

Types of Play

Rebecca McMahon Giles, Ph.D.

University of South Alabama

Rather than using a universally agreed upon definition of play, the following list of characteristics, first presented in the widely cited Association of Childhood Education International position statement on play, "Play: A Necessity for All Children" (ACEI/Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988), is used to distinguish play from non-play behaviors: intrinsically motivated and self-initiated; process oriented; non-literal and pleasurable; exploratory and active; and rule-governed. Types of play have been categorized according to both the degree of social participation (Parten, 1932) and the level of cognitive functioning (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1967).

In a now classic study, Mildred Parten discovered that children's socialization while playing increased with age. Parten identified two behaviors often observed in the vicinity of children's play as well as four sequential categories of social participation during play that have remained relatively unchanged since their introduction. Unoccupied behavior refers to a child being in close proximity to or simply observing others' play. The term onlooker behavior is used for a child who is aware of and interacts with the players in some way, such as through conversation, without actually becoming engaged in the play. Solitary play, most prevalent during infancy, describes children who are playing alone and/or independently with objects. During parallel play, which is typical of toddlers, children play beside one another without interaction despite being involved in comparable activities and/or using similar objects. In associative play, two or more children play together sharing materials. Cooperative play emerges

with older preschoolers as children's associative play evolves into a truly collaborative effort to create sustained play episodes around an agreed upon theme.

Jean Piaget (1962) noted three successive stages of play according to the degree to which the play involves thought. Practice, or functional play, coincides with Piaget's stage of sensorimotor development in which infants explore the properties of objects or repeat simple muscle movements. Symbolic play appears during the preoperational stage as children ages 2 to 7 years old gain the ability to use mental symbols, as evidenced in their use of make-believe. As children move into the concrete operational stage (ages 7-11), games with rules result from their emerging ability to reason logically, which leads to their use of predetermined rules and/or rules negotiated during play. Smilansky (1968) elaborated upon Piaget's original classification dividing symbolic play into the two categories of constructive play, which involves the manipulation of objects to build or create something, and dramatic play, which involves pretending to be someone or something else.

Lev Vygotsky (1967) viewed make-believe, or sociodramatic play, as the means for developing imagination and intentional behaviors that lead to higher mental functioning. As children create an imaginary scene, enact roles, and follow the guidelines determined by their specific roles, they transition from thinking constrained by the context of their situation to distorting the boundaries between fiction and reality. Daniil Eklonin (2005) describes four levels of make-believe play. In level 1, the play is object centered. Children do not name their roles and repeat basic stereotypical actions without apparent logical order. In level 2, the action remains object oriented but begins to more accurately reflect a real-life sequence of events with children often naming their roles during play. In level 3, the children's characterization of their roles, which are distinct and clearly identified before play begins, start to reflect precise words and

actions. Inconsistencies between a child's behavior and his/her role are noted and addressed. In level 4, known as fully developed mature play, roles are well-defined and depicted through both a detailed sequence of actions and children's use of language with the play focused upon the relationships between the characters being portrayed.

These types of play develop in a relatively fixed sequence; however, the appearance or prevalence of a particular kind of play does not signify the end of a previous type. For example, a child in kindergarten will continue to enjoy such sensory experiences as playing with sand, which can resemble a toddler's practice play.

Further readings:

Elkonin, D. B. (2005). Chapter 1: The subject of our research: The developed form of play.

Journal of Russian and East European Psychology 43(1),22–48.

DOI: 10.1080/10610405.2005.11059242

Isenberg, J., & Quisenberry, N. L. (1988). Play: A necessity for all children. *Childhood Education*, 64(3), 138.

Parten, M. B. (1932). Social participation among pre-school children. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 27, 243-269.

Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams, and imitation in childhood*. New York: Norton.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1967). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Soviet Psychology*, 5, 6–18.