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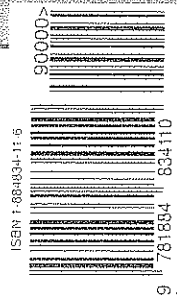
—Sara Smilansky
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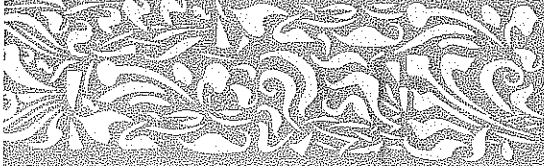
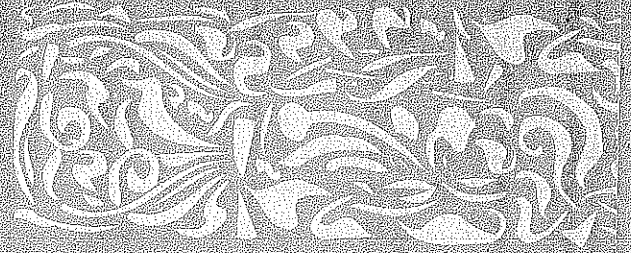
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CHAPTER 7

The Importance of Play in Human Development: A Head Start Training Model

Ingrid H. Chalufour and Walter F. Drew

Play is the self-active representation of the inner life from inner impulse and necessity. The child who is absorbing from his environment materials with which he is building his own world clarifies and orders his own experience through its constant expression in play (Froebel, 1904).

The process of self-active play is rooted in the belief that each of us, adults as well as children, has a developmental need to experience our own creativity through self-expression. It is through physical action that we find that expression and come to value and develop it. Through this process, each player acquires a sense of control over concrete objects as well as his or her own situation. A deep sense of empowerment and satisfaction can result from being truly focused on one simple task or experience.

Adult self-active play is a powerful vehicle for expanding understanding of the learning process. When provided with a carefully structured setting, open-ended materials, and a sensitive coach, parents and teachers can have play experiences that may change their approaches to the education of young children.

In workshops we have conducted for adults, we have often observed that when people focus on the play materials at hand, they relax and begin to represent various patterns and forms. They express their creativity spontaneously and feel positive about both the experience and themselves. In the same ways that children engage in the reverie of play, adults can rediscover the joy and importance of their own play and creativity.

SELF-ACTIVE PLAY: A WORKSHOP

The Play Experience

Melanie, a Head Start parent, is attending her first New England Head Start Association conference with self-consciousness and trepidation. A bit reluctantly, she is attending a workshop, “The Importance of Play in Human Development.” There has been a lot of talk at Head Start about whether or not children should play in school. The director has suggested Melanie attend this workshop and report to the parents what she learns. She is somewhat convinced that play does not belong in school, and she is not looking forward to hearing someone talk about it for 2 hours.

As Melanie enters the room, she is first aware of the other people, whom she does not know, and of soft piano music playing in the background. There are no chairs or tables, but piles of materials are scattered about the floor. Some of the piles contain materials that are familiar to her, like blocks. There is some sand and some earth clay like that she has seen used in a Head Start classroom. Other materials are not as familiar: heaps of colored pieces of foam, each different—blue rectangles, pink circles, long yellow strips; smaller piles consisting of hundreds of buttons; skeins of yarn; and a supply of one-inch squares of cardboard. Each set of materials is distinct. There are no tools with which to work, such as scissors, staplers, or glue.

The workshop coach, Dr. Walter Drew, introduces himself. He asks each participant to choose a set of materials and find a comfortable place to play. “Please spread out. Be sure there is plenty of room for you to play; allow space between you and the people around you. There is nothing in particular you need to do with the materials—there is no product or goal to achieve other than simply fiddling. For the next 20 minutes or so, just relax and explore the materials. During this time, please refrain from talking; just be with yourself. No sharing materials; just use the ones you have chosen. The idea here is to reduce distractions, to be available to inspiration, to connect with your creativity through play. There will be no evaluation, no judgment. The idea is simply to relax and enjoy yourself. I’m going to put on some soft music, and I will let you know 5 minutes before it is time to stop.”

