

Essay on developmental psychology

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



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Why is play with siblings and peers important for children's development?

The subject of child's play is an ardently discussed topic amongst psychologists, with the focus usually placed upon its involvement with the child's development. Whilst most psychologists' opinions will differ on the various influences that play holds, there are recurrent themes which suggest that the child's sex and personality (including the extent of their imagination) are big factors in how influential play is, as well as other factors such as the child's choice of toys and their parental influence. The parental role is generally seen as being a "culturally, socially and historically specific set of expectations" (Lamb et al. 14) which suggests that the parents do have a crucial role in the child's development, but play helps the child to develop independent exploratory skills that help them to understand the world. When children play with their siblings or peers, it is referred to as a reciprocal process: "the function of these reciprocal interactions is to acquire skills that can only be learned among equals" (Littleton & Miell 96) – these are skills such as social and cultural norms. For example, a child will learn a sense of how to 'fit in' from his peers whereas his parents and teachers provide a stronger sense of what is conventional in society as a whole. The purpose of this essay is to explore the various different types of play which children engage in, and the importance of interaction with peers and siblings, with regard to the influence it has on their development.

It goes without saying that a substantial part of any child's development is the influential interactions that he encounters through his home and school

life. Our dependency on our caregivers is part of what distinguishes human beings from other animals (Lamb et al. 17). The first influence in a child's life is his parents: they guide and support him through the earliest years of his childhood and continue to encourage him throughout his development: "From most psychological perspectives, parents are seen as the primary agents who constrain, organize and structure their children's experiences and personalities." (Lamb et al. 15). However, as the child reaches school-attending age, he begins to draw influences from his teachers and peers. Teachers and parents play their own role within the child's development: "In some interactions the individuals have differing knowledge and social power... Such interactions are characterized by the complementarity of roles." (Littleton & Miell 96). This means that in these types of interaction, the child is learning from someone with a greater knowledge and social understanding. For example, when at school, the child is likely to learn key social skills that will aid his development into adulthood - skills such as: patience, turn-taking, manners and sharing. This is largely due to the adult supervision still though and when among peers and their siblings, the child interacts on an equal level which allows him to learn socializing skills that his parents and teachers may not actively encourage including the beginnings of a sense of humour.

For many children, interaction with other children (whether they are the same age or older) revolves around the idea of imitation. This can take the form of facial and vocal expressions and infants are cognitively equipped to do this from as young as 14 to 16 months old. (Charlesworth 264). This more frequently happens with younger children imitating their older peers as the

younger usually respects the elder. Some have voiced concerns about the child's ability to imitate older children who may be vastly more advanced and whose behaviour or play may not be entirely appropriate for the younger child. For example, play and games that involve simulated violence including guns, war and fighting; however, Jeffrey Goldstein argues that he is "more concerned about the millions of children who have no toys... but who do have available real guns and who are stimulated to imitation by older peers and by the heavy doses of daily exposure to realistic violence on television." (Goldstein 24-25). By this, he means that in some instances, the interaction with older peers or siblings can have a negative effect and cause the child to develop into an individual who is desensitized to violence and aggression. The implication here is that imitation can lead to a warped development for the child: if his influences are bad ones, the child can develop abnormally. However, for the most part, the acting out of childish violence is a normal part of growing up – particularly for boys – and whilst it should not be encouraged, neither should it be discouraged as most children will grow out of it as they age.

Oates et al. discuss this further under the heading of 'disturbing and disturbed behaviour.' They clarify this term by detailing its two potential meanings: "One reading suggests a compassionate view, that of the child as a victim whose behaviour is the product of external forces; perhaps inadequate or abusive parenting." (Oates et al. 58). They add that the term is deliberately ambiguous to enable it to cover a multitude of problems. Invariably, this sort of behaviour can begin to be more prominent as the child begins to play with his peers or siblings. Whilst most parents will view their

child as being completely angelic and flawless initially, the child's peers will quickly detect if he makes them feel uncomfortable or worried. It is argued that the role of the Mother has a significant part to play in the child's development and the potential for the child to develop disturbing behaviour: the child must learn to be less dependent on his mother and that in cases where the mother displays "unnatural perturbations" (i. e. when they show an impassive reaction to the child) then the child becomes frustrated, confused and sometimes aggressive (Oates et al. 71). An on-going case of this can cause the child to become insecure and aggressive in the face of a lack of attention which will often cause problems during play and interaction with his peers.

Many psychologists discuss how much or how little the parents should be involved with the child's playing but in the instance of allowing the child to be exposed to graphic materials, it is the parents who are at fault. Whilst the parent's role is as a protector and carer, it is widely considered that an important aspect of parenting is to allow the child to experience his own frustrations so as to learn how to overcome them (Lamb et al. 25) and play can provide opportunities for just that. Often, play with older children (such as a sibling) can aid this development. It is the slightness of the gap in age between two siblings which can cause them to be so highly influential: "on the one hand the older child can act as a teacher, guide and model to the younger; on the other hand, however, both children share interest and competence to a sufficient degree to tackle jointly the task of social understanding." (Littleton & Miell 97). In the correct environmental setting, two siblings can play on the same level whilst still learning from one another

- games such as simulating families or any aspect of adult life, is the child exploration of their perceptions of adults and adulthood. Child psychologist, Peter Slade discusses the importance of what he terms as ‘ personal play’, which is where the child acts out the role for himself, rather than playing vicariously through a dolly or a toy. Slade claims that play can help with “ balancing the personality” (Slade 3) and this view is echoed by Goldstein who states that “ repeated social fantasy typified by reciprocal interaction with a familiar playmate, such as a sibling ... facilitates social cognition.” (Goldstein 40). This clearly states the importance of child’s play as being a vitally important element of the child’s development – intensified by their playmates for being peers rather than adults: both children bringing their own perceptions of the world, to the table.

A vital difference between child and adult interaction and that between child and peer, is that when a group of children are playing, they all have their own “ aspirations, motives and intentions” (Littleton & Miell 98). This means that, often, a conflict can arise out of children’s play as a result of the pressure placed on a child to quickly adjust to social expectations. As the child’s development continues, their ability to play in a social situation is a pressure felt by them to develop further. The immaturity of children can often cause frustration and anger to be taken out on what they perceive as the cause of their distress. However, this still presents play and interaction with peers and siblings as being an important aspect of a child’s development as “ It is a fact of life that conflict exists and a child learns all things through play.” (Goldstein 71). In this respect, the child must learn how to deal with conflict and invariably, he does so through the medium of play.

The importance of the effect of playing with peers and siblings on a child's development is palpable: through play, the child develops social skills, imitations, aspirations and conflict-resolving skills too. Although simply playing is not enough to encourage the development of these skills – the environment must be supportive and appropriate to the child's stage of development. For example, the regular exposure to violent and graphic images will warp the child's development and cause him to become more aggressive and desensitized, whereas a child who plays simple games with other children (even games such as 'Cops and Robbers' which can involve the imaginary use of guns) learns how to interact harmoniously with others. This is a vital life skill which, without it, we would be fundamentally unable to socialize, form relationships and ultimately procreate. Social activity is a crucial part of a happy, stable life as it enables us to feel secure and supported; play is the first time when we encounter this and therefore, it is massively important to the healthy development of a child.

References

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