

**Teaching through Play and
Respecting the Motivation of Preschoolers**

by

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From *Focus on Curriculum, Volume 5 in Research on Sociocultural Influences on Motivation and Learning*, edited by Dennis M. McInerney and Shawn Van Etten. Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing Inc, 2005, pp. 3-23.

Play is the dominant activity of preschoolers, their favorite way to spend time. Yet, many parents are unsure about the importance of imaginative play and early childhood educators may not understand this initial expression of creativity well enough to ensure a prominent place for it in the curriculum. This presentation consists of two segments, each describing a separate aspect of the dynamics of play. First, we will describe studies that make known the potential of play for teaching certain concepts more effectively than is possible when traditional forms of instruction are applied. Second, motives of preschool players will be examined to identify misperceptions and replace these with awareness regarding normative mental development.

The Potential of Play for Teaching

Our motivation to explore imaginative play was based on a desire to help parents join preschoolers in the forum they enjoy most. The literature seldom considered interpersonal variables, usually describing play as if the participants were interchangeable and represent the same potential for influence. In contrast, we assumed that play could yield differential benefits, depending on the players, whether the companions of young children were their parents, peers or fantasy characters they invented during solitary play.

We needed a suitable environment in which to refine our assumptions and subject them to observation. A team of student architects was recruited along with a group of mothers with young children. Together they planned and constructed a colorful fantasy-oriented laboratory. Financial support to establish the work was provided by the Danforth Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, General Mills, and the Toy Manufacturers of America. At the time we did not foresee that this local collaboration would one day evolve into a global venture that provides education for parents at every stage of their long-term role as teachers (P. Strom & Strom, 2002; R. Strom, 1995; R. Strom, 2002; R. Strom & Strom, 1998). An overview of current research and development can be examined at the Office of Parent Development International Web site <http://www.public.asu.edu/~rdstrom>

Defining the Challenge

Parents of preschoolers have a difficult teaching role because some goals must be accomplished through play. Reliance on play as a method for instruction may not appear demanding until it is recognized that parents (the teachers) have a shorter attention span than their children (the learners) for fantasy interaction. Then too, young children more readily access imagination than is typical among adults. Given these conditions, the purposes of parents can best be achieved when they regard themselves as partners in play. Competition does not characterize a partnership. Instead, strengths of each partner are merged for mutual advantage. In fantasy play, a partnership can produce reciprocal learning and respect.

We wanted to honor the strengths that parents and preschoolers bring to their play and understand how these attributes can be combined. A related challenge was to figure out how the interactive process of pretending together could guide instruction. There was a corresponding need to discover how the lesser access of adults than children to imagination could be compensated for by reliance upon other resources. Finally, it was necessary to decide on the kinds of lessons that should be emphasized during interactive play with 3- to 5-year-olds.

Play Preferences and Needs

One of our first observations indicated the preference of young children for repetition, their need to recreate certain play situations over and over again. By contrast, most adults who came to the play laboratory expressed feelings of boredom when placed in repetitive situations. To illustrate, when four-year old John asked his father to play soldiers, dad said, "But Johnny, we just played with these soldiers yesterday. Let's play something else,

something different.” Because adults are prone to boredom in repetitive settings, few of them are able to play with preschoolers for long periods. Indeed, laboratory observations suggested that, during parent-child fantasy play, adults have the shorter attention spans.

The attention span differences between parents and their children were viewed by some observers as evidence of incompatibility. This conclusion was reinforced by colleagues who asked, “Why should children play with their parents anyway? When it comes to play, what children need most are friends their own age.” At least this view seemed to be the prevailing opinion. Perhaps the play needs of children can be appreciated more by juxtaposing them with our own recreational needs. What kinds of games do we consider most exciting, the most fun to watch? Generally, adults agree that they prefer to watch a close game, one in which the outcome remains doubtful until near the end of the contest. When a football team outscores another 60 to 0, spectators may complain that what they witnessed was not a game at all. There was such an imbalance of power that the game eliminated uncertainty and consequent excitement over who would be the winner. When our team runs away with the score, we might encourage scoring by the opposition and find some pleasure in their success. Professional football and basketball teams initiated the annual draft recruitment policy for new players so that power would not become the exclusive realm of one team in the league. Promoters of sports realized that, if power were unilateral, fans would conclude, “Why watch?”

Some parents experience a similar motivation when they play games with their young children. The adults recognize their own competence is too great for the child to win, perhaps too powerful for the child to sense any satisfaction from the contest. Then, during a game of checkers, when the child begins to complain, threatens to quit, or seems ready to cry, the parent must decide what to do. Why do some parents decide to cheat in favor of their young opponent? Certainly it is not to teach dishonesty. The reason is to make the child feel powerful. The fact that young children are powerless in games that require rules means that these are not the best play activities for families to engage in together. There is a better way to respect children and become involved in their lives—through fantasy play (Taylor, 1999; Torrance, 1995).

We wanted to check our hunch that preschoolers need to play with parents so they can share dominance. Twenty-five parents agreed to participate with their four year olds in fantasy interaction for ten minutes each morning and evening. This schedule was followed for one week. During the following week, the parents were told to offer children excuses for being unable to play together. Throughout the experiment, each family kept a daily record

of child misbehavior. As a group, the family records revealed an incidence of misconduct six times as great for non-play days as for the 'child power' days of interactive play. The substantially less misbehavior on days when parents played with children suggested that certain power needs are met during family fantasy play (Strom, 1995).

