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ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 146 (2014) 450 – 455

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

Third Annual International Conference «Early Childhood Care and Education»

Sociology Of Preschool Childhood: Age Dynamics Of The Child's Play

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Abstract

The article presents the results of a poll of 1936 parents, who's preschool children visit Moscow kindergartens, about organization of child's play activity. It continues a cycle of works about preschool sociology conducted by researchers of Institute for Sociology of Education RAE. Special attention is given to the consideration of place of joint play of parents with their child in general structure of family leisure time and involvement of parents in child's play. Besides we analyze representations of parents about game preferences of preschoolers: what toys and games are preferred by their children. The analysis is conducted on the impact of a number of demographic (gender, age) and social stratification factors (material status, education level, composition of the family, etc.).

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Russian Psychological Society.

Keywords: sociology of preschool childhood; child's play activity; family leisure time; game preferences of preschoolers.

1. Introduction

The article presents the results of a poll of 1936 preschool children parents about organization of child's play activity. It continues a whole cycle of our works about preschool sociology [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. Special attention is given to the consideration of place of joint play of parents with their child in general structure of family leisure time and involvement of parents in child's play. Besides we analyze representations of parents about game preferences of preschoolers: what toys and games are preferred by their children. The analysis is conducted on

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the impact of a number of demographic (gender, age) and social stratification factors (material status, education level, composition of the family, etc.).

Value of play activity for the child's mental development can hardly be overestimated. Specialists note that in role-playing game are formed and rapidly developing all higher mental functions and personality characteristics of the child: voluntary attention and behavior, memory, motivation, etc. The game has a great influence on the mental development of the preschooler. It helps to ensure that the child goes to thinking in images and representations, develops abilities, allowing to understand the other point of view [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], [11]. The representation about play as leading activity in preschool age is accepted in Russian psychology (L.Vygotsky, A.Leontev, D.Elkonin etc.) [12], [13], [14]. At the present moment a great number of researches concern features of children's play and its influence on development and formation of child's personality [9], [10], [11]. It should be noted that if within psychological science a rich tradition of research devoted to child's play activity exists, sociological works on this subject are almost absent. Taking into account importance of the play as the leading activity of preschool age, we have tried to discuss this topic in our sociological research.

2. Joint play in the structure of family leisure time

In order to find out what place is occupied by joint play of parents with their child in general structure of a family leisure time a special question was asked to respondents concerning the typical way of spending free time with their child at home. The general average data on preferences of various kinds of joint activity at leisure time by parents of preschoolers is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Joint activity of parents with their child at leisure time (%)

Types of joint activity	%
Reading of books	53,9
Joint play	49,1
Walks	44,5
Watching TV	25,5
Watching DVD, video	18,3
Involving the child into housework	16,8
Building, constructing	16,2
Modeling, drawing	15,2
Music listening, singing	10,2
Playing the computer	6,1
The child organizes his free time himself	9,3

Apparently from the data resulted in the table, among various kinds of activity preference to joint play with the child at leisure time is given by almost a half of interrogated parents (49,1%). And significant distinctions in answers of fathers and mothers are not revealed. At the same time it is indicative that the gender of a child makes significant impact on the opinions of parents concerning joint play. Parents of boys choose joint play more often, than parents of girls (accordingly: 52,2% and 44,5%; $p = .001$).

Parents' preferences of play activity in leisure structure also depend on the age of the child. Thus, parents of the senior preschool children (5-7 year old children) choose the given type of activity much less often, than parents of younger children (accordingly: 43,7% and 57,9%; $p = .0001$). It is important to highlight that when a child reaches this age the general structure of joint leisure of parents with him also changes.

And finally, the material status of a family plays also an important role: needy parents choose joint play with their child essentially less often than prosperous (accordingly: 42,8% and 51,6%; $p = .0004$).

3. Involvement of parents in their child's play

In order to find out the degree of parental involvement in play activity with their child, a special question has been offered to the respondents: «Do you play together with your child?». It is necessary to notice that answers

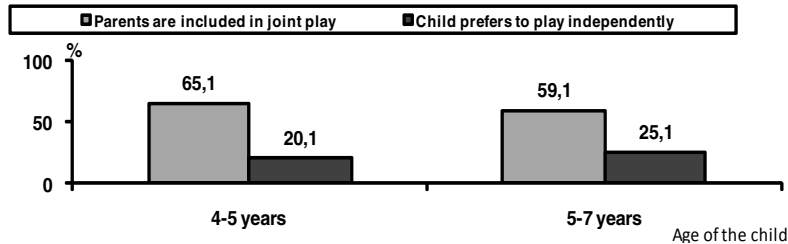
allow to find out not only the inclusiveness of parents in their child’s play but also to distinguish those reasons in connection with which parents don't take part in joint play, for example: child’s preference of independent, separate play; inaptitude of parents to play with their child; lack of free time for joint play. Distribution of parents’ answers to this question is given in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of answers of parents to the question on their involvement in joint play with their child (%)

