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What is This?
Contexts of childhood and play: Exploring parental perceptions

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Abstract
The article explores cross-cultural notions of play in childhood among parents based on empirical investigations in two economically diverse residential areas in a metropolis in India. All parents had an unquestionable belief in an epistemic grounding of play in children’s lives. However, parents begin to question play timings and children’s engagement with play when faced with the contemporary demands of schooling which are enmeshed in a childhood dominated by academic achievement, suppressing parents’ intuitive leanings towards play. The school-led social environment regulates play and shapes notions of childhood, forcing parents to socialize children for school performance and ‘print expertise’. Social class variations are more an outcome of socioeconomic geographies and not education-based awareness only. The penetrating advent of technology in children’s lives renders gadgets as treasured play objects among certain social groups replacing the make-believe games of yesteryear.

Keywords
area of residence, childhood, cultural beliefs, education, families, play, play and school, socioeconomic groups, technology and childhood

Introduction
Play is often synonymous with childhood and has early beginnings. An infant watching a mobile over the cot and responding in delight is often the beginnings of play. A toddler improvises and explores objects for innovative play. Older children engage playfully with strategy and planning in complex games. Adults refer to instances of child-chosen activities as play. Children spontaneously utilize acts of fun to experiment in the worlds

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they inhabit. Simultaneously, processes of socialization rush to ‘teach children’, putting social pressures on childhood. Most often, children engaging voluntarily in activities with spontaneous interest are instances seen as ‘play’, which at times may be in tandem with socializing norms. Despite indulging in children’s activities, parents begin to regulate childhood play, which slides to a disputed domain as adults begin to see children’s play as transgression.

Play is universal and every culture has had devices for playful childhood sociality. Opie and Opie (1970 [1959]) compiled children’s rhymes and different forms of games in their seminal work The Lore and Language of School Children. Going beyond the nursery, the Opies discuss the culture of childhood through the rites and rhymes, jokes and jeers, laws, games and secret spells of childhood play, which shows no sign of dying out. The central importance of creative play in children’s healthy development is well supported by decades of research (Almon, 2002). In most societies childhood is largely directed by family orientations in conjunction with societal beliefs, which in the contemporary world comprise the overarching educationally led social definition of childhood (Holt, 1967; Jenks, 1996). A worldwide emphasis on schooling situates children to be on their own, leaving them to negotiate with school systems in addition to neighbourhood and family norms to pursue any self-chosen activity (Corsaro, 2003).

Major theorists like Piaget, Erikson and Vygotsky all agree that the child uses play for self-teaching. The child plays through situations very much like an adult thinks through a situation. Vygotsky believed that play is a means of deferring immediate gratification – instead of tantrums or suppressing the need, the child fulfills needs in fantasy play. He also believed that children learn to live within self-imposed rules during their fantasy play; play allows the child to practise self-regulation. Also, fantasy play is a manifestation of symbolic representation – the child represents objects and ideas through play situations. Vygotsky assigned play a special place in his theory, listing it specifically as one of the social contexts responsible for creating young children’s ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD).

In play the child is always behaving beyond his/her age, above his/her usual everyday behaviour; in play the child is, as it were, a head above him/herself. Play contains in a concentrated form, as in the focus of a magnifying glass, all developmental tendencies; it is as if the child tries to jump above his/her usual level. The relationship of play to development should be compared to the relationship between instruction and development (Vygotsky, 1978: 74).

Parents are the first socializing adults. Attachment studies indicate that securely attached children initiate more playful activity and the tenor of their interactions with the mother is more positive than that of insecurely attached children (Bretherton, 1989; Roggman and Langlois, 1987). Play and processes in the care of the young will contribute in creating a social world in which growing children develop. Parenting has certain universal dimensions however; parental norms are constructed and practised according to people’s cultural belief systems. The belief systems are often implicitly rooted in economy and access, impacting parenting in more ways than one, and are not an outcome of a ‘process’ of training to be a parent. Play is often a result of the contexts people live in and the environment they are able to provide for their growing children (Pellegrini and Smith, 2003). Children’s
play depends on familiarity with props and people, safety and minimal intrusion by adults (Rubin et al., 1983). The concept of the ‘eco-cultural niche’ developed by Weisner (Harkness and Super, 1996) relates parents’ cultural belief systems to the ecology of the family and community, on the one hand, and to parental behaviour, on the other.

