

Understanding Play

Lesson Aim

Explain the purpose of play in the cognitive, physical and social development of a child.

Uninterrupted play is important for a child's social, physical and mental development; play encourages brain development, stimulates creativity, increases a child's academic ability, and enhances quality of life through to adulthood. Children who have learnt how to play, will have a more playful and creative approach to life as adults.

This course focuses on the provision of play opportunities for children and teenagers.

PLAY LEADERSHIP

Play leaders are people who create and manage play opportunities.

Sometimes play leaders are people who are fulfilling a dual role. They can be parents, teachers, pre school teachers, or nannies, who look after both the play needs, and other needs of children in their care.

Some play leaders are employed specifically to concentrate on managing the play needs of children. They may be an assistant to a teacher or care worker, or they may be employed in a supervised playground, play centre or other facility that focuses on play.

Play is far more important than most people think.

Children who play well develop properly.

Children who are deprived of play opportunities will develop abnormally and are likely to suffer problems as a result later in life.

Adults who cannot or do not play usually suffer greater stress.

Children learn more life skills through play than they do through formal education.

Levels of Childhood Development

Child psychology is concerned with the development of a person during childhood. This involves the development of a child's mental capacity (i.e. cognitive development); and the development of their emotional and social behaviour.

It is important to state that most of these forms of development do not simply cease as a child reaches adulthood. Adults also are capable of growing and changing in terms of their mental, emotional and social behaviours. Some characteristics are however more easy to develop and change during childhood.

It is important to note that any distinction between cognitive, emotional and social aspects of behaviour are purely theoretical (ie. the distinction is made simply to help us learn and understand, but in reality, you should think of these aspects overlapping and blending with each other, rather than being distinctly separate parts of the child's character).

When problems develop in any area of development, they usually become rapidly evident in other areas as well. The study of child psychology is partly concerned with identifying such interrelationships.

Needless to say, child psychologists are particularly interested in discovering the causes of certain patterns of behaviour in children. They are interested, for instance, in how the child's environment and relationships (e.g. home, school and neighbourhood) affect the child's development. This involves an attempt to establish causes.

They are also interested in "outcomes" of certain childhood experiences; for example, how does the experience of living in a poverty stricken environment affect the later behaviour of the child?

It is difficult to identify "one" solitary cause for any behaviour. Usually behaviour is far more complex, having been influenced by a mixture of prior experiences.

Nature or Nurture

The nature-nurture debate involves how we explain the causes (ie. determinants) of particular characteristics in people. The nature position argues that many characteristics are genetically or biologically determined - that is, they are hereditary. Hereditary refers to the transmission of genes from parent to offspring which determine the course of development in a growing embryo.

The nurture position, on the other hand, argues that most characteristics are determined by environmental influences. These influences may be familial, educational or social. Behaviourist and social learning theorists often claim that the infant's consciousness is like a blank slate after birth -that all characteristics are the product of the environmental influences the infant experiences.

Consider the following question in the context of the nature-nurture debate:

Why does Mark drink so much alcohol?

It may be because he inherited his father's genetic predisposition towards alcoholism. Alternatively, it may be because he has learnt the habit from being constantly exposed to his father's drinking behaviour.

Common sense tells us that often genetic and environmental influences interact to produce a specific characteristic. Most psychologists thus agree that both the nature and nurture approaches should be used in trying to locate the determinants of a child's characteristics.

Isolating hereditary characteristics

An interesting research method which child psychologists often use is to compare monozygotic twins and dizygotic twins. This provides a way of isolating genetic influence. The rationale is as follows:

- Since monozygotic (identical) twins are born from the same zygote (an ovum that has been fertilised by a sperm cell), they will have an identical genetic make up.
- Dizygotic twins are born from two different zygotes, thus their genetic make-up differs as much as any two siblings genetic make-up would.

Example: A study to see if intelligence is genetically determined.