Use of Play Themes

Generational differences in the preferred focus of play posed the task of discovering how children's wish for repetition could be reconciled with the adult desire for novelty. Toward this possibility, we exposed boys and girls to a wide array of toys that had been contributed to the laboratory by many of the 2,000 member companies in the Toy Manufacturers of America. The choice of toys and play themes preschoolers chose were identified by highest to lowest frequency of attention. The favorite themes implicated toys such as doctors and nurse's kits, action figure dolls, trucks, airplanes, soldiers, boats, and prehistoric animals. Experiments revealed that during play adults were able to accept the child's preference for repetition without enduring monotony. This was accomplished by focusing on one general theme related to the playthings selected by children but revising a theme each time in subtle ways. To illustrate, during play with doctors and nurses kits, we were able to extend our attention spans by reliance on these subthemes:

We must find the brown dog that bit the little boy.

The witch doctor wants to have a job at the hospital.

The Martian has never been to see a doctor before.

Nurse, the hospital is full of noises and I can't sleep.

His family is needed to help him so he gets well again.

The patient must be hiding around here somewhere.

I want my dog to be with me while I am in the hospital.

Lots of things happen in the hospital emergency ward.

Animals are working as doctors in this animal hospital.

Let's try to help the elephant mother to have her baby.

We need to visit sick people who are in the hospital.

It soon became obvious that while children want to pursue familiar themes, they will readily accept an incremental variety of subthemes. In this way parent desire for novelty can be met without giving up the favorite

play theme of a child. This approach implicated use of improvisation, being able to think quickly of sub thematic variations on the spot. However, most adults that we observed, including preschool and primary teachers, performed poorly in generating alternative subthemes. Still, it was evident that the attention span of adults had to increase, to become long enough so parents would find enjoyment in fantasy play and make use of fantasy interaction to teach without suffering boredom.

How could subtheme variations be provided for adult players who yearn for greater novelty than they themselves are able to spontaneously produce? At the outset, we brainstormed lists of subthemes and placed them beside parents on the floor while they were observed during scheduled play periods with their child. Fifty subthemes were provided with toy airplanes and general theme of “The airplanes are ready”.

Airplanes can find the people who are lost in the desert.

All of the passengers have to be checked for weapons.

Passengers want Chicago but the hijacker says Mexico.

Our suitcases did not come with us on the same plane.

This airplane will be flying with animal stewardesses.

The children are working together in the control tower.

There are not enough soft drinks on board for everyone.

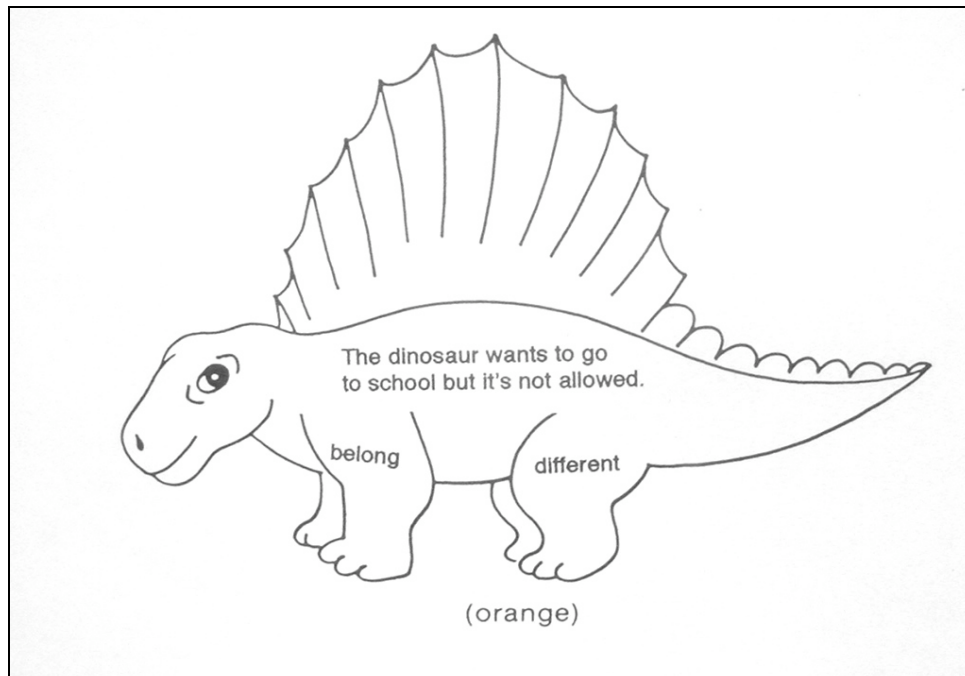
By providing this structure and easy access to versions of a theme, we hoped to diminish the parent polar responses of coercion and concession that typified their play with children. Coercion and concession are inappropriate ways to share dominance. Still, some parents suppose that, if they are using toys, their coercive interaction can be called play. In an opposite way, concession-oriented parents continually look to their children to provide them with direction about what to do next or say because they are unable to think of options on their own.

Subtheme lists were helpful but they presented limitations as well. The incidence of coercion declined but some parents felt overwhelmed with the wide range of subtheme options given to them. Other parents with a strong need to complete one task before going on to another reported feeling frustrated when they could not finish all of the subthemes they were provided prior to a play session. Classroom teachers sometimes experience similar frustrations when they have more lessons to cover than there is time in the schedule.

