

Chapter 24

The Role of Culturally-Appropriate Play in Child Development

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“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning. Play is really the work of childhood.”
 —Fred Rogers



Children everywhere enjoy play

What is Play?

Even though everyone knows play when they see it, academics have had a good deal of trouble defining it (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999). When researchers examine play, they tend to characterize play and types of play according to their specific research focus (Cheng & Johnson, 2009), scholarly discipline, and ideology. For example, H. Mildred Parten and S. M. Newhall stated that in “cooperative or organized supplementary play, the child plays in a group that is organized for the purpose of:

- Making some material product.
- Striving to attain some competitive goal.
- Dramatizing situations of adult or group life.
- Playing formal games.

There is a marked sense of belonging or not belonging to the group. Control of the group situation is in the hands of one or two members who direct the activity of the others. The goal as well as the method of control necessitates a division of labor, the taking of different roles by various group members, and the organization of activity so that the efforts of one child are supplemented by those of another.”

Play is also a fun activity for the children involved. Cultural orientation influences the ways that play is observed and described. There is no single, clear definition of play that will cover all the different meanings given by parents, educators, researchers, and even children themselves. Although there is no clear *definition* of what constitutes play, there is a good deal of research about the characteristics of play, as well as the common themes in human play. However, within the research, some contradictions can be found.

Common themes in children’s play:

- Very young children display playful behavior when they explore sounds, engage in simple actions, experiment with objects of interest...and engage in simple give and take or copying games with their peers, older siblings, or adults.
- Children choose games or activities they enjoy.
- Children enjoy repetition, repetition, repetition.
- Children may play alone or may invite other children or familiar adults to join in their play.
- Children’s play can look serious. Players may become very absorbed in the activity, and disagreements can result from a difference of opinion about how the play should progress.
- Play activities are not essential to meet basic physical survival needs, but ***play does seem to support children’s emotional wellbeing, as well as a wide range of learning*** (Lindon, 2002).

Mastrangelo (2009) distills descriptions by various researchers (Garvey, 1977; Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983; and Smith & Vollstedt, 1985) into a short list of the qualities of play:

- Has no goals imposed from the outside.
- Is spontaneous, voluntary, and intrinsically motivating.
- Involves some active engagement on the part of the player.
- Requires attention to the means over the end production of the action or activity.
- Is flexible and changing.
- Must have a nonliteral orientation.
- Is pleasurable and enjoyable.

It is important to remember that play with rules, which appears later in life, has goals, objectives, and sometimes even a script created by society to teach children skills. Games with rules can be spontaneous or organized by both children and adults and have a literal orientation.

Aistear (n.d.) identified the characteristics of play as shown in *Table 1*.

Who Plays?

“Children all around the world play. No matter where they come from, what language they speak, or clothes they wear . . . all children love to play (UNICEF, n.d.)!

Not only human children play. We all have seen the cute puppy chasing a ball, the small ape playing with her mother, or the dolphin playing with humans across differing elements—water and air.

Adults play too! According to Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” model, when challenges are balanced by skills, attention is heightened and allows the person to enjoy the experience of being fully engaged in an activity (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2012). Like children engrossed in play, this attitude in adults is optimum for learning and creativity. It is similar to Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development,” where a child at the peak of their developmental level is intrinsically motivated, yet challenged—the optimum state for learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Hopefully all children—no matter their economic status or area in which they live in the world—have the freedom to enjoy play. The authors not only agree with Montessori that “play is the work of the child,” but also believe play is their intrinsic human right.

What Can We Learn from Children’s Play?

Parents, educators, therapists, and researchers observe children at play to learn about the individual child’s:

- Understanding of language.
- Theory of mind.
- Ability to engage and persist in activities.
- Problem-solving skills.
- Social interactions.
- Ability to manage feelings, experiences, and interests.

“We don’t stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.”

—George Bernard Shaw

Table 1

Characteristics of Play

“Do not keep children to their studies by compulsion but by play.”

