

The Importance of Play

A Importância de Brincar

Sofia PIRES^{✉1}, Sandra BORGES¹, Teresa TEMUDO²
Acta Med Port 2024 May;37(5):320-322 • <https://doi.org/10.20344/amp.20641>

Keywords: Child; Child Development; Play and Playthings
Palavras-chave: Brincadeiras e Brinquedos; Criança; Desenvolvimento da Criança

INTRODUCTION

Play, embedded in human existence, is covered in symbolism, learning, and representations that depend on history, culture, and individual characteristics. It is a hallmark of the fullness of life and happiness in children. Could it also be an essential component in health and in the development of good medical practices?

NOWADAYS

Play takes a secondary position in a world centered around academic success. Schools, teachers, parents, and technologies tend to direct and manipulate play, using alternative strategies to achieve academic goals. The place of imagination and creativity is removed, making play an almost inaccessible luxury. It is important to remember its value within a perspective of healthy development.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (revised in 2019) states that children have “(...) the right to rest and leisure, the right to engage in play and recreational activities”.¹ Neurobiologically, play is directly linked to the development of the prefrontal cortex, which controls the most complex levels of thought and functioning.² It also promotes the creation of new neuronal connections between previously unrelated areas.²

HISTORY

Major developmental authors interpret play and emphasize its importance. Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) classified it as cathartic, helping to release unpleasant feelings, replacing them with positive ones.³ Jean Piaget (1896 - 1980) considered it the most important tool in the child's mental development, from a cognitive perspective.³ Erik Erikson (1902 - 1994) discussed play throughout the early years of life as an integral part of the evolutionary process.³

Play emerges in various forms, involving objects, goals, individual or group play, parallel or interactive, passive or active, energetic, silent or noisy, contemplative, free or structured. It encompasses any freely chosen activity, with intrinsic motivation, as long as it is done with enjoyment.⁴ It

is the foundation of civilization.⁴

THROUGHOUT DEVELOPMENT

Depending on exploration, increasing interaction with the environment and acquired abilities, play takes on different forms. It is important to adapt the challenges to different developmental stages.⁵ This evolution begins with exploration of the world, leading to functionality and then symbolism, becoming more complex in social play with rules.⁵ There are many different types of play: synchronized play (in the first months – interaction with gaze, exchanges of smiles, sounds), play with body and movement (from the womb, through muscular development and motor planning, to strength control, walking and running), play with objects (curiosity and exploration with chew tools and food could be the first), symbolic play and make-believe (representation of imagination and creativity), social play (from the simplest peek-a-boo), narrative play and stories (development of communication, understanding, socialization), among others.⁶

THE BENEFITS

Through play, children develop skills by varying, repeating, and recombining behavior sequences outside their primary context.⁷ Thus, it brings developmental and learning benefits: emotional, behavioral, social, cognitive, and physical.⁸

Play is an unique language that conveys joy, frustrations, achievements, skills, and difficulties by expressing itself to the world, in contact with the inner reality.² It allows new experiences, behavioral and social training in a safe environment, an opportunity to recreate real situations, conflicts, difficulties and to develop a diverse emotional repertoire, regulatory ability, negotiating with others and also generates a sense of identity.⁷ It builds trust in others and attachment through interaction.^{7,8} It develops social relationships, increases empathy, cooperation, sharing, and provides the opportunity to make decisions.⁵ It promotes communication, language and memory skills, the development of resilience,

1. Serviço de Psiquiatria da Infância e Adolescência. Centro Hospitalar de Vila Nova de Gaia/Espinho. Vila Nova de Gaia. Portugal.

2. Serviço de Neuropediatria. Centro Hospitalar Universitário de Santo António. Porto. Portugal.

✉ Autor correspondente: Sofia Pires. ana.rodrigues.pires@chvng.mh-saude.pt

Recebido/Received: 04/09/2023 - Aceite/Accepted: 19/12/2023 - Publicado/Published: 02/05/2024

Copyright © Ordem dos Médicos 2024



adaptability and reasoning skills, contributing to better problem-solving.⁸ It is useful for processing new information (cognitive and emotional), stimulates fantasy and promotes creative thinking.^{7,8} It enhances motor skills, increases range of motion, coordination, balance, flexibility, improves muscle control and strength.^{7,8} Play is also therapeutic: it helps reduce pain, anxiety and depression, reduces the risk of psychopathology and fatigue associated with chronic diseases.⁷

HOW TO PLAY?