The researcher will want to see if the intellectual capacity of identical twins is more similar, or more closely correlated than that of dizygotic twins. If it is (and this has actually been discovered to be correct) then the evidence indicates that intelligence is largely genetically determined.

Cause versus correlation

Though the ideal aim of the child psychologist may be to identify the causes of a specific behaviour or characteristic, this is practically impossible to do.

In a world with such a multitude of influences -things happen all of the time - it is not possible to attribute one cause to one characteristic.

Example: It has been discovered that children brought up in an impoverished environment often have a low level of cognitive ability.

- Firstly, we cannot say that the former causes the latter, because there are always exceptions to the rule (i.e. There are always disadvantaged children who succeed in intellectual pursuits).
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- Secondly, we cannot isolate what particular influence in the environment has caused cognitive disadvantages -is it inadequate education, poor nutrition, stress in the home, lack of play things (e.g. toys), or something else? It could be any one (or several) of these.

Instead of using the term "cause", child psychologists use the term correlation.

In the above case they say that there is a high correlation between impoverished environment and low cognitive ability in children. The term correlation means that there is a strong association, which, in some contexts, implies that the one variable (environment) has a strong influence on the other variable (cognition).

Rather than wasting their time trying to find "causes", researchers focus on the degree of association or influence expressed in the term correlation.

Continuity versus discontinuity

Theorists differ as to how they regard the way in which people change as they get older. Some regard human development as a continuous, sequential process; they view development as a process of continuous building upon previous knowledge, with no abrupt changes occurring. Others however view development as a series of distinct stages, each stage having its own peculiar characteristics, with fairly abrupt changes occurring as a person moves from one stage to the next.

According to the "stage theorists", each stage of development has a dominant theme; each stage is qualitatively different from the previous stage; and stages occur in a fixed universal sequence.

CROSS SECTIONAL AND LONGITUDINAL STUDIES

Prominent research psychologists in the field of child psychology have employed the following two research methods to investigate how children change as they grow older.

The first-cross sectional method involves a short term study, investigating groups of children from various different age groups, and looking into how they behave in the same situation. The behaviours of children of different ages are compared in order to find out how a child's behaviour changes with age. This method can show how children's patterns of behaviour change as they grow, but it cannot explore the influences behind such change. Nor can it determine the "stability" of characteristics (i.e. It cannot show whether a child of a certain age, exhibits the same characteristics at a later age). Cross sectional studies cannot do this because they don't investigate the same children again at a later age. Longitudinal study is useful in overcoming this problem.

In longitudinal studies, the researcher observes and investigates the behaviour of a group of children over an extended period of time. The same children are assessed at intermittent intervals, allowing the researcher to determine how a specific child's behaviour changes (or remains the same) as he/she grows older. Under certain conditions, the researcher will also be able to determine factors that influenced a particular developmental pattern. Despite advantages in this method of study, there are obvious disadvantages in the time and cost, which often preclude its use.

Reliability of verbal reports

The first thing that researchers need before they can start working is information on the behaviour of their subjects. Such information can be obtained through observing a subject, under natural or experimental situations. In most areas of psychology however, the research is based upon information acquired from the subjects themselves, through verbal questioning and verbal report. In the case of child psychology, the children themselves as well as associated adults (e.g. parents and teachers) are usually the main sources of information.

Children may lack the cognitive ability to interpret clearly the experimenter's questions, or may be unable to express themselves well enough. In addition, they are emotionally vulnerable in strange situations, so their responses might not be an accurate reflection of their actual experiences.

Investigations have found that parents are not as reliable as what might have been hoped for. Parents' long term memory of their children's behaviour is not generally accurate. Often they are confused as to which of their children exhibited certain behaviours. Also, parents may tend to idealise their children, and subliminally censor out their child's negative behaviours.

Comparisons between parents verbal accounts of their child's past behaviour, and evidence in medical records of their child's previous habits (e.g. thumb sucking), often show that parents will deny remembering such habits, even when they themselves had previously reported those habits to a doctor. Parents are very keen to give a positive image of their child rearing practices, that they often make errors of omission unconsciously and unintentionally.

