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## “Ready, Steady, Play” The Contribution of Play to Learning in the Kindergarten

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### Abstract

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This article deals with the contribution of play to cognitive, social, emotional and physical development in children. The game is having an internal need- every baby and every child in the whole world, characteristics of the game purchased from any culture according to the unique life style of her environment. However - as the baby was younger, we can say what is common between him and the other babies outweighs their differences. Children integrate play into activities, creativity, enjoyment and thought by exercising their rich, almost limitless imagination. Play also enables improvement in social skills. Play is an emotional need for children and through it they express their fears and free their emotions. Children's language develops through play. Play contributes to their physical development, to developing delicate and crude motor skills and coordination between different parts of the body. This article aims to present the contribution of play to children's learning in kindergarten, as well as describing the way in which children learn in early childhood.

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### 1. Introduction

"Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays" (Friedrich Schiller)

Many parents are very excited when their young children are about to begin kindergarten. This excitement is mainly accompanied by expectations that their children will integrate into this new framework without difficulty, that their basic needs will be met, but most of all they look to kindergarten teachers, whose role is to prepare their children for first grade during this period, who will teach them to read and write, solve and write out arithmetical problems and in between will let them play a little, with emphasis on the words a little.

When parents enter kindergarten initially, they see a world of games, corners dedicated to dolls, building blocks hollow blocks, a small sandpit, different items to stick down, small play animals, cars of different sizes, boxes with different size Lego pieces and diverse building games that let children engage in constructive building that they term as buildings, roads, articles of clothing for dress up and children play games of pretense. If so, how do children in this kindergarten learn anything? How can they acquire the skills they need for first grade? How much time can be "wasted" on playing?

Often parents approach kindergarten teachers at initial parents' meetings and ask what their children do at kindergarten except play. And why are they not being taught? And how is it possible to learn through play? Is it possible at all?

These questions often show parents' lack of understanding and knowledge as well as first grade teachers who wonder why kindergarten children "do not learn", and how kindergarten teachers are capable of instilling cognitive, social, emotional and motor skills through play alone.

Parents and kindergarten teachers view kindergarten as preparation for school and not as an experience in itself. Parents demand directed rather than spontaneous learning; kindergarten teachers prefer concentrating on literacy and nurturing preparedness for reading and writing rather than nurturing play and liberated creativity. These demands are inconsistent with all the information that has accumulated about people's development and the link between it and preschoolers' experiences.

Play at kindergarten is a broad topic that should be raised in discussion with kindergarten parents and first grade teachers, as this is the only way in which it will be clarified that play is essential for learning, its contribution and great importance in children's sound development. It is possible that only when parents actually play kindergarten games, will they be able to really know what their influence is; why it is so important to play them; how children think and what benefit to children get from these games. As a result of this, they will be able to help their children reap optimal benefit for games at home as well, when parents' thinking will be based on the knowledge that playing is essential and necessary for their overall development: cognitive (consciousness), language, emotional, social and physical.

Studying up to date professional literature on the topic of play at a young age can serve to support and reinforce what preschool educators say based on their professional knowledge and personal experience over years of work. This article will describe how children learn through playing, as well as strengthening the link between play and informal learning that takes place in an environment of play and creativity, understanding the importance of play as a learning driver at a young age, will emphasize the significant contribution of games to cognitive, emotional-social and physical development of children at kindergarten.

The article seeks to put on the educational agenda the importance of play for learning in preschoolers, from a belief and awareness that the way in which kindergarten children learn is through experience and play and not formally as exists today at school. The central figures that accompany children at kindergarten are kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers choose and ascertain between children's ability to learn and the children themselves, therefore it will be important and significant to follow up and point out prominent issues in kindergarten teachers' educational perceptions of how children learn.

## **2. Theoretical foundation and related literature**

Philosophers and educators have dealt with different aspects of play: as a means of learning, as creating and imitating reality, as a creative expression. In the 1950's Hartley, Frank and Goldson (1952) wrote about the role of play in nurturing health personalities in young children.

Play accompanies people throughout their lives, at any age, in any place and society. According to the humanist perception, play is an activity in itself done willingly, with enjoyment and without material reward. Play is the foundation of cultural experience (Goodale & Godberry, 1988; Winnicott, 1995) and it is made possible in conditions free of worry for existential needs and social burdens: only when individuals are at leisure, can they isolate themselves from reality, and immerse themselves in the pretend world of play. With children, the experience of leisure is under the auspices of adults. In the animal world too, cubs that play are under the auspices of their mother and free from worrying about their existential needs (Rapp, 1989).

Alongside freedom from burdens and constraints, which are a condition of play, play activities allow freedom in a framework protected by rules (Huizinga, 1984). During play, games can free their imaginations, lead them into danger of losing control and deal with the limits of their abilities in dangerous and challenging situations, without causing any damage to them or their environment. This freedom instills a sense of joy in playing, which derives from the fact that games are free, a feeling that is not widespread in the daily lives of most people (Goodale & Godberry, 1988).