Answer to the question	%
Yes, I play together with my child	63,7
No, my child prefers to play by himself	22,5
No, I am not able	3,0
Unfortunately, I don't have enough time	10,2

The analysis of the received answers shows that the involvement of parents in joint play depends on the child’s age (Fig.1). Thus, with children of 4-5 years play 65,1% of parents, whereas with children of 5-7 years – 59,1% ($p = .04$). Moreover parents of the senior preschool children (5-7 years) more often, than parents of 4-5 year-old children notice that their children prefer to play independently (accordingly: 25,1% and 20,1%, $p = .04$).

Figure 1. Involvement of parents in joint play depending on the age of the child (%)



The graph shows that up to the senior preschool age there is a gradual withdrawal of parents from joint play with their child and child’s orientation to independent, separate play increases. Saying differently at the stage of senior preschool age a child’s play activity becomes more self-dependent.

Distinctions of parents’ involvement in joint play degree depending on child’s gender which we have already mentioned is confirmed. Thus, parents of girls mark their lack of free time for joint play more frequently than parents of boys (accordingly: 11,7% and 9,0%; $p = .04$). Gender of parents also has a significant impact on their involvement in a play with the child. So, mothers answer that they play with their child in 65,7% of cases, and fathers — in 58,3% ($p = .001$).

Influence of socially-stratification factors is also traced. Parents with higher education note their involvement in joint play with the child more often than parents with secondary education (accordingly: 66,5% and 60,6%; $p = .02$). In comparison parents with secondary education mark independence of their child in play more frequently than parents with higher education (accordingly: 25,7% and 20,6%; $p = .01$). It is remarkable that unmarried mothers, in comparison with married, more often mark their inability to play with their child (accordingly: 4,6% and 1,7%; $p = .004$).

4. Children's game preferences

During the poll parents were asked to answer which of the listed types of games their children usually prefer to play in (Table 3).

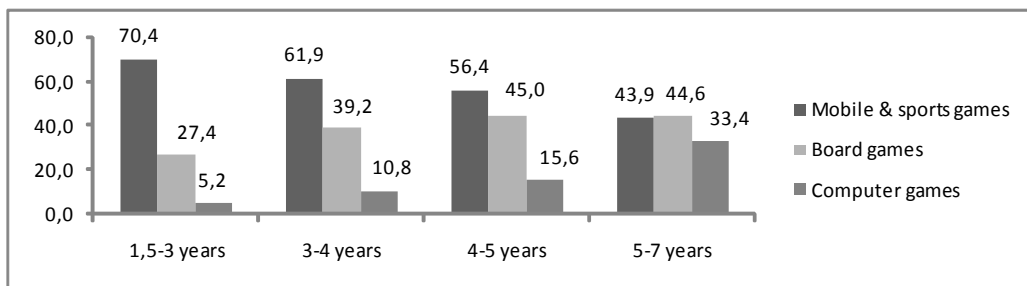
Table 3. Game preferences of preschool children (%)

Types of games	%	Parents of boys	Parents of girls
Active games, sports games	52,3	53,8	51,6
Board games	42,2	39,2	44,5
Building, constructing	41,7	50,8	31,2
Games in family	24,7	9,7	39,9
Computer games, game console	23,0	28,4	17,4
Games in characters from books, films, cartoons	13,3	13,0	13,6
Military games	12,3	21,4	3,1
Games in different professions	7,3	4,6	10,5

From the data resulted in the table it is visible that game preferences differ depending on the gender of children. Boys much more often than girls prefer to play computer games (accordingly: 28,4% and 17,4%; $p = .0001$), military games (accordingly: 21,4% and 3,1%; $p = .0001$) and also to build and construct (accordingly: 50,8% and 31,2%; $p = .0001$). Girls more often than boys prefer board games (accordingly: 44,5% and 39,2%; $p = .01$), games in family (accordingly: 39,9% and 9,7%; $p = .0001$) and in different professions (accordingly: 10,5% and 4,6%; $p = .0001$).