Melanie, still a bit apprehensive, wanders around the room with the others, looking for something familiar, something with which she will know what to do. She is the last to choose and takes one of the three sets remaining, a pile of hundreds of black and white felt circles about a half-inch in diameter. She begins to move the circles around. The room is quiet and the music sets a peaceful tone. She tries one arrangement, then another, exploring new ways of putting the materials together. Her focus shifts from her discomfort to the materials and then from her activity with the materials to a variety of her own thoughts and feelings.

“You have about 5 more minutes to play,” Walter announces. It seems to Melanie that no time has passed, yet in only 20 minutes, she has moved from feelings of

insecurity and fear to a sense of comfort and confidence. She feels safe, appreciating the absence of judgment. She realizes that she is no longer resistant and unsure of herself. She is surprised that she is able to play and is actually enjoying the experience, and feels a desire to share this new knowledge with others, especially her children.

“If you are finished, please stop here,” says Walter. “If you need more time, feel free to continue. Sit for a moment and observe what you did. Notice the detail, the patterns. Relax and observe carefully. Reflect on your experience. Remember where you started. Visualize yourself as you played with the material. How did you feel?”

A few moments pass, and Walter says, “At this point I’d like to ask you to take a moment and share with one other person. Take turns, one person talking and the other just listening. This is different from regular conversation; there is no verbal exchange. The listener remains silent, present, and attentive but does not interrupt while the partner is talking. This allows each of you to express yourself without distraction, to remain in the flow of thought or inspiration. The listener accepts whatever is said as the partner’s experience. There is no judgment, no evaluation. As listeners, just be present and accept.”

“When it is your turn to talk, begin anywhere; start with whatever comes to mind and flow with it. In 4 or 5 minutes, I’ll call ‘time,’ and you switch roles so that each person has a turn talking and a turn listening.”

Reflection

A man who had been playing with colored blocks near Melanie suggests that they share. He tells his story first. “I just started putting shapes together. I thought it would look like a castle—the backyard, a bridge, stepping stones. This is a door. I walked the people in.”

“This is interesting. . . . There was no one telling me that they were expecting me to do this and expecting me to do that. It was strange to set my own limits, make my own decisions. I started to create something that I didn’t even know I was creating.”

Melanie shares her experience: her initial feelings of discomfort, the way the materials drew her into a private world, and the full range of emotions she has had. She realizes, as she explains it to him, that she is beginning to have a new understanding of play.

Walter asks if the participants have something they want to share with the whole group about their experience. People take turns describing their constructions. Melanie walks around the room with the others, viewing what other players have done with their materials. Each construction, like each play experience, is different; each has led to personal insights. One participant explains, “You reflect yourself in your play. I can see myself in my construction. You can’t escape it.”

Some players are frustrated with their materials; they think they didn’t have enough pieces, or they weren’t able to do what they envisioned. “The foam didn’t

interlock well together. It frustrated me on the corners. I wanted it to be in different shapes so that I could make the castle or the square work.”

For others, frustration turned into creative problem solving. “Well, at first I was inhibited, you know, it’s like I don’t have any scissors, so I can’t do anything. . . . But then as I relaxed and got into just playing with the pieces, I found other ways to do what I wanted without using the scissors.”

Several participants found that the experience brought momentary peace of mind. “When I saw these columns here, I started out making the castle. When the music came on and I couldn’t work on the castle—I started making boats. I built some boats, and I needed a pier. I listened to the music, and I felt really calm because I grew up on the seacoast, and when anything bothered me I’d go down and watch the boats. There’s a lot going on in my life right now, yet I felt so calm.”

Other individuals felt pain: “I am trying to find answers. I don’t know if my questions about my life are hard ones or even have answers. This workshop brings out feelings in me. I realize that I missed out on a lot as a child. I feel the child in me is dead, or at least really lost. As a mother, this is really hard. My children want me to play, and I can’t. I want to, but I was never able to be a child, so I don’t know how.”

Some people were reminded of pleasant childhood experiences. “My grandfather was a woodworker and a carver and he had boxes of odds and ends, and we would just sit there and play. My grandparents didn’t have a television. So in order to amuse ourselves, we had to use our imagination. And we just built whatever our imagination struck on. My grandmother and grandfather would tell us a story that went with it and encourage us to build. They never once said ‘Oh, that’s ugly,’ or ‘What’s the purpose of that?’”

