

# The Importance of Imaginative Play in Child Development

Author: Aleksandra Helena Plocha

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/502>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2007

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.

# The Importance of Imaginative Play in Child Development

Aleksandra Helena Plocha

Boston College 2007

Psychology Department

Advisor: Dr. Julia Fisher

## Acknowledgments

To my mom, who has always believed in me- no matter what.

To my wonderful sisters, who will always be my best friends.

To Professor Fisher, who made this experiences so much more than just writing a thesis,  
and whose invaluable guidance and friendship I hope to always have.

## Abstract

The future of imaginative playtime in the lives of children today is at great risk. Currently, 40% of schools are considering eliminating- or have already eliminated- recess from the school day. The goal of this essay is to argue the irreplaceable value that imaginative play has in contributing to the cognitive, emotional, and social growth of a child. In making a case for the importance of play in child development, all three of these areas of potential growth will collectively be considered as true *development* of the child. To lay the foundation for these specific categories of benefits, it is necessary to understand the general biological background supporting the innate importance of play, as well as the previous work of those who have researched this subject. Once this information is presented, the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of imaginative play will be explored in more detail, and the effects of play deprivation and play reintroduction will be discussed. In this manner, it is the aim of this presentation to demonstrate the exceptional importance of imaginative play.

The future of imaginative playtime in children's lives is currently at great risk in the United States. Despite the numerous benefits that this activity provides in the lives of all children, 40% of schools across the country have already eliminated, or are considering eliminating, recess from the school day (Kieff, 2001). While it is convenient to blame these schools for the shrinking presence imaginative play has in the lives of children today, at the root of this problem is a lack of understanding of the numerous and distinct benefits provided by imaginative play. In order for this activity to be preserved in the lives of American children, the extent of its importance must be better appreciated by all.

The concept of "play" is a term that encompasses a wide range of activities. Its definition varies according to the different aspects or characteristics of the activity being considered. Vygotsky (1984) and Sutton-Smith (1994) view play as it pertains to children's ability to problem-solve and employ other cognitive functions. Other perspectives on play define it in terms of observation-based learning or the acquisition of social skills through interaction with others (Furth, 1996; Garvey, 1977). While all of these definitions highlight valuable components of play, for the purposes of this paper, play will be defined in terms of the development of symbol formation. Piaget (1951) defined *imaginative* play, which is more specifically the focus here, as "a symbolic transposition which subjects things to the child's activity, without rules or limitations" (p. 87). Imaginative play includes a representational element beyond the sensory-motor based curiosity that characterizes exploration; it is "the expression of knowledge gained through experience or observation" (McCune, 1993, p. 67).

The goal of this essay is to argue the irreplaceable value that this symbol formation characteristic of imaginative play has in contributing to the cognitive, emotional, and social growth of a child. In making a case for the importance of play in child development, all three of these areas of potential growth will collectively be considered as true *development* of the child. To lay the foundation for these specific categories of benefits, it is necessary to understand the general biological background supporting the innate importance of play, as well as the previous work of those who have researched this subject. Once this information is presented, the cognitive, emotional, and social benefits of imaginative play will be explored in more detail, and the effects of play deprivation and play reintroduction will be discussed. In this manner, it is the aim of this presentation to demonstrate the exceptional importance of imaginative play.

Evolution and biological composition provide support for the importance of imaginative play in child development. In one of his studies, Sutton-Smith (1994) found a significantly positive correlation between brain size and the amount and type of play different animals engage in. The larger the brain size, the more complex the episodes of play the species engaged in, and the more time was spent dedicated to this playtime. At its most basic, play is often considered to be an animal's mimicking of its parents and elders in order to learn the skills it will need to survive. Most animals, even those of rudimentary levels of cognitive functioning, engage in this type of play. This imitation is very different from the variety of play that is characteristic of species of higher cognitive functioning. While smaller-brained animals learn through highly repetitive imitation of the most essential behaviors, more developed animals engage in episodes of

play that are more elaborate; scenarios with varying elements are played out, and often groups of several animals will participate. For example, lions take part in rough and tumble play, acting out different hunting strategies in a variety of situations. Similarly, dolphins participate in elaborate and often difficult group games that seem to constantly change in attempts to keep the goals challenging (Kuczaj & Highfill, 2005). While the types of play vary in complexity across different species, the necessity of play is the same for all living beings. Darwin (1872) noted that the tendency to play was a naturally selected characteristic; that is, those animals that played, regardless of the intricacy of their play, were more likely to survive and reproduce. Thus, the tendency to play is an activity that all animals seem intrinsically motivated to perform.

The biological basis for play is a crucial component in the development of humans as an advanced species. In an evolutionary theory of play, Furth (1996) discusses play as a means of constructing society. Through the most complex instances of imaginative play, human beings develop intricate models of social norms. Just as with our smaller-brained relatives, the progress of human thinking is reflected through our own play experiences. The practicing of social norms and the cognitive and motivational skills that characterize human imaginative play are in turn the basis of our own state of being as a species. In this way, imaginative play can be linked to the formation and development of human societies; imaginative play provides a foundation on which other facets of society are built. In the same way that other species of mammals have adjusted to their own environments, so human-beings have biologically adapted to life in our developed societies. Just as lions play out scenarios that equip them for life as part of a

team of predators, so does imaginative play prepare human beings for membership into our own societal structure.

