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PREVIEW

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**Symbolic play and its relationship to toddler temperament,  
organizational functioning, parent attitude and play style**

**Hack, Karen Jo, Psy.D.**

**Pace University, 1990**

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PREVIEW

**SYMBOLIC PLAY AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO  
TODDLER TEMPERAMENT, ORGANIZATIONAL FUNCTIONING,  
PARENT ATTITUDE AND PLAY STYLE**

**by**

**Karen Hack**

**A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the  
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(Please type all information)

NAME: Karen Hack

TITLE OF PROJECT: Symbolic Play and its Relationship to  
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**DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:**

PROJECT ADVISOR: K. Mark Sossin, Ph.D.  
(Name)  
Adjunct Associate Professor  
of Psychology Pace University  
(Title) (Affiliation)

PROJECT CONSULTANT: Phyllis Ackman, Ph.D.  
(Name)  
Adjunct Professor  
of Psychology Pace University  
(Title) (Affiliation)

**FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:**

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements for the Psy.D. degree in School-Community Psychology.

  
(Project Advisor's Signature)

11/12/90  
(Date)

  
(Project Consultant's Signature)

11/12/90  
(Date)

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ABSTRACT

Symbolic Play and its Relationship to  
Toddler Temperament, Organizational Functioning,  
Parent Attitude and Play Style

Karen Hack

Play has an essential role in the development of the child. It is generally seen as a reflection of what developmental level a child is on and an expression of what is on the child's mind, as well as what his or her understanding of the world is.

Symbolic play emerges during the beginning of the second year of life. It is of particular interest because its appearance demonstrates that the child has developed the capacity to substitute one object for another. He or she can hold onto a mental picture of something and recreate it in his or her own personal style. Symbolic play has been linked to emotional and cognitive problem solving, creative abilities, and emotional well-being.

This study examined the relationship between symbolic play development in toddlers and the following factors: toddler temperament, toddler's capacity to organize his or her world and represent the symbolically, mother's capacity to facilitate her child's organizational and representational abilities, mother's attitude towards her child and the play style of the child.

Symbolic play was measured by the Lowe-Costello Symbolic Play Test. Toddler temperament was measured by the

Toddler Temperament Scale. The Greenspan Structural Approach was used to assess the child's and mother's capacities to organize and symbolize. The mother's attitude was measured by the Hudson Index of Parent Attitudes. Finally, play style characteristics were measured by the Play Style Scale which was developed for this study. Both individual and interactive play were considered when measuring play style.

Correlational analyses revealed significant relationships between symbolic play and the play style characteristics of attention span and complexity of play during individual play, and complexity of play and interest during interactive play. Also, girls demonstrated a significantly higher level of symbolic play than boys.

Simultaneous multiple regression analyses revealed significant predictive relationships between symbolic play level and the individual play style characteristics of complexity of play, persistence, and attention span. A significant relationship was found between symbolic play and combination of individual play style characteristics, as well.

Findings also suggest that complexity of play, a relatively general concept, may bear a greater relationship than symbolic play, to some of the factors investigated. Specifically, there were significant positive correlations between interactive complexity of play and 3 of four

variables measured by the Greenspan Structural Approach:  
child's organizational functioning, and mother's ability to  
facilitate her child's organizational functioning and  
representational functioning.

The results of this study have implications for  
facilitating play development at home, in childcare, and in  
early intervention and prevention programs.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Play has an essential role in the development of the child. Play is a medium through which children gain an understanding of their world and also through which adults can better understand the emotional and intellectual world of children. Winnicott states, "it is play that is universal, and that belongs to health; play facilitates growth and therefore health" (1971, p. 41). Huizinga (1950) claims also that play "adorns life, amplifies it and is to that extent a necessity both for the individual - as a life function - and for society by reason of the meaning it contains, its significance, its expressive value, its spiritual and social associations, in short, as a cultural function" (p. 9).

The specifics of the role of play in development is not generally agreed upon; neither is the definition of play itself. Either because of this elusive quality of play or in spite of it there has been an enormous amount of writing about play ranging from the purely philosophical to statistical analysis of minute aspects of play behavior. Developmental theorists have used play behavior in supporting their individual theories and also have explained

play behavior through their theories. Play is seen as a means of gaining understanding about the world as well as a reflection of what is understood by the child. Childhood play is linked with later creativity and problem solving (Garvey, 1977). One wonders what the play of the theorists, themselves, was like in order for them to have developed such interesting and creative ideas about play. Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud, Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Bruno Bettelheim, Margaret Mahler, Daniel Stern, Jerome Singer, to name a few giants in developmental and psychological theory, have greatly contributed to our understanding of the phenomena.

