

# Perspectives on Play in a Changing World

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## Chapter objectives

Study of this chapter enables the reader to understand that:

- ➔ play and learning are inextricably woven together; play is intrinsically motivated and powerful for children in all cultures. Play is integral to children's sense of well-being.
- ➔ symbolic, imaginative play provides the foundation for social, emotional, cognitive and physical development in the growing child
- ➔ influential theorists (such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner) have made significant but different contributions to our understanding of the meaning of play; Vygotsky's famous statement that 'play leads development' is acknowledged as assisting our understanding of how children learn
- ➔ families are subject to pressures in a rapidly changing world and that for the first time a majority of children in many affluent Western countries are spending a large part of their early childhood years in some form of out-of-home childcare
- ➔ opportunities for children to play are disappearing as some educators are under pressure to reduce play-based learning in the curriculum and replace it with academic learning.

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter introduces the notion of play and how children make sense of their world through play. It incorporates definitions of play and raises awareness of the major theorists who have enhanced our understanding of the value and significance of play. Through this introduction, readers can reflect on a play-based curriculum and the role of early educators in facilitating learning and teaching during early childhood. It also examines the diverse contexts of children's play in contemporary societies, including formal early childhood settings and informal settings in the home and community. Play is viewed as being integral to children's sense of well-being and happiness. In raising issues of concern for parents and educators, this chapter discusses the challenges of creating time in which child-centred play can be nurtured as a basic right of all children, wherever they live.

Through play, children are constructing an identity—who they are, what they know and what their joys and fears are, as well as their sense of belonging to a family and a community. As the world changes, opportunities for children to play diminish. In some contexts children no longer have sufficient time, space or adult support to be 'players'.

This chapter then introduces many of the themes that are fundamental to the content developed by the various authors who contributed to this book. The nature and meaning of play is presented and is viewed as integral to children's well-being, happiness, confidence and sense of agency. In essence, children are viewed as capable and competent in actively shaping their own identity. Children's play is defined and perceived in many ways: joyful; engaging; pleasurable; evoking imagination; spontaneous; free flowing; sometimes involving risk taking; and increasing knowledge, skills and understanding. The characteristics of play are discussed and play and learning are inextricably woven together as play equals learning (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff 2008).

How to make provision for play in the early childhood curriculum is presented as achievable and early childhood educators are challenged to think about their practices. Play is presented as the foundation for all curriculum, and in discussing practice the critical role of make-believe play in leading development is seen to be fundamental (Berk 1999; Singer & Singer 1990/2005; Vygotsky 1978a).

This chapter examines the substantive theories about play and learning, and discusses the work of Piaget and Vygotsky as dominant cognitive developmental theorists. The bioecological model of Bronfenbrenner (which positions children as both products and producers of their environment) lays the foundation for more recent work on children's development, which examines the dynamical systems theory. Some cultural contexts are also examined showing that play is culturally mediated. In other words, what play means in any culture and for any group of children must be explored within a local, societal context (James 2003).

In essence, this chapter examines what play is to children and to the professionals who work with them in early childhood settings. The changing world and the consequential impact on families is also commented on, including the pressures families undergo as they rear their children.

## NATURE AND MEANING OF CHILDREN'S PLAY



Below are two scenarios of children's play; they are set in very different contexts: one in Sydney, Australia, and the other in Baghdad, Iraq. Both contexts are urban settings where children live, but their lifestyles are dramatically different.



### Preschool in Sydney, Australia

In a preschool in Sydney, children are playing outdoors. There are many flexible play structures set up that include climbing equipment, large outdoor blocks and accessory toys. Three four-year-old boys wearing hats and summer clothes have found a stick of wood that has fallen from one of the large gum trees shading the outdoor environment. One of the boys, Peter, points the stick at the others, shouting, 'Bang, bang, you're dead!' The other two boys immediately fall to the ground and play 'dead'. A teacher who is nearby quickly moves over and attempts to channel the boys' play in another direction.



### Street scene in Baghdad, Iraq

Early one morning in Baghdad, three four-year-old boys are playing in the street. Their environment is barren: there is no pavement or any growing vegetation. The children have no toys at their disposal but they are playing an 'army game', which involves them marching in a line on the side of a busy road. One child is clearly the leader and turns to issue commands to the 'followers'. Two of the children have improvised guns made from scrap pieces of plastic and metal. People walking nearby show no interest in what the children are doing. The sound of real gunshots rings out and the three boys immediately run for cover in a nearby house.

These two scenarios show how contextually different play environments can be for children of comparable chronological age living in different parts of the world. Consider what these two play scenarios have in common and why. Below are some pointers to begin with.

- Children throughout the world have a strong motivation to play. It is like an innate desire or a basic human need, a drive that occurs irrespective of the environment, setting, resources or lack of resources.
- Children will use play to interpret and understand their world.
- Play will occur whether adults are present or not.
- Children will use whatever is available as props in their play.
- Play can involve opportunities to interact with peers.
- Children's play can include risk taking and can raise safety concerns.

Hughes (2010, p. 4) states that there are five essential characteristics of play. First, play is intrinsically motivated; it is an end in itself. Second, play must be freely chosen by the participants. Third, it must be pleasurable. Fourth, play is non-literal; in this sense, it must involve some make-believe—that is, acting out imaginary situations. The fifth and last characteristic is that play must be actively engaging.