Given this innate inclination towards play, it is not surprising that human children everywhere have the tendency to play. Children in all cultures play, and ethnic variations are reflected in the themes of their imaginative scenarios and the nature of their games (Furth, 1996). Regardless of differences in their personalities and backgrounds, all children seem to be able to- and *want* to- play unabashedly in any given place (Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1993). Thus, just as play is not restricted by species or brain-size, it is similarly independent of ethnicity or culture in humans. Unless they are impaired by a mental handicap or are actively restrained, all children will find a way to engage in play (Sutton-Smith, 1994). A lack of play generally indicates a period of stress or impairment of normal life, which for humans might include mental illness, depression, or social maladjustment. The presence of play, conversely, suggests vitality, including both physical and mental well-being. This leads to the idea that play may be closely related to social and emotional adjustment, in addition to an acquisition of knowledge.

Given biological differences between the sexes, it is logical that boys and girls show differences in the nature of their play from a very early age (Goldstein, 1994). The most obvious of these differences is the more aggressive quality of boys' play versus girls' play. Games that boys play tend to be much more competitive, involve more participants, and include the establishment of teams. Boys' play seems to have an amount of noise and apparent anarchy that is not as common in play with girls. This tendency is sometimes viewed as worrisome to onlookers, who fear that aggressive or



rough play will lead to later aggression in boys. As Goldstein points out, however, aggressive play is *not* aggressive behavior, and he asserts that it is actually quite natural for boys to play aggressively. A study examining a recent trend in Scotland showed that even when teachers, nurseries, and parents tried to keep toy weapons out of reach, boys still employed sticks, tennis rackets, and even crayons to serve as make-believe daggers and guns (MacLeod & McCulloch, 2003). Children have shown that they know the difference between aggressive play and aggressive behavior (Goldstein). In fact, highly aggressive children have been found to be less likely to play-fight, because their aggressive natures often violate the shared norms of the game. This being said, boys do prefer to act out action and adventure scenarios, and even when playing with blocks, they tend to build tall, sprawling structures consistent with this active theme (Erikson, 1977).

In Goldstein's research (1994), the nature of girls' play appears to be very different than that of boys. Girls tend to favor smaller groups and games that involve fewer but better developed roles. Their games are normally quieter and seemingly much more organized. Girls show an inclination towards a more nurturing side, preferring games in which there are "caretaker" roles and dolls or toy animals to care for. Nonetheless, while girls may not show the outright physical antagonistic behavior that is typical in boys' play, they do often act out examples of social ostracism and gossip in imaginative episodes that could be considered equally aggressive. This suggests that despite gender differences, both girls and boys include themes in their playtime that directly affect them, and that are reflective of how they may fit into society. These differences, therefore, do not exclude either gender from the benefits of imaginative play,

but rather they support the idea that imaginative play may be a crucial means through which an individual establishes his or her place in society.

In addition to acknowledgment of the biological component, support for the importance of imaginative play has built upon the research of many renowned individuals throughout the history of psychology. The Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget is credited as being one of the early authorities on the cognitive development of children. His original research resulted in new insights into how children think, problem-solve, and perceive the world. His focus was on the cognitive aspects of child development, and he was therefore more interested in exactly how and when children acquired knowledge than he was about how *much* they knew. Piaget believed that children take a very active part in their growth and acquisition of intelligence, which he defined as an individual's ability to deal with the world based on how they mentally process their experiences (Piaget, 1965). He suggested that children do not just view the world passively, but rather react to it through reasoning. He considered this reasoning to be the core of intelligence. Intelligence is a cumulative process according to Piaget, since children increase their understanding of situations as they experience more in life. He used the term *adaptation* to explain the ability children and adults have to adjust to changes in their environment (Piaget, 1950). Adaptation includes the paired operations of *assimilation* and *accommodation*, which together describe the ways in which new information is processed. Through these complimentary processes, Piaget believed that children then form what he called *schemas*, or mental patterns that the mind uses to organize and interpret information. As existing schemas are developed and new ones are formed,

children are continually seeking *equilibration*, or a balance between their sense of self and their relationship with others.

Piaget was also one of the first to outline the stages of child development, which was a strategy adopted by many of those who studied this subject after him. He called the first stage the sensory-motor stage, which lasts from birth to age two (Piaget, 1954). In this phase, the child uses innate reflexes, such as grasping, sucking, and random movement of the arms and legs to react to the world. Development of thought or intelligence is not yet displayed, because the movements are still random and uncontrolled. The end of this stage is marked by what Piaget called *object permanence*, in which the child is able to understand that objects still exist even when they are taken out of sight; if an object is hidden under a blanket, the child will know that the object still exists and that it is covered by the blanket. From ages two through seven, the child is in Piaget's preoperational stage. During this time, the child becomes very interested in objects he or she sees, although this interest is limited to a very egocentric perspective. The exploration is from the child's perspective, and therefore it is during this stage that the thoughts of a child will appear to greatly differ from those of adults. The world will begin to be represented through mental images that are stored and built upon in the child's schemas, but the child will not yet think beyond this personal way of looking at the world. The ability to manipulate the way of looking at the world emerges in Piaget's third stage, which lasts from ages seven to eleven. During this phase, called concrete operations, the child is able to perform "mental operations" and actually think about actions or situations retrospectively and in a contextual manner (Singer & Revenson,

1996). The final stage of development is that of formal operations, from ages eleven to sixteen. In this phase the child thinks more abstractly, which includes having thoughts about the future and hypothetical situations. At this point in development, a child is able to solve a problem by first looking at it from several perspectives and then selecting the best solution. According to Piaget, this final phase marks the end of one's creation of schemas, and all intellectual development after formal operations revolves around increasing the depth of understanding of information that has already been stored. While this final point has been criticized by psychologists such as Furth (1996), who argues that there may be a stage beyond that of formal operations, most academics still use Piaget's basic principles of child development.

