

**PLAY; IT'S MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE IN CHILDHOOD****Richa Gupta****Assistant Professor, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi****Sandeep Kumar****Assistant Professor, Department of Education, University of Delhi****ABSTRACT**

*In this paper the developmental significance of play in children's life has been explored. The paper explores how play facilitates physical, cognitive and social-emotional development in children. It also explores how development in children leads to progression in play. Further in the paper the therapeutic significance of play has been explored, how play develops out of a healthy psychological development through 'good enough mothering' and its failure to develop signifies psychological pathology. In the paper an attempt has been made to integrate the developmental perspective on play with the psychoanalytic perspective paving a way to explore the continuum between play in childhood and creativity and innovation in adulthood. In the end the impact of various factors like geography, mass media, technology, social, cultural and economic factors on the expression and experience of play in a childhood have also been explored in it.*

**Keywords:** Play, children and development**Introduction**

One often finds children engaged in various play activities in almost every physical space they have an access to and are a part of. From classroom to community parks to domestic spaces play is an important developmental process in children's life. The importance of play in cognitive development, mind-body coordination, social and emotional development of children is emphatic. Looking at the cultural significance of play in childhood we often find the conceptualization of childhood in India is marked by *śbal lila* in the cultural psyche often drawing connections with the childhood of Hindu deities like *śKrishna*, *śHanuman* and *śGanesha*. Earlier the narratives of these deities were told in the folk tales, poems, songs and stories by the older generation to the younger one. With the advancement in technology and reach of media to the lives of a very large segment of Indian population these narratives have reached the world of children through the animated cartoons and movies that enrich the content and structure of children's play especially make-believe play with these narratives. Children identify with deities and their *ślila* which gets supported by the adult world. How play and playfulness is experienced in our mythological narratives informs to a large extent our everyday attitudes towards children's play which has no other aim than playing itself. The stories and images of Krishna stealing *śmaakhan* (butter) from people's house, breaking pots of village women carrying water, playing with cows, playing flute and killing the demons like *śBakasura*, *śAghasura*, raising and holding *śGovardhan* mountain on his finger contribute to our everyday cultural understanding of play in childhood in which children not only invert the rules of the real life and experience a sense of omnipotence but they are also allowed to do so. They are generally exempted from punishment for breaking down the social norms and rules for living like we often see the boundaries of religion, class and caste gets weakened while playing in childhood. Mischief is allowed while playing as it is considered a feature of play for example entering into the neighbor's garden while playing hide and seek, using mother's sarees to construct a tent to play etc. The cultural narrative and understanding

of play through mythology allows adults to let children experience autonomy, initiative, omnipotence, abstract thinking, creating rules and laws of punishment etc. that have important implications on the physical, cognitive, language, moral and social and emotional development of children. One can easily find parallels between the common cultural understanding of play in childhood and developmental understanding of play in the domains of psychology and education.

Play often provides for the space for exploring new possibilities in which children display skills that they have not yet displayed in their non-play behavior. They also display of their existing and growing understanding of the self and the world. Play leads to development and development leads to transformations in play behavior. Children often not just display but also learn social roles in group play. Group play becomes a possibility after achieving certain developmental milestones.

### **Play: Types and developmental significance in childhood**

The nature of play changes in children as they grow. What represents play at a given age stops exciting children to play at another age and they bring more novelty and innovation in exploring the same objects and constructs that served as play at an earlier age. Developmentally we see it evolving from solitary play to games with rules. Generally this development of play behavior and transition from one type of play to another is seen as an indicator of new gains in the cognitive development of children.

Children start with solitary play in infancy and toddlerhood i.e. playing alone with different objects. In this initial stage of play thought and action are not separated from each other. The meaning of the object and the ways of its manipulation are the same as in the reality outside play. According to Piaget (1945/1962) it is also the functional or practice stage of play with the defining features of the sensorimotor stage.