Melanie is impressed with the other participants’ insights. They validate her own experience and at the same time broaden her perspective: Play is not necessarily fun; it can bring up past painful experiences, cause frustration, or lead to unpleasant insights. But play can often be very enlightening.

Melanie decides to share her experience.

At first I didn’t want to do this. But then, as I got started, I made my initials, little circles, squares, rectangles, and then a little tiny house. All of my inner feelings started coming out. At first it didn’t mean anything; then it focused on certain things in my life. I thought about my kids, and how I want to protect them as well as myself—because you put your inner feelings on the back burner and deal with your children’s feelings instead. Then, when you come to something like this, you look at yourself and you have to deal with those feelings. You realize that regardless of what comes or goes, you have to take a moment for yourself. Inner feelings can destroy you as well

as build you up. Even though you have feelings, you have to question those feelings and bring them out so you can go on. I’m very organized, and I try not to let my kids know that I am burdened. But you have to take that moment out for yourself. You have to build yourself back up so you can go on. I was listening to you all talking about your kids. You have to take time for your kids, but you also have to take time for yourself so you can go on for them.

Walter responds, “What I heard you say is that we, as adults, need to take time out for ourselves. That is terribly difficult at times, isn’t it? Playing with materials helps us to focus, to take time to sort things out. This type of play can help us to think more effectively and help us to organize and see more clearly what is happening and what our choices may be.”

He has captured the essence of what Melanie said, further validating the experience for her.

THE VALUE OF SELF-ACTIVE PLAY

Self-active play is about focus, control, imagination, and self-expression through objects and nonrepresentational materials. No preconceived assignment or prescribed outcome is intended. Design and meaning are entirely determined by the players. Players are in touch with the individual capacities to create, to represent harmony and order, and to express something important in a way that is deeply satisfying and unique.

The process of self-active play transcends self-imposed limitations because it arises from inspiration and imagination, opening us up to potential new ways of behaving. In effect, people can create new realities through self-active play.

Reflection is an essential part of self-active play. Verbalizing actions, thoughts, and feelings allows players to review the sensory experience, focusing first on the play materials, then gradually connecting with earlier life experiences or thoughts about the world.

Margaret’s reflections demonstrate this process.

The colors attracted me . . . as did the idea of building something. I began to put the pieces out one at a time, building a structure. I wanted to go high. I noticed I needed a strong base to be able to go high. I thought about building something systematic with the same-size pieces at each level, but I did it another way: I put them out according to my feelings about their shape and color. This uneven base then created an unevenness throughout the whole construction. The construction has tilt, a rolling quality . . . sort of like life itself.

Margaret's contemplation of her experience put her in touch with one of her perceptions about the world. Physical play led to the concrete representation of this idea.

For both the speaker and the listeners, understanding of what another has experienced is achieved more easily when there is a physical model or structure to use as a catalyst; it organizes and focuses the mind on elements that are concrete. Richness and clarity come from connecting visual forms of play with reflective dialog.

THE ROLE OF THE COACH

The coach is the key to successful self-active play experiences. The coach is an advocate for creative expression, facilitating each player's process of connecting with imagination and self-expression. The coach's perspective must be that the players have enormous potential and profound creativity and that they are capable of extraordinary productivity and insight.

The coach's work begins with creating the play environment. Plenty of space is needed, with as few distractions as possible. Materials are open-ended—not representing a particular use or product. There must be more sets of materials than there are people; participants should be able to assemble unique sets to eliminate the tendency to compare their work with each other. Soft, soothing music contributes to the atmosphere, setting a tone of peace and relaxation.

When the participants arrive, the coach sets the stage for their play experience. The coach's role is that of a calm, centered, patient, attentive, accepting, and unobtrusive listener/observer. Throughout the experience, the coach maintains a balance among setting limits, observing, listening, and validating.

Limits, such as not talking and not sharing materials, contribute to the feeling of safety that players need in order to connect with their inner creativity. Sound, motion, judgment, criticism, and competition all have the power to counter the liberating aspects of play. Once external limits are set, players are free to explore their own internal processes.

