



## **Impact of Play on Early Childhood**

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Literature Review

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**Abstract:**

In this essay, the concept of play is explored within the context of early childhood education, emphasizing its definition, functions, and developmental significance. This study examines many theoretical viewpoints and their consequences as it explores the multidimensional character of play, drawing on the insights of scholars and researchers. It also looks at specific types of play, such as play in the outdoors, play for children with special needs, and play's relationship to education. This investigation emphasizes the critical role that play plays in early childhood and development, emphasizing the value of play in promoting learning experiences and holistic growth.

**Keywords:** play, development, early childhood education, history, learning, children with special needs

### Introduction:

Parents, writers, psychologists, philosophers, and others have long been fascinated by the phenomena of play in its cultural contexts. One cannot help but be impressed by the volume, richness, and diversity of the play literature ( King & Newstead, 2021; Mellou, 1994; Pramling Samuelsson & Fler, 2009) and then demotivated by the inability to construct a coherent definition of play from such a variety of ideas.

When it comes to early learning, play is essential (Bruce, 2015). The majority of people don't often see small children attending school and playing during the school day. The question of play in early childhood education is now up for discussion. To find out more about how young children learn, numerous studies have been carried out (Bruce, 2015). Numerous research projects have demonstrated the importance of early childhood education (Bruce, 2015).

Thesis question:

*“What role does play have in early childhood education?”*

Since play has only sometimes been encouraged in the classroom, as more research has been published in recent years, individuals have begun to recognize the value of play (Sarach and Spodek,

1995). In recent eras many early childhood educations, play is the main focus (Saracho and Spodek, 1995). Additionally, play can serve a variety of purposes in the classroom. For children to learn and grow, children are required to play (Saracho and Spodek, 1995). There are a variety of opinions regarding what constitutes play when people try to define it. Numerous theorists have discussed play as an unstructured, natural process (Saracho and Spodek, 1995). A child expresses their interests and feelings through play. In the progressive age, early childhood educators were the ones who could tell the difference between children engaging in play and other activities (Sarach and Spodek, 1995).

### **What is Early Childhood Education and Care?**

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Early Childhood Education and Care (2018) underscores the centrality of play in young children's learning and development, advocating for a child-centered approach where play serves as a natural avenue for exploration and understanding of the world around them (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018).

Play is highlighted as a fundamental right of every child and a vital aspect of promoting their holistic development, encompassing physical, cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). According to research, play-based

strategies in ECEC settings support a number of developmental domains in children. For instance, a research by Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) highlights how play helps young children improve their language, creativity, problem-solving abilities, and social competence. In a similar vein, studies conducted in 2007 by Bodrova and Leong highlight the cognitive advantages of play, including enhanced executive functioning, memory, and attention span.

In addition, including play into early childhood education is consistent with developmentally appropriate practice guidelines (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This paradigm suggests that teachers create lessons that take into account the special needs, interests, and developmental capacities of young children. Children can participate in meaningful, entertaining, and developmentally appropriate activities in play-based learning settings. (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Similarly, in Finnish education system, educators are encouraged to create environments conducive to diverse play activities and actively engage with children during play to support their learning and development (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018). The lesson plan incorporates various forms of play, including free play, structured play, and guided play, to stimulate children's creativity, imagination, and cognitive skills (Pramling Samuelsson & Asplund Carlsson, 2008). The

lesson plan integrates activities that promote the development of transversal competences, such as collaborative group projects, role-playing scenarios, and problem-solving tasks (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997). Through these activities, children have opportunities to enhance their communication skills, teamwork abilities, and emotional regulation, which are essential components of transversal competence development in Finnish ECEC (Sylva et al., 2004).

The Finnish National Core Curriculum for Pre-Primary Education (2014) similarly emphasizes play's role in fostering children's creativity, social skills, and problem-solving abilities, underscoring the importance of both indoor and outdoor play experiences (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2014).

In Finland, early childhood education and care (ECEC) encompass a comprehensive system of services catering to children from birth until the commencement of compulsory schooling, embodying principles of child-centeredness, holistic development, and equity (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018).

ECEC services in Finland include daycare centers, family daycare, and preschools, overseen and regulated by the Finnish National Agency for Education to ensure adherence to national curriculum

standards and policies (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018).

### **Play in Early Childhood**

Play is recognized as a fundamental component of early childhood education, contributing significantly to children's development and learning processes (Jung, 2014). Defined in various ways by scholars and intellectuals, play encompasses activities that involve acting out behaviors or engaging in enjoyable activities (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Theoretical perspectives on play have evolved over time, with researchers striving to comprehend its multifaceted nature and implications for child development (Spodek & Saracho, 1995).