Also age distinctions in game preferences of children are observed (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Dynamics of popularity of different types of games depending on the age of the child (%)



It can be seen from the results presented in Fig. 2 that different types of games are preferable during the different age periods. Children of 1,5–3 years play board games much more rare, than older children (27,4% at 1,5-3 years and 39,2% at 3-4 years; $p = .01$). Preference of sports games decreases with the years (children of 4-5 years – 56,4%, children of 5-7 years – 43,9%; $p = .0001$). Among the parents of children of 1,5 – 3 years computer games are marked only in 5,2% of cases whereas among parents of children of 3-4 years their amount reaches 10,8% ($p = .04$). Moreover it is shown on the chart that both child's age and frequency of parent's choice of computer games gradually increases.

Representations of parents about game preferences of their children depend on demographic and socially-stratification factors. So, fathers more often than mothers note among the game preferences of their children games where they act like books, films and cartoons characters (accordingly: 16,1% and 12,4%; $p = .02$).

Mothers more often than fathers point out child's preference of games in family (accordingly: 27,0% and 18,8%; $p = .0003$).

It is necessary to point out that parents with higher education mark games of their children in characters of books, films and cartoons more often than parents with secondary education (accordingly: 17,1% and 8,3%; $p = .0001$). Parents with secondary education choose games in "family" more often than parents with higher education (accordingly: 28,5% and 23,4%; $p = .007$).

Income level of a family also influences parents' representation of game preferences of their child. Computer games are less often marked by parents from needy families (18,8%) in comparison with prosperous parents (24,6%; $p = .006$). The similar parity concerns such type of game as building and constructing (37,1% in needy families and 44,1% in prosperous; $p = .006$). Games in different professions are more often marked by parents from needy families, compared with the more prosperous (accordingly: 10,1% and 6,4%, $p = .003$).

Dependence of children game preferences from marital status of their parents is also observed. Table 4 shows significant distinctions in preferences of different types of games by children from divorced and married parents (answers of married and unmarried mothers were considered).

Table 4. Dependence of children's game preferences from marital status of their parents (%)

Types of games	Married mothers	Unmarried mothers	P =
Mobile games, sports games	50,5	60,8	.003
Board games	44,2	42,6	.02
Building, constructing	43,7	33,6	.003
Computer games, game console	23,8	17,8	.03

These results show that children whose mothers are divorced prefer sports games, while children from complete families prefer board games, constructing and computer games.

5. Preference of different types of toys

In the research parents of preschool children were asked: "What is your child's favorite toy?". Obtained answers were grouped into 12 categories. General average data on preferences of different toy types of preschool children: Transport toys — 31,1%, Animals — 30,5%, Traditional dolls — 17,5%, Materials for productive game — 13,6%, Modern dolls — 7,0%, Modern characters of children's subculture — 5,7%, Military toys — 4,6%, Not toys — 3,2%, Traditional characters of children's subculture — 3,1%, Sport toys — 2,2%, Games with rules — 1,4%, Didactic toys — 0,5%.

The obtained data show significant difference in preferred types of toys for boys and girls. Boys more often than girls prefer transport toys (accordingly: 43,3% and 6,0%; $p = .0001$), materials for productive game (accordingly: 15,0% and 8,0%; $p = .0001$), modern characters of children's subculture (accordingly: 7,2% and 2,1%; $p = .0001$) and military toys (accordingly: 6,6% and 0,5%; $p = .0001$). Girls more often than boys prefer animals (accordingly: 41,5% and 20,2%; $p = .0001$), traditional dolls (accordingly: 34,8% and 1,6%; $p = .0001$), modern dolls (accordingly: 14,8% and 0%; $p = .0001$) and traditional characters of children's subculture (accordingly: 4,9% and 1,3%; $p = .0002$).

Structural analysis of toy type preferences according to the age of preschoolers identified specific age trajectory of the play activities for boys and girls. If girls in the game are focused on the development and expansion of the

role repertoire of behavior using toys as partners, boys are focused on the variety of game scenes using toys as tools that support the adoption of a symbolic role.

6. Conclusion

On the basis of the conducted research the following conclusions are made.

In the structure of family leisure time play activity of parents with their child takes a leading place. Parents' involvement in joint play with the child depends on the child's age. In the age of 5-7 years structure of the play changes a lot. The play becomes more independent from the adult.

The study highlighted a number of age and gender characteristics in the game preference of preschool children. Boys significantly more likely than girls prefer such types of games as computer games, building and construction, military games. Girls are significantly more often than boys prefer board games, playing in "family" and in various professions. In preschool age the interest for board games and computer games constantly increases and the interest for outdoor games gradually reduces. This underlines the importance of such problem as lack of exercise in childhood.

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