Returning to the two scenarios, it would appear that in both there are 'players' who meet the characteristics of play as defined by Hughes (2010), but there are some constraints, especially in the Iraqi scenario, where the play is dramatically interrupted by dangerous and life-threatening external elements. In both Australia and Iraq, symbolism is used in the children's play; this suggests that symbolic

**Figure 1.1** Fallen leaves become a plaything



**Figure 1.2** Playing hide and seek can start early



play occurs regardless of the cultural context in which the play occurs. Children, then, are representing reality through the use of symbols (Hughes 2010). Van Hoorn and colleagues (2007, p. 51) comment on the importance of symbolic activities in play:

The development of symbolic or abstract thought is one of the key aspects of intellectual development centered in the early childhood years. It is also a characteristic of early childhood play frequently studied by child development researchers over the years and therefore gives us a lens for interpreting our observations of children at play.

Therefore, play to children is activity for its own sake. It involves deep engagement; it is non-literal, intrinsically motivated and pleasurable; it involves some make-believe, and is free flowing and flexible (Elkind 2003; Hedges 2000; Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff 2008; Paley 1984, 1990; Piaget 1951, 1963; Saracho & Spodek 1995; Smith & Pellegrini 2008; Vygotsky 1978a).

## WHAT DO THEORISTS BELIEVE ABOUT PLAY?

Play is viewed as integral to children's well-being—that is, happiness.

Van Hoorn and colleagues (2007, p. 4) write that play is a human activity that occurs across the lifespan and across cultures. Many researchers who are knowledgeable about play believe that it has universal components that span cultures; they also believe that the contexts that children live in greatly affect the type of play that occurs (Haight et al. 1999/2003).

James (2003) proposes that children are people in their own right and should be studied while interacting socially with other children. His approach is primarily anthropological; he looks at play through the individual culture using an ethnographic method of participant observation: 'What play means in any culture and for any group of children must be explored in that local social context' (James 2003, p. 105).

Through play there is the vision of the possible, the real and the imagined.

An anthropological approach seeks to discover children's understandings: what they mean, why they play the way they do and what their play involves. Playing a game means knowing what to play, where to play, how to play and who to play with. It is by observing and studying this play in its social context that we can understand it. The anthropological approach also considers changes in human behaviour over time, such as the changes in child-rearing, rites of passage, age-related behaviour and gender roles. All these influence particular patterns of play in any one culture in any country (James 2003). Play, therefore, cannot be separated from the lives of children, their families and their communities, which make up the social world of which they are part. As Van Hoorn and colleagues (2007, p. 6) state, 'Through play, children develop boundaries of the real and the imagined, and also visions of the possible, the drive from childhood that turns the wheels of invention.'

The learning opportunities provided through play are significantly enhanced when there are other people present who are playing with the children. These other people could be family members (such as siblings or grandparents), as well as the child's peers and important adults with whom a child has regular contact (such as a teacher or a childcare assistant). Consider the following play episode involving Harry (3.5 years old) and his sister Lily (5.2 years old).

**Figure 1.3** A girl is tenderly kissing her favourite teddy, who has become a real person to her



### Brother and sister at play

After his morning shower Harry insists on being wrapped naked in a large towel and hunches on the wooden floor, knocking loudly.

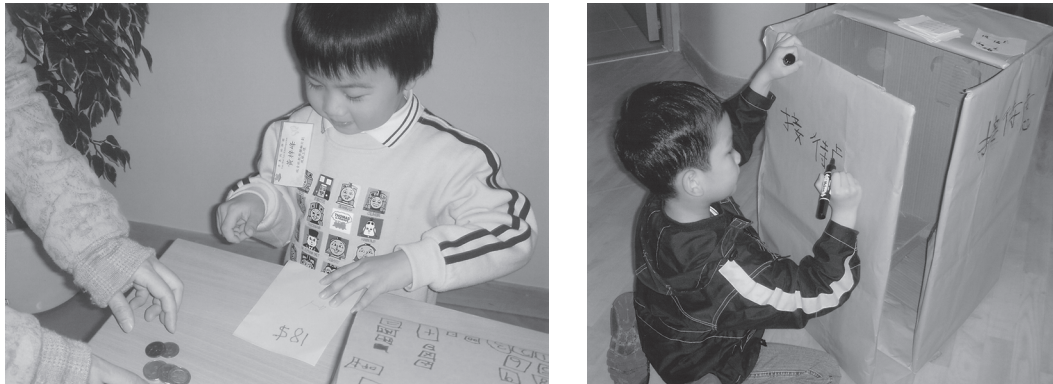
- Harry: There's a parcel at the door.  
 Lily: What is it?  
 Harry: It's Pippin, the cat.  
 Lily: Pippin, what do you want for breakfast?  
 Harry: I'd like a chocolate croissant.  
 Lily: OK Pippin, but cats only eat tinned fish. I'll get you a tin of fish but wait here and meow, meow, a thank you.



This play episode illustrates one of Vygotsky's principles: children learn through engagement in make-believe play with an older sibling (Vygotsky 1978a). The following photographs (which were taken at a childcare centre in Hong Kong) show a group of four-year-olds actively involved in a play experience that also includes their teacher.

The play context of this scenario is the home corner at a childcare centre and the children are busily setting up a dim-sum restaurant. In the play dialogue, some children have agreed to be the customers while another child is setting up a cash register with the help of the teacher. The teacher in this play context has taken a scaffolding role in orchestrating the learning of the children.

