

## PLAY: AN IMPERATIVE FOR HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

**OKUJAGU, ADOKIYE ADOLPHUS, PhD.**  
**Early Childhood & Primary Education Department**  
**Ignatius Ajuru University of Education**  
**Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt**

### Abstract

*Play is a major occupation of childhood in which children derive much fun and excitement. Through play activities, children are motivated to learn, and they are also offered opportunities to put into practice and apply the skills learnt in course of playing. Children could play with each other, one another or even with objects. In each case, they derive as much satisfaction as possible, and as a result of this, it has been severally suggested that child educators and teachers should adopt the play way method to teach children. This method takes advantage of the play characteristic inherent at childhood to provide the broad based motivation required for effective teaching and learning. The imperatives of play in the overall development of children cannot be over-emphasized. Play enhances the development of cognitive and social skills which lays the foundation for learning concepts that are more complex as children transit to adulthood. It also enhances children strong and healthy growth as well as enabling them learns about the meaning of things in their environment. With play children learn and grow in ways that make them feel good about themselves, and it also helps set the pace for their adult life. It is against the background of all these that this presentation reviewed the concept of play and its kinds, discussed the theories of play and the place of play in children's holistic development, and examined the roles of early childhood educators and teachers in using play for the holistic development of children. The presentation recommended appropriate and adequate capacity building for early childhood teachers in the use of playway and play-related instructional strategies, and development/review and effective implementation of play-based curriculum, among others.*

**Keywords:** Play, early childhood, holistic development.

### Introduction

Generally speaking, play is a multifaceted term that is often associated with non-serious, informal and flexible activities carried out by children. In doing this, children derive a lot of pleasure and enjoyment. Hence, they preoccupy

themselves with play, not as a pastime activity but as one focused on achieving objectives. IN this way, play does not only promote and aid physical development in children, but is also instrumental to their cognitive development and social skills. For this reason, psychologists, philosophers and educators such as Jean Piaget, Fredrick Froebel, John Dewey and Maria Montessori to mention a few, have proposed that play be employed in teaching the child for better learning and improvement in academic achievements. This presentation will review the concept, types and theories of play.

The place of play in the development of children and the roles of early childhood teachers, caregivers and educators in using play for development of children will equally be examined.

### **Concept of play**

Play as a concept is broad, complex and ambiguous to define. This could be as a result of the fact that it offers a mix of physical, social affective and cognitive rewards at all the stages it may occur, and elusive phenomenon that cannot be contained within any thoroughly written area of study or discipline (Eberle 2014 and Spariosu 1989). However, since play is a basic occupation of children and if well formally structured will enhance the cognitive development of children, attempts will be made to docile its definition in the domain of child development.

The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defined play as an activity which is engaged for enjoyment and recreation rather than serious or practical purpose. The above definition shows that play is often associated with children.

Thus, Scales, Almy, Nicolopulou & Ervin – Tripp (1991) saw play as that activity in which young children are engrossed with enthusiasm and abandon during participation. Snyder (1990) noted that play is one activity that is rewarding due to its fun-like and enjoyable nature, and that satisfaction comes from the activity itself rather than from anticipated rewards. Linwood (2004) posited that play is job of children that consists of activities performed for self-amusement that leads to some behavioural, social and psychomotor rewards. Implicit in this definition is the child-directed, enjoyable and spontaneous stance of play.

There are some common threads that run across the above definitions and these include:

- Play is for enjoyment, recreation and amusement.
- Play is child-initiated and child-directed.
- Play is rewarding in terms of physical, school, psychomotor and cognitive concerns of the child
- Play is spontaneous.

These common threads are a clear indication of the fact that play is an inestimable aspect of the development of children. The reason being that through play, children learn not only about themselves but also about other children, objects and phenomena within their environments. The different ways that they maneuver and explore their environment during play not only enhance their thinking ability but also impact on their ability to learn social, affective and psychomotor skills.

### **Types of Play**

Given the fact that play is child-initiated, it means that all children do not enjoy or get involved in one type of play. Even when children are playing together, their interests during the play also differ. Hence it will be instructive to specify play types in order to guide teachers, caregivers and even parents to properly channel the child's developmental process through play. The following types of play can be identified among children either in school or at home.

