

Effects of Play on the Social Development of Preschool Children

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Abstract

This concept paper aims to provide early exposure and an understanding of the effectiveness of playing on the social development of children. Generally, children that play more are better at self-control, cooperation, thoughtfulness, sociable and have a higher social competence. There are various importances of play that are involved in the process of teaching and learning that affects the social development of children. This concept paper focuses on the theories, definitions, interests, and the components of the social development of children. This paper discusses the implications of play on the social development of children.

Keywords

Play, Social Development, Pre-School, Children

1. Introduction

The early years of a child's life are critical for later development. A child's development is a process of a change in behaviour from being immature to mature, from simple to complex, from being dependent to being self-reliant. There are many critical skills that children need to develop in preparation for later developments, such as exploring, risk-taking, fine motor skills, and gross motor development. These skills can be learned effectively through play-based activities (Johnson et al., 2010). Taking into account the nature of children is "play", the lessons and learning process involving young children should be done through play (Puteh, 2013, Puteh & Ali, 2012, Puteh & Ali, 2011). Moreover, play offers the best learning experience for children (Moyles, 2005).

Education experts, organizations and curriculum documents worldwide indicate the importance of integrating play into the education of young children. An association in the United States comprising of various early childhood profes-

sionals—the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) emphasized the need to incorporate play in teaching and learning. Play is vital in helping the holistic development of children (NAEYC, 2009). In Malaysia, the National Standard Preschool Curriculum (KSPK) by the *Ministry of Education Malaysia (2017)* highlights play as one of the approaches that is highly recommended to be implemented throughout the classrooms. *Vygotsky (1978)* stressed the important function of play through social interaction and language expression. During children’s exploration of the world, they learn to communicate and express naturally. In contrast, *Piaget (1951)* asserted that children construct knowledge through interaction with others and by acting on their environment. *Piaget (1951)* highlights the relationship between play and cognitive development; whereby children could reach a higher level of cognitive developments through the process of assimilation of experience through play.

Young children cannot be separated from play. Also, every child has the right to engage in play (*Jantan, 2013*). More importantly, play is an essential part of a child’s development and it is critical for a child to reach their full potential (*Ginsburg, 2007*). As highlighted by NAEYC (2009), play is an important factor in helping the holistic development of children. Play contributes to the aspects of cognitive, physical, social and emotional development of children (*Rosli & Lin, 2018; Ali & Mahamod, 2015*). However, to elicit social development in children, it can occur when children explore their environment with their peers or adults through social interactions (*Dzainudin et al., 2018*). This can be done through play, where the adults will have ample opportunities to participate in their children’s activities (*Jantan, 2013*). The process of teaching and learning using play-based activities is a structured approach that provides students with the opportunity to learn in a meaningful and positive way (*Loy, 2017*). Children will develop cooperative skills and display appropriate social behaviour. The social competence of children will increase as children learn to control themselves, overcoming stress, and talk about emotions (*Daubert et al., 2018*). Children will display various positive emotions such as joy and happiness. This will lead them building their own experiences through exploration and discovery.

2. Play—Emerging Issues and Challenges

Various studies were conducted on play in preschools. Of concern are findings highlighting a large number of obstacles to incorporating play in school settings. In the Malaysian context, pre-school children are expected to master the 4M skills (reading, counting, writing and thinking) as preparation to enter formal education in Year 1. Pressure from various parties to see children become literate as soon as possible forces the teachers to not engage in fun learning and practice academic-oriented teaching solely to ensure that the children are able to master the 4M without delay (*Ismail, 2015*). For example, most schools or teachers are not paying enough attention to the emphasis on play approach because they are too obsolete for their students to read as soon as possible and ap-

ply formal education rather than fun learning (Ismail, 2015). Even if children are capable of mastering the required skills, they may be seen as academically inclined but are the students able to socialize well? Further, as teachers pursue the teaching syllabus and become too focused on the curriculum, they tend to neglect the importance of playing for children (Irvin, 2017).

Research reported on the benefits of play approach in teaching and learning of young children. A well-practised and well-integrated play approach can greatly enrich the development of preschool children. Various skills have been successfully applied to preschool children through play. Most educators indeed know this very well. Even though there are many approaches to fun learning in preschool education, most schools or teachers are not paying enough attention to this emphasis because they are too obsolete for their students to read as soon as possible and apply formal education (Ismail, 2015).

Some parents are wary of play to be incorporated into their children's learning and believe that a school is a place for learning and not for playing. Parents viewed play as separated from learning and perceived no benefits of play in the school setting. Additionally, parents' high academic expectations had cause them to put pressure on schools and teachers to prepare their children with academic knowledge and skills necessary for the present as well as future life. Hence, teachers are expected to employ direct instruction rather than engaged their children in play.

