

What We Know About Play

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

Have you ever taken a few moments to sit back and contemplate all the bustling activity of the children in your care? Chances are, you'll see movements and interactions and activities that seem at once both purposeful and random. You may wonder what is happening to each individual child as they play, what they are learning, how they are learning it, and why they are pursuing that activity now and in that way.

If you do, you are not alone. For generations, researchers have been intrigued by the why, how, and what of children's play. If you want new reference points the next time you have a few minutes to enjoy watching children do what children do, take a quick walk through the knowledge base on play as it now exists. Among the many that could be highlighted, you'll find a selection of resources below.

The state of the knowledge base

First, a word about existing research. Put simply, the knowledge base about play, consisting of studies that have

been conducted over the past several generations, is sizable. And yet, what we still don't know looms large. Suffice it to say that there are plenty of masters' theses and doctoral dissertation topics to keep graduate students in business for a long time to come.

At *Playing for Keeps*, we are committed to serving as the central source of information about play, and to that end we are developing a major project that will collect information about all the major studies that have been done on play. The objective is to create a comprehensive, categorized database that summarizes the knowledge base and makes it easily available to anyone who needs it, including scholars, educators, human

services practitioners, parents, and the toy and children's entertainment industries. In addition, the project will bring together scholars and practitioners to identify gaps in the knowledge base and develop strategies for filling them.

Categorizing types of research

Similar to most child development topics, a vast number of possible

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in Boston, Massachusetts. He is also a charter member of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum within the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Among his publications are *Play, Policy and Practice* (Redleaf Press), and *Children's Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications* (edited with Smilansky; Teachers College Press). He currently serves on the board of New England AEYC.

questions exists about play that are appropriate for researchers to tackle. Any early childhood educator or caregiver who wants to learn more by going through the literature might organize their efforts into these categories:

- A review of basic theories about child development
- Studies that document the developmental benefits of play for children
- Investigations into why play is useful for children, i.e. what happens within the activity of play that makes it such an effective learning tool
- Documentation about the impact of various approaches to using play as a learning tool, i.e. what works in classrooms and other settings for young children as well as studies about play behaviors that may not be healthy for children

Theories about child development

Want to go back to the starting point for much of today's thinking about play? Start with the theorists who articulated the frameworks most subsequent scholars have used to shape their studies. You'll want to explore:

- Jean Piaget, who focuses on learning that happens through play with objects, symbolic play, and games with rules. You'll find it all in *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (Norton, 1962).
- L. S. Vygotsky, who theorized that children develop cognitive capacities through social interactions that eventually become internalized. "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice," noted Vygotsky, "first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual rela-

tionships between individuals." A good summary of his theory can be found in *Mind in Society*, a collection of his essays (Harvard University Press, 1978).

Studies about the developmental benefits of play

Ready to spend a couple of afternoons in a college or university library? Here is a sampling of studies that an early childhood educator or caregiver might want to consult for an understanding of the developmental benefits of play for young children:

- The role of imaginative and pretend play: look at Jerome L. Singer's chapter titled "Cognitive and Affective Implications of Imaginative Play in Childhood" in *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (edited by M. Lewis, Lippincott, Williams & Wilkins 2002) and "Theory of Mind Development and Social Understanding" by Janet Wilde Astington and Jennifer Jenkins, which appeared in *Cognition and Emotion*, 9 (1995).
- Connection between play and the skill building that is central to developing emergent literacy: check out *Emergent Literacy: Writing and Reading* by William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby (Ablex Publishing corp., 1986) and "Symbolic Play, Phonological Awareness, and Literacy Skills at Three Age Levels" by Doris Bergen and D. Mauer that appears in *Literacy and Play in the Early Years* (Christie and Roskos, editors; Erlbaum, 2000).
- Development of appropriate social skills and positive social outcomes: Robert J. Coplan and K. H. Rubin cover this territory in "Social Play", a chapter in *Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond*, edited by Doris Fromberg and Doris Bergen (Garland Press, 1998).
- Motor development: see "Physical Activity Play: The Nature and Function of a Neglected Aspect of Play" by

Anthony D. Pelligrini and P. K. Smith in *Child Development*, 69 (1998).

- Cultural differences in play: Jaipaul L. Roopnarine leads a group that has examined cultural difference in play (e.g., differences in preferences for cooperative rather than competitive activities and differences based on typical play materials available) that can be found in *Multiple Perspectives on Play in Early Childhood*, (State University of New York Press, 1998) edited by O. N. Saracho and B. Spodek.
- An easy-to-read summary of some of the major themes relating to play through age three — including a description of the Touchpoints Model in the appendix — can be found in *The Irreducible Needs of Children: What Every Child Must Have to Grow, Learn, and Flourish* (Perseus Publishing, 2000) by pediatrician T. Barry Brazelton and child psychiatrist Stanley L. Greenspan.