The Finnish ECEC system operates on the basis of children's subjective rights, with parents making decisions regarding their child's participation in ECEC following the parental leave period, typically when the child is around 9 or 10 months old (Finnish National Agency of Education, 2018).

Parents have various options for ECEC settings, including family daycare, ECEC centers, or home care, with provisions for home care notably, scholars such as Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Piaget have offered divergent views on the relationship between play and cognitive development (Saracho, 1995). Vygotsky emphasized the



role of play in fostering cognitive growth, while Piaget proposed distinct stages of play development, ranging from sensorimotor to rule-based games (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Despite differences, these theories underscore the significance of play in shaping children's cognitive abilities and social interactions.

Early childhood encompasses various forms of play, each serving distinct developmental purposes (Harris, N., 2023). From unoccupied play in infancy to cooperative play in later stages, children engage in activities that promote independence, socialization, and skill acquisition. Symbolic play emerges as toddlers begin to represent objects and roles, laying the foundation for imaginative thinking (Harris, N., 2023). As children progress, they transition through parallel, associative, and cooperative play, refining communication and teamwork skills (Harris, N., 2023). Furthermore, diverse forms of play, including dramatic, competitive, physical, and constructive play, offer avenues for holistic development (Harris, N., 2023). Through imaginative scenarios, competitive games, physical activities, and creative construction, children hone motor skills, social competencies, and problem-solving abilities. These varied play experiences not only enrich early childhood education but also foster resilience, empathy, and adaptability essential for navigating the complexities of life (Harris, N., 2023).

**The play's history:**

Throughout psychology's history, play has been acknowledged as a crucial component of cognitive development (Bruner, 1972). Play has long been a component of education for young children (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

The importance of play was emphasized by German educator Friedrich Froebel, Swiss educator Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Italian educator Maria Montessori, although they differed on the best ways to employ play with young children (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

The concept and historical relevance of play have been clarified by a number of ideas, which have made play research a major area of study in developmental psychology (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). A number of perspectives have been used to understand play, such as the surplus energy theory (Smith, 1982), which holds that children use play as an outlet for their extra energy. According to this view, play is an impulsive activity that helps children release extra energy and improves their physical and emotional health.

The recreation theory, which stresses the function of play in giving people enjoyment and leisure, is another significant concept that has influenced our understanding of play (Huizinga, 1955). This

viewpoint holds that play is an enjoyable, voluntary activity that lets children explore and try new things in a laid-back setting, encouraging creativity and social interaction (Burghardt, 2005).

According to Hall's 1904 recapitulation theory, play activities are a reflection of the developmental phases and evolutionary processes that have been seen throughout human history. According to this theory, children's play activities reflect the actions and experiences of their prehistoric ancestors, offering us a glimpse into their social and cognitive growth (Pellegrini, 2009).

Moreover, the instinct theory asserts that play activities are biologically based, intrinsic, and serve adaptive purposes in the development of children (Gordon, 2008). This viewpoint holds that play is innate and functions as a method of honing abilities required for socializing and survival (Bekoff & Byers, 1998).

All of these perspectives have influenced how we view play as a complex phenomena with a range of purposes and effects on children's development (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Froebel is credited with creating the first kindergarten, which he envisioned as a place where children engaged in extensive play with manipulative objects and craft projects (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Similarly, Maria Montessori developed her educational components based on observations of children's natural play, though she also opposed free play like Froebel (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

John Dewey, another influential theorist, advocated for early childhood education and the integration of play into learning environments, contributing to the modern nursery school and kindergarten movement (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

From the early works of theorists like Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky to contemporary research, the importance of play in fostering cognitive growth has been consistently emphasized (Vygotsky, 1967). Jean Piaget proposed a theory of cognitive development in children, emphasizing stages such as sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational, based on his observations of children's learning processes (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Piaget's theory includes an extended section on the relationship between accommodation and assimilation, advice against rushing children through childhood, and respecting history while acknowledging that changes are necessary (McDevitt, T. M., & Ormrod, J. E. 2020). The importance of play as a mechanism for cognitive development was particularly stressed by Vygotsky, who proposed that children's play activities operate as a zone of

proximal development where they may engage with more knowledgeable adults and deepen their understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). In a similar vein, Piaget suggested that play enables children to investigate and make sense of their surroundings, which helps them build cognitive schemas (Piaget, 1962).

