



**The Role of Curriculum in Early  
Childhood Special Education**

**The Role of Play in  
Curriculum**

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## **Questions for Reflection: The Importance of Being Playful**

*These questions can be used for personal study and/or as questions to guide study group discussions.*

1. Are play and learning mutually exclusive?
2. According to research, play contributes to the advancement of what areas of development?
3. Specifically, children's engagement in pretend play was found to be positively and significantly correlated with what literacy competencies?
4. What are the characteristics of mature play?
5. What are some reasons young children may not learn to play at a mature level?
6. What are some strategies teachers can use to support children's engagement in mature play?
7. What are some of the positive effects that research has linked to mature play?
8. What role does/should play serve in your classroom?

# **For Further Investigation: Research Related to Play and Development in Early Childhood Annotated Bibliography**

Bagley, D. M., & Klass, P. H. (1998, Fall-Winter). Comparison of the quality of preschoolers' play in housekeeping and thematic sociodramatic play centers. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 12(1), 71-77.

ABSTRACT: Differences in the quality of play in thematic and housekeeping organizational patterns of the sociodramatic play center in preschool classrooms were documented by biweekly videotaping children's play during free choice time in 18 classrooms of an early childhood program in a moderately sized Midwest city. Videotapes for each classroom group were divided into the 4 quarters of the academic year. Of these, 68 were randomly selected and evaluated for play quality. The thematic organization resulted in higher quality sociodramatic play in which the children enacted more roles outside the home, utilized more aspects of their roles, demonstrated higher levels of symbolic prop use, and played longer. Early childhood educators wishing to utilize the thematic organization of the sociodramatic play center will find the practice supported, leading to longer play episodes, increased symbolic prop use, and higher quality make-believe.

Craig-Unkefer, L. A., & Kaiser, A. P. (2002, Spring). Improving the social communication skills of at-risk preschool children in a play context. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 22(1), 3-13.

ABSTRACT: Examined the effects of a 3-component intervention on the social-communicative interactions of 6 preschool children (aged 3yrs 5mo-3yrs 11mo) at risk for language delays and behavior problems. In a multiple baseline design across 3 dyads, children were taught to (1) plan their play, (2) use conversational social interaction strategies, and (3) self-evaluate their play interactions. The number of social communicative behaviors by each child increased following introduction of the intervention condition, as did their use of descriptive and request utterances during play sessions. Increases in linguistic complexity, diversity, and play complexity also were associated with the intervention. It is suggested that this intervention holds promise for improving social, linguistic, and play behaviors in preschoolers at risk for language delays and behavior problems.

De-Long, A. J., Tegano, D. W., Moran, J. D., Brickey, J. et al. (1994, July). Effects of spatial scale on cognitive play in preschool children. *Early-Education-and-Development*, 5(3), 237-246.

ABSTRACT: Examined the effects of a scale-reduced play environment on temporal aspects of play behavior. Specifically, the study examined the amount of time required to enter complex forms of play, the length of play segments, and the percentage of total play time spent in complex play under normal environmental conditions (full-size, control) and under scale-reduced environmental conditions (experimental). 11 Ss (mean age 4 yrs 2 mo) were observed during unstructured play activity with playdough in a small-n, A-B-A-B design. Ss served as their own controls and were self-motivated relative to the activity. The play structure (scale-reduced environment) consisted of a screened wooden frame over a vinyl floor. Results show that Ss entered complex forms of play more quickly, engaged in play segments of longer duration, and spent a greater percentage of their overall play time in complex play under experimental conditions.

Fisher, E. P. (1992, May). The impact of play on development: A meta-analysis. *Play and Culture*, 5(2), 159-181.

ABSTRACT: Conducted a meta-analysis of 46 studies focused on the effects of play behavior in cognitive, linguistic, and affective-social development. Half of the studies surveyed some aspect of cognitive development (i.e., creativity, logical problem solving). The remaining studies were equally divided between studies examining (1) the effects of play on language mastery or reading readiness and (2) the power of play to enhance awareness of social roles or build empathetic interpersonal skills via make-believe and perspective taking. Results suggest that sociodramatic play results in improved performances in both cognitive-linguistic and social affective domains.

Galyer, K. T., & Evans, I. M. (2001). Pretend play and the development of emotion regulation in preschool children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 166, 93-108.