How and why play helps to shape children

While there has been significant documentation on the fact that play does indeed shape the physical, cognitive, sensory, social, and emotional development of children, there is less understanding of exactly what it is in the play activity and interchange that creates the impact.

According to Professor Doris Bergen of Miami University of Ohio, speaking at the March 2000 Playing for Keeps national conference at Wheelock College in Boston, a new wave of research questions is now capturing the attention of scholars — research that looks "more precisely at the meanings of play for children, . . . cognitive processes such as children's theory of mind, educational processes such as language/literacy development, and sociocultural meanings imbedded in play of children of diverse cultures . . .

. The relationship of play to brain development, personality differences in playfulness, and the adaptive nature of play in human evolution are also of current interest to researchers, as is the influence of technology."

Playing for Keeps will be tracking and reporting on this new level of inquiry as results are documented. In the meantime, a couple of papers that may whet the appetite would include:

■ Investigations about the use of play as an adaptive mechanism: See "Evolving a Consilience of Play Definitions: Playfully" by Brian Sutton Smith in *Play and Culture Studies, Volume 2*, (Ablex Publishing, 1998) edited by Stuart Reifel.

■ The differences among children in their willingness to engage in fantasy play: take a look at Jerome and Dorothy Singer's chapter on fantasy and imagination in *Play from Birth to Twelve and Beyond*, (Garland Press, 1998) edited by Doris Fromberg and Doris Bergen.

The outcomes of play

Given that play is considered to be best practiced in early childhood educational programs, and that new practice innovations need to be field tested in various settings, you can be sure that somewhere out there, researchers are investigating the impact of play. Among recent studies that have documented that play, in fact, does matter to the healthy development of children are these:

■ The value of recess for elementary school children is explored in "What the Research Says About the Need for Recess" by Olga S. Jarrett and Darlene M. Maxwell (2000).

■ A study conducted by Jerome and Dorothy Singer in child care centers serving low-income children in New Haven, Atlanta, and Los Angeles found that increasing make-believe play for

pre-schoolers improved their school readiness skills (www.yale.edu/opa/newsr/00-06-01-02.all.html).

■ A study conducted by Case Western Reserve University Professor Sandra Russ as part of a longitudinal project documenting children's creativity over time found that children who showed the most sophisticated, imaginative play as first and second graders were the most creative problem solvers as fifth and sixth graders (www.apa.org/monitor/nov99/nl3.html). Find out more at the next *Playing for Keeps* National Conference in March 2003, at which Professor Russ will be presenting her "hot-off-the-presses" findings from the next phase of the longitudinal study.

■ *Play in Practice: Case Studies in Young Children's Play*, by Cheryl Render Brown and Catherine Marchant (Redleaf Press, 2000) includes excellent training cases emanating from play theory and real life practice with children.

■ Several studies have been designed to empirically test the developmental impact of toys that can be used to depict violent activities. *Playing for Keeps* is currently working on a position paper that will review the research on this topic and present useful suggestions to parents and early childhood educators and caregivers to help them make decisions about such products.

More to come . . .

In the coming months, watch for updates on the *Playing for Keeps* knowledge base documentation project and other *Playing for Keeps* activities on our web site at www.playingforkeeps.org. If you have any suggestions for research that is begging to be done, feel free to contact executive director Susan Oliver at soliver@playingforkeeps.org. In addition, a review of current research will be presented by Jerome and Dorothy Singer at the next *Playing for Keeps* National Conference on March 14, 2003 at Yale

University in New Haven, Connecticut. You'll find more details about the conference on our web site or by calling (877) 755-5347.

References

Jarrett, O. S., & Maxwell, D. M. (2000). "What the Research Says About the Need for Recess." In Clements, R. L. (ed) *Elementary School Recess*. Boston: American Press.

Susan Oliver's favorite childhood play space was the huge haymow in the main barn on the dairy farm where she was raised. She and her siblings spent countless carefree hours arranging hay bales into houses, forts, and small villages and populating them with imaginary children and families. Since then, she has spent much of her career working in the not-for-profit sector to improve living and learning conditions for children.

Edgar Klugman has always enjoyed play. That is what attracted him to teaching. Can you imagine having the opportunity to make a movie, raise chickens in your classroom, produce eggs from a bantam hen, collect 37 eggs, and have enough to make a wedding cake? And, what is a wedding cake without a wedding? They had to write a play in which the prince and princess married. Of course, they shared the cake with the audience along with song and dance. Play can lead to other opportunities. And, he continues to play!