– Plato

Active

Children use their bodies and minds in their play. They interact with the environment, materials, and other people.

Adventurous and Risky

Play helps children to explore the unknown. The pretend element offers a safety net that encourages children to take risks.

Communicative

Children share information and knowledge through their play. Their communication can be verbal or nonverbal, simple or complex.

Enjoyable

Play is fun and exciting and involves a sense of humor.

Involved

Children become deeply absorbed and focused in their play—concentrating and thinking about what they are doing.

Meaningful

Children play about what they have seen and heard and what they know. Play helps them to build and extend their knowledge, understanding, and skills in a way that makes sense to them.

Sociable & Interactive

Children play alongside or with others. Sometimes they also like and need to play alone.

Symbolic

Children imagine and pretend when they are playing. They try out ideas, feelings, and roles. They reenact the past and rehearse the future. This can involve them “reading” and “writing” long before they develop these skills.

Therapeutic

Play helps children to express and work through emotions and experiences.

Voluntary

Children choose to play. Their play is spontaneous. They shape it as they go—changing the characters, events, objects, and locations.

“Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn.”

—O. Fred Donaldson

Observation of children at play can reveal much about a child’s developmental status. Listening to the language used in play, analyzing social behaviors within activities, and “observing how children select, approach, and complete play tasks” provides valuable information about children (Mastrangelo, 2009). Observation of very young children playing with their parents, siblings, or other children can give a “preverbal window into the cognitive development and representational capacity of both typical and atypical children” (Cheng & Johnson, 2010). Observing children in play interactions with other children and how children use manipulatives and props can help teachers:

- Determine children’s current strengths and needs.
- Plan goals and activities to achieve those goals.
- Measure progress.

Many school districts use play-based assessment, such as Linder’s transdisciplinary tool, to determine eligibility and plan appropriate services for transition evaluations as children move from IDEA Part C to Part B services. Observation of a child at play gives a view of a child’s zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Not only can one ascertain a child’s level and quality of play alone, but also see how a child plays with others and how a child learns when provided various forms of scaffolding, such as prompting, modeling, and imitation (Casby, 2003).

Whether a child chooses to play alone or with others can be illuminating when we observe children. It has been the authors’ experience that many 2 year olds who have delayed language ability need to be specifically taught pretending skills. Unless children practice pretend schemes, they may engage in inappropriate or immature social behaviors, such as

grabbing toys and physical aggression, and miss out on engaging in and learning language with their peers.

Children who have language delays are at risk for difficulty with social skills. Early intervention for children who have hearing loss often has a primary focus on potential language deficits due to auditory deprivation. “Children with language delays often have difficulty initiating and sustaining play in that they spend less time in group play and engage in more unoccupied behavior than peers with normal language abilities” (Sualy, Yount, Kelly-Vance, & Ryalls, 2011). It is easy to see how language delay can lead to less imaginative and less mature play.

The type of play in which children who have language deficits are engaged in typically involves simple manipulation of toys and is often repetitive and patterned, as opposed to dramatic or symbolic (Rescorla & Goossens, 1992; Udwin & Yule, 1983). Children with language delays are also more likely to exhibit behavior problems at home and in school. Children who have difficulty communicating due to hearing loss or language differences may be isolated from peers in schools, playgroups, and neighborhoods. They miss out on play opportunities and the opportunity to learn from play interactions.



Photo courtesy of ADIS

“The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct.”

—Carl Jung

“Play and language development are mutually reinforcing and follow parallel courses, especially at young ages. As play complexity increases, so does language, vocabulary, and social ability” (Sualy, Yount, Kelly-Vance, & Ryalls, 2011). Children who have hearing loss, compromised sensory systems, developmental delays, or autism spectrum disorder may present with a language delay. These children can experience difficulty with social skills, self-esteem, and academics. When they are young, hints of future difficulties can be seen through their limited play skill repertoire (Sualy, Yount, Kelly-Vance, & Ryalls, 2011). These children may exhibit different or limited play skills in comparison with same-age peers who are typically developing.