- **Games:** This is one major play in which children engage themselves. Games have been made popular by the support of Information Communication Technology (ICT) facilities. There is a variety of video board and card games at the disposal of young children. Often times, these games are played by one child alone. The games are played by rules and in turns. All that is needed is for them to download their preferred games and play by the rules.
- **Dramatic play:** Children put themselves in the position or place of other people and then use the instinct of initiation to act out the characters involved in the play (Okujagu, 2008). Plays of this sort can be guided or spontaneous as in real drama, role-playing play-let, miming and puppetry.

- **Physical play:** This is when children mobilize their body parts for play activities, and parts of the body involved in this type of play include the legs, hands and head. Common play activities under this type which children engage in are hide and seek, run, jump, clap, chase and even games like football. For this type of play to be effective and enjoyable, children need to play in pairs or group. In this way, social skills are developed in addition to enhancing the child's physical development.
- **Expressive play:** This type of play affords children the opportunity to express their feelings and this they achieve by engaging with materials. Common expressive materials children use during this play include, poster colours, crayons, sand, clay, pencils, drawing paper, leaves, marker, water plastercine and musical instruments like moth organ, guitar and recorder. These materials are either used individually or in combination to create impression or sound about the way they feel at any given time.
- **Manipulative play:** In this type of play, children freely manipulate objects to master their workings as well as to understand their environment. Objects for manipulative play include puzzles, mechanical and battery-powered toys, among others. Children manipulate all these to gain an understanding of how they work and in the process create and enjoy fun.

Note that the above listed types of play are not exhaustive and can also lend themselves to necessary overlap.

### Theories of play

There exist a lot of theories to explain why children play and these include:

- **The recreation theory:** This theory views play from the perspective of recovery and recuperation. It postulates that play results from fatigue experienced as a result of hardwork. Play is, therefore, needed to restore energy and this proves more beneficial to the human body than being idle. Therefore play refreshes and restores the mental and physical fatigue of the child.
- **The surplus energy theory:** The child's body according to this theory has an excess of energy and that (active) play is required to stabilize the child by getting rid of the excess. In the view of Curtis (1916) when a child does not expend all his energy in worthwhile ventures, the remaining will be

used to play. Play, therefore, is an expression of excess energy which the young person has in abundance (Lovell, 1973).

- **The recapitulation theory:** Perceives play as being heredity. This is in the sense that trust plays by children reflect the ways their ancestors used to conduct their activities. Such play includes farming, fishing, homemaking, climbing, hunting and cooking to mention a few. These activities represent the ways the ancestors lived their lives.
- **The growth theory:** Appleton (1919) states that play is a response to a generalized drive for growth in an organism. Thus, its purpose is to ensure that the skills necessary to induce functioning of adult behaviours is mastered.
- **The cognitive theory:** Jean Piaget postulates that play emanates from the child's working out of 2 basic characteristics of his mode of experience and development. These are assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the child's ability to comprehend new elements from his environment to his mental framework.

Accommodation means the attempt by the child to modify existing structure or ideas to suit new experiences of the environment.

Of the theories above, the author aligns himself with the cognitive theory in explaining the role of play in cognitive development of the child. In the description of Miller and Almon (2009) play constitutes activities that are voluntary and directed by the children engaged in them and arising from intrinsic motivation.

This is essential to the development of the child because it relates to the cognitive, social, physical and emotional wellbeing of children (Ginsburg, 2007).

Experts agree that play provides the foundation for learning and later successes in academics. Bodrova and Leong (2007) noted that children with a set of mental processes that are central to helping to organize and order actions and behaviours do better in school both in academic areas and in acquisition of social skills. Thus, improved academic achievements and in acquisition of social skills. Thus, improved academic achievements and social adjustment in the primary schools are indicators of a transformed early childhood education systems.

Therefore, when the functions of play are effectively harnessed for the development of children, then play becomes an imperative. When play is supervised, a very vital avenue is created for the presentation of potentialities for the promotion of development in the physical, emotional health and social aspects of the child, especially when it is planned bearing in mind the individual needs of the children (Kinanee, 2004 & Layman, 1970).

