

Chapter 1

HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL VIEWPOINTS

Scott, a first grader with little interest in competitive sports, agreed to join a school soccer team only because his parents insisted on it. However, playing soccer frightens Scott, and on the evening of each game he is so overcome by anxiety that he can scarcely eat his dinner. Six-month-old Michelle can spend extensive amounts of time exploring the contents of her mother's purse; she seriously and methodically inspects every item she discovers before moving on to the next one. Jennifer loves her job as a copyeditor for the local newspaper; she often comments to friends that she feels almost guilty to be drawing a salary for doing something that she enjoys so much.

When Scott is on the soccer field, is it accurate to describe him as a child at play? Is Michelle playing when she examines the contents of her mother's purse? And what about Jennifer? When she is at the office, is she working, or is there a sense that her work is really a playful activity?

A DEFINITION OF PLAY

What exactly is *play*? What is the dividing line between *play* and *work*? Can an activity be both play and work at the same time? Can an activity begin as one and gradually evolve into the other? Actually, there is no simple definition of play, and the borderlines between play and other activities, such as work, exploration, and learning, are not always clear. Nevertheless, social scientists have identified a number of elements that are typical of play, so we will now try to arrive at a definition of play by examining some of these generally agreed-upon essential characteristics.

Learning Objectives

After reading Chapter 1, a student should be able to:

- ◆ Understand the essential characteristics of a definition of play and recognize the difference between play and work according to these criteria.
- ◆ Identify different beliefs about the relative values of play and work in the early childhood education curriculum.
- ◆ List and describe the central characteristics of the “developmentally appropriate curriculum” as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- ◆ Trace the history of attitudes toward children’s play from the Mediterranean world before the birth of Christ to the present day.
- ◆ Compare and contrast the French naturalistic view of child development with that of British empiricism and recognize how both of these philosophical positions are reflected in modern American attitudes toward children’s play.
- ◆ Recognize the similarities and the differences between the psychoanalytic, cognitive, contextual, and arousal modulation theories of children’s play.

Essential Characteristics of Play

Before an activity can be described as play, it must contain five essential characteristics (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). First, play is *intrinsically motivated*. It is an end in itself, done only for the satisfaction of doing it. A second, related characteristic of play is that it must be *freely chosen* by the participants.

As Vandenberg (1998) observed, “the excitement of play results from the sheer exercise of freedom over necessity” (p. 303). If children are forced into play, they may not regard the assigned activity as play at all. In one study (King, 1979), for example, it was found that if a kindergarten teacher assigned a play activity to her pupils, they tended to regard it as work, even though they described the identical activity as play if they were allowed to choose it themselves.

A third essential characteristic of play is that it must be *pleasurable*. In fact, adults observing children’s play episodes identify “positive affect” as the most typical behavioral criterion of play (Jenvey & Jenvey, 2002). If we think of Scott, the first grader who reluctantly agreed to play soccer only because his

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE 1.1

Allowing Freedom of Expression in Play

Do not discourage children from exploring in play such “unacceptable” feelings as anger, fear, and sexual curiosity. Such play can help reduce their anxiety and can teach adults a good deal about the children’s psychological needs.

Fluid materials such as clay and finger paints are excellent media through which children can express anger as well as curiosity about body parts and functions. With clay, children can tear and pound harmlessly, and they can also create human figures that often have anatomically correct parts. With clay, sand, or blocks, they can be safely destructive and will learn that their own destructive impulses are not necessarily harmful and should not frighten them. Sometimes the pleasure of creating is enhanced by the anticipation of destroying what one has created. With dolls children can create family scenes and explore family-related anxieties. If they are allowed to communicate freely when using hand puppets, children can reveal some of their innermost feelings, in actions or words, since it is not they but the puppets who are communicating.

Adults need to exert control over the behavior of young children, so they must place restrictions on free expression with materials. For example, clay can be pounded, pulled apart, or squashed but should not be thrown at the wall or at other children. However, adults should try to remember that if they are overly restrictive, the play will lose some of its emotional value for children. They should also realize that even a young child can make a distinction between knocking over a block structure that he or she has created and knocking over the furniture in the classroom.

parents wanted him to, it becomes apparent that his activity on the soccer field fails to satisfy any of the characteristics of play that have been mentioned thus far. Soccer is certainly not intrinsically motivating for Scott; his motivation for doing it is to please his parents. It is not a freely chosen activity because it was chosen for him by his parents. Finally, an activity that engenders so much stress in the participant can hardly be described as pleasurable!

A fourth characteristic of play is that it is *nonliteral*. That is, it involves a certain element of make-believe, a distortion of reality to accommodate the interests of the player. This is particularly true of the symbolic play that is so characteristic of the preschool years, when children spend much of their time experimenting with new roles and playing out imaginary scenes. Finally, play is *actively engaged* in by the player. The child must be involved—physically, psychologically, or both—rather than passive or indifferent to what is going on.

Play, Work, and the Education of Young Children

Play differs in a number of ways from what is usually regarded as work. The major difference is that, even when work is enjoyable, it is still extrinsically motivated. It has a goal, such as to earn money, enhance status, feel useful, or attain success in a chosen field. Like play, work is sometimes freely chosen, but the option to avoid work is rarely available in our society. A person who regards work as pleasurable is fortunate; for most workers, it is not. The non-literal element that typifies play is not usually found in work activities. Finally, work resembles play in the last characteristic: Both are actively engaged in, to some extent at least, by the participants.

Psychologists and educators agree that spontaneous, goal-free play facilitates children's development, but what is the value of work? Is play a valuable activity for children's development while work is not? Is there a role for work in children's lives? As a matter of fact, work has its place along with play, and this is particularly apparent when we address issues concerning the education of children.

How much work and how much play should be involved in the education of a young child? Few would suggest that all learning occurs through spontaneous play while teachers assume only minor and passive roles, and perhaps no one maintains that play is completely unrelated to learning. Instead, there is a range of opinion as to the relative importance of work and play. Toward the play end of the play-work continuum, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) suggests in a listing of developmentally appropriate practices that children should be allowed to direct their own play activities, that they are more likely to "feel successful when they engage in a task that they have defined for themselves," and that learning should not be influenced by "adult-established concepts of completion, achievement and failure" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 3). (See Table 1.1.) The teacher's role, therefore, is to be supportive but not overly directive. It would be inappropriate for teachers to "use highly-structured, teacher-directed lessons almost exclusively," to "direct all the activity," or to "decide what the children will do and when" while expecting the children to listen passively or do pencil and paper tasks for long periods of time (Bredekamp, p. 3).

On the other hand, the NAEYC position is that while a curriculum that emphasizes spontaneous play but ignores the role of work might be beneficial to children's overall development, it would be insufficient from an educational standpoint. After all, teaching is intended to encourage learning, and if children's activities are totally unstructured, the children may be bored and will need a teacher-directed activity to help them focus their attention (Hatch et al., 2002). "Child-initiated learning does not occur in the absence of teacher guidance or input" (Bredekamp, 1993, p. 118).

TABLE 1.1 The Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

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| Curriculum goals should address all areas of children's development in age-appropriate ways. This includes physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development in an integrated approach, since development in one area inevitably affects development in the other three. |
| Goals and plans should be based on the needs, strengths, and interests of the individual child. Information about family and cultural background should be considered in order to broaden the curriculum to include all children. |
| Children should be active participants in their own education and should be encouraged to freely explore materials, adults, and other children. Unstructured free play is an essential part of this process. |
| Learning materials should be concrete, real, and relevant to the lives of young children. Children should be allowed to manipulate materials before they are expected to deal with symbols such as letters and numbers. |
| Adults must be aware that chronological age is not the best predictor of developmental level. Available materials should reflect the entire range of the age span, and provisions must be made for the child whose interests and skills are beyond the normal developmental range. |
| Teachers should provide a variety of activities and materials for children and should increase the level of complexity as children develop their understanding and skills. |
| The teacher's role is to prepare the child's environment with a variety of interesting and challenging activity choices and then to encourage children to initiate and direct their own activities. |
| Children of all ages should be exposed to a multicultural and nonsexist experience in terms of activities and educational materials. Such exposure not only enhances a child's self-esteem but also encourages children to be appreciative of and respectful of individual differences. |

Source: Adapted from S. Bredekamp (Ed.) (1987).