In the preoperational stage children (2-7 years of age) are usually occupied in solitary and parallel play in which children play alone with their toys but they play beside or in the presence of other children. Quite often in a play school one can observe children sitting in a group but engaged in their own play activities in which they do not have to cooperate and negotiate with other children in exchanging roles and defining rules. The major cognitive development at this stage is the symbolic representation i.e. when children are able to substitute an object for something else in play e.g. using a spoon as a mobile phone and geometry box as car. Piaget calls it symbolic play (make believe play). In symbolic play Piaget further makes a distinction between constructive play and dramatic play. In constructive play objects are used to build and create other objects. In dramatic play, children create pretend situations and roles using gesture and language. Dramatic play usually surfaces slightly behind the emergence of constructive play (Bodrova and Leong, 1996).

Perspective taking skill is required for children to engage in cooperative play or organized games with rules with other children as rules and themes need to be negotiated with other children and just cannot be established unilaterally. Piaget finds this capacity missing in preoperational children and characterizes that stage with egocentric thought which is the inability to take other's perspective. Therefore for Piaget this kind of play can only emerge in the concrete operational stage where children have the capacity for decentration of thought and hence of perspective taking which begins at 7 years of age. Piaget's view on lack of perspective taking in preoperational children has been contested in later studies that show that

children around 3 years of age begin to acknowledge that others can have feelings, desires, beliefs and intentions that are different from their own (Dunn, 1988; Fein 1984; Cox, 1999).

For Piaget the final stage of play is games with rules which is primarily a feature of concrete operational stage (7-11 years). The gains in cognitive development at this stage allow children to coordinate with other children to develop various rules and regulations for the games and decide on the penalty of breaking them. This has important linkages with Piaget's stages of moral development where children during this age judge the outcomes based on the intentions of the doer rather than the factual consequences.

In the Vygotskian framework play integrates social, emotional and cognitive development in children. It is seen as a tool that leads to development. For Vygotsky, play serves as a tool of the mind enabling children to master their own behavior (Vygotsky, 1996/1977). In the development and progression of play rules shift from being hidden and implicit (pretend play) to being external and reached through a shared understanding with others (structured games with others) but rules inevitably exist in every form of play. When a child pretends to be a mommy and feeds her doll who is her daughter in the play, the play is governed by the hidden rules of how a mommy behaves and how a daughter behaves coming from the real life understanding of these roles by the child, informing the roles and enactments in the imaginary play. Language hence becomes an important theme in play for Vygotsky, its development is interwoven with the development of play from one stage to the other. Language and external speech plays an important role in associated, cooperative, pretend plays and games with rules. At the same time language also plays an important role in self regulation and following of implicit rules and expanding of play themes in solitary play. For Vygotsky, play influences development in three ways; Play creates the child's zone of proximal development, Play facilitates the separation of thought from actions and objects, Play facilitates the development of self regulation (Bodrova and Leong, 1996).

In play situations children can behave more maturely and exhibit higher cognitive, social and emotional competence than in non-play situations. For example, a five year old child will show sustained attention and more commitment in writing alphabets and practicing phonemic sounds or drawing and coloring while playing 'teacher-student' in which she is playing the role of a good student as compared to non-play situation where she is asked to do her homework. It is not surprising to find children resolving their disputes quickly in play and bond well with each other during play as compared to normal classroom tasks.

In play, children act in accordance with the internal ideas rather than external reality. Because play requires the substitution of one object for another, the child begins to separate the meaning or idea of the object from the object itself. The separation of the meaning from the object is preparation for the development of abstract ideas and abstract thinking (Berk, 1994). In abstract thinking we evaluate, manipulate, and monitor thoughts and ideas without reference to the real world. This act of separating object and idea is also preparation for the transition to writing, where the word looks nothing like it stands for. Finally behavior is no longer driven by the objects; it is no longer reactive. Objects can be used as tools to understand other ideas (Bodrova and Leong, 1996).

**Psychoanalytic understanding of play; Developmental and therapeutic significance; through the work of D.W Winnicott**

D.W Winnicott defines play as doing; a doing in time and space. Play as a potential space between the subjective inner experience and the external objective shared world. It is the meeting and interplay of these two worlds where the child uses the power or the experience of the subjective to manipulate the objective reality (without reverting to hallucination) to master anxieties that surround child's life, gain pleasure while the sensual instinctual bodily erogenous pleasure have not taken over the child, to express aggression without damaging the child's relationship with the external world, to gain experience and knowledge of herself and the world and to communicate the same to the receptive others, etc. all these aspects in the play becomes purposive to a better integrated personality of the child who can contribute to the development of the culture and is able to exploit and manipulate the culture and its resources for personal development.

