

Preschool

Insights & Research

Play is essential to develop important social & emotional skills

“Everyone knows that children have a marked impulse to form themselves into groups and that the respect paid to the rules and regulations of their play constitutes an important feature of this social life.”

– Jean Piaget

“What I like [most about school] is playing with my friends. I don’t like being sad. Sometimes we don’t get along. Mostly we do. [The teacher] helps us get along. She plays toys with us too.”

– Reilly, 5 yr

Reilly is a member of Rita’s preschool class in a city in southwestern Los Angeles County. She came in with little to no social skills and lacking both verbal and nonverbal communication. Rita called on her teacher training experience with play to help her children learn how to engage more appropriately and cooperate openly with each other. She encouraged the children early on to role-play, often offering situations they could try and resolve.

Rita admits to ‘just a working knowledge and understanding’ of the studies carried out by Piaget and Vygotsky, amongst others, but knows first-hand the importance of putting their research into practice. There are five key points she attempts to replicate every day in the classroom:

- To help the children **appreciate the feelings of others** by putting them in their shoes, trying to see the problem from their point-of-view
- To find different ways for the children **to express their feelings** – whether it is drawing, roleplaying, making up stories, or simply while playing
- To teach children **to wait their turn and share**, especially when the motivation to claim ‘the best toy’ can be so tantalising
- To provide the children with opportunities **to consider and learn about personal space**
- All underlined by the expectation that all children **to be caring and thoughtful**

How does play help build social skills?

The work of Piaget (1962), and support from countless researchers since, shows clearly that play is imperative in developing social and emotional skills. Imaginary characters and settings can help to simplify events and help make them more understandable for young children, allowing them to eliminate details if necessary. Play also allows children to do things they couldn’t in real life, such as eating nothing but candy. Children can test boundaries and avoid consequences by pretending other characters have done something wrong, such as blaming the imaginary friend for encouraging them to eat all the sweets. In a broader context, children are able to express feelings by acting out that they or a suitable avatar are sad or angry, for example, and learn to cope with how those emotions make them feel.

Furthermore, as the first quote from Piaget suggests, these early discoveries and experiences help them form friendship groups, identify and respect unwritten group rules, and improve their ability to self-regulate social interactions as they grow and develop.

While presenting the evidence in their study, *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool*, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk and Singer (2009) summarize that research confirms make-believe play contributes to emotional understanding. They conclude that in regards to social development, a child's knowledge of emotions promotes self-regulation of behavior, acceptance of others and a willingness to make up for hurting others. Their study also shows that for children from difficult backgrounds, or those with emotional issues, play is even more critical.

A key takeaway message from Hirsh-Pasek, et al, is that it is imperative not to rob young children of time to play, if that time is given over to getting a 'head start on academic skills'. The huge body of research undertaken points to preschool education moving in the wrong direction if play is eliminated from children's daily lives.

What the teachers say

"I learned names like Piaget and Vygotsky doing my teacher training. It's safe to say they came up from time to time in my reading too. I was far too cynical about what I supposed these old men were telling me about children in my classroom. But all the research I've managed to read since then, everything I've witnessed in my teaching space, says the same thing. Children need to play. They need playful classrooms. I play with the same toys as the children during the day. We learn social skills together. I exhibit the behaviour I'd most like them to copy. Honestly, most of the time it doesn't feel like teaching – in the traditional sense – because we just have fun together. There is so much going on beneath that 'fun' layer though. So much!"

- Rita

References

Piaget, Jean (1962) *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic Books)

Hirsh-Pasek, K., Golinkoff, R.M., Berk, L.E., and Singer, D.G. (2009) *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence* (New York: Oxford UP)