At that point an insight led us to abandon subtheme lists. The replacement method was to write one subtheme on separate cutout figural forms. This change was intended to eliminate parent feelings of over choice but

preserve access to novel ideas. In addition to many subthemes, there was diversity of figural shapes. Figure 1, Examples of Dinosaur Figures, shows one of the five dinosaur shapes made of colored construction paper. Children were less distracted as parents referred to a colorful paper figure on which a play subtheme was written than when adults had to turn to subtheme lists. To summarize, the purpose for placing one subtheme on each paper dinosaur is to provide parents a continuing source of ideas to sustain their involvement while preventing boredom. Five shapes of paper figures of airplanes, boats, doctors, and soldiers are provided when corresponding toys are found to be of greatest interest to the children. In every case, the couple plays with actual toys, not with the construction paper figures incorporated solely as a guide for parents. This approach is effective in structuring resource ideas that promote fantasy interaction. And, make no mistake about it—adults need structure.

Figure 1. Example of Dinosaur Cutout



Parent Goals For Teaching

Before parents can use subthemes effectively, they should feel comfortable with this process as a way to achieve some personal goals for child guidance. We start by acquainting them with the possibilities for teaching

values, that realm of child learning for which most parents consider themselves accountable and want to be successful. For example, dinosaur play is introduced in this manner:

“This is dinosaur country. Most of us do not realize how hard it is to be a dinosaur these days. The fact is, except for the children, hardly anyone pays much attention to dinosaurs anymore. I got to thinking that maybe things would be different if the population of dinosaurs could increase so they would not be such a small group. After some persuasion, the 25 dinosaurs you see displayed on the wall agreed to come here with the expectation that you will help increase their numbers to start the population boom they need.

As you might suppose, dinosaurs are not all alike. The best way to tell them apart is not by appearance but by the values they support. These differing values are shown by separate colors. For example, regardless of their shape, pink dinosaurs all believe that the most important lesson for early learning is the ‘constructive use of power.’ Dinosaurs whose color is blue are united in believing that ‘sharing fears and anxieties’ deserves the greatest attention. Green dinosaurs are convinced that ‘understanding the needs and feelings of others’ deserve the highest priority. Yellow dinosaurs place their greatest emphasis on ‘cooperation with others’ while orange ones think that ‘expressing differences verbally’ should be the dominant aspect of curriculum.

All of the dinosaurs will now be taken down from the wall and placed in groups according to their color. You are asked to join one group whose value focus you wish to support. In addition to figures with subthemes, your team will have two dinosaurs with no theme written on them. Bear in mind that, to belong to any group as well as add to the dinosaur population, these unmarked dinosaurs must acquire a subtheme. So, in the next fifteen minutes, the task of your team is to brainstorm possible subthemes and choose the two most preferable that will be assigned to give dinosaurs a sense of identity.

Consider the five values and 25 subthemes that accompany them.

Play Theme: This is Dinosaur Country

Parent Goal: Teaching Constructive Use of Power (Pink Dinosaurs)

Subthemes

The boy is teaching the dinosaur how to swim.

We can cross the river on the dinosaur’s back.

Let’s ask him to help tear down old buildings.

Tell the dinosaur family the hunters are coming.

The biggest dinosaur is stuck in the mud.

Parent Goal: Sharing Fears and Worries (Blue Dinosaurs)

Subthemes

It's dark and he hears a noise outside the cave.

It's an earthquake and trees are falling down.

She woke up crying from a bad dream.

She is trying to find her way home.

People are running away to hide from him.

Parent Goal: Understanding needs and feelings of others (Green Dinosaurs)

Subthemes

My best friend has to move to another place.

She's sad because she can't fit on the merry-go-round.

He's not been chosen for the animal parade.

She needs to make lots of noise but it bothers people.

He wants to play but no one will let him out of his cage.

Parent Goal: Cooperating with Others (Yellow Dinosaurs)

Subthemes

My friend cut his leg and we can't find a big enough bandage.

This is the world's only dinosaur circus.

He can help us at the school playground.

Climb his tail so we can pick fruit from the trees.

Teach the dinosaur to cook so he won't be hungry.

Parent Goal: Expressing differences with others (Orange Dinosaurs)

Subthemes

The dinosaur wants to go to school but it's not allowed.

He is a friendly dinosaur but only the children know.

The cave people have become angry at the dinosaurs.

He just wants to sit and watch television all day long.

The little dinosaur tells his parents he will run away.

After the parents generate alternatives, they choose five of the subtheme figures to take home for trial. The only recommendations that are given to them at this stage are:

1. Play with your preschooler a few minutes every day for the next week.
2. Schedule all of the play sessions at a time when you are fresh and have energy.
3. Write your thoughts in a notebook after each play period.

Generally, parents report that using the subthemes enables them to interact for longer periods with their children. As the parents share their experiences, they commonly acknowledge their discovery that children are the best models for learning how to engage in fantasy play. Once this conclusion has been reached and the corresponding respect for children is evident, parents are ready to assume a more influential teaching role.

What are the benefits of using subthemes for instruction? First, it is well known that helping children perceive options is essential to divergent thinking. This way of looking at things can offer greater advantage than either/or thinking, the my-way or your-way kind of outlook. The impression that there are two sides to every issue is an underestimate in a society that promotes differences. Instead, if everyone can look at situations in a variety of ways, the chances of conciliation, getting along, sharing dominance, and living together even though we are different is much improved. Children need to develop an ability to see many possibilities in situations if they are to do well in problem solving as well as conflict resolution, areas of achievement in which too few people are able to excel. What we have in the subtheme approach is a way to increase duration of parent-child play, a way to practice sensing alternatives, and a way in which the child can learn to use assertion as well as compromise. Unlike a child's immature peers, parents offer a more mature model of how to express and accept differences.