Is there some ideal balance of work and play in early childhood education settings? Joan Goodman (1994) of the University of Pennsylvania suggested that educators and psychologists too often have limited themselves by making an artificial either/or distinction between the two. Play, she argued, may be different from work but is not its direct opposite. To be sure, there are purely work-related activities, such as when a child is struggling with a difficult arithmetic assignment and cannot wait to complete it. There is also pure play, such as when a child frolics in the waves at the beach. Somewhere between the two, however, is a type of activity that Goodman called play/work. For example, a child, with a teacher's direction and encouragement, is struggling with a block-building project. This is a goal-directed activity—and one that is occasionally frustrating. At the same time, however, the child is completely absorbed and

self-motivated. It is here at what Goodman saw as the midpoint between play and work that the best teaching occurs. The child enjoys the project for the sake of itself and considers it his or her own and not the teacher's. The teacher, however, provides the underlying skills necessary to solve the problem, determines that certain problems are more appropriate than others, and offers continuing support and encouragement throughout the problem-solving process.

THE HISTORY OF PLAY IN THE WESTERN WORLD

In order to understand the various theoretical perspectives on the significance of play to child development and to appreciate current attitudes in the United States toward play, it is important to know something about the history of conceptions of childhood, not only in this country but in the entire Western world. Let us now look briefly at childhood in its historical context, with particular reference to the attitudes of adults toward children's play.

From Ancient Times to the Middle Ages

For a thousand years before the birth of Christ, the recorded history of all the major cultures in the eastern Mediterranean world indicates a fairly similar view of childhood. Children were never romanticized, as they often are today; they were not seen as naturally innocent and pure. However, they were thought of as helpless, incapable of directing their own affairs, and having special needs, including the desire and the need to play. Play was an understandable and an acceptable part of children's lives. In ancient Egyptian wall paintings, for example, children can be seen playing with balls and dolls, as well as jumping rope (French, 1977).

Children in ancient Greece were seen as naturally playful, and play was allowed and even encouraged. Children also were seen as naturally more unformed, unruly, helpless, fearful, cheerful, and affectionate than adults. Even though childhood and children's activities were appreciated, the role of the adult was to guide the child gently into becoming a useful and responsible citizen (French, 1977). The gentle and respectful nature of this guidance is illustrated by the writings of the philosopher Plato. Although he described the young boy as "the craftiest, most mischievous, and unruiliest of brutes" (*Laws*, Book 7, 360 BC/1961, p. 808), Plato was also concerned that excessive adult supervision could be harmful. Spoiling children can make them "fretful, peevish, and easily upset by mere trifles," he wrote, but harsh childrearing approaches can make them "sullen, spiritless, servile, and unfit for the intercourse of domestic

and civic life” (*Laws*, Book 7, 360 BC/1961, p. 91). Although perhaps less gentle in their approaches to child guidance, the ancient Romans shared the Greek view of children as affectionate, cheerful, and playful, but they saw children as being in need of discipline tempered with affection (French, 1977).

The special nature of childhood continued to be recognized in the Western world from the early Christian era to the Middle Ages, approximately 12 centuries after the birth of Christ. The early Christian view was that a child is important to God, has a soul, and therefore is not to be abused by adults. Indeed, the Church had a special role in promoting the welfare of children. Although children in the Middle Ages were not sheltered from the hardships and realities of life (as is often the case today), neither were they seen as miniature versions of adults, and special childhood activities, including play, continued to be thought of as both acceptable and appropriate (Borstelmann, 1983).

The Renaissance Perspective

Negative attitudes about children—and about the need for them to have special activities—began to surface in Europe during the period known as the Renaissance (1300–1600 AD). While the Renaissance is generally recognized as one of the most creative periods in European history, a time of openness to new ideas in all areas of the arts and sciences, children apparently did not benefit from this open-mindedness. For example, it was common practice to place children in the custody of a nurse or a succession of nurses, who usually saw their caretaking roles in purely monetary terms. Children were believed to be of little importance compared with adults and were said to lack strength, wit, and cunning. Often they were the subject of jokes and were placed in the category of fools and senile old people (Tucker, 1974). A commonly heard phrase was “Who sees a child sees nothing” (Whiting & Whiting, 1968, p. 83).

All distinctions between the world of childhood and that of adulthood vanished, it seems, during the Renaissance. Children were put to work as soon as was reasonable because idleness was considered both sinful and unprofitable (Tucker, 1974). It was only in elite families that children were sent to school, and that was not a pleasant prospect for them; there, they would spend long hours in the care of stern, unfeeling teachers. Nevertheless, there seems to have been time enough for play as well, and many of what we would call children’s play activities can be observed in paintings depicting scenes from everyday life in Renaissance Europe.

However, it is not only children who can be seen playing. Since there was no distinction between the world of children and that of adults, people of all ages played the same games and chanted the same nursery rhymes. In fact, the only

real nursery rhymes were those composed specifically for the nursery, and the only chants that truly belonged to the world of childhood were lullabies (Tucker, 1974). Riddles were typically made up by adults and for adults, and many popular chants that have come down to us from that period were originally sung by adults and often contained interesting political or social messages. For example, the children's rhyme "Sing-a-Song-of-Sixpence" was an adult song telling of King Henry VIII's love for Anne Boleyn and other events at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (Opie & Opie, 1957; Borstelmann, 1983).

Interestingly, it was during the Renaissance that, in southern Germany, the toy-manufacturing industry was born. Along with such homemade toys as kites and tops that had been seen during the Middle Ages, now there were also lead soldiers, elaborate wooden dolls, and glass animals. We should not presume, however, that these toys were made for children. The lack of a distinction between the child's world and that of adults is nicely illustrated by the fact that the Renaissance toys were intended not only for children but for adults, too. In fact, many toys of this era—and of the 17th and 18th centuries, as well—were so elaborate and so delicate (e.g., tea sets, dolls, dollhouses) that it is likely that children were not allowed even to touch them (Somerville, 1982).

In the 17th century, as the Renaissance era was coming to an end, European attitudes about children and about play were beginning to change. There arose what has been described as a "new consciousness of childhood" (Pinchbeck & Hewitt, 2005, p. 197); children began to be seen as worthy of attention and having developmental needs and problems that were different from those of adults. The 17th century was also a period of enthusiastic colonization of the New World, and because of colonization patterns, the major European influences on American attitudes toward work and play came from the countries of France and England.

French Influences

As Europe emerged from the Renaissance at the dawn of the 17th century, the French attitude toward play could be characterized as one of acceptance, and this acceptance has continued to one degree or another until the present day. Even though the Catholic clergy took a dim view of play without the redeeming social value of work, they were apparently powerless to prevent its occurrence (Aries, 1962).

Perhaps the most complete record of children's play in 17th-century France can be found in a diary kept by Jean Heroard, the physician who attended young King Louis XIII. Louis was hardly a typical French child of the time.

What is more, the diary seems to contain a number of exaggerations and distortions intended to put the child in the best possible light (Marvick, 1974). Heroard claimed, for example, that Louis understood human speech when he was only 5 weeks old; on being told that God placed him in the world for a purpose and therefore he must be good and just, the infant responded with a knowing smile!