It would be of interest to explore in the vastly varying Indian urban contexts the different influences that shape parental belief systems in relation to play. Parental beliefs about play seem important against the rising pressures of education, learning and making decisions about everyday routines for children.

Parental attitudes are mingled with memories of their own childhood activities; however, hindsight makes adults believe that adult intervention facilitates play. Research has shown that adult-directed play tends to lose its spontaneity and dynamism (Corsaro, 1997; Kapoor, 2005). In 2002, the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) reported that play provides a useful balance between what is learnt through child-initiated activities and the play directed by adults. Play has an overall developmental influence on children (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978). Play is associated with socialization including the acquisition of gender roles, values and understanding about social institutions (Sutton-Smith and Rosenberg, 1980).

Play and especially outdoor play is absolutely crucial for the child’s development, health and well-being (Vygotsky, 1978). It is the interplay of multiple factors, such as the child’s disposition, the role of play partners and the contextual nature of play, which stimulates the various developmental domains of the child. Piaget saw play as a behaviour that emerges as a result of combining skills, knowledge and understanding to create a learning experience. Play continues to get more complex as children grow, helping to gain mastery and coordination.

**Research project**

For any parent, the major concern is the optimal development of their child for which they turn to cultural scripts. In Indian cultural belief systems, children are considered incarnations of God and childhood activities are referred to as *bal krida* (child-play). The ethnic literature has many descriptions of the playful acts of popular mythological icons as children. *Bhakti* poets such as Tulsidas and Suradasa weave in their poetry vivid images of adult–child partnerships and the adulation of childhood play that culturally situates play within the Indian family (Kakar, 1981). However, there is little information available on contemporary parental belief systems regarding the value of play in the lives of children.

In India too, adults in the family are the first and foremost part of the social network, interacting through infant games and rhymes with babies. Older children may have specific play objects or children may freely play with make-believe objects while the mother goes about the daily chores. This child–object playfulness often becomes an opportunity to interpret and experience the social environment in an acceptable manner. Internalizations are an outcome of intersections between sociocultural prescriptions and personal belief systems. Understanding beliefs about play may be useful to deepen child-sensitive orientations and impact children’s development through contexts of play. Research has also explored the relation between environmental variables such as play materials, play space and play partners, and the types of play in which children engage (Georgia, 1984).
It would be of interest to explore in the varying Indian urban contexts, the influences that shape parental belief systems regarding childhood and the positioning of play in contemporary social contexts.

The research reported in this article was guided by the belief in the epistemology of play supported by Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches in making meaning of how children learn and expand their mental, physical and intellectual horizons. The important questions to be explored were, how do parents view and support children’s play and contribute to ethno-theories about childhood play? Societal orientations and beliefs regarding play were evident by a visible presence of indigenous toys, jingles and traditional rhymes in every culture. Parental perceptions as adults in the immediate environment regarding childhood propensity for play poses interesting questions with social responsibilities as active socializing agents.

We wish to provide empirical perspectives of childhood play from two very distinct socioeconomic groups in India. This article describes and analyses socioeconomic diversity and people’s beliefs about play, identifies universal features promoting play and takes note of points of departure in people’s views.

**The sample and socioeconomic geographies**

Socioeconomic, cultural and geographical parameters define diversity in Indian contexts and influence play spaces, objects and play patterns. In India, neighbourhoods largely comprise families with similar socioeconomic backgrounds and locality determines everyday rhythms by way of access to basic needs like water and electricity. Multiple linguistic groups, many religious persuasions and occupations are natural within most residential areas. During childhood the playing fields offer brief windows of time for a natural mix among children from different social classes. Examples from the ethnic literature provide many instances of social equality in the playing fields despite persistent patterns of uneven access to resources and inequity in life chances (Premchand, 2004[1935]). It is quite natural to see close playmates growing apart in very diverse social worlds while they may have bonded within the demands of the ‘play activity’.