Amidst these four general stages of development, Piaget also examined the importance of play in the development of a child. According to Piaget, play begins at birth (Piaget, 1962). Throughout the sensory-motor stage, infants play by imitating sounds or actions they are exposed to. As the child grows and enters the later stages of development, Piaget identified three categories of play that emerge from these imitations: practice play, symbolic play, and play with rules. Practice play begins in the sensory-motor stage, and it is characterized by achieving mastery over a certain task. This involves both doing something to see if it will reoccur, and also deriving physical pleasure from the act. Kicking a ball, for example, would be characterized as practice play, because a child is learning the consequences of a repeated action and enjoying a physical sensation at the same time. Around the age of two, children begin to incorporate imagery into their games. This symbolic form of play includes the manipulation of real

objects or situations, and in doing so the child is learning the difference between reality and fantasy. Piaget believed that symbolic play is essential to the creation and development of a child's schemas. The final type of play, games with rules, emerges much later in the child's life, generally at around five or six years of age. Although younger children may engage in some games with basic rules, Piaget characterized this stage as that in which play becomes intertwined with socializing. Games with rules characterize the type of play through which children learn how to interact with others. For Piaget, play was not separable from child development. Just as he believed that children would pass through all the stages of development, so did he maintain that play was an integral part of this growth.

While Piaget made enormous contributions to the understanding of intellectual development in children, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Erik Erikson significantly influenced the understanding of the development of children's personalities and emotions. More specifically, Freud's work incorporated the importance of social influence on a developing child. Freud and Jung focused on the development of thought as it was related to the unconscious workings of the mind. Although their work varied in some aspects, they shared similar views on the unconscious repression of memories and desires. They believed that this repression shapes a person's personality and can cause mental distress later in life. Erik Erikson's studies of child development focused not only on explanations of personality development, but also on interpersonal relationships. His work included examining the feelings that children have as they move through different stages of development, for example the emergence of feelings of guilt as a child learns to

take more initiative and assert independence (Erikson, 1950). He also studied the feelings children have as they begin to interact with others and try to achieve a sense of belonging to a group. In this way, Erikson looked at how personality develops around not only the actions of children, but also their emotional responses to situations. The combined perspectives of these scholars provide a strong groundwork for examining the importance of play in child development and have been continually supported by current research.

The positive impacts of imaginative play on cognitive development are numerous. Children play before they are able to speak, and thus play becomes a central means of expression when vocabulary mastery is not great enough to communicate orally. Therefore, given a limited word selection, a child's ideas and feelings may be expressed through the world of make-believe (Tamis-LeMonda & Borstein, 1993). As adults we brainstorm ideas verbally and we may talk through our problems. For children, this opportunity comes through play. Vygotsky's (1934) extensive research on language acquisition stresses the importance of children being able to speak aloud in order to develop both linguistic skills and thought. According to Vygotsky, a child must first speak to him or herself before language can be internalized and become what we consider to be thought. Thus, playtime is essential for providing children with the opportunity to speak unabashedly to themselves.

A child who does not have strong mastery of language can use objects to represent several things that cannot yet be said, and thus play out situations that cannot yet be explained. Furthermore, conflicts may arise amidst playtime that need to be

resolved. For example, a child taking on the role of more than one character in an imaginative game must find a way to distinguish him or herself in each role. Also, the very task of expressing an imaginative situation with a limited amount of words poses a challenge. As demonstrated in Furth's 1999 study, children will not compromise their storylines when they cannot find words to express them, but rather they will increase their use of representations, whether this is with props or with more fantasy images. In this way, imaginative playtime provides an opportunity for a child to practice important reasoning skills and to expand upon ideas before they can be adequately verbalized.

Imaginative play also encourages cognitive advancements in a child's thought process. Make believe is the way in which children first explore the novelty of their world (Goldstein, 1994). When children begin to play, they tend to make each toy as close to its real-world counterpart as possible (Tamis-LeMonda & Bornstein, 1993). When imaginative play is allowed to develop, however, children soon realize that this rigidity cannot work within their games; the model truck or stove simply cannot function as one would in real life. The child has to realize, in order to make the toy truck or stove work in the game, that many things only *sort of* look like other things. This adjustment a child must make mentally is a crucial step in thought, as flexibility in thinking is developed. As a child continues to play imaginatively, less representative toys will be needed, and in fact even desired by the child, as the ability to manipulate thoughts in the child's own mind is cultivated (Singer & Singer, 1990). When employing the mental imagery required in imaginative play, the young mind is learning how to mentally rework

situations that are presented tangibly, toward an eventual formation of abstract representations.

This mental modification is a vital part of the final cognitive benefit of imaginative play: the development of schemas. Schemas are mental patterns that take shape in the mind, through which cognitive perceptions and responses are mentally organized. If left unchallenged, these blocks of knowledge, that become ingrained so early in a child's life, may remain the only sources of reality a child knows. As a child explores and plays imaginatively, however, new information is slowly integrated into the existing schemas, differentiation is made between them, and entirely new ones are formed; these mental structures are revised and expanded upon through exposure to new information about the world. Through symbolic play, children can combine the skill of flexible thinking with the formation of schemas, and this in turn may allow a wider variety of mental structures to develop in a child's mind.