If we disregard Heroard's self-serving suggestions about Louis's remarkable precocity, the diary tells us much about the 17th-century attitude toward children in general and toward play in particular. Louis had windmills to play with, hobbyhorses, and whipping toys resembling modern tops. By the age of 17 months, the future king was able to play the violin and sing at the same time. (Perhaps this is another bit of exaggeration.) As a toddler, he played ball exactly as did the adults of his time, and by the age of 2, he had a little drum to bang on and was already becoming a skillful dancer. At 4, he liked to play cards and to shoot with a bow and arrow, and by the age of 6, he was beginning to play chess and to enjoy parlor games (Aries, 1962).

The most revealing feature of Louis's play is its similarity to that of the adults of his time. As a matter of fact, many of Louis's playmates were adult servants and courtiers. Play that involved music, athletic skills, board games, and parlor games was engaged in by noblemen and noblewomen of all ages because beyond the age of infancy there was no separation between the games of children and those of adults. Indeed, as was true during the Renaissance, virtually no distinction existed in the early 17th century between the world of children and the world of adults; there was as yet no concept of childhood innocence, and there was little separation between work and play.

As the century progressed, however, a separation gradually appeared between the worlds of childhood and adulthood and between the games of children and adults. The games of children (and fools) were physical in nature, whereas adults—at least those of the nobility who aspired to some degree of sophistication—played only games of intellect and wit. Work and play were increasingly thought of as separate activities. Work became the center of adult life, while play came to be seen as an activity reserved for children and for those with childish minds. Nevertheless, play continued to be at least tolerated in France, as it was not to be in England, and the French retained a definite appreciation for the period of childhood.

The French appreciation for childhood—and for children's natural activities—was later embodied in the writings of France's most influential philosopher of the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778). Rousseau (1762/2007) expressed the philosophy of **naturalism**. “God makes all things good,” he wrote. “Man meddles with them and they become evil” (p. 11). Children come into the

world not as empty organisms waiting for experience to shape them but as original human beings equipped by nature with an innate plan for their development. The child is more than an incomplete version of an adult, and adults must appreciate children for who they are. “Childhood has its own way of seeing, thinking, and feeling, and nothing is more foolish than to try to substitute ours for them,” wrote Rousseau in *Emile* (p. 63), his classic work on education.

Rousseau believed that little harm would come to children if they were allowed to grow without excessive adult supervision. The first 12 years of life should be a time of leisure, during which the only education should be negative. That is, adults should try not to teach virtues to children but only to prevent them from acquiring vices. “Give him no orders at all, absolutely none,” wrote Rousseau. “Do not even let him think that you claim authority over him” (1762/2007, p. 63).

The widespread acceptance of Rousseau’s ideas tells us as much about the age in which he lived as it does about the character of the French people. Europe in the 18th century witnessed the emergence of the spirit of Romanticism, in which childhood was glorified and childhood innocence celebrated. It is unlikely, of course, that all French people of the time agreed with Rousseau’s views on child development or that the average citizen read his books (or anything else for that matter). However, it reveals much about the French view of life that Rousseau should have gained so large an audience in that country. His ideas were not as well received in England, even in the Romantic era; nor was he as widely read in the American Colonies as was John Locke, whose ideas will be discussed in the following section. As we shall see, England lacked the fertile soil in which the radical democratic ideas of naturalism could grow.

British Influences

As in other European countries, there was in 17th-century England a growing awareness of the child as an individual with special needs and a worldview different from that of adults. Nevertheless, this enlightened perspective did not lead to a greater acceptance of children’s play. In fact, while the French maintained an appreciation for play, even as they relegated it to the realm of childhood, the emphasis in England in the 17th and 18th centuries was almost completely on the value of work for both children and adults. What was responsible for the overwhelming emphasis on work and the corresponding de-emphasis on play in England? Actually both religious and philosophical reasons contributed to the devaluation of play in English life.

The religious influence most responsible for the devaluation of play in England was the rise of Protestantism. While Catholicism stressed the necessity of faith in achieving salvation, the Protestant view was that faith alone would not

suffice. Hard work was also necessary, as was self-discipline; material success was thought to be indicative of good moral character. Play was viewed as the opposite of work and so was both sinful and irresponsible. In the words of the theologian John Wesley (1768, p. 283), “He that plays when he is a boy will play when he is a man.” (One can assume that this statement was meant to apply to girls and women as well.)

As Rousseau was later to become the preeminent philosopher of France, the philosopher whose views on the nature of children would be the most widely accepted in England was John Locke (1632–1704). Locke was representative of 17th-century thinking in his belief that each child is a unique and valuable human being whose developmental needs must be recognized by adults. Not surprisingly, he also represented the religious tradition in which he was raised. The son of Puritan parents, Locke held ideas on childrearing that were quite consistent with the Puritan worldview, which will be discussed in the following section. Locke’s ideas were also consistent with those of virtually every other Protestant sect in England at the time.

Locke apparently loved children and felt a special empathy with them yet neither romanticized them nor recommended that they be indulged. Instead, he argued that the child needs firm adult direction. A central assumption of Locke’s theory was that the human organism is empty at birth—that the mind of the newborn is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate—and that all knowledge of the world comes through the senses. It follows that the environment is all-important in shaping a person’s direction, so beginning in infancy, the foundations of good character must be laid down by parents.

Indulgence must be avoided because children have no natural awareness of what is best for them. Their natural tendency is to seek freedom to do what they want and to exert control over the world around them; but other than satisfying their basic physiological needs, parents must never give children what they cry for. “Children must leave it to the choice and ordering of their parents, what they think properest for them, and how much: and must not be permitted to chuse for themselves,” Locke wrote in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693/1964, p. 41). Parental direction is necessary for the mind to be “made obedient to discipline and pliant to reason when it [is] most tender, most easy to be bowed” (p. 54).

Although he emphasized the value of firm direction for children and even went so far as to suggest that their feet be immersed in cold water every day to harden them against the chilly English climate, Locke’s views on childrearing and education were actually quite humane. He advocated gentle and respectful approaches to parenting. For example, he condemned both physical punishment and excessive nagging and argued in favor of methods that would help children develop their own internal controls. Furthermore, it was his hope that as children

matured, parents would need to exert their authority less and less so that the parent-child relationship would eventually come to be based on equality. Parental authority, wrote Locke in *Thoughts*, “should be relaxed as fast as their age, discretion, and good behavior could allow it. . . . The sooner you treat him as a man, the sooner he will begin to be one” (1693/1964, p. 88).

Locke’s ideas were widely circulated during the late 17th and the 18th centuries, not only in England but also throughout Europe and in the Colonies of the New World. His ideas about the importance of firmness, rationality, discipline, and moral education were enthusiastically received. Although his philosophy was certainly more respectful of children as individuals than was the Renaissance perspective, Locke was no advocate of naturalistic childrearing approaches. Indeed, the “natural” elements of childhood were those that needed correction, and while he did not actually condemn play, Locke made it clear that work, rationality, and discipline were the central ingredients in a child’s optimal development.

In summary, the ideas of Protestant reformers had a dramatic impact on British attitudes toward childrearing in general and toward work and play in particular. Locke, influenced by his Protestant upbringing and by a revolutionary 17th-century view of the child as a distinct and original creation of God, came to have a significant influence on British—and later American—beliefs about children. Work and self-discipline were seen as paths to eternal salvation, to material success, and to mature rationality; play was at best a distraction, at worst a sin against God. The result was that play was virtually suppressed by the middle and end of the 18th century. Many English towns even went so far as to enact laws forbidding certain forms of play, such as playing with tops or running races in the public streets.

