, means a) to engage in sport or recreation, b) to have sexual relations, c) to move aimlessly about or to toy or fiddle around with something, d) to take advantage of (as in 'playing on fears'), e) to move or operate in a lively, irregular, or intermittent manner, f) to move or function freely within prescribed limits, g) to produce a stream (as in 'a hose playing on a fire'), h) to perform music, i) to act in a dramatic production, j) to pretend to engage in an activity (as in 'children playing war or playing at house').

Former professor of early childhood education Janet Moyles (1989) and play theorist H. Strandell (2000) pointed out that it might be impossible to define play because of the complex nature of the phenomenon. Psychologist Justine Howard of the University of Glamorgan (2002) noted that since the meaning and definition of play appear to shift based on the context in which the play occurs and the experience it provides for the participants, it is not only difficult to obtain an "all-encompassing generic definition" (p. 491), but quite probably unrealistic as well. Turnbull & Jenvey of Monash University (2004) cited the psychologists Martin & Caro (1985), Smith (1988), and Power (2000) to illustrate how some researchers feel that it is unhelpful to "describe play as a unitary phenomenon with few distinguishing features" (p. 540).

Further complicating matters is the fact that play is an activity that does not occur solely in human children, but also in adult humans, as well as in young and mature members of various other species. As will be seen below, research into play in all three of these populations has helped to generate a more complete understanding of the possible meanings of and reasons for play.

Across many disciplines and over a period covering much

of recorded human history, philosophers and scientists have attempted to define and describe play. Rousseau (1979) referenced Plato (380 BC) in stating the importance of children being allowed time to play:

Respect childhood, and do not hurry to judge it, either for good or for ill...a badly instructed child is farther from wisdom than the one who has not been instructed at all. You are alarmed to see him consume his early years in doing nothing. What? Is it nothing to be happy? Is it nothing to jump, play, and run all day? He will never be so busy in his life. Plato, in his Republic, believed to be so austere, raises the children only by festivals, games, songs and pastimes; one could say that he has done everything when he taught them well how to enjoy themselves. (p. 107)

The Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1955) traced in great detail the wide cultural and historical usages of words and phrases to describe play. He pointed out that certain cultures have multiple words for the concept of play, and he noted that the idea of play evolved and developed over time. In writings from ancient times one finds references to play as participating in battle or in warfare, as well as descriptions of play as engaging in idleness or similar non-work behaviors and attitudes.

Howard (2002) stated that historically play has been defined in three ways: descriptive, developmental, and functional. Attempts to describe play as demonstrating specific behavioral and dispositional characteristics are illustrated by psychologist Kenneth Rubin and associates (1983). Psychologist Michael Ellis (1973) referred to this way of describing play as looking at “play

defined by content” (p. 17), and pointed to an assumption that “if laymen, and presumably other animals, can differentiate play from non-play then it should be possible to write down the attributes of the animal, its behavior, and the setting which signal the playful character of play behavior” (p.17). Attempts to understand play as a driver of social-emotional and cognitive development through the explication of various categories and developmental stages are exemplified by the developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1962). Finally, theorists and researchers have worked to explain play in terms of its functionality- play as a means of expending surplus energy or play as relaxation (Groos, 1976), or in terms of the cognitive, social-emotional, or physical benefits that play provides people (Johnson, 1990).

I will review the meanings and definitions of play through the lenses of each of these three perspectives. I begin by looking at criteria/ characteristicbased definitions of play, then I discuss the most widely-accepted structures and stages for categorizing types of play, and finally, I discuss perspectives on the reasons for or functions of play.

Criteria/ Characteristic-based Definitions of Play

Huizinga (1955) is one of the most widely cited theorists on the subject of play. In his book *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, he laid out five qualities that characterize play: play is an activity that people engage in voluntarily, play involves the removal of the individual’s perspective out of real life into a “temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all its own” (p. 8), play occurs within specific spatial and temporal limits, play creates its own sense of order, and all play has rules. Huizinga stated that:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (p. 13)

Many researchers agree with Huizinga's belief that play activity is characterized by a lack of goal orientation by the participants. Rubin et. al. (1983) claimed that play is personally motivated and unrelated to basic needs or drives; individuals at play are less interested in goals than in the activity itself, and if goals are present they are self-imposed; play involves either familiar objects or the exploration of new objects; rules in play are self-imposed, not put in place by individuals outside of the play scenario; and play is an active pursuit that requires the engagement of the players.