Although play is often perceived as beneficial for young children, there exists a mismatch between teachers' beliefs and their practices. Factors including limited time allocations as well as space and insufficient resources for play activities are hindrances to incorporating play in learning (Puteh, 2013). As a result, many programmes in schools and child centres employ strategies such as the use of drills and practice while neglecting play-based activities in the teaching and learning process (Miller & Almon, 2009).

Damanhuri's (2017) study shows that pre-schoolers' develop holistically through play. However, the researcher focused solely on language, cognitive, emotional and creativity development. The effects of play on children's social development has not been identified in the study. Although the author states that the potential of play on a child's social development, the author has not specifically studied the effects of play on children's social development.

Based on the highlights of the study, it is clear that play affects the development of preschool children holistically. These involve various development including language, cognitive, emotional and creativity. Therefore, this paper aims to explore various methods and activities that may promote children's social development.

3. Types of Play in Children's Social Development

According to Ashari et al. (2013), when a child actively interacts with the world around them, their knowledge will be built naturally. Young children will not only receive information passively through the learning process but they also

build knowledge through the interaction with the environment. Therefore, the cognitive and social elements are intertwined in the interactions with the environment. Through the studies of Brock et al. (2009), play can provide children with such opportunities through the process of restructuring, discoveries, enrichment processes, building experiences and knowledge as well as discovering new concepts.

Mildren Parten developed the Stages of Development of Social Play through her research done in 1932. [Parten \(1932\)](#) categorized social play into several categories. The first is unoccupied play. Unoccupied play is when the child is neither playing with anyone nor with any games. The second is solitary play where the children will play on their own without involving themselves with other children. Next is onlooker play. Onlooker play is where the children simply watch and observe other children playing without any desire to engage. Children are only observing passively. Fourth is parallel play where the children play on their own without playing the same game as the other children in the same room. Next is associative play. Associative play occurs when children are sharing materials and interacting, but there is no distinguishable goal for the group. The last is cooperative play whereby it involves children working together with some sort of shared goal, rules, and/or organization. Children will be actively involved as a group to play together and teachers set the goals or outcomes that need to be achieved. The children in this group are interdependent and need to learn to cooperate. Examples of cooperative play includes building blocks and treasure hunt.

The theory developed by Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky believes that children's cognitive development and knowledge are the result of ongoing interactions and environmental factors ([Ashari et al., 2013](#)). Based on the writings of [Wathu \(2016\)](#), Vygotsky's theory of social-culture states that pretend play is important for the acquisition of social competence. This means that children learn through the process of play and as such, have a positive impact on their social development.

It is beneficial that children being given the opportunity to play freely, for example, letting children choose what to play such as building castles made out of the sand. In that particular situation, children will also tend to role play with different characters such as kings, queens, knights and so on. From there, the child's social development will take place indirectly and the children will have to try to interact with peers. From not being able to speak clearly, they develop speech to become clearer and they are able to learn new vocabulary as well. This shows that play in children's learning is crucial to the social development of children.

4. Implications of Play on the Social Development of Children

According to [Whitman \(2018\)](#), in a social context, play is important. The reason being is that at this stage, children will begin to develop relationships, build trust

and establish long-term bonds. Play will enhance the imagination by allowing children to be creative and engage in pretend play. It also improves communication skills for children and develops language skills while playing. Through the writings of Denham (1986), children will interact with others during playing to build up relationships. Therefore, pro-social behaviour is required during play as it allows children to recognize other people's emotions and enhance their ability to see perspectives. Denham also implied that emotional awareness of others teaches children to empathise with others. Such a perspective that is built at a young age is important whereby it helps children to be less egocentric. When children exhibit pro-social behaviours, they are also learning to think about others as well.

The caregiver or guardian is the "first teacher" of the child and is a primary proponent for a child's learning experience. Therefore, caregivers play an important role in creating a learning space through play. Also, it is important to support the caregivers and empower them to take an active role in shaping the children's education and development, as well as to facilitate fun learning for children at home and in the community in their everyday experiences (UNICEF, 2018).

Proper preschool education can help children in the formation and development of attitudes, intellectual, physical and motor skills, social, moral, and creativity required by a child before moving on to the next stage of development. One of the aspects that starts to grow at this age is the social aspect of children (Dewi et al., 2017; Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). Children who have a good grasp on their social skills will find that they are able to adapt easier, to enjoy their childhood and later on, be adaptable in various situations as adults (Dewi et al., 2017). Inviting the families and community members into the preschool environment to interact with young children and experience the process of learning directly would help demonstrate the benefits of play to the adults. Directly experiencing active learning can help in convincing the family that the experience of play can build critical skills that cannot be learned through a traditional learning environment (UNICEF, 2018). Society also plays an important role in establishing young children's relationships with the real world. Communities can provide additional resources and services to help enhance learning through play. It is therefore important to identify and integrate community resources into learning. Examples include community centres, libraries, museums, and playgrounds to enrich play-based learning.