Solutions to such problems of verbal inaccuracies might be to seek greater detail, hence making parents think more deeply; for example:

- Asking parents to write a detailed, hour by hour diary of a child's behaviour patterns.
- Researchers contacting parents at regular intervals to prompt them to record the child's behaviour.

Ethics and experiments

The experimental method of research differs from the purely observational method in that the researcher manipulates aspects of the environment, and measures the behavioural responses of the child. It is important to note that in using experimental conditions in the laboratory, or in the natural setting, the psychologist must remain ethical. Ethics is concerned with maintaining moral standards and fairness to all involved. Experimental practices must never involve any action that may harm or disturb the child subject.

While the parent usually volunteers their child as subjects in psychological experiments, the children too must be informed of such in a way that is easily understood by them. Young children however, do not have the cognitive ability to totally understand the reasons and purpose of experiments and are therefore vulnerable to feelings of unease. Such feelings should be reduced by way of a caring, sympathetic attitude in the experimenter.

The withholding of certain information may be necessary for effective research (eg. you cannot tell a child that you are looking to see how dependant they are on their mother). Deception of the child though, should be avoided at all costs. The child does have the right to be told information obtained from the research, as well as any conclusions made from the research.

The child's welfare should always be a top priority.

A child should also be completely free to withdraw from any experiment at any stage.

If significant levels of distress are identified during an experiment, the child should be withdrawn, whether they ask or not.

"Play is a natural form of behaviour for your child. Motivating children through play is therefore a natural way to influence your child. Play is your child's world. Playing is important because it provides the information to learn about self and others."

Ref: *Motivating Kids Through Play* by Bunker et al., Leisure Press (1982) USA

PLAY DEPRIVATION AND JUVENILE VIOLENCE

There are international trends towards:

- Increasing youth violence
- Criminals getting younger
- Crimes becoming more violent

These trends appear to be related to loss of traditional values and dissolution of the family. The task of rearing non-violent children is also complicated by the degree of violence in the media, television, computer games and other sections of society. Children are increasingly exposed to TV, movies, video games and computers, and less exposed to traditional non-violent play. Studies suggest that such play deprivation can lead to juvenile violence.

"Play is a complex concept that eludes precise definition but is commonly characterised by pleasurable, self motivated, non goal directed spontaneous and free adult-imposed rules" (Frost, 1992).

Play can take different forms:

- Random expressive movements of a child
- Free exploration by a toddler
- Pretend, imaginative or constructive (building) activity by a pre-school child
- Chase games
- Physical contact active games of school children

Non-Play is when the activity is controlled by outside influences such as adults or machines.

Pure Play is Free!

Children are not involved in free play when they lack control over what or how they play (eg. playing a computer game or watching TV).

"Children play in order to develop cognitive (reasoning or thinking), motor skills and to learn about the social world" (Berk, 1994)

"Creative, free play has therapeutic powers" (Landreth, 1991)

In modern societies, many factors that encouraged or allowed free play in the past have changed:

- Today children's lives are often controlled by schedules and the busy lives of their parents. They may go to a care centre at a particular time; they may be shuffled between parents or between parents and grandparents – all living in different places. The result is that they do not have a home- base neighbourhood where they live and play 7 days a week, in which they can make friends, and develop strong bonds.
- Places to play are being restricted. Access to outdoor spaces for play is being reduced in many areas. Neighbourhoods are not as safe as they used to be for children to wander about alone.
- Organised sport is sometimes over emphasised to the detriment of the child. Healthy competition is good for children, but when adults over emphasise winning and competition, the game is no longer constructive play. It can become a destructive force taking valuable time from free play. Also, the control aspect of play is often missing, as children do not normally control what they do during sport.
- Schools in some countries have tended to shorten school recess and lunch breaks aiming to improve academic performance; the problem is that this can also reduce free play opportunities.
- There is a misguided assumption in modern society that high tech play is a good substitute for free play. There is a booming industry in all types of entertainment facilities, from theme parks to complex toys, from sophisticated playground equipment to computer games. These are not a substitute for creative and imaginative free play.

