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# Cultural Variations in Parental Support of Children's Play

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## Abstract

The purpose of this reading is to highlight the importance of play for children's development and to examine the role of parents in supporting children's play in various cultures. Although play is believed to be universal, the amount of attention devoted to play in a particular society depends in part on the cultural beliefs about the nature of childhood, and on the adults' specific goals for their young children. Researchers have found that some parents consider themselves appropriate social partners for their young children, but in many communities it is older siblings and peers who are the children's primary play partners. Regardless of their direct involvement in the on-going play activities, parents often provide support and guidance for children's play.

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## Introduction

An elderly Maya woman sits in her chair by the outdoor brick oven, making a large stack of corn tortillas that will soon be cooked for the mid-day meal. She smiles and talks to her visitors, but her hands never stop pressing the tortillas. Around her feet are a number of chickens scratching and pecking at the dirt floor. Occasionally the woman stops, grabs a long stick nearby, and shoos the chickens away. As the woman resumes making tortillas, her oldest daughter begins to set the table, asking the visitors what they would like to drink. The youngest member of the family present is a young girl of about four years of age. She is watching all the preparations but not yet taking an active part in them. Occasionally she shoos the chickens, but she is focused mostly on playing with some kittens and watching the strangers. When asked what toys she likes to play with, the little girl smiles shyly, goes into the house and brings back two treasured items. She hands one of them to me, a pop-up book of animals who live in the rain forest. The other she holds up proudly, a worn looking, blond-haired blue-eyed Barbie. It is the same doll that my daughter plays with, in another country and in an entirely different cultural setting.

One of the most remarkable features of play is that children all over the world engage in various forms of play, whether it be with dolls, balls, homemade materials or with only the child's imagination. Hughes (1999) calls play a "true cultural universal." Regardless of their economic situation, children seem to find both time and materials for play. Schwartzman (1986) described children's abilities to relate their play to their on-going responsibilities for work in the family. In one example, children played tag while watching the family cows, and in another, an 8-year-old continued playing despite carrying her baby sister on her back. In fact, Schwartzman argued that children play even more creatively when they do not have their own private space or ready-made toys. A large number of ethnographies have detailed children's ingenuity in using objects found in their environment (reeds, banana leaves, stones, seeds, teeth, shells, wood, cans, and so forth) and making them into toys that support both imaginative and physical play.

Play can be considered one of the most vital activities for children in all cultures (Bloch & Pelligrini, 1989). Play is believed to serve many important functions for children's development, including cognitive skills (e.g., symbolism and language use, problem-solving, role-playing, creativity) and social advances (e.g., friendships, social competence, emotional maturity). There are numerous theories and research examining each of these areas of play. For the purposes of this reading, only a brief overview of the relevant sociocultural theories will be presented.

## Sociocultural Theories Related to Play

The Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky (1967, 1978, 1990) proposed that play was one of the most important sources of learning for young children, and that learning occurs primarily through observations and interactions with highly skilled members of the culture. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) to explain the differences between the child's independent performance or actual developmental level,

and their potential development when supported by a more skilled partner. Playing with a more sophisticated partner such as an adult, or an older child, will enhance the child's skills and encourage more complex play (Howes & Unger, 1989). Thus, play in the Vygotskian perspective encourages children to be imaginative, to try new roles, and to broaden their own ZPD as they play with different people.