Play is seen essential for healthy emotional, social, intellectual development and for facilitating creative imagination in child hence an inevitable part of artistic development and development of civilization. One can see a kind of transition in a child's play from solitary to group play to artistic work. There is an excessive use of transitional objects in the play which are never lost but get diffused with time into a psychic constellation of many objects.

The absence of play in a child's life and in a person's life in general can be seen as pathological while play in itself is seen immensely therapeutic. A child who can not play in forms that could be recognised or related to the external world, is the child who lives in a split where inner is not integrated with the outer to give the child a complete wholist experience of himself or herself. This is the child withdrawn in his/her inner world ó cannot socialise with people in meaningful way- the child whose experience of external reality is so harsh that the child repudiates it with rejection and to survive creates a kind of psychotic defense where the child gets divorced from the larger shared external world as the symbols and forms with which the child experience his experience is too different from the forms in which the shared reality invites experience. For this child the private speech is never given away but used as a defensive play. For this child retreating into a fantasy world is the solution. Living difficulty of this unrelatedness might get translated into an addiction of a dissociated life where the child loses herself completely in the television- cartoons or fairy worlds or that of romantic songs where the child vicariously fills the gap or emptiness of the absence of companionship/friends.

While asserting the significance of play in therapy and therapy in play, Winnicott says that no psychoanalytic therapy or interpretation of the psychic content is possible if the therapist and the patient do not enter into a play with each other that is to say an overlap of subjectivities for the creation of an inter-subjective space. Winnicott calls psychoanalysis as a highly specialized form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and others.

According to Winnicott there is a sequence of relationships related to development processes which also exist in the development of play.

Play begins with a state of complete fusion where the baby and the object of play are merged into each other and the object is subjectively perceived by the child. The mother or the mother figure supports

or provides for this subjective view of the object by translating the child's imagination into experienced reality. The mother feeds the doll of the child when the child demands the doll to be fed along with her.

“The object is repudiated, re-accepted and perceived objectively by the child.” This can happen only when the mother is able to provide for the experience of omnipotence by the child. When the child and the mother enter into a play in the mutuality created between them. When the mother asserts her distinctness by waiting to be objectively perceived by the child but at the same time let herself to be subjectively perceived by merging herself with her child. The mother becomes the object of play. It is this effective role of the mother that leads to significant progressions and transitions in the development of complexity in the play of the child. The child makes a transition from the mother's breast to the friends in shared play and then to art forms like painting and poetry where the child plays by making his/her subjectivity fiddle with the external reality to give shape to something creative and concrete.

When the mother through her good enough mothering is able to provide a sense of security to her child, the child begins to develop a capacity to be alone marked with development of reflective thinking and containment of experience. The capacity of the child to play alone in the presence of the mother unfurls into a capacity to play alone in the absence of the mother as the child is secured of her presence in need. If the child always remains insecure with precariousness of the mother's warmth the child is not able to play alone and later in life the child encounters problems in working through her loneliness.

The next developmental stage in the theory of play is the development of a group play. When the child is able to introduce creatively other children in her play and play with them. At the same time the child is also able to enter into other's themes of play and play co-operatively and productively without losing her agency to play. This lays the foundation of team work in latter stages of life. Children who face difficulties or are not able to play group play find group work difficult later on in life.

Thus in this theory of play Winnicott makes play the bedrock of all health in the child. The failure at any stage alludes to failure the emotional and social development (psychological development) of the child which later in life might result in psychological disturbances or vulnerabilities in the child. While attaching play to health or failure of health, *Winnicott opens the possibility of psychological healing in play and hence called Play a therapy in itself*. In play there is a form and content and both are important routes to understand the child in observation and important therapeutic goals can be achieved in the play without engaging in the classical interpretive work.

