Landscape of Play

Landscape of Play:

Crafting Joyful Spaces for Children's Growth and Explorations

Edited by

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and Sima Pouya

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PREFACE

This book, which we have edited, is the product of a joint study of many professional disciplines, specially design and planning disciplines, on children and their place in the learning process and aims to present planning and design approaches that include universal children's rights in urban areas and create liveable and healthy environments for children.

The new urban management approach, which is handled with an approach that includes management in cities collectively, is handled with an understanding that will give meaning to the existence of children, disabled people and especially the elderly, by including them in life with the mottos of *Integrated Design, Inclusive Design and Design for All.*

The process of re-naturalization of cities and the opportunities offered in the natural city and its immediate surroundings are also among the information to be given within the scope of this book. In this context, information is given about *Nature Schools and Green Classes*, which have been organized especially in recent years to help them get to know nature and natural environments, and the benefits of the activities that children of different age groups participate in natural environments, such as the positive contribution to their psycho-pedagogical development, are revealed.

Within the scope of the book, each chapter, which is interrelated and will be formed as parts of the whole,

- child-focused national and international children's rights and organizations
- open and green space organization shaped by the child's concept of play
- thematic and creative game focuses that will directly contribute to their physical and spiritual development where they can express themselves better
- urban design components/microenvironment designs that will increase them emotional and cognitive intelligence/awareness
- identity components that will strengthen their commitment and sense of belonging to the city
- it presents a research design by providing information about the existence of green islands and sports areas where people can experience nature in the city and its immediate surroundings

In recent years, different thematic playgrounds, creative spaces, and healthy living environments that enable children's physical and mental development, created within the scope of child-friendly cities, have taken their place among the priorities of city management and organization. All schools and school gardens within the city macroform, all play opportunities offered in open spaces, and improvements and arrangements made for disabled individuals are considered as very important facts by all stakeholders that make up the city and in terms of the dynamics that make up the city. Many actors related to the subject (designers of children's playgrounds and equipment, scientific and social organizations, academics, social scientists and behavioural scientists, researchers on disabled individuals, child development experts, local governments, parents, psych pedagogical fields, non-governmental organizations, universities) A wide range of interest groups, including centres established within the organization, children's aid organizations, etc., are at the centre of attention of this book.

First, we would like to thank the editorial board who contributed greatly to the publication of book and Cambridge Scholars Publishing and its officials who followed the process successfully. The biggest thank you is to you, the authors of the book chapters, for preparing the quality and valuable works that you have shared with us.

May, 2025

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PART 1

THE CONCEPT OF CHILD AND PLAY

CHAPTER 1

PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

EMİNE KOCAADAM, MERVE ÜNAL

What is play and why is it important?

Play is an activity that the child participates in with internal motivation, chooses with his/her free will, carries out with fun and enjoyment, and the process is more important than the result. Everything is possible in play; there is no logical order or absolute rules. This flexibility allows the child to develop his/her cognitive, emotional and social skills. In addition, play is a holistic process that includes physical, mental and sensory experiences; the child plays an active role in play, discovers, solves problems and learns. Imitation and role-playing games develop the child's thinking skills and organizational skills, while the different roles he/she experiences during play help him/her resolve his/her internal conflicts and reduce his/her anxiety. In addition, the place where the game is played, the materials used, and the playmates directly affect the quality of the game and the process. (Sevinç 2004, 26-30).

While adults generally see play as a leisure activity or a form of relaxation, for children, play is not a momentary activity but rather a process that lasts all day long and is an integral part of their lives. The boundary between play and learning is unclear for children because they naturally discover, learn and develop by playing. Play is more than just a fun activity; it is a multi-dimensional activity that supports children's emotional, cognitive, physical, linguistic and social development. Play is one of the ways children express their individuality. It can be played by a single child or by a group of children. It can be structured with toys, or it can emerge completely based on imagination. Its duration can vary from a few minutes to a game that lasts for days (Aksoy and Çiftçi 2020, 2-6).

