Chapter 9

Children’s Play and Development

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ABSTRACT

Play expresses that human beings use activity as the most natural and adaptive way to be in the world. However, children’s play had not been a subject of study and theoretical reflection until the beginning of the last century. Fortunately, the spread of developmental and educational psychology has been little by little sensitive to this extraordinary and original activity and the observation, study, and analysis of play have advanced a lot; the scientific development on play advances through the creation of very interesting theories based on the psychodevelopmental nature of play. In addition, in the last decades, an important number of authors stand up for a critical look at the general interpretation according to which children’s play is just an enjoyable and relaxing activity: an activity of interest, per se, that plays an essential role in children’s cognitive development and creative thinking. Both interpretations are considered in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Play expresses that human beings use activity as the most natural and adaptive way to be in the world. We play from the first months of life and, throughout the first years, play becomes one of the main activities children do, along with eating and sleeping. Thus, play occupies an important part of children’s life. However, children’s play had not been a subject of study and theoretical reflection until the beginning of the last century. Fortunately, Developmental and Educational Psychology has been little by little sensitive to this extraordinary and original activity and the observation, study and analysis of
play have advanced a lot. The classical theories that explained the nature of the playful activity have included from the ones which considered play as a way of using the excess of one’s energy during the first years of life, to those which believed that it was a way little children used in order to practice and learn in advance those tasks which were typical of the adulthood. These theoretical trends occupied the first years of the 20th century, but the basis of the scientific interpretation of children’s play was set in the 1930s: the spread of developmental psychology assumes Vygotsky’s and Piaget’s theories as a reasonable explanation. Additionally, the scientific development on play advances through the creation of very interesting theories based on the psychodevelopmental nature of play. Theories that with more or less accuracy have allowed to support educational initiatives which consider the playful activity as a learning and development environment. In addition, in the last decades, we have witnessed an increase in the number of authors who stand up for a critical look at the general interpretation according to which children’s play is just an enjoyable and relaxing activity. They understand it as an activity of interest per se and that it plays an essential role in children’s cognitive development and creative thinking, apart from its extraordinary role as a psychotherapeutic tool in the first years of development of children’s psychopathology.

WHAT IS PLAYING? CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAYING

We could say that play is an activity which has popularly been associated with entertainment, leisure, satisfaction and with the pleasure for the action being carried out and which does not have a specific purpose in advance. Nevertheless, from a psychodevelopmental point of view, play is so complex and includes so many aspects that nowadays it is difficult to find an agreed definition which globally accounts for the psychosocial nature of the behaviours it includes or may include. Different authors have shown that there is a narrow line which separates play from other activities such as exploring, serious activity, learning, etc. Thus, for example, it would be difficult to define the type of activity a child is carrying out while s/he is busy tidying up all the pieces of a puzzle on a table and singing a song which marks the pace of tidying up, because the adult in charge has established it as a requirement before starting a new activity. It could appear to be a game, as the child seems to be having fun with the activity. However, it has been the adult who has established the rule or necessity of carrying out that task, setting a different goal. In this sense, we could say that it is a job, given the fact that it does not meet the basic characteristic of play: doing it just because, without any other purpose than playing. Therefore, establishing the characteristics which allow us to distinguish a playful activity from one which is not so seems to be more operational than trying to give a thorough definition of what play is (Hughes, 2010; Ortega, 2003). In this regard, we must underline several characteristics: (1) play is an intrinsically motivated activity, there is no other reason to do it, it is only done because of the satisfaction of doing it; (2) it is an activity that the participants have freely chosen, it is not assigned by anyone else, as it is the person who chooses to do it; (3) play, although it may not always be, is itself a pleasant activity, which provides or creates satisfaction and positive affection; (4) it is a fictitious activity, in other words, most play have got a representative and imaginary basis; the activity often represents a reality in which anything is possible and adjusts to the participants’ pleasure and interests; (5) play is an activity which requires an active involvement by the participants, it is not an activity in which we can stay passive or expectant, but it requires a physical activation, a psychological activation or both; (6) play is a smart activity, since when one plays, cognitive functions are involved in significant levels, which provides
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