Once the cognitive process of schema-formation has taken place, there are several emotional benefits that arise as a result of imaginative play. Establishment of a wide variety of schemas is a key component of a child's emotional resilience, as emotions are directly related to the bank of memories a child has formed. Negative emotions, such as fear, anger, and sadness, are provoked when a disparity occurs between one's expectations in a given circumstance and the confrontation of information that is not recognized in the individual's mind (Goldstein, 1994). These emotions may become stronger when this incongruity persists over time. Positive emotions, in contrast, emerge based on how quickly new information can be matched to any of an established store of



schemas, or based on whether the novelty of the situation is temperate enough compared to these schemas to invite exploration. In this way, an extensive array of schemas, in addition to the ability to process new information in a way that is congruent with existing schemas, may reduce one's negatively charged emotional responses to new situations. Through play, children have the opportunity to minimize the fears of their external world; they can develop new schemas and practice matching new information to existing pieces of their mental storage. While playing, the different scenarios acted out are in a sense helping the child "practice" emotion, as the discrepancies between the real world and what he or she already knows are accommodated. In the event that a new situation arises for which a child has no existing schemas, imaginative play helps equip the child with the ability to process the new information and avoid a negative emotion just because there is no direct schematic match. Piaget (1962) states that "[a child forms] a vast network of devices which allows the ego to assimilate the whole of reality, i.e., to integrate it in order to relieve it, to dominate it or to compensate" (p. 147). In this way, imaginative play instills an emotional resilience that will be present for the rest of the child's life, both in the actual schemas that are developed and in the manner of thinking that allows the child to assimilate new information.

The ability to freely experience emotions during imaginative play also helps a child learn how to control negative emotions. Freud (1911) argued in favor of imaginative play as a means of reducing the strength of fantasies and keeping one's Id in check. While many of Freud's ideas were criticized, more recent research supports the idea that imaginative play may in fact help a child express even his or her most irrational

impulses in a healthy way (Singer, 1990). In their own research, Jerome and Dorothy Singer (1990) found that children who have engaged regularly in imaginative play are more likely to control their emotions when placed in the structured school environment than children who did not frequently play imaginatively. Singer and Singer propose that through imaginative play, a child is able to understand how to truly *feel* emotions in addition to how to express them, and this in turn prevents the child from needing to act out or express emotions in an inappropriate way, such as with violence. Through imaginative play, a child can role-play situations in which different emotions are evoked and in doing so, he or she can literally practice reacting to such events. The child not only lessens the incongruity between new information and already established schemas, but also learns how to express emotions in a healthy manner.

Imaginative play also provides the emotional benefit of helping a child build confidence. According to Singer (1994), as children begin to learn to communicate linguistically, they verbalize what we consider to be thought. While playing, children will babble to themselves an assortment of language fragments they may have heard or learned. In doing this they are practicing their vocabulary and enhancing their linguistic expression by hearing themselves speak. They are also learning through the process of trial and error. This, in turn, may help a child build confidence, as he or she becomes comfortable saying and hearing words that may not yet be completely correct linguistically without any scrutiny or judgment (Singer). In this way, the child is being conditioned to be unafraid of making mistakes, and to keep trying. Imaginative play offers a stage on which a child can feel free to act out any idea or attempt to say any word

without feeling self-conscious, because it gives a child the opportunity to be his or her own audience. This fosters a feeling of self-assuredness that the child will internalize and can draw upon later when asked to speak or perform in front of others. Having made mistakes in front of him or herself with no negative consequence, a child is less likely to be afraid to do so in front of others. In these ways, imaginative play greatly influences the development of a child's emotional stability and resilience.

Imaginative play provides further benefits in terms of helping a child find his or her place in society. It is through exploration and play that a child first comes in contact with the world. No matter the cultural perspective, play offers the chance for a child to miniaturize his or her world into a size that is manageable (Furth, 1996). In a study of Zulu children in a town near Durban, South Africa, Furth and his colleagues (1993) noted cultural similarities and differences between the imaginative themes played out by these children as compared to American children. They found that while many of the premises of the games that the Zulu children acted out were different, for example the behavior of "militant workers" and the scene of a "badly run shop," the tendency to draw upon issues and situations in daily life was consistent. Even given vast cultural differences, both groups of children imaginatively played out scenarios that mirrored- and miniaturized- their society. This demonstrates how children use imaginative play as a means of better understanding their societal world at a more manageable size, and how in doing so they also familiarize themselves with the roles in their society.

Engaging in make-believe play also facilitates the emergence of independence in a child. Many theories assert that the struggle between independence and a need to feel a

sense of closeness and belonging can be achieved through imaginative play (Singer & Singer, 1990; Jung, 1928). Jung referred to these opposing internal forces as the *animus-anima* tension, and many psychiatrists and psychologists since have examined this conflict as an important landmark in a young person's establishment of his or her sense of self (Singer & Singer). Through pretend play, a child is able to work continuously on maintaining a balance between preserving relations with others, while still trying to establish the independence that comes with privacy, personal power, and initiative. In the world of make-believe, a child is free to exert his or her authority in a controlled environment, whether this involves choosing what role to act out or what rules to follow. At the same time, during play situations with others, the child is able to keep sight of relationships and the feelings of belonging to a group. The realm of make-believe is small enough to allow a child to maintain a sense of personal power he or she may not feel in the larger world that is still unfamiliar, and it provides a situation in which taking initiative is not as intimidating. Imaginative play requires the ability to understand a sense of belonging, whether a child is playing with others in a group or finding a place for different elements of an imaginative game. In these ways, it is clear that imaginative play allows a child to develop cognitive skills of expression and basic reasoning, and also helps instill confidence and a sense of balanced personal power.

Playing imaginatively not only gives a child this consciousness of self, but also provides an understanding of how he or she fits into a group. In order for group imaginative play to work, all parties involved must come to some understanding and acceptance of the different representational elements. The game cannot proceed if one

child imagines the group is living in a tent and the others maintain the imaginary stage is actually the king and queen's palace. As Furth (1996) states, "The coordination of imagery allows for no less than consensus" (p. 22). Once placed in a group situation, children will quickly come to learn the different roles they can take, and where they tend to fit in such situations. Within this setting, different children will naturally assume different roles; more assertive or older children may take greater initiative in a game, while children who are more timid may do no more than follow the lead of those who have deemed themselves the leaders. Very often, however, the roles are not so simple, and there will be more than one child who wants his or her ideas to be followed or a child who does not agree with the decisions made by the leader. This conflict teaches all children a fundamental social lesson, as it forces them to learn how to not only assert themselves, but also when and how to compromise. Furthermore, this situation helps make a child aware of exactly how he or she personally fits into a group.