In the literature, the contribution of play to cognitive development is frequently emphasized and it is stated that children deepen their learning processes by establishing a connection between reality and fiction through

imagination. In addition, the fact that play takes place in a social context shows that it reinforces children's skills in cooperation, following rules, developing empathy and expressing their feelings. Play is thought to be a natural process that supports active learning by increasing children's intrinsic motivation. Although it is observed that adults give more importance to structured academic learning processes, play has a critical role in children's healthy development by enabling them to make sense of the world, strengthen their abstract thinking skills, structure their experiences and develop their creative thinking skills. Therefore, play should be considered as an integral part of early childhood education and a learning process that directly affects development (Pehlivan 2005, 8-12).
In general, play is an activity that has many different functions such as relaxation, getting rid of excess energy, practicing, fulfilling desires, enjoying and learning. When the behaviours of children while playing are examined, it is seen that games are largely fed by their life experiences. Therefore, play is not only a means of instant entertainment, but also a process that supports all areas of development of a person, balances the functions of the individual and brings them together. The definition of play may vary, but the fact that it is an indispensable part of childhood does not change in any case (Aksoy and Çiftçi 2020, 2-6). In all these aspects, play is not only a fun activity, but also a basic learning and discovery tool that supports the child's development in many dimensions.

As play has an important place in a child's development, parents, teachers, and healthcare professionals can contribute to every area of development (physical, intellectual, emotional, and social) by using play effectively. In order to provide an efficient environment, kids should be given the necessary opportunities and toys. It is crucial for the adults who are part of a child's everyday life to remember that games and toys can contribute to the child's development and health at an optimal level in applications related to children. Their play should be supported (Bekmezci and Özkan 2015, 82-86).

Features of play

According to Hurwitz (2003), there are five characteristics that distinguish play from other activities:

1) Play is a process, and the result obtained is not as important as the process itself.

2) Play is played because the child chooses it.

3) Anything can happen during play (such as extraordinary circumstances).

4) Play is a work of intelligence and enables the child to develop questioning and meaning-making skills.

5) Play is a tool for testing rules, rules can exist or disappear, and new rules can be determined from children's previous experiences.

Play is an activity that emerges spontaneously in line with the child's natural tendencies and is independent of necessity. During play, the child freely determines the content and direction of their behaviours and acts with intrinsic motivation instead of responding to external expectations. Play, which has a symbolic structure, contains layers of meaning, is open to change and allows children to relate their past experiences to the current context, while allowing them to understand the perspectives of others by assuming different roles. There are specific or implicit rules in play, children can create and change their own rules. What the game is and what it is not is as important, and in this context, the attitudes of adults play a decisive role; Adults should encourage play environments where children can make choices, set rules, take an active role, make the changes they want, and most importantly, enjoy the process (Aksoy and Çiftçi 2020, 2-6).

According to Sevinç (2004), play is a dynamic and flexible activity based on intrinsic motivation, where the process is more important than the purpose. It is shaped according to the child's mood by eliminating the boundaries between reality and the world of imagination and does not always follow a logical order. Rules can be changed with the acceptance of the participants, but active participation in physical, cognitive and emotional terms is essential. Play supports development by creating positive effects on individuals; the space, materials and behaviours of the participants determine the quality of the play. As an unstructured and improvisational process, play offers children a safe area of discovery, supports cognitive and physical development and develops problem solving, creative thinking and social interaction skills. The child is safe in play. This situation enables him/her to be motivated and focus on a subject. While the materials used increase the child's interest, the play process contributes to hand-eye coordination, conceptual development and social integration, providing a multi-dimensional learning experience.

Stages of play based on child development

Cognitive Stages of Play

Piaget

Cognitive theories are based on the work of the Swiss psychologist Piaget (1951, 1962) and consider play within the broader framework of psychological

development. Piaget developed a theory that explained children's cognitive development in detail and suggested that this process progressed parallel to play. According to Piaget's theory, play not only reflects the child's current level of cognitive development, but also contributes to this process. During play, the individual tends to adapt reality to their own cognitive structures (assimilation); this becomes more dominant than the process of changing the cognitive structure to adapt to the environment (accommodation). However, for learning and cognitive development to occur, a balance must be achieved between assimilation and accommodation. Piaget suggested that children do not acquire completely new skills through play but rather reinforce skills they have recently learned by repeating them (Mellou 1994, 95).