Elaborating on this theory, Rogoff (1990) described a process of guided participation, in which children participate in loosely or formally structured on-going routines and activities guided by other, more competent, members of the culture. Through intersubjectivity, or a shared focus of attention, both the child and the adult or other "expert" have a shared interest and sense of purpose in the task at hand (Rogoff, 1990). In order to help the child develop more advanced skills and to reach an eventual goal of independence, parents and others provide guidance and support to encourage and ensure the child's skill development. Providing enough help and support so that the child will not fail at the task, yet not so much that the child will not be challenged, has been termed **scaffolding** (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Thus children learn through their social interactions with more competent members of the culture, who provide guidance or scaffolding in various culturally relevant activities. In many cultures, parents or older siblings scaffold children's play, guiding them to learn more about some aspect of the play (e.g., the concept of turn-taking) or the world at large (e.g., using money to buy goods).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model also emphasizes the importance of children's environments and their interactions with various members of the culture. Bronfenbrenner proposed that every child grows up in the midst of a large number of social systems that interact in important ways. Those systems include the "microsystem," or the child's direct interactions with family and other caregivers, with teachers and peers in school, with peers in the village, or whatever groups apply to the child's cultural context. Whether or not the family and teachers support and encourage play, and the availability of opportunities to play with other children, have a direct effect on the child's development.

At the next level in his ecological model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) asserted the importance of the interactions of the various microsystems (e.g., the links between home and school). He called this the "mesosystem." Suppose a child's teachers believed that free play in the classroom was the most important activity for young children's learning, but the parents did not. In this case there would be a significant imbalance in the goals for that child across the mesosystem of home and school. Economic factors play an important role in this example, since wealthier parents are more likely to favor academic pursuits over free play, whereas parents with less money may focus on the child's role as a worker (Garborino, 1989).

At the next level in the ecological model, there is the "exosystem," or any setting which affects the child indirectly rather than directly. For example, policies in the parents' workplace, or municipal plans, may have an impact on the child's development even though he or she is not directly in contact with these systems. The town may decide to build new parks and playgrounds, giving the children space and equipment with which to play. The company may decide to enact more "family-friendly" work policies, changing the parents' schedules or perhaps enabling them to work from home. In both cases, decisions

will have an impact on the child's experiences, although the child was never directly involved in these systems.

Finally, the "macrosystem" is the broadest level of influence, comprising the cultural values and societal ideologies. In terms of the cultural importance of play, each society may have definitive views about whether children should be protected from adult work or be part of it, and whether or not they should have "a protected social space to play" (Garbarino, 1989). In agrarian societies, for example, where children may have many responsibilities for the family's land and crops, and also be a student, there may be little time or adult interest in supporting play and games. By contrast, cultures where the parents work outside the home and do not involve the children in their economic life may be more likely to provide support (direct or indirect) for children's play throughout early and middle childhood (Rogoff, Mistry, Goncu & Mosier, 1993). Thus, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides an important framework for considering play as part of a child's development in the midst of various social systems, with the family occupying a central role.

### **Cultural Variations in Parental Roles in Play**

Children's play often occurs in the midst of on-going adult activities, as in the scenario in the Maya village described at the beginning of the paper. The young girl plays and also watches as the older women prepare the food. Eventually, she will be expected to take a larger role in the daily household activities, such as helping her grandmother cook or helping her aunt weave a hammock. For now, the adults support her with ample time and space to play. In fact, they watch her play fondly, though they do not play with her. As noted above, the amount of time children can devote to playing is determined in part by the cultural values of childhood. In some cultures emphasis is placed on the acquisition of the skills that contribute to the economic gain of the family as children perform daily chores and other family responsibilities such as child care. In other communities, such as many middle class families in the United States, children have few responsibilities other than play and school throughout much of their childhood.

Based on their study of children's play in six cultures, Beatrice and John Whiting (1975) concluded that children in more complex cultures play more and with more complexity. They also showed that within the most complex groups, there was more play in the children who had greater freedom to roam about the community and play with whomever they chose (Sutton-Smith & Roberts, 1981). Sutton-Smith and Roberts (1981) referred to this phenomenon as "cultural leeway," suggesting that freedom to explore the environment is an important component in understanding the role of cultural support for children's play. Implicit in the definition of "cultural leeway" is the parental support for the time and the freedom for children's play. Indeed, Sutton-Smith (1974) has argued that the critical variable in determining the amount of parental support for the role of play in children's lives hinges on the need to involve them in the economic survival of the family. In societies where children must work to help support the family from an early age, there is

less observation of play than in societies where children are less tied to the economic well-being of the family.