Miriam Tal (1993) wrote that play, in contrast to other activities such as work, study and creation, is an activity in itself and people are not bound by its outcomes. It provides room for a wide range of activities without fearing the outcome. When a game ends, the event is over without any actual responsibility for its material results and it is possible to continue with the next game immediately, with renewed hopes, possibilities and luck. That is why challenges and stimuli are so great and there is so much optimism found in the possibilities of game activities. This is why play is so enjoyable at all ages.

The introduction to "*Playing Man*" (Huizinga, 1984), reads that despite the fact that it (play) is found in all cultural manifestations, it is not swallowed up by them, but remains a unique and well known phenomenon.

Piaget (1962) argued, followed by Kohlberg & Neyman (2015), that the way children act in competitive situations and their ability to cooperate, which are dominant characteristics of play, depend greatly on their levels of moral thought, which is open to change and development.

The journey to examine the phenomenon of play is not at all simple. Goffman (1976) pointed out that for hundreds of years the role of play has been written about, but to no avail. It is possible that the fact that play appears in such diverse cultural contexts and includes such a wide range of behaviors, does not allow researchers to achieve a uniform and comprehensive perception of this phenomenon.

The essential difficulty with examining the phenomenon of play is expressed too by how difficult it is to define the phenomenon.

Wittgenstein (in Rapp, 1989) compared the play phenomenon to a situation in which a person meets someone s/he recognizes in an audience, and s/he does not know where to assign this person, because s/he is not certain from where s/he knows this person. So too with play: when we play or see others playing, we recognize the phenomenon with certainty, but we find it difficult to define it. According to Rapp (1989), play cannot be defined by its content, but by its form. Every action carried out seriously can be performed in a playful manner, with certain changes - play is a phenomenon of imitation through change, this change is not primarily a content change, but placing the content into another framework (such as transferring a tune from one musical scale to another

Noy (1983) defined play as an activity that exists in its own right, driven by the desire to enjoy oneself and restricted by place and time. The activity includes seeking a challenge against an opponent or role, and ruled by winning or losing. Playful activity is accompanied by tension or excitement. Despite the fact that the activity is taken seriously with maximum investment, players are constantly aware that they are taking part in an activity that is not real

According to Shafir (1988), every game includes an activity, but this activity is not the game, it takes places with a game's framework. Sapir defined a game as an operational framework, in which one situation is preferred to another, and this by agreement between participants

Games also have an element of chance - throwing dice, moving a hand, drawing a card and more. In some games chance determines to a great extent game moves, fear of fate and attempts to deal with it, both combined in a person's life and both holding a key position in game activity.

The need to face fate and luck in life is the key urge in thinking people and the ability to plan that helps navigate their lives and steps despite predestination. Bettelheim (1980) argued that success in games of chance strengthens children's confidence, as evidence that failure in games of chance will be interpreted as an external hindrance, that players cannot control, and therefore also frees them from unease caused by responsibility for failure. The luck factor dims the sense of rivalry between game competitors. Winners secretly bless their skills that helped them win, but can remain modest on the surface and say to losers: so what, I was just lucky! As such they can beat their friends without becoming distanced from them, whereas losers take comfort from the thought that only bad luck made them lose and therefore will not accumulate any feelings of resentment against winners. Play activity characteristics are many and even contradictory, they are expressed during a game at various strengths and emphases, at different times and in different conditions, according to players' personalities and desires. Predominant characteristics are: dealing with personal achievements - winning; group cooperation - agreeing defined rules; chance - luck; planning and strategy; keeping to agreed rule systems; free choice of moves; components taken from reality - imitation; game application, using imagination and creativity - in relation to reality.

In contrast to work, study and creation, play is an activity in itself, and its outcomes are not binding. Games provide room for a wide range of activities, without fear of their outcome. When a game ends, so do the events without any real responsibility for material results and it is possible to continue immediately with the next game with renewed hopes, possibilities and luck. That is why challenges and stimuli are so great and there is so much optimism found in the possibilities of game activities. This is why play is so enjoyable at all ages.

Today there is agreement that play is a basic and essential need, play contributes greatly to learners' development, leads to change processes, increases motivation and helps with learning skills in many areas. Awareness of play's worth and its integration into preschool learning and even into school has grown. It is integrated into formal learning in educational frameworks, social activities as well as enabling parents and their participation in kindergarten life. This integration is carried out in different ways, the choice of how is dependent on purpose, in the area of knowledge and its special structure, in specific content and its place in learning process activities.

