

Imaginative Play: A Review of Literature on the Influence of Media and
Educational Changes

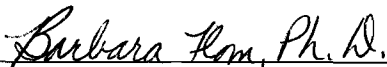
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ABSTRACT

Imaginative play has been proven to be an important component in the cognitive development of a child. As times have changed, so has imaginative play. The purpose of this study was to explore literature that investigated contributing factors influencing the decline of imaginative play in children. Youth today are spending more time engaging in media related activities than they have in the past, which leaves less time for them to play. In addition, there is increased pressure for students to achieve well academically. Some schools are reducing or eliminating recess, which deprives students of needed play time. Overall, the data uncovered in this review attributes increased media and educational changes to the decline in children's imaginative play. School counselors need to advocate and promote imaginative play to educators and parents. Our nation needs to look more closely at how media and education trends are impacting the play of our youth.

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Chapter I: Introduction

What if there were no longer playgrounds at elementary schools? What if children did not know how to play pretend? What if children were so busy that they did not have time to play? Sadly, this phenomenon is occurring throughout the nation. Some cases are more severe than others, but children's lives have been affected by academic pressures and increased media exposure. According to Cloud and Elkind (2007), children are often portrayed by the media as high achieving, mini-adults, concerned with school issues and family problems. Has our society turned our youth into miniature adults?

Imaginative play is an important factor in contributing to the development of necessary skills needed to function appropriately in our society. Research shows that children who engage in imaginative play are better able to express themselves, are more empathetic to other people's feelings, and function better socially than those who do not spend time playing imaginatively (Robinson, 2004). Through play, children sort out their feelings and work through difficult situations. Theorists have also recognized the importance of play in a child's life. According to Powell (2001), Piaget's view of play is supportive because he believed that play helps children develop creativity, try different roles, solve problems, and make sense of feelings and experiences. Children benefit through play by being able to express their ideas, thoughts, and feelings (Reed, 2007).

Society is changing, pulling youth away from imaginative play and luring them toward using media as a means for entertainment. According to Miller (2005), on average, youth in the United States spend between four and five hours per day watching television, videos, or using the computer. Children are not using their creativity or playing make-believe as much as they have in the past because they have become

dependent on technology to entertain them. As Miller (2005) stated, “Educators report that many children that are adept at playing video games, pushing buttons, and operating a mouse show an alarming lack of imagination” (p. 38). It is a trend that seems to be here to stay as our technology continues to evolve and improve.

What our society used to call playtime has now become media time (Dill, 2005). Kalb (2003) reported that “children in the United States devote some 40 hours a week to television, videogames and the internet” (p. 26). Many children in our society are considered overweight and even obese. The weight problems seen in our children may be a reflection of an increase of media exposure, which has led to a decline in the amount of time youth spend actively engaging in play. According to Dill (2005), because of increased attention to media, there has been a loss of children using their imaginations and participating in physical activity. “On any given day in America, less than 5% of children report using media for an hour or less-everyone else is a heavier user” (Dill, 2005, p. 317). The time children spend engaging in media activities is commonly not monitored by parents.

As our society progresses, there seems to be a greater emphasis placed on achievement and improving test scores and a decline in the amount of time kids are able to play and be carefree. Schools are changing their curriculum to meet the high academic demands of our society. “Under extreme pressure to ensure high scores on standardized tests, many school administrators have cut recess out or try to use physical education as a substitute for it” (Chmelynski, 2006, p. 10). Not only have schools eliminated recess, but some schools are even being built without playgrounds (MacPherson, n.d.). “Nearly 40% of the nation’s 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering

deleting recess” (Chmelynski, 2006, p. 11). The high emphasis on test scores has also meant cuts in art and music programs (Kalb, 2003). Our schools are losing creativity and variety because of the value our society has placed on standardized test scores. In Florida, approximately 43,000 children failed the standardized test and were forced to repeat a grade (Butzin, 2004).

Along with increased standardized test scores comes an increase in homework for students. School districts are pushing for better results on standardized tests and in an attempt to raise test scores, many students are given more homework and expected to complete it during their own time. According to MacPherson (n.d.), “Since the late 1970’s children have lost 12 hours per week in free time, including a 25 percent drop in play and a 50 percent drop in unstructured outdoor activities” (n.p.). Much of this is due to extra homework and more structured extracurricular activities.