The intervention of an adult in children's play can be positive or negative depending on the play context. Hedges (2000, p. 16) suggests that co-construction—that is, shared meaning making through play—acknowledges cultural and social forces and holds a potentially empowering approach that encourages both adults and children to be proactive in teaching and learning. Cultural beliefs and values

**Figure 1.4a and 1.4b** Running the dim-sum restaurant

about education in some Asian countries are very strong. Parents who believe that the earlier children start academic work the better do not always favourably view play for young children. For instance, it is often the case in Hong Kong that the teacher has many academic expectations from parents and the general public to take an active role to direct the play of children.

## Viewing play through developmental prisms

There has been considerable writing and research on what play means and its importance to children's development. Bodrova and Leong (2007, p. 129) comment that over the years many theorists have emphasised the importance of play and have stressed how it influences specific psychological processes. In categorising play they propose the psychoanalytic perspective (Erikson 1963), social interactionist perspective (Howes 1980; Howes & Matheson 1992; Parten 1933; Rubin 1980), and constructivist perspective (Piaget 1951; Vygotsky 1978a).

If you consider that play is the typical and innate way for young children to make sense of their world, there is agreement with Piaget's (1951) proposition that play is the children's way of adapting to their situation in life, assimilating it and understanding it. Piaget's work shows how children, over time, develop the ability to represent their world through a series of stages in which assimilation and accommodation are increasingly coordinated (Van Hoorn et al. 2007).

Vygotsky (1978a), another highly influential developmental theorist, proposed that make-believe play is the leading activity of young children, and that it promotes cognitive, emotional and social development. Vygotsky's theory has been named 'socio-cultural', and his work has influenced the thinking of many developmental theorists. Vygotsky proposed that social experiences are essential for intellectual development. He saw as important the values, beliefs and customs of a social group and how these cultural entities are transmitted to the next generation. Central to Vygotsky's theory is the concept that cooperative dialogues with more knowledgeable members of society are necessary for children to acquire the ways of thinking and behaving in a community's culture (Berk 2013, p. 25). His unique term, 'the zone of proximal development', refers to the way children's understanding is increased as a result of social interactions. Vygotsky also proposed the (now well-known) maxim

When to intervene and when not to intervene in children's play is an important consideration.

that play leads development. He considered complex mental activities—such as voluntary attention, deliberate memory, categorisation and problem solving—to have their origins in social interaction (as cited in Berk 2013, p. 226).

Figures 1.5a and 1.5b (showing two different interactions between young children and their grandparents) illustrate Piaget's and Vygotsky's principles of play-based learning in action. Fantasy play is a prominent play activity in Vygotsky's theory; he granted it the status of a leading factor in development. Any discussion on children's intellectual development through play draws heavily on the pioneering work of Piaget and Vygotsky. The contribution that these theorists have made to our understanding of child development and play is monumental.

**Figure 1.5a and 1.5b** Children and their grandfathers—intergenerational teaching and learning



Another highly influential theorist whose work relates to our understanding of child development is Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1994, 2004). Bronfenbrenner's work focused on an ecological systems theory, which views the child as developing within a complex system of relationships that are affected by the ever-changing nature of the environment. Bronfenbrenner perceived the environment to be constantly evolving; he also considered children to be both products and producers of their environment. In a 2004 publication, *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner presented a culminating summary of his views on what he finally termed a 'bioecological perspective' on human development. The interdisciplinary domain that he created has been highly instrumental in shaping education policy in many contexts. Cotterrell (1986), as cited in Bronfenbrenner's model, stated that the workplace and broader community are capable of indirectly influencing the child because of the experiences parents bring from their work and community contexts into the family home.

## Variations in development

Berk (2012) proposes that, when seeking answers to both the consistency and variability in children's development, we should turn to the new theoretical directions. One relatively new theoretical dimension is what is now named the 'dynamic systems theory of motor development'. The crux of this theory is that the child's mind, body, and physical and social worlds form an integrated system that guides the mastery of new skills (Berk 2012, pp. 184–6). This theory assists us in understanding how the mastery of motor skills involves acquiring increasingly complex systems of action. When motor skills work as a system, separate abilities are integrated and assist, for example, babies to explore their environments. Each new skill is a joint product of the development of the central nervous system, movement possibilities of the body and environmental support for the skill. The refinement of motor skills can also be seen in the reaching and grasping of infants as gross motor skills become refined to fine movements (Thelen 1989, 2001; Thelen & Smith 2006).

It is important to understand the differences in development as children play. All theories add to our understanding of how children grow and learn. While Winter (2004, p. 31) proposes that there is widening recognition that development is multidimensional and occurs as a result of the dynamic interaction of the effects of both genetic endowment and experience, it can be claimed that children learn continuously as they interact and derive meaning from their environments (Bronfenbrenner 1994, 2004; Bruner 1986; NAEYC 2009; Vygotsky 1978a).

