

# Supporting Play: Development, Meaning and Growth



**TTAC**  
A COLLABORATION  
BETWEEN

**NEW YORK**  
**CENTER FOR CHILD**  
**DEVELOPMENT**

 **McSILVER INSTITUTE**  
FOR POVERTY POLICY AND RESEARCH

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OF SOCIAL WORK

# TTAC

The New York City Training and Technical Assistance Center (TTAC), funded through ThriveNYC, in partnership with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene ( DOHMH).

TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development ( NYCCD) and the McSilver Institute on Poverty, Policy and Research

TTAC is tasked with building capacity and competencies of mental health professionals and early childhood professionals in family serving systems to identify and address the social-emotional needs of young children and their families across NYC.

<http://www.TTACny.org>







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# PLAY FUNDAMENTALS

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# Defining Play

- Play is understood to be the “child’s spontaneous and pleasurable actions on objects, others and self, which contributes to the discovery, expression and mastery of physical and social reality, ideas and feelings” (Sheridan, Foley, & Radlinksky, 1995, p.1)
- The dimension of spontaneity embraces the qualities of play as intrinsically motivated, self-directed, flexible and unfolding. (Lillard, Lerner, Hopkins, Dore, Smith, & Palmquist, 2013)



# Functions of play

- Tension reduction and pleasure
- Exploration, discovery, stimulation and mastery
- Arousal and regulation-novelty, uncertainty, complexity
- Pleasure and imagery which compensates for felt limitations, anxieties and deprivations-wish fulfillment
- Problem solving, rehearsal and adaptation
- Expression and communication

# Play Skills

- **Sensorimotor**
  - Mouth, fingers, vision and the surface of the skin of self and parent: reaching, tasting, touching
  - Properties of the body transferred to some soft object pillow, teddy “transitional object” birth-4M
  - Play material which does not serve as a substitute for the body but rather exploration, discovery, mastery and learning: grasping, inspecting, banging, dropping
  - The sequence of sensorimotor learning through play accidental object discovery, repetition, exploration, anticipation of the effects of actions on objects 4-8M
  - Novel imitation, awareness of an independent universe, increased anticipatory behavior, limited understanding of language and the intentional application of known means to new situations 8-12 M

(Erikson, 1972 ; Sheridan, Foley & Radlinkski, 1995)

# Play Skills

- Functional Play
  - Combination: filling-dumping, opening-shutting, fitting-in, messing
  - Movable toys in correspondence to locomotion
  - Constructive play: building and destruction in correspondence to ambivalent trends
  - Repetition, imitation and ritual
  - New means through active trial and error experimentation e.g. tool use 12-18M
  - New means through mental combination e.g. solving simple puzzle by inspection memory and thought 18-24M



# Play Skills

- Symbolic play
  - Body based representation-drinks from empty cup
  - Independent representation-feeds doll
  - Object substitution
  - Replica building
  - Socio-dramatic play with props and ideas at the level of personal experience-recreates bedtime ritual
  - Imaginative play- novel combination-pretense beyond personal experience and break with convention on object use, scene or role
  - Pleasure in the finished product

# Attributes of Symbolic Play

- Object substitution
- Pretense
- Socio-dramatic quality
- Roles and rules

# Play Themes

- Sensory pleasure and tension reduction
- Getting and taking in
- Alertness and “ableness”
- Resolution of ambivalence
- Mastery and autonomy
- Reality and fantasy
- Consolidation of sexual identity and social roles
- Experimentation, problem solving, trying on new possibilities – an “intermediate space”



# Social Continuum of play

- Solitary
- Onlooker
- Parallel
- Associative
- Cooperative

(Parten, 1932)

# PLAY IMPERILED

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# Continuum of Play Activities from Open-ended to Structured

- Spontaneous.....Planned
- Varied AFFECT range.....Static Affect
- Affect practice.....Staying “Safe”
- Varied Play Themes.....Repetition of Themes
- Range of players.....Favored Players
- Sensory Variation.....Sensory “Safe”
- Real Life.....Lacking Relevance
- Child directed.....Adult Directed