The French philosopher Roger Caillois (2006) pointed out that Huizinga, in claiming that play is a profit-less activity, neglected games of chance that are played for money, ie. gambling. Caillois attempted to address this perceived oversight by stating that in play, particularly among adults: "property is exchanged, but no goods are produced. What is more, this exchange affects only the players, and only to the degree that they accept, through a free decision remade each game, the probability of such transfer. A characteristic of play, in fact, is

that it creates no wealth or goods, thus differing from work or art..." (p. 124).

Caillois agreed with Huizinga in other regards, seconding the premise that play is a free and voluntary activity. "A game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play. It would become constraint, drudgery from which one would strive to be freed. As an obligation or simply an order, it would lose one of its basic characteristics: the fact that the player devotes himself spontaneously to the game, of his free will and for his pleasure" (Caillois, 2006, p. 125).

The significance of the freely-chosen nature of play was echoed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981). He stated that a distinguishing characteristic of play is that "the goals and rules of action [a player] is following are freely chosen among the many sets of goals and rules one could have chosen" (p. 19).

Moreover, activities do not have an inherent quality of play that defines them as play, but the definition of an activity as play is a result of "how one's actions are interpreted by oneself" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 19). Play is a "state of subjective experience" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 19), and this allows for the following consideration of play: "...it is possible for some to play successfully at becoming millionaires or prime ministers in the so-called 'real' world, while others toil seriously at basketball or chess without ever experiencing play" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1981, p. 19).

Csikszentmihalyi explicitly moved beyond Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2006) when he stated that it is not the form or the content of an activity that defines it as play, but it is the way in which the player experiences the activity. He emphasized the importance of the idea of playfulness and the ways in which

players make free choices to accept certain goals and rules while engaging in play, while knowing the whole time that they are free to make a different choice.

Developmental psychologist D.W. Winnicott (1971) laid out several characteristics of play in *Playing and Reality* that can be seen as both echoing and expanding on the work of Huizinga (1955). He claimed that play in young children involves a state of preoccupation, similar to but different from concentration as displayed by more mature children and adults. During play it is difficult to break a child's focus or to pull him away from the play that is deeply engaging. Additionally, play takes place in an aspect of reality that is not internally located within the child nor externally located in the larger world.

Mark Twain (1982), in *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, stated that "work and play are words used to describe the same thing under differing conditions...work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do; play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do" (p.19).

Psychologist Gordon Burghardt (2005), in *The Genesis of Animal Play*, provided another way of describing Twain's point when he claimed that play is an activity of "limited immediate function" and that it is "an activity that is different from the non-play version of that activity (in terms of form, sequence, or the stage of life in which it occurs)" (p. 29).

Psychologist Susanna Millar (1974) neatly synthesized Csikszentmihalyi's (1981) and Burghardt's (2005) perspectives when she posited that "perhaps play is best used as an adverb; not a name of a class of activities, nor as distinguished by the accompanying mood, but to describe how and under what conditions an action is performed" (p. 21). She emphasized the importance of choice and "lack of constraint from conventional

ways of handling objects, materials, and ideas” (p. 21) in attempting to define play.

Millar (1974) provided further corroboration of Burghardt’s (2005) central point that “play is an activity that is different from the non-play version of that activity” (Burghardt, 2005, p. 29) when she described four characteristics of animal play. She said that play is any general activity which is engaged in not as a response to an immediate environmental stimulus, and that play activities include normal behavior patterns which are usually biologically based, but which occur outside of their regular context, or without fulfilling their usual biological function.

In a further explication of play from the perspective of animal behavior, Loizos (1966) agreed with Millar (1974) and Burghardt (2005) that “playful acts are motor behaviors that are divorced from their usual motivation and are qualitatively distinct from the same patterns appearing in their originally motivating contexts” (Loizos, 1966, p. 2). The key characteristics that distinguish play from other behaviors include a resequencing of the order of the acts engaged in, an increase in the amount of repetition of certain behaviors beyond what would normally occur, exaggeration of some activities, and a shortening or incomplete quality of some activities or behavior sequences.

In 1945 Beach described the key characteristics of play as being emotionally pleasurable, generally considered to be engaged in by children more frequently than by adults, having no significant biological outcome which has any effect on the success of the species, species-specific (people play in certain ways, dogs play in certain ways, etc.), and variable as regards the frequency and length of engagement depending on a species’ position; for instance, play occurs more frequently and for longer spans of time in higher animals than in lower ones.