Perspectives on children, including empiricist, nativist, and interactionist lenses, have influenced approaches to early childhood education, with each perspective offering unique insights into child development (Meade & Cubey, 2008). The fundamental principle of John Locke's empiricism (empiricist lens) is that there are no intrinsic concepts that exist from birth and that all knowledge is acquired via experience. Sensation and reflection are both parts of experience (Bruce, 2005). In contrast to Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau (creator of nativist lens) thought that children had natural skills and potential that develop with age. Gaining knowledge and experience leads to growth. They are born with an intrinsic sense of justice and unfairness, both right and wrong. (Wikipedia, 2018). In the interactionist perspective, children are viewed as both preprogrammed and an empty vessel. There is communication between the two and within the two. This was invented by Immanuel Kant (Bruce, 2005)

Several research conducted in the past have backed up the idea that play fosters social competence, creativity, and problem-solving abilities, all of which are important for cognitive development (Bergen, 2002; Ginsburg, 2007). Furthermore, studies have demonstrated that play supports the growth of executive functions, which include cognitive flexibility and attentional control and are essential for both academic success and general cognitive functioning (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007; Howard, Vasseleu, & Kervin, 2018). Additionally, long-term effects of early play experiences on cognitive outcomes, such as improved academic performance and increased levels of creativity, have been shown by longitudinal research (McCabe, Altamura, & Mellott, 2015; Pellis & Pellis, 2017).

### **Play and Learning Are Related:**

Play has been elevated to the forefront of the early childhood conversation as early childhood education has grown in significance over time (McDevitt, T. M., & Ormrod, J. E. 2020). Children learn best when given the opportunity to explore their surroundings, making play a crucial part of supporting young children's brain development, given the significant changes the brain undergoes during the early years of life (McDevitt, T. M., & Ormrod, J. E. 2020). The child's brain develops and grows as a

result of play, with the prefrontal cortex undergoing significant changes during this process (McDevitt, T. M., & Ormrod, J. E. 2020). Children learn through play, but their ability to learn is constrained by their social and emotional environments as well as their intellectual and physical development. Nonetheless, supporting and promoting a child's self-initiated learning activities is the greatest way to guarantee their healthy development, regardless of these circumstances (Elkind, 2008).

For example, no one instructs an infant to converse. Children produce a large range of vowel and consonant sounds by nature. The newborn makes all the sounds necessary to utilize a language by babble (Elkind, 2008). The infant would never learn to talk or would learn to speak very slowly without these self-made noises (Elkind, 2008). We may thus support and encourage the infant's linguistic abilities and assist in honing the use of language that will influence the child's future when the child starts to produce recognized sounds—and only after the child has made these sounds on his or her own (Elkind, 2008).

By participating in the social relationships that children begin on their own, we may also support their social development. (Elkind, 2008) When the baby, say, puts a rattle on the ground at four or five months old, we pick it up in response. The infant then goes through the same sequence again, and we have a game where

everyone is aware of their role (Elkind, 2008). This is a straightforward and well-known illustration of the ways in which work, love, and play may all contribute to development. The moment the baby drops the rattle, playtime begins. When an adult tenderly picks it up, the child is more likely to respond with affection (Elkind, 2008).

Selecting the appropriate toys becomes particularly crucial for this age group since these early connections are so fundamental and vital (Elkind, 2008). Compared to one-dimensional items, three-dimensional objects provide more worthwhile learning opportunities (Elkind, 2008). For instance, a set of wooden blocks is a wise purchase since children can use them for a range of play activities. Children may use them to create structures, while newborns can use them to learn about size differences (Elkind, 2008). To let children express themselves in their own unique ways, puppets, dolls, and art supplies like clay and paints are available (Elkind, 2008).

### **Play Activities for Children with Special Needs**

Every child loves and enjoys playing (Sandall, 2003). A child's worst nightmare is to be excluded from the joy that the other children are having (Sandall, 2003). Fortunately, modern technologies and play equipment enable children to interact and



play with children of their age (Sandall, 2003). Sandall (2003) has divided play modifications into eight categories that aim to encourage young children to participate in play and learn in the classroom. It is the teacher's responsibility to observe the children when they play and then choose how best to improve their playtime in the learning environment (Sandall, 2003).

Environmental support modification is the first kind (Sandall, 2003). At this point, teachers can determine what modifications to the child's surroundings are necessary (Sandall, 2003). This might imply that the teacher modifies social, physical, and temporal aspects. An illustration of this might be a child who wanders the classroom in search of anything. Every area of the classroom might have images/drawings taken by the teacher. Instead of running around the room, the teacher might then use the images/drawings to guide the child (Sandall, 2003).

Materials adaptations are the following kind of play modification. This is the process by which a teacher prepares an object so that the child can handle it (Sandall, 2003).

Simplify the activity: If a child has trouble standing, the teacher should make sure that the child is placed in a center where they may sit. The child will feel like they belong in the learning environment if measures like those are taken. Making playing

easier for the child is the third kind of play modification (Sandall, 2003). For instance, if a child struggles with hand coordination, the teacher may choose to cut the paper instead of assisting them to spare the child from using the scissors. For children with limitations, school activities become less stressful when teachers do little chores like this one (Sandall, 2003).