Coaching is built on trust, both in the process and in the individuals involved. The coach encourages, validates, and accepts unconditionally. The intent is to ensure a concrete, creative, and enjoyable experience, and then to encourage reflection in the player by eliciting verbal interpretation of the encounter, referring to the manipulation of the play materials.

SELF-ACTIVE PLAY IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF TEACHERS

Head Start administrators throughout New England are finding that self-active play is one of the most meaningful forms of professional development they have

offered to parents and teachers. When adults experience self-active play with materials and then observe, listen to, and interact with other players, they gain a better understanding of the role of play in children's development. They also gain new insight into their own roles as teachers. The direct experience of their own play serves adult learners as a focal point for deeper understanding of play, and brings new insight and greater skill to their interactions with children.

Our work with Head Start programs began when a group of parents, moved by the insights they had gained during self-active play at a New England Head Start Association conference, asked the association to provide more opportunities for them to play. In response to their request, Ingrid Chalouff, from the New England Head Start Resource Center, and Walter Drew, from the Institute for Self-Active Education, developed a training-of-trainers program. This effort has taken the play experience from the regional conference level to that of local programs.

In the training-of-trainer sessions, education and social service coordinators from New England Head Start programs attend a 3-day training program to learn the skills needed to coach self-active play. During the first day, the adult learners participate in both solitary and small-group play, discovering the value of each. Their reflections on these experiences are used to create a set of assumptions about play and to focus discussion about the relationship between their own play experiences and the play of children.

On the second day, participants prepare to become coaches of play. Using play and reflection, they draw the essential elements for the play materials and the environment from their manipulative activity. Appropriate styles of interaction are discussed. On the final day, participants make specific plans for incorporating adult play into their home programs. To whom will they offer it first? What materials will they use? How will they get the materials? When will they introduce the play experience? Former coach trainees who have assimilated play into their programs join the group for this discussion.

As a result of these training-of-trainer events, self-active play has become a vital part of many Head Start programs in New England. Coordinators, now acting as coaches, use play to inspire the values and practices of coworkers and parents in their programs. The play event and sharing are usually followed by a few simple discussion questions that focus the participants' thinking on the relevance of the workshop to their work with children. These questions help participants to draw new knowledge about classroom practice from their play. In the first processing of the experience, the adult players describe what they did and what it meant to them. In the second process, they reflect on those elements of the experience that they would like to incorporate into their work with children. This approach mirrors the way children learn about the world—that is, by constructing knowledge from experience.

OBSERVING CHANGES IN CLASSROOMS

Coordinator/coaches have found that their play workshops exert a profound effect on the participants. Frequently, teachers will modify their classrooms after self-active play experiences, looking for new materials and ways to display them. They develop a new appreciation for open-ended materials and want to provide their children with a greater quantity and variety of them. Teachers scrounge through closets for old stashes of stuff that can become new play materials for the children. They also make pilgrimages to the few school-based recycling programs in the region, looking for large quantities of industrial by-products, which are ideal materials for self-active play.

Teachers have also changed their way of perceiving time. Having gained a new appreciation for the intense absorption children sometimes experience while playing, teachers are less likely to ask children to abruptly stop in order to move on to circle time or other teacher-directed activities. More than ever, children are being viewed as individuals with unique interests and needs. One coordinator articulated her new perceptions when she said, "I really feel that it has helped our teachers understand the children, the environment, and children's play. I can really see it. I can see it when the teachers play with the children, when they talk to them, when they are setting up an environment, when they are figuring out what materials they want to bring into the room."

Self-active play workshops have also been very useful in helping parents understand what goes on in the classroom and appreciate a play-centered curriculum. Parents become better classroom volunteers, understanding the use of materials, the routines, and how to interact with children in more supportive ways. In addition, parents gain insight into their own use of time with their children. They look on their children's play with new appreciation and can reevaluate their own roles in stimulating play at home. Parents begin to question the amount of television viewing they allow and the kinds of toys they provide. One parent reported that she returned from a workshop and cleaned out her children's closets, throwing away toys that did not encourage creative expression. Her goal, she said, was to provide more open-ended activities for her children.