For parents and educators, play can become the conduit to build on many skills, including language development. Today, it is more common for children who have hearing loss to receive services in inclusive settings (Katz & Schery, 2006). Educators of the deaf and hard of hearing, as well as researchers in the field, support the theory that improved communication with peers, including a repertoire of communicative repair strategies, can lead to improved academic and social outcomes later in life (DeLuzio & Girolametto, 2011). Communication skills can be practiced joyfully and repeatedly through play, leading to communicative competence (Hogan, 1997).

Resources on ways to play with children who have hearing loss include games, songs, books, and play materials. Elizabeth Rosenzweig—a Listening and Spoken Language Specialist and Certified Auditory Verbal Therapist—provides some great hints about choosing toys for children who have hearing loss at the cochlear implant on-line site (<http://cochlearimplantonline.com/site/choosing-toys-for-children-with-hearing-loss/>). Her ideas can apply to all children, as she encourages basic open-ended playthings that promote a variety of actions across developmental domains. These types of materials lead to play that also promote important language skills and vocabulary. Rosenzweig suggests

that, “low-tech is better than high-tech for encouraging cognitive development and creative play.” She encourages literacy activities (books) and simple games, such as Barn-Yard Bingo. Other resources for ideas about games can be found at these cochlear implant company sites:

- Advanced Bionics has “The Listening Room” with activities designed for different age groups in English and Spanish, <http://thelisteningroom.com>
- Cochlear Americas provides their HOPE materials for children, <http://hope.cochlearamericas.com/listening-tools/HOPEWords>
- MED-EL has many resources for children, including books and interactive music activities, <http://www.medel.com/soundscape-listening-fun-with-music-and-song/>

Although these materials are intended for children who have cochlear implants, the activities can be used with all children in fun ways.

How Do Children Play?

All types of play have their unique role in child development and for learning the skills children need to be successful in their environment. Play can be classified by how children play, the developmental level reflected in their play, and the types of interactions they have with both materials and others during their play (see *Table 2*).

All of these types of play help children with their overall development. There are many advantages to encouraging children to engage in different types of play, including play with others. For example, socio-dramatic play enhances children’s capacity for reflecting before acting, role taking, perspective taking, empathy, altruism, emotional understanding, and self-regulation. In play with peers, children’s negotiation and problem-solving skills are exercised, as are their abilities to cooperate with others, share, take turns, self-restrain, work in a group, and get along with others. Play also promotes

Table 2 Classifications of Child’s Age-Related Play

Unoccupied Play

(from birth to about 3 months)

Solitary Play

(from 3 to 18 months)

Parallel Play

(from the age of 18 months to 2 years)

Associative Play

(3 to 4 years of age). This play is sometimes referred to as “loosely organized play,” because there is no formal organization. This type of play helps children learn about sharing. It is important for language development, problem-solving skills, and cooperation. In associative play, groups of children have similar goals.

Social Play

(by age 3). Children learn social rules, such as give and take and cooperation. Children are able to share toys and ideas.

Motor-Physical Play

Physical play offers a chance for children to exercise and develop muscle strength.

Constructive Play

In this type of play, children create things by manipulating their environment, such as when they use blocks.

Expressive Play

Some types of play help children learn to express feelings through different mediums, such as clay, paper, crayons, etc.

Fantasy Play/Pretend Play

Children get to assume adult roles and learn to think in abstract methods.

Games with Rules/Cooperative Play

Even the philosopher Charles Pierce agrees that “play is practice for problem-solving,” and that “the playful antics of kittens are safe ways of learning the serious business of hunting.”

children's ability to read intentionality in others' actions and language (Ashiabi, 2007). Vocabulary acquisition is enhanced by various types of play. The use of play in early intervention can capitalize on family routines and values with a focus on family-identified vocabulary, social language, and the language of home routines.