The conflict resolution that comes with imaginative group play teaches children several specific lessons pertaining to society. The first of these is that children can learn the expectations of a good leader. While group consensus comes about when one child takes the most initiative and the other children follow suit, this does not release the leader from group responsibility. In Furth's (1996) close examination of one play scenario of a group of four girls, he observed how the girls enacted this mandatory course of agreement. Even though one of the girls established herself as the leader early on in the game, as she asserted the most ideas and assigned roles to the other girls, it is noted that even when no one challenged her, she still affirmed her decisions with each other girl,

saying, “Okay?” after each one (Furth, 1996). In Furth’s opinion, this indicates the leader’s desire for mutual respect from her group. In this manner, the children in this group were learning to respect an authority figure whom they felt respected their opinions, and the leader of the group was exerting her own desire for affirmation of her decisions. Both parties thus learned crucial lessons about real societal group dynamics. In this way, when children are free to assign roles themselves, they are learning crucial skills about interacting with others and the way in which people may act in different roles in society.

In other group situations in which leadership may not be as well established, compromises may need to be drawn or turns may need to be taken. As stated earlier, the game cannot proceed if full agreement is not reached, and thus the group must act accordingly to reach consensus. From this, children learn the necessity of taking turns and compromise. If several children have different ideas of how a play episode should go, either all the children must agree to play out the scenario several times so that every child’s ideas are employed- they must take turns, or else an agreement must be made by all participants on each imaginative element- they must reach a compromise. The idea of taking turns is also important in that it teaches children patience and fairness; children will learn that they must give up the right to be first every time to be accepted into a group (Singer & Singer, 1990). In both cases, issues must be discussed and settled for any type of game that involves an element of fantasy to begin. For girls, this may be a game such as the case portrayed earlier, in which there are fewer more well-developed roles (Goldstein, 1994). Boys tend to need this agreement for a game in which they are

establishing teams with more players and more concrete rules. In both cases, however, the success of imaginative play hinges on children's ability to act not only as an individual, but also as part of a group.

Other important social characteristics emerge from this necessity for group agreement. Especially when coupled with scenarios that reflect situations in their own societies, imaginative play becomes the basis on which morals are first founded (Singer, 1994). Once social norms are established, such as taking turns and following group-established rules, children next learn what it means to go against these norms. During group imaginative play, children see the consequences of breaking rules or violating norms; if they do not follow the guidelines agreed upon by all the children involved, the game will be disrupted. In some situations, the child may even be excluded from a game by his or her peers if the behavior is such that it threatens the functioning of the game and the fun of the rest of the group. The same thing may happen for any norm that is breached, be it sharing or playing fairly. Children will quickly understand through the acceptance and criticism of their peers what behavior will be tolerated. From this, children learn the difference between good behavior and bad behavior, and the consequences of each. In short, through imaginative play, children begin to develop basic morals; they can learn the difference between right and wrong in social situations.

The many benefits that imaginative play provides for children can be seen in the detrimental effects exhibited by children who are *denied* the opportunity to play. The first of these problems is an impairment of children's social skills and a potential inclination towards belligerence. In 1998, Scrivner-Mediate, a manager of the Center for

Creative Play and an advocate of imaginative play as an essential part of child development, reported that the social behavior of children who have been deprived of play was more aggressive than children who regularly participated in imaginative play. Children also appeared to lack social skills in the sense that they had trouble interacting with other children and were more easily upset by various interactions with their peers. These children were more likely to raise their voices, throw objects, or leave a social situation in anger. Scrivner-Mediate noted that these children who had not played imaginatively were more likely to grow into adults who had similar social problems in the workplace. Brown (1998) found connections in his own research between children who were denied regular opportunities to play and adults with serious violent or antisocial personalities. In a study of 26 young murderers, Brown found that the common bond between the men, regardless of demographic differences, was the absence of free playtime as children.

Children who do not have the opportunity to play imaginatively may also have more behavioral problems and be more susceptible to depression. Children who do not play regularly are less equipped with the cognitive tools they need to face new situations, and as a result they may respond to such instances with bouts of anger. This frustration in turn causes anxiety for children, and may make them more prone to depression. Play is the only activity through which we can learn to emotionally manage periods of extreme stress; it is through play that children learn to explore different situations and, as was discussed earlier, develop the wide variety of schemas that allow children to react to different situations without much distress (Goldstein, 1998). In a perhaps extreme and



certainly controversial perspective, Panksepp (1984) argues that play deprivation may even be a critical reason why children develop attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Panksepp asserts that the psychostimulants usually administered to treat ADHD (and help the child focus) are at the same time reducing the child's urge to engage in recreational play. He believes that rather than eliminating this urge, more should be done to satisfy a child's innate need to play. Doing this, he maintains, would enable children to focus without medication, as play deprivation would no longer have adverse affects on their behavior. In addition to behavioral affects, the stress children experience from being denied the opportunity to play may also produce other physically manifested symptoms. Children who are deprived play often have noticeably poorer overall health (Scrivner-Mediate, 1998). In all of these ways, play deprivation has clear adverse affects on a child's mood, behavior, and even physical well-being.