**Locating families from local early childhood centres**

In the present study 14 families each were selected from two residential areas. Low income Group A from the periphery of the city comprised parents of children attending the state-run early childhood (ECCE) centre, while high income Group B living in different parts of the capital city were parents of children attending a fee-paying early childhood education centre in the locality. In total there were 28 parental dyads from two income groups. All the participants were parents of second-born children attending the ECCE centres, to ensure mature reflections on child rearing.

Group A was comprised largely of low income families that had a history of migration. They had inhabited the present housing complex for about 30 years before which they had lived in temporary shanty dwellings in the middle of the city with makeshift civic facilities. These resettlement colonies emerged as a sociopolitical policy shift...
wherein large numbers of slum dwellers became ‘land owners’ on the outer margins of the capital city. Each family received a plot of 22.5 sq yards irrespective of the number of extended members in the household. The densely inhabited living area was noticeable. The relocation made for an organized living structure with proximity to schools and play areas. Parental occupations were in the unorganized sector and on an average the family income ranged from Rs1500 to Rs3000 per month. Men were employed as vegetable sellers, washer men or factory labourers while the mothers supported the family by small sewing jobs, often outsourced by big companies. Most parents had been to school up to class V or class XII and there was only one mother who was a postgraduate.

Group B included parents who had professional careers or were high ranking government officials. They had high educational achievements – all being graduates, with some having postgraduate degrees. These families lived in large, spacious three to four bedroom houses, with at least 500 sq yards of living space and an abundance of play resources and access to outdoor space. Besides being property owners their income ranged from Rs20,000 to Rs40,000 per month. Children went to expensive fee-paying schools, unlike the other group where the older children attended state-run schools that were free of cost. The families had been contacted through a reputable fee-paying early childhood centre in central Delhi.

**Method**

Observation and interview schedules were used to generate data. At least three to four visits to families were necessary to elicit details of play and parenting. During these sessions observations were made of parent–child interactions, children’s play behaviour as well as the materials and objects used in play. Interviews probed areas of parental beliefs, parenting practices and play and their notions about the value of play in their children’s lives. Word nets were created around play and toys. This process entails posing a word and making a graphic note of the spontaneous verbal reactions in the order of utterance. Responses were tape recorded wherever possible as well as noted in detail. Data were qualitatively analysed, creating themes as units of analysis.

**Findings**

All parents, irrespective of educational background, physical setting and economic disparity, converged in their attitudes in viewing the value of play. Despite disparate resources, inequity in available space and very different methods and means of raising children in the two groups, these contemporary parents all acknowledged the necessity of play in children’s development, but that academic pressures and invasive technology tend to deprive children of play. Parents themselves felt compelled to restrict play under the pressure of achieving academic excellence and keeping pace with school demands and rhythms. Almost all the parents could relate with the classic as well as changing meanings and conditions of play in the contemporary world. Parents categorically acknowledged children’s right to play and be playful.
Play and children’s development

Parents understood play as integral to children and believed that play was children’s work and medium for learning. A few mothers strongly asserted that absence of play means absence of learning. Most parents believed play to be significant for teaching-learning that allows children subtle exploration of the environment and facilitates self-will. ‘Play is an activity which gives happiness, enjoyment and entertainment to the children’ seemed the most common understanding among parents (23 dyads).