Adult beliefs about play have been shown to influence how likely parents are to become involved in children's play. When mothers did not consider themselves appropriate play partners for their children, for example East Indian, Guatemalan (Goncu & Mosier, 1991, April), Mayan (Gaskins, 1996) and Mexican mothers (Farver, 1993), they were much less involved and engaged in playing with their children than American and Turkish mothers, who considered play culturally appropriate behavior (Farver & Wimbarti, 1995; Goncu & Mosier, 1991; Haight, Parke, & Black, 1997).

Interesting research by Farver and her colleagues (e.g., Farver, 1993, Farver & Wimbarti, 1995) emphasizes the importance of considering the role of older siblings in guiding children's play in many cultures. Farver (1993) found that in Mexican families, the older siblings' guidance of play and tendency to involve their younger siblings in complex pretend play was very similar to the way American mothers behaved with their young children. This was in contrast to sibling play in the United States, which tended to be more discordant (Farver, 1993). In Mexico, older siblings are much more likely to be younger children's play partners, and there is a highly nurturing relationship between the older and younger siblings.

Similarly, Farver and Wimbarti (1995) reported that in Indonesia, parents respond to their young infants' needs until they become mobile, at which point older siblings take a more active role, and adults are no longer play partners for their children. In their study of Indonesian mothers' and siblings' play with young children, Farver and Wimbarti (1995) found that the children's object play and cooperative social pretend play followed trends similar to those of Western children. Older siblings tended to scaffold and encourage younger children's play whereas Indonesian mothers used more directives and corrections of children's behavior.

When adults do become involved in children's play, how they interact with the child seems to vary in part due to socialization values and goals (Haight, Wang, Fung, Williams & Mintz, 1999). For example, European-American mothers emphasize independence and self-expression whereas Chinese caregivers are more interested in social harmony and respect for rules (Haight et al., 1999). Haight et al. (1999) found corresponding differences in the children's play, in that the Chinese children had more social play and that Chinese caregivers' initiations of play were often focused on practicing proper conduct. Irish-American children had longer periods of solo pretend play alternating with social pretending with peers. Similarly, Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, Cyphers, Toda, and Ogino (1992) found that Japanese mothers focused more on social interactions and communication in play with their toddlers, whereas American mothers tended to use play as a context for teaching world-knowledge.

In a study examining the sociocultural context of pretending at home in a small sample of middle-class American families, Haight and Miller (1993) found that the mothers (the primary caregivers) were highly engaged in their young children's pretending. When the children were infants, mothers introduced the notion of pretend play, but as the children grew older pretend play became a joint activity. Mothers incorporated their

children's pretending into the daily routines of laundry and cooking. Haight and Miller (1993) found that mothers were children's primary play partners until 36 months, and that these young children actually preferred their mothers as play partners to their older siblings. After about 3 years of age, however, mothers arranged more play dates with friends and were less likely to play themselves.

In a study of parent play with older, preschool-aged children, Vandermaas-Peeler, King, Clayton, Holt, Kurtz, Maestri, Morris and Woody (2001) found that both parents and children were highly engaged in play, mostly pretending, during observations conducted in both home and laboratory settings. Of the various types of scaffolding employed by parents during play, including teaching the child, commenting on play, making suggestions, or directing the on-going activities (Farver, 1993), teaching was by far the most common. Parents frequently used the context of play to teach their children conceptual knowledge (e.g., "this is how the doctor takes your blood pressure" when playing doctor), as well as the use of objects in the real world (e.g., "this is a credit card machine" when playing store). Vandermaas-Peeler et al. (2001) found considerable variability in parents' abilities to integrate teaching smoothly into the on-going play, with some parents able to maintain both high rates of play and high amounts of teaching, and others completely halting the play in order to focus on instruction. Thus, when teaching is the parents' goal, some parents may be more successful than others at using play as a medium of enhancing their child's learning about the world.