# Play Imperiled

- Traditional play materials (toys & books) vs. play with electronic devices
  - Fewer words
  - Fewer circles of communication (conversational turn taking)
  - Fewer parental responses
  - Fewer content-specific words produced
  - Less child vocalization overall
  - Play with electronic devices is associated with decreased quantity and quality of language input

(Westby, 2018)

# Play-Based versus Didactic-Centered Classrooms

- Children in didactic centered classrooms had better early reading skills.....BUT
  - Rated their abilities significantly lower
  - Had lower expectations for academic success
  - More dependent on adult approval
  - Less self-initiative
  - Less pride in accomplishment
  - More worry about school

(Westby, 2018)

# Impact of Play Deficits

- Physical harm
  - Twenty nine percent increase in childhood obesity in neighborhoods without a park
- Intellectual harm
  - Decreased creativity, curiosity, social skills resilience and developmentally appropriate risk-taking
- Social harm
  - Compromised capacity for sharing, negotiating, resolving conflict self-advocating and increased problems with social integration
- Emotional harm
  - Schools without recess face increased incidences of behavioral problems

(Westby, 2018)



# HOW PLAY PROMOTES SELF-REGULATION

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# Homeostasis: Foundation for Regulation Construct

- The *construct of regulation* has roots in the concept of *homeostasis* which describes the *self-correcting tendency of the body to maintain a relative constancy or biological equilibrium among a range of functions* even in the face of *changing external and internal forces*.
- While the *homeostasis research focused on physiological functions such as heart rate, temperature, blood sugar and acid-balance* the concept of homeostasis has been extended to *systems such as emotion, cognition and sensation, recognizing the functional similarities between behavioral*.

(Cannon, 1932)

# Regulation

- The child's developing capacity to flexibly modulate and grade reactivity to sensation, affect arousal and behavior with relative autonomy in support of goal-directed actions across a broad range of functions.

(Carver & Scheier, 2016; Foley, 2017; Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos, & Hamoudi, 2015)



# Contributions to Self-Regulation

## Symbolization

- Symbols bind anxiety and mediate between a felt need and behavior
- Symbols are signs charged with meaning that stand or suggest something else
- Symbolic Play is characterized by:
  - Pretense
  - Object substitution
  - Socio-dramatic action
  - Roles & Rules

(Foley, 2017; Wieder, 2017)

# Contributions to Self-Regulation

## Parenting

- Attachment
- External regulation- co-regulation-self-regulation
- Internal working model

# Regulatory Functions of Play

- Private speech-self-talk
- Pretense imposes control over external stimuli exerting regulated intent over physical/descriptive reality
- Play as regulatory practice
- Novelty and investigation
- Roles and rules

(Bodrova, Germuroth, & Leong, 2013; Foley, 2017; Vygotsky, 1967)



- Play Constrictions

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# Limitations in Play

- Repetition-preoccupation
- Blunted-little affect or expression
- Constricted-narrow range of interest, experimentation or curiosity
- Delayed-play skills discrepant from chronological expectations
- Derailed-odd or outside the typical and expected developmental patterns of play

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# Contributions to Play Limitations

- Intellectual disability
- Neuromotor disorders
- Lack of experience/deprivation
- Sensory/individual profile themes
- Visual-spatial problems
- Tone, posture, planning
- Trauma and emotional conflicts
- Attentional problems



- Roles in Supporting Play

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# Caregiver Roles

- Set designer
- Expander/challenger
- Narrator
- Reflector
- Clarifier
- Interpreter

- Expanding Play

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# Expanding Play

- Positioning-OT/PT consult to classroom
- Attributes of objects-too light, too fuzzy, too small, too complex, adapt materials, etc.
- Expectations too high-backing down, simplify e.g. water demands nothing from the child
- Attributes of the play environment-too busy, too noisy, too close, too many toys- too many choices
- Level of structure-open ended, task analyzed, sequenced
- Language loading-comprehension