According to Piaget, play is a process that progresses in parallel with the child's cognitive development and is an activity in which assimilation and accommodation dominate. The child incorporates events and objects into their existing mental structures through play.

Piaget considers the development of play in three stages:

Practice Play (0-2 years): The child enjoys developing motor skills by repeating movements and actions. This play is a part of the sensory-motor period.

Symbolic Play (2-4 years): The child begins to use symbols to represent objects and actions. Imaginary games and "pretend play" are seen in this period. Symbolic play allows the child to reshape the external world according to his/her own internal needs.

Play with Rules (4 years and later): The child turns to games that require social interaction and are based on certain rules. These games contribute to the learning of social rules and social development.

According to Piaget, play progresses from individual processes to social processes. While the child assimilates the outside world through play, he also develops his cognitive and social skills. Symbolic play helps the child express his inner world, while games with rules contribute to the learning of social order and cooperation (Nicolopoulou 1993, 3-7).

Smilansky

Smilansky added the building game based on Piaget's cognitive game stages and rearranged the model, emphasizing the importance of symbolic play. As a result of his studies with children, he also included building and socio-dramatic games in Piaget's developmental stages. According to Smilansky, functional play includes physical activities, while sports games fall into the category of games with rules because they have certain rules. Smilansky, who suggests that the stages of play may overlap as age progresses, stated

that different types of play development may be more dominant in certain periods. Smilansky's game classification consists of four stages: Functional (Sensory-Motor) Play, Constructive Play, Symbolic Play, and Play with Rules (Demir 2024, 34). Takhvar and Smith (1990) have addressed Smilansky's stages of play as follows.

Functional Play: The child's play process begins with simple muscle movements that support physical development. These games are naturally "functional" and involve the child discovering and repeating body movements. The child imitates his own movements, tries new movements and continues the learning process by repeating them. At the same time, he tries to repeat and imitate them by making sounds, thus laying the foundations for language development. By interacting with toys and various objects, he discovers his environment and begins to know it better. Functional play contributes to the child's transition to the next developmental stage by enabling him to develop his physical skills and experience his immediate environment.

Constructive Play: This type of play allows the child to participate in creative processes and gives him the satisfaction of creation. The child learns to use play materials in different ways and transitions from simple movements to games where he produces a specific product. He can now focus his attention for a longer period of time during the game, determine a theme for his game and organize it more systematically. At this stage, the child not only achieves the play goals he has set but can also adapt to the goals set by others. The transition between functional play and constructive play involves the process of consciously combining objects instead of using random objects. The objects he creates during play allow him to express himself and help the child to see himself as a “creator.”

Dramatic Play**:** At this stage, the child begins to express his experiences in different ways through symbolic play. Dramatic play allows the child to freely display his physical skills, creativity, and developing social awareness. The child discovers the adult world through play and establishes a connection between play and reality. This process allows the child to both understand his environment and create imaginary scenarios that reflect his own needs and dreams. Dramatic play plays an important role in the development of social skills because the child takes on roles as a player, an observer, and an active participant in this process. In this way, he develops social interaction skills more effectively.

Games with Rules: According to theorists, the most advanced stage of play development is rule-based games. In this type of play, the child has to accept predetermined rules and act within these rules. This process helps the child learn to control his/her own behaviour, actions and reactions within

certain limits. Games with rules continue to exist as one of the basic forms of play that the individual experiences not only in childhood but also in adulthood.

Social Stages of Play

Parten

Unlike Piaget and Smilansky, Parten did not approach play from a cognitive perspective. Parten's play theory classifies children's play in the context of social development into six stages: unoccupied play, onlooker play, solitary play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. According to Parten, children increase their social interactions during the game process and move on to more complex types of games, and these stages are considered as an indicator of their social development (Çelik and Kangal 2022, 206-207).