Parents (27) reaffirmed the numerous ways in which play contributed to the growth and development among children and their health and well-being. Play provided immediate benefits like increasing stamina, keeping children fit, active and alert:

The biggest benefit is that it improves health because with play, the energy gets utilized, their appetite increases and if they eat properly they will be fit. (Father, Group A)

Parents (10/28) believed that play is one of the best recreational activities, and that it channels energy by releasing tension and regulates boredom. Some mothers specifically mentioned the social and educational value of play. Parents in both groups also saw an important relation between play and learning besides the spontaneous joy that playful opportunities infused in children. Mothers in the lower income Group A particularly mentioned a fundamental link between play and learning, while a few mentioned that play distracts children from studies. About 50 percent of parents (13/28) also considered play as a catalyst in fostering the process of cognitive development and something to be encouraged. Parents (17) felt play led to such outcomes as learning of social skills and values like sharing and cooperation. Play is often a platform for children to gain competencies and mastery of self and the environment.

Contemporary childhood and regulating time for play

Some parents (3) saw no demerits to play whatsoever. Just as parents accepted the value of play, they also stressed the need for adult surveillance as a matter of physical safety of young children. Also, in everyday practice play has to be balanced with roles that provide competencies for the future such as education:

Of course play is an obstacle. Earlier there was a saying that if you will play you are spoiled, but if you study you will be a king/nawab. (Mother, Group A)

Parents assumed that children look to adults to provide an environment with material and non-material experiences which may help them to grow as individuals belonging to a particular culture at a particular time.

Despite an effusive valuing of play and the parental (10) affirmation of play as an important medium for children to imbibe processes of life, freedom for play was tempered and frequently followed by the mention of ‘fixed times for play’. The regulation of play time and the primacy of ‘completing’ school-related tasks was a concern irrespective of social class. In both groups, discussions about play led to contemporary academic
demands on children and the expectations of good school behaviour that left children with little and only fixed time for playful activities. This compliance with school pressures distressed the low income mothers. Nine parents from Group A believed that there should be a fixed time for children to play so that they could devote some time to studies. According to parents children could engage in self-chosen play activity but it should not be an endless activity.

Flexibility with regard to play hours was shared by few parents from Group B. The upper class parents defined age as an important factor in the regulation of play and prescribing time slots. They felt play was young children’s primary activity.

The time gets fixed automatically. In the morning they go to school, then to tuition classes and after that they get busy doing the homework. So they play in the time left over. (Mother, Group A)

See it’s dependent on the child’s age. You cannot have [a] fixed time concept with very young children, but with older children it’s possible. (Father, Group B)

Parental preferences for play spaces

Parents thought outdoor spaces are good for children, helping them to expend their energy. Parents (17) in both locations undisputedly identified parks as the best places for children to play, noting that the unrestricted availability of large open space like a park offers opportunity for free play and physical exercise:

It is better if they play outside as it is healthy for both body and mind. (Mother, Group A)

While mothers from Group A emphasized outdoor play, parents (9) from Group B considered both outdoor and indoor play as equally important in having direct influence on physical growth and development. Upper class homes have segregated outdoor spaces taking children out of visibility, which necessitates an adult presence. Having to leave tasks and be with a child creates an added assigned role for the upper class parent and makes outdoor play a task to be executed, making a sharp distinction between outdoor and indoor play, which does not occur in Group A homes:

Children play inside the homes as space for play is available while if they play outside, there is a need to keep an eye [on them]. (Mother, Group B)

Low income residences comprising one room do not have segregated spaces but common areas for the different members of the family. Both shortage of space and improvised arrangements not only make outdoor play a natural outcome in congested living areas but many household chores like washing dishes and clothes happen outside the house. In localities with small houses flanking narrow lanes there is little traffic close to homes and children play while mothers work and ‘watch over’ their children at play with fluid neighbourly interactions and interventions. Parents from Group A indicated ‘no particular preference for either indoor or outdoor play’.
Far less traffic and easy access makes streets preferred and secure places for children to play in lower income homes, and mean surveillance or ‘keeping an eye’ are a part of daily rhythms. While parks were the ideal spaces for children’s play, observations indicate that a large number of parents prefer children to play right outside the home or on the street (Group A), or in their own gardens or on the terrace in the case of upper class families (Group B). Adult concerns about children’s safety are making places at close proximity to the home the preferred play spaces for young children. Play in neighbours’ homes was quite common in Group A, while in the Group B locations families’ social boundaries with neighbours were not so permeable.