Childhood in the United States

The Puritan Legacy

The earliest permanent settlers in what would become the American Colonies were the Puritans, a religious reform group who left England in 1630 to seek freedom of expression in a new world. The Puritan influence was widely felt in the Colonies of New England. This group was to have a significant impact on later U.S. attitudes toward work and play, although the Puritans themselves—and their influence on U.S. thought—are often misunderstood.

The Puritans are often stereotyped as a harsh, unfeeling people who treated their children with a sternness bordering on cruelty and had little use for play of any sort. In fact, this was not the case at all. Puritan views on childhood, as exemplified in the writings of John Locke, were considerably more humane and

enlightened than were the views of most of the Puritans' contemporaries (Somerville, 1982).

The Puritans were reformers, after all, who envisioned a world that was new and better than their own. Reformers tend to be future-oriented people, and the children of Puritan society were highly valued as representing the hope of the future. They were seen as individuals in their own right instead of mere family replacements, a status that was indicated by the names they were typically given (Somerville, 1982). The European pattern of naming had always been to bestow on a child the name of a parent or another relative. In fact, siblings in the Middle Ages often were given identical names and were referred to not by name but by labels indicating their birth order (Illick, 1974). By contrast, the Puritans gave names that symbolized their hope for a better society under God (Prudence, Thankful, Safe-on-High), and the very fact that Puritan children received original names is an indication that they were perceived as unique and original human beings.

The Puritans believed that children needed a considerable amount of discipline and instruction if they were to live orderly and responsible lives. The child was thought to be born ignorant and sinful but at least capable of being enlightened (Borstelmann, 1983). Proper discipline would make this partially rational but evil-natured creature behave reasonably and thereby reflect credit on its parents in the eyes of God.

In terms of instruction, the Puritans thought it important to provide children with the knowledge—and particularly the religious knowledge—that would enable them to serve God better and increase the chances of their own salvation. To that end, the Puritans were the first Americans to publish books especially intended for children, and until the early 18th century, most books written in English and addressed to a child audience were written by Puritan authors (Somerville, 1982).

Not only were Puritan adults sensitive to the special needs of children and aware of developmental differences between their children and themselves, they also did not despise all forms of playfulness, as is commonly believed. Nevertheless, it is true that play was discouraged in the life of the Puritan child. Play was not seen as evil in itself but as an activity that would distract a child from the study and vocational training that were needed to acquire appropriate self-discipline. From a practical standpoint, it is hard to imagine a Puritan child having much time for play, in any case, since school began as early as 7 a.m., 6 days a week, and did not end until 4 or 5 p.m. and since children were expected to perform their household chores as well (Illick, 1974).

Ultimately, the Puritan experiment in the Colonies was doomed to failure because, by the end of the 17th century, each new generation seemed to lose some of the religious zeal of its predecessor (Walzer, 1974). Nevertheless, the

Puritans had a lasting influence on American attitudes toward children as developmentally different from adults and as symbols of the hope for a better future. They had another type of influence as well, perhaps one that has been less positive. Despite a degree of acceptance that was almost revolutionary for its time, there were also elements of rejection in the Puritan attitude toward children. The reasonable behavior that was the purpose of discipline and instruction was thought to be against a child's basic nature; thus, the goal of childrearing was to make children into something that by nature they were not. Such a view hardly constitutes acceptance of children in their own right and might be described as an effort to subdue the very individuality that the Puritans were among the first to recognize in the child.

In the Puritan attitude toward children, therefore, there was a degree of ambivalence that was to evolve in this country into a feeling of uncertainty about the value of childhood and the relative importance of the seemingly natural activities of children and adults: play and work. As a part of our Puritan legacy, this ambivalence would continue for several centuries. Some would argue that it continues to the present day.

Colonial Times

In the Colonial United States of the 18th century, the Puritan legacy of ambivalence about the value of children was evident, and perhaps as a result, there was a certain ambiguity about the relationship between work and play (Walzer, 1974). On the one hand, Colonial parents were genuinely interested in their children, rejoiced at their births, played with them, gave them presents, wrote letters to them when separated, and grieved considerably when a child died. There seemed to be in the Colonies a greater fondness for children and a closer relationship between parent and child than was found in England at the time.

On the other side, however, early American parents engaged in many activities that distanced them from their children. Infant abandonment, a common occurrence in Europe, was rare in the New World, but very young Colonial children were often "put out." That is, they were given over to the custody of nurses, schools, tutors, or assorted relatives, a practice that modern Americans would certainly see as unusual. As an illustration of this practice, in May 1782 Pamela Sedgewick of western New England wrote of her young daughter to her cousin Betsey Mayhew in Boston: "I have a little prattler, your namesake. If you do not burden yourself with a family before [she] is old enough to leave her mama, I intend to send her to your care. So you see, my dear, you must not expect to get rid of trouble by living single" (Walzer, 1974, p. 353).

The rejection of children in Colonial America also took another form: the complete submission of the child to parental control. It was the parents' role, as it had been in Puritan times, to shape children according to their own strongly held religious convictions. In that sense, children had value only insofar as they served as extensions of and reflected well upon their parents. Again, there was that curious contradiction. How could children be appreciated in their own right and at the same time be seen as creatures in desperate need of shaping and correcting?

Compared with the 17th-century view, the 18th-century American view of childhood was considerably more diversified. There was a blending of Locke's environmentalist views with the new Romanticism typified by Rousseau's naturalistic perspective. The question of the relative influences of nurture and nature on development was now raised in earnest: Are children nothing more than reflections of the sum total of their experiences, or do innate characteristics play a role in determining who and what a person grows to be?

The 19th Century

As the British had established Colonies along the eastern seaboard, there had been extensive French colonization in the American South and Midwest. It is apparent that early American attitudes about play came to reflect the perspectives of both countries. The British emphasis on discipline, hard work, and moral rectitude was definitely reflected in 19th-century American thought, although to a lesser degree than in the mother country. In fact, British visitors to the United States in the early 1800s were horrified by what they considered the irreverent and disrespectful behavior of American children; they typically attributed this state of affairs to overindulgence by American parents, and they expressed surprise at the degree of intimacy and familiarity that characterized parent-child relationships in this country (Borstelmann, 1983). British observers typically described Americans as more relaxed, frivolous, and fun loving than they. Perhaps they still do so, just as we still tend to describe the British as somewhat serious and formal.

As has already been mentioned, the French had always maintained an attitude of greater acceptance toward play and toward the naturalness of childhood than had the British. How, then, would a French visitor have described Americans of the 19th century? While the British saw them as lacking in discipline, French observers characterized Americans as rather serious minded compared with themselves. Typical were the views of Alexis de Tocqueville (1805–1859), who toured the new republic in the early 1800s and described our Colonial ancestors as a sober and serious people, unable to enjoy play unless it was integrated in some way with work (Tocqueville, 1835/1946).

Early American play was, indeed, somewhat work oriented in nature. Supposed play activities, such as raising a barn or making a quilt, were obviously related to the necessary work of an agricultural society. This blend of work and play probably reflected a blend of the early British and French influences on the American Colonies. The net result of these competing perspectives was an American ambivalence about play that carried through the 19th and into the 20th century, compounded by the diverse and continuous immigration pattern that created a multicultural American society.

There are numerous illustrations of the 19th-century ambivalence toward children and play. On the one hand, the mid-19th century is often regarded as a period in which parents exerted considerable psychological rather than physical control over their children (Davis, 1976). That is, the emphasis was on strong parental authority, with little empathy for the child; the repression of personal feelings; and the encouragement of children's practicing self-control motivated by feelings of guilt.