Parten herself explains the six stages of play in her study in 1932 as follows.

Unoccupied play (birth-2): The child does not appear to be actively engaged in play but instead observes whatever is moving and captures their attention at the moment. When nothing particularly interesting is happening, they may entertain themselves by moving around and playing with their bodies, getting on and off chairs, standing idly, following the teacher, or sitting in one place while scanning the room.

Solitary play (age 2-3): Solitary play or playing alone is defined as a form of behaviour in which a child plays independently without interacting with other children. Although it is not always possible to make a clear distinction between group play and solitary play, certain criteria have been used to determine this distinction. Accordingly, if a child plays with toys that are different from other children within talking distance, focuses only on his own play, and does not communicate with the children around him, he is considered to be playing alone.

Onlooker play (age 2.5- 3.5): The child primarily observes other children as they play, occasionally engaging with them by asking questions, making comments, or offering suggestions, but without actively joining the play. Unlike unoccupied behaviour, where the child watches anything of interest, the onlooker specifically focuses on a particular group. They position themselves close enough to see and hear everything happening, maintaining a level of involvement through observation rather than direct participation.

Parallel play (age 2.5- 3.5): The child engages in independent play, yet the activity he selects naturally places him among other children. Although

he plays with toys similar to those used by the children around him, he uses the toy according to his own will and does not try to influence or change the play of the children around him. He plays next to, rather than with, the other children and makes no effort to influence who joins or leaves the group.

Associative play (age 3- 4): The child plays with other children. Conversations are structured around shared activities; toys are borrowed and given, children follow each other and play with trains or wagons. There may be slight guidance about who can and cannot join the play. All children do similar or the same activity, but there is no division of labour or organization around a common goal. Each child acts according to his or her own individual interests. The main interest of the children is in the social interaction they establish with their playmates rather than in the play activity itself. From time to time, two or three children may not focus on a particular activity but may act only according to what interests them.

Cooperative play (age 4- 6): Children play in an organized group to produce a specific material, to strive for a competitive goal, to revitalize adult and group life, or to play games with rules. In this type of play, children experience a strong sense of belonging or not belonging to the group. Group dynamics take shape under the leadership of one or two children, and these children direct the activities of others. Both the goal of the game and the process of achieving this goal require a division of labour among children, their assuming different roles, and the complementing of each child's efforts with the efforts of the other.

Contributions of play to child development

Play and Physical–Psychomotor Development in Early Childhood

Infants are born with the ability to move, whether through reflexive or conscious movements. While reflexes persist throughout life, conscious movements develop in a sequential manner. In the early stages of life, infants engage in primitive movements to explore and express themselves, but as they grow, their movements mature, and they begin to exhibit manipulative skills. From birth, children explore both themselves and their surroundings through movement. The most natural and enjoyable way to acquire experiences through movement, both as a means and an end, is play (Ağyar 2014, 123-124).

Motor development is a process in which children acquire movement skills that develop in parallel with their physical growth and central nervous system. This process starts with reflexive movements and turns into complex social skills and plays a fundamental role in children's physical,

cognitive and emotional development. In the preschool period, children's motor skill development is supported through play and movement. Play is an important tool for children to express themselves and develop their emotional and social skills. At the same time, play helps children learn moral values and rules and is an important part of the developmental process. Adults' participation in children's play and creating safe and comfortable environments supports children's healthy development (Senturk et al. 2015, 42-43).

The earliest form of play observed in most mammals, physical play, includes activities that develop both gross and fine motor skills, such as jumping, climbing, ball games, painting, cutting, playing with toys/objects, and what is commonly referred to as "rough-and-tumble play.". Rough-and-tumble play is a type of play that involves physical contact such as wrestling, grasping, kicking, and rolling, and may seem aggressive, but is focused on social interaction that takes place in the context of play (Pellegrini and Smith 1998, 579-584). Play activities help children gain daily life skills by supporting their small and large muscle development. While developing fine motor skills such as cutting, holding, and buttoning; activities such as outdoor games, gymnastics, and cycling positively affect large muscle development. Play improves the child's physical strength, reaction ability, attention, balance, and coordination, and provides flexibility and agility (Durualp and Aral 2018, 244-245). Whitebread et al. (2017), in their review of 13 empirical studies on this topic, stated that physical play is associated with children's cognitive and academic performance, social skills, and emotion regulation. The studies examined within this research indicate that physical play has positive effects on children's health indicators, adaptive behaviours, cognitive self-regulation, social competence, and problem-solving skills.