Parents (18/28) believed that any area could be a safe play area as long as there was the possibility of adult supervision (13 from Group B). The infrequent mention of a need for supervision among lower class parents does not indicate a lack of concern for the safety of their children as supervision occurs while mothers work and is not a specific task to be accounted for. In upper class homes, supervision is a sharply articulated concern as it is a designated task with rigid demarcation of boundaries in secluded homes. Sometimes Group B children were seen cycling outside their homes in the presence of an adult. Most of the upper class children played inside their homes as they usually have open spaces within the house.

Greater adult surveillance has, needless to say, revealed more intrusion into children’s state of well-being (Jenks, 1996). Often a child plays to escape adult rules and to assert his/her own control. Excessive supervision, monitoring and control can obstruct thinking minds and the paths to autonomy. Restrictions and obstructions form the basis of parental action, embodied in beliefs and ideas that may be personal or culturally shared.

**Play areas and multiple users**

Parents may report outdoor area as suitable for play; however these spaces had to be negotiated as there were multiple uses of areas designated as ‘parks for play’. Play becomes a contested activity when play spaces overlap adult interests. Parents in both locations expressed the need to protect children from nagging neighbours or ‘restrictive neighbourhoods’, but this was far more frequently mentioned among the upper social class parents:

Children require open space free from nagging neighbours, so that during play their physical movement is not restricted and they are not disturbed. So for that, park is the best option. (Father, Group B)

Best option is a park. There is no restriction, and open space is available as in Delhi otherwise there is no open space. (Mother, Group B)

One father considered the playing fields in the school as the best place to play. In high economic social groups ‘outside’ play space or outdoor play was preferred (Kapoor, 2005), while for economically deprived neighbourhoods researchers have reported that the lure of the streets is conducive for play, as the lively bustle of the streets also stimulates play (Roberts, 1980).
Parents also identified other influences on children’s play behaviour. Parents (5) from Group B linked the choice of play space with the developmental level and age of the child. They believed young children should play inside with play materials or toys in the presence of adults. It is only as the child grows older that he or she can play with peers outside the home. Children could have some degree of freedom, with permission, in choosing their play space, especially if they wished to explore some new play area. Other studies have also found that children’s choice for play and games is guided by the competence, age and interests of children (Harris et al., 1954). Theorists have described the shift from crudely structured play to organized games in adolescence and adulthood (Pellegrini and Smith, 2003).

**Play patterns display social change**

Play and childhood led parents to compare their own childhood. The parents animatedly recalled the variety of games they played as children. Fathers from Group B mentioned games such as volleyball, hockey and basketball while the mothers mentioned games like ghar-ghar (house-house), gudiya ki shadi (doll’s wedding), chhupan-chhupai (hide and seek), gitte (pebbles) and rassa (skipping). Two mothers from Group B reported playing more with commercially available toys. Five parents from Group A recalled many regional games using improvised play materials, and common games like gulli-danda (a street game), kushti (wrestling), kabaddi (boxing), cricket and kanche (marbles). Premchand’s stories set in rural and small towns abound with descriptions of children’s games, among which the tale *Gulli Danda* is a fine commentary on play being a medium for social mixing negating major social differences in aspirations.