Other research has supported the fact that children who do not play at a young age actually develop smaller and less-developed brains (Kelman & Sharp, 2003). As the young brain develops, different experiences are needed to stimulate the formation of synapses, or connections for the billions of neurons of the brain. Everything that is said to or done with a young child encourages these connections, wiring a child's brain for everything from feeling to learning. Unstructured play, motivated by the child and encouraged by the caregiver, is the first opportunity infants have to make these neurological connections. Once these synapses are formed, they must be developed, as the brain, having far more connections than it can maintain, will eliminate those that are used the least. Thus, deprivation of exploratory playtime, especially during the critical

first three years of life, prevents the child from solidifying many important synapses, or from even developing them at all. This absence of play often permanently stunts the growth of the brain, as many of the parts of the brain that are stimulated by play have only specific windows of opportunity in which they can be formed. If children's playtime is stifled or in any way inhibited in the first few years of life, be it through neglect or active restraint, the brain can be affected permanently.

Another study supports the idea that playtime does not just provide an active role during these critical periods, but rather that it constitutes the *entire* critical period (Byres, 1998). According to such research, put quite simply, a child's brain will only grow if the child plays. A study of Rumanian orphans in the United States showed smaller brain size and stunted neurological development when compared to their peers, presumably due to play deprivation (Brown et al, 2001). In 1997, Baylor College of Medicine reported that the brains of children who do not play are an average of 20% to 30% smaller than average for their age (Nash, 1997). Thus, not only the connections within the brain, but the actual size and overall development of the brain also, may be permanently harmed when children are deprived of play.

Just as the deprivation of play can have detrimental effects on a developing child, so can the reintroduction of playtime in the life of a child provide a variety of benefits. One of the most dramatic benefits of play is seen in use of play therapy in helping children deal with traumatic experiences. Children who are placed in therapy are often reluctant to share their feelings, as the process of therapy can be new and frightening for them (Lowenstien, 2005). Many children may be highly anxious, especially in wake of a

traumatic experience, and they may not be able to emotionally tolerate any direct questioning about their feelings (Hudd, 2005). This is especially true in cases of sexual or physical abuse, in which children may have feelings of guilt, betrayal, or think that they are in some way to blame for what happened. When these difficult feelings can be projected onto play objects or fantasy scenarios as is done during playtime, a child has the opportunity to express him or herself in a created space that distances these feelings away from the self (LeVay, 2005). As LeVay states, “Play therapy...allows these children to engage in a process of expressive communication that does not threaten to overwhelm their fragile emotional and psychological states of being” (p. 247). For these reasons, close observation of a child’s playtime may reveal a great deal about the child’s current fears or conflicts through an activity that is natural and not as frightening for them.

Modern play therapy is centered around a number of play techniques, all of which aim to make it as easy as possible for a child to express him or herself. These activities may include simply watching a child play with toys of his or her choice, or they may take the form of games that incorporate artistic expression or storytelling. The child is assessed by the therapist based on a combination of his or her history, observations of the child’s interactions, and the substance of the play session (Hudd, 2005). Through play, the therapist can gain a better understanding of how the child views the world, and from this a therapist may be able to better help the child learn how to cope with his or her feelings. As was discussed earlier, play provides a child with the necessary schemas to handle difficult situations. In the same way, observations of playtime can offer insight

into which schemas a child is either lacking, or those that have been damaged by a traumatic experience. Then, again through play, a child can be guided to construct or reconstruct these schemas. The result of this structured or guided play is a means to help the child reorganize this new- and difficult- emotional information and to help find a place for it in his or her mental storage (Hudd). Doing this may allow the child to better understand and cope with the situation.

Play therapy may also be used in situations in which a child has perhaps not yet had a traumatic experience, but will soon be facing a difficult situation. This use of play therapy is often referred to as play intervention (Russ, 2005). In one study, Johnson and Stockdale (1975) examined the effects that playing out a frightening situation with puppets had on the anxiety levels of children. Johnson and Stockdale measured Palmar Sweat Index levels of children before and after surgery, and they found that those children who had played through the surgery scenario with puppets had lower anxiety levels both before and after the surgery. Similar positive results were found in using play to help children cope with separation anxiety (Russ, 2005). In playing out the separation, children were better able to express their feelings of sadness and anger, and ultimately experience less anxiety when faced with actual separation (Milos & Reiss, 1982). Given what has already been discussed with regards to the connections between imaginative play and emotional resilience that is built through the development of schemas, it is not surprising that children have less difficulty coping with situations that they have first encountered in the context of playtime. For these reasons, the concept of “play tutoring” has also been supported by researchers who argue that children who are encouraged to

play as imaginatively and freely as possible will demonstrate more imaginative freedom in their play (Dansky & Silverman, 1973). This expansion of their play themes may, in turn, help children face a wider variety of difficult situations, be it a traumatic experience or a social conflict with peers.

Observation of a child's playtime may also help therapists better understand a child's behavior. Just as play allows a child to more comfortably access and express his or her feelings, so the use of structured or guided play is used to treat children with certain behavioral disorders. Levin (2005) discusses the importance of examining the playtime of children who are suspected of autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) or pervasive developmental disorder (PDD). According to Levin, "Play-based assessment can help the practitioner arrive at more meaningful, individually accurate, and developmentally relevant information than the rigid and often ill-supported technical diagnosis by conventional means" (p. 81). In Levin's opinion, children are often diagnosed too quickly with ASD or PDD, and play assessment provides an opportunity for the therapist to examine the real strengths and weaknesses of the children. This, in turn, may help establish a more effective and case-specific means of therapy for each child. Similar results have been found with regards to examining the playtime of children suspected of disruptive behavior disorders, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and conduct disorder (CD). Hudak (2000) discusses the benefits that observing play of children suspected of these disruptive behavior disorders can have on their behavior later in life. Given that such disorders are thought to be caused in large part by brain chemistry and neurochemistry, as well as

several other factors, traits of these behaviors can often be observed in play beginning at an early age. An infant with ADHD, for example, will have trouble focusing on the objects that he or she is given to play with, and may become extremely frustrated when not given the opportunity to play and explore freely. Given this, the child may skip some of the crucial steps of play development and have consequent behavioral issues as a result. While play therapy alone may not be enough to manage disruptive behavior disorders, certain approaches, such as social skills-play therapy and problem-solving play therapy may be very effective when combined with other methods of treatment. In these ways, introducing play into the lives of children can provide both preventative and post-traumatic healing, as well as a better understanding of a child's behavior.