# Expanding the Play

- Introduce child to new experiences and play objects-graded exposure
- Model-touch, demonstrate, say
- Provide social and experiential referents-trip to the firehouse, farm, store
- Add novelty, surprise, anticipation-jack-in-the box
- Use affect
- Use self-put object on head, in mouth
- Follow the child's lead
- Join the child

Gilbert Foley 2014

# Expanding the Play

- Challenge-playful obstruction, playing dumb, playful errors
- Attend to level of arousal –activate, calm, organize, corral, sensory diet
- Elaborate-add a new step, redirect, point out features
- Involve peers-mediate interaction, allow for onlooker learning



- Discovering Meaning In Play

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# Finding Meaning in Play and Talking Effectively to Children: Interpretation

“Infer from the selective attractions and aversions created by a standard environment

- Affect-emotional interest in and withdrawal from objects
- Ideation-verbalized content, acted out themes
- Repetition-recurring themes and in what sequence
- Dramatization by interlay of body parts and organ systems
- Arrangements of small objects in such a way that their organization signifies a configuration of conflicting forces in the child’s life (microsphere)
- “The microsphere of toys can seduce the child into an unguarded expression of dangerous wishes and themes that then arouse anxiety and lead to-most revealing –sudden play disruption, the counterpart in waking life of the anxiety dream.” (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 50)

# Finding Meaning in Play

- Therapist's impressions, associations and reflections



- Interpretation

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# Interpretation

“ My father once remarked on the philosopher (Kant) who said that the man who first hurled a word of abuse (instead of a spear) at his enemy was the founder of civilization. That is really what analysts are aiming to do in getting patients to verbalize”

- Anna Freud

# Interpretation

- An interpretation is a verbal intervention which is intended to direct the patient's attention or consciousness in a particular way, usually toward or away from conflictual ideation.
- Interpret from the defense to the dynamic
- Interpretation of defense
  - “Every time I talk about your visits to see your Mother, you cover your ears”
  - “You didn't like what I said today and you may say inside, I don't want to go there and play again or I would rather go outside with my friends to play, but I will be here waiting for you.”



# Interpretation

## Interpretation of content or dynamics

- “Your worry about the shark in the toilet might really have something to do with your fear that daddy’s anger might hurt you or mommy”
- Narration-putting into words
- Transforming direct expression of impulses into expression through thought or fantasy so that the child can exercise increasing insight or control.

# Interpretation

- Interpretation of the transference
  - “You **wish** I could be there to help you get dressed and lend you an umbrella.”
- Clarifications
  - With children, the task is often to correct the faulty reality which had been registered earlier due to the child’s immature perceptual and cognitive capacities
  - “Your Dad was very sick. He died because he was sick and couldn’t get better not because someone hurt him or had bad thoughts about him”

# Interpretation

- Observations
  - “You are not interested in the blocks today and your thoughts seem to some where else.”
- Connective statements
  - “Maybe you don’t want to talk about your worries here because they remind you of worries at home”



- Factors in Play Therapy that Promote Healing

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- “Awaken the urge to complete development”
- Education in the broadest sense
- Being fully present-intersubjectivity
- Being uniquely understood
- Experience a New Object
- Afford the opportunity for a “corrective emotional experience”

- Reflective function
- Containment
- Holding
- Narcissistic grandiosity/titrated frustration

“One of the great paradoxes about omnipotence is that we need to feel it early in life, and lose it early in life, in order to achieve a healthy, realistic yet exciting sense of potency later on.”

-Fred Rogers



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Sensory Integration and Self-Regulation: Sensory Contributions to Young Children's Social-Emotional Development

*Monday, November 26, 2018*

Foundations of Social-Emotional Development in Infants and Toddlers E-Learning Modules

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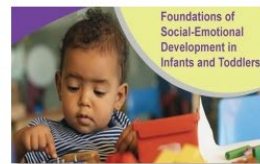


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