

# Teacher Play Interaction Styles: Effects on Play Behavior and Relationships with Teacher Training and Experience

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This study examined how four preschool teachers, who differed greatly in terms of experience and training, interacted with children during play. Over the course of three months, each teacher was videotaped interacting with three groups of children. The teachers were taped twice with each group. The videotaped play sessions were then transcribed and analyzed. Six different play interaction styles were identified: uninvolved, interviewer, stage manager, co-player, player leaders and director. The stage-manager, co-player and play leaders styles appeared to have a positive impact on children's pretend play, whereas the uninvolved, interviewer and director styles impeded children's play efforts. The teachers' differences in training and experience paralleled their choice of play styles. The two most experienced teachers relied heavily on the three effective styles, while the two inexperienced teachers consistently used less effective styles.

Early childhood educators generally agree that play has an important role in children's development and should be a standard feature of preschool and kindergarten programs. Play's high curricular status is apparent in position statements by leading professional organizations, which contain declarations such as "children learn through play" (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1991, p.26) and "teachers must take the lead in articulating the need for play in children's lives, including the curriculum" (Association for Childhood Education International, 1988, p.139).

Considerably less agreement exists concerning the teacher's role in classroom play. Some experts recommend that teachers get directly involved by making suggestions to children while they play and by joining in and becoming the children's play partners (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Manning & Sharp, 1977). These play "interventionists" maintain that, when

teachers engage in supportive and responsive interactions with children during play, play's developmental potential can be maximized (Erwin, Carpenter, & Kontos, 1993).

Advocates site a number of potential benefits to teacher involvement in play:

- Approval—When teachers participate in play, they let children know that play is a valuable, worthwhile activity (Manning & Sharp, 1977).
- Attachment—Children who experience positive interactions with adults during play are likely to become more securely attached to those adults (Howes & Smith, 1995).
- Peer Interaction—Teachers can facilitate contacts between peers during play and coach children in successful techniques for getting along with others (Howes & Smith, 1995)
- Enrichment—Teachers can provide resources and ideas that expand the scope of children's play endeavors (Griffing, 1983; Woodard, 1984).
- Scaffolding—Joint involvement with an adult can create a "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1978), allowing children to engage in activities that they could not do on their own.

Opponents counter these advantages by highlighting the potential dangers of teacher participation in play. They cite examples of how adults can overpower play, limiting children's ability to play on their own terms and reducing opportunities for discovery, problem solving, and peer interaction during play (Miller, Fernie & Kantor, 1992). Pellegrini and Galda (1993) contend that, "when children and adults interact, adults do most of the work" (p. 169). Research has also shown that some teachers interrupt play to teach concepts (Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Wood, McMahon, & Cranstoun, 1980), while others attempt to redirect play toward academic goals (Schradler, 1990). These types of abuses have caused Sutton-Smith, a fervent anti-interventionist, to comment, "It is better to encourage children to play amongst themselves than to infect them with our didactic play bumbling" (1990, p.5).

Research on the impact of teacher involvement on children's play has had mixed results. Sylva, Roy and Painter (1980) reported that preschoolers' play episodes lasted twice as long and were more elaborate when a teacher was involved than when children played only with their peers. Howes and Smith's (1995) large scale study of 150 child care programs revealed that positive teacher interaction was associated with higher levels of cognitive activity during play.