Yet this also was a period in which American children were encouraged through their play to become more mobile and to achieve greater degrees of mastery over the environment. Toys became increasingly complex; for instance, there appeared a variety of miniature vehicles, such as trains, that were made up of many parts and presented a challenge to the player as well as a source of education. Board games appeared at this time, and these required skill and a flair for competition. The first cap pistol was produced in 1859, allowing a child a new means of expressing aggression and mastery over the environment (Davis, 1976). The message to children was that they must look inward to control themselves and also turn outward to attain a degree of mobility and control over their surroundings.

It was in the middle of the 19th century that educators began to emphasize the importance of children's play, although, consistent with 19th-century attitudes, play was seen as purposeful rather than a desirable end in itself. The Swiss educator Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) developed the first kindergarten and introduced play into the early childhood education curriculum. He saw such structured play as the manipulation of balls and blocks, singing, engaging in organized games, and practicing various crafts as means of helping children acquire abstract ideas and spiritual values that would serve them well as adults. In structured play children could learn to be creative, moral, and responsible members of society. They could learn about the unity and harmony in the world around them. The Italian educator Maria Montessori (1870–1952) designed play materials for children and observed how they played with them in her classroom. Based on her observations, she determined what were the essential elements of play and the learning that different forms of play produced. For example, play could teach children about colors, numbers, size, and different

shapes of objects. She then went on to use specific materials to teach specific concepts. Neither Froebel nor Montessori supported the use of spontaneous or imaginative play in their curricula. In fact, Montessori believed that free play could actually interfere with learning and make-believe play could hamper a child's understanding of reality (Spodek & Saracho, 2003).

20th-Century Attitudes

In the first 10 years of the 20th century, there were efforts to lessen the repressive internal controls that had previously been fostered in children, with a corresponding increase in willingness to let children—and adults for that matter—express their feelings openly (Davis, 1976). There was also greater parental interest in understanding the perspectives and feelings of their children. The interest, at least temporarily, was not in molding the child into a satisfactory adult but in reaching the child—in understanding children as they were.

This was the era in which the child study movement began to flourish, a movement characterized by efforts to develop a genuine science of child development and typified by the writings of the renowned American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924). It was also the era in which early childhood educators moved away from the highly structured use of play in the classroom to a more flexible approach, which allowed for a greater amount of spontaneity and creative expression (Nawrotski, 2006). John Dewey (1859–1952) was the founder of the Progressive kindergarten movement, in which children's spontaneous play was seen as an opportunity for learning. This was the basis of the modern educational concept of play as a vehicle for child development and learning (Saracho & Spodek, 1995).

Even as the trend was beginning to move toward a greater appreciation of the individuality and special developmental characteristics of children, a new force was emerging in American psychology. This was the appearance, between 1910 and 1920, of the theory of **Behaviorism**, as set forth in the writings of the man who would be the most influential of all American psychologists, John B. Watson (1878–1958). Influenced by the ideas of John Locke, Watson also believed that the mind is a blank slate at birth and that people grow to be what they are made to be by the environment (Langer, 1969). “Give me a dozen healthy infants,” wrote Watson, “and my own specified world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one at random and train him to become any kind of specialist I might select—doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant, chief, and yes, even beggarman and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, tendencies, abilities, vocations, and race of his ancestors” (Watson, 1925, p. 82).

A Behaviorist Speaks About Childrearing

Some Thoughts From John B. Watson

John B. Watson was not only the author of the theory of Behaviorism; he also wrote many articles in popular magazines encouraging American parents to incorporate Behaviorist principles into their childrearing practices. This is an example of his advice:

Even granting that the mother thinks she kisses the child for the perfectly logical reason of implanting the proper amount of affection and kindliness in it, does she succeed? The fact that . . . we rarely see a happy child is proof to the contrary. The fact that our children are always crying and always whining shows the unhappy, unwholesome state they are in. Their digestion is interfered with and probably their whole glandular system is deranged.

There is a sensible way of treating children. Treat them as though they were young adults. Let your behavior always be objective and kindly firm. Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit on your lap. If you must, kiss them once on the forehead when they say good night. Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. Try it out. In a week's time you will find how easy it is to be perfectly objective with your child and at the same time kindly. (Watson, 1928, pp. 80–81)

Considering the importance of the environment in setting a person's developmental direction, it follows that parents must take an active—even aggressive—stance when raising their children. They must be firm, logical, and consistent, and they must realize that sentiment has nothing to do with childrearing. Watson even advised parents not to kiss or cuddle their children because cuddled children grow up to expect cuddling as adults; they become chronic complainers, always expecting sympathy from other people. (See the boxed item, which contains some of Watson's advice to parents.)

How did children's play fit into the behaviorist view of the world? Play was seen not as a valuable end in itself but as a means of bringing about social reform. Its value was that it could be a learning experience that allowed children to cultivate socially acceptable behaviors. A reader of the magazine *Parents* in the early 1930s wrote to ask, "Must boys fight?" The magazine's response was that fighting can actually have value in "cultivating strength and skill. . . . As our boys grow older they can be shown how the energy that might be spent in fighting can be utilized in wholesome sports or other worthwhile activities" (Leigh, 1931, p. 25). Perhaps she was responding to the Behaviorist emphasis on reinforcement when cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote in the late 1920s that Americans tend to see play as a reward for work, rather than thinking of work and play as natural separate-but-equal features of everyday life.

In the mid- and later 20th century, there was a growing recognition that the perspectives on childrearing that typified the years through the 1920s were unduly narrow. Most post–World War II parents would consider John Watson’s advice on childrearing both bizarre and cruel, for example. The trend in the past 40 years has been toward a degree of autonomy and freedom of expression for children that has no precedent in either ancient or modern history (Davis, 1976). Play has at last been accorded a place of significance in a child’s development. Not only are children now *allowed* to play, but also it is believed that they *should* play because play affords the opportunity for intellectual and social development as well as for emotional release. Here we can see the influences of both psychoanalytic and cognitive-developmental theorists.

Before we conclude, however, that we have finally come to a total acceptance of children’s play, we should recognize that many psychologists continue to wonder if we are as tolerant of play as we believe. Many (e.g., Hartley, 1971; Logan, 1977; Elkind, 1981, 1987) suggest that our acceptance of play—and of children in general—is highly conditional. Ruth Hartley (1971), one of the pioneer researchers in the area, worried that play is often misunderstood by parents and even by early childhood educators who see it as a natural part of childhood but one that has little developmental value. Cross-cultural psychologist Richard Logan (1977) suggested that even as we argue that children should be allowed to play, we unconsciously resent them for having the opportunity to do so while we adults must work to earn a living. David Elkind (1981, 1987) has expressed repeated concern that children today are being forced to grow up too fast and that childhood activities like play are being replaced at earlier and earlier ages with the “meaningful” life pursuits of educational and occupational success.

THEORIES OF PLAY

What is the value of play in a child’s development? Is play necessary? What function does it serve?

In an effort to answer questions of this sort, psychologists have proposed a number of theories of play (see Table 1.2). As these theories are discussed, it is important to keep in mind that no one theory has ever been able to explain completely the significance of play in children’s development. In fact, no one theory is adequate to explain any aspect of child development. Theories must be seen as only tentative models, helpful frameworks within which child development and behavior can be better understood.