### *2.1. Contribution of Play Activities' to Learning – the Emotional Aspect*

As pointed out, among others, in the discussion of theory, play activity contributes to emotional development processes in children, and provides opportunity for emotional expression, release of fear and satisfying wishes. In an era when it is agreed that emotional aspects constitute effective learning conditions, one should clarify how these factors are likely to integrate into pedagogic aims, and to express them and give them a place in planning activities.

#### *2.1.1. Play as a means of creating internal motivation to learn*

Motivation is the internal power that awakens individuals' willingness to act in order to achieve certain aims. Aloni (1998) argued that internal enjoyment is a qualitative principle, and that without the active involvement of will, it is not possible to achieve anything worthwhile in the world. Morgan (1984) and Stipek (1988) and others also argued that enjoyment factors determine pupils' self-image, their expectations of themselves, and as such - their behaviours as learners. Another researcher who describes his position on play's contribution to learning enjoyment and utilizing learners' abilities was Goleman (1997), according to whom emotional intelligence at its best is the ability to go with the flow which is made possible when children adhere to tasks that they like. The flow represents harnessing emotions to serve execution and learning, and it encourages individuals to make full use of their abilities. Experiencing the flow encourages gaining control over a task or skill, because the motivation to add and improve derives from the desire to continue the flow. According to Goleman, the flow occurs in the area between boredom and fear. This opinion matches the perception of play in existential philosophy, as presented in this article, which argues that play activity allows release from boredom and fear.

The motivational aspect of play derives from different factors, such as: competitive urge, desire to become stronger, curiosity, the need for control, the desire to belong and the aura of lightness that play gives. However, it appears that above all, motivation is linked to the enjoyment that play provides, and this is what I will discuss now.

## *2.2. Play as a way of learning through enjoyment*

As previously mentioned, the most prominent characteristic of play is enjoyment that accompanies the activity. Enjoyment, as pointed out above, constitutes a driving factor to learning, but various researchers believe that it has great worth in itself. Huizinga (1938/1984) and Rapp (1989) argued that the central purpose of integrating play into learning is enjoyment in the activity. Enjoyment from learning helps individuals to adapt an enjoyable approach to life generally and thereby contributes to improving quality of life. Aloni (1998) agreed and argued that good human life depends on a personal sense of happiness and satisfaction, therefore Aloni raises individual happiness to the level of an educational ideal.

From Feitelson's (1990) research, we can learn about the contribution of the enjoyment factor in play and its educational worth. The research took place amongst twins, and its aim was to examine the effectiveness of learning through play. Half the children who participated in the research were given deliberate games of puzzles, mosaics and blocks. Their twins received instruction in pre-reading skills using pencil and paper activities. In a follow up test, in which the children were asked to copy a five word sentence, it emerged that those who had played made significantly fewer mistakes, and approached the task more enthusiastically than those who had worked with pencil and paper. Feitelson concluded that certain types of games can be more effective than attempting to teach skills directly. However, over and above the advantage of effective performance, she found that play influenced the spirit of subject children and their motivation to act and their enjoyment from the activity. In her opinion, this fact gives play great educational value. It is worthwhile pointing out that children who play do not enter a situation in order to derive any learning gain, from their point of view - the enjoyment that they derive from play is the driver to their participation in the activity. Rapp (1989) clarified this view: in his opinion, making children aware of the aims of a game disrupts achieving its aims, because the motivation to play is, foremost, the motivation to do something in itself.

## *2.3. Contribution of Play Activities to Learning – the Social Aspect*

Play activity allows examination of the different variations that exist in reciprocal social actions, and invites development of the skills needed to do this. Darom (1989) raised the need to develop social skills to a level of life value. In addition, there are those who regard this as one of the most important learning sources and an impetus to developing various cognitive abilities (Piaget, in Lavie, 1990; Globman & Harrison, 1982).

Play constitutes the ultimate means of developing social skills.

This article will examine three aspects of social skill development, as expressed in integrated play in the teaching-learning process.

## *2.4 Play as a Means of Developing Interpersonal Communication*

Interpersonal communication requires mastering different social skills, such as: understanding complex social situations, openness, listening, flexibility, appreciation, ability to resolve conflicts. These skills can be acquired in a variety of social experiences, where play - in being a situation in which formal and informal interactions take place between participants - constitutes a natural and central means of acquiring them.