ABSTRACT: Examined pretend play and the development of emotion regulation in preschool children. 51 preschool students (aged 4-5 yrs) and their parents completed questionnaires concerning frequency of play, pretend play, and non-pretend play. Ss also completed the Emotional Regulation Checklist (A. Shields and D. Cicchetti, 1997). Teachers completed the Social Skills Rating System--Pre-school Form (F. Gresham and N. Elliott, 1990). Additional

collected data included observations during pretend play activity and during a negatively valenced event designed to elicit a high level of arousal. Results show that Ss who demonstrated emotion regulation skills in pretend play situations were rated as having better emotion regulation in daily life. Regular pretend play with a more experienced play partner was related to higher frequency of adaptive affect displays, empathy, and emotional self-awareness in daily interactions. Continuing a pretend play game when faced with a negatively valenced event was related to emotion regulation in the wider context, whereas effective solutions for this event were not.

Harper, L. V., & Huie, K. S. (1998, July). Free play use of space by preschoolers from diverse backgrounds: Factors influencing activity choices. *Merrill Palmer Quarterly*, 44(3), 423-446.

ABSTRACT: Analyses were made of the location and quality of free play of 244 3- to 5-year-olds from 6 different preschool and day-care centers. Although SES and ethnicity were confounded with amount of space and the range of choices available, 13 play sites/activities could account for at least half the children's time in every center. There was no simple relation between the amount of space allocated to a setting and the proportion of time that the children used it. Patterns of use varied as a function of weather-related accessibility in spacious facilities. Differences across samples drawn from the same SES/ethnic pool indicated that the particular make-up of a group (the "cohort") in the same physical context can affect specific patterns of usage. Among children drawn from all 6 centers, there were sex differences in time spent in 5 of 9 common play sites. Moreover, across centers and a broader spectrum of areas, certain play sites consistently yielded different patterns of social exchanges with peers and adults.

Isenberg, J., & Jacob, E. (1983, March-April). Literacy and symbolic play: A review of the literature. *Childhood Education*, 59(4), 272-276.

ABSTRACT: Theoretical research on symbolic play by such authors as J. Piaget and B. Inhelder (1969) and L. S. Vygotsky (1976, 1978) indicates that engaging children in symbolic play while incorporating literacy content into such play can have a positive influence on early literacy development. Empirical research by such authors as C. H. Wolfgang (1974) and A. D. Pellegrini (1980) supports this conclusion. Teachers of preschoolers should remain aware of the level of representation that their students use in play and of the content of the play. Teachers may want to introduce literacy artifacts that students will need later in school. (29 ref)

Johnson, J. E. (1994, October-December). The challenge of incorporating research on play into the practice of preschool education. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 15(4), 603-618.

ABSTRACT: Discusses research and theory on play to draw out implications for practice and policy in early childhood education (ECE). Illustrations of advancements in outlooks on play are given to suggest progress in the field of ECE. The importance of play in defining developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is then raised relative to the educational philosophy of constructivism and the concept of choice. Structural and psychological or attitudinal factors impeding the translation of research on children's play into practice can be removed through increased and improved dissemination, collaborative research, and teacher preparation and in-service programs.

Kontos, S. (1999, September). Preschool teachers' talk, roles, and activity settings during free play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 14(3), 363-382.

ABSTRACT: Examined preschool teachers' involvement in activity settings, their roles, and their talk during free play time. 40 teachers and assistant teachers from 22 Head Start classrooms in 2 midwestern Head Start programs were audiotaped during free play time. Audiotapes were transcribed and coded. Results revealed that teachers were most often in the role of play enhancer/playmate and stage manager. They spent the most time in constructive and manipulative activity settings. Their talk focused most often on statements supporting play with objects, practical/personal assistance, and questions supporting play with objects. There was evidence that teachers modified their role by activity setting and modified their talk by role and activity setting. Teachers exhibiting different patterns of involvement in roles and activity settings were found to differ in how they talked to children.

Mellou, E. (1994, December). The values of dramatic play in children. *Early Child Development and Care*, 104, 105-114

ABSTRACT: A review of the research on dramatic play indicates that it provides personal expression and catharsis of inner desires; helps the child to distinguish between reality and fantasy; provides for children's social adaptation; provides a dynamic for learning; and enhances creativity through interaction, transformation, and imagination.

Morrow, L. M., & Rand, M. K. (1991, February). Promoting literacy during play by designing early childhood classroom environments. *Reading Teacher*, 44(6), 396-402.

ABSTRACT: Evaluates the effects that environmental changes in early childhood activity centers and patterns of teacher guidance have on children's literacy behavior. Finds that the children are likely to engage in voluntary literacy behaviors during free play when literacy materials are introduced and teachers guide children to use those materials.

Morrow, L. M. (1990, December). Preparing the classroom environment to promote literacy during play. *Early*

*Childhood Research Quarterly*, 5(4), 537-554.