Our youth today are overscheduled, overstressed, and overstimulated by their environments (Cloud & Elkind, 2007). Time spent in structured sports activities has almost doubled since the 1970s (MacPherson, n.d.). Not only are youth participating in structured sports, but they are also involved in other after school activities, for example, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Since families today seem to want their children actively involved in extracurricular activities and have a rushed lifestyle, many children are missing out on the benefits associated with play (Cloud & Elkind, 2007).

Today, there is more pressure for youth to excel and achieve academically at a young age. Although research shows that play positively affects children, many parents believe that imaginative play is not necessary (MacPherson, n.d.). Parents’ main focus

today seems to be how they can make sure their child is ahead. They are neglecting the academic and developmental benefits that play can provide.

Statement of the Problem

Many anecdotal reports in popular sources discuss how children are not spending as much time playing imaginatively as they have in the past; however, they do not describe the factors that contribute to the decline in play. The reasons behind the decrease in imaginative play need to be sorted out by reviewing current literature and research on the topic. This study investigates contributing factors to the decline in children engaging in imaginative play. The focus of the study is to understand how increased media exposure and changes in education have affected play in children. An analysis of the literature, limitations of current research, implications for future research, implications for practice, and a summary are also included.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following questions:

1. How has the increase of media exposure impacted imaginative play in children?
2. How have changes in education impacted imaginative play in children?

Definition of Terms

For clarity of understanding, the following terms need to be defined:

Imaginative Play-play in which children transcend the constraints of reality by acting “as if” (Singer & Singer, 2001, p. 122).

Media-a means of mass communication including television, computers, radio, and for purposes of this study, video games (Media, 2008).

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that the literature reviewed in this work represents a sample of recent research which is available on the subject of imaginative play. It is also assumed that scholarly works are peer reviewed; popular literature is less closely screened. The bulk of the literature reviewed is scholarly.

A limitation of this study is that there was not access to all of the literature available on the topic. Some sources used are dated and may not contain the most contemporary views of play. Additionally, the review itself will uncover gaps in scholarly studies.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The focus of this chapter is to explore the issue of imaginative play and how it has been affected by increased media and educational changes. The chapter will include a discussion on the importance of imaginative play for child development, followed by information on increased media and play. The chapter will conclude with information regarding educational changes that have affected play.

Importance of Play for Child Development

The significance of play has changed over the years. Early theories focused on the biological and genetic components of play, such as expending energy (Hughes, 1999). Sigmund Freud was one of the first contemporary theorists to define play from a different perspective. He saw play as a way to cope with anxiety-producing situations, as well, as to fulfill unmet desires (Singer, 1973). In Freud's mind, play was not something children did for fun, or gained developmental benefits from, but rather a way to deal with unpleasant circumstances. According to Singer (1973), Freud believed play represented mastery in children as they dealt with conflict and difficult situations. After Freud, other theorists looked more closely at play and developed their own theories.

In order for one to understand the relevance of play in a child's life, one needs to know the impact it has on child development. Jean Piaget, a child development theorist, had the following to say regarding play and children:

During the play process, children "assimilate" or stretch reality by fitting it into their own understanding and needs, and by inventing ideas that are new to themselves. Through play, children try on new roles; they imagine what might be instead of what is; they develop creativity as they combine old elements into

new ways to discover new possibilities; and they learn problem-solving skills as they transform difficulties they run into (Piaget, as cited in Powell, 2001, p. 37).

Piaget was an advocate for play, believing it helped children learn how to function in society. Children acquire social rules, and their imaginations adapt to reality (Piaget, 1962). They imitate what they see and learn through playing imaginatively. Piaget believed that repetitively repeating newly learned behaviors through play is the way children learn how to behave (Hughes, 1999).

Another advocate for play was Lev Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist who was also a social constructivist. He believed that play stimulates the development of abstract thought (Reed, 2007). Vygotsky developed the concept of the zone of proximal development, believing there is a difference between a child's actual developmental level and the potential developmental level of a child (Barnes, 2001). When children play, they have the ability to behave beyond their age and typical behavior (Barnes, 2001). They can try on different roles and characteristics and explore how the world operates through play. "Play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development" (Vygotsky, as cited in Barnes, 2001, p. 241).