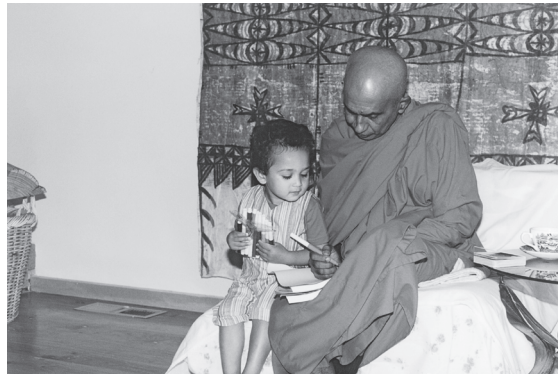
The dynamic systems theory, then, is useful for focusing closely on children to show how interrelated their development is (Thelen 2001; Thelen & Smith 2006). This theory also ties in with current research findings on brain development, which detail the critical importance of early learning (Berninger & Richards 2002; Blakemore & Frith 2007; McCain et al. 2007; Mustard 2008; Nash 1997; Shonkoff & Phillips 2000; Shore, 1997). However, many of these theories are complementary and, if reviewed together, add to our overall understanding of how important it is for children to play.

## Putting theories into practice: some implications

Teachers, caregivers and parents (in fact, all adults who work with children) see the theories about teaching and learning in a practical context, in their everyday interactions with children. For example, the ecological (cultural) context is often important to parents because they want their cultures maintained (NAEYC 2009). Accordingly, the passage of culture is demonstrated and reinforced by family members in different ways, especially in the language spoken at home, food, religious worship, festivals and traditions. Examples of such are favourite dishes that a father or grandmother was good at making, or stories about acts of gallantry, or mischievousness about certain family members. These all evoke shared understandings about the diversity of family cultures. In some cultures, it was the Buddhist priests who introduced children to reading and writing, as they were considered the most honourable teachers and keepers of the faith. As shown in Figure 1.6, these ancient customs or practices can continue in modern homes, where the opportunity to interact with traditional teachers, such as Buddhist priests, may eventuate either by chance or by direct intervention by parents or grandparents who are actively seeking to reinforce family traditions.

By simply being present during these occasions, young children (whether they are fully engaged in these conversations or not) become aware of the special features of their own families. It is possible that

**Figure 1.6** A Buddhist priest introducing reading and writing to a child



when they are with other children, they could attempt to relate their family stories to things that happen at preschool or day care. A perceptive and knowledgeable teacher could assist by bridging the gaps in the stories, and this is made possible by maintaining good communication with the children's families. The theories of Piaget and Vygotsky can assist us in understanding the importance of continuing these conversations between children, parents and early childhood professionals.

### Maintaining children's home languages

Ellen, a childcare worker, talks to an Italian parent, Sylvia, who would like her two-year-old daughter, Maria, to be given pasta to eat at lunch time. Sylvia would also like Maria to be given the social opportunity to play with Anna, her cousin, who also attends the same centre. In addition, Sylvia hopes that Maria will be given the opportunity, in the centre, to use her Italian language.



Having read the above scenario about Ellen, Sylvia and Maria, reflect on the following questions:

- What are some of the issues for Ellen?
- How can the early childhood educator meet the needs of this family (and of others who want their language to be maintained)?
- What strategies could you facilitate at a preschool (or in a childcare setting) to nurture diversity of languages?

The children depicted in Figure 1.7 have been considering different cultural traditions, and their Muslim teacher enabled them to dress up as a way of experiencing different styles of clothing that may reflect various cultural origins. Sutton-Smith (1977, as cited in James 2003, p. 107) said:

Children are not mirrors in which we can see our younger selves. Instead, children's progressive understanding of their future as men and women in the social world is a complex, inventive and innovative process. Children are actively engaged with their future adult roles through the intricacies of their day-to-day encounters. They are not simply copied or taken on.

**Figure 1.7** Playing with dress-ups or learning to respect cultural diversity?



## Theories and understanding

How can theories about play assist people who work with children to better understand child development and learning? This is an important question for you to think about. The following discussion will increase understanding about individual development as it is applied in case studies.

### Play in the first two years of life—the sensorimotor period

In looking at children's development through play, the broad categories of age tend to be: first, the infant/toddler period (ages zero–two years); second, the preschool years (ages two–five years); and third, the school-aged child. However, these broad categories are usually grouped for early childhood as sensorimotor and preoperational stages. There is considerable individual variation in the development of children of the same chronological age and this happens through all phases of development. This book does not endorse outdated normative aspects of development.

The first distinction to draw about infant play is that there is a difference between play and exploration (Hughes 2010, p. 62). Hughes proposed that in exploring their environment and/or themselves as individuals, children appear to attend closely to what they are doing and engage in almost ritualistic behaviour; whereas in play, children are more joyful, more willing to be distracted and more diverse in their behaviour. These differences can be seen in Eve's story.

## CASE STUDY: EVE'S STORY

This play episode shows the exploration of an eight-month-old baby girl, Eve. She is seated with a large, wooden animal puzzle that has pull-out pieces. Eve looks at each piece of the puzzle, pulls it out, puts it in her mouth and then quickly drops the piece. She continues with this pattern of exploration until all the pieces are out. Then Eve looks at her mother, who puts the pieces back and Eve reaches over and quickly starts the whole activity over again!

If you were supporting Eve's mother to enhance her child's development, think about what suggestions you could make. For example, consider the following questions:

- How can Eve's mother continue to foster her child's language development through play?
- How would you respond if Eve's mother asks you, 'Is it too early for me to read to Eve because she's not even one year old?'
- What advice would you give her in relation to play resources that Eve might need?

The sensory motor focus of the first year is well documented and play is perceived as a way of consolidating learning through repeated practice, which is fundamental to the infant's motor activity (Piaget 1963; Sutton-Smith 1985). Piaget (1963) believed that sensorimotor play reflects the child's evolving intellectual development. Hughes (2010, p. 63) agrees, and says that 'sensorimotor or practice play begins with the infant's accidental discovery of an activity that is inherently satisfying and consists of the continuous repetition of that activity for the sheer joy of doing so'.