Psychomotor development is a fundamental process that supports children's cognitive, social and emotional skills through physical movements and should be encouraged with appropriate strategies at an early age. However, the lack of teaching materials and inadequate parental involvement negatively affect this process. The development of motor skills is directly related not only to physical activity but also to a diet rich in protein, minerals and carbohydrates. While optimal nutrition in the first two years supports children's learning processes by increasing their motor agility, inadequate nutrition can cause retardation in motor skills and delay in physical growth. While lack of psychomotor development can lead to children having difficulty in academic skills such as writing, reading, distinguishing letters and logical thinking, it is emphasized that play-based activities support this development and increase children's social, cognitive

and emotional competencies. The acquisition of motor skills is shaped through environmental interactions in parallel with the maturation of the nervous system and this process should be considered as an integral part of physical growth and cognitive development. Therefore, combining healthy nutrition, play and movement-based activities with appropriate early stimulation strategies in early childhood supports children's motor and cognitive development and forms the basis for future learning skills (Cedeño-Roldán and Reyes-Meza 2022, 561-562).

Due to technological developments, children spend most of their days in front of the television and computer, which leads to weaknesses in their movement development. Inactivity negatively affects children's physical development and causes their motor skills to regress. In the preschool period, mobility is of great importance to support children's physical, mental, social and emotional development. Play is an important tool in children's psychomotor development and allows them to understand and explore the world. Play is one of the basic needs of children, like nutrition and love, and its deficiency can negatively affect their healthy development (Arslan, Akoğlan and Guter 2021, 36-38). If children are deprived of physical activity play, they will engage in more intense and prolonged physical activity play when given the opportunity. This suggests that physical activity play serves specific developmental functions and that its absence creates a need that must be compensated for (Pellegrini and Smith 1998, 579-584).

Particularly in infancy and early childhood, the total duration and frequency of physical activity are consistently and positively associated with various health indicators in this age group. Therefore, encouraging children to engage in physical activity from an early age will have beneficial effects on their development and overall well-being (Carson et al. 2016, 573-577). In addition, A sedentary lifestyle increases the risk of obesity by making individuals sedentary, and this poses a great danger especially for children. Research shows that individuals who are overweight in childhood are more likely to become obese in adulthood. Therefore, it is of great importance for children to adopt an active lifestyle and participate in play activities. Otherwise, psychological problems may arise in overweight children. The same way, activities that include play and exercise support the healthy physical development of children and help them maintain their physical and psychomotor structures in later ages (Arslan et al. 2021, 36-38). Play increases children's positive emotions, regulates their immune system, cardiovascular system, and hormonal system, and boosts productivity. It reduces the effects of stress, fatigue, and depression, and enhances

movement, agility, coordination, balance, and both fine and gross motor skills (Goldstein 2012, 6-7).

Environmental conditions and spatial design play a major role in children's development. The first spaces encountered, such as housing, schools and playgrounds, should be designed to support the child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. With urbanization, children's ties to nature have weakened and safe outdoor play areas have decreased. Therefore, there is a need for artificial movement areas where children can move and develop their psychomotor skills. Areas that will support children's gross motor skills such as running, jumping and climbing and manipulative skills should be taken into consideration in spatial design. Systematic and planned approaches that combine play and movement should be adopted in spatial design for children, and children's basic needs and developmental requirements should be considered (Aydemir and Yalçınkaya 2023, 649).

