ENCYCLOPEDIA
on Early Childhood
Development

Play and Cultural Context

Yumi Gosso, PhD, Ana Maria Almeida Carvalho, PhD

Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil

June 2013

Introduction

Human beings are biologically sociocultural.[1] Every human activity is, thus, permeated with and affected by culture, and reciprocally affects culture's dynamics and historical transformations. Play is no exception. Culture permeates and is affected by children's play in two major ways: creative assimilation, or interpretive reproduction[2] of meso- and macro-cultural aspects of the social environment (routines, rules, values); and construction of shared meanings and routines that constitute the microculture of peer groups.[2,3]

Subject

Understanding play as a basic human motivation and a locus of individual development and of culture assimilation and construction leads to a particular view on childhood and early education. Play should not be opposed to learning activities or to "serious" work, but rather seen as an important arena of children's lives, a condition for children's welfare and a legitimate right of childhood.

Problems

Many studies on play are guided by a futuristic perspective, looking for correlates between play activities and developmental outcomes in near or remote future, and often missing the relevance

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

of play during childhood. Furthermore, and as a consequence of this perspective, studies are often performed in controlled, laboratory conditions, where the potential of free play in displaying children's creativity and agency may be obscured.

Research Context

In this paper priority will be given to field studies in natural settings, with an ethnographic and observational approach.

Key Research Questions

- Identifying culture in play activities: universality and variability.
- Main factors affecting the frequency, duration and nature of play activities.
- Gender differences.
- Environmental contexts and cultural conceptions and practices affecting the availability of time, space, materials and play partners.

Recent Research Results

Play has been observed in every society where children were studied. It can be considered a universal trait of human psychology. However, like every human activity, it is affected by our cultural context. Different cultures value and react differently to play: play can be recognized by adults as having important consequences for cognitive, social and emotional development, and adults can engage as playmates; play can be seen as a spontaneous activity of children, which adults do not structure or participate in; or else play can be seen as a spontaneous activity, but the amount of play is limited because other activities are considered more important.[4] Children at play reproduce and also recreate the specificities of their cultural environment.[2,5]

Studies on play in different cultural contexts enlighten the various ways in which culture flows throughout play activities. The availability of time and space, of objects and playmates; adult role models and attitudes toward play are some of the contextual aspects that affect the frequency, duration and nature of children's play. In a South American Indian community, boys often play bow-and-arrows; boys and girls of varied ages dive and swim in the river and play chase around the village, with little or no adult supervision. They use primarily natural objects in their pretend play (i.e., sand, water, stone, plants). Urban children in large towns play more often with

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

manufactured toys, at home, at school or playgroups, playgrounds or parks, usually with some adult supervision, especially when they are younger; locomotor play and chase play tend to occur in protected spaces.[6]

Many common play activities, such as marbles, kite-flying, dolls, houses, hopscotch and so forth, reappear with their deep structure preserved in different cultural contexts, but are modified in varied ways, creating local versions, using local resources and called by different names (even within a single language). In different regions of Brazil, for instance, marbles are called búrica, búlica, papão, peteca or gude, and are practiced with local rules, with glass balls, mud balls or even cashew nuts.[6]

Besides the deep structure of many play activities, gender differences regarding choice of partners and the nature of play activities are another very recurrent cross-cultural similarity. Preference for companions of the same gender appears to arise around age 3.[7] It is usually attributed to processes of social identification, of which gender identity is one of the main aspects, and tends to increase as children deepen their understanding of gender differences.[8] Gender preferences, as expressed in the imitation of same gender activities, are resistant to adult encouragement to inter-gender imitation.[9] These preferences tend to occur even when there are few available same age partners and it implies interacting with varied age companions. In larger groups, children of the same gender and age similarity tend to be drawn together to form play subgroups.[5]

Gender differences can also be explained by similar preferences for play activities, regardless of cultural contexts. Boys tend to occupy larger spaces, play in larger groups and farther away from home, and engage in activities that involve gross movements. Girls occupy internal or more restricted spaces, play in smaller groups, near their houses and with themes related to social and domestic activities. Pretend play themes are more varied among girls than among boys, which may be due to lack of male models in some cultural contexts: even when mothers work out of home, they still offer female models of domestic chores.[6,8,10,11,12,13]

There is evidence that sexual hormones may contribute to gender differences in play behaviour, [12,14,15,16] but also of strong cultural influences regarding the appropriateness of certain types of play for boys and girls. These perceptions vary in different cultural contexts:in some societies, gender roles are well defined and children's choice of play activities[17] closely mirror adult practices.[6,8,18]

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

Structural aspects of the immediate environment (time and space availability, social environment, etc.) are easily identifiable factors affecting the frequency, duration and nature of play activities.