Regarding the process, healthy play is intended to be enjoyable and spontaneous. It is important to let children guide at their own pace and to avoid imposing ideas, manipulating play or creating power struggles.⁶ Playing provides the opportunity to exercise control and autonomy and, consequently, improves self-confidence and safety.⁴ There should always be room for praise, attention, appreciation of achievements and acquisition of skills while avoiding criticism and encouraging autonomous problem-solving.⁶ When it comes to objects (never excluding the possibility that they may only exist in the imaginary sphere of individual creativity), suitable toys are those that allow for mutable and flexible forms of use, applications and symbolism, allowing children to use their imagination and create their own play.⁵ They are appropriate when adjusted to the level of development, when they do not cause boredom (by not allowing challenge) or frustration (when of a higher level); when they involve multiple senses or take on different shapes or interpretations, involve hand use or promote physical activity and movement; ideally washable and transportable to various contexts.^{5,8}

THE DIGITAL WORLD

While play is constantly evolving, it is noted that modern technology has brought about profound changes in play behaviors. However, not all mentioned learning is acquired through the digital world. Despite providing undeniable advantages, promoting educational moments, social interaction, and acquisition of physical skills, digital technology operates within narrow limits and specific capacities on the developmental scales. It does not contribute to a biopsychosocial development endowed with enriching sensory experiences, with all the sensations and emotions that contact with real world entails (shapes, textures, colors, sizes, dynamics of interaction/climatic factors, multimodal, multisensory experiences). It should be stressed that increased levels of physical activity and short screen time are favorable to development.⁹ Outdoor activities promote opportunities for physically active habits, address obesity and encourage social skills training.⁹ While it is not possible to eliminate screen time, it is important to have limits and opportunities

to diversify activities and reflect on digital media.⁵

IN THE CLINICAL SETTING

In the medical context, it can be difficult to assess a child who is playing. Previous traumatic experiences, the 'fear of the white coat', hostile hospital environments devoid of the colorful comfort of play can compromise observation and can make it difficult to identify symptoms. The scientific community is aware that play is therapeutic in reducing anxiety, stress and pain related to procedures or hospital environments, contributing to adaptation to the illness/treatment, thereby lowering the need for sedative drugs, enhancing treatment adherence and ensuring better clinical outcomes.¹⁰ As for therapeutic decision-making, it promotes empowerment and confidence in the child, avoiding opposition to and refusal of certain situations.¹⁰ In the communication field, play thrives as a symbolic language full of meaning and transparency in emotional expression. It avoids labels and difficult words, mediates conflicts, and provides access to the inner world; it helps build new narratives, allows sharing and negotiates meanings.¹⁰

In this framework, play provides the ideal opportunity for engagement and relationship with children, serving as a bridge in approaching and interacting in the context of medical assessment or intervention. Toys can be used as positive reinforcement, to get attention, self-regulation, interest and, consequently, collaboration. The clinician can thus identify warning signs, communicate with the child, perform a physical examination, observe difficulties, and read emotional states. It is also the clinician's role to promote and maintain an appropriate clinical observation environment where there are appropriate toys for different ages.

Play is crucial in the existence of any human being, enabling us to become competent adults in all areas. It is an indicator of mental well-being with obvious potential for individual physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. It presents clear benefits and utility in a medical context as a tool for observing children's psychomotor development.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

SP: Literature search and writing of the manuscript.

SB, TT: Critical review of the manuscript.

All authors approved the final version to be published.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

FUNDING SOURCES

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

REFERENCES

1. Fundo das Nações Unidas para a Infância. Convenção sobre os direitos da criança e protocolos facultativos. 2019;1-80. [cited 2023 Nov 08]. Available from: https://www.unicef.pt/docs/pdf_publicacoes/convencao_direitos_crianca2004.pdf.
2. Yogman M, Garner A, Hutchinson J, Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff RM, Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, Council on Communications and Media. The power of play: a pediatric role in enhancing development in young children. *Pediatrics*. 2018;142:e20182058.
3. Burriss KG, Tsao LL. Review of research: how much do we know about the importance of play in child development? *Child Educ*. 2002;78:230-3.
4. Hansen J, Macarini SM, Martins GD, Wanderlind FH, Vieira ML. O brincar e suas implicações para o desenvolvimento infantil a partir da psicologia evolucionista. *J Hum Growth Dev*. 2007;17:133-43.
5. Kang S. The power of play. *Am J Health Promot*. 2020;34:573-5.
6. National Institute for Play. Play: the basics. 2018. [cited 2023 Nov 08]. Available from: <https://www.nifplay.org/what-is-play/the-basics/>.
7. Nijhof SL, Vinkers CH, van Geelen SM, Duijff SN, Achterberg EJ, van der Net J, et al. Healthy play, better coping: the importance of play for the development of children in health and disease. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev*. 2018;95:421-9.
8. Ginsburg KR, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Communications, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*. 2007;119:182-91.
9. Hinkley T, Brown H, Carson V, Teychenne M. Cross sectional associations of screen time and outdoor play with social skills in preschool children. *PLoS One*. 2018;13:e0193700.
10. Perasso G, Camurati G, Morrin E, Dill C, Dolidze K, Clegg T, et al. Five reasons why pediatric settings should integrate the play specialist and five issues in practice. *Front Psychol*. 2021;12:687292.