Theories About Play in Early Childhood Education

By Sandie Rollins

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." While this ancient proverb may seem trite or cliche to modern scholars, it still holds true when discussing children and play. Greek Philosophers Plato and Aristotle discussed the role of play in education, but specific play theories were not developed until centuries later. The following discussion of a few modern psychological theories and theorists describes the current trends put into "play" in today's educational settings.

Play as Therapy

In 1920, Sigmund Freud posed a psychoanalytic play theory that was defined in his book "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In this work, Freud described play as a child's mechanism for repeatedly working out a previously experienced traumatic event in an effort to correct or master the event to his satisfaction.

Play as Rehearsal

In 1972, Bruner stated that one of the main functions of child's play was to rehearse actions to various real-life scenarios in a safe, risk-free environment so that when confronted with a difficult situation, it would not be so stressful.

Play as Preparation

John Dewey was a prominent theorist in the early 1900s. According to Dewey, play is a subconscious activity that helps an individual develop both mentally and socially. It should be separate from work as play helps a child to grow into a working world. As children become adults, they no longer "play" but seek amusement from their occupation. This childhood activity of play prepares them to become healthy working adults.

Play as Sensory Learning

Maria Montessori, an Italian educationist during the early 1900s, postulated that "play is the child's work." According to the Montessori method, which is still employed today in private schools, children would be best served spending their play time learning or imagining. Montessori play is sensory, using a hands-on approach to everyday tools like sand tables. The child sets her own pace, and the teacher is collaborative in helping the child play to learn.

Play as Intellectual Development

Jean Piaget is most noted for introducing the stages of child development. These stages directly relate to play, as he stated that intellectual growth occurs as children go through the stages of assimilation, or manipulating the outside world to meet one's own needs--playacting--and accommodation, or readjusting one's own views to meet the needs of the outside environment, or work.

Play as Social Development

Lev Vygotsky suggested that children will use play as a means to grow socially. In play, they encounter others and learn to interact using language and role-play. Vygotsky is most noted for introducing the ZPD, or zone of proximal development. This suggests that while children need their peers or playmates to grow, they need adult interaction as they master each social skill and are ready to be introduced to new learning for growth.
Children go through stages of play, and each stage has different characteristics. Become yourself aware of the stages of child play and how to make sure children are moving through them.

**Solitary Play**

Older infants and toddlers engage in solitary play. In the solitary stage, a child plays with toys alone and with some degree of focus. The child pays little attention to the play of other children, although he may occasionally interact by taking a toy. A toddler demonstrating solitary play might repeatedly fill and empty a bucket with wooden blocks.

**Parallel Play**

Toddlers and two-year-olds often demonstrate parallel play. Children exhibiting parallel play sit near each other and use the same types of toys. The focus of each child remains on her own individual play. Children talk aloud to each other, though not about the same topic. For example, one child dressing a baby doll might sit near another child feeding a doll pretend food. The first child might announce the baby wears a pink hat, while the second child might reply that the grapes are all gone.

**Associative Play**

This stage is still centered on the individual child and happens among children, ages 3 to 4 1/2 years old. In associate play, the child plays closer to others and borrows and share toys; however, the child still has the thought that he is the most important. During this phase, children are still independent and don't work in groups. With children in this stage, start to pair them up with others so they begin to transition into the cooperative play phase. It is important they begin to develop their communication skills. It is also during this time that children like to hop, skip and jump, further developing their large motor skills. They enjoy riding toys, using blocks to build things and doing puzzles and crafts.

**Cooperative Play**

Cooperative play involves children, ages 4 to 6 years old, playing together, interacting with toys and sharing. During this play, some children stand up as an organizer of the group, suggesting what everyone plays. For example, during this stage children may play house together. A child may decide who the mom, dad and children will be. Kids are interacting together, playing and using their imagination.

**School Age Children**

As children enter elementary school, their play is much more organized. They play with each other, getting together and organizing themselves on their own to play games such as kickball, football or baseball. At this time they are aware of rules and begin to be become competitive with others. Children during this stage are group-oriented and tend to choose friends who have the same interests.