Games or play activities are an important stimulus for children. Aspects of children's development can be nurtured optimally and maximised through play activities (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). Play greatly influences a young child's social, behavioural, cognitive and language development. It is something universal and critical to healthy social development. As fewer opportunities are presented for children to play, a variety of social problems arise (Daubert et al., 2018). In the context of social development, play provides an opportunity for children to learn to connect or interact with others. Play can enhance the explo-

ration of an environment and provide a safe space for children to try something new (Abdullah & J, 2008).

Through play, children will learn to work together and strive to demonstrate good behaviour (Daubert et al., 2018). Playing is also a form of therapy for children, especially for the younger ones who are not able to express themselves properly through words. It has become a form of expression that children use to express themselves (Irvin, 2017). For example, playing in the backyard can foster a sense of cohesion as well as develop social skills (Abdullah & J, 2008). Besides, children will learn to control their (impulsive) behaviours and plan or construct a more appropriate response to a situation (Daubert et al., 2018).

Play and play-based learning is important for children's social development. Children who play are better at being able to control themselves, be more cooperative, considerate, friendly and are with higher social competence. They also exhibit good social behaviour, adaptable and are more likely to interact with peers. However, it is being said that children are missing out on opportunities to play due to the pressure that is on them to focus on their academic pursuits and are also more likely to play video games instead (Daubert et al., 2018; Irvin, 2017).

Research done on play using technology and multimedia shows both negative and positive results. Being in these current times, technology and multimedia-based play is inevitable. Hence, we need to maximise the positive aspects of using technology into play. According to Johnson & Christie (2009), new media is vital to be used to enrich rather than hinder a child's play experience. Based on the writings of Slutsky et al. (2014), computer games can promote creativity and imagination by having children build things. These type of games can be pro-social and educational. Children can use these type of games to promote positive learning and experiences. Slutsky also added that media can foster social skills. Technology can help promote children's development of skills such as collaboration, cooperation and social interaction skills. Lieberman, Fisk, & Biely (2009) stated that multimedia and interactive experiences help build children's learning, cognitive development, skill-building, social interactions, physical activity and healthy behaviours.

Play-based learning often takes place in a state of an active relationship and interaction between children and their peers or their environment (Daubert et al., 2018). One of the most popular types of play to help with children's social development is free play and role-playing. It is one of the solutions to address children's social and emotional development problems by adopting a learning approach that is appropriate to the child's need and age (Dewi et al., 2017). According to Pyle (2018), free play is very beneficial to the development of social competence and a child's self-control. For example, in role-playing, which is a form of free play, children will have the opportunity to resolve problems in a conflict, suppress impulsive behaviour, express emotions, adhere to social rules and support the emotional needs of others.

The results of previous studies have also shown that role-playing affects developing early socio-emotional skills for young children (Holis, 2017). Experiences that provide space and exploratory opportunities are the essence of early childhood learning. In these situations, children are able to generate strong imagination and fantasy thus making an impact. This shows that role-playing is not a form of meaningless simulation, it has the capability of bringing children to explore both the actual and the factual (Holis, 2017). It is also a reference for the children to act effectively in the face of a difficult situation (Holis, 2017; Irvin, 2017).

Another approach that has been used to help in the development of children's social aspect is the stimulation through games using puzzles. Researchers have studied the impact of the use of puzzles on the social development and the autonomy of preschool children (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). The results show that puzzles have a significant impact on children's social development (Setyaningsih & Wahyuni, 2018). The game trains children to develop a cooperative attitude, patiently waiting for their turn and being able to control themselves well. Children will not only enjoy the play-based activities through learning, they also develop physically, mentally and emotionally (Nachiappan et al., 2017).

5. Conclusion

Obviously, play enhances many aspects of children's social development. The process of building a child's social development will be more effective if the curriculum of the children's education is based on fun learning and play activities. Children will learn skills, concepts, gain knowledge and understand issues around them in a fun and meaningful way through. Many research has shown that play does enhance children's social skills. Among the social skills that can be built includes pride in succeeding, skills in doing what is expected of them, cooperative skills, friendship, and self-reliability.

Puteh & Ali (2012) assert that implementing play-based learning into lessons is a difficult task if one does not possess the knowledge and skills relating to this approach. The findings of the study revealed that some teachers, especially private preschool teachers, have reported that they lacked skills on play approach and this was the most challenging factor when employing a play-based approach. This requires educators to be creative in order to incorporate various play activities into children's learning experience. Using play, teachers are able to see from time to time that the children will improve holistically which are the physical aspects, social, emotional and cognitive development.

In conclusion, adults such as parents and society need to value the concept of play in early childhood education and its importance to children's social development. Child development depends on the adults who help bring up the child whether it is at home or the school. The home and community environment is where children spend most of their time, interacting with parents, siblings, fam-

ily members, and neighbours. These interactions and relationships have a significant impact on how children understand and experience the world around them. The home and community environment also provides an excellent opportunity to promote learning through play for preschool and elementary school children (UNICEF, 2018).

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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