Games with Rules/Cooperative Play

Although all types of play are important, the focus of this section is traditional games with rules. Games with rules involve cooperation. According to the Encyclopedia of Children's health (<http://www.healthofchildren.com/P/Play.html#ixzz3Ka4skHgZ>), "Cooperative play begins in the late preschool period. The play is organized by group goals. There is at least one leader, and children are definitely in or out of the group." The child development institute states that, "The 'games with rules' concept teaches children a critically important concept: The game of life has rules (laws) that we all must follow to function productively. Examples of games with rules are Simon Says (USA) and Marco Polo (USA).

Different countries have unique traditional games with rules (i.e., The Orphan or The Hurricane in Central America). Some games are common between cultures. One example, the Chinese game, "Lost Handkerchief," is played in India (where it is called Koda Chamaad Khaye) and in France (where it is called le Jeu du Foulard). Others have subtle variations that reflect cultural differences. Octopus Tag, played in New Zealand, is actually a safety-conscious version of the U.S. game Red Rover (Pocket Culture, n.d, <http://book.pocketcultures.com/>).

Other examples of traditional games with rules:

- *Let's Play in the Forest* (South America)
- *Mantantirutirulan* and *One, Two, Three, Touch the Wall* (Spain)

More information regarding traditional games with rules may be found at <http://childdevelopmentinfo.com/child-development/play-work-of-children/pl1/#ixzz3Ka6jfr5N>.

Games with rules provide educators with a wonderful opportunity to introduce culturally-appropriate games to students and their families. Parents are an important part of passing these cultural games along to children. In fact, at least one study showed that preschoolers spontaneously chose to learn simple rule games from adults rather than peer models (Rakoczy, Hamann, Warneken, & Tomasello, 2010). Children's learning and inclusion flourishes when adults and older children act as supports and models for play skills.

Every country has traditional games that have been part of their culture for generations. These games were a way to teach the skills needed to survive in that particular society, as well as global developmental skills. They were passed down from generation to generation. Unfortunately, due to globalization, migration, the disintegration of the extended family, acculturation, and assimilation, many of these games are disappearing and with them a wonderful opportunity for children to practice needed developmental skill, as well learn the families' rightful cultural heritage.

How Can Play Teach about Society and Culture?

The study of play, as reviewed in educational and developmental journals, tends to focus on the context of play, and play as related to intervention with children who have special needs (Cheng & Johnson, 2009). The role of group, rule-based play as a vehicle for cultural transmission and to assist in bridging language and cultural barriers between the dominant culture and newcomers to the U.S. has not been given much attention. There are many ethnographic studies of cultural and traditional plays and songs

"You can't make children grow faster by pushing them—just as you can't make flowers grow faster by pulling them" (Rushton, Rushton, & Larkin, 2010, p 360).

in African, Chinese, Javanese, Lithuanian cultures, but none have focused on how using traditional play can help build relationships, language, and other developmental skills within immigrant communities.

Immigrant children often lose touch with their indigenous play as they acquire high-tech toys, video games, computers, and other technological gadgets. In their rush to assimilate into the new culture, they leave their birth-culture behind (Khasandi-Telewa, 2012). Adults in these families also lose touch with their traditions while facing a daunting new culture and striving to help their children find success and acceptance in the U.S. There is a dearth of research on current use of traditional rule-based games and play in the U.S. in relation to honoring and welcoming children from other cultures and their families into American early intervention programs, preschool classrooms, and early elementary classrooms. This topic deserves some attention.

Games with Rules as Culturally Appropriate Games

Peter O. Gray (2010) states that Groos' (1901) believed that our species play "at the very specific activities that we see are crucial to success in the particular culture in which we are growing up. Children in a hunting culture play at hunting" (p. 122). Traditional games are a gateway to teach the needed skills, values, and norms of a specific culture. Hyun explains that play, in addition to being important in child development, "serves as an acculturative mechanism" (Schwartzman, 1978, as quoted by Hyun, 1988).

