

THE CHANGING NATURE OF PLAY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

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1. Contemporary changes in children's play

Bulgarian psychological and pedagogical theory accepts the **activity approach**. According to this approach for every period of life there is a main or **leading activity**. Leading is this activity, which is most important for development.

Emotional communication/interaction with mother (and the other relatives) is the leading activity for the early childhood. Learning is the leading activity for the middle childhood. For pre-school children the leading activity is the play.

When the child is healthy, it plays. Children need to play since the play is essential for their development. That is why educators have to stimulate children's play.

In the past children used to learn how to play from other children. The older showed the younger how to make a doll from old rags, how to take care of it; the older taught games with rules etc.

Nowadays many kids who live in big cities don't have the opportunity to learn how to play. There are various reasons for this fact.

1. Many families have only one child. So the kid cannot interact with other children in his/hers family.

2. Parents are too busy. They don't have time to play with their child.

3. Parents believe that learning is more important than playing. They prefer to enroll their children for lessons (languages, maths, dancing...). Additionally **there are too many lessons in the kindergarten.** Therefore children have no time for playing.

4. Natural playing territory has changed. Because of the traffic and urbanization many children don't have access to free outdoor plays. Parents are worried about the safety of their kids and don't let them go out alone.

5. Children spend a lot of their free time watching television and playing computer games. That makes them passive, they get used to reacting and consuming.

6. Toys and play materials have changed too. Many modern toys are monofunctional and don't allow the child to invent, to put into practice various plays.

Because of these changes the natural mechanism of acquiring play skills has been distorted. The natural mechanism is the play community. It is a group of children who are neighbors. Children who live in big cities have lost the access to such groups. That is why many manners of playing and many games got forgotten. Today the kindergarten has the responsibility to stimulate and foster children's play.

2. The benefits of playing

Psychologists and educators believe that playing is important for the child's development. The benefits of play and game are many.

Playing is the first activity in life where the child resolves the conflict between "I wish" and "I must" in a favor of "I must". In other words in the play the child does what he/she must do (according to the role and rules) instead of doing whatever he/she wishes. In the play the child's will develops. This is very important for school.

Play helps children to overcome their self-centeredness. Little children are unable to perceive someone else's point of view. But they learn to do this through play. That is why the play is very important for their mental development.

Play develops imagination. The playground turns into a faraway planet, the swing into a spaceship and the friend into an alien monster. Through play the child learns how to replace missing objects with their substitutes. This

ability is crucial for school education where real objects are represented through symbols (letters, numbers etc.). **Play stimulates symbolic function.**

Play develops social skills. Communication with adults is not sufficient for the complete social development. One child assumes an equal position only to another child. If there is a conflict between an adult and a child the adult resolves it. If there is conflict between two children, they have to resolve it together. If not, the game gets over. Children learn to take turns, to share and to resolve conflicts in the play interactions.

Play introduces children to human's artifacts, activities and relationships. There are many adult tools and subject which are dangerous and inappropriate for the child (knife, iron) but in play the kid can manipulate with their replicas (a toy-knife, a toy-iron). In this manner the child learns about the functions of these tools and about the actions which can be performed with them. The play is an exercise for adult life. The meaning and the models of human activities and relationships become familiar to the child.

Play is essential for physical development. Many plays and games require dynamic actions and therefore improve children's movements, coordination and physical properties (speed, strength). Play brings joy and builds up a cheerful character.

"Play is so important that its significance in children's lives is recognized by the United Nations as a specific right in addition to, and distinct from, a child's right to recreation and leisure" (<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/pdfs/LessonsInLearning/Nov-08-06-Let-the-Children-Play.pdf>).