

Social Play*

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Introduction

You already have been introduced to the topic of play as part of the *Infant Play Activity*, using the Belsky & Most play scale. Developmental psychologists place a great deal of emphasis on children's play for two important reasons. The first is that children's play is a window on the minds of children. Skills, competencies, and beliefs that otherwise may be difficult or impossible to "see" very often will be revealed with clarity through a child's play. The second reason that we emphasize play is that play is the "business" of early childhood. Sometimes it is said (my wife and I said this to our children) that the "job" of school-aged children is to do well in school. Well, it can also be said that the "job" of preschoolers is to play.

The primary difference between the play of infants, and the play of preschoolers, that the preschoolers play together. Their play is fundamentally social. Preschoolers love to play "house," "doctor," "school," and so on. In fact, these themes give us one clue about the "functions" of early play: Young children's play is a way for them to practice and master important skills, roles, and behaviors that they will need as they enter the worlds outside the home, including school.

Some people think that play is "just for children." Nothing could be further from the truth. Although play is (or ought to be) the predominant activity of childhood, play is not just for children. There are lots of reasons adolescents and adults should play, not the least of which is that play is good for one's mental and physical health. Playful people are also more

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productive, and more creative. If you would like to learn more about play and its importance, visit the website for the Play Institute. I imagine you will find it interesting.

Requirements

The social play activity will be done in class using videotapes taken of the same children you have seen in many of the other activities. The videotapes the social play activity were made during a “summer play camp” that children in TCU’s Child Development Project were invited to attend during two consecutive summers. The children were two-and-one-half years during the first play camp, and were three-and-one-half years during the second play camp. We used a time sampling scheme, so that each child was videotaped for two, four-minute play episodes on each day of camp (children attend two days per week, for two weeks). The play camp schedule included two free play sessions, one that was rich in pretend play props (e.g., a kitchen area), and one that was rich in action-based play (e.g., a sand table).

Steps

1. Attend lectures and do the associated readings.
2. Attend class (probably during the second unit) to score the videotape; select a partner.
3. Get together with your partner to compute reliabilities and plan your written report.
4. Write your report and turn it in by the announced deadline.

Notes

- Do this activity with a partner.
- Your written report should include (a) your partner’s and your score-sheets, (b) computation and interpretation of your partner’s and your reliabilities, and (c) a *joint* set of answers to the questions (see below).
- Your grade will be based on your completion of the scoring assignment, and the quality of your answers to the questions. Your grade will *not* be based on the level of agreement you and your partner achieve, as reflected in your reliabilities.

Materials

- Description of play categories (“Terms for Play Assessment”).
- Score sheet for the play observation (part of this handout).

Readings

- The relevant parts of your textbook.

Questions

1. Answer the “Four General Questions” of observation as they pertain to this activity (see “Use of Observational Techniques” above).
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the observational method used in this activity?
3. What are the potential sources of observational bias in this observational activity?
4. How might children’s play in this context be related to their attachment style as an infant? Make a prediction for each child that you and your partner scored, and justify (briefly) your prediction.

Terms for Play Assessment

You will be using a scoring scheme that was developed by one of my former doctoral students—Dr. Anne Ware—for her research. According to this scheme, play can be analyzed along two dimensions: cognitive and social. In this activity you will not be concerned with the cognitive content of play, only with the social sophistication of play. As we will discuss later in the course, children’s play becomes more social and pretense-oriented as they develop. Generally speaking, infants tend to play alone, and their play contains only the rudiments of pretense. However, by the time children enter Kindergarten, their play is highly social and their pretense is extremely sophisticated. Accordingly, developmental psychologists have identified a sequence of play behaviors that begins with solitary play, ends with interactive play, and includes parallel play as a transition between the two. Here are the categories you will use in your play assessment:

- U** *Non-play*. The child has no apparent focus of attention on any object or activity. This includes focusing their attention on others rather than playing. Also includes “rough-housing” or negative aggression.
- S** *Solitary Play*. Playing by one’s self. No peers are nearby or engaged in a similar activity.
- P** *Parallel Play*. The child is playing near but not with a peer. The target child and peer are engaged in similar play activities. They may briefly look at each other’s activity, or briefly exchange eye contact.
- I** *Interactive Play*. The child’s play involves reciprocal interaction with a peer in a common activity. This ranges from brief interactions involving only a toy to extended interactions with obvious collaboration and/or exchange.

Social Play Scoresheet

Date _____

Subject _____

Scorer _____

| Minute | 0-10 sec | 11-20 sec | 21-30 sec | 31-40 sec | 41-50 sec | 51-60 sec |
|--------|----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 2 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 3 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 4 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| Break | | | | | | |
| 5 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 6 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 7 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |
| 8 | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S | U S |
| | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I | P I |