Despite the numerous benefits of imaginative play and the truly devastating costs that may develop when children are deprived of it, the activity of imaginative play is at great risk in our country- if not on its way to becoming extinct. The biggest movement made in regards to the gradual elimination of playtime came with a nation-wide trend to cut the time allocated for school recess, or in some cases, to do away with recess altogether. A survey by the American Association for the Child's Right to Play in 2001 revealed that about 40% of public schools have already cut, or are planning to cut, at least one entire recess period from the school day. New elementary schools are being built without playgrounds, an action that is no less than a death-sentence for the one hour children have in their structured days to run free and *play*. Despite some concern from parents, teachers, psychiatrists, and psychologists, this trend does not appear to be reversing itself- or even slowing down.

As the benefits of providing children the opportunity to play imaginatively are so numerous, it seems difficult to imagine any reason good enough to eliminate such an activity from the school environment. The main reason for the recent thrust to eliminate recess and unstructured playtime from schools is intense pressure within our society to improve test scores, increase the number of activities and courses children engage in from a younger and younger age, and to compete with the high demands that are being placed on college and job applicants. Schools are becoming increasingly competitive in order to produce the most college or job-ready graduates, and thus to also improve their own ranking (Cromwell, 2006). It is for this reason that Smith (1976) believes that as our society grows in complexity, unstructured free play may be increasing less valuable to children than instructional, directed learning. Unfortunately for the future of unstructured playtime as a part of the school day, many school principals are in agreement with Smith's beliefs (Cromwell).

Some academics believe that these new demands for schools began due to international pressure in the 1980s, when American school children were deemed to be at a low international ranking in the "Nation at Risk" article printed in 1983 (Cromwell, 2006). Since then, the United States has become more concerned with the academic standing of schools, and the top priority for schools has been the improvement of both national and international rankings. For these reasons, schools are doing away with recess in favor of more instructional courses, be it additional language classes, science programs, or music instruction. Some advocates of eliminating recess argue that replacing this time with a structured activity that still allows children to get exercise, such

as a nature walk or other activities outdoors, will retain the benefits that recess offers children in school. This is not the case, however, as it is the *unstructured* quality of recess, in which children are allowed to play freely, that truly contributes to their development. While a nature walk may provide a minimal amount of exercise, it will not allow children the opportunity to reap the unique benefits that come only through imaginative play. Eliminating the chance for children to play imaginatively robs them not only of the personal and social elements of a truly holistic education, but it deprives them of the many other crucial elements that compose their development.

The same pressures that schools face today are also felt by parents at home. Just as schools are trying to saturate the school day with academics, so parents today are overscheduling their children and eliminating the majority of their free time (Scrivner-Mediate, 1998). Whether it is because parents want their children to be eligible for a specific junior high or high school, or because parents keep their children's afternoons packed with activities to better fit their own busy schedules, children have increasingly less free time at home. Furthermore, many parents worry when they find their children talking out loud to themselves or to an imaginary friend, and they are concerned when their children appear aggressive during a rough and tumble game (Goldstein, 1994). Thus, while there has been a wave of parent response in opposition to the trend of cutting recess, parents must realize that it is also their responsibility to make room for imaginative play and support this activity in their children's lives. Schools are not the only ones to blame for the failure to provide unstructured free time in which children can play imaginatively. It is essential that all parents- and all adults in general- understand



the great importance of imaginative play in child development, and that they appreciate that the tendency children have to play is not only beneficial, but also normal and innate.

The unique benefits that children gain from engaging in imaginative play must be preserved for the sake of children's cognitive, emotional, and social development, as well as for their growth into stable, well-adjusted adults. An avid supporter of the importance of imaginative play, Sutton-Smith states, "Children need their play...and to do that they need a lot of time to themselves. We should defend that need and not intrude upon it...under the guise of preparing their future" (p. 146). The innate tendency towards play, the extensive benefits, the harmful effects of play deprivation, and even the reparative quality that comes with its reintroduction provide a strong case for the irreplaceable quality of imaginative play.

## References

- Brown, P.S., Sutherby, J.A., Therrell, J.A., & Thornton, C.D. (2001). Play is essential for brain development. *International Play Equipment Manufacturers Association News*. Retrieved January 14, 2007 from: <http://www.ipema.org/News/default.aspx>
- Brown, S. L. (1998). Play as an organizing principle: Clinical evidence and personal observations. In Bekoff, M. & Byers, J. A. (Eds.), *Animal play: Evolutionary, comparative, and ethological perspectives* (pp. 243-250). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Byres, J.A. (1998). *Animal play: Evolutionary, comparative, and Ecological Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Cited in Play Wales Chwarae Cymru, *Play Deprivation: Facts and interpretations*. Retrieved December 11, 2006, from: <http://www.chwaraecymru.org.uk/downloaddoc.asp?id=1&page=42&skin=0>
- Dansky, J.L. & Silverman, I.W. (1973). Play: A general facilitator of associative fluency. *Developmental psychology*, 9, 38-43.
- Darwin, C. (1872;1965). *The expression of emotion in man and animals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Cited in Dorothy G. & Jerome L. Singer, *The house of make-believe: Children's play and the developing imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Erikson, E.H. (1950). *Childhood and society*. New York: Norton.
- Erikson, E. H. (1958). Sex differences in the play constructions of pre-adolescents. In *World health organization: Discussions in child development*, 3, 91-132. New York: International Universities Press.
- Erkison, E.H. (1977). *Toys and reasons: Stages in the ritualization of experience*. New York: Norton.
- Freud, S. (1911). Formulations regarding the two principles of mental functioning. In *The complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 12). London: Hogarth Press.
- Furth, C. (1996). *Desire for society: Children's knowledge as social development*. New York and London: Plenum Press.

