ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Preschoolers' play at home and school as a natural contributor to early literacy and language development

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November 2024

Introduction

Children of all ages play and through play, naturally engage in child-initiated activities that foster learning. Interactive peer play, a spontaneous, joyful and fun activity that children engage in with peers, is a salient developmental task of the preschool period that fosters developmental skills, like language and literacy. For children growing up in low-income families, research suggests that peer play experiences offer opportunities to promote a positive path forward for children disproportionately experiencing early risks to school success. Here, we provide an overview of research on preschool play in home and school settings in relation to children's language and literacy skills.

Subject

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Developmental theorists[1] and early childhood researchers[2,3,4] articulate two key ideas when studying play and preschool language and literacy development. First, it is important to take a holistic, strength-based perspective when studying development within relevant family, community, and socio-cultural contexts. Secondly, researchers must recall that children construct their own learning experiences through active exploration and extend their learning through interactions with peers and more knowledgeable adults.

Problems

Early education systems increasingly prioritize academic instruction because of accountability pressures[5]. In fact, once viewed as an opportunity for socialization and free play, kindergarten is now viewed as the "new first grade"[6]. Teachers must balance time for free play and play-based learning while meeting demands for didactic academic instruction; and children from low-income families attending under-resourced early childhood programs are more likely to experience didactic instruction versus opportunities for play-based learning[7]. In addition, parents from diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds hold varied beliefs in the value of children's play.

Research Context

In the past decade, there has been a movement by developmental scholars away from a comparative and deficit-model approach, toward a strength-based within-group approach[2,3,8,9] that acknowledges the culturally relevant ways in which families and teachers support children's engagement in play and learning. Parent and teacher observations within home and school settings[10] identifies three dimensions of peer play: interactive peer play, which describes prosocial, cooperative and creative behaviors, disruptive peer play, such as aggressive behaviors, and disconnected peer play which includes withdrawn behaviors that may interfere with productive peer interactions.

Key Research Questions

How do preschool positive peer play interactions at home and at school relate to language and literacy skills? What perspectives do parents from diverse language and cultural backgrounds bring to their parenting on play? What can parents and teachers do to promote preschoolers' play and learning at home and in school settings?

Recent Research Results

Preschool positive peer play interactions include collaboration and communication – opportunities for children to practice negotiating roles, use creativity and imagination, and problem-solve conflicts. Through activities such as story-telling, make believe play, song play, puppet play, and picture book reading, children develop greater vocabularies and oral narrative skills[11]. Cooperative play with peers is associated with higher receptive vocabulary skills[12].

Conversely, negative peer play interactions such as disruptive or disconnected play behaviors are associated with lower language and literacy outcomes. Children who display disconnected play (shy or withdrawn behaviors) within the classroom, engage less with peers in conversations, and rarely directly engage with their peer play group; subsequently these children score lower on measures of receptive and expressive vocabulary[12]. Children who display aggressive or disruptive behaviors during play also score lower on measures of vocabulary[13] and letter sounds and knowledge[14]. This, along with the positive association between positive peer play and vocabulary skill development, would suggest peer play's potential to contribute to language learning[15]. However, it is also likely that peer play and language skills develop in a transactional and complementary way during the preschool years. Given that these findings derive from correlational studies, it would be important for future research to examine their potential bidirectional relationship more closely.

It is important to examine how the context of cultural, language, and socioeconomic backgrounds influences how adults value and encourage play as a learning opportunity for children. Children of parents who endorse beliefs about the positive value of play display higher socially competent interactions in play with their peers at school[16-18]. In interviews of predominantly Black mothers of children enrolled in Head Start, parents described all the different ways they observed their children play (inside the house, running, playing independently or with others) and the opportunities in play for children to learn cognitive skills, such as literacy and numeracy concepts (shapes, colors, numbers)[19]. In a study conducted in early Head Start, Latine parents' positive feelings about play as a support for learning was associated with greater parental involvement with children's learning at home and school[20]. Parental involvement during play allows opportunities for children to receive guidance, quality feedback, and support to promote language learning. Similar to parents' perspectives, some preschool teachers see play and learning as distinct, with play negatively influencing children's learning, while other teachers see play as a means of supporting children's learning[21].

Parents and teachers both play a critical role in providing everyday play-based opportunities for children to expand their language and literacy skills[22]. At home, even small changes in how parents promote and engage in play with their children can positively influence children's language and literacy skills. Colliver studied parents who embedded language and literacy activities during everyday child-led activities.[23] Parents intentionally embedded code-related skills (letter sounds) when writing a letter with their child to a family member. As parents wrote the letter with the child, they talked about the sounds of the letters and identified letters they used; as a result, children gained language and literacy skills[23]. This is an example of ways parents can incorporate opportunities to learn during everyday play situations.

In preschool classrooms, teachers can also encourage learning through play, "inside and outside the flow"[24]. Teachers can create language-rich child-directed learning opportunities by setting up free play areas and materials that elicit conversations, peer sharing and problem solving, creativity, storytelling and imaginative play. Teachers can participate actively as play partners or by asking questions about what children are doing, modeling advanced language, and facilitating opportunities for children to exchange ideas with peers in play, which can foster communication skills[25]. In programs serving low-income children, guided play is associated with higher expressive and receptive vocabulary development than just free play[26] and higher instructional support augments benefits of positive play interactions on academic skills[27].

Research Gaps

Technology is changing the way that children play. Children increasingly interact digitally on screens which influences literacy and language development, in both positive and negative ways. The National Association for the Education of Young Children recommended that technology be used to enhance literacy through applications designed to teach letters, phonics, and vocabulary in engaging ways[28]. However, the American Academy of Pediatrics cautions parents to manage digital media use of young children effectively.[29] Adult-child relationships are crucial for the educational benefits of technology; tools like computers can aid learning but cannot replace face-to-face interactions in children's language development[29].

More research is needed to understand the unique strengths of culturally diverse families as they support play and language development. Research shows that play beliefs and practices vary by immigration, education level, socioeconomic status, and cultural experiences[16,18,30]. More studies are needed to examine familial values and funds of knowledge to understand how play beliefs

and practices support language and literacy development, especially for dual language learners.

Conclusions

In summary, most children naturally engage in play with peers during the preschool years and play is fun, intrinsically motivating, and fosters language and literacy skills. Home and school are important contexts affording unique opportunities for children to learn through play. Parents and teachers can engage in guided play experiences and encourage peer play that extends children's language development during everyday activities at home, and within preschool classrooms. It is important to consider cultural and socioeconomic differences in how play is valued and promoted by adults as key contributors to children's learning.

Implications for Parents, Services, and Policy

Ultimately, preparing children for kindergarten is not just about academics. For young children to learn in a developmentally appropriate way-- a whole child approach is needed –all children need time to play. Home-school partnerships are critical, particularly for families from low-income and minoritized backgrounds where there may be structural or systemic barriers to shared communication across home and school settings[31]. Early childhood programs and schools can provide professional development support to teachers and strategies to families, regarding ways to facilitate learning in play. Research shows promise in the efficacy of implementing professional development on guided play principles in the classroom to promote children's engagement and communication[32].

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