TABLE 1.2 Theories of Play

| Theory | Theorists | Reasons for Play | Greatest Benefits |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| <i>Surplus Energy</i> | H. Spencer | To discharge the natural energy of the body | Physical |
| <i>Renewal of Energy</i> | G. T. W. Patrick | To avoid boredom while the natural motor functions of the body are restored | Physical |
| <i>Recapitulation</i> | G. S. Hall | To relive periods in the evolutionary history of the human species | Physical |
| <i>Practice for Adulthood</i> | K. Groos | To develop skills and knowledge necessary for functioning as an adult | Physical, intellectual |
| <i>Psychoanalytic</i> | S. Freud, A. Freud, E. Erikson | To reduce anxiety by giving a child a sense of control over the world and an acceptable way to express forbidden impulses | Emotional, social |
| <i>Cognitive-Developmental</i> | J. Bruner, J. Piaget, B. Sutton-Smith | To facilitate general cognitive development To consolidate learning that has already taken place while allowing for the possibility of new learning in a relaxed atmosphere | Intellectual, social |
| <i>Arousal Modulation</i> | D. E. Berlyne, G. Fein, H. Ellis | To keep the body at an optimal state of arousal To relieve boredom To reduce uncertainty | Emotional, physical |
| <i>Contextual</i> | L. Vygotsky | To reconstruct reality without situational influences or restraints | Intellectual |

Classic Theories

Early play theories, those that appeared in the latter part of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th, emphasized the biogenetic significance of play. That is, they described play as an instinctive mechanism that either promoted optimal physical development or reflected the evolutionary history of the human species. These theories were grounded more in philosophical speculation than in the empirical research that is characteristic of modern theories of play (Saracho & Spodek, 2003).

Herbert Spencer (1873), in his **surplus energy theory**, described play as necessary to allow children to discharge pent-up energy. He argued that nature equips human beings with a certain amount of energy to be used in the process of survival. If this energy is not used for that purpose, it must be discharged somehow, and children discharge their excess energy in play. Spencer was right in the sense that play can indeed be used to release energy; parents and teachers often notice that children are more relaxed after vigorous exercise. However, adults also notice the exact opposite phenomenon: A child will often play to the point of sheer exhaustion and appear to be even more energized afterward than before!

A view of play that was almost the opposite of Spencer's was expressed by G. T. W. Patrick (1916). The purpose of play, according to Patrick, was the renewal of energy. When children are tired and relaxed, play keeps them occupied and helps them avoid boredom while they wait for their natural energy supply to be restored. However, while such a theory might explain the sedentary play that children often engage in, how would it account for the rough-and-tumble play that also makes up a part of any healthy child's day?

G. Stanley Hall, one of the leading figures in the early years of American psychology—and one of the first to write extensively about childhood and adolescence—had a unique perspective on the meaning of children's play. In an article titled "The Contents of Children's Minds" (1883), he put forth his **recapitulation theory**, according to which each person's development reflects the evolutionary progression of the entire human species. An infant crawling about at play might be reflecting some unspecified period in human evolution when humans walked on all fours; a first grader playing "cops and robbers" might be reliving the experiences of a prehistoric ancestor whose daily activities included hunting and gathering food. Hall's was certainly an intriguing theory of play (and of human development in general), but it was based on a rather unsophisticated view of physical anthropology. It is a theory that would find little acceptance among developmental psychologists today.

A final biogenetic theory was expressed by Karl Groos (1901), who suggested that play is the body's natural way of preparing itself for the tasks of adult life. Just as a kitten chasing a ball of string is rehearsing skills that will later be used in stalking food, the child who plays "house" may be preparing for the experience of someday running a household. In fact, much of children's play does resemble adult activities, particularly when children begin to explore adult roles in dramatic play. However, many children's play activities bear little real resemblance to activities pursued in adulthood and can be seen as preparation for adult life only in the most general sense.

Contemporary Theories

None of the early play theories, with their emphasis on instinctive—and often unspecified—biological mechanisms, has strong advocates among modern psychologists, although each contains at least some element of truth. More typical of the modern view are theories that emphasize the psychological value of play and its significance to a child's intellectual, social, and emotional development. Let us turn now to an examination of some of these contemporary theories.



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Psychoanalytic theorists believe that an infant playing with a toy derives a sense of power that helps relieve objective anxiety.

The Psychoanalytic Approach

According to psychoanalytic theorists, most notably Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Anna Freud (1895–1982), play's value is primarily emotional in that it allows children to reduce anxiety (Freud, 1974). But why would a child suffer from anxiety in the first place? There are two types of anxiety that characterize the years of infancy and childhood.

Objective anxiety is fear of the external world. Infants and young children realize their helplessness and know that they must rely on the good will of others to have their basic needs met. The fear of abandonment is particularly strong in early childhood, and this is not surprising since a child, unlike an adult, needs a caretaker for its very survival. Play reduces objective anxiety by giving a child the illusion of power and control. The rattle a baby plays with becomes an extension of the body and provides the child with a greater sense of

power. An older child building a tower of blocks or playing with dolls or miniature life toys is reducing the ordinarily large and overwhelming world to a size that he or she can handle. Play provides at least the temporary illusion of being in command. In much the same way, the child who plays at being a monster can, by reversing roles, allay a fear of monsters, and the child who punishes a doll can work through anxiety at being punished by a parent.

A second form of anxiety experienced by children is **instinctual anxiety**. Anna Freud (1974) observed that “the human ego by its very nature is never a promising soil for the unhampered gratification of instinct. . . . Its mistrust of their demands is always present.” She added that “the effect of the anxiety experienced by the ego is . . . [that] defense mechanisms are brought into operation against the instincts, with all the familiar results in the formation of neuroses and neurotic characteristics” (pp. 58–59).

Psychoanalytic theorists noted that many of a child’s feelings, including anger, unreasonable fear, sexual curiosity, and the wish to be messy or destructive, are frowned on by adult society. Since the powerful adults in his or her world disapprove of these feelings, the child comes to fear expressing them, and soon the very feelings themselves, whether or not they are translated into behaviors, trigger a reaction of anxiety in the child.

Play allows the child to explore unwelcome feelings without the repercussions of adult disapproval. For instance, the desire to break a window, strike a playmate, or wallow in the mud may frighten a child, but in play the child is free to be both destructive and messy, within limits of course. Many timid children become aggressive when squeezing and pounding ceramic clay, destroying a sand castle, or punching a Bobo doll, and the cleanest, neatest children are often the first to be covered to the elbows in finger paint.

The psychoanalytic perspective on play is also reflected in the writings of Erik Erikson (1902–1994). Erikson rejected as unduly narrow Freud’s view that the major function of play was anxiety reduction. He suggested that play can also have an ego-building function, since it brings about the development of physical and social skills that enhance a child’s self-esteem. During the first year of life, play centers on the exploration of the child’s own body. In the gradual recognition of their sensory and motor skills (e.g., looking, listening, talking, walking) and in the exploration of their own bodies (e.g., playing with their hands and feet), children come to have an understanding of themselves as different from other people. Erikson called play with one’s own body **autocosmic play**.

Children in the second year of life begin to go beyond their own bodies in play and to acquire mastery over objects, including toys. This form of mastery play further enhances the ego, and Erikson referred to it as **microsphere play**.

PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE 1.2

Making Sure That Play Is Really Play

If a child is not enjoying what is supposed to be a play activity, for that child the activity is not play at all. Find ways to increase the child's enjoyment (e.g., by teaching appropriate skills or offering encouragement), or direct the child to an activity that is more appropriate.

If a child does not find an activity enjoyable, it is not play. However, a lack of enjoyment may not mean that the activity is inherently uninteresting or that it could not become play under the guidance of a sensitive adult. Sometimes a child's inability to enjoy what others see as play may result from social anxiety, lack of self-confidence with the material, or uncertainty about what is expected. In addition, some play materials are more approachable than others. For example, blocks may be the least intimidating of materials because they are clean, relatively indestructible, and familiar to most young children, and they lend themselves easily to the creation of a product. A more fluid material, such as clay or finger paints, may cause discomfort in children who are fearful of making a mess or who tend to be product oriented in their approach to play.

It is not only play materials that vary in their appeal. Some play activities are more approachable than others. A child who has difficulty interacting with peers may find group activities stressful, with the result that activities requiring peer interaction and cooperation will be challenging to the point that they are not play at all. A socially uncomfortable child would be more comfortable in solitary or parallel play.