The play in the therapeutic setting and the free play that is continuous outside the intimate room of therapy, both are real for the child and thus have an underlying similarity or uniqueness of the element of revelation of the inner experience of one's existential being in relation to the world one inhabits and also an element of discovery- undertaking the task of knowing the unknown terrains of intra-psyche material by the child by its ripening and the child's spontaneity and creative imagination in short the child's readiness to know them and the discovery of art of manipulation the objects, relationships, symbols of the external world. There is a continuous process of re-signification that is involved in the child's play. Winnicott brought to us the understanding of play as a noun. Every play has a form and content. An understanding through observation is made of progression as well as regression in the play of children.

**Play and Development of Creativity –**

There is a lot of spontaneity in a child's play. This is easily observable in children's play. They spontaneously create games with the resources that are available to them. Children's creativity therefore overcome the challenges of lack of commercially available toys as play is a mental operation therefore play activities seen amongst children across socio-economic and cultural groups are vivid and rich. Pebbles and wooden sticks are as significant as play material as a Barbie doll or a digital game for facilitating the development of creativity in children. With one object children can play multiple games while using and manipulating the object differently in the multitude of themes that they play. For example blocks can be used by children to construct towers or as potential spaces to hide something while playing with other children or they can serve as anything a child wants during pretend play.

*Playing allows the child to experience her/his omnipotence to create new meanings, experiences and worlds. It has a magical quality where the magic of the child's omnipotence works beautifully if gets supported by a good nurturing containing environment. A wooden stick can become a magic stick which reduces people to horses in a child's play. The magic of the play enables the child to manipulate the external world according to her subjective world. Playing facilitates creative abstract thinking and imagination in children which latter enable them to perform creative arts like painting, poetry etc. which become cultural artifacts and contribute to the development of the civilization. There is a similarity in early and adult forms of play, in play children display their knowledge of the world, try to construct and produce new things with their imagination and try to know and reach the unknown and this search for the unknown meaning is what at the heart of invention and innovation, development and evolution of human culture (referred to as adult form of play).*

#### **Social factors affecting play: Rural and Urban spaces, socio-economic class, mass media, technology**

Play also gets influenced by the various factors affecting children's life at systemic level. For example smart mobile phones, high rise buildings, scarcity of safe open spaces like courtyard and neighborhood garden in contemporary urban India has changed the nature of play as compared to the rural spaces where play still develops around nature like water bodies, forests, agricultural land, soil, bricks, coconut shells etc. At the same time transformations are visible in the patterns of play in rural spaces where children have been introduced to board games and toys bought from the market and digital games on mobile phone. A study conducted by Bowen in 2008 in Mayurbhanj district of northern Odisha gives a vivid description of this.

According to Bowen children's play in Mayurbhanj was more closely and intricately involved with nature and its resources such as soil, water sources, agriculture, and forest which were also the center of the community's cultural and economic life. At the same time she reports how the shifts in the center of the cultural and economic life have brought visible transformations in children's play.

ōCertain trees were favored for climbing games, others for the shade they provide for board games or card games, or the space they provided to build miniature homes for play; the village pond was not simply a bathing and laundry *ghat*, it was a prime *šhang-out* spot for meeting up to gossip, joke and muck around with friends, and for numerous water games such as underwater tag. The post harvest rice plots are the site of winter-only games of *chakri*, a local hockey variant with hockey sticks carved from jungle wood and a

puck/flat disc cut out of an old rubber sandal. Apparently švacant lands were peer-recognized cricket and *kabadi* fields. The river during the monsoon season is the site for a number of exhilarating play activities, engaging with wildly flowing inlets, sending off and capturing floating objects and setting each other personal or tea, challenges in crossing and channeling streams. Flooded paddy fields become sites for fishing and observing frogs and waterbirds.

The soil/earth was a primary medium and constituent for elementary school-children s peer play. Soon after my arrival, a group of girls told me that playing dolls is one of their favorite activities. When I asked to see their dolls, they responded šWe have to make them first! and later showed me how they collect clay from the bottom of the pond, mold whatever dolls and paraphernalia they needs for a particular game or story that they want to play, leave them to dry for a while and then start playing . Dressing the clay dolls in strips of colourful rags converted into saris (female dress) and lungis (male garments), they enacted mock weddings, picnics and family-life/village-life dramas with their creations. Games, too drew on the soil as a play resource.

