Understanding the Importance of Play in Physical Education

by Rhonda Clements, Feature Editor

Peter, a ten year veteran physical educator, slumped into his desk after a long day in the gymnasium. He turned to his co-teacher Cheryl and said, "I just ran into Mrs. Hatfield, who could not resist saying, "I don't know why your students look so tired, since all they do is play in Physical Education." Cheryl gave her discouraged colleague a pat on the shoulder and reminded him that the world is filled with Mrs. Hatfields, that is, people who clearly do not understand the importance of play in physical education. Still, Peter is clearly frustrated by what he feels is a lack of respect shown to his profession. From Mrs. Hatfield’s viewpoint, play represents frivolous or meaningless activity. Peter feels that this perspective degrades the strong image of physical education that he is trying to achieve. Furthermore, he admits to being worried that some parents might view recess as a satisfactory way to achieve physical fitness, and his teaching position could be eliminated in the future. In contrast, Cheryl firmly believes that physical education and play are closely linked together and disputes the myth that play professionals and physical educators do not share similar values.

While most child development experts acknowledge there is no universally agreed upon definition of children’s play, there is general agreement that a lack of play, commonly known as play deprivation in play theories and research, can greatly stifle the child’s normal healthy development (See Figure 1). Characteristics of play deprivation are very similar to those observed when children are deprived the many health benefits associated with physical activity. Therefore, the need for daily play experiences and daily physical education classes is a mutual concern of both settings, and professionals in play and physical education benefit from shared knowledge.

1. Developmental behaviors becoming restricted and distorted.
2. Children become bored and disaffected with little understanding of how to occupy their time during school vacations, holidays, and after school hours.
3. Spontaneity and sense of freedom is decreased.
4. There is a lack of quality life-enhancing physical activity experiences.
5. Future use of recreational facilities is reduced.
6. Social retardation and lack of direction occurs.
7. Children show little adaptability and resilience, or the inability to cope with fears, conflicts, and aggression by pretending to be someone else or the object that is feared.
8. There is a likelihood of greater family stress.
9. A reduction in opportunities for risk-taking and challenge and, therefore, a decrease in self-confidence and self-esteem occurs.
10. Antisocial behaviors develop, such as vandalism and acts of violence, and feelings during adulthood of being robbed of normal childhood experiences.

Figure 1 Possible consequences of being denied adequate play opportunities.
In fact, play provides the mechanism for very young children to explore the world around them, and the medium through which physical skills are developed and practiced. For example, outcomes inherent in physical play are very satisfying to the child, as they lay the foundation for future creativity and a love for physical activity (see Figure 2). In addition, early child-initiated play activities may incorporate a variety of toys and miniature equipment or simply rely on the child’s imagination; allow the child to be boisterous and energetic or quiet and contemplative; be lighthearted or very serious, depending on the child’s disposition; be performed in solitude or with other peers; and have a definite end product or simply reflect the philosophy of play for its own sake. For young children, play is the vehicle through which the urge to move, learn, and interact with playmates is satisfied. It is verbal and nonverbal communication and expression, combining thought and physical action; it gives the young child enjoyment and identity. Most importantly, play empowers young children by reaffirming and supporting their individual right to make choices and decisions and to develop at their own pace.

As children enter elementary school, there is a period of adjustment to the norms and values of society. First, their lives become more structured and more programmed in time and space. Opportunities for spontaneity and free expression are suddenly halted, and the shift away from play and learning through exploration is usurped with an emphasis on increased academics and standardized testing. Parents and administrators alike support the emphasis on increased academics and teacher accountability. Is it possible, then, for physical

1. Exhibiting the ability to imagine, to make-believe or pretend
2. Utilizing creative thinking to solve simple problems
3. Investigating the function of specific objects or things
4. Reasoning or rationalizing solutions to self-selected tasks
5. Expanding one’s vocabulary and linguistics
6. Recognizing how things are different and alike
7. Discovering novel ways of moving
8. Recalling how to accomplish previous tasks
9. Observing and learning from others
10. Imitating or repeating movements and actions of others
11. Identifying activities that provide success
12. Finding joy and satisfaction in practicing or repeating a task

Figure 2  Sample outcomes inherent in physical play experiences.