A sensitive adult will realize that not all play materials and activities are suitable for all children and that one child's play is another child's work. The most effective way to make sure that play is really play is to follow a few basic principles:

- Make sure that a variety of play options are available.
- Be sure that play materials and activities vary in the degree of social interaction that they require, as well as in the extent to which the materials could threaten an inhibited or insecure child.
- Make available play materials that facilitate but do not force social interaction. Blocks are an excellent example of such a material.
- Do not underestimate the need to provide instruction in the use of play materials or activities. Some children are experienced players. Others are not.
- Model play activities for children, and provide instruction in the form of gentle suggestions as the children are playing.

Finally, during the preschool years, children at play move beyond mastery of their own bodies and mastery of objects to mastery in social interactions. Playing with peers, sharing both fantasy and reality with them, and demonstrating skills in a social setting are all elements of **macrosphere play**, which again strengthens children's egos as they realize that they can be successful in the larger social world. Erikson suggested that successful macrosphere play helps children better understand their culture and the social roles that they—and everyone else—are expected to assume.

The Cognitive-Developmental Approach to Play

Rather than emphasizing its emotional value, cognitive theorists typically regard play as a tool for facilitating intellectual growth. Jerome Bruner (1972) and Brian Sutton-Smith (1967), for example, both maintained that play provides a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere in which children can learn to solve a variety of problems. Later, when children are confronted with the more complex problems of the real world, the learning that took place during play is of great benefit to them.

Perhaps the most extensive treatment of play by a cognitive theorist can be found in the writings of the Swiss biologist and philosopher Jean Piaget (1896–1980), the author of what is certainly the most influential of all theories of children's intellectual development. Piaget (1962, 1983) maintained that a primary function of all living organisms is to adapt to the environment. Such adaptation is necessary for survival and can be physical, as when an overheated organism perspires to cool the body down, or psychological, as when people adapt their ways of thinking to incorporate new information presented to them. Physical adaptation is necessary for the survival and growth of the body; psychological adaptation ensures the continued growth of the intellectual structures of the mind.

Assimilation and accommodation. Adaptation involves two processes that usually occur simultaneously: assimilation and accommodation. **Assimilation** means taking new material from the outside world and fitting it into one's already existing structures. In a physical sense, the body assimilates food by digesting it. In an analogous manner, we are able to assimilate new intellectual materials—ideas, concepts, points of view—into the existing structures of our minds so that those new ideas eventually become incorporated into our own worldviews.

Accommodation is the adjusting of the structure in reaction to the newly incorporated material. Thus, the body accommodates food by salivating, by stomach contractions and the flow of gastric juices to break down the foreign substance, and eventually by growing and changing. So, too, the mind accommodates new intellectual material, as when a person adjusts his or her perspective on life, even ever so slightly, after incorporating a new idea. Growth, either physical or intellectual, will not occur unless *both* assimilation and accommodation take place.

Assimilation and accommodation generally occur at the same time, but there are instances in which one occurs to a considerably greater extent than the other. Play, according to Piaget, is the dominance of assimilation over accommodation. That is, it is the incorporation of new intellectual material into already existing cognitive structures without a corresponding alteration of the structures themselves. As a concrete example, 6-year-old Peter finds an empty cardboard box and determines that for his purposes it is not a box at all but a rocket that will take him to the moon. Thus, Peter forces reality to conform to his perspective rather than adjusting his way of thinking to fit reality. Piaget spoke of play as a consolidation of newly learned behaviors: A child first learns something new and then repeats what is learned over and over again until it becomes an established part of his or her repertoire (Rubin et al., 1983; Sutton-Smith, 1985). As an example at the level of motor activity, a child who is learning to use a skateboard must first learn how to stand on it without falling and must rehearse the basic maneuvers involved in balancing until these become firmly established routines. Only after the simpler motor patterns are consolidated can the child move on to more elaborate ones, but such consolidation obviously involves the rehearsal of old learning rather than the learning of something new.

Play and intellectual development. Piaget's primary goal was to create a comprehensive theory of children's intellectual development, and he treated play as a reflection of the development of thought rather than as a stimulus to intellectual growth. It was Piaget's contention that intelligence is sensory and motor in nature in the first year of life; becomes representational, or symbolic, in the second year; and begins to incorporate elements of logic at about the time the child is ready to enter school. These three stages are the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, and the operational stage, and as will be seen in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, the stages are reflected in three very different forms of play—sensorimotor play, symbolic play, and games with rules. In that sense, play could be seen as reflecting intellectual development, and development could be seen as leading play.

While play is not synonymous with intellectual development in Piaget's theory, however, it can certainly facilitate development. For example, an infant's play with a rattle, a sponge, a ball, or a spoon could improve eye-hand coordination, balance, and physical strength and could teach about differences in size, shape, texture, and weight that characterize objects in the physical world. An older child who builds a fortress out of sticks might try to make it as realistic as possible and in the process might learn something about logical classification, part-whole relationships, measurement, balance, and spatial relationships. In that sense, make-believe play can lead to what Piaget called **games of construction**, which he saw as representing an area of transition between symbolic play and "nonplayful activities, or serious adaptation" (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969, p. 59). Finally, the rule-oriented games of the elementary-school child may not be engaged in for the specific purpose of learning and typically involve the consolidation of skills rather than intentional efforts to learn new ones, but they can easily stimulate intellectual growth. In such games, children learn to share, to remember and follow rules, and to acquire new skills as they move from one level of mastery to another.

Arousal Modulation Theories

A distinguishing feature of play is that it is intrinsically motivated. As we have seen, both psychoanalytic theory and that of Jean Piaget accepted the concept of internal motivation, whether it was to reduce anxiety or to consolidate previously learned activities. However, behavioral learning theorists in the United States (e.g., Hull, 1943) maintained that external motivation—and specifically the need to satisfy one's basic physiological needs—is at the root of even the most psychologically sophisticated behaviors.

The motivation for some behaviors, however, cannot be explained in terms of basic physiological needs; these behaviors include play and exploration of the environment. Human beings—and lower animals as well—play with and explore their surroundings simply because they want to; there is no reason for these behaviors that can be understood in terms of physiological need reduction. Learning theorists attempted to explain play, therefore, by referring to the concept of internal rather than external motivation and more specifically to the concept of arousal modulation.

The underlying premise of **arousal modulation theories** of children's play is that there is some optimal level of central nervous system arousal that a human being tries to maintain (Berlyne, 1969). The ideal environment, therefore, affords neither too much nor too little stimulation but just enough to keep a person

optimally aroused. What is this optimal level? It falls somewhere between uncertainty and boredom. When there are new or confusing stimuli in the environment, the person feels confused and uncertain, and the level of central nervous system arousal is elevated. To reduce this level, the person must explore the environment in order to reduce its uncertainty. In contrast, when there is a lack of stimulation in the environment, the person is bored and seeks stimulation to maintain the desired arousal level. It is here that play comes in, because children use play to generate environmental stimulation where a sufficient amount does not already exist (Berlyne).

Similar views of play as arousal modulation were offered by Ellis (1973) and Fein (1981), who suggested that children's play provides a variety of forms of stimulation to an organism in need of it. Included are kinesthetic, or physical, stimulation; perceptual stimulation; and intellectual stimulation. Children at play produce novel effects and at first are made apprehensive by the uncertainty of the new situation. Later, however, as the uncertainty of the situation is reduced, the effect of play is generally positive. It is then that children will work to create new uncertainties, which they immediately proceed to reduce, thus perpetuating a cycle of creation and reduction of uncertainty. Indeed, children appear to enjoy activities characterized by degrees of novelty and risk, such as playing with fire, climbing trees, playing monsters, and so forth. Perhaps children include this element of danger, of limits testing, because they are seeking stimulation unavailable in nonplayful activities.