Second, we should take advantage of the identification phase of early childhood. Using play subthemes that are colored according to personality (affective) objectives allows parents to assume certain positive roles that daily affairs might prevent them from modeling. Some values that parents hold dear ordinarily are displayed in response to situations that seldom occur when children are around to observe. Children could follow their parents for weeks and never witness some of the values parents consider most important. However, play offers a unique opportunity to invent situations that permit parents to demonstrate their values in a consistent way.

The illustration of parental values has more effect on children than does an imposition of values. Consequently, it is recommended that, instead of settling for a random positive model of our values, parents choose

a deliberate and consistent model. Goals for teaching values combined with the subtheme approach allow mothers and fathers to do so during play. The primary limitation of this method that we refer to ‘Toy Talk’ relates to age of the children. Until boys and girls are about three and one half years old, they do not have a sufficient language base and the concentration necessary to sustain thematic interaction. Parents continue to report mutual gains from kindergarten through grade three. The upper age limit for using Toy Talk seems to be 10, when soldiers and space toys serve as the last dominant themes.

Vocabulary and Language Development

When parents begin to enjoy fantasy play, as reflected by an increased attention span to a minimum of 12 minutes, and they can model values during play, we concentrate next on vocabulary development. In deciding about the words to convey, it is important to share language that is context relevant. This means respecting the vocabulary that is used by parents rather than prescribing ‘appropriate’ words for them to teach children. The words should be ones used in the home, a factor that varies with education of parents and their socioeconomic status. Accordingly, parents choose from vocabulary lists the words they want to teach. The selected words are then applied to subtheme figures representing the play focus chosen by their child such as airplanes, boats, soldiers doctors and nurses or dinosaurs. Figure 1, Example of Dinosaur Figures, includes words that apply to a subtheme for one of the goals parents can choose to emphasize in play with dinosaurs.

For each word a parent selects, suggestions are given for ways to enact the definition in context. To illustrate:

Accident: something bad happens without being planned

- a. The caveman fell off the mountain. It was an accident.
- b. The caveman cut himself with a rock. It was an accident.

Afraid: feeling that something is going to hurt you

- a. A big mean dinosaur is coming toward her and she feels afraid.
- b. The cavemen are trying to run away from the dinosaurs.

Alone: without anyone else nearby, to be by oneself

- a. The baby dinosaur is sleeping alone under the tree.
- b. The cavemen go to the lake together. They do not swim alone.

Similarly, during the course of a ten-minute “flight” with airplane subthemes, a parent might introduce and try to define words such as passenger, destination, hijacker, delay, schedule, luggage, search, ticket, weapons, altitude, terrorist, afraid, rescue, negotiate, and reunion. Or, while on a submarine voyage to find treasures, the child might be exposed to the meaning of words like buried, search, sailing, submerge, map, compass, surface, depth, pirate, oxygen, ocean, unknown, and sink. Whatever the play theme, parents can enlarge their child’s understand vocabulary (that is always larger than their spoken vocabulary) by defining relevant words in context. Usually we recommend emphasizing a small number of words per week. Using words in more than a single subtheme should reinforce the meanings.

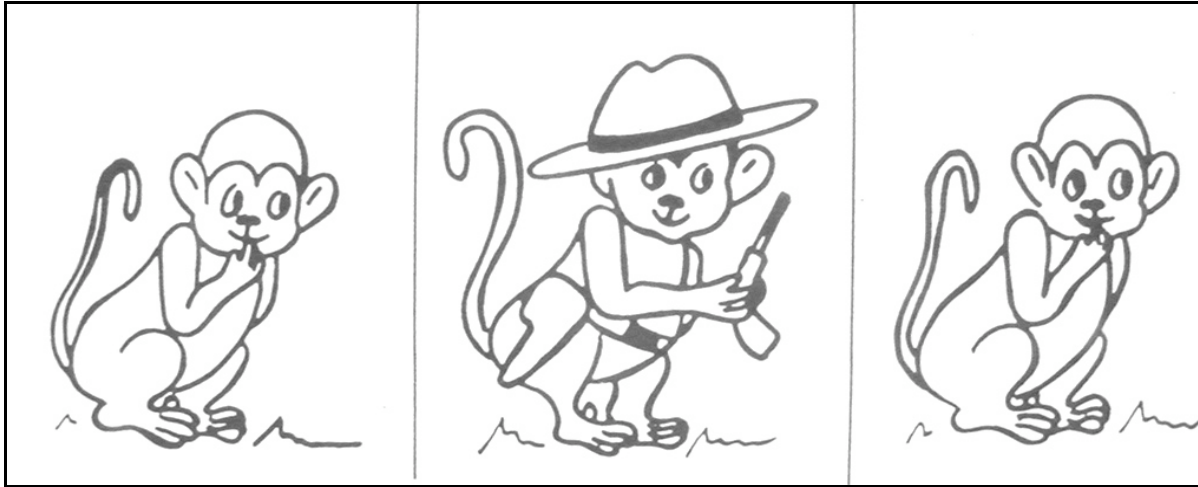
By the time children arrive in kindergarten, there is a great disparity in word power among them. It is estimated that, in terms of sentence structure, a child’s spoken language reaches 90% of its mature level by age six; a first grader uses every part of speech and forms of sentence. Speaking three-word sentences, telling stories, sharing ideas, and telling first name, last name, and age are skills that develop between two and three years of age. Three to four year olds make sentences of four to five words and ask lots of questions. Most four to five year olds can define common words, count to 20, and enjoy looking at books.