SELF-ACTIVE PLAY AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Self-active play allows us to be less inhibited and has the potential to reveal deep truths about who we are and what we can do to be at our best for ourselves and our children. We experience the forces of change in a safe way. We can feel the power of our own intention in the patterns, systems, and designs that we create.

Self-active play also offers an opportunity to revisit and reconstruct life experience. We are given the opportunity to move "the pieces" around, creating new organization in our lives. Personal situations, past and present, as well as possibilities for the future, can be spontaneously revealed to us through our play. This is as true for adults as it is for children.

Self-active play is a powerful tool for each of our personal journeys, but it is especially important for those of us whose life work is the education of others. Newly achieved self-awareness can translate into a better understanding of the potential of others. We grow to value the individuals' need for creative expression and empowerment.

Every person, child and adult, has a powerful need to discover, develop, and express creativity. We need to understand who we are and what our particular gifts may be and to find ways of contributing meaningfully to family, community, and society.

SUMMARY: THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ACTIVE PLAY IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

- Self-active play builds self-esteem and a sense of personal power.
- Hands-on, self-directed play at home and in school teaches us to believe in our own inspirations, make decisions, plan, experience control, and express our ideas through creative activity.
- Self-active play builds knowledge of ourselves and social relationships. It provides a safe way to explore different roles and experience other facets of our personalities. New connections are made with inner thoughts and feelings.
- Self-active play builds the foundation for success and personal competence.
- The richer the play experience in terms of different places and situations, people, objects, sights, and sounds, the richer the potential for understanding, association, and self-expression. Fantasy play is important in forming this base of experience.
- Self-active play teaches us to value differences.
- Through play we come to see and value the natural diversity in what other people make, think, say, and feel. These differences are part of the richness of play.
- Self-active play enables us to focus within and develop our powers of concentration.

Play helps us find a focus within the self, which is the source of motivation and self-fulfillment.

- Self-active play develops the spirit of curiosity and the power of self-determination.
- It satisfies the developmental need to follow inspiration and find out about the world through satisfying self-active exploration and discovery rather than through response to others' demands.
- Self-active play is the heart of rejuvenation.
- Play allows us to create a new freshness in our lives. Exploring with recycled materials, blocks, paint, and clay brings renewal in the midst of ordinary life situations. This ability to bring playfulness into the mainstream of our lives touches our hearts, transforming and improving the quality of our lives.

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CHAPTER 8

The Assessment of Dramatic and Sociodramatic Play: Goals, Tools, Criteria, and Conceptual Frameworks

Leah Shefatya

Sociodramatic play, more than any other behavioral manifestation of early childhood, involves the total personality of the child. In the framework of the play, children mobilize cognitive, language, and social skills; they express affect and also often utilize manual-creative skills. As Piaget points out, symbolic play represents assimilation of the child's past experiences. We contend that it also involves ongoing accommodation to the demands and challenges of a constantly changing play situation that is patterned not only by the individual child, but also by other coplayers whose cognitive and play schemata may differ considerably from each other. In the course of play, children are required to adapt to shifts in play roles and themes and to opportunities and limitations of space, time, equipment, and other circumstances of the play setting.

It is only natural, in view of the fluid and multidimensional quality of dramatic and sociodramatic play, as well as of the many-faceted expressions of the child's personality during play, that a variety of approaches can be applied to assessing this type of play. Evaluation tools and strategies are a function of the behavioral dimension and are of great interest to the investigator. Since sociodramatic play involves and mirrors almost all aspects of the child's personality and achievements, there are no limits to the potential criteria for evaluation.

In this chapter, some of the more widespread assessment categories will be described. Emphasis will be on the goals of the evaluations and the theoretical bases from which those goals are derived.

The first and most important differentiation to be made is between approaches that concentrate on evaluating the level of play itself and those that utilize the play setting as a convenient base for assessment of other significant dimensions of child behavior and development (see Table I on page 98). The border between evaluating play proper and other behaviors is not always obvious, as will soon be shown. Our main focus is on the evaluation of sociodramatic play itself; still, a brief review of the utilization of dramatic play for other research and diagnostic purposes will be presented first, both because it is inherently interesting and because it contributes to an understanding of the multifaceted nature of pretend play.