Both mothers and fathers were able to share in the nostalgia and recall moments from their own childhood, carving out play opportunities while carrying out gender-specific tasks. The nostalgic desire to revisit childhood to discuss play and play behaviour is an important indication of the reality of play in the lives of children. Recalling and reminiscing also provided parents an opportunity to display and discuss beliefs and attitudes towards play:

- We used to play in fields, whenever we took the cattle to graze. (Father, Group A)

- I liked playing along the riverside, and jumping from the trees. But now it’s impossible to even think that. (Mother, Group A)

- In Group B, certain cultural influences were carried forward from their childhoods as rules for their own children. Nine parents from Group A adhered to cultural understandings of play and cited some cultural sanctions to regulate their children’s play timings. Some of the cultural sanctions were: disallowing play in the evenings, prohibiting play with specific objects and certain styles and forms of play:

  In the evening I do not allow my children to play pebbles, cards and also do not let them go near peepal trees after having sweets. Actually in our area there is lot of superstition. (Mother, Group B)
Play research in the anthropological domain by Helen Schwartzman (1983 [1978]) emphasizes play as a medium for children to internalize and express cultural trends, patterns and values. Play and cultural expression may be the glue of role identification. Children in the resettlement colony (Group A) were seen engaging in local festivities such as Diwali/Dussera and played with play objects and engaged in dramatic play related to legends. Parents’ responses to the word nets exercise also corroborated words associated with topical play. Children in the central Delhi bungalows did not appear to buy the local toys as much. The word nets also talked of abstract notions of ‘environment and nature’ more than festivals.

**Differences in the choice of play objects**

Low income parents nostalgically recalled proximity to nature and improvisational play and reported a phenomenal increase in play objects in current times. Economic status played an important role in the selection of play materials. Upper class parents noted that children have different play areas and many items that constitute play materials. Some decline in outdoor play was reported as a result of fancy mechanical play materials such as remote controlled toys, cars and so on. But across income groups many parents (20/28) stressed the use of improvised and indigenous play materials, such as bricks instead of proper wickets for cricket, when there was no access to the proper equipment.

Playful engagement with objects enables children to establish a meaningful dialogue with all that they encounter, creating experiences that further define their emotional well-being and establishing a sense of belonging to their culture and social setting. Toys have a special connection with children’s play as they are essential for children’s holistic growth and development. Significance of play with objects was mentioned more by high income parents, while low income parents did not fail to mention economic limitations. There have been policy recommendations with regard to the presence of play materials. For example, the National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education (NCERT, 2005) specified the 3Cs of play materials – commercial toys, creative materials and collective materials.

According to our observations, socioeconomic limitations prepared children in Group A to frequently rely on creative and collective play materials. It was noted that children were readily using materials in their surroundings to improvise and engage in spontaneous play led by a desire for activity. Play is not solely dependent on materials and expensive toys even though economic resources facilitated children in Group B to own commercial toys:

> Earlier we used to use an improvised form of bat, but now they are easily available in the market, which are affordable too. (Father, Group A)

A predominant aspect among a subsection of the upper income sample is the noted increase in domestication of modern childhood play and a movement of play towards indoor areas. It has been noted that domestication is accentuated by an increasing control and supervision of play by cultural agencies such as playground supervision, sports organizations and other recreational organizations (Goldstein, 1994).
Effect of technology

Most parents (17/28) believed that television leaves time for neither study nor play. Parents were critical of technology as it changed the site of children’s leisure activities:

Sitting and only watching television is like rusting the body, which leads to health problems. (Mother, Group B)

High income parents (9/14) strongly believed that the easy availability of high tech toys is reducing children’s physical activity and affecting their health. The impact of the commercialization of technological play materials and their invasion into children’s play activities was more an upper income phenomenon. The lower income families, due to limited resources, could not easily afford gadgets and resorted to outdoor play.

Parental notions and developmental understandings

Urbanization and industrialization has changed the structure of the family from extended families to nuclear families. Fathers reported that work situations and the absence of the extended family have taken away playmates from domestic spaces. Play becoming individualistic and personal (Sutton-Smith, 1994) was an observation from the word net activity with upper class families, who mentioned toys, bicycles or a PlayStation, while for lower income parents play was a collective activity, like marbles or flying kites.