ABSTRACT: Examined whether the voluntary literacy behaviors (LBs) of children could be increased in type and quantity through design changes by including reading and writing materials in dramatic play areas. 13 preschool classes consisted of 1 control group and 3 experimental groups: (1) thematic play (TP) with literacy materials guided by teachers; (2) TP with literacy materials not guided by teachers; and (3) books, pencils, and papers supplied in unthemed dramatic play areas with teacher guidance. LBs increased significantly in all the experimental groups over the control group. TP with teacher guidance yielded the greatest gains. The effect of the treatments continued after a delayed period of time. Implications support the importance of the physical environment as a catalyst for changing behavior.

Neuman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (1990). The influence of literacy-enriched play settings on preschoolers' engagement with written language. *National Reading Conference Yearbook*, 39, 179-187.

ABSTRACT: Examined the influence of literacy-enriched play centers on preschoolers' conceptions of print. 37 4-5 yr olds were observed in their preschool classrooms for 2 wks for literacy behaviors during play. Their classrooms were then redesigned to emphasize literacy. The redesigning included separating play areas, labeling items, and creating 4 distinct areas (post office, library, office, and kitchen). After 4 wks in the new environment, Ss were observed for 2 wks. Literacy demonstrations increased and became more functional for the Ss and more embedded in their play. As a result, the play gave greater coherence and meaning to literacy. Thus, literacy-enriched play centers can influence young children's literacy activities.

Quay, L. C., Weaver, J. H., & Neel, J. H. (1986). The effects of play materials on positive and negative social behaviors in preschool boys and girls. *Child Study Journal*, 16(1): 67-76.

ABSTRACT: Randomly sampled 11 preschool play centers located within a classroom where 24 children (mean age 66 mo) were enrolled to observe Ss' behaviors during free play, focusing on the frequency with which Ss attended to particular play center environments, the frequency of social and nonsocial behaviors, and the quality (positive [P] or negative [N]) of social interactions. Results from 2 log-linear analyses, each of which permitted the simultaneous comparison of all 11 play centers, indicate that play centers differed in frequency of use, and that, overall, Ss engaged in more social than nonsocial and more P than N behavior. A significant play center by social/nonsocial behavior interaction indicated that more social behavior occurred in some play centers than in others. A significant play center by P/N social behavior interaction indicated that more N social behavior occurred in woodworking and doll/dollhouse environments. A significant play center by gender interaction indicated that boys played more in woodworking, manipulative, and language centers; while girls played more in paints, housekeeping, games, art, and book centers.

Tegano, D. W., Lookabaugh, S., May, G. E., & Burdette, M. P. (1991, March). Constructive play and problem solving: The role of structure and time in the classroom. *Early Child Development and Care*, 68, 27-35.

ABSTRACT: Observed 40 preschool and kindergarten children (aged 48-79 mo) playing with playdough and blocks to examine the effects of degrees of situational structuring on the relative amount of constructive play. Situational structuring ranged over materials only, materials plus (un)structured props, and materials plus model/instructions. Results pointed to an increase in constructive play when the child imposed structure on the play situation and a decrease when the teacher imposed the structure. Data suggest that high levels of teacher structuring may not provide children opportunities for problem solving.

## Specific to Children with Disabilities

Constantine, J. L. (2001, March). Integrating thematic-fantasy play and phonological awareness activities in a speech-language preschool environment. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 28(1), 9-14.

ABSTRACT: Describes the experimental integration of 2 selected intervention strategies for children with speech articulation/phonological disorders in a preschool setting: (1) thematic-fantasy play and (2) phonological awareness instruction. The treatment philosophy is based upon tenets of phonological development and the anticipated positive effects of play training of learning. Intervention was performed over a 10 wk period in a self-contained phonology preschool group of 4, 4-yr-old males. Effects of combining thematic-fantasy play and activities targeting discrimination and production of rhyming words were examined. Findings suggest positive gains in phonological awareness across the group. Potential benefit for generalization of metaphonological skills to other contexts are also pointed out.

Goldstein, H., & Cisar, C. L. (1992, Summer). Promoting interaction during sociodramatic play: Teaching scripts to typical preschoolers and classmates with disabilities. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 25(2), 265-280.

ABSTRACT: Investigated the effects of teaching sociodramatic scripts on subsequent interaction among 3 triads, each containing 2 typical children (aged 3-5 yrs) and 1 child with autistic characteristics. The same type and rate of teacher prompts were implemented throughout structured play observations to avoid confounding effects. After learning the scripts, all children demonstrated more frequent theme-related social behavior. These improvements in social-communicative interaction were replicated through training with 3 sociodramatic scripts (pet shop, carnival,

magic show) according to a multiple baseline design. These effects were maintained during training with successive scripts and when the triads were reconstituted to include new but similarly trained partners. Results provide support for the inclusion of systematic training with scripts to enhance interaction among children with and without disabilities during sociodramatic play.