The methodology we have described is called “Toy Talk.” This is one way parents can meet their responsibility for contributing to child language. Toy Talk is an activity where children at play are given the opportunity to learn at least one meaning for each of a number of words and use these words in a relevant setting. Toy Talk can also help build positive attitudes and values through play.

Although it is possible to communicate feelings and thoughts with a minimum of vocabulary, the more words at one’s command, the richer and more exact the speech. Each person depends upon language facility to express their ideas, to label thoughts, to urge the consideration of feelings, to describe emotions, and to compare experiences. Everyone has been in the situation of trying to convey an idea when the appropriate words seemed fugitive. The problem is more acute for persons whose speech has been developed in settings where a minority linguistic system or restricted language tends to be prevalent. Students from such backgrounds often find themselves less able to understand and to make themselves understood than do their peers who come to school with facility in the language of the dominant culture. The greater the access to vocabulary, the less frequently all these frustrations occur.

Figure 2. Vocabulary Assessment

PRETEST



A

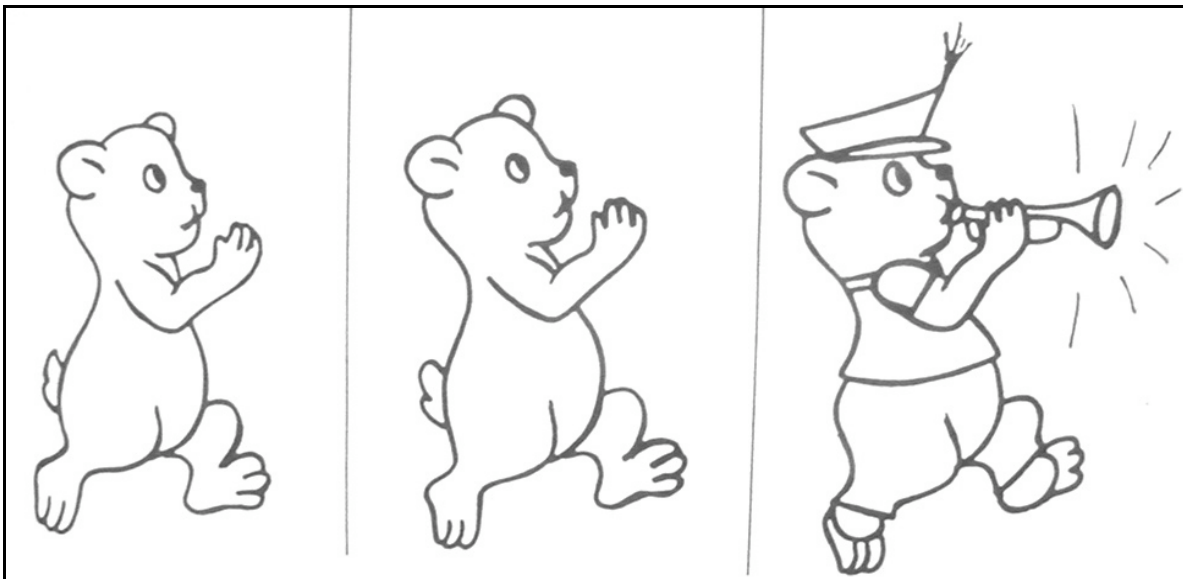
B

C

DIFFERENT: not alike

1. Which picture shows someone who is being different?
2. Why did you choose that one?
3. What do you do to be different?

POSTTEST



A

B

C

DIFFERENT: not alike

1. Which picture shows someone who is being different?
2. Why did you choose that one?
3. What do you do to be different?

Before parents start teaching language through play, we help them learn to assess their child's vocabulary. Otherwise, they lack the means to determine whether they've taught the child anything the child did not already know. Here it is important to underscore the self-concept of parents as the first teachers of their child. The possibility of confirming the effectiveness of their teaching helps them offset feelings of insecurity in the instructional role. Figure 2, Vocabulary Assessment, illustrates the techniques that we devised to check comprehension. The questions parents ask children before and after they teach vocabulary words (called pre/post testing) are the same for each word. However, different pictures are used on the pre and posttest. Children are asked to identify, explain, and elaborate the meaning of each word. This broad based procedure provides a more accurate assessment of comprehension than is common in traditional vocabulary testing for this age group. Our studies show that over 90% of 3 year olds comprehend the pictures.

Summary of the Studies

Parents benefit from learning to pretend with their young children. Some critics regard imaginative play as an unimportant activity that is only appropriate for children. The view we maintain is quite different. Our studies indicate that interactive fantasy play can contribute to mental health at every age. Play is an especially powerful tool on which parents can rely for teaching values, social skills and vocabulary to their children. Play requires creativity, and adults should regularly exercise their imagination to remain viable. Perhaps Michel Montaigne, the French philosopher, said it best, "The play of children is their most serious business." We recommend that participation in this serious business should become a more common aspect of the parent experience.