Freud, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) describes the importance of play in psychological development, emphasizing intrapsychic emotional functioning. In his view, play is the method through which children master their impulses, gain an understanding and a sense of control of the world, and express their wishes. Piaget (1962) discusses play in terms of cognitive structure, suggesting that a child's play reflects his or her cognitive level of understanding, and also, through play, the child takes in information from the world and adjusts that information in accordance with his or her own already established organizational scheme. While different theorists chose different aspects of play to analyze, many of them support one another. Their emphasis may be different, for

instance, one may focus on emotional development, another on cognitive development, another on early play and yet another on late play, but this does not preclude compatibility.

### What Is Play

Play is usually described by listing characteristics rather than by giving a strict definition. Garvey (1977) lists 5 characteristics of play activity: it is pleasurable, it has no extrinsic goals, it is spontaneous and voluntary, it is active, and it relates in a systematic way to what is not play (for example, a child's playing the role of mommy is related to her real experience of mommy). Rubin (1988) adds that there are no set rules in play, therefore he distinguishes game play from play. He also feels that children give their own meaning to the objects they play with. They are past the exploratory stage when trying to understand what an object is all about, is itself, the activity. In "true play", according to Rubin (1988), children are working on what they can do with the things they already know about. For Rubin (1988) true play also involves pretense. Pretense is "behavior in a simulative, nonliteral or 'as if' mode" (Fein, 1981, p. 1096). Most investigators of earlier development would disagree with Rubin's assertion; in fact, pre-symbolic, early exploratory play and early play development are subjects of much investigation. What is agreed upon is that concrete,



exploratory, presimulative, play appears first followed by pretend play which appears in the beginning of the second year of life. Bruner (1976) would add that play also minimizes the consequences of one's actions, and also more specifically, minimizes the consequences of learning something new. Play provides an opportunity to try out different combinations of behavior that under real life pressure would never be tried.

Pretend or symbolic play is what is most often written about, especially when describing play in children over 2 years of age. Symbolic play, pretend play, dramatic play, fantasy play, and imaginative play have been used interchangeably to describe this play. Those who investigate earlier play look at the development of playful behaviors and what seems to lead to pretend play.

#### Importance of Symbolic Play in Human Development

Why is play important? What purpose does it serve? Freud's contribution to the theory of play set the stage for others to expand upon. One can see the threads of his theory of development running through later theorists in their thoughts on play. He stated in 1908 that "a child's play is determined by his wishes" (p. 146). Waelder (1933) expands upon Freud's (1920) earlier notions and describes play as an intrapsychic phenomena with several possible purposes including wish fulfillment and mastery over an

event that was difficult to understand or accept. Play can be an example of repetition compulsion, or of reenacting an event that was too difficult to assimilate at the time of its original occurrence. Neubauer (1987) feels that play could be seen as similar to Freud's notion of sublimation in adults but that play is closer to the drives than sublimation. He contends that the symbolic aspects of play are what allow for the intensity and investment that children put into play.

Play can be a way of transforming one's participation in an event from passive to active. It can be a way of temporarily leaving reality and superego behind and finally it can be an expression of fantasy about something real. Erikson (1977) extends Waelder's analysis. Play can be a means of working through trauma in an attempt to communicate. It may also be the mechanism for the mastering of complex situations, as Waelder described, and finally, play can "serve the joy of self expression" (p. 691). Anna Freud (1965) elaborates further; according to her, play leads to the ability of the child to do work which involves controlling impulses, working with others, delaying gratification and getting pleasure from a finished product. She describes it as facilitating the movement from the pleasure principle to the reality principle - a necessity for adult work. Bettelheim (1987) concurs, stating that "besides being a means of coping with past and present

concerns, play is the child's most useful tool for preparing himself for the future and its tasks...Play teaches the child, without his being aware of it, the habits most needed for intellectual growth, such as stick-to-itiveness, which is so important in all learning" (p. 36). Gottfried (1985) feels that play is intrinsically motivated; that the drives for competence and problem solving are internally derived and motivate children to play.

From observing the apathetic and delayed play of institutionalized infants who had no primary caregiver, Provence and Lipton (1962) concluded that play development greatly depends upon the child's experience with close human relationships. The manner by which qualities of parenting and attachment influence play development, however, have yet to be more clearly explicated in research.

Winnicott (1971) proposed that play is not completely internal like pure fantasy, nor is it purely in the external world. In a sense, play is in the interaction between internal and external experiences that create a third "transitional" or "potential" psychological space. Winnicott (1971) also suggested that play is an important element in the development of trust; and reciprocally, trust between parent and infant is elemental to the development of productive play. "Play implies trust and belongs to the potential space between what was at first baby and mother-figure, with the baby in a state of near-absolute

dependence" (1971, p. 51). The importance a play thing can have for a young child is epitomized by the transitional object. This toy that the baby has chosen for his or her special companion Winnicott (1971) describes as a direct representative of the mother. It helps the child move from feeling as one with the mother to accepting that the mother is a separate entity. Its existence also demonstrates a baby's capacity to symbolize, and exemplifies the overlap between such symbolization and affect development.