Favorite Early Play Activities

- Yo yo, String Games
- Marbles, Jacks, Spinning Tops
- Jump Rope, Kite
- Labyrinths, Stilts
- Bicycle and Wagon
- Sledding
- Hoop Rolling

The value of play can not be calculated in monetary or materialistic terms, but must be considered in terms of human worth and dignity. The voluntary nature of play provides a unique condition whereby creativity, stimulation, and variation can be directly experienced without the limitations of an adult-oriented world of work. Play in itself is not necessarily the opposite of work; on the contrary, it provides the components and prerequisites necessary to achieve a meaningful and productive life in our modern society. Work is often a world of tension, frustration, and monotonous activity, while play can provide an opportunity for active relaxation and a feeling of accomplishment and purpose. In a real sense, play provides meaningful outlets that satisfy our needs for self-esteem, recognition, acceptance, and respect for others.

—The International Association for the Child’s Right to Play (IPA) Position statement
educators to remain advocates for freely chosen play activities such as those enjoyed by earlier generations (See Figure 3), when society is heavily focused on the importance of assessment and immediate outcomes to validate that learning has occurred? The answer can be yes, but the first step is to dispel common myths that perpetuate misunderstandings concerning play. Therefore, the primary goal of this TEPE feature is to provide information and activities that address ten common myths physical educators encounter on a regular basis. All the articles are written by experts in play theory, who also have strong expertise in elementary and middle school physical education. The information should help decrease any future tendency to cringe when play and physical education are discussed as having similar goals.

Many adults who grew up in the 1950s are quick to agree that it is our responsibility, duty, and even moral obligation to expose all children to their personal childhood favorite plaything. The object first on many lists is the “high-bounce Spalding ball” (pronounced spal-deen) that recently returned to the market. These same adults have fond memories of games like Hit the Penny, Stoopball, Boxball, Chinese handball, and Stickball because of this small, easily gripped rubber ball that was noticeably the color of pink bubblegum. The Spalding Sporting Company sold them primarily in the Northeast from 1949-1959; they could be purchased for 25 cents each through 1979. Today, they are available in hardware stores, sporting goods department stores, and even in some candy stores. The following activity, O’Leary, was played by children of an earlier time using this spaldeen. The game was very effective in increasing the eye-hand coordination skills of children in Grades Five through Six. It was also played with tennis balls if the physical educator could not secure the real thing.

**O’Leary**

**Equipment:** One Spaldeen, rubber handball, or tennis ball per player.

**Formation:** Scattered

**How to Play the Game:**

1. The game’s objective is to complete all twelve challenges in succession without losing control of the ball, while also reciting the following verse:

   1, 2, 3, O’Leary
   4, 5, 6, O’Leary
   7, 8, 9, O’Leary
   10, O’Leary Postman

2. To begin, each player tosses the ball to the ground three times as he or she counts 1, 2, 3.

3. On the count 3, the ball is given a more forceful bounce so that it rebounds higher.

4. Upon saying the word, “O’Leary,” each player performs the following challenges:

   1 2, 3, O’Leary (Swing the right leg outwardly over the ball)
   4, 5, 6, O’Leary (repeat)
   7, 8, 9 O’Leary (repeat)

5. When saying “10, O’Leary postman” the player catches the ball with one or two hands, pauses briefly, and begins the third challenge, and so on.

