

# Does Play Serve as an Important Developmental Activity for Preparing Young Children for School, or Is It Simply a Sign of Their Early Cognitive Immaturity?

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Play is essential for a child's development, leading many researchers to explore it in-depth and specifically. Being part of play, Vygotsky (1967) emphasised the significance of Sociodramatic play, also called Make-believe play, in fostering higher levels of mental functions in preschoolers (Bodrova & Leong, 2015). In this essay, I will discuss the effectiveness of sociodramatic play in preparing young children for school, based on the play theory of Vygotsky (1967). Beginning with an introduction of the theory, I will then argue how play promotes children's deeper understanding of behaviour norms, which contribute to their school adaptation. The play process develops children's willpower and self-control, aiding them in future academic work completion will also be stated, with criticisms emphasising the ineffectiveness of play in a given situation.

## 2. THE THEORY OF PLAY

According to Vygotsky (1967), as children transition into their preschool years, they still retain the typical sense of urgency in fulfilling the immediate desires observed in very young children, while combining many long-term desires and needs. Specifically, regarding those desires, Leont'ev (1981) explored that preschool children not only desired to interact with objects around them, such as toys, but also aspire to act and behave like adults. Thus, to satisfy these desires, sociodramatic play arises from children's imagination, creating an imaginary situation to form virtual realities, liberating children from the constraints of reality, and enabling them to address needs that may remain unrealised in real life (Vygotsky, 1967). This imaginary situation, known as the "field of meaning", enables children to employ their imagination in crafting desired roles and rules, while also attributing entirely new meanings to ordinary everyday objects and actions, termed as imaginary objects and actions (Veresov et al., 2024, p. 65). Through this process of substituting the original meaning of things with another, children thus utilise and develop their capacity for symbolic representation (Duncan & Tarulli, 2003).

Giving a real-life example, a three-year-old girl, inspired by watching an adult riding a horse, desires to do the same. However, she could not fulfil this wish immediately due to safety concerns and her young age. Instead, she utilised her imagination to create an imaginary situation where she pretended a stick was a horse. Pretending to be the rider, she mimicked actions she had observed others make while riding, implicitly following the behaviour norms of a rider. Consequently, play based on imagination is structured around imaginary situations, roles and rules, as well as play objects and actions (Veresov et al., 2024). Particularly focusing on the rule of play, Vygotsky (1967) noted that once children engage in play, they instinctively adhere to the rules of behaviour associated with the roles they embody, even if this rule is not explicitly stated. Hence, play could not exist independently of rules. With the premise of sociodramatic play's complexity, as Vygotsky (1978) emphasised, it obviously does not include simple activities that merely provide functional pleasure, like sucking a pacifier.

Through continuous investigation of play, Vygotsky (1967) found that play could create a zone of proximal development (ZPD) for preschool children. As explained by Morgan and Skaggs (2016), "the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is defined as the space between what a learner can do without help and where the learner needs significant instruction" (P. 664). This implies that ZPD serves as a space where children engage in their learning process under appropriate support to reach higher levels of achievement. In this context, play functions as the

supportive element, wherein an imaginary situation is created, and children are involved in role-play to immerse themselves in various roles, enact specific behaviours and adopt different perspectives based on the role's identity (Irshad et al., 2021). Within this imaginary situation, children find a safe and familiar space to shift from their own perspective to that of the role they are playing, enabling them to observe the world from different viewpoints. This fosters a more comprehensive understanding of the world and contributes to their cognitive and social development.

Furthermore, Vygotsky (1967) posited that preschool children spontaneously establish intentions or goals during play and strive to achieve them. This process involves exhibiting diverse motivations, considering needing steps, forming plans based on real-life challenges and utilising skills for accomplishment. All these activities involved in the play contribute to development across multiple psychological domains, including cognitive, social and emotional, thereby establishing play as the highest level of development in preschool children (Vygotsky, 1967). Accordingly, Vygotsky (1967) emphasised that "the child moves forward essentially through play activity" (P. 18). In aligning with Leont'ev's (1981) definition of leading activity, "in connection with whose development the most important changes take place in the child's psyche and within which psychic processes develop that pave the way for the child's transition to a new, higher level of development" (P. 369), Vygotsky thus affirms play activity as the leading activity for children during the preschool period.