Independence reaches a peak at two years of age, when children believe they can do anything and go anywhere unaided. While this independence can cause conflict with peers and parents, it needs to be understood in terms of demonstrating control over what the child can do. 'No!' is often the most commonly expressed word. Some two-year-olds are capable of sustained, engaged involvement in play and may become frustrated if their play is interrupted or terminated by an adult. However, the confidence of two-year-olds is wonderful to behold, as is their growing command of language. Play, then, for infants and toddlers is of the utmost importance, and they learn holistically through interacting with their environments.

## Play in the preschool years—the preoperational stage

Hughes (2010, p. 78) presents the transition of play into the next phase as follows:

Play is moving from being an uncoordinated collection of activities to one that is coordinated and schematic, a trend that parallels the transition at the end of the second year from one-word utterances to two-word combinations in speech.



Berk (2012) reminds us that as children move from the sensorimotor to preoperational stage, which spans the ages of two–seven years old, the most obvious change is an extraordinary increase in mental representation. What emerges developmentally as the child moves into this phase is the development of symbolic play where the child begins to use objects to represent reality and, as a result, more complex play emerges.

There are great differences in development over the ages of two–seven years old. If we consider, for example, the three-year-old who becomes part of a wider social world and often enjoys interacting with others, including adults, there emerges over time a greater willingness to cooperate, share toys and enjoy engagement with others. As three-year-olds are increasingly better coordinated, they enjoy physical activities such as running for the joy of it and climbing to get to the top. They begin to coordinate physical play with imaginative play, and more sophisticated control of small muscles allows for the involvement in block play, building, art and other creative activities.

Socially, three-year-olds are often capable of forming friendships in preschool and may play consistently with the same friends over an extended period of time. They may also successfully exclude others with whom they do not want to play, but on the other hand, they are capable of expressing empathy (Ebbeck et al. 2013).

## CASE STUDY: YOU ARE NOT OUR FRIEND TODAY

Rebecca (4.2 years old) and Susie (4.8 years old) have assumed ownership of the dramatic play area and are busily putting on hats and looking for a ‘baby’ to seat in the stroller. Jennifer comes over to join the play. Susie excludes her with the statement, ‘You are not our friend today’.

Young children can be unintentionally cruel to one another, and social relationships do impact on children’s engagement and enjoyment in play, as reflected in the play episode described in the case study, ‘You Are Not Our Friend Today’. The role of the adult is often crucial in assisting children to include rather than exclude other children in their play. Children also need to learn to assert their rights in play so that they ultimately can negotiate involvement with others on their terms.

What actions do you think an early childhood educator can take in relation to Jennifer’s exclusion by Susie? Anticipating reluctance from Susie to collaborate with Jennifer, reflect on the words and actions you would need to use to win her over in guiding her towards cooperative play. It is also important to consider the involvement of Rebecca in this encounter. It is possible that she does not share Susie’s views on excluding Jennifer. An understanding of peer relationships can make a difference in what role adults adopt when intervening in children’s play.

## CASE STUDY: YOU CAN'T PLAY WITH US; YOUR SKIN IS DIRTY

A childcare centre in Singapore has a diverse population of children from a variety of ethnic groups: Malaysian, Chinese and Indian. There are very few Indian children in the group. A new Indian child, Krishna, started at the centre and the educator was horrified to hear a three-year-old child say to Krishna, 'You can't play with us; your skin is dirty'.

Ask yourself what follow-up action you need to take to promote respectful relationships among children in your early childhood setting.

There are often significant differences in the physical growth, social and emotional maturity and intellectual development in three- and four-year-old children. However, four-year-old children show increasing self-confidence and mastery of their growing bodies. They are often interested in creating art products, show representation in their drawings and can engage in sustained make-believe play. As Hughes (2010, p. 104) states, 'the years from three to six are generally recognised as the golden years of pretend, or make-believe play; at no other time in life is a human being so involved in the world of fantasy'. This view is supported by the extensive work of Singer and Singer (2005) in relation to imaginative thinking and the psycho-social benefits of play.

## CASE STUDY: BEN AND JACK AND THE AIRPORT

Ben (3.8 years old) and Jack (3.4 years old) have drawn an airport runway on a large piece of paper and marked it 'number 3 runway' by drawing three sticks. They have stationed a plane on the runway.

Ben: I'm the captain. Where's my hat?

Jack goes to the dress-up box and returns with a cap.

Jack: Here it is, captain.

Ben: What can we use for phones?

Ben goes to the art table and returns with two toilet-roll cylinders.

Ben: Call the control tower to see if I can take off.

Jack pushes imaginary phone numbers.

Jack: No, you can't; it's too windy. You will just have to wait!

The social cooperation and engagement of these two boys shows the value of imaginative play and taking turns without conflict, which can characterise the imaginative play of three- and four-year-olds as they learn to compromise when necessary. The ability to engage in cooperative group play is important for children's successful peer relationships (Mendoza & Katz 2008).

Berk (2013, p. 360) comments that preschoolers' rapidly expanding vocabularies and general knowledge support their impressive categorising skills. In their play they are also capable of showing problem solving, reasoning and some logical understanding as their intellectual capacities develop (Siegler 1998). The NAEYC (2009) 'Position statement on play' asserts that play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition and social competence.