   Challenge Three: Swing the right leg inwardly over the bounced ball. Challenge Four: Swing the left leg inwardly over the bounced ball. Challenge Five: Grasp both hands to create a circle and make the bounced ball pass through the circle from below. Challenge Six: Same action, but the ball passes through from above. Challenge Seven: Place the hand on the hip and have the ball pass through the circle created from above. Challenge Eight: Same action, but have the ball pass through the circle from below. Challenge Nine: Bounce the ball and catch it in the shape created by holding the left thumb and the left forefinger together. Challenge Ten: Bounce the ball and catch it in the shape created by holding the right thumb and right forefinger together. Challenge Eleven: Bounce the ball and perform a complete turn to the left. Challenge Twelve: Bounce the ball and perform a complete turn to the right.

**Rule:** The game continues until all players have completed the twelve challenges.

**Advanced Rule:** If a player misses or loses control of the ball at any time, he or she must begin the activity from Challenge One.

**Advanced Rule:** Bat the ball with an open hand instead of bouncing the ball.

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**Figure 3** The original Spaldeen or “Old Pinky” enjoyed by earlier generations.
Twelve Ways to View Play From a Philosophical Standpoint

It should be noted that children at play are not playing about; their games should be seen as their most serious-minded activity.

—Montaigne (1533-1592)

The concept and importance of play has been viewed differently by many theorists and educators in varying cultures. Play as a “pedagogical tool” for teaching young children was first introduced in Germany in 1837 by Friedrich Frobel (1782-1852; Frobel, 1887). Frobel’s work emphasized children learning through imaginative play, playing with small manipulatives, and freely exploring the outdoor environment. Swiss educational reformer, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827; Pestalozzi, 1801/1894) also saw play as an instrument for learning as children used their senses and powers of observation to solve simple problems. In contrast, German’s philosopher Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805; von Schiller, 1875) viewed play as the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy. This belief was also shared by the English social philosopher, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903; Spencer, 1873), and both von Schiller and Spencer are credited with the surplus energy theory of play.

John Dewey (1859-1952; Dewey, 1922), American educator, psychologist, and philosopher who revolutionized teaching methods in the USA, interpreted play as activities not consciously performed for the sake of any result beyond them. Contemporary theorists refer to this believe as play for its own sake. However, Dewey did believe that when children play, they build up a storehouse of concepts and word meanings, all of which are essential to intellectual growth. Dutch historian, Johan Huizinga (1938) provided a comprehensive definition of play reflecting its importance to every culture. He theorized that play is a function of culture that is voluntary and creates order. It is not associated with any particular stage of civilization but it is a universal part of life for all humans and animals. Therefore, from Huizinga’s perspective, play was central not only to the development of children, but also to that of adults, the family, community and society.

The psycho-analytical theories of Austrian born Sigmund Freud (1856-1939; Freud, 1955/72) believed that play is chiefly motivated by the “pleasure principle.” Pleasure according to Freud, is achieved through “wish fulfillment” in play. While playing and pretending to be a policeman, fireman, or famous baseball player, the child is able to mold reality in order to gain self gratification. Freud also theorized that play had a therapeutic value by assisting children to overcome unpleasant, or conflicting emotions. Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934; Vygotsky, 1967) placed emphasis on the belief that play was a major source of development since the child at play frequently behaves beyond his or her actual age. He termed this action the “zone of proximal development” and emphasized that play served the major role in the child’s mental development. In contrast, Swiss Scientist Jean Piaget (1896-1980; Piaget, 1962) offered a theory of cognition in which the child integrates new experiences or environment information into his or her existing cognitive structure through the process of assimilation. In his hypothesis, play allowed children to practice skills they had already learned, but it did not guarantee the learning of new information.

As a final point, even Daniel Webster in his Desk Dictionary of the English Language, had difficulty in defining play. This resulted in 34 different meanings for the word “play.” The following definitions may have special interest for teachers of physical activity: (a) to employ a piece of equipment, (b) exercise or activity for amusement or recreation, (c) the action of a game, (d) to act or imitate the part of a person or character, and (e) fun or jest, as opposed to seriousness!

References