### **3. PLAY'S ROLE IN PRESCHOOLERS' UNDERSTANDING OF BEHAVIOUR NORMS AND FACILITATING SCHOOL ADAPTATION**

Through sociodramatic play, preschool children participate in role-playing situations, developing a better understanding of various behavioural norms across different roles and situations. Internalising these norms into their cognition through the frequency of sociodramatic play reinforces children's ability to interact flexibly with teachers and students in school. According to Vygotsky (1967), preschool children can take many actions based on external requirements from others, like parents, without fully understanding the meaning of the action. Given that games with imaginary situations are interdependent with rules, he further stated that "what passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play" (Vygotsky, 1967, p.10), highlighting that children would adopt behaviours they are unaware of or do not understand the meaning of in real life, and may also unconsciously observe others' behaviours, using them as rules within their role play.

By analysing Sully's observations of two real sisters engaging in a sociodramatic play where they pretended to be each other's real sisters, Vygotsky (1967) found that the rule within this play involves the need of sisters to recall their real-life actions that display sisterhood, such as holding hands while walking and dressing alike, and replicating them in the game to maintain its continuity. Since sisters unconsciously exhibit sisterly behaviour in their everyday lives (Vygotsky, 1967), obeying the rule of this sociodramatic play derived from these unconscious behaviours allows children to become aware of the norms of behaviour in sisterhood relationships. Furthermore, consider a hypothetical scenario where a boy engages in sociodramatic play, assuming the role of a doctor while his toys pretend to be patients. Drawing from his observations during hospital visits, he imitates doctors' actions to interact with his toys, such as giving an injection to patients during role-playing. By imitating doctors' behaviour in play, he could visualise the behaviour norms associated with the doctors' role. Thus, as children engage in play, assuming different roles and exploring various scenarios, they could develop an understanding of the most appropriate behaviours for different social roles and situations. According to Duncan and Tarulli (2003), through consistent engagement in sociodramatic play, children repeatedly experience and practice behaviour norms, reinforcing and deepening their understanding, gradually internalising those norms from the awareness level supported by the play into their cognition.

With this, based on Vygotsky's (1967) explanation, once children grasp the meaning behind the behaviour, they will think before they act to make the most appropriate behaviour. As preschoolers frequently immerse themselves in a wide range of play scenarios while taking on various social roles, they internalise numerous behaviour rules into their cognitive framework. Accordingly, children could effectively identify and apply the most appropriate behaviour based on social norms when confronted with in-life situations, demonstrating their heightened social competence. Therefore, within a school environment, children with a higher level of social competence are more likely to follow school rules and heed teachers' instructions, thereby reducing conflict and fostering positive relationships with teachers (Legkauskas & Magelinskaitė-Legkauskienė, 2019). Moreover, Cillessen and Bellmore (2022) claimed that socially competent children in the classroom are adept at recognising their peers' emotions and taking others' perspectives, enabling them to support their classmates effectively. Consequently, these children could adapt to school life more easily.