Imaginative play has been shown to help children develop cognitively. "Play helps the child to expand vocabulary and link objects with actions, develop object constancy, form event schemas and scripts, learn strategies for problem solving, develop divergent thinking ability, and develop a flexibility in shifting between different types of thought (narrative and logical)" (Russ, 2004, p. 9). Play also helps children understand the world around them. According to Harris (2000), children's play is a way for them to

put their understanding of the physical and mental world into action and make sense of it. Through play children learn and develop concepts, which help their cognitive development (Russ, 2004).

In addition to cognitive development, children also develop emotionally through play. “Play has an important role in emotional development as it gives children the opportunity to suspend reality and explore potentially threatening and/or traumatic experiences in the controlled and relatively safe context of imagination, pretence, and fantasy” (Barnes, 2001, p. 261). Furthermore, observing a child playing imaginatively can help adults understand the emotional state of the child. Children’s play provides insights to what is going on in the child’s eyes (Barnes, 2001).

Increased Media Exposure

Children today are spending nearly 40 hours a week using the Internet, playing videogames, and watching television, which means that technological devices have become a full-time job for our youth (Kalb, 2003). Although there are benefits to the increase of technology, the amount of time our children spend engaging in media related activities means less play time for them at a time when play is so critical in their lives. “Over the past two decades, children have lost 12 hours of free time a week, including 8 hours of unstructured play and outdoor activities” (Cloud & Elkind, 2007, p. B4). We live in a technologically driven world that may have negative impacts on who our children become.

There are mixed findings regarding the effects television has on children’s imagination. “On the one hand, television viewing is believed to produce a passive intellect and to reduce imaginative capacities. On the other hand, there has been

enthusiasm about educational television viewing fostering children's creative thinking skills" (Singer & Singer, 2001, p. 121). According to Guernsey (2007), scientific research indicates that a number of children's educational television shows have positively impacted children academically and socially. Unfortunately, not all children's television programs are helpful. The show must be slow, linear, and repetitive in order to be beneficial to young children (Guernsey, 2007). Singer and Singer (1978) conducted research on correlates of imaginative play and found that children who had imaginary friends tended to watch much less television than those who did not have imaginary friends.

A study by French and Pena (1991) investigated children's imaginative play by comparing a group of children who had not been exposed to television to a group of children who normally watch television. The findings indicated that there were differences in how these children played. The themes present in the play of children who did not watch television were family-themed, and their heroes were people in their lives (French & Pena, 1991). Those who watched television had themes of heroic adventure play and their heroes were fantasy characters (French & Pena, 1991).

Many parents are under the assumption that their children will be more advanced the earlier they start using technology (Miller, 2005). Child development experts disagree with this belief because they see the work of a young child as regulating their emotions, solving problems, imagining, and learning to coordinate their body movements (Miller, 2005). Yet numerous early childhood programs offer computer time and teach children how to use computers. This is the case because educators face much pressure from parents to teach their children how to email, use a mouse, and create Power-Point

presentations (Miller, 2005). Child development experts believe that children should be able to learn through play when they are young and they will be able to “catch up” on technology when they have mastered the important skills that are developed through imaginative play.

Media is seen everywhere in our nation. Public schools are equipped with televisions, computers, and the Internet. Most households today have more than one television, a variety of videogames, computers with Internet access, and many movies for children to watch. Parents commonly do not monitor how much media time their children engage in, and many do not see it as a problem; however, it is a problem. An increase in time spent using technological devices as a means of entertainment has led to a decline in the amount of time children are active and using their imaginations (Miller, 2005).

Obesity in children is a major issue facing our nation and it has a lot to do with the lack of time youth spend engaging in the physical activity that is obtained through play.

According to Miller (2005), “Technology robs young children of the imaginative play that helps them develop the qualities they will need for future success” (p. 37).

Media has affected the way children play. Research has uncovered the fact that watching television shapes the imaginative play of children (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007). One example of the way imaginative play is affected by television viewing is a child playing Superman. The child may model their play after the character, but they are still creating their own story lines. There is no evidence that fantasy play is increased by the amount of television one watches; however, playing and watching television can occur simultaneously (Comstock & Scharrer, 2007).

