

Play Pattern in Preschool Setting

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ABSTRACT The present study was conducted to assess the play pattern of children in the preschool setting. The aspects covered included studying the play equipments available to these children, the nature and content of their play activities and the adult supervision available. The sample consisted of 40 play sessions comprising of children in the age group of 2-5 years, studying in 20 preschools across Jammu city. The adults present were also observed for their direct or indirect participation. A combination of random and event sampling was used for sample selection. The tools used included non-participant observations and interviews. The results revealed that the play behaviour of the children did not undergo any alterations in the preschool setting. Opportunities for free play and outdoor activities were available at all the preschools. The play activities underwent alterations due to availability of space and play equipments. The children indulged in pretend, associative and constructive play in a number of play sessions. They also exhibited cooperative, solitary and onlooker play but to slightly lesser extent. Gender and age differences were noted in the play behaviour of the children and were especially evident in homogenous groups. Presence of teachers helped in making the play activities more organized and stimulating.

INTRODUCTION

Preschool years are often termed as the 'try age'. This period is ideal for learning new skills. Much learning takes place by observing and doing and development of preschoolers can be stimulated both by providing opportunity for children to learn on their own in play and by interacting in which the adults deliberately teaches some thing. The play activities should ideally include free play, organized (group) play, physical activities and play ground activities using play apparatus (Seth and Ahuja, 1995). Play and play materials are part of the basic needs of all preschool children. Various theories and empirical findings constantly signify the great potential that play has in directing preschoolers learn to interact and adapt to their environment. Imaginative play allows preschool children to act out real life situations that they may not understand and by solving these problems they gain a sense of satisfaction and power over their own small world (Haight and Miller, 1993). Feeling of independence and confidence the two very important emotions are also developed. Providing children with opportunities to solve both physical and mental problems also encourages development of their cognitive skills (Block

and Pellegrini, 1989). Children progress through solitary and parallel play and then begin to play in group situations and it is in these group situations that the children learn to give and receive, and to share and cooperate with their peers thus developing their ability to form relationship with others. It is also helpful in the development of vocabulary and concept formation (Mc Cune, 1995), visual motor integration (Yarkes, 1982) and satisfies the exploratory drive (Gumaer, 1984).

Dunn and Herming (1992) reveal the influence of gender in guiding the play preferences of young children. They reported that boys display more functional/solitary functional play (fantasy play and more originality) than girls, who exhibit more constructive play (playing with concrete objects). There is a strong gender differentiation in both the choice of play material as well as the games. Play is ascribed different meanings in different ecological and social settings (Oke et al., 1999; Block et al., 1989). The availability of physical space and play materials can make a lot of difference. When children have more interactions with adults and the adults exhibit more participative behaviour, then children engage in less of unoccupied and solitary play (both are types of non social play) and are able to learn various concepts easily (Vandell and Power, 1983).

The present study was designed to gather information on the play pattern of young children in the preschool setting. Analysis of the play

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pattern included covering of aspects such as the nature of play material available, the nature of play activities exhibited by these children and the nature and extent of adult supervision involved. Studies in the past have overlooked the influence of preschool setting in shaping the play behaviour of the young children. Researches have been confined to the play activities in open spaces and mainly deal with the play behaviour of children in their middle and late childhood, focusing little on the activities of preschoolers, especially within the confines of the preschool.

METHOD

Sample and Procedure: The children the age group of 2-5 years were observed as members of varied play groups, essentially during the midday school break. These children were studying in 20 preschools of Jammu city. A total of 40 play sessions of the children (two each from one preschool) were observed for gathering data on their play pattern. Adult members present, especially teachers, were also observed for their direct or indirect participation in children's play. Random sampling (lottery method) was used for the selection of the preschool and event sampling (instantaneous sampling) technique was used for the observation of the spontaneous play sessions. These observations were non-participant in nature, with the preschoolers being unaware of the purpose of the observations. The entire play session was observed starting from its formation to its dissolution.

Tools: Non-participant observations and interviews were used for gathering the relevant data. For the children on spot, non-participant observation were carried out, while for the teachers an interview schedule was prepared. This schedule contained questions pertaining to basic information about the preschool, the number of working hour, teacher-child ratio, supervision at the time of play, activities of children and so on.

Analysis: For the analysis of the data both quantitative and qualitative procedures were used. Part of the data was summarized for frequency and percentages and for the rest content analysis was done to deduce the major findings.