Creative play is in fact a viable alternative and in fact an antidote for violence in youth. (Reference: IPS, Play Rights Vol XVIII No.4, June 1996)

Remember

- Children who live with criticism, learn to condemn
- Children who live with hostility learn to fight
- Children who live with fear, learn to be apprehensive
- Children who live with encouragement learn to be confident
- Children who live with praise learn to be appreciative
- Children who live with approval learn to like themselves
- Children who live with recognition, learn to have a goal

- Children who live with honesty, learn the value of trust

Ref: Motivating Kids through Play by Bunker et al Leisure Press, 1982 USA

ACTIVITIES FILE

You should submit an activities file that provides a profile of a variety of different recreation activities in each lesson. The profile of each activity should ideally be kept on standard card file cards (126 x 76 mm) for ease of handling; or if you prefer, as a print out from a computer file.

Each card should outline an activity containing the following information:

- Name of the activity.
- Equipment/facilities needed to conduct the activity.
- Age/sex - If the activity is more suited to a particular type of person state it - otherwise describe it as suitable for "all ages".
- Space needed in terms of area, under cover or outside.
- Outline of how the activity is conducted.
- Any other comments regarding the activity.

Each group of cards submitted should include a variety of activities as follows:

1 sport or fitness type activity

1 craft activity

1 game

1 nature/environmental activity

This is a minimum requirement. You may do extra activity cards if you desire, and you are encouraged to do so.

An example of the information you might place on each card would be as follows:

CIRCLE HAT PASS

Ages: children (not toddlers) and teenagers (perhaps adults)

Space: sufficient to form a circle – If outdoors, face away from wind.

Description: participants form a circle each has a hat on their head and their right hand on their neighbour's hat. When the leader calls 'shift left' they put their hats on the person to their left. When the leader calls 'shift right' they put their hat on the person to the right. If a person is caught without a hat on their head they can be eliminated from the game.

Reference: "Playtime - A World Recreation Handbook" by S. Jernigan and Co. Vendien McGraw Hill 1972.

SET TASK

Activity 1

Find a place where you can watch children of varying ages at play in a non supervised situation (i.e. with no play leader, teacher or parent etc, exercising control over what they do). For example this may be a playground in a park, or school ground; or children playing at home (indoors or out).

Visit this place on two separate occasions, and observe (if possible) 3 or more children at play on each occasion, for a period of half an hour or more.

Observe the interaction between different children and their environment, as well as the interaction between each other.

After returning home, make notes of what you observe.

Caution: You should be aware of social norms and legal restrictions that may affect what you may or may not do in your country. In some places it may not be legal to observe children in certain ways without formal approval. We do not encourage anyone to break the law or in any way contravene social norms. If you are restricted in what you can observe, you may need to first obtain permission, or perhaps make observations of children from a distance and for shorter periods (e.g. visiting a shopping centre and taking note of the way different children behave as you walk around the shops).

Assignment 1

Question 1

Report on your set task.

What did you observe?

In what way did children of different ages play differently?

Did the children do anything that they appeared to tire of? If so what? Why would you guess they tired?

Write about half a page or 250 words.

Question 2

Why is play important to the cognitive development of a child? Write a paragraph or two.

Question 3

In what way might inappropriate play opportunities as a child result in physical developmental problems for an adult? Suggest an example. Write a paragraph or two.

Question 4

How can social play (or the lack of it) in a child impact upon that child when they become an adult? Write a paragraph or two.

Question 5

What similarities and differences are there between free play and playing a very imaginative computer game? Write a paragraph or two.

Question 6

Remember to also submit your activities file.

TO FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS COURSE VISIT

<https://www.acsedu.co.uk/Courses/Health-Fitness-and-Recreation/PLAY-LEADERSHIP-VRE101-406.aspx>