Educational Changes

Schools are increasingly utilizing scripted teaching, computerized learning, and standardized assessments to help our youth learn (Olfman, 2003). Unfortunately, play is becoming less and less important during the school day. The increased emphasis on standardized testing has had a major impact in the area of play. Many administrators have cut out recess, or have at least minimized the time children are allowed for recess, so that teachers will have more time to teach academics. According to Chmelynski (2006), “the modern idea of playtime is the physical embodiment of teaching that is endorsed by the No Child Left Behind Act” (p. 11). Schools face pressures to do well on standardized testing in order to maintain necessary funding. Many principals see recess cuts as necessary to improve academic achievement (Dubroc, 2007).

“According to the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play, forty percent of schools in the United States are eliminating, reducing, or changing recess periods” (Dubroc, 2007, p. 3). Schools seem to have no choice in eliminating recess because the standardized testing enforced through the No Child Left Behind, which punishes schools that do not score well enough (Dubroc, 2007). Recess is becoming viewed as a waste of time because educators are believing that the time would be put to better use through academics (Henley, McBride, Milligan, & Nichols, 2007).

School boards and governments have pushed standardized testing and worked to develop more and better standardized tests (Winchester, 2006). “To the extent that evidence does exist from previous rounds of high-stakes testing and extensive research on human motivation, there is every reason to believe that these systems will do more harm than good” (Shepard, 2002, p. 57). If there is little evidence supporting the use of high-

stakes testing, why are we depriving our youth of play time in order to achieve higher scores on tests?

Educational changes in reading and math have meant “play and other activities that promote social and emotional learning are being replaced by academic drills designed to improve early literacy and numeracy” (Miller, 2005, p. 38). In the past, play was recognized as an important activity for youth. Unfortunately, times have changed and now academics have become a greater priority. Play is a natural part of childhood and is considered by child development experts as a “task.” Therefore, the job of the child is to learn and grow through play. The approaches schools are taking to ensure quality education “trivialize and undermine children’s natural capacities for meaningful and focused life lessons through creative play, and this leaves many children profoundly alienated from their school experiences” (Olfman, 2003).

Our society places a tremendous amount of pressure on young children to learn and be “ahead.” Parents are often the ones pushing; however, the requirements for kindergarten have increased compared to what they have been in the past (Kalb, 2003). Therefore, parents need to make sure their child is prepared. According to Kalb (2003), school administrators want to help kids become ready for a competitive world through intellectual development, but critics believe that denying kids the social, physical, and intellectual benefits gained from simple play is not the answer. Play not only has an effect on children’s lives in the present, but also impacts how they think and act in the future. Children who play imaginatively when they are young have a higher likelihood of thinking creatively and solving problems as they get older (Kalb, 2003).

Imaginative play is not the same for children today as it has been in the past. The impacts of increased media and educational changes have changed the amount of time children spend playing. The youth in our nation today are spending more time using media and developing media-related skills than ever before. The themes and characters in children's play have changed with the increase of media. Additionally, the amount of time our youth have for recess has changed as academic performance and high achievement on standardized tests are gaining priority. Many children are missing out on the important benefits that imaginative play can provide.

Chapter III: Discussion

The information provided in this section will serve as a summary of research findings derived from the review of literature on imaginative play as it relates to an increase in media and changes in education. Results of qualitative and quantitative research, limitations of the current research, implications for future research, and implications for practice are discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study.

Analysis of the Literature Review

Our society wants our children to be intelligent and creative and to have good social and emotional skills. Therefore, it seems ironic that play is being minimized and eliminated from schools when play is a major factor in developing those important skills. Taking playtime and playgrounds away from children may be hindering their development, rather than helping it. Some schools are being built without playgrounds, and many schools have already reduced or eliminated recess to replace it with academics. Children's lives have become serious, and play is not coming across as being valuable (MacPherson, n.d.).