In an environment of high-level local self-reliance, children s games too, by and large, relied on props produced by children themselves. The list of noncommercial/market props and toys that children were regularly making included cricket bats and hockey sticks which boys hand-carved from wood that they had cut down in the forests; kopra balls (different kinds of balls that children made from tightly bound rags or discarded plastic bags and string, sometimes around a stone, or wooden core); ceramic discs/towers for the kopra ball game (made from discarded broken pottery or clay roof tiles); bows, arrows and catapults; cars and carts made either of clay or old bottles/containers, wire setc; clay dolls, and other figurines including miniature animals, miniature pots and plates; and of course game boards, which, as described, are generally drawn straight onto the ground at the start of a game, and the accompanying dices, counters etc.

I found that when children inhabited spaces where mains power was present and market commodities were easily accessible and homes more densely laid out, young people reported that they depended more on store-purchased cardboard game boards with plastic tokens and dices and less on their own autonomously produced props. Their game choices were more influenced by television media marketing and the commercial offerings of general stores and the local market. Children, particularly girls, reported spending more time indoors in solitary play or watching television. Mobile phones were increasingly common and highly valued in rural households within the single span of the year of my fieldwork. For many young people, a significant attraction of the phone was as a digital gaming device, which honed their familiarity with the devices.š(Bowen,2015)

In another study done on children s play in urban spaces by T.S Saraswati in Vadodhara and Mumbai, she reports that the various types of play played by children were catch/tag, hide and seek, ball and stick, Jumping/skipping/dancing, paper and pencil, singing ,pretending, masti/horse play/teasing/play fighting. The taxonomy of play material included things that were designed for play like swings, see-saw, slides, jungle gyms and merry go round, stuffed toys, board games, marbles, dolls, balls, tricycle, ropes etc. In the urban landscape the material which was not designed for play but was used by children included parked vehicles; construction material like sand and cement mixers, household and personal material like utensils, slippers; rubbish like plastic rings, wooden planks, coconut shells, tin boxes, polythene bags, scrap of cloth, thread, plastic bottles, tobacco packs, bottle tops, torn balloons, broken bangles etc and nature s

bounty like trees, leaves, twigs, stones, grass, mud etc. Physical setting for play mostly included places which not designed for play like railway tracks, roundabouts at traffic signals and crossroads, staircases of abandoned buildings, pavements and pathways, parking lots, school compounds etc. These spaces are not always safe for play but play inevitably happens in these spaces. In both low income group and in middle and higher income groups there is a scarcity of space for children to play. The soft grass lawns provided for children to play in the residential areas often provide enough space for children to play and push them to play in spaces not designed to play.

We can see a stark difference between the play material designed and made available to children in urban spaces as compared to the rural ones where children themselves design and create their material for play. There is also difference in the conceptualization and use of space for play in both the rural and the urban setting. In rural setting we do not find a space especially dedicated and provided to children to play but they find their own spots and convert them into spaces to play. In rural areas work and play does not have to be differentiated in the child's world as they are intricately interwoven with each other. One can find this continuity in the life of urban children who are not a part of formal schooling process. Children often play around with each other while selling pens on metro railway stations, while begging on urban streets or doing household chores. On the other hand in school going children in both urban and rural spaces work and play gets compartmentalized from each other and have a different schedule and life of its own.

The socio-economic class and the specific context of the children's life also influence children's play by influencing the play material, space and content of play. The themes of make-believe play changes with the context of children's life. A school going child will have dominant theme of school and education in her pretend play as compared to a child living in slum and not attending any school. The dominant theme in this child's pretend play would represent the conditions and situations of the real life of this child and her family like master-servant. It is not often to observe children from low socio-economic class playing on the swings and other play material available in community parks. These children would often play in the congested spaces in their slums, construction sites or on roadside. Rubbish than commercially available play material is used by these children to play mostly. Many a times replicas of expensive toys sold in weekly *shaats*, used toys and games which might not be in good state are used as play material by them. The boundaries of caste often get blurred in the urban areas in children's play as compared to class. In the rural spaces caste acts as a stronger segregating factor as compared to class in children's play. There are more chances of children from same caste but different in class to become playmates.