## CASE STUDY: LISA AND PETER WITH THE SHARKS

Lisa (5.1 years old) and Peter (4.1 years old) are playing in a large cardboard box—it has become a boat.

- Lisa: What can we do? The waves are too big.  
 Peter: Put on your life jacket.  
 Lisa: Are there any sharks in the water?  
 Peter: No, I killed them all with my Darth Vader gun.

Why is make-believe play so important to children's development? As an early childhood educator or an adult interacting with children, it is important to be able to articulate your views as to why make-believe play is so important.

Adults are often alarmed at the graphic expressions of violence in some imaginative play. Children's fears tend to become neutralised as frightening issues are played out over and over again. Children can be exposed to violence through television, movies, computer games and, sadly, sometimes through real-life experiences that take place within their own families or in their local communities, including at shopping centres, local parks and playgrounds. Play helps children to come to terms with what is happening in their world.

### Are all children given opportunities to play?

Article 31 of the United Nations' (1990) *Convention on the Rights of the Child* enshrines play as a basic right of all children. Kofi Annan, the former secretary general of the United Nations, stated that this convention is the most widely accepted human rights treaty in the world (UNICEF 1998). Almost every country in the world makes a commitment, in theory, to protect its most vulnerable citizens. However, it is documented that not all children have this right to play upheld. Not all countries honour this human right. Child labour, for example, remains a major problem in Africa, Asia and Latin America. An estimated 60 million child labourers fall between the ages of five and eleven years (UNICEF 2001, p. 14). Also, many children live in war-torn regions in the Middle East, Asia and Africa and have neither safe spaces to play in their neighbourhoods nor access to early childhood centres. Graca Machel's (2001) book, *The Impact of War on Children*, presents chilling evidence of the horrific toll that war takes on

children. Machel (2001, p. 119) reports that the most widely used weapons of mass destruction are not nuclear or biological, but are the estimated 500 million small arms and light weapons that are available in many countries. It is these inexpensive and easy-to-use weapons that are fuelling bloodshed and mayhem around the world. Two of the consequences of this mayhem are many civilian casualties and the transformation of hundreds of thousands of children into professional killers (by being recruited by local armed groups). A culture of weapons can be transformed into a culture of violence when a state cannot guarantee the security and well-being of its citizens.

It is clear that many children around the world today have neither the opportunities to play, nor an experience of a childhood free of conflict and violence. Children need to play and they have a right to be able to play safely; this is not being allowed in all parts of the world. Bruce (1994/2014, p. 18) wrote:

If we are to promote the valuing of play in ways which are effective for children's learning, we need to see play for what it is. Children all over the world play, if given the opportunity to do so. Although play is central to humanity, it remains one of the most difficult processes to pin down.



## REFLECTION

Think back to your own childhood. What opportunities did you have to play? Are there differences between the opportunities you had and those available to children today? Discuss these questions and responses with any interested friends or colleagues.

## Families and children's play in a changing world

Our changing world is greatly impacting on the capacity of parents to rear their children. The economic difficulties of recent times have meant that many families have lost the capacity to cope with the stresses and strains of their daily living as their primary 'breadwinners' have succumbed to unemployment. The 'Child survival: the state of the world's children' report (UNICEF 2007, p. 104) refers to ways in which children's lives have been 'disrupted by armed conflict, high levels of violence and crime within communities or by living in an embattled home'. Six years on, the UNICEF Annual Report for 2014 (UNICEF 2015, pp. 3–8) states... *it was one of the worst years in recent memory*. Reflecting on this reality, UNICEF's Annual Report 2014 opens with an overview of its emergency work during the year, with an estimated 230 million children living in countries affected by armed conflict. The report goes on to document that of the 102 million people affected by natural disasters in 2014, 50–60 per cent were children. UNICEF responded to 300 emergencies in ninety-eight countries. Readers are encouraged to read further about the humanitarian work of UNICEF in its annual report of 2014 ([www.unicef.org/publications](http://www.unicef.org/publications)).

The quality of children's lives can be adversely affected in very many ways, and much can be done to prevent and/or minimise the harmful effects. For instance, the availability of paid parental leave in affluent countries such as Finland, Norway and Sweden has been assessed as generous in providing equity for both mothers and fathers (Ray et al. 2010). Parental leave can significantly enhance the time and resources available to nurture young children's learning and development within family contexts.

Another publication by UNICEF (2008) is highly relevant; it states:

- a great change in childhood is occurring in the world's richest countries
- today's rising generation is the first in which the majority is spending a large part of early childhood in out-of-home childcare
- neuro-scientific research is demonstrating that loving, stable, secure and stimulating relationships with caregivers in the earliest months and years of life are critical for every aspect of a child's development
- taken together, these two developments confront the public and policymakers in OECD countries with urgent questions
- whether the transition in childcare will represent an advance or a setback—for today's children and tomorrow's world—will depend on the responses of the policymakers.

This report (UNICEF 2008, p. 8) also states that societal pressures (including the fact that two-thirds of women in industrialised countries are in the workforce) are causing both governments and families in OECD countries to move towards radically different patterns of childcare. These trends show that children are spending less time with their families and more time in some form of care.

According to the United Nations' annual statistical report on the World's Women for 2015, globally about 50 per cent of women of working age are in paid employment (United Nations 2015). While this might represent advances in equity between men and women in terms of employment opportunities, there are concomitant economic pressures: the poorer the family, the greater the pressure to return to work as soon as possible. Therefore, the rising employment of women reflects not necessarily new opportunities for women but new necessities for families; the impact of these changes is felt by every member of the household, especially young children.