A Contextual Cognitive Approach: Vygotsky's Social-Historical Theory

All of the theories presented thus far have something in common: They are based on an unstated assumption that stages of play and reasons for play are universal, occurring in much the same way in children in every culture. **Contextual theories**, on the other hand, are rooted in the belief that a child's development cannot be fully understood without referring to the social-cultural and historical setting in which it occurs. In other words, child development can be understood only if we look at the overall picture, which might include the child's family history, economic circumstances, and degree of comfort in the current social setting. This global approach, which has become increasingly widespread in recent years among child development professionals, is represented by the writings of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

Born in Russia, Vygotsky (1896–1934) was educated in literature and law before earning his doctoral degree in psychology. Perhaps because his education

was so broad, he came to believe that psychologists view human beings too narrowly, focusing on the inner workings of the mind while sometimes ignoring the larger social context. For example, he criticized theorists such as Freud and Piaget for paying too little attention to the cultural context of development. As Vygotsky observed, “The developmental uniformities established by Piaget apply to the given milieu, under the conditions of Piaget’s study. They are not laws of nature, but are historically and socially determined” (1962, p. 23). He also pointed out that “Piaget observed children at play together in a particular kindergarten, and his (findings) are valid only for this special child milieu” (1962, p. 23–24).

Vygotsky believed that there are two simultaneous lines of development, which continuously interact with one another. The *natural line* describes development from within; the *social-historical line* describes development from without. While the natural line is very important during the first 2 years of life, the social-historical line becomes increasingly influential after the age of 2. In other words, infant development may be largely explained by internal mechanisms, but development beyond infancy is heavily influenced by the environmental context in which it occurs.

Vygotsky argued that there are a number of acquired and shared tools that aid in human thinking and behavior—skills that allow us to think more clearly than if we did not have them and to better understand our own thinking processes. These include human speech, writing, systems of numbering, and various logical, mathematical, and scientific concepts. These tools are not intuitive but must be provided by formal instruction, and the role of parents and teachers is critical in transmitting their knowledge and beliefs to children (Maratsos, 2007). While the basic tools are found in virtually every society, the more sophisticated tools of scientific reasoning are available in some cultures but not in others; so development cannot be studied apart from its cultural context.

One of Vygotsky’s more interesting concepts to those who study child development and education nicely illustrates the importance of the social context. This is his belief in the **zone of proximal development**. If asked to work independently on a problem, such as sorting objects according to shape or function, a child will display a particular level of performance. Vygotsky believed, however, that the child’s performance may not reflect his or her true potential. If the same child is allowed to work with other children on the problem or is given direction by an adult, he or she might perform at a higher level than when working alone. The distance between the child’s actual performance when working alone and his or her potential ability in a different social context is the zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development has major implications for those who study child development in general and children's play in particular. It seems clear, first of all, that development does not depend only on internal mechanisms but can be enhanced by appropriate social experiences. Educators can observe the child in his or her zone of proximal development, create appropriate learning experiences that build on the child's existing understanding (a process known as "scaffolding"), and actually further the child's development. In that sense, learning leads development rather than simply reflecting the child's developmental level (Levykh, 2008).

It is also clear in Vygotsky's framework that anyone wanting to understand an individual child's behavior must observe that child in more than one social setting. A child may play unimaginatively in the block corner when alone, simply stacking blocks and then returning them to the shelves, but may soar into flights of fantasy and may use the blocks in more complicated ways when provided with gentle direction by an encouraging teacher. This point was illustrated in a study by Gregory, Kim, and Whiren (2003), who trained adults to recognize varying degrees of complexity in block construction and then had them observe children at block play and offer verbal support for creating increasingly complex structures. While the adults didn't interfere in the play and took a supportive rather than a directive role, they engaged in such verbal scaffolding as asking open-ended questions, thinking of possibilities out loud, and occasionally posing problems (e.g., "What would happen if . . . ?").

The result was an increase in the complexity of the children's block structures. One might assume that the next time these children play with blocks, they may reconstruct the experience inspired by the teacher but in their own imagination, without any external influences or constraints. In other words, symbolic play re-creates an experience in which knowledge and skills were transmitted to a child and thus may help him or her better understand reality. In that sense, play leads development (Vygotsky, 1978). It might appear that Vygotsky reduced the symbolic play of the young child to an imitative process, and in fact he did suggest that make-believe play is primarily an imitative process (Lambert & Clyde, 2003).

The necessity of taking a contextual approach seems more apparent in the United States today than ever before, since there is increasing diversity in what Vygotsky would have called the social-historical line. That is, U.S. schools are becoming more and more ethnically diverse, with 4 in 10 children in public schools being members of minority groups. When we study play, therefore, or any other aspect of children's development, we must be careful to look at what has been described as "children in relation" (Lubeck, 1994, p. 153).

Summary

Play has five essential characteristics. It is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral, and actively engaged in by the participants. Early theories of play emphasized its biological and genetic elements, such as its biologically determined role in releasing the body's excess energy or in preparing a child for adult living, while contemporary theories stress the emotional, intellectual, and social benefits of play. For example, the psychoanalytic perspective is that play is a defense against anxiety, cognitive theories emphasize play's intellectual value, and arousal modulation theories suggest that children play in order to provide themselves with an optimal level of stimulation.

From the time of the ancient Egyptians until the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, children were thought of as having special needs and special activities, including that of play. During the period of the Renaissance, however, children came to be thought of as having little importance compared with adults and were fully integrated into the adult world, in the sense that people of all ages worked and played together.

In the 17th century, a new consciousness of children developed. They were now seen as deserving attention and as having developmental needs and problems that were different from those of adults. The French were always more accepting of play than were the British. In France, play came to be seen as suitable only for children, while in England play was seen as a frivolous activity that interfered with a child's development of discipline and time for work. The Puritan legacy in the United States has been ambivalence about children and about the value of play: Compared with the British, Americans have been closer to their children and more indulgent with them, yet unlike the French, they have not fully accepted children's playfulness. Americans today, however, are more accepting of play and more aware of the special developmental characteristics and needs of children. Questions remain, though, about the extent of that acceptance. Some psychologists argue that we try to accept play but do not understand its functions, while others believe that we begrudge children the opportunity to play and make efforts to hurry them into adulthood.

Key Terms

| | | | |
|---------------------------|-------|-----------------------|-------|
| Accommodation | p. 28 | Games of Construction | p. 29 |
| Arousal Modulation Theory | p. 29 | Instinctual Anxiety | p. 25 |
| Assimilation | p. 27 | Macrosphere Play | p. 27 |
| Autocosmic Play | p. 26 | Microsphere Play | p. 27 |
| Behaviorism | p. 19 | Naturalism | p. 11 |
| Contextual Theory | p. 30 | Objective Anxiety | p. 24 |

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|-----------------------|-------|------------------------------|-------|
| Recapitulation Theory | p. 23 | Tabula Rasa | p. 13 |
| Surplus Energy Theory | p. 23 | Zone of Proximal Development | p. 31 |

Issues for Class Discussion

1. It has been found that young children may regard even a supposedly playful activity as work if it is assigned to them rather than freely chosen. How can a teacher suggest a playful activity to children yet avoid the impression of imposing it on them?
2. Why would practitioners in the field of early childhood special education put less emphasis on play than do those who work with “normal” children? Is this an understandable emphasis, or is it unfair to children with disabilities?
3. What is a theory? How are theories developed? What is their purpose?
4. How do the psychoanalytic and the cognitive theories of play reflect their different conceptions of human nature in general? Is it possible that both the psychoanalytic and the cognitive theorists are correct in their interpretations of children’s play?