Hanline, M. F., & Fox, L. (1993, Summer). Learning within the context of play: Providing typical early childhood experiences for children with severe disabilities. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 18(2), 121-129.

ABSTRACT: Provides support for play-based environment as the most natural instructional context for young children with severe disabilities. Application of a play-based curriculum requires neither an abandonment of effective instructional special education practice nor a violation of early childhood education (ECE) best practice. Adopting such an approach represents a conceptual step away from existing practice. Further, allowing play activities to form the foundation on which effective instruction and classroom organization are built requires the utilization of best practice in the fields of ECE and early childhood special education in conjunction with effective practices for educating students with severe disabilities.

Hestenes, L. L., & Carroll, D. E. (2000). The play interactions of young children with and without disabilities: Individual and environmental influences. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 15(2), 229-246.

ABSTRACT: Examined preschool children's play interactions and beliefs in inclusive preschool settings in order to better understand the experience of inclusive classrooms for children with and without disabilities. Individual interviews of 21 typically developing children and observations of 29 children with and without disabilities in the classroom and on the playground provided data for the study. Summaries of children's play patterns showed a tendency for children without disabilities to engage in more cooperative play and less solitary play and onlooking behavior than did their peers with disabilities. Descriptive comparisons of activity choice showed a high level of similarity between the types of activities that children with and without disabilities selected during free play. Typically developing children spent less time interacting with their peers with disabilities than was expected, and children with disabilities interacted less with their typically developing peers than was expected. An understanding of disability was predictive of stated preference to play with hypothetical peers with disabilities. Actual interactions with peers with disabilities were predicted by children's age and teacher presence, but not by an understanding of disability or stated playmate preference.

Lieber, J. (1993, July). A comparison of social pretend play in young children with and without disabilities. *Early Education and Development*, 4(3), 148-161.

ABSTRACT: The social pretend play exhibited by 15 children (mean age 52.13 mo) with mild disabilities (i.e., delays in speech and language, cerebral palsy, mild mental retardation) was compared with that exhibited by 15 children (mean age 50.73 mo) without disabilities in an integrated preschool setting. Videotapes of 2 15-min free-play sessions were transcribed and analyzed to determine strategies used to enter, initiate, maintain, and terminate play. Ss with disabilities participated in pretend play but tended to use more direct and disruptive strategies to enter play. In contrast, nondisabled Ss used more indirect strategies. Both groups initiated play without discussing roles in advance and maintained play through short play dialogs. Differences were found in the pretend play themes used: only nondisabled Ss incorporated fantasy themes into their play. Both groups terminated their play by leaving the area.

Minnett, A., Clark, K., & Wilson, G. (1994, October). Play behavior and communication between deaf and hard of hearing children and their hearing peers in an integrated preschool. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 139(4), 420-429.

ABSTRACT: 30 deaf and hard-of-hearing preschoolers and 30 hearing ones (all Ss aged 3-5 yrs) were observed in their integrated school during "centers" and outdoor play. Half the children experienced auditory communication and half total communication modes of communication. All children had known their classmates for 6 mo to 3 yrs. It was found that all children preferred to play and communicate with same-hearing status children; however, 63% of all children communicated with children of other-hearing status. Amounts of social play and communication differed somewhat between the 2 communication environments, and context of interaction was related to the behavior and communication of children who were deaf and hard-of-hearing.



## Web Links for Play

Infant/Toddler Play As A Way Of Enhancing Intellectual, Social & Emotional Development  
<http://www.pitc.org/infant/index.htm>

The Beginnings of Literacy  
[http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter\\_key\\_language\\_beginnings&ddInterest=1145](http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_language_beginnings&ddInterest=1145)

More Evidence on how Play Enhances Cognitive Development  
<http://www.abacon.com/berk/lifespan/aid7.html>

The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development  
<http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v4n1/bergen.html>

The Influence of Preschool Experience on Early Literacy Attainment: The Research Evidence  
<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Research/brooks.html>

Pretend Play and Young Children's Development (ERIC Digest)  
<http://www.ericdigests.org/2002-2/play.htm>

Early Learning, Later Success: The Abecedarian Study  
<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~abc/ells-04.pdf>

Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Project  
<http://www.highscope.org/Content.asp?ContentId=219>

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth  
<http://www.naeyc.org/about/positions/pdf/PSDAP98.PDF>

Eager to Learn: Educating our Preschoolers  
<http://www.nap.edu/books/0309068363/html/>

How Students Learn: Science in the Classroom  
<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11102.html>

How Students Learn: Mathematics in the Classroom  
<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/11101.html>

Helping Children Learn Mathematics  
<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10434.html>

Early Childhood Development and Learning: New Knowledge for Policy  
<http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10067.html>