While the discussion thus far has focused exclusively on characteristics of play and playful activity as theorized and described by adults, Howard (2002) attempted to elicit young children's definitions and descriptions of play by asking them to sort photographs of preschool and kindergarten students engaged in different activities into categories of play, work, and learning. She found two interesting results: one, children "clearly distinguished play from work in 92% of the photographic stimuli, and learning from not learning in 73%. This suggests that even at a young age, children have begun to form perceptions of what constitutes play, work and learning" (p. 496). Important variables in the photographs that impacted children's categorization of an activity as showing playing, working, or learning included teacher presence, space (ie. whether an activity was happening at a table or on the floor), positive affect (ie. whether a child in the photograph was smiling or appeared to be concentrating), and the nature of the activity.

A follow-up study (Howard et. al, 2004) led to a more explicit description of the variables which affected children's perceptions of a classroom activity as playing, working or learning. It was found that children perceived an activity to be play most frequently when a teacher was not present in a photograph, and children also indicated an activity as play when a photograph depicted cooperative or parallel activity amongst children, as opposed to solitary activity. This study, Howard asserted, demonstrated that children have a strong concept and understanding of the meaning of play.

Of particular relevance to our attempts to characterize play and playful experiences is that Howard et. al.'s (2004) study showed that children view play as being a free activity, personally motivated, engaged in of free will and for personal pleasure.

This finding is in agreement with Huizinga (1955), Rubin et. al. (1983), and Caillois (2006).

Stages and Categories of Play

Piaget is probably the most cited theorist when it comes to looking at play in terms of developmental stages. Piaget (1962) attempted to analyze play and games by looking at the structures present in these activities and by considering the mental complexity involved in different sorts of games and play scenarios. He determined that there are three kinds of games that children play and they range in complexity from practice games, to symbolic games, to games with rules.

Piaget (1962) described the purpose of practice games as to “practice the behavior merely for functional pleasure, or for the pleasure obtained from the awareness of new powers” (p. 114). These games are not based on symbolic thought or the use of rules, and are seen most frequently in animals. He pointed out that “when a kitten runs after a dead leaf or a ball of wool, we have no reason to suppose that these objects represent mice for it” (p. 114). He did differentiate between practice games in children and practice games in animals when he noted that “in the latter, the motor schemas carried out in the void are frequently reflex or instinctive...in the higher species such as the chimpanzee, and in the child, ludic activity extends far beyond the reflex schemas and is a continuation of almost all actions” (1962, p. 111).

Games of make-believe and pretend, or engagement in flights of imagination, are examples of symbolic games, and are based on the representation of an object that is not actually present,

or participants using one object to stand for another, such as when a child uses a cardboard box to pretend he is driving a car. Piaget (1962) stated that these sorts of games are not seen in animals, but can usually be seen in children in the second year of life.

Finally, Piaget (1962) believed that games with rules are the most sophisticated and developmentally advanced types of play that children engage in. One of the key characteristics of games with rules is that they involve social and interpersonal relationships. These sorts of games occur when social relationships are formed, and they involve the replacement of symbols with rules.

Psychologist Sara Smilansky (1990) laid out four categories or types of play behavior that both reflect and diverge from Piaget's (1962) stage-based descriptions. According to Smilansky the four types of play are functional play, constructive play, dramatic play (also known as symbolic or pretend play), and games with rules. Smilansky made the point that children do not necessarily leave behind any particular types of play as they move from one category to the next, but "can be observed alternating between the different types of play at different levels of elaboration" (p. 1).

Echoing Piaget (1962), Smilansky described functional play as the earliest form of play to develop in children. Such play involves rudimentary sensorimotor activities that allow a child to "practice his physical capabilities and the chance to explore and experience the material environment" (1990, p. 2).

Constructive play appears in early childhood and can last into adulthood. While constructive play is also based on sensory-motor activity, it includes the addition of a preconceived plan. A key aspect of constructive play is that, as the result of learning how to use and combine different materials in activities, a

child begins to see himself as a 'creator'. "Development from functional play to constructive play is a progression from manipulation of a form to formation; from sporadic handling of sand and bricks to building something which will remain even after he has finished playing" (Smilansky, 1990, p. 2).

Smilansky described two categories of games with rules: table games such as board games, cards, dominoes, etc., and physical games such as hide and seek and ball games. The key criteria of games with rules include accepting and adjusting prearranged rules, and controlling behavior within certain mutually agreed upon parameters. Engagement in games with rules, Smilansky asserted, begins in childhood and continues into adulthood.

