

Building a Play Research Agenda: What Do We Know About Play? What New Questions Do We Need to Ask?

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

"There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that high-quality pretend play is an important facilitator of perspective taking and later abstract thought, that it may facilitate higher-level cognition, and that there are clear links between pretend play and social and linguistic competence. . . . There is still a great need for research on the relationship between high-quality pretend play and development of specific academic skills."

— From a study by
Professor Doris Bergen,
Miami University of Ohio

Type children's play research into a Google search and get ready to spend the afternoon — and if you're seriously dedicated to the effort, many more afternoons — sorting through the approximately 347,000 results that will pop up. Using Google Scholar narrows it down, but enter *children's play* and you'll still be overwhelmed by the 5,070 entries to explore.

You will quickly notice a couple of trends. There are many play research entries from the United Kingdom, other European countries, Canada, Japan, and Australia. You are likely to find many more "think" pieces on play than rigorous, empirical studies with projectible conclusions. You will see that several sub-topics begin to emerge: research about indoor and outdoor play environments; the link between play and literacy; play as a solution to childhood obesity; and the connection between play and school readiness, to name a few.

What are some of the trends in research about play? How do we assess the state of the knowledge base about play? How do we evaluate the quality of a study we find on the Internet or in an article?

Impact of cognitive emphasis on play research

"Children's later school success appears to have been enhanced by more active, child-

initiated early learning experiences. Their progress may have been slowed by overly academic preschool experiences that introduced formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status."

— From a study by
Professor Rebecca A. Marcon,
University of North Florida

Today's research about children's play exists in the context of deep societal concern about our children's learning and development. Teachers may understand why play is a key contributor to healthy child development, but "the pressure of national and state standards, the focus on early literacy, and the introduction of Head Start academic outcomes and normed tests is leading many early childhood education teachers to change or adapt their positions."³

The new focus is on children's functional skills — most notably, literacy and numeracy — rather than on adaptive processes like creativity and problem solving. This fits into the priorities of flagship federal legislation and programs such as No Child Left Behind and Early Reading First that are shaping the educational experiences of our younger Millennial Generation members.

Many researchers observe that this has inhibited cutting edge research about play. "With a few exceptions, you would

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be hard pressed to find federally-sponsored research on play and its developmental benefits for children coming out of the Department of Education or the National Institute of Health," says Dorothy Justus Sluss, First Vice President of The Association for the Study of Play (TASP) and Associate Dean of the School of Education at the College of William and Mary. "It is difficult for young scholars to build a career studying play because it is not taken seriously. With the current emphasis on reading and math skills, there is diminishing interest among parents, educators, and policy makers in what play can do for young children. Consequently, many talented new researchers are turning to current concerns such as assessment topics."

Trends in the number of studies about play

A quick look at the numbers of studies posted on the Internet and searchable through Google Scholar shows that the pace of scholarship investigating more cognitive- and school-related early childhood topics is increasing rapidly while the rate of study on play is not keeping pace. This analysis gives us a rough and informal measure that can help us understand the trend. Mid-decade, we are already seeing 95% more studies on early literacy than we did during the 1990s, 80% more studies on school readiness, and a virtual explosion of studies investigating No Child Left Behind. By contrast,

the rate of studies we see on children's play is, at best, stable.

Researchers are challenged by lack of resources at all levels, notes Professor Sluss, and it shows in the type of work they are producing. Sample sizes for play studies are often smaller than ideal and frequently do not include a broad mix of children, which brings the projectibility of the findings into question. Studies tend to address descriptive questions (e.g., is there a difference in the ways Anglo-American children and Korean-American children engage in pretend play?) rather than to establish causal connections (e.g., does play with violent themes cause children to become more aggressive?) that are so useful for decision-making and advocacy.

The state of the knowledge base

One can argue that some questions about play are a matter of settled research — for example, the link between play and literacy development. "Credible evidence supports the claim that play can serve literacy in several ways by providing settings that promote literacy activity, skills, and strategies; serving as a language experience that can build connection between oral and written modes of expression; and providing opportunities to teach and learn literacy."⁵ We also know that physical play shows positive correlations with children's health, social development, and learning^{6,7,8} and that play is strongly linked with the development of imagination and creativity.^{9,10,11}

While a comprehensive list of as-yet-unresearched topics would be lengthy and would span a wide range of play-related topics, many recurring questions are focused on how to translate what is known about play into effective practice that generates the outcomes promised by play. We asked several experienced early childhood educators who represent various aspects of the field, including classroom teachers, administrators, and researchers what they view as the most compelling play-related issues about which we need reliable research.