Teachers must strive to provide their students with an environment that is culturally inclusive and remember that "traditional games are a precious intangible cultural heritage inseparable from community [and family] life" (UNESCO, Bangkok, n.d). Traditional games share the characteristic of having

been passed on through oral tradition from generation to generation. Children learned these games from their parents, grandparents, and older children, as well as from teachers at school. In many Latin countries, these types of games were part of physical education classes. "Mentoring by elders and older peers is one of the means by which cultural knowledge, values, and skills relevant to a particular society and its context are transmitted to the younger generation. Cultural content is often embedded in the songs and chants, gestures and movements, roles assigned, and goals of the game" (UNESCO, <http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/ich/children-games/ichdes/childrens-games-as-ich>).

Although some games are unique to a particular country or region, some are similar with slight variations even from one country to another across the globe. Some are based on historic events, and some pass on values, beliefs, and even local myths. Cultural content is usually part of these games, as can be observed through the songs, phrases, movement, objectives, narrative, and roles that are part of the game.

Agustín Millares Carlo observed that for children ages 3 to 6 years, traditional games are a "perfect" mechanism to get involved in fun-filled activities while helping these children develop the areas of cognition, gross/fine motor, and social skills while learning a variety of skills" (Vega, 2012).



Photo courtesy of NCHAM

"The playing adult steps sideward into another reality; the playing child advances forward to new stages of mastery."

—Erik H. Erikson

“Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.”

—Mr. Rogers

Play is the highest form of research.”

—Albert Einstein

Traditional games offer these developmental bonuses while also promoting and enhancing a sense of identity and pride in their own culture. The rules of traditional games are often full of cultural meaning that is frequently overlooked.

Many nations have recognized the importance of maintaining traditional games as a source of cultural heritage and pride, as well as a vehicle for teaching children developmental domain skills. “In Mexico City, a new sports center for pre-Hispanic games is being built. The Mexican Sports Confederation is printing rulebooks for several of the ancient games and trying to start teams for the games in schools nationwide. Meanwhile, government instructors are holding seminars to teach the games to grade school gym teachers, such as the ones dodging the fiery ball on a recent afternoon” (Think Mexican, March 2010; <http://thinkmexican.tumblr.com/post/482439135/mexico-revives-traditional-games>)

In Southeast Asia, a game-based curriculum has been created (<http://www.unescobkk.org/culture/ich/children-games/teachers/>). Skills developed from playing traditional children’s games are compatible with skills targeted in various subjects, especially those at the primary school level. To help teachers take advantage of the rich repository of traditional children’s games in the region, the project offers a simple game-based curriculum for students of primary schools. The curriculum encourages the

use of traditional games from the region as a teaching and learning resource. For the convenience of teachers, the game-based curriculum is categorized by subject areas taught in school (UNESCO Bangkok).

The U.S. has always been a country of immigrants. Early interventionists, preschool, and K-12 teachers are seeing children come into the educational system from all over the world. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the top 10 largest immigrant groups, comprising over half of all immigrants to the U.S. in 2012, were from Mexico, Korea, India, Guatemala, El Salvador, Philippines, China, Cuba, Vietnam, and the Dominican Republic. Early interventionists can benefit from using culturally-appropriate traditional games, as families will be more likely to carry on the skills these games teach as well as feel that their cultures are respected—allowing the interventionist and the family to create a deeper bond.

Kindergarten teachers can benefit from the use of traditional games, as they are perfect for teaching a variety of skills and can teach the nonimmigrant children about other cultures and help newcomers feel welcome and that their culture is appreciated. For children who have limited English language skills, games that use their native language can help create a bridge to spoken English. Teachers also need to develop cultural competence and sensitivity by learning about the culture of the populations they serve and by having a genuine appreciation for the gift that diversity brings to their classroom.

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