- Garvey, C. (1977). *Play*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Cited in Caster, T. R. (1984). The young child's play and social and emotional development. In Thomas D. Yawkey and Anthony D. Pellegrini (Eds.), *Child's play and play therapy* (pp.17-39). Lancaster: Technomic Publishing Co., Inc.
- Goldstein, J. (1994). Sex differences in toy play and use of video games. In Jeffrey H. Goldstein (Ed.), *Toys, play, and child development* (pp.110-129). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hudd, S. (2005). The use of play and narrative story stems in assessing the mental health needs of foster children. In Charles Schaefer, Judy McCormick, and Akiko Ohnogi (Eds.), *International handbook of play therapy: Advances in assessment, research, and practice* (pp. 113-132). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Johnson, P.A., & Stockdale, D.F. (1975). Effects of puppet therapy on palmar sweating of hospitalized children. In *John's Hopkins medical journal*, 137, 1-5.
- Jung, C.G. (1928). The relations between the ego and the unconscious. In C.G. Jung *Collected works* (Vol. 7). Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Kelman, K. & Sharp, A. (2003). Well connected: The critical influence of parents and caregivers on brain development. In *Nursery world*. Retrieved January 14, 2007, from: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/Braindev.html#well>
- Kieff, J. (2001). The silencing of recess bells. In *Childhood education: Annual theme issue*.
- Kuczaj, S.A. II & Highfill, L.E. (2005). Dolphin play; Evidence for cooperation and culture? In *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 28(5), 705-706.
- LeVay, D. (2005). "Little monsters"? Play therapy for children with sexually problematic behavior. In Charles Schaefer, Judy McCormick, & Akiko Ohnogi (Eds.), *International handbook of play therapy: Advances in assessment, research, and practice* (pp. 243-262). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Lowenstein, L. (2005). Creative interventions to engage resistant children in therapy. In Charles Schaefer, Judy McCormick, & Akiko Ohnogi (Eds.), *International handbook of play therapy: Advances in assessment, research, and practice* (pp. 263-278). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

- MacLeod, M. & McCulloch, S. (2003). Playing with guns is “good for boys.” In *Scotland on Sunday*. Retrieved January 7, 2006, from: <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/international.cfm?id=763492003>
- McCune, L. (1993). The development of play as the development of consciousness. In Marc H. Bornstein & Anne Watson O’Reilly (Eds.), *The role of play in the development of thought* (pp. 67-79). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Milos, M.E. & Reiss, S. (1982). Effects of three play conditions on separation anxiety in young children. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 50(3), 389-395.
- Nash, J.M. (1997 February 3). Fertile minds. *Time*, (pp. 49-56).
- Panksepp, J. (1998). Attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, psychostimulants, and intolerance of childhood playfulness: A tragedy in the making? In *Current directions in psychological science*, 7(3), 91-98.
- Piaget, J. (1951). *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. (C. Gattegno and F.M. Hodgson, Trans.) London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, Ltd.
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co. Cited in Singer, D. G. & Revenson, T. A., *A Piaget primer: How a child thinks*. New York: International Universities Press, Inc.
- Piaget, J. (1954). *The construction of reality in the child*. (M. Cook, Trans.) New York: Basic Books.
- Piaget, J. (1950). *The psychology of intelligence*. (M. Piercy & D. E. Berlyne, Trans.) New York: Routledge Classics.
- Recess and the importance of play: A position statement on young children and recess. (30 Jan. 2006). *National association of early childhood specialists in state departments of education*.
- Schaefer, C., McCormick, J., & Akiko Ohnogi (Eds.), *International handbook of play therapy: Advances in assessment, research, and practice*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Scrivner-Mediate, H. (1998). Healthy, happy kids: A child at play will stay at play. Retrieved January 9, 2007, from: <http://www.e-bility.com/articles/creative-play.php>.

- Singer, D. G. & Singer, J. L. (1990). *The house of make-believe: Children's play and developing imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Singer, J. L. (1994). Imaginative play and adaptive development. In Jeffrey H. Goldstein (Ed.), *Toys, play, and child development* (pp. 6-26). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, P.K. (1976). Does play matter? Functional and evolutionary aspects of animal and human play. *Behavioral and brain sciences*, 5. Cited in Dorothy G. & Jerome L. Singer, *The house of make-believe: Children's play and the developing imagination*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1994). Does play prepare the future? In Jeffrey H. Goldstein (Ed.), *Toys, play, and child development* (pp. 130-146). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tamis-Lemonda, C. S. & Bornstein, M. C. (1993). Play and its relations to other mental functions in the child. In Marc H. Bornstein & Anne Watson O'Reilly (Eds.), *The role of play in the development of thought* (pp.17-28). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1934). *Thought and language*. (E. Hanfmann & G. Vakar, Trans.). Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1984). In R. W. Rieber and A. S Carton (Eds.), *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 5: Child Psychology* (N. Minick, Trans). New York: Plenum.