There is a danger that the transition from home to childcare may follow a pattern or pathway determined by adults' needs and the pressures of the moment (UNICEF 2008). Families may also be subjected to economic and time pressures and pressure from the media. For instance, 'create a smarter child' is a regular by-line in print and electronic media. This is particularly prevalent in Asian countries, such as Hong Kong and Singapore, where economic affluence means that families can shop for all sorts of educational toys and gadgets in the hope that by playing with these their children's learning will be extended. Educators such as Carlsson-Paige (2008) have expressed concern about the host of social forces and trends that put great pressure on children and parents. Carlsson-Paige (2008, pp. 1–2) said, 'entertainment media are too often replacing active, child-centred play and social time with peers and family'. She believes there is a loss of unstructured, imaginative play and that childhood is being stolen. Another point made by Carlsson-Paige (2008, p. 5) is that play is a vitally important tool that children use to make sense of an increasingly frightening world. Specifically in relation to parents, Carlsson-Paige states that when parents get home from work they are exhausted and so allow the television to occupy their children. There can be negative effects if children spend large amounts of time viewing either TV, smartphones, iPads or other IT gadgets. Bilton (2013) commented on the findings of the Millennium Cohort Study (Parkes et al. 2013), which found that children who watched more than three hours of screen time per day had a higher risk of conduct, emotional and relationship problems by the time they were seven years old than did those children who did not engage in this amount of screen viewing.

**Figure 1.8** Communication occurs at an early age

Heckman et al. (2006) write of the importance of the family in mediating cognitive and emotional skills, which children develop in the early years. However, the impact that family pressures have on young children—and the long hours that children spend in out-of-home care—is in need of further research. Eiser et al. (2000, p. 405), in writing of the measurement of quality of life in young children, stated that it is vitally important to gain some insights into how children perceive aspects of their rapidly changing world. They also emphasised the importance of gaining an understanding of how children perceive their experiences, such as childcare, preschool and informal care by relatives or babysitters. However, Eiser et al. also cite difficulties in developing appropriate measures that are reliable and valid with such young children. As a result, our knowledge of what children think of these experiences is sparse.

## MAKING PROVISION FOR PLAY IN THE CURRICULUM

The notion of play-based learning can be easily located within government policy on early childhood education. For example, the Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR 2009) explicitly affirms play-based learning as ‘a context for learning through which children organise and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations’ (p. 6). This trend reflects the global awareness and the ‘overwhelming consensus regarding the importance of play in early childhood development’ (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, p. 77). This belief has been reinforced through research evidence, which shows that ‘children in play-based kindergartens have a double advantage over those who are denied play: they end up equally good or better at reading and other intellectual skills, and they are more likely to become well-adjusted, healthy people’ (Miller & Almon 2009, p. 8).



Through careful observation and reflection on children's developmental abilities, interests and needs, educational goals can be defined to promote the realisation of each child's potential. It is the educator's role to construct and facilitate children's learning through discovery and exploration of the environments the educators provide. Keep in mind that 'left to their own devices, we know that the play of children sometimes becomes repetitive, and effective educators, therefore, encourage children to take on new challenges and introduce new and extended experiences' (Siraj-Blatchford 2009, p. 85). This does not mean that child-initiated play is less valuable; rather, as a guide or a facilitator, it is possible that the educator could fade into the background as the child takes the lead in directing the play.

Clearly there is a need for the importance of play to be promoted to and by early childhood educators, families and other agencies that work with young children and families. The advocacy message needs to explain that play has many functions, and that a play-based curriculum in early childhood settings should be the foundation for learning and developing in the early childhood years (Moyles 1989, 1991, 1994/2010; Van Hoorn et al. 2007). Fleet and Robertson (2004, p. 5), when writing of early childhood specialists, propose that we have not, however, always been good about conveying to the wide community our understandings of the skills and meanings that children develop through such play. As such, it is important to reiterate the accumulated research evidence, which shows the benefits of play as it enables children to:

- use symbols to represent and understand their world (Bergen 2002; Berk 2013; Gonzalez-Mena 2013; Smilansky & Shefatya 1990; Vygotsky 1978a)
- be flexible in their thinking (Elkind 2003; Isenberg & Jalongo 2001; Singer & Singer 2005)
- form meaningful relationships with peers, adults and significant others in their lives (Bronfenbrenner 1979, 1994; Essa 2011; Mendoza & Katz 2008; Vygotsky 1978a)
- experience a range of emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, jealousy, excitement, wonder and fear (Erikson 1963; Jalongo 2008; Van Hoorn et al. 2007; Vygotsky 1978a)
- form friendships as research shows children are happier at preschool and school and adjust more quickly when they have friends (Theobald et al. 2014, as cited in Garvis & Pendergast 2014)
- construct their knowledge through meaningful, direct, first-hand experiences (Bruner 1986; Dewey 1971; Piaget 1951, 1963)
- foster and extend their communication skills (Berk 2013, p. 360; Bodrova & Leong 2007; NAEYC 2009; UNESCO 2006)
- function above their current intellectual level and extend their cognitive skills (Vygotsky 1978a).

Berk (2013) emphasises the importance of scaffolding children's imaginative play in order to promote reflective, self-regulatory and socially cooperative behaviour. Bruce (1994, 2014, pp. 20–1) enumerated twelve features of play, which are summarised below.