### **Place of Play in Children's Holistic Development**

Children not only derive pleasure from play, but to them that is as good as life itself. For children, play is the ultimate level of achievement as they learn about the world and make sense of it through play. Play should be encouraged among children since it is a natural part of children's lives. Some forms of play have been discussed earlier, and this section of the paper will espouse how play can be used to arouse the holistic development of the child and will be seen in the following categories:

**Physical development:** This is the physical growth and improves locomotors skills of the child. It also involves the co-ordination attained by the child while performing activities focused on gross motor skills. Physical development of the child is often attained in the types of play which engages the child in play with and manipulation of toys, objects, people and things to learn about them. Therefore, the child gains sensory education and motor exploration of toys, objects and people at his disposal within the play environment. An improved level of this sensory education and motor exploration is exhibited in construction of something as can be exemplified in block building and stacking of cubes. Materials and objects are better handled with better control to create something more reasonable (i.e. according to plan).

**Cognitive development:** The mental ability of a child is not only measured in numbers, but also by a lot of variables that can encourage development of the brain. These include development of the child that focuses on problem-solving, language, reasoning, information processing, comprehension and acquisition of conceptual and perceptual skills. This development can be induced by the use of pretend play such as drama, where the child gets to be something other than what he really is, and uses actions, words or even objects to represent other situations or events. Play (games with rules) can

also be employed to develop the child's cognition as his actions are based on the established rules to sustain legitimate play.

**Socio-emotional development:** In the socio-emotional development of the child, the emphasis is on self-awareness and self-regularization. In course of playing, the child identifies and recognizes that there are associative plays, apart from the solitary ones. During associative plays children play with one another either in pairs or in groups together, and also share materials, objects and toys among themselves. These pave way for robust, active and energetic interaction. During this sustain play, children in groups, negotiate, share responsibilities and even leadership to achieve objectives. Associative co-operative plays can also be utilized to attain socio-emotional development of the child as children express their emotions such as fear, desires and anxieties.

### **The Role of Early Childhood Teachers, Caregivers and Educators in Using Play for Holistic Development of Children.**

The form and nature of play to which children are exposed has a good bearing on their holistic development. Stated below are some tit bits on what caregivers, teachers and educators of early childhood can do to support the holistic development of children using play.

- **Give opportunity to experience play outside.** Just like formal learning does not only take place in the classroom alone, but also outside of it, children should be given opportunities to experience play outside of their immediate environment i.e. home. This is because children live in the world of play to experience life. Children can be taken to other environment like botanical garden, sand beach, very shallow stream and open grass lawn. In these environments external to the home, children would be able to get familiar with some natural concepts such as slimy and watery, thick and light, wet and dry, hot and cold etc. as they work with their hands. For increased fun, other playmates could be introduced to your child to learn other attributes such as co-operation and expression of feelings. In this way they create and appreciate the value of friendship. When the children play together, especially those of mixed ages, it affords them the opportunity of learning from older ones, and older one teaching younger children.

- **Exposure to a variety of play materials and activities**

When children are exposed to a variety of play materials and challenging play activities, the intellect, mind, body, and emotion are stimulated. Thus, age appropriate toys that are attractive in colours and interesting in textures should be provided for child to play with. As children get 'lost' in play with these materials and associated activities, they become familiar with the weight, sizes, shapes, length, colours and mass of these toys as they manipulate them. As children play together using these assorted toys, they learning to share with one another and take turns.

- **Encourage children to explore.** Children's learning process encompasses discovery through trial and error and this should be taken advantage of by caregivers and teachers of children. Children, especially preschoolers, have the capacity to do gross motor skills, but this must be developed in them. To develop this and other related skills, they must be given the opportunity to explore through free play. As children play in sand and water, they develop their finger muscles as well as opening curiosity for discovery.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has reviewed the concept of play, kinds of and theories underlying play. It has also taken a swipe at the place of play in the holistic development of children and what early childhood teachers, caregivers and educators can do to develop children holistically through play. It is the desired opinion of the author of this presentation that if these activities are meticulously applied in their classrooms, especially for the preschoolers, the holistic development of children using play will be a lot of fun for caregivers and pupils.

### **Recommendations**

Characteristically, children are playful and engage in play to achieve their own set objectives. For play to be optimally harnessed to holistically develop children, the author recommends that:

- The capacity of teachers in preschool and junior school setting be ethically built as to equip them with the know-how about play for utilization in their classrooms. This teacher development exercise will afford them the

knowledge and skills to deal with play in a manner that will be purposeful for instructional activities.

- A play based curriculum be developed/renewed and effectively implemented in early childhood centres and primary school.
- Children should be given opportunities to engage in out-door play under teachers or caregiver's supervision.

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