Accepting the Motives of Young Children

The second segment of this presentation concerns motives of preschoolers in fantasy play. We believe that the prevailing opinion about how boys and girls see things is inconsistent with what is known of normal cognitive development. One way to begin is by recalling the first "television war." This 1991 conflict was fought in the Persian Gulf when many nations opposed the Iraqi annexation of Kuwait. People wanted to watch everything they could of the continuous news coverage even though they feared what was happening. There were frequent briefings from officials at the Pentagon and military leaders in coalition forces. A photographic record of target damage from

the pilot's view was included in the daily report of bombing raids. Service men and women were interviewed in the battle zone about their particular roles and impressions of the progress. Defense experts talked about the strategies of warfare, explained capability and performance of various armaments, and posed scenarios about events that might occur next.

Shortly thereafter, television networks provided children with an orientation to the war and joined parents in trying to respond to the broad range of questions that were expressed by youngsters. What can we do to support the troops? Should our family go to the shopping mall if that is the kind of place terrorists would strike? Why don't we treat the prisoners we capture the same way as they do? Who will take care of the single-parent children and those who have two parents in the war? What do the Moslem soldiers believe about dying in a battle? Can anything be done to save the birds and wildlife we see dripping with oil? How will the burning oil wells affect the rest of the world? Are the people of Iraq our enemy, or is just Saddam Hussein, the man who is their leader?

Differences Between Real and Pretend War

Parents expressed many concerns too and they wondered how watching the war would influence their children. Some were uncertain about allowing sons and daughters to play with toy weapons or military games. Barbara is a 35-year-old mother of two preschoolers. Even before the war, Barbara and her husband felt that violent toys breed lawlessness. "We know that the decision to deny them weapon toys would be difficult for our boys to understand. It would be easy to conform to the majority opinion, but to us that would mean a lowering of our personal standards of integrity."

Denise had misgivings about war toys when her fifth grade son, Ben, got a laser tag set. This game requires a gun that shoots an infrared light beam. The gun is aimed at a red "star sensor" target worn by an opponent. When a sensor is hit, it lights up and plays an electronic series of sounds. After 6 hits, the sensor signals an end to the game. The light that is emitted is not an actual laser beam. It is a safe infrared light enabling children to play in the dark. Ben says that he likes it mostly because for the first time he can play tag and know for certain when someone has been hit. Denise feels there is more to the game than tag causing the mock killing of another person to be viewed as a form of achievement. She has similar complaints about the video war games that Ben wants, particularly one that features a shootout with terrorists trying to blow up the airport.

During our parent education class discussions, we listened to many adults opposed to children playing war. They believe this activity can cause the rise of aggression, support impulsive behavior, and teach children to discount the value of human life. The worry is that children may come to view war as enjoyable and killing an enemy as justifiable so long as it is being done for patriotic reasons. A frequent comment is that there is already too much crime on television and in the community without being reminded of it by children at play.

Children's Understanding of Death

Those who oppose play warfare state that their goal is simply to encourage a reliance on weapons as the way to resolve disputes. They contend that gunplay in childhood could result in the desire for immediate revenge instead of the fair-trial, innocent-until-proven-guilty philosophy that we expect of grownups. Jane, the mother of a four-year-old boy, expresses this perspective.

After overhearing my child tell his cowboy companions he was going to shoot and kill them, I felt compelled to say, "Donnie, you don't really mean that." I reconsidered and thought maybe I should sit him down and explain that when you kill someone they are dead, and they will never breathe again. Then I wondered, if I don't let Donnie play with guns, it might give him the feeling that we are convinced he is so violent he requires different toys from everyone else. Finally, not knowing what to do or say, I ignored him and went on feeling guilty.

Jane's dilemma is a common one. Perhaps we can reduce the problem by more closely examining just what young children mean when they talk about killing and dying. Preschoolers view death as a reversible process. Whether they play hide-and-go-seek or cowboys and Indians, all the dead people are expected to recover quickly and live again. The conventional television cartoon reinforces this notion when the rabbit runs and then falls off a high cliff, hits the ground with a thud, and, in keeping with the child's reversible concept of death, is brought back to life. The same thing happens whenever children watch a television actor die on one program and later miraculously appear as a guest on a talk show. Some time ago, when Paris was a preschooler, we had this conversation:

Paris: Dad, I'm going to dress up like an army man.

Dad: You look just like a soldier. I was a soldier once.

Paris: Why?

Dad: Because the country needed me. We were having a war in Asia.

Paris: Dad, did you die?

Dad: No, I was lucky.

The realization that death is permanent develops in stages. Between ages 3 to 5, there is a lot of curiosity and questioning about death. Unfortunately, many adults suppress this curiosity, and think it is impolite for a child to ask old Mrs. Thompson when she is going to die. In contrast, several generations ago, it was common for children to witness at least one deathbed event, usually the death of a grandparent. Yet, the preschooler believes death is not final; it is like being less alive; just as sleeping people can wake up and people on a trip can return, so too a dead person can come back to life. The coffin limits their movement, but dead people must continue to eat and breathe. People buried at the cemetery know what is happening on the earth, they are sad for themselves and feel it whenever someone thinks of them. Dying disturbs the preschooler, since life in the grave is seen as boring and unpleasant. But, most of all, it bothers the child because death separates people from one another. And, at this age, a child's greatest fear is separation from parents.