Parents irrespective of education or income were aware that choice of play partners depended on the child’s age. Peer groups replace play with adults:

Initially the young child will play more with parents, slowly-slowly with siblings and then he will play with peers. (Mother, Group A)

Most parents (21/28) believed large families with multi-age play partners such as parents, grandparents, siblings, friends or age mates as crucial for childhood play. Children develop special intergenerational relationships as grandparents tend to play ‘for’ the child with care for their physical, social and emotional well-being. Parents (13) felt that despite more limited physical agility, children enjoy playing with their grandparents because they indulge childhood whims and expression of sovereignty:

My children love to play with their grandparents. Firstly, because grandparents listen to them, and secondly they repeatedly give chances to children and finally allow them to win. But due to the age factor they do not play games that require a lot of physical activity. (Father, Group A)

The presence of grandparents is an important facet of everyday rhythms in the cultural context. Parents believed that play with the elderly provides emotional security while play with peers and siblings in parental (14/28) belief systems is conducive to learning the skills of social survival. Play among siblings may be conflict ridden but parents (14/28) strongly felt that despite the conventional rivalry, siblings tend to be caring, affectionate and protective towards each other.
Discussion

Current research confirms the connection established by Piaget (1962) between make-believe play and children’s development and Vygotsky’s (1978) notion that play is a source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Parents from both settings outlined a positive relationship between play and the overall development of children, which led to the significance of play being universally accepted. Parental beliefs and ethno-theories can be seen to be grounded in Vygotskian (1978) theory that emphasizes that social learning precedes development:

Every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). (Vygotsky, 1978: 57)

Parents understand that play provides physical exercise, enjoyment and expends excess energy. Play is seen as learning in a less risky situation with minimal consequences of action and many opportunities to try combinations of behaviour that would not otherwise be tried (Garvey, 1977). Like Vygotskian zones of proximal development, parental views indicated that play allows children to explore their social and physical world. An important function of play is one of working through experiences as a preparation for activities that must be mastered for the reality of living (Lieberman, 1977).

Adults assume that play is something which children ‘just do’ and it is their nature to do so to derive information and build social skills (Harkness and Super, 1996). Though the notion of play and its impact on social-cognitive competence was well understood, parents had a concern for the demands of school life and their children’s future. Across income groups, parental construction of childhood in contemporary social networks is defined by academic achievement. The beliefs about the significance of play are dismissed and performance in school is seen as the only path for children to carve out success. The dialogues of parents shift to ‘it is important to first finish school tasks and engage in play if time permits’. Competitive life or the demands of school are not viewed as inappropriate or in opposition to play. Pramanik (2007: 291) states, ‘In modern society, childhood is primarily dominated by the family or educational system’ where the latter takes the lead as schools become the designated places for locating children.

Advocacy for childhood issues

Schools must ensure lively, playful engagement with children bearing in mind their interests. Children must be seen as ‘active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and the society in which they live’ (James and Prout, 1986: 72). If civic amenities support play there is little reason for adult subjugation. Children need not deal with undue restrictions and pressures of hierarchy. Social sanctions for play revolve around territorial rights over open areas of adult use and children’s right to play. Parks may be civic amenities for children’s play but they are accessed by adults for household tasks in the absence of private open spaces, such as for drying clothes, sun drying vegetables or adult exercise. Research reports that with shrinking
play spaces children have to negotiate with adults as well as adapt and modify their play behaviour (Sud, 1989). Absence of space and the presence of easily available readymade play materials could produce physical and intellectual laziness. There is an urgent need to link early schooling to the benefits of ‘playfulness’ and not have schooling dominate play, making adults fearful of the freedom to play.

Role of adults in children’s play

On the other hand, one of the primary ways in which adults engage with children and tend to organize their schedules is by regulating children’s rhythms, whereby children adhere to time tables. Studies indicate that the way adults define and idealize play may reflect the needs of adults to organize and control children, rather than children’s own needs and wishes (Pellegrini and Smith, 2003). Children require adults to provide them with the opportunities for play to act out their hopes, fears and needs in a secure zone. Play provides a forum to learn and understand more about different social roles and relationships. Children need time and space to make sense of the adult world in their own way. If adults pay attention and engage in children’s play, with appropriate stimulations, then there is recognition of play as a natural activity for children (Santrock, 1994). The valuing of play by adults may impact children’s self-concept as it facilitates children’s guilt-free participation in normally appealing activities.