Dramatic or symbolic play is based on actively experiencing human relationships through the use of symbolic representation. "Sociodramatic play allows the child to be an actor, observer, and interactor simultaneously, using his abilities in common enterprise with other children. Sociodramatic play differs from the three other types of play in that it is person-oriented and not material and/ or object oriented" (Smilansky, 1990, p. 3).

Sociologist Mildred Parten (1932, pp. 249-251) took a slightly different approach from Piaget (1962) and Smilansky (1990) when she looked at children's play in terms of the type or degree of social interaction displayed. She arrived at a hierarchy of children's play where children begin by engaging in what Parten called "unoccupied behavior". In this early stage children are not actively playing, but spend their time watching any passing object or incident of interest, and if there is nothing interesting happening they will stand around idly or play with their own bodies, looking randomly around the room.

When children spend the majority of their time observing

other children playing they are acting as what Parten described as “onlookers”. They might talk to the children they are watching and even comment on their play, but they won’t actively participate in the play itself. “Solitary independent play” occurs, according to Parten, when children play “alone and independently with toys that are different from those used by the children within speaking distance, and make no effort to get close to other children” (1932, p. 250).

In “parallel play”, Parten contended, children continue to play independently but choose an activity or toy that causes them to play near other children who are playing with similar materials. They will use the toy in their own way and not in the same way as the other children, and importantly they play “beside rather than with the other children” (1932, p. 250).

“Associative play”, for Parten, is characterized by children playing with

other children, with all involved playing at similar activities, but there is a lack of

group consensus or attempts to organize and direct the play towards any

particular goal or product.

The highest level of social play for Parten is “cooperative play”, where children play in groups organized around a specific goal or accomplishment. There is a division of labor as well as a dynamic where one or two children emerge as leaders, directing the play in order to maximize the likelihood of attaining the goal.

Parten is not alone in describing stages of social play engaged in by children. Seagoe (1970) laid out five categories of social play comprised of Informal-Individual, Adult-Oriented, Informal-Social, Individual-Competitive and Cooperative-

Competitive. Seagoe's categories are differentiated depending on the degree of child imitation of 'adult life', the amount of self- or adult-direction involved, and whether the play activity is formally or informally patterned. Iwanaga (1973), similarly to Parten (1932), looked at how children engaged in play in relation to other children, and Howes (1980) structured categories of play according to the degree of complexity of social interaction.

Dockett (1999, pp. 32-34) noted that utilizing Smilansky's (1990) cognitive play stages and Parten's (1932) social play stages in combination as a matrix allows for a more complete understanding and interpretation of children's play activity. Dockett proposed a format where Smilansky's (1990) categories of play, functional, constructive, dramatic and games with rules are organized down the left side of the matrix and Parten's (1932) social categories are organized across the top of the matrix. This allows for consideration that a child might be engaging in functional play as an onlooker, as an observer, or in parallel play, etc., or that a child might be engaging in dramatic play while engaging cooperatively, or associatively, etc. This sort of matrix provides a more robust tool for characterizing the play that children engage in.

Moyles (1989, pp. 12-13) described three broad categories of play: physical play, intellectual play, and social/ emotional play. These categories are not meant to be hierarchical but are intended to describe the content of the play activity itself. For example, physical play is based on gross and fine motor engagement and consists of activities such as building with blocks, playing musical instruments, climbing on an outdoor structure, or dancing. Intellectual play is based on linguistic, scientific, symbolic/ mathematical and creative engagement and consists of hearing and telling stories, painting and drawing,

and engaging in various symbolic games. Social/ emotional play is based on therapeutic, empathic, self-concept involving, and gaming engagement and consists of activities such as play with puppets, word and number games, and playing in a dramatic play corner.

Creaser (as cited in Dockett, 1990) took a different approach and looked at children's play from the perspective of children's preferred ways of entering and engaging in situations. Creaser used categories such as explorer, spectator, and dramatist to highlight the children's preferred ways of acting and focused on how adults might use an awareness of these styles to enhance children's play.

Functions and Outcomes of Play

It might seem contradictory that play could on one hand be "an activity connected with no material interest....[where] no profit can be gained by it" (Huizinga, 1955, p. 13), and simultaneously be an activity or a form of engagement with the potential to yield beneficial outcomes across a range of psychological and physical domains. However, if one considers that play could lead to positive outcomes even while the individual involved in play is not consciously setting out to achieve such results, there might be a way to reconcile these two positions.