Preschoolers are self-centered and preoccupied by present events, so they are unable to recognize how a death in the family may impose future demands on them including the permanent loss of someone's presence, their comfort, love, encouragement, and perhaps financial support. Because these understandings do not come until a later age, little children may not express grief immediately, or even cry like their adult relatives and friends. In fact, it is common for adults to mistakenly conclude that a child is coping well with the loss of a loved one. But, bear in mind that little children are unable to fully comprehend the situation and they can only tolerate short periods of sadness. Because it is easy for them to be distracted, they may appear to be finished with the grief and mourning process earlier than is actually the case.

Even young children recognize that words are an insufficient way to help someone in grief and that what matters most is just being there to console them. To illustrate, four-year old Amanda did not come in from the backyard when she was first called by her mother. Later, when mother asked Amanda to explain why she was late, the little girl replied, "I was helping Judy." Mother wanted more information. "What were you doing?" Amanda

said, "Well, her doll's head got crushed. " Mother wondered aloud, "How could you help fix that?" Amanda had a good answer and said, "I was helping her cry."

Children between 5 to 9 years of age tend to personify death, seeing it as an angelic character that makes rounds in the night to start life for some individuals and end it for others. The big shift in the child's thinking from the first stage to this one is that death is recognized as possibly being final. It is no longer seen as just a reduced form of life. This view of death emerges with increasing personal experiences, which suggest that certain separations are permanent. When the pet goldfish dies, mother buys a new one because, she says, the other one is gone forever. Claude Carteret's (1963) book *Where do Goldfish Go?* shows how children can become upset by adults whose insensitive reaction to animal death is that pets can be replaced. When Valerie's goldfish unexpectedly dies, no one is bothered except Valerie; yet the family is overcome with sorrow when grandfather dies, even though his death had been anticipated for years.

It is not just families that need to become more aware and sensitive to children's feelings about death. In conversations with prospective kindergarten and first-grade teachers we asked, What would you do if some morning at school the class goldfish were found dead? The range of responses included these comments: I would deliver a eulogy; declare a day of mourning; conduct a burial; discuss the virtues of the deceased; consider the after-life of fish; invite testimonials from friends; talk about human death and its meaning; or, flush the fish and say, "Take out your books, it's time for oral reading."

Parents know that they cannot guarantee a long life for pets, but hope they can reduce the amount of exposure their children have to death on television. The outcome of this decision to protect youngsters usually is a refusal to let them watch television detective and police programs, censorship of some aggressive cartoons, and an ambivalence about viewing the local news which frequently portrays violence or death in the community.

The typical 5- to 9-year-old child believes that the cause of death is external, and they personify death as being an outside agent. Since they conceive of death as a person, children feel it is possible to avoid death if protective measures are taken. Thus, one child may claim that his grandfather won't die because the family is taking good care of him. Children of single parents admit they worry most about "What will happen to me if my mother dies?" It is reassuring for them to know that plans have been made so they will be taken care of in the event of an unexpected death.

Finally, about ages 9 to 10, children realize that death is not only final but also inevitable. It will happen to them too, no matter how clever they are or how well they take care of themselves. Instead of imagining death as being controlled by an external agent, they now recognize that internal, biological forces are involved. As children begin to accept the universality and certainty of death, some changes can be observed. They begin to show concern about the meaning of life, their purposes for being on earth, and ways to achieve them. This means that values become important in governing their behavior.

Many children throughout the world are growing up in the midst of death and threat of destruction. They see death on television with such regularity that war has become a common fear. Children look to adults for answers about death, but our attitude is the most important response. Certainly you will want to explain your beliefs about what happens after death. But, bear in mind that youngsters love mystery, and they will adopt our sense of wonder and uncertainty if we are willing to express it.

Child Perceptions of Toys

There are many playthings parents believe children could do without. Some dislike all military toys because they reflect violence. Others oppose stunt-oriented toys that might encourage taking risks on bicycles. Crash cars that fall apart on impact and then can quickly be reconstructed are thought to sanction a disregard for safety, and martial arts dolls create reliance on an irrational method for resolving conflicts. Parents expressing these complaints are often ambivalent because they want to purchase toys that reflect their own values, but they should also recognize that children require opportunities in decision making to develop their own value system. And where is it more appropriate for children to be given options than in their realm of play?

Grownups can justify making some decisions for children such as whether they will attend school, if they will go to the doctor, and when it is time for bed. Parents will also determine how much money can be spent on entertainment and toys for children. On the other hand, to claim that boys and girls need coherent values but deny them practice in making some personal choices is unreasonable. So, parents are bothered about the priority they should assign to feelings of their children in selecting toys for them.

Instead of declaring your values by choosing children's toys or by censoring the content of their fantasy, try to enact your values while you participate in pretend-type play with them. The imposition of values always has less

influence than the illustration of values. If you feel that war tends to be glorified while the darker sides of battle are overlooked, give some attention to the aftermath of war and importance of the peacemaker role in your play.

Most people share the aspiration that international disarmament will rid us of the threat of nuclear war. But, while peace means the end of war, it does not mean an end to differences of opinion. Since there is a critical distinction between the fantasy wars enacted by children and the bloody wars carried out by adults, it is a serious error to misread the motives of the preschool soldier. Grownups who suppose that preschoolers playing soldiers have the same purposes as the warring men and women they imitate, misinterpret the motives of children and their level of understanding about violence, and death. Parents should strive to see favorable possibilities in their children's choice of playthings.