There are three aspects of interpersonal communication skill development through play:

1. Handling relationships - social play invites handling relationships, meaning: it demands control of emotional signs that we transmit and identifying emotional signs transmitted by others. According to Goleman (1997) the art of handling relationships constitutes one of the elements of intelligence and the basis of being able to develop different social abilities (popularity, leadership, social stardom, etc).
2. Carrying out dialogue - Shor and Freire (1990) viewed dialogue as a creative act, that constitutes a cornerstone for all educational doing. The dialogue process leads individuals to a situation of active searching, through attempts to rediscover knowledge, as it arises in their world. Consolidating a learning process by having a dialogue between educators and their pupils based on, in their opinion, perceiving pupils as powerful subjects, and respecting their rights and abilities to determine their behaviour as learners.
3. Resolving conflict - play activities invite agreement and acceptance amongst participants, but at the same time, it is likely to awaken conflict when matters are not agreed and accepted. Darom (1989) pointed out that the need to resolve conflicts invites expressing values, opinions and beliefs, and contributes, therefore, to developing interpersonal communication skills and mainly - developing the ability to listen and empathize. This process is carried out using cognitive tools and contributes, as a result, to their development.

### *2.5 Play Activities' Contribution to Learning - Cognitive Aspect*

Cognitive development is a phenomenon that expresses children's growth in recognizing, understanding and interpreting their environment. Piaget's (1962) approach was that cognitive development takes place, naturally, through play. Piaget, as we know, restricted his theory to a young age. Goleman (1997) expanded this understanding and argued that gaining control over any skill or accumulating knowledge must take place, at every stage, naturally, when individuals are drawn to areas they love. According to him, early enthusiasm that makes individuals feel happiness, can become a kernel for higher levels of achievement and expanding limits of ability.

1. Play as a means of acquiring knowledge and exercising it - Learning through play takes place in a process of experiential learning in which the first stage is action, whose results lead to understanding, after which a process of generalization takes place and finally - application in new circumstances (and this, in contrast to learning through processing information, in which the first stage is getting information and only the final stage is action). Experiential learning has four prominent advantages: (1) It enables learners to construct knowledge in a manner that is significant to each one. (2) It is not dependent on symbolization. (3) Being based on action, it is characterized by intrinsic motivation. (4) It retains learned material better, because associations with concrete actions accompanied by emotion, are retained better in memory than associations based on abstract symbols.
2. Play as a means of acquiring learning habits - Chase (in Anderson, 1990) described the level of energy and effort children need in order to develop knowledge on an expert level. Suitable learning habits make it easier for pupils, and contributes to effective and meaningful learning.

Among its contributions, Bettelheim (1990) pointed out that play advances children's intellectual development in that it gives them two habits needed for learning:

1. Perseverance - play presents a challenging activity for children, that integrates magic with enjoyment. During play, children do not tend to give in when unsuccessful, failure encourages them to try again and again. Acquiring perseverance, achieved through play activity, helps children cope with more routine tasks (such as: doing homework).
2. Sense of self-efficacy - play, which forces children into repeated efforts, despite the fact that some fail, allows them to develop belief in their ability to succeed. Acquiring a sense of self-efficacy constitutes a condition to cope with complex challenges that demand great investment. In addition:
3. Learning from mistakes – making mistakes is inevitable. In general, the meaning given to a situation of "mistake" is failure - a mistake is not something from which one can learn. Play, in contrast, provides opportunities to learn from things that are not done correctly, without threat and without losing self-confidence. According to Claxton (1987), good learners take their time, they are not afraid of changing their mind, of saying "I don't know" or making mistakes.

### **3. Conclusion**

This article reviewed the contribution of play to promoting learning in children, and its influence on the basic areas of their development.

The education system's position regarding play, and acknowledgement of its unique status and need to integrate it into teaching-learning processes has undergone, over the year, different changes:

The fact that play is defined as an activity without purpose, gave birth to a perception that sees it as a waste of time and the opposite of meaningful learning. This fact created a fundamental and didactic difficulty in integrating play into the formal educational system, which acts as a purposeful system with defined goals. With the introduction of modern technologies and rich stimuli into the education system, play has lost its exclusive status as an attractive means of varying teaching. As such, over recent years, the status of play as a learning tool has decreased. It is fitting to illustrate that in the transfer to computer games, which generally invite individual activity opposite a screen, the social aspect that constitutes a cornerstone of play activity has been completely damaged.

Against the background of enormous changes that society has undergone in recent years, it is clear to all that the education system must update its perceptions with regard to the aims, processes and ways in which the younger generation should be educated, so that it will provide a real answer to individuals living in postmodern society, and the diverse and dynamic needs of society.

The ideational basis for integrating play in teaching-learning processes derives from the perception that learners are autonomous and active beings, operating in an educational social humanist climate, who act according to principles of belief, choice, openness, shared responsibility, and respect the natural rights of children to experiential learning and to enjoy the act of education; empowering play activity, inherent in children, by integrating them in a dynamic, complex and multidimensional learning



system. In contrast to being educated deliberately, play, intrinsically, provides room for multifaceted non-threatening opportunities that have renewed hopes. Therefore with its many stimuli, challenges and opportunities, play combines emotion, excitement, imagination, challenge and enjoyment, and as such we should view it as an educational means to be nurtured.

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