Free games, which we know as games that develop spontaneously in early childhood, are among the types of games that positively affect the physical and mental health of children in this period. Outdoor play, risky play, rough-and-tumble play, hand-eye coordination games, and activities that support fine motor skills are recognized as physical activities that promote the development of preschool-aged children. Supporting motor development from an early age ensures that the child has a healthy body structure in the future and strengthens other developmental areas. Including planned play activities in preschool education is of great importance in terms of supporting all developmental areas of the child (Durualp and Aral 2018, 244-245).

Play and cognitive development in early childhood – language development

Cognitive development refers to the growth of children's thinking, problem solving, and learning abilities. It progresses rapidly in early childhood, shaping other developmental areas such as language, motor skills, and social interactions. As children explore their surroundings and engage with new experiences, they continuously expand their cognitive world. This process involves key abilities like perception, memory, reasoning, and problem-solving. While genetics provide the foundation for a child's cognitive potential, the environment, particularly family and school, plays a crucial role in how this potential unfolds. A stimulating learning environment fosters children's ability to think logically, solve problems effectively, and

understand cause-and-effect relationships, laying the groundwork for future learning and development (Amalia and Khoiriyati 2018, 104-105).

Cognitive development is a fundamental developmental area that encompasses the processes of acquiring, processing, storing and restructuring information by interacting with the individual's environment from birth. Developmental theorists such as Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky have suggested that cognitive development depends not only on biological factors but also on environmental interactions. Environmental factors shape the development of an individual's mental capacity and play a critical role in the progression of cognitive processes such as problem solving, reasoning and conceptual thinking. Indeed, scientific research has shown that an environment enriched with environmental stimuli positively affects cognitive development, whereas stimuli deprivation can limit cognitive functions. In today's rapidly changing and complex world of information, individuals' critical thinking, analytical reasoning and the ability to develop different solution strategies are of great importance (Türkoğlu and Uslu 2024, 51-52).

Early childhood is a critical period in human life when brain development occurs most rapidly and intensively. During this process, synaptic overproduction and pruning occur in brain regions associated with sensory information processing and higher-level cognitive functions. Healthy brain development forms the basis for future cognitive and academic success by supporting the acquisition and advancement of abilities in various cognitive areas such as language, memory, spatial awareness and executive functions. In this context, understanding and encouraging the factors that support cognitive development in early childhood is of great importance (Carson et al. 2016, 573-577).

Language development is a critical process that involves individual acquiring language skills through environmental interactions from birth. Language is not only a means of communication, but also one of the basic elements that shape cognitive development. Early childhood is of great importance in terms of language acquisition; the child first starts by making meaningless sounds, then imitates the words he hears and produces meaningful expressions. The cultural and linguistic environment determines the ability to perceive and produce sounds, affecting language learning in later ages. Play is an important tool that supports the child in expanding his vocabulary, developing verbal expression skills, and learning social communication rules in this process. Therefore, environments that encourage language development in the early period and play-based learning experiences directly affect the child's cognitive and linguistic competencies (Kol 2011, 10-17).

Internalized language use is an important cognitive process in terms of an individual directing their own behaviour and planning their future actions. Private speech plays a critical role in the development of an individual's self-direction and self-regulation skills in early childhood. In this process, children's determination of how to use their hands, bodies and voices by talking to themselves reveals the contribution of language to cognitive and emotional development. In particular, make-believe play is one of the basic activities that support the development of private speech. During play, children direct play scenarios using their internal dialogues and develop problem-solving skills. Private speech is directly related to the development of executive functions. However, children who are predominantly involved in teacher-centred activities or spend time in front of television and digital screens limit their opportunities to develop self-regulation skills through language. In this context, play-based learning environments stand out as an important tool that supports children's language development and cognitive regulation processes (Lockhart 2010, 5-7).