RESULTS

The results reveal that out of the 20 preschools covered 16 were run by private agencies

and the remaining 04 were public institutions. All these preschools were near residential area, and except for two, rest all were located in clean and hygienic surroundings. 90% of these preschools ran for 5-6 hours daily and only 10% were running for more than 5 hours/day. Normally the children were in the age range of 2-5 years and children of same age were usually clubbed together. 60% of the preschools made a combinative use of formal and play way education and the other 40% used only play way method of teaching. In the latter system of education the stress was mainly on teaching of rudimentary skills through use of play techniques, while in the former system the stress was equally divided between formal teaching by the use of the three R's and play techniques of teaching-learning. Also in the latter system there was a flexibility of curriculum. However, in all the preschools there was no fixed timetable. In majority of the preschools 9 (45%) a teacher child ratio of 1:10 was maintained. In another 5 (25%) a ratio of 1: 20 and in 3 (15%) preschools each a ration of 1:30 and 1: 40 was observed respectively. Apart from this there was a provision of helpers in all the preschool and the number of helpers was in accordance with the number of children.

Outdoor Space and Play Behaviour: 60% of the preschools allotted two hours and 40% one hour on a daily basis for free play activities and were usually observed at the mid-day break or the periods immediately following the same. The children played on their own during these play times with little restrictions and interference from others. Also at these times the children invariable preferred to play outside their classroom with the exception being the times when the climate was unsuitable (rain/harsh sun) or the play space available was very limited. All the preschools had provision of different outdoor play equipment. Majority (65%-70%) of the preschools had equipment for jumping, cycling, climbing and sand play. Eight schools each had provision for water play and gardening. The children showed interest in the different play equipments and enjoyed themselves in the open and spacious play grounds. The specific play equipment that were available at these preschools included swings (95%), ropes and balls (85%), tricycles (80%), climbing frames (65%), rocking horses (60%), balancing boards (55%), planks (45%) and jungle gym (10%). In 25% of the preschools the toys and equipment were bought keeping in view

the age and safety of the children whereas in the overwhelming majority, 75% of the preschools equipments were selected according to the preferences of the children. The favourite outdoor play activities of these children were observed to be playing with swings, dancing/jumping, tag/running, hide and seek, and riding rocking horses. When large open play field were available the children used to indulge in games that required running and jumping in the open field, but when little free space was available the children tried to indulge in games, which were sedentary in nature. Some of these children played in a group while others had little interaction with others. It was observed that the children used to shift quickly from one play activity to another. It was also observed that when a number of play equipments were available the children made utmost use of them. All the children showed interest in them and structured their games around these. But on the other hand, when only a few play equipments were available then the children showed less interest in them and their involvement with them was limited. Relative presence or absence of play materials brought visible changes in the content and nature of the games though there were no changes in the duration of the play period. When the equipments were available the children indulged in games that were more physically challenging and had more variety. On the other hand, the children exhibited more sedentary and monotonous games in absence of the play material.

Nature of Play: In 40 play sessions observed the children indulged in about 12 types of games. The nature of play activities and the rules followed by the children during the games remained almost same across different preschools. In these play sessions the children exhibited pretend play in 12 (30%) incidences. They tried to imitate animals, parents, friends as well as their teachers. Girls usually formed groups and pretended as if they were feeding and bathing their dolls. They pretended to take them to school and at times acted as if they were teachers while their dolls were the students. The girls were usually noted to imitate their mothers, teachers, television actresses and other familiar female characters. On the other hand, the boys were found to imitate male members at home and their most common imitation was that of a police/army officer or a doctor. 10 incidences (25%) of associative play were noted among these children. The children

interacted and showed interest among each other. They used to borrow and lend toys to one another and this process became an activity in itself for them. In 8 episodes (20%) the children exhibited constructive play. They played with different types of blocks and formed different structures such as bridge, house or a car. Here, the children used to draw and indulge in more organized set of activities. Children who were elder and mostly above 3 years in age indulged more in the three of the above mentioned play types. Besides, these, 5 incidences (12%) of cooperative, 3 incidences (8%) of solitary play, and 2 incidences (5%) of onlooker play were observed. A few children would simply try to look at what others did and showed no involvement at all in these activities. While in solitary play the children quietly played on their own with little care to what others were doing. These types of play activities were usually exhibited by younger children especially those below 3 – 3 1/2 years of age.

Gender Segregation: It was found that out of the 40 play sessions, 60% of the playgroups were heterogeneous and the remaining 40% were homogenous in nature. Age and gender of the children had no influence on the former group type while in the latter both these factors were of prime consideration. In the former type of groups no specific differentiation on the basis of gender could be noted while in the later differences were observed in the nature and content of the play activities according to the gender of the children. The girls played with dolls and soft toys and also among the outdoor equipment they showed preference for swings and ropes. While the boys were usually seen to show more interest in cars, aeroplanes and among the outdoor materials showed more interest in bat and ball, rocking horses, and climbing frames. The female children were restricted in their use of space and demarcated their play space at the outset of the games while the boys tend to make maximum use of the space. More male children indulged in associative and constructive play and were more aggressive and showed preference for physically demanding games while the female children indulged more in pretend play activities and seemed to be more docile and preferred less physically taxing games.