The changing social conditions in urban India along with the changing landscape have also influenced the nature of play in childhood. The increasing rate of crime against children has made the outside spaces for play very unsafe unless guarded by parents or other family members in the collective psyche of urban population. This has forced children to play mostly inside their home in which there is a high proportion of apartments in the high rise buildings which have very limited space for children to play. A small open area is generally kept for children to play in these apartments. This area is often not sufficient for all the children to play and which restricts play activities that involves a lot of physical movement and energy and children often spend play time in chatting or playing games that does not require much space or movement. In situations where there are streets outside the houses children do not get enough opportunity to play outside and they play inside their homes.

Developmentally the progression of play is seen from solitary to organized group play that involves explicit rules. Digital games available to children on mobile phones and computers and other gaming devices have brought an interesting twist and turn into this sequence of change in the nature of play as solitary play has gained importance in early to late childhood through these games. Playing on mobile phones and other gaming devices restrict social interaction in children while playing. Mostly games do not require another player and children play alone. In certain types of games others can be involved remotely but the interactions are dominated by technology and are devoid of a real human communication. In other games where you can play with the other on the gaming devices, the nuances of problem solving, strategy making, team building, making of shared rules, emotional and social bonding are missing which have important developmental implications in childhood in the domains of cognitive, moral and social-emotional development.

The popularity of television in Indian homes has also affected the play behavior of children in the past 2 decades especially with the introduction of private channels available made available earlier by cable operators and then by dish TV. Children spend a considerable amount of time in watching television programmes which has reduced play timings in their daily routines. Characters and themes of popular television shows, cartoons and movies also inform the content of children's play.

### **Conclusion**

Play is an important theme in our imagination and experience of childhood. In this chapter we have discussed in detail the developmental significance of play. Play has an important role to play in children's physical, cognitive, language, social, emotional and moral development. It not only supports development but also acts as a medium for the expression of the process of development in children. Development leads to advancement and more complex patterns of play giving way to development of play from solitary play in infancy to games with rules in late childhood to creative expression of art and innovation in adulthood.

Play not only has developmental significance but also therapeutic value in the life of children and adults and the absence of play in the life of children can lead to pathological behavior. Play serves as an important tool to enter into and understand one's phenomenological experience of life. It is an important medium to understand people's subjectivity as we have discussed in the case study of Kavya. Every act of play has a form and content to it. It is important to understand them to understand what processes are unfolding in play behavior and what is getting to expression in the doing of the child. In play the child honestly expresses herself in the most hidden and unconscious ways. In play the child functions on the mobius of the inner and the outer world. Observation is an important technique to understand children's play and one can participate in the play to enrich its therapeutic value by providing intervention. When I say that participation enriches the therapeutic value of play I reassert that the very nature of play is therapeutic. It is not only a catharsis that gets expression in play but children also work through their traumas and psychological wounds while they play. Drawings become important medium to understand children's subjectivity. Art and other forms of creative expressions are popularly used by therapists, psychologists and educationists to understand problems in children's life and to provide intervention to them.

Social factors affect play in emphatic ways. The cultural and economic life of a community has important implications on what and how their children play as discussed in the work of Bowen and T.S Saraswati. The change and transitions in the social fabric of our country has brought significant changes in the play behavior of children from space to play routines to form and content. These days play is significantly driven by digital technology making children playing games on mobile applications and gaming devices ó having important implications on the personality development of children.

Play is a complex behavior that is intricately woven in the threads of the fabric of life of every culture and society. It is a natural phenomenon that unfolds in living beings with developmental and therapeutic significance. At the same time, the other factors influencing and contributing to the life cycle of a community have important role in shaping the play behavior of the children of that community and the meaning that they attribute to play in their lives as individuals and as a culture.

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