Another play modification that teachers can do is taking the child's preferences to assist the child (Sandall, 2003). A sign of this would be if the child showed little interest in science or the sand table. The child's interest in the sand table might be added by the teacher. For instance, the teacher may add a ladybug to the sand table if the child likes ladybugs. In today's educational setting, giving the child specialized equipment is another common way to modify play (Sandall, 2003). At this point, the teachers provide the child with the tools necessary to engage with the other children (Sandall, 2003).

Special equipment: If the teacher planned to take the class on a nature walk and had a child who uses a walker, she could either give the child a wheelchair or reduce the route (Sandall, 2003). This allows the child to use a walker to finish the walk alongside the other children. The child's walk will be far more joyful because the instructor takes this action (Sandall, 2003).

Another play modification is having an adult to support the child (Sandall, 2003). This is when an adult helps a child who may require more encouragement to complete an activity. For instance, if a child is shy and doesn't play much on the playground, an adult may accompany them there and give them encouragement to play while they are there (Sandall, 2003). The child will feel more at ease in the circumstance they are struggling with if measures like these are taken (Sandall, 2003).

Another kind of play modification a teacher can provide to a student is called peer support (Sandall, 2003). Peer support occurs when a child helps another child with a particular task. For instance, a teacher might pair up a child with another child if they are having problems contributing during circle time. In this manner, the student would receive more assistance from a peer while feeling less pressure (Sandall, 2003).

Invisible support is the final type of play modification (Sandall, 2003). This is the situation where a teacher prepares a lesson that she is certain that a child can complete on their own (Sandall, 2003). The teacher is practically preparing for the child's success by acting in this way. When a teacher acts in this way, the child's confidence in the teacher's actions will increase (Sandall, 2003).

**Importance of outdoor play:**

An essential component of a child's play is the outdoors. For young children, outdoor play offers opportunities that indoor play never does (Charles, Louv, & Bodner, 2008).

A child's physical development can be improved by outdoor play. According to studies, outdoor play is now a crucial aspect of children (Charles, Louv, & Bodner, 2008).

A rising number of people are concerned that children are not spending as much time outside as they should in the past several years. They believed that the explanation had to do with the way of life and specific circumstances that families are facing in today's world, such as the fact that more parents are working longer hours (Charles, Louv, & Bodner, 2008).

There is concern that some children may acquire nature deficit disorder due to being denied this outdoor time. Leave No Child Inside is a movement that educates people on the value of allowing young children to spend their early years outdoors (Charles, Louv, & Bodner, 2008). Children explore their surroundings with their classmates in outdoor play areas (Perry, 2001). While some view a child's time outside as a respite from school, the outdoors is just as much of a learning environment as a classroom. For young children, outdoor play offers benefits that indoor play cannot

always match (Perry, 2001). Nature play is a significant component of outdoor play. Playing in nature is important for a young child's growth. It aids in children's sensory development and environmental learning (Charles, Louv, & Bodner, 2008).

Children's gross motor abilities, coordination, and strength are all developed through outdoor play (Ginsburg, 2007). The production of Vitamin D, which is necessary for healthy bones, is aided by exposure to environmental factors such as sunshine (Holick, 2007). Children's mental health outcomes, such as lower stress levels and happier moods, have been related to outdoor play (Wells & Evans, 2003). Natural environments offer chances for rest and stimulation of the senses, which enhance emotional health (Kuo & Taylor, 2004). By encouraging inquiry and hands-on learning, outdoor settings encourage cognitive development by igniting curiosity and creativity (Chawla, 2006). Engaging in outdoor activities fosters critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and environmental consciousness (Louv, 2005). Children are able to interact and collaborate with one another through outdoor play, which helps them improve their communication, empathy, and collaboration abilities (Dyment & Bell, 2008). Peer bonding and conflict resolution are promoted by cooperative outdoor sports and activities (Maller et al., 2006). Children's awareness for the environment and care of the environment are nurtured through

outdoor play, which promotes a closer relationship with the natural world (Kellert, 2005). Early exposure to the outdoors fosters environmental ideals and practices that last a lifetime (Cheng & Monroe, 2012).

**Conclusion:**

All children play, and it's something they can learn from (Bruce, 2015). The study underscores the importance of understanding and promoting play in early childhood education worldwide, drawing attention to its role in fostering learning, growth, and well-being for children (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). The main message of this work is the imperative to prioritize play in early childhood education, taking cues from effective models like Finland's curriculum, to ensure optimal development and learning opportunities for children globally.

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