There are various theoretical approaches to the relationship between children's play and cognitive development, but these approaches generally provide insights into the nature of play but are limited in terms of how it contributes to cognitive development. Piaget argues that imaginary play is related to the child's egocentric assimilation of the environment in the pre-operational period and that play reinforces newly acquired cognitive skills, while he believes that it does not directly cause cognitive growth. However, this theory has limitations such as ignoring the social and cultural context of play, adopting a narrow definition of play, and not considering the play environment as an independent developmental context. Alternative approaches suggest that socio-cultural factors, adult guidance, and learning processes are determinants of the development of imaginary play, while emphasizing that play is not based solely on assimilation, that the child constructs meaning by producing new symbols in play, and that he adapts to environmental inputs. While Piaget considers play as a way of representing the external world, other approaches suggest that play has certain rules and limits, that the child adapts his thought processes within this context, and that he enters a restructuring process by experiencing cognitive imbalances during play. In this regard, play should be considered as a dynamic process that not only reinforces existing cognitive structures but also encourages the child to develop new cognitive skills (Fink 1976, 895-898).

Piaget believes that kids who are in the process of learning are like scientists because they conduct experiments, observe, and explore the world as they engage with their surroundings. Kids enhance their existing

knowledge by adding more to it and adapting their old ideas to incorporate new learning. According to Piaget's developmental stage theory of cognitive development, play is a process that should be enriched with appropriate environmental stimuli. Particularly in early childhood, play is a natural component of the learning process, nourishing children's cognitive skills while supporting social interactions. Play helps children understand the world at all stages of cognitive development, starting with Piaget's sensorimotor period. It is also a learning tool that enhances problem-solving skills and adaptation to environmental stimuli (Bhagat, Haque and Jaalam 2018, 128-129).

Play and social-emotional development in early childhood

Play is a crucial component of child development, providing a unique opportunity to foster essential skills. Research indicates that developmentally appropriate play with parents and peers enhances social-emotional, cognitive, language, and self-regulation abilities, all of which contribute to executive function and prosocial behaviour. Additionally, play facilitates the formation of secure and nurturing relationships with caregivers, which are fundamental for a child's well-being and resilience against toxic stress (Yogman et al. 2018, 1-7).

Play holds a critical role in children’s socialization process and directly contributes to their social and emotional development. In a play environment, children learn social skills such as cooperating, sharing, waiting their turn, obeying rules and respecting the rights of others by experiencing them. During this process, they reinforce their self-expression, empathy and problem-solving skills through social interactions. Play also allows children to discover social rules and roles; they internalize social structures by assuming different roles and making sense of social hierarchies and relationships. Imaginary games and symbolic role-plays allow children to learn by reflecting historical events, cultural norms and social statuses in their games. In this context, play helps children resolve their emotional conflicts while also contributing to their understanding of the social world and learning how to act in this world. In addition, features important for individual and social development such as decision-making, taking responsibility, gaining self-confidence and developing tolerance are also reinforced through play. As a result, play is not only an entertaining activity, but also a fundamental learning process that develops children’s social and emotional skills and shapes their future personality and social adaptation (Pehlivan 2005, 23-25).

Imaginative play has an important place in children's social-emotional development. Such games develop children's skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, waiting for their turn, expressing themselves, defending their rights and establishing positive relationships with others. Imaginary games, especially imitation, taking on professional roles and playing house, allow children to rehearse social life and experience social and moral rules. These games teach children to understand others' feelings, develop empathy and discover their social roles. At the same time, children learn to cooperate with others and adapt to dynamics within a group through imaginary games. The interactive and creative nature of imaginary games contributes to the strengthening of children's social skills and emotional adaptation. Research shows that imaginary games contribute greatly to children's emotional and social development by increasing their social skills and emotional adaptation (Ertabak et al. 2023, 27).

Conclusion

One of the most innate and successful ways that people learn in their early years is through play. Children utilize games throughout this time to express themselves, engage with their surroundings, and make sense of the world. Theoretical approaches covered in this section demonstrate that play serves a variety of purposes in terms of language, social, emotional, cognitive, physical, and recreational development. While Vygotsky views play as a tool that helps a child's growth through social roles and the organizing of mental functions, Piaget believes that play is structured in parallel with a child's cognitive development phases.

Children acquire and practice a variety of life skills through play, including cooperation, waiting for turns, problem solving, and decision making. Play provides abundant chances for language development, including the establishment of successful communication, the development of storytelling abilities, and vocabulary expansion. Additionally, it gives kids a secure environment in which to use their creativity and imagination. Children's social skills, empathy, and problem-solving abilities are especially enhanced by imaginative activities.