1. Free-flow play actively uses first-hand experiences, including struggles, manipulations, exploration, discovery and practice.
2. Free-flow play exerts no external pressure to conform to rules, pressures, goals, tasks or a definite direction.
3. Free-flow play is an active process without a product.

4. Free-flow play is intrinsically motivated.
5. Free-flow play is about possible, alternative worlds that involve supposing and ‘as if’, which lift participants to a higher level of functioning. This involves being imaginative, creative, original and innovative.
6. Free-flow play is sustained, and when in full flow helps us to function in advance of what we can actually do in our real lives.
7. Free-flow play can be initiated by a child or by an adult; if it is initiated by an adult, he or she must pay attention to the features in points 2, 9 and 10 of this list.
8. Free-flow play can be solitary.
9. Free-flow play can be in partnership with other children or groups of adults and/or children who will be sensitive to each other’s personal agendas.
10. Free-flow play is about participants wallowing in ideas, feelings, relationships, reflecting on and becoming aware of what we know (meta-cognition).
11. During free-flow play, we use the technical prowess, mastery and competence we have previously developed, and so can be in control.
12. Free-flow play is an integrating mechanism that brings together everything we learn, know, feel and understand.

Collectively, these twelve features can assist early childhood educators to understand what play is all about. Children, through their play, need to engage in meaningful, sustained relationships with their peers, caregivers, teachers and families. Creating safe play environments for children remains a challenge in many contexts and countries (as previously noted in this chapter).

Children’s play flourishes where opportunities for deep engagement occur (Laevers 1994, 1997; Laevers & Heylen 2004). Deep engagement can be difficult to achieve, particularly in early childhood centres where there are large numbers of children, and educators are under pressure to introduce an ‘academic curriculum’ rather than an authentic play-based curriculum that extends the interests of children and fosters their development in all domains. Saracho and Spodek (1995) propose that the challenge for teachers is to utilise and maintain the natural qualities of children’s play in ways that have educational value. These words, written more than twenty years ago, are a sound reminder for today’s early educators about the significant role they must adopt in advocating, implementing and researching play-based learning and teaching wherever young children are.

Throughout the ensuing chapters in this text many of these issues are explored in depth. Making play a safe reality for children is an important ongoing theme.

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

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This chapter examined the nature and meaning of children’s play. In presenting relevant theoretical perspectives on play and development, the importance of a play-based curriculum to enhance early learning and development was highlighted. Educators must also consider (when using play as a focus for teaching and learning) the impact of changing contexts within children’s homes and their communities.

## KEY CONCEPTS

- **Linking play and development:** learning through play is one of the most natural ways of promoting child development. This link between play and development is well supported through research-based evidence.
- **Play-based curriculum:** a planned intervention by a skilled educator who is concerned with promoting educational goals that are aimed at realising a child's potential.
- **Play-based learning:** learning through discovery and exploration; at times, this learning may be mediated through interactions with others, both adults and other children.

## Points of discussion and debate

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1. Who are some of the key theorists who have influenced our understanding about play-based learning in early childhood? Describe some of the key contributions of each theorist who has enhanced your role in promoting children's play.
2. What are the challenges that you face as an early childhood professional trying to make provision for play in the curriculum? To what extent do these challenges reflect the socio-cultural environment of your early childhood setting?
3. When to intervene and not to intervene in children's play is an ongoing question for early childhood educators. What are your views about this?
4. What are some issues you think parents need to understand so that your role as a teacher and their role as a parent can be complementary?
5. How can we convince politicians, policymakers and administrators of programs for young children that play is vitally important and must be central to all programs for young children?

## Key learning references

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Berk, LE (2013), *Child Development*, 9th edn, Pearson, Boston.

This is an excellent, comprehensive text that documents children's development in detail. As a secondary source of theorists, the text is very valuable and cites interesting and relevant research studies in child development.

Carlsson-Paige, N (2008), *Taking Back Childhood: Helping Your Kids Thrive in a Fast-paced, Media-saturated, Violence-filled World*, Hudson Street Press, New York.

This book takes an evaluative stance in relation to the negative effect on children's development of the media and other influences that diminish children's opportunities to engage in spontaneous, imaginative play.

Dockett, S & Fleer, M (1999), *Play and Pedagogy in Early Childhood: Bending the Rules*, Harcourt Brace, Sydney.

This book takes a traditional view of play, but has comprehensive definitions and presents ways of analysing play. In addition, organising for play in the curriculum is helpful for early childhood professionals and the book has an Australian orientation.

UNICEF (2008), *The Childcare Transition: A League Table of Early Childhood Education and Care in Economically Advanced Countries*, Report card 8, UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, Italy.

This is a very important UNICEF publication. It documents contemporary global trends and issues relating to children and families that are of strong interest to early childhood professionals.

Van Hoorn, J, Nourot, PM, Scales, B & Alward, KR (2007), *Play at the Center of the Curriculum*, 4th edn, Pearson Merrill/Prentice Hall, Upper Saddle River, NJ.

This book is a comprehensive early childhood text that emphasises the value of play to young children's development. The text focuses on how a play-centred curriculum is fundamental to early childhood teaching and shows how the role of the teacher can extend children's development during play.

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## Websites

**www.abc.net.au**

The website for all the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) television and radio programs

**www.google.com**

The most popular search engine on the internet

**www.theage.com.au**

The online version of the *Age* newspaper