In describing play by looking at the usefulness or utility of the activity one sees that there are two broad ways to consider play's functions. Wide brushstroke theories have attempted to discuss how play benefits human beings as a species (Groos, 1976), and smaller, more precise theories have laid out the ways in which play and playful activity might benefit people, children in particular, in social-emotional, physical, academic/ cognitive,

and creative contexts (Cazden, 1976; Pellegrini, 1998).

In the nineteenth century the philosophers Schiller and Spencer (as cited in Groos, 1976) were proponents of the 'surplus energy' theory of play. They held that play is the necessary physiological result of an individual having an excess of strength, enthusiasm, or vigor. In a sense, play allows an individual to regain a sort of equilibrium by burning off residual energy for which his body has no use.

To the contrary, Patrick (1916) claimed that play is an opportunity for relaxation, or a "means to reset and relax the exhausted mental and physical faculties of an individual" (as cited in Groos, 1976). Patrick felt that play was needed to help individuals recover from the stress of work, which of course led to the problematic question of why children engage in play, as they don't actually engage in the stressful or strenuous work typical of adults.

In *The Play of Animals* Groos (1976) claimed that the function of play is to prepare the young of a species for adult life. Through play a child or young animal has the opportunity to perfect certain instinctual skills that will be crucial to survival as an adult.

Psychoanalytic theory views play as both a means of catharsis and a means of assimilating experiences that are difficult for a person to comprehend or deal with. As Ellis (1973) said, "the most important element in the psychoanalytic conception of the child and play is the capacity for the repetition in play of prior unpleasant and excessive experiences to diminish their residual impact and allow the child to assimilate or come to terms with them" (pp. 60-61).

These broad theories about the reasons people engage in play provide potentially useful frameworks for understanding a

human behavior that at first glance seems to possess “limited immediate function” (Burghardt, 2005, p. 29). Researchers have also looked much more specifically at areas where children appear to benefit from engaging in play, and they have found that engagement in play provides social, emotional, cognitive, and physical benefits that, while not deliberately sought out by the individual playing, are present and often quite powerful. In the next section I look at some of the central literature regarding these specific benefits of play for children.

In *The Role of Recess in Primary School* Anthony Pellegrini (2006) cited Bjorklund and Harnishfeger (1987) and Dempster (1992) to make the point that children have immature nervous systems which leads to their being more affected by ‘cognitive interference’ during periods of structured, teacher-directed work. In several studies Pellegrini (Pellegrini, 1993; Pellegrini et. al, 1995) demonstrated that children were more attentive to classroom work after spending time in free play at recess than they were prior to the recess period.

Significantly, Pellegrini found that it was during recess contexts where children were allowed to engage in free play that they gained the most benefit vis-a-vis their subsequent attention during class. Pellegrini defined free play as “opportunities for children to interact with peers or materials on their own terms, that is with minimal adult direction...free choice of activities and playmates...the role of adults should be to supervise children’s safety” (2006, p. 38).

In their paper “Physical Activity Play: The Nature and Function of a Neglected Aspect of Play”, Pellegrini and Smith (1998) described the benefits of gross motor play such as running, jumping, chasing, climbing, etc. Beginning from a reverse perspective that looked at the results of deprivation of physical

activity play in young children, Pellegrini and Smith claimed that “if children are deprived of opportunities for physical activity play, they will, when given the opportunity to play, engage in more intense and sustained bouts of physical activity play than they would have done if not so deprived” (p. 582). They theorized that exercise play can serve a positive cognitive function in children by “breaking up cognitive tasks...providing distributed practice instead of massed practice” (p. 584). Enhanced well-being and feelings of mastery after successfully engaging in physical activity play might also improve subsequent cognitive engagement in children.

Engaging in physical activity play at recess and in other contexts is an excellent way for children to maintain and improve their health, and particularly to help counter increases in childhood obesity. Rhonda Clements (as cited in Chmelynski, 2006) noted that physical activity play outdoors increases resistance to chronic illnesses and also provides an excellent way to absorb vitamin D from sunlight. Susan Solomon (as cited in Chmelynski, 2006) emphasized that it is not just the physical activity aspect of gross motor play that is significant, but it is the context in which it occurs. When children are made to engage in scripted, adult-directed physical activity, they lose opportunities to interact freely with peers, to think creatively, to experiment with ways of moving and using their bodies, to persevere and work towards the achievement of an intrinsically motivated goal or accomplishment.