Adult Supervision: In all the preschools the children used to play under direct or indirect supervision of the adults. During the free play

sessions this was mainly an indirect supervision. At 25% of the preschools this was meant only for the safety of the children. The teachers felt that the children needed to be constantly monitored so that they do not fight with one another or hurt themselves. But in the other 75% of the cases supervision was provided not only to safeguard the children but also to provide mental stimulation. The teachers would constantly provide inputs to the children to as to pass on their experience and knowledge of games. In majority of the preschools (18) no physical restrictions were imposed on the children except those necessary for their physical safety. The only restrictions applicable on the children were those related to discipline. The teachers enforced these restrictions such as asking for permission before touching the toys, talking to others. It was found that the children were little influenced by the presence of the adults and they continued with their natural play behaviour. But at the same time it was observed that in the presence of the teachers the children had fewer fights amongst themselves and would be more organized.

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to focus on the play pattern of the children in the preschool setting. The analysis of the result reveals that most of the schools had provision of free play activity for their children. Midday break was offered at all the schools and this time was utilized by the children mainly for their free play activities. Besides this many preschools earmarked specific intervals for free play. Whether the children played in open or in preschool setting their play behaviour hardly altered and they were not adversely influenced by the presence of their teachers. Notwithstanding in which preschool they study, the children exhibited the same play behaviour. Their games and activities were similar in nature and content.

All the preschools also offered the children opportunity to play with outdoor equipment. The children showed a strong liking for outdoor activities and modified their play behaviour according to the availability of the play space. When the children had facility of large playground they indulged in activities such as tag and other games, which required running and chasing one another. But in the preschools where large open play fields were not available it was seen that the children

indulged in more sedentary games. This shows that the children always make adaptive use of the space available to them. Similar results were found in the study conducted by Oke et al. (1999) which highlighted the creative use of the space by the children. The children were also found to shift frequently from one play activity to another, showing that preschoolers need variety of play material and opportunity to play. The results of Kaul (1993) reveal that the children shift frequently from one play activity to another.

Results also show that the play behaviour of the children was altered due to the relative presence or absence of the play equipment. Though there was no alteration in the duration of the play period but significant differences in the nature and content of the games was observed. The children structured the games around these materials in case of their availability. The studies conducted by Hartel (1996) and Calodero (1989) also found that the play patterns underwent changes due to the kind of play material available. When play equipment was available the games required more physical activities and had more variety.

The children tend to exhibit different types of play such as pretend, associative, constructive, cooperative, solitary and onlooker. The incidences were slightly higher for the first two play types and also the slightly elder children indulged more in the first three types of play. These results are similar to the findings of Doyel and Leeper (1992) and Haight and Miller (1993) who found that as the children approach 3 years of age they show remarkable lowering in onlooker and solitary play activities and an increase in pretend and constructive play. The results also confirm the gender differences in the play behaviour of the children. Sharp differences in the play because of gender were visible only in homogenous groups where as in heterogeneous groups where both the girls as well as the boys participated no segregation on the basis of gender was evident. Analysis of the former groups reveals that the female children indulged in sedentary play and also were more involved in pretend play whereas the male children exhibited more of associative and constructive play and liked more physically challenging games. Similar results were found in the study of Kour et al. (2000) and Oke et al. (1999). Differences were also noted in their preferences of play materials. The age mix and gender differences in play clearly reflect the distinct socialization of the children even at this tender age. Girls conform to the rules

of the game whereas boys use flexible rules and change them as per their own convenience.

It was found that the presence of adults hardly altered the play behaviour of the children except for when the adults deliberately interfered in their activities. In the presence of adults the children became more organized and more sustained. Results of research conducted by Garland and White (1980) also found that when adults were involved the level of children's play became more complicated and sustained.

The parents and the early childhood educators should acknowledge the importance of play as a potential medium of instruction. As it was found that many children during these years indulged in pretend and constructive play, thus while being engaged in play activities the children can learn many new and important concepts. Learning can be moulded into an enjoyable experience for the children by incorporating play. The results showed remarkable improvement in the play behaviour of the children due to the presence of the teachers and hence imply that the elders can provide mental stimulations to the children for their healthy overall development.

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