The first research question asked is: How has the increase of media exposure impacted imaginative play in children? Although there is controversy regarding how much media has influenced imaginative play, according to most sources it has been a contributing factor to the decline of children engaging in imaginative play. Children are spending much of their free time watching television, playing video games, or using the Internet. The time spent on these activities is replacing the time that children used to

spend playing. The result is that youth are not gaining the benefits of play because many children are choosing media related activities over play.

The second research question asked is: How have changes in education impacted imaginative play in children? According to the research, changes in education have taken a toll on the amount of time youth spend playing imaginatively. The No Child Left Behind Act has been a factor in increasing the amount of homework students receive and decreasing or eliminating recess time. The increase of homework and the pressure to do well in school has left youth with less free time to play because they are using that time to study. Since students have more academic responsibility at a younger age, they have a need for imaginative play at recess. Unfortunately, many schools are cutting back or eliminating recess leaving children with even less free play time.

Limitations of Current Research

Limited research has been conducted regarding the changes in lifestyle that are affecting imaginative play. Along with that, there seem to be gaps in scholarly studies related to imaginative play. Research design has been an issue since most of the studies have consisted of observations and surveys. There were not many randomized, controlled studies related to this topic. It would have been helpful to discover more ways in which imaginative play has changed, rather than been eliminated, by media and changes in education. Additionally, the study could have benefited from a broader base of cross-cultural research.

Implications for Future Research

Since there are not many current research studies describing the influences of external distractions on imaginative play, I believe it is a topic that should be explored

further. According to most of the literature reviewed, there seems to be a national trend of less children spending time playing imaginatively. Future researchers should consider exploring imaginative play in other countries and cultures and comparing it to the data from children in the United States. They should also explore other factors that may contribute to the decline in imaginative play. Furthermore, researchers should look at strategies to promote imaginative play, such as having parents limit the amount of media time their children are allowed.

Implications for Practice

Based on the literature reviewed in this study, there is compelling evidence suggesting that educators and parents need to make time for kids to play. Evidence shows that play provides many social, intellectual and developmental benefits. Since many children spend large amounts of time using current media and focusing on improving academically, they are not gaining the benefits most children in past decades gained through regular imaginative play. It is important for school counselors to recognize the need for play in children's lives and be advocates for imaginative play.

Elementary school counselors can make sure their office is equipped with age appropriate toys and games, especially toys that stimulate the use of imagination. Such toys include: paints, blocks, clay, sand trays, puppets, boxes, telephones, doll houses, dolls, kitchen sets, medical kits, and many others. School counselors should allow students to choose their own play activities and observe how they play to understand the emotional state of the child. They should avoid discouraging students from exploring typically unacceptable feelings such as anger and fear; exploring these feelings can lessen

their anxiety and help the counselor understand the psychological needs of the child (Hughes, 1999).

In addition to having a play friendly office, school counselors should also be an advocate to other educators regarding imaginative play. School counselors should be the voice for imaginative play in children by reminding other educators the social, cognitive, and developmental benefits gained through play. They must encourage fellow educators to limit the amount of media time children spend in the classroom. Furthermore, school counselors should educate parents on the importance of play. One example of this would be to encourage parents to get their children involved in “green hour.” The green hour program suggests that parents give their children an hour a day of unstructured play outside (National Wildlife Federation, 2008).

Summary

Children are spending much of their free time utilizing media such as: television, computers, and video games, rather than playing. The increase of media has changed the way in which children play. Their play has become more adventurous with themes and characters than it was prior to media exposure. Parents are contributing to the increased media time, believing their children will be more advanced the earlier they begin using technology. The large quantities of time children are spending on media-related activities is taking away from the benefits they can receive from spending time playing imaginatively.

In addition to increased media exposure, changes in education have led to less free time for children to play. The No Child Left Behind Act has put pressure on school administrators to ensure that scores on standardized tests are meeting expectations so

funding is ensured. The impact of the No Child Left Behind Act for many youth is less or no recess time and more homework. The end result for children is less time for imaginative play.

School counselors should be advocates for imaginative play in children. They can inform parents and educators of the benefits associated with play and work toward allowing children adequate amounts of play time during the school hours. A school counselor's office should be equipped with toys that stimulate imagination and allow students to decide what toys they will play with and how they will play with them. It is time that our nation recognizes the importance of imaginative play for children. Our youth need less media and homework time and more time to play.

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