Pellegrini and Smith (2003) also discuss the immediate functions of play such as thermoregulation, exercise and affiliation with peer groups, including the practising of adult roles, decoding and encoding social signals. ‘Play occurs during childhood to aid in skill assembly and is dis-assembled when skill is mastered, that is, benefits of play are not immediate but deferred until after childhood’ (Roskos, 2000).

Different levels of parents’ education, as well as access to resources, were not necessarily an indicator of developmentally appropriate concern for childhood. Childcare practices and what parents convey is often dependent on sociophysical geographies. In high income families the parental tendency to monitor children and the idea that ‘children need to be supervised’ border on overprotection but in reality are more a function of individual homes and rigid boundaries for privacy and led by the idea that parks are the spaces for play. Low income parents living in interactive neighbourhoods seemed to be more adjusted to childcare with no overt mention of supervising childhood rhythms. Fluid socioeconomic geographic boundaries in living arrangements, neighbourly cooperation rather than any lack of education or awareness allowed free play regulation with ease. The permeable boundaries foster collective childcare for parents or neighbours, who keep an eye on children through an unwritten pact, and convey a sense of watchful freedom for children. Regulating children’s play is an organic part of women’s chores and not a separate task to be counted. Interaction and neighbourly cooperation is inversely proportional to income. The lower the income of parents, the higher is the mutual support especially due to the proximity of living areas.

Income determines access to resources for play in terms of objects. Earlier studies have indicated higher levels of storybook reading, word games and other playful types of print activities among children whose parents believed in the need for children to
experience happiness and enjoyment of an activity (Roskos and Christie, 2000). High income parents talked of commercial toys and the lure of technology shifting play to an indoor activity (Roberts, 1980). They also lamented with nostalgia their own creative and innovative adaptations of play objects now absent in contemporary living (Frost and Klein, 1979). At any point play reflects societal values. Smith (2010) makes a persuasive argument for the universality of play, but which when examined carefully differs symbolically as it reflects adult culture filtered through the child’s view and the values of the culture.

Park (2003) notes that the behaviour of individuals is positioned within the frames of cultural models, which was echoed by parents’ understanding that their beliefs and views are constructed within the boundaries of cultural notions of childhood. The emerging parental understanding about the significance of play for young children seems to indicate that children spontaneously learn games, rules and boundaries, and imbibe social skills. It is the culture of childhood that reproduces play, games and childhood language through playful regimes. Patterns in play change with the times and social and technological changes also bring changes in play and choice of play objects. School learning is essential and contemporary childhood follows school rhythms and academic competencies must be developed.

Implications

Childhood play in its spontaneous choice of activities mirrors contemporary societal values and beliefs through its socialization practices. Play tends to mirror adult roles and work irrespective of social class, geographical location or occupation. In modern society school systems and the need to be literate guide socialization practices and childhood rhythms with decreasing acknowledgement of time and space for play as a basis for learning in childhood. Play needs to be integral in childhood-related spaces and settings for building future competencies.

Research must sensitively probe notions of childhood through multiple techniques as communities have many unique ways of taking care of the young. The subtle differences in childcare may be missed if research is not guided by openness to interpret ‘surprises’. Social groups may interact with children in ways that may not ‘fit’ in with normative standards for raising children.

Second, active advocacy is needed for a harmonious balance in childhood propensities for self-chosen play and exploration, and to raise a voice for school routines to be more fair and just. Exploration and experimentation facilitate critical thinking, while excessive pressure for training to be a competent adult may diffuse critical skills. In fact playfulness in school rhythms may enhance cognitive and linguistic competence in early childhood. Play nurtures children’s curiosity, nourishes innovative skills and allows the development of individual potential.

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1. Some of the extracts are translated by the authors from Hindi.

References