#### **4. PLAY IN DEVELOPING PRESCHOOLERS' WILLPOWER AND SELF-CONTROL FOR ACADEMIC TASK COMPLETION**

Through sociodramatic play, preschool children learn to delay immediate gratification in favour of long-term and more satisfying rewards, practising their willpower by consistently following rules and deferring immediate desires. In the process of following rules, children develop self-control over their emotions and behaviour. Enhancing these capacities supports children's successful completion of learning tasks. According to Vygotsky (1967), children experience greater and lasting satisfaction in maintaining consistency and interest throughout the overall gaming experience by adhering to the rules of the play, compared to the temporary enjoyment derived from satisfying immediate impulses. With the statement by Spinoza: "An affect can be overcome only by a stronger affect" (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 15), preschool children gradually learn to defer immediate gratification in play for greater long-term enjoyment, fostering their willpower to follow the play rules consistently to derive the maximum satisfaction from fully experiencing the game. In a hypothetical scenario, five preschoolers engaged in sociodramatic play, pretending to shop for candies. One child pretended to be a salesperson while the other four acted as customers. The rule of the play dictates that the customer has to conduct a dialogue with the salesperson to acquire the candies. Instead of immediately grabbing the candies, children build their willpower to restrain their impulses and wait to receive the candies after being successfully involved in the dialogue.

According to Savina (2014), to control their immediate impulses, children start focusing on how to act in accordance with the rules of the game, thus developing their ability to self-control. Preschoolers, as noted by Strobbe (2017), are still at the developmental stage where they tend to react with impulsive emotions immediately when they encounter things they urgently desire. During play, children strive to express emotions in line with the role they are pretending, thereby substituting those impulsive emotions with those appropriate for their role (Ashiabi, 2007) to adhere to the rules. Taking the example of the pretend shopping scenario, children acting as customers have to control their immediate impulsive emotions when they see candy, such as feelings of anxiety or excitement. Instead, they patiently interact with the seller to acquire the candy. This process enhances preschoolers' ability to foster emotional regulation. Similarly, in terms of improving behaviour management skills, children engage in internal self-dialogue to regulate their actions, mentally directing themselves on how to act according to their pretend roles (Lorenzetti & Kruger, 2020). This process exercises their conscious control over their behaviour, thus developing their self-control.

In the context of preparing for schooling, as Compagnoni et al. (2020) stated, preschool children with lower levels of willpower are more likely to give up when faced with challenging tasks. Children strengthen their willpower through sociodramatic play by constantly following rules to endeavour to defer gratification, which will encourage them to insist on academic challenges in learning. Moreover, children with the capacity for behavioural and emotional self-control also contribute to academic task completion. As Kim et al. (2017) claimed, children with high levels of self-control in managing their behaviour could adhere more effectively to their learning schedule, completing established tasks promptly without delay. This enhances their ability to finish academic tasks on time. For children who have acquired emotion regulation skills, they can control disruptive emotions like anxiety when facing learning challenges (Kurki et al., 2014). This helps them stay calm when tackling complex tasks without letting negative emotions affect their completion speed.

#### **5. FAILURES OF SOCIODRAMATIC PLAY IN PROMOTING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

While many studies have affirmed the efficacy of sociodramatic play in developing the higher mental functions of preschool children (Savina, 2014), there are still arguments positing that play demonstrates the child's existing lower level of cognition fails to enhance their mental functioning. According to Bodrova and Leong (2015), in today's sociodramatic play, five to six-year-old children often exhibit their current immature cognition level by portraying non-diverse characters, relying on fixed scenes and using realistic props, reflecting a lower level of play construction. This indicates their existing lower level of cognition, which limits their creativity and imagination in building more diverse in-play scenarios. Since Berk et al. (2006) emphasised that only children who participated in play at an advanced level could develop higher psychological functions, the restricted play scenarios limit their exploration and deeper understanding of social roles and perspectives. This limitation also prevents them from acquiring new social skills, impeding their further cognitive growth and affecting their school readiness.

## 6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, sociodramatic play plays a vital role in the psychological development of preschoolers, fostering an understanding of behaviour norms and facilitating their adjustment to school life. Moreover, through play, children also cultivate essential skills of willpower and self-control, enhancing their capacity to manage behaviour and emotions, thus aiding them in academic success. However, critics argue that children who could construct play at a lower level using their existing immature cognitive level may struggle to develop more advanced psychological functions. Despite this criticism, sociodramatic play remains widely recognised for its significance in contributing to preschoolers' overall development.

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