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# [Archived] Commentary on Smith and Pellegrini and Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff

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Commenting: “Learning Through Play” (Smith and Pellegrini)[MG1] and “Why Play = Learning” (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff).

## Introduction

The papers by Smith and Pellegrini and Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff provide an up-to-date and informative view of learning through play. As Piaget stated, “play is the work of childhood,”[2] a view that holds substantial currency among researchers and practitioners working with young children. Given the long-standing debates about appropriate curricula for early childhood education—namely between those who advocate a child-centred, constructivist approach such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) or those who hold to a more traditional, skill-based approach—discussions about the role of play are timely.

## Research and Conclusions

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The two papers complement each other and provide the reader with a solid foundation from which to explore this topic in more detail. Both papers provide somewhat overlapping definitions of play, but also give the reader a sense of the complexity of defining play. Smith and Pellegrini distinguish play from exploration, work, and games, which is important. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff include a definition of play that is widely accepted by psychological and educational researchers, as well as curriculum designers. In addition, these authors mention the long-standing interest in children's play emanating from the time of Plato, which suggests that the role of play in children's lives has been of interest historically and is yet to be clearly understood.

Both papers address the different types of play, which provides further evidence of the complexity inherent to the understanding of this behavior. Smith and Pellegrini discuss five types of play (locomotor, social, object, language, and pretend), whereas Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff focus on four types (object, pretend, physical/rough-and-tumble, and guided play). While there is some overlap (i.e., pretend, locomotor/physical), a careful analysis of both lists raises some questions. For example, the descriptions of language play and pretend play provided by Smith and Pellegrini have some overlap and raise the question of how a researcher would distinguish between the two. Why have Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff omitted social play? This form of play appears to be critical in young children's lives as they move from playing alone to collaborating with groups of peers.

In the 20th century, two major types of play were identified, a conceptualization that has guided much of the research: social play[1] and cognitive play.[2,3] To my mind, these broad categories are useful in classifying some of the types of play identified in the two papers, although it is probably beneficial to include other categories as some behaviors do not fit neatly into social or cognitive play. In particular, the more physical types of play may require their own category. Further, the work of Rubin[4,5] provides a useful framework or rubric for considering the overlap between different types of play, for example children can be engaged in pretense that is solitary or with a group of peers. This rubric is useful in operationally defining levels of social play (e.g., solitary, parallel, group) with types of cognitive play (e.g., sensory-motor, pretense, constructive, game-with-rules) nested under the levels of social play.

Is Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff's category of *guided play* really play? Their definition is rather vague and to some degree seems to contradict the definition of play that they employ. In particular, does guided play meet the criteria of being *spontaneous* and having no *extrinsic goals* . It seems unlikely that adults become involved in children's play without some kind of an

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extrinsic goal, thus I do not think that this category fits the definition of play. More fundamentally, play is a behavior that children engage in (with others or alone, sometimes with or without objects) and certainly there is a role for adults to guide the behavior towards a deeper understanding of various concepts or skills, but this does not qualify as children's play.

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff make a strong argument that play = learning. Their arguments mirror those of passionate advocates for the view that play has a critical role in early childhood development because it is "how children learn." Smith and Pellegrini are more cautious in their interpretations of the research linking children's play with learning and believe that the evidence for the "essential role of play" in learning is exaggerated. My own reading of the literature suggests that the more cautious approach is probably warranted. In fact, the evidence of links between play and learning is mostly based on correlational studies, which, although intriguing, do not provide the direct evidence required to support a cause and effect relationship that Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff argue for in their paper. Further, there has been little work delineating the processes of play that might be critical indicators or evidence of children's learning. Moreover, as both sets of authors indicate, there are a number of different types of play, thus it is not clear if particular kinds of play (and the processes inherent in these different types) are factors in promoting children's learning across different areas of development. Nevertheless, as outlined below, there are many excellent reasons to investigate the links between play and learning that suggest that researchers should renew their efforts to investigate this domain of children's behavior.

**Implications for Development and Policy**

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff rightly argue for renewed research to compare the experiences and social and academic outcomes of children enrolled in play-based versus more academic early childhood programs. Such research has direct policy implications for the kinds of early childhood education experiences that are available for young children and should be used as the basis for national, state, and provincial guidelines or regulations regarding curriculum in preschools, prekindergarten, and kindergarten programs. Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff's list of the five Cs is a worthy prescription for life skills, namely collaboration, content, communication, creative innovation, and confidence.

Smith and Pellegrini address applied issues related to play, specifically the adult's role in structuring the environment to provide challenging materials and opportunities for play. They

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recommend *play tutoring*, which they seem to equate with more structured play, and that appears to be akin to Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff's notion of guided play. In contrast, they briefly mention the idea of free play. In a truly enriched and challenging environment created for and *with* the children, free play means extended opportunities for children to guide and direct their own play, and presumably their own learning. The move to include many structured and adult-led activities defeats the purpose of free play. To some degree, these structured activities mean that teachers do not trust children to guide their own play and learning. While there is certainly room for some structured activities in the classroom and for teacher scaffolding and guidance, we must not lose sight of the meaning and importance of free play for children.

Industrialized societies have ambivalent attitudes about play and work in the early years. We read of *helicopter parents* who hover over their children and cram their lives full of structured and organized activities (sports, art, dance, academic preschools) so as to prepare them for a lifetime of success. The lives of these children include little time for free play and relaxation, which is worrisome for their future development. Other parents and educators worry about children's attraction to war play or superhero play. There is a paramount need to be concerned with aggression and hostile behavior, but the banishment of superhero play from the classroom has been based more on perceptions and anecdotal reports than empirical research.[6]

In conclusion, there are many implications of research on play that directly relate to the development of children and social policy. Some of these implications include the increasing concern with obesity and the need for physical play, the opportunities to explore the natural and physical worlds and creativity, the attitudes of parents and educators regarding the place of play in children's lives, the investigation of the links between play-based early childhood education curricula and later performance in school, and the regulation of curricula by government bodies. But in the end, we must remember the great pleasure that children take in play and the central role that this behavior has in their lives. Let children play!

**References**


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