The time allowed for play activities varies widely in different contexts. In rural societies, in low-income families and in isolated communities such as African-Brazilian “quilombos” and South-American Indian groups, children (particularly girls) are often required to help adults in varied chores, which leaves less free time to play – although they often insert play activities into their tasks.[5,8,13,19,20,21]

The amount of proximity with adult activities in different ways of life affects the degree of realism in their representation of these activities in pretend play. In hunter-gatherer societies, children are in close contact with adults as they perform their daily chores. In urban contexts, where fathers work out of home, boys tend to represent male activities in vague, poorly-specified manners, such as “Daddy is driving to work.” The representation of female activities, especially domestic chores, tends to be richer. The influence of media characters (superheroes, space travellers) is more noticeable in boys' pretend play.[18,22,23,24,25]

Most modern societies limit children’s play due to safety concerns. Young children are not allowed to play freely because parents are afraid of accidents or do not have time to take them to a playground. Parents prefer to keep their children safely at home, for example, playing videogame or watching TV. When television is not available, children spend more time playing[26]: the time spent in play by Japanese boys outside the house is inversely proportional to the time spent in video games.[27] South American Indian children and those who live in rural areas, even with some access to the media, often have more freedom, little adult intervention, large spaces and many available companions, factors which favour the occurrence of play.[5]

The availability of play partners, particularly partners of different ages, reflects cultural conceptions and practices regarding childhood, as well as the varied social networks in which the child takes part. Families with several children and/or extended families, either living together or in close proximity, usually provide a large multi-age group of siblings and/or cousins of both genders. The same may happen in small communities, in rural contexts or in small towns where children are allowed to play in the streets with their siblings and neighbours. By contrast, urban children living in large towns are often restricted to interactions with same age partners in day care centers and have less access to safe areas for free and active play.[28,29]

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

Research Gaps

Studies in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts highlight both universal and particular features of play activities and traditions. Despite the increasing communication between researchers around the world, our knowledge about play is still marked by the prevalence of studies conducted in the Western developed world.

Themes that deserve more attention:

- Processes of appropriation, transmission, innovation and creation of culture: how and through which communication processes, do children construct play activities and cultural facts such as peer cultures? Which research procedures and perspectives highlight children’s agency in play?
- Studies with multi-age free play groups, with little adult intervention, can highlight interactional abilities that are not easily observable in same-age groups, such as caregiving, creation of different play rules and expectations regarding younger partners, transmission of knowledge between older/more experienced partners and younger/less experienced ones and so forth.

Conclusions

Playing is a universal phenomenon, a basic motivation and a legitimate right of children. Studies in different cultural contexts highlight both universal features of play (such as the deep structure of traditional games/play activities and gender differences regarding play preferences and performance) and cultural variability, either introduced by the children themselves or constrained by the availability of time, space, objects and partners, reflecting the conceptions of each context about childhood and play.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

Modern urban life tends to limit children's opportunities for free play in several ways. Due to mothers’ engagement in the labor market or to other factors, since the early years children increasingly attend pre-school centers where time for free play is often reduced to breaks between educational tasks intended to enhance precociousness and competitive future competence. Parental concerns about safety or other factors, such as dwelling conditions, limit their access to open places where active play with varied aged partners would be possible, thus

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

favoring more sedentary and less healthy play activities: the availability of parks and other neighbourhood safe play areas should be as much a concern of child-oriented policies as the provision of educational and health services. The toy industry and technological developments respond to these conditions by offering an increasing variety of sedentary and often individualized and highly-structured toys and games which allow little space for children's creativity in the exploration and collective construction of play objects and materials. The psychological literature depicts the child as an active agent of his/her development since an early age; this conception seems to be often mis-translated in cultural practices and attitudes regarding the availability of time, space, choice of play partners and of play activities by the children.