Toward building a play research agenda

"Free and unstructured play is healthy and — in fact — essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones as well as helping them manage stress and become resilient. . . . The most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare children for success come not from extracurricular or academic commitments, but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling and guidance."¹²

—From a review of play research conducted by the American Academy of Pediatrics

The most frequent responses centered on practice issues resulting from requirements imposed by federal legislation and programs. The very specific questions reflect the high stakes teaching environment in which many educators work, and a desire to be confident in what works and doesn't work *before* taking the chance of experimenting in the classroom. Here is a sampling of the questions respondents posed:

■ If children in Reading First classrooms are provided opportunities to play in addition to the 90-minute block of language instruction, will they show increments in language ability and gains on vocabulary compared to children in non-play Reading First classrooms?

Numbers of studies on selected early childhood topics⁴

	Children's Play	No Child Left Behind	School Readiness	Early Literacy
1990s	1,580	Not applicable	1,000	1,290
2001	228	140	310	450
2002	205	440	370	450
2003	286	1,130	382	540
2004	227	1,810	395	601
2005	175	1,705	347	470
TOTAL SINCE 2001	1,121	5,225	1,804	2,511

Given the challenges for teachers presented by changing demographics and the fact that play is an effective tool for supporting language development, what specific communication strategies are used by English language learners during pretend play?

■ Is play different for children from families at different socioeconomic

Is it good research?

- How do we evaluate research about play? What constitutes high quality research that is worthy of being used for decision making? If the answers to these questions, adapted from guidelines developed by the National Association for the Education of Young Children¹⁴ is “yes”, you can expect the research to be useful and reliable.
- Does it pose an important question about play and its benefits that can be investigated empirically?
- Does it make a meaningful contribution to the knowledge base about children’s play?
- Does it use relevant theory and previous research (as seen in detailed references to others’ work) as a base?
- Does it take an independent, balanced, and objective approach to the research?
- Does it use research methods that are well-suited to the specific question that is being investigated?
- Does it give enough information about the methods so that other researchers could reproduce or replicate the study?
- Does it evaluate alternative explanations for the findings?
- Has it been through a peer review process, i.e., has it been reviewed by other knowledgeable researchers?

levels, and do those differences have an impact on what children learn from play? What is the impact of a child’s culture and environment on their ability to engage in productive play?

A second group of responses centered on how we can best incorporate what we know about play into teacher training so early childhood educators can make better use of play in the classroom and show results. Typical questions included:

- We know that kids learn social skills through play. What is the evidence that children can learn specific subject-matter content (math, science, social studies, literacy) through play?
- How can teachers better incorporate opportunities to learn subject matter (math, science, social studies, and literacy) in play and how can we document that the learning came from play-based activities? More general issues centered around longer-term consequences of our culture’s move away from free play for kids:
- Is the mental health of adolescents and adults affected if they did not have adequate access to healthy play as young children?
- What are the long-term costs and benefits of eliminating play from our children’s school day? Can the elimination of art, music, and recess in school, for example, be quantified into later economic impacts?

The demand for quality research about the benefits and outcomes children derive from healthy play is alive and well, and perhaps all the more urgent now that early education has become focused on cognitive achievement and measurable outcomes. Playing for Keeps, the national not-for-profit organization

dedicated to better outcomes for children through increasing their access to healthy, constructive play, supports The Association for the Study of Play and other organizations in their efforts to enrich the knowledge base and nurture the careers of emerging scholars. To do this effectively, the field needs increased funding for both large scale national research projects and responsive small scale funding that can increase the quality of studies conducted by promising graduate students as they explore a commitment to the study of play.

Growing the number of new professors and scholars who understand and can communicate the importance of healthy play in early childhood will help educators, administrators, policy makers, and parents make stronger choices about children’s formal and informal educational experiences. Will having the information make a difference for children? Just ask the “former children,” beneficiaries of a strong play-based, child initiated curriculum who participated in the study cited below:

“From 1962-1967, at ages 3 and 4, the subjects were randomly divided into a program group that received a high-quality preschool program based on High/Scope’s participatory learning approach and a comparison group who received no preschool program. The study found that adults at age 40 who had the preschool program had higher earnings, were more likely to hold a job, had committed fewer crimes, and were more likely to have graduated from high school than adults who did not have preschool.”¹³

— From a longitudinal study conducted by the High/Scope Educational Foundation

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