Conflict toys and games can serve to meet certain needs of boys and girls. This kind of play offers relief from feelings of powerlessness and dependence that accounts for much of a child's experience. Surely there is nothing strange about the desire to control others, especially those who daily exercise power over you. Children delight when they can assert themselves in play and make Daddy run away or fall down because he has been shot. Then too, conflict playthings offer a safe setting in which to express disapproved feelings like anger, fear, frustration and jealousy. In many homes these feelings are met by punishment, ridicule, or shame. Danger play also provides an opportunity to repeatedly confront fearful issues, such as war, death, and injury. Although these subjects are of universal concern to youngsters, many adults avoid talking about them and, in the process, increase the anxiety of children.

Taking risks requires practice in a low-cost setting. In danger play children can afford to take chances, to see what it is like to rebel, to be the bad guy, or outcast. These are risks they dare not take in daily family life. In this connection, it is worth noting that war play is the only context in which some children can conduct conflict without guilt. Even though parents should teach how to settle disputes in constructive ways, some boys and girls learn instead to feel guilty whenever they oppose an authority figure. For many kids fighting off the mutual 'enemy' fosters competition needs. War play also allows children to experience leadership, to take charge and command others as well as to become heroes like their favorite television characters. Finally, conflict toys and games are enjoyable, they're fun, a fact that should be appreciated by a leisure-oriented society.

The Influence of Toys and Players

Safety should always be a parent consideration when they buy toys for their children. However, instead of overemphasizing the effect of toys, it is important to understand that the adults who play with children also can have a significant influence. Otherwise, the value of playthings is exaggerated and the impact of players is underestimated. Relatives cannot fulfill their guidance role merely by purchasing the right kind of toys or forbidding the wrong ones.

Adults complain that children are inclined to believe whatever they see advertised on television. Is the adult condition better if we believe everything we read on toy packaging? For example, exposure to so-called educational or creative toys will not necessarily support imaginative behavior. Creativity does not reside in certain toys because of their design, but mostly in the interaction between the persons who play with them. Research on creative behavior and modeling shows that parents should play with their children; they should get involved instead of limiting themselves to judging merits of playthings. The assumption that certain toys can have a disabling effect on the personality of children is unwarranted. But the view that adults can have an impact through play has been demonstrated.

Parents and grandparents should discontinue the practice of censoring the content of children's fantasy play, except in instances of bodily danger. Once the direction of children's pretending becomes the choice of adults, boys and girls are no longer the decision makers. And, in fantasy play, making choices is essential for participation (Taylor, 1999). Adults can share in determining the agenda if they are willing to accept the role of a play partner. It is unfair to interpret the content of children's play as representing adult motives. When an actor portrays the role of a killer in a film or a stage play, the audience may say the performance was convincing and therefore successful. However, when a pretending child chooses to play the same type of violent role, the reasons for deciding to act like or become that particular character may receive greater attention than the performance. This pessimistic interpretation of child's play leads to unfair inferences and the attribution of motives that children do not possess. The motives of children who kill each other temporarily using toy weapons are unrelated to motivation for violent activity in adult life.

Conclusion

Mothers and fathers should accept the stages of normal development through which all children grow in understanding the finality of death. When the war play of young children is misconstrued as a personality fault or inclination toward violence in adult life, the motives of boys and girls are unfairly judged. Pretending helps children to confront their common fears about war, death, and injury and enables them to experience vicarious power and control over such events.

Everyone possesses creative abilities to some degree. Most of what little children learn before schooling comes from guessing, questioning, searching, manipulating, and playing. These activities define the creative thinking process and characterize the method of instruction that we call Toy Talk. Given the natural creativity of children, the main concern of parents should be to preserve and enrich this priceless asset that supports adjustment and success throughout life. Robert Louis Stevenson (1915) urged adults to always keep in mind the child view of how play stimulates imagination.

When I was sick and lay a-bed,
I had two pillows at my head,
And all my toys beside me lay
To keep me happy all the day.

And sometimes for an hour or so
I watched my leaden soldiers go,
With different uniforms and drills,
Among the bed clothes, through the hills.

And sometimes sent my ships in fleets
All up and down among the sheets;
Or brought my trees and houses out,
And planted cities all about.

I was the giant great and still
That sits upon the pillow-hill,
And sees before him, dale and plain,
The pleasant land of counterpane.

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Summary Statement

Nations have begun to assign higher priority to creative thinking in schools. Persons who possess creative abilities are more able to accommodate novelty, avoid boredom, cope with an abundance of consumer choices, accept complexity, tolerate ambiguity, make independent judgments, use leisure time constructively, and adapt to new knowledge. These assets are vital for societies characterized by rapid change. Creativity is most prominent when curiosity is encouraged, self-directed learning is practiced, and access to imagination is common. There is agreement that support for these conditions should begin at home during early childhood. However, many adults do not know how play affects development and, as a result, sometimes make unwise decisions on what child activities and behaviors to encourage.

Strom and Strom explain why children need to play with parents and how the benefits of this fantasy interaction differ from the advantages offered by peers. This presentation describes experiments with culturally diverse populations that reveal how mothers and fathers can rely on play as a medium to teach vocabulary, values, and social skills to preschool children. ‘Toy Talk’ promotes reciprocal learning by merging the separate strengths of parent and child. The authors examine common apprehensions expressed by parents about the motives of young pretenders and the possible effects that certain kinds of toys might have on the formation of character. The progression of cognitive development is portrayed in a way that enables parents to accept motives of children at play and establish a mutually satisfying relationship.

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