References

1. Bussab VSR, Ribeiro FJL. Biologicamente cultural [Biologically cultural]. In: Souza L, Freitas MFQ & Rodrigues MMP, eds. *Psicologia: Reflexões (im)pertinentes* [Psychology: (im)pertinent reflections]. São Paulo, Brazil: Casa do Psicólogo; 1998:175-193.
2. Corsaro WA. Interpretive reproduction in children's role play. *Childhood* 1993;3: 64-74.
3. Roopnarine JL, Johnson JE. The need to look at play in diverse cultural settings. In: Roopnarine JL, Johnson JE & Hooper FH, eds. *Children's play in diverse cultures*. Albany: State University of New York Press; 1994: 1-8.
4. Gaskins S, Haight W, Lancy D. The cultural construction of play. In Goncu A & Gaskins S, eds. *Play and development: Evolutionary, sociocultural and functional perspectives*. Erlbaum Press; 2007: 179-202.
5. Gosso Y. Play in different cultures. In Smith PK. *Children and play*. New York, NY: J. Wiley; 2010: 80-98.
6. Carvalho AMA, Magalhães CMC, Pontes FAR, Bichara, ID, eds. *Brincadeira e cultura: Viajando pelo Brazil que brinca* [Play and Culture: a Travel through Brazil at Play]. São Paulo, SP: Casa do Psicólogo; 2003.
7. Maccoby EE. Gender and relationships. *American Psychologist* 1990;45(4):513-520.
8. Bichara ID. Play and gender issues in rural and urban Brazilian contexts. In: Bastos AC, Uriko K & Valsiner J, eds. *Cultural dynamics of women's lives.* Charlotte, NC; 2012: 197-208.
9. Eibl-Eibesfeldt I. *Human ethology*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter: 1989.
10. Goldstein J. Aggressive toy play. In: Pellegrini AD, ed. *The future of play theory*. New York; 1995: 127-147.
11. Humphreys AP, Smith PK. Rough and tumble, friendship and dominance in schoolchildren: evidence for continuity and change with age. *Child Development*1987;58:201-212.
12. Pellegrini AD, Smith PK. Physical activity play: the nature and function of a neglected aspect of play.*Child Development* 1998;69(3):577-598.
13. Edwards CP. Children's play in cross-cultural perspective: a new look at the six cultures study. *Cross Cultural Research* 2000;34:318-338.
14. Bjorklund DF, Pellegrini AD. Child development and evolutionary psychology. *Child Development* 2000;71:1687-1708.
15. Humphreys AP, Smith PK. Rough-and-tumble in preschool and playground. In: Smith PK, ed. Play in animals and humans. New York: Basil Blackwell; 1984:241-269.

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY

16. Smith PK. Social and pretend play in children. In: Pellegrini AD & Smith PK, eds. *The nature of play: Great apes and humans*. New York: Guilford Press; 2005:173-209.

17. Carvalho AMA, Smith PK, Hunter T, Costabile A. Playground activities for boys and girls: some developmental and cultural trends in children´s perception of gender differences. *Play and Culture* 1990;3(4):343-347.

18. Leakock E. At play in African villages. In: Bruner JS, Jolly A & Sylva K, eds. *Play – Its role in development and evolution*. London: Penguim Books; 1978:466-473.

19. Gaskins S. Children's daily activities in a Mayan village: A culturally grounded description. *Cross-Cultural Research* 2000;34(4):375-389.

20. Göncü A, Mistry J., Mosier C. Cultural variations in the play of toddlers. *International Journal of Behavioral Development* 2000;24(3):321-329.

21. Larson RW, Verma S How children and adolescents spend time across the world: work, play, and developmental opportunities. *Psychological Bulletin* 1999;125(6): 701-736.

22. Gosso Y, Otta E, Morais MLS, Ribeiro FJL, Bussab VSR. Play in hunter-gatherer society. In: Pellegrini AD & Smith PK, eds. *The nature of play: Great apes and humans*. New York: Guilford; 2005: 213-253.

23. Kamei N. Play among Baka children in Cameroon. In: Hewlett BS & Lamb ME, eds. *Hunter-gatherer childhoods: evolutionary, developmental and cultural perspectives*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers; 2005:342-359.

24. Lancy, D.F. P*laying on the mother ground: Cultural routines for children's development.* New York: Guilford Press; 1996.

25. Shostak M. *Nisa: the life and words of a !Kung woman*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1981.

26. Van der Voort THA, Valkenburg PM. Television's impact on fantasy play: a review of research. *Developmental Review* 1994; 14: 27-51.

27. Takeuchi M. Children's play in Japan. In J. L. Roopnaire, J. E. Johnson, & F. H. Hooper, eds. *Children's play in diverse cultures*. Albany: State University of New York Press; 1994: 51-72.

28. Veitch J, Salmon J & Ball K. Children's active free play on local neighborhoods: a behavioral mappint study. *Health education research* 2008;23 (5):870-879.

29. Handt S, Cao X, Mokhtarian P. Neighborhood design and children's outdoor play: Evidence from Northern California. *Children, youth and environment* 2008;18(2):160-179.

©2013-2026 ABILIO | PLAY