Berk et. al (2006) referred to Vygotsky (1978) in laying out ways in which make-believe play, particularly when initiated by children and encouraged or scaffolded by adults, leads to significant social and emotional benefits including the development of self-regulation and self-control as well as increases

in socially responsible behavior. Vygotsky believed that it was critical that children have opportunities to communicate with more mature individuals in the context of the child's zone of proximal development. A shared, mutually agreed upon understanding between individuals leads to opportunities for scaffolding, where an adult or more mature person can help a child learn to master new competencies. The collaborative dialogue which is often a key feature of make-believe play is particularly significant, as is the opportunity provided for children to begin to think symbolically, and potentially use symbols "as tools for overcoming impulse and managing their own behavior" (Berk et. al, 2006, p. 76). Additionally, Vygotsky felt that make-believe play is rule-based, and through negotiating and navigating these rules children become more able to act in socially acceptable ways. As Vygotsky (1978) said, "[make-believe] play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development" (p. 102).

Another way of looking at the benefits of make-believe play in children was presented by Singer and Singer (1977, p. 3), who quoted Goldstein in saying that the highest human function is "our ability to take an attitude toward the possible." Singer and Singer saw make-believe play as helping develop the ability to anticipate consequences and plan ahead. Additional areas of benefit resulting from make-believe play include positive affect; the development of a sense of self and a sense of control over the environment; the use of imagery or symbolism, where one object might stand for another, non-present object; verbal skills,

through hearing the words and language of their playmates; emotional awareness and sensitivity; learning to take on and shift roles in social situations; flexibility in new social situations; and creativity.

The significance of play and playful activity in the classroom as a means of increasing cognitive and academic achievement presents a dilemma when one considers definitions of play that characterize it as being intrinsically motivated and self-directed. Youngquist and Ching (2004) confronted this challenge by reframing the idea of play in the classroom as a process of inquiry, in order to reconcile Sponseller (1982), who stated that play must be personally and socially meaningful to the individual, and Lillard (1998), who claimed that “every act of play contributes to theories the learner is constructing” (Youngquist & Ching, 2004, p. 172). Christie and Roskos (2006) referred to Piaget and Vygotsky in asserting that “play activity is essential in the preschool years because it leads development, giving rise to abstract thinking, self-awareness, and self-regulation. Play, in other words, is a process particularly influential at the preschool age for achieving cycles of self-organization and development that contribute to cognition. It is a mechanism of developmental change” (Christie & Roskos, 2006, p. 62).

The role of play in children’s language development was articulated by Christie & Roskos (2006, 2009). They stated that incorporating play is an excellent way of strengthening literacy instruction for children, based on scientifically based reading research (SBRR) and an understanding of four basic components of early literacy: oral language, phonological awareness, print awareness, and background knowledge. In sociodramatic play children take on roles and act out imaginary stories and scenarios, and the necessary use of oral language to realize

this complex sort of engagement helps to improve children's vocabulary, narrative production, and long-term language growth. Multiple studies have shown that "the total number of words and the variety of words that children used during free play in preschool were positively related to their performance on language measures administered in kindergarten" (Christie & Roskos, 2006, p. 63).

Cazden (1976) claimed that opportunities for children to play and be playful with language lead to increased literacy because in language play "the child's attention has been focused on the means, the forms of language, whereas in normal communicative contexts, his attention is focused only on the end" (p. 605). Cazden specifically pointed to the importance of teachers and parents being aware of too much adult interference in children's language play, stating that "we must maintain an atmosphere of familiarity and emotional reassurance, and not inhibit play by directing it, or prevent its intrinsically joyful quality through external reinforcement" (p. 607).

What is Play, Why do People Play, and Why is Play Important?

In looking at play through three lenses- descriptive, developmental, and functional, one can begin to see that while there is a great deal of complexity involved in trying to summarize play in a convenient, easily-digested phrase or definition, there are broad areas of consensus among psychologists, philosophers, historians, and educators that do allow for an understanding of this elusive concept. Huizinga (1955) and Rubin et. al. (1983) showed us that play is intrinsically motivated behavior engaged in for its own sake, with little regard on the part

of the player for material goals or outcomes. Despite the lack of overt goal-orientation, play is a key driver of human cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. The stage theories of Piaget (1962), Smilansky (1990) and Parten (1932) demonstrated how children move through increasingly complex stages of cognitive and social play, and Vygotsky (1978) described how playful activity in the zone of proximal development is a driver of self-regulation and self-control. Pellegrini (2006), Christie & Roskos (2009), and Berk et. al. (2006) demonstrated how play and playful activity in the school context lead to specific beneficial academic outcomes in terms of student attention, language and literacy development, and creative, divergent thinking.

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