Early childhood education programs should prioritize play-based approaches because of the multifaceted character of play. In addition to meeting children's developmental needs, high quality, kid-centred play spaces foster their creativity and drive to study. Therefore, it is crucial to assist children's development by using play-based approaches in early childhood education and giving them spaces where they can play freely.

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CHAPTER 2

CHILD AND PLAY

AYŞEGÜL ERGÜL, ÜLKÜ BÜŞRA ÜLKÜ AKIN

Introduction

Children's desire to play is deeply rooted in both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contribute to their overall development and well-being. Play is not only a fundamental right of children, as recognized by international conventions, but also a critical component of their growth, learning, and socialization. The multifaceted nature of play allows children to explore their environment, express themselves, and develop essential life skills.

Play, which has existed throughout the history of humanity, starts with the birth of an individual and shows a lifelong development. Responding to children's different needs and interests, play is a natural activity that they enjoy the most. At the same time, play can be defined as a process that enables children to explore, interact with and use objects in the environment to support their development (Lifter 2011).

Engagement in play constitutes a voluntary endeavour or undertaking, undertaken with full consent, yet conducted in adherence to rigorously defined regulations within specific temporal and spatial boundaries, possessing an intrinsic purpose, accompanied by a sensation of both tension and elation, as well as an awareness of a state of existence that is distinct from everyday life (Huizinga 2021, 1-25). Engaging in play allows children to face fears and insecurities in a controlled setting, helping them learn to regulate their emotions and build resilience (Silva et al. 2024).

The architectural design and accessibility of play environments exert a profound impact on the cognitive and social maturation of children. Play settings that are meticulously constructed and easily accessible can significantly bolster children's imaginative capacities, emotional self-regulation, and interpersonal skills. Such environments present opportunities for children to partake in varied modalities of play, which are essential for their comprehensive development. The incorporation of natural elements,

an array of play features, and vigilant adult supervision are pivotal components that enhance the efficacy of play environments in promoting cognitive and social advancement among children.

Play for living beings

Play is a prevalent and complex behaviour that is documented across a multitude of species, encompassing humans, mammals, and a diverse range of other animals. It transcends mere entertainment, playing a significant role in emotional, cognitive, and social growth. Play is not only a biological necessity but also a cultural and existential phenomenon that enriches life beyond basic survival. To enhance our comprehension of the significance of play in human development, it is advantageous to briefly investigate its roles among other organisms with whom we cohabit our environment.

Play is a critical component of development, particularly during early life stages. In species like foals (horses), play involves locomotor activities such as jumping, running, and circling, which are essential for rapid motor maturation (Maglieri et al. 2024). Play fosters cognitive growth by encouraging exploration and creativity. For example, object play in orangutans and belugas involves manipulating objects, which may enhance problem-solving skills (Kunz et al. 2024). Play also plays a role in preparing individuals for life challenges. In juvenile Belding's ground squirrels, social play predicts increases in boldness and exploration, helping them navigate unfamiliar situations (Marks et al. 2017).

Engagement in play serves as a potent mechanism for facilitating social learning and fostering relational bonds. It aids individuals in honing their interpersonal competencies, delineating social hierarchies, and comprehending the intricacies of group dynamics. In moor macaques and Japanese macaques, play behaviour varies with the species' dominance style. Moor macaques, which are less despotic, engage in more cooperative and varied play, while Japanese macaques focus more on grooming (Beltran et al. 2020). This highlights the link between play and social structure. In African elephants, play is socially contagious, with individuals being more likely to play when others are playing. This contagion is strongest among closely affiliated individuals, suggesting its role in enhancing social bonds (Norscia et al. 2024).

Engagement in play transcends mere physical or social interaction; it possesses profound emotional and psychological implications. It serves as a medium for the articulation and regulation of emotions, while simultaneously fostering the development of emotional resilience. Play allows individuals to express emotions in a safe and controlled environment.