Bornstein and his colleagues (Bornstein, 1989; O'Reilly & Bornstein, 1993) have suggested that parents can assume a variety of roles during joint play with their children, some more social and others more didactic. Social behaviors include turn-taking and emotional expressions, whereas didactic interactions include direct teaching and providing information to the child (O'Reilly & Bornstein, 1993). Research reviewed by Bornstein and Tamis-LeMonda (1989) suggests that when social and didactic modes can be successfully integrated in parent-child play, there can be long lasting social and cognitive benefits for the child.

In a review of the literature on caregiver-child interactions during play, O'Reilly and Bornstein (1993) affirmed the central role of parents in developing their child's cognitive abilities through warm, supportive interactions in various types of instruction. In the context of play, children are receptive to parental suggestions, and they play in a more sophisticated manner when their caregivers join them (O'Reilly & Bornstein, 1993). As the specific nature of parental goals differs across cultures, so does the parents' particular emphasis during play interactions with their child. However, it seems to be true universally that parental support, whether it be direct or indirect, enhances the quality of a child's play experience.

## **Conclusions**

One of the most important ways that children learn about and become engaged in the world is through play. Singer and Singer (1990) emphasized the importance of make-believe or pretend play for children's joyful well-being, especially from ages three to six.

Vygotsky highlighted the role of play in children's cognitive development, especially as a tool for enhancing social interactions, role-playing and creativity. Erikson affirmed the importance of play in children's emotional expressions and their ability to relate to others. A multitude of others have written for over a century about the importance of play in children's lives.

The nature of parent-child interactions during play differs widely by culture and socialization. First, not all parents join their children in play, and not all children have so few responsibilities that playing is their primary "work." Economic means of the family is one factor, and the culture's beliefs about childhood is another consideration. Even among the parents who believe that playing with their child is important, the nature of the parent-child play differs widely by culture. Although many Western parents believe that play is an important way to teach their children about the world, not all of them are skillful at combining teaching and play (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2001). In fact, some of them stop play altogether in favor of providing instruction. Caldwell (1986) called this the "paradox of play," in that we assume that because parents are generally more skilled than their children, they know how to play better. Caldwell (1986) argued that children know quite well how to play. She suggested that parents can help their children learn, within the context of play, by encouraging diversity within play rather than rigidity, and emphasizing the social roles as well as the didactic or teaching-oriented behaviors. Interesting, in many cultures, it is the siblings who are responsible for guiding younger children's play, and research shows that they do this in a sophisticated and sensitive manner. This review has highlighted the importance of play for children's learning. Parental support of children's play is extremely important, but the actual means of support, whether through the provision of time, space, materials, or social partners, varies widely and appropriately by culture. The study of play should always be conducted with the particular cultural context in mind. In the words of experts on play, like Caldwell, Sutton-Smith, and the Singers, play should be spontaneous and flexible, and most of all, fun.

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Dr. Vandermaas-Peeler received her B.A. from Wake Forest University and her Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from North Carolina State University in the United States. She is currently an Associate Professor of Psychology at Elon University in North Carolina, U.S.A. Before coming to Elon, Dr. Vandermaas-Peeler taught at the University of Hawaii at Hilo and at the University of the South. Several of her favorite courses include Lifespan Development, Play, Sport and Development, and Child Development in Cultural Context. Her research examines parental guidance of children's participation in culturally relevant activities such as play. She first became interested in play by observing and playing with her two children, Cooper and Alex.

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### Questions for Discussion

1. Consider your childhood for a moment. In what activities did you participate as a child with other members of your culture? Was there guided participation in these activities, and with whom? Describe how the guided participation may have enhanced your learning.
2. In the United States, affluent parents buy material possessions to support children's play throughout their childhood. Where does this cultural value fit in Bronfenbrenner's ecological model? Why is it an important influence on child development and play?
3. How does the economic situation of the family influence the amount and type of play in the children?
4. How does parental involvement in play differ by culture? What is the importance of the role of siblings in some cultures?
5. What is the focus of much parent-child play in the United States? Why?
6. What conclusions can you draw about the influences of culture and parental support on children's play?