Drucker (1979) adds that play can be used to work through developmental issues such as separation-individuation, which in fact can be seen as the expression of fantasy about something real. The child must move away from the mother and become a person in his or her own right. Play gives the child the opportunity to hold onto the mother, in order to solidify his or her own sense of self and cope with the anxiety involved with being separate. There appears to be a reciprocal relationship between the ability to play and a healthy relationship with the caregivers, in that without one, the other suffers.

Early enriching play experiences are seen as fostering later originality and creativity in children (Hutt, 1976). The underlying symbolic activity of adult artistic and scientific creativity is seen as developing from the cognitive activity that occurs in symbolic play in children (Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988). In addition, Singer states

that "to be able to make-believe gives both the child and adult a power over the environment and an opportunity to create ones own novelty and potential joy...What is most truly human about man, what is perhaps his greatest resource in his mastery of the environment, and of himself, is his capacity to fantasize" (1973, p.258-259).

### Development of Symbolic Play

The complexity and importance of play become more apparent as we move up the evolutionary ladder.

Ethological observation suggests that insects and amphibians do not play and fish rarely play (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1975). Young animals, kittens for example, are known to be extremely playful but much of this playfulness comes abruptly to an end when the kitten becomes a cat. Karl Groos states that animals "have a period of youth in order to play" (1976, p. 66). Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1975) states that, "it is usually easy to recognize when an animal plays and when it is more seriously occupied; nevertheless it is not easy to give a definition of play" (p. 273). However, he considers the basis of play in all animals to be curiosity and the motivation towards movement. Play and learning are related through a drive that learning stems from, that also underlies curiosity. He states that, "Play always implies a dialogue with the environment, and

this dialogue is always a result of an internal drive" (1975, p. 273).

Play in young animals is viewed as essential. Its purpose is usually seen as preparation for adulthood. It gives the animal a chance to practice combining different behaviors and experiencing the outcome without danger. It gives the animal the chance to try different behaviors that in the real world would never be tried (Bruner, 1976). Fagen (1976) believes that the function of play in animals is to give the opportunity for behavioral variability which is necessary for adaptation in an ever changing environment. Several studies indicate that animals with rich early experiences are better able to learn from new experiences later on and that the brains of animals raised in enriched environments differed from those of animals raised in less stimulating environments (Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988).

Primate play has been observed extensively and becomes a more important behavior moving up the evolutionary ladder from the old world primates to the Great Apes to man (Bruner, Jolly & Sylva, 1976). The capacity for observational learning is stressed, as well as the importance of the mother-child relationship in the discussion of primate play. Goodall (1976) describes an example of the importance of these 2 experiences for a chimp that she had been observing whose mother died when he was 3. At 4 1/2 this chimp could not use a stick for

termiting, a skill that 4 year olds typically show. Chimp toddlers play "termiting" games with their mothers before doing it themselves. This particular chimp did not have the opportunity to play this with his mother and later had not mastered the skill.

Regarding human development, Weininger and Fitzgerald (1988) see that the capacity for symbolic play is related to interconnection and reciprocity of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. They state that, "this reciprocity in interhemispheric activity leads to increased cognitive skills, greater creative potential, and an enhanced capacity to deal with novel situations and stimuli as well, and is an important tool for dealing with anxiety and stressful situations" (Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988, p. 23).

Interestingly, the Piagetian preoperational stage which is characterized in part by the development of language and symbolic activity, is correlated with an increase in interhemispheric myelination as well as myelination of the postthalamc auditory fibers (Weininger & Fitzgerald, 1988). Galin (1977) suggests that the nature of interaction between hemispheres is largely determined by environmental stimulation. Weininger and Fitzgerald (1988) suggest that the exact nature of the relationship between play, brain development, problem solving and creative thinking needs to be investigated further because they see an important reciprocal relationship among these activities.

From the very beginning of life, the infant is moving, touching his or her own body and getting pleasure from this. He or she holds onto toes and fingers, puts them in the mouth, kicks feet and waves arms. The infant gurgles and coos, listens, and does it again. Distinctive qualities of tension and shape characterizing these developmentally pertinent movements have been described by Kestenberg. The shape of the body grows and shrinks with movement. Kestenberg (1975) believes that the changes in the body shape provide structure for the baby's contacts with the environment. Along with changes in shape are changes in tension which she believes are used for drive discharge. With movement and vocalization, the infant comes in contact with objects outside of his or her body, for example, playthings that are in the crib or playpen, the crib itself, blankets, etc. All of this time he or she is looking. By five months the infant has enough eye-hand coordination so that if something is seen, within reach, it can be picked up and investigated (Kaplan, 1978). Through these early playful experiences the baby is getting to know him or herself and the environment.

The relationship between caregiver and infant is the second arena of play, the first being the infant's own body. The beginnings for both are at birth and possibly before, and, as Provence and Lipton (1962) point out, are very much interrelated. Play between caregiver and infant involves