

Time Matters

The Importance of Sustained Play in Child Development

by Diane E. Levin

Scenario I

Jason is using play dough at the classroom art table. He flattens out a ball into a pancake. He puts two little flattened balls near the top for 'eyes.' Next, he rolls out a piece of play dough into a long thin strip, cuts it in half, puts one piece vertically between the eyes down the middle of the face, moving it around. "This is the nose," he says, as he changes the shape of the nose a bit and then smiles. Next, he takes the other piece of the strip and puts it near the bottom of the circle, playing around with how it curves until it makes 'a smiling mouth.' When he's finished, Jason starts over with another piece of play dough making another face, going through the same process — only this time, as he's working on the play dough strip for the mouth, the ends curve down. After a careful look at it, maybe even a bit surprised, he excitedly announces that he's made 'a sad face' and starts playing around with other ways the strip can curve and forms an upside down 'V,' which he decides will be an 'angry' face.

Next, Jason goes to the writing/drawing area and starts drawing a smiling face, similar to the one he made out of play dough, and then a 'sad' and an 'angry' face. Throughout, there is a lot of play with the shapes of the mouths. Another child, Jill, comes over, looks at Jason's faces and starts drawing a face, too. Jason asks if it is going to be happy or sad or mad. The two of them make a few faces at each other and laugh. Jill then quickly finishes drawing her not-very-descript face and leaves, but Jason continues.

The teacher comes over, talks to Jason about his faces, and then asks if he would like help writing a story about all his different kinds of faces. Jason excitedly accepts. He takes a piece of paper for the 'book cover' and starts drawing several big and little happy, mad, and sad faces on it.



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In the scenario above, the teacher reports that Jason first became interested in drawing faces and facial features at the easel and then in making them out of play dough. Only recently has he begun focusing on facial expressions and feelings. She thinks this latest focus developed after she read a book about feelings. As she read it, she focused a lot on how the faces looked as they talked about the different feelings. Jason was very engaged in this discussion and tried to imitate the faces being discussed with his own face. That same day he started making different shaped mouths in his paintings and with the play dough. She thinks Jason is now ready to expand his interest into telling/writing stories about his 'feeling' faces. This is not the first time she has seen Jason develop a deep interest in his play that develops and grows in unique ways over time. She feels that Jason's play provides an excellent example of

Scenario II

Three four-year-olds go into the housekeeping area of their classroom. They put three plates onto the table and put an apple on each plate. Then they each take a cup and sit down at the table. They pretend to take a couple of nibbles from the apples and sips from their cups. Then they all get up, put the apples, plates, and cups back on the shelf, push the chairs in, and walk away. The whole activity takes about six minutes. Next, they go to the block area and line up several blocks into what seems to be a 'road.' They run vehicles along the road a few times making "vrrmm, vrrmm" noises. They add a few more blocks to the 'road' to make it a little longer and run the cars along it, with sound effects again. Then they put the blocks back on the shelves and move on, each to a different area this time.

why extended playtime periods are an essential component of her daily school schedule.

The teacher often sees these children flitting from activity to activity and says this is a common pattern for their 'play' during choice time. She has often tried to go over to help extend the activity they have begun. For instance, she says she might have sat at the housekeeping area table and said, "Yum, this is a good apple. What can we cook now to go with our apple?" But she finds it rarely has a very lasting impact. As soon as she leaves, they quickly finish the activity she helped them start and move on.

She says she has several children in the class like this who seem to need a lot of structure and direct instruction about what to do to stay involved in an activity. She worries about this because it seems like they are always using what they already know in their play, not trying to figure out and master new

things. She feels like it has become a bigger issue since she has had to shorten the playtime in her class because of the time she has to spend on more formal curriculum activities. She has less time to try to facilitate play during playtime because she has to work with individual and small groups of children who are having difficulty mastering some of the required formal curriculum skills.

What's the Difference?

Jason's play illustrates what it means for a child to engage in child-controlled, sustainable and evolving play around a deep interest. No other child would go through quite the same play sequence as Jason to develop similar skills. He uses what he knows about the play dough to do something he is very interested in — representing 'faces.' He keeps finding interesting new challenges and problems to figure out: How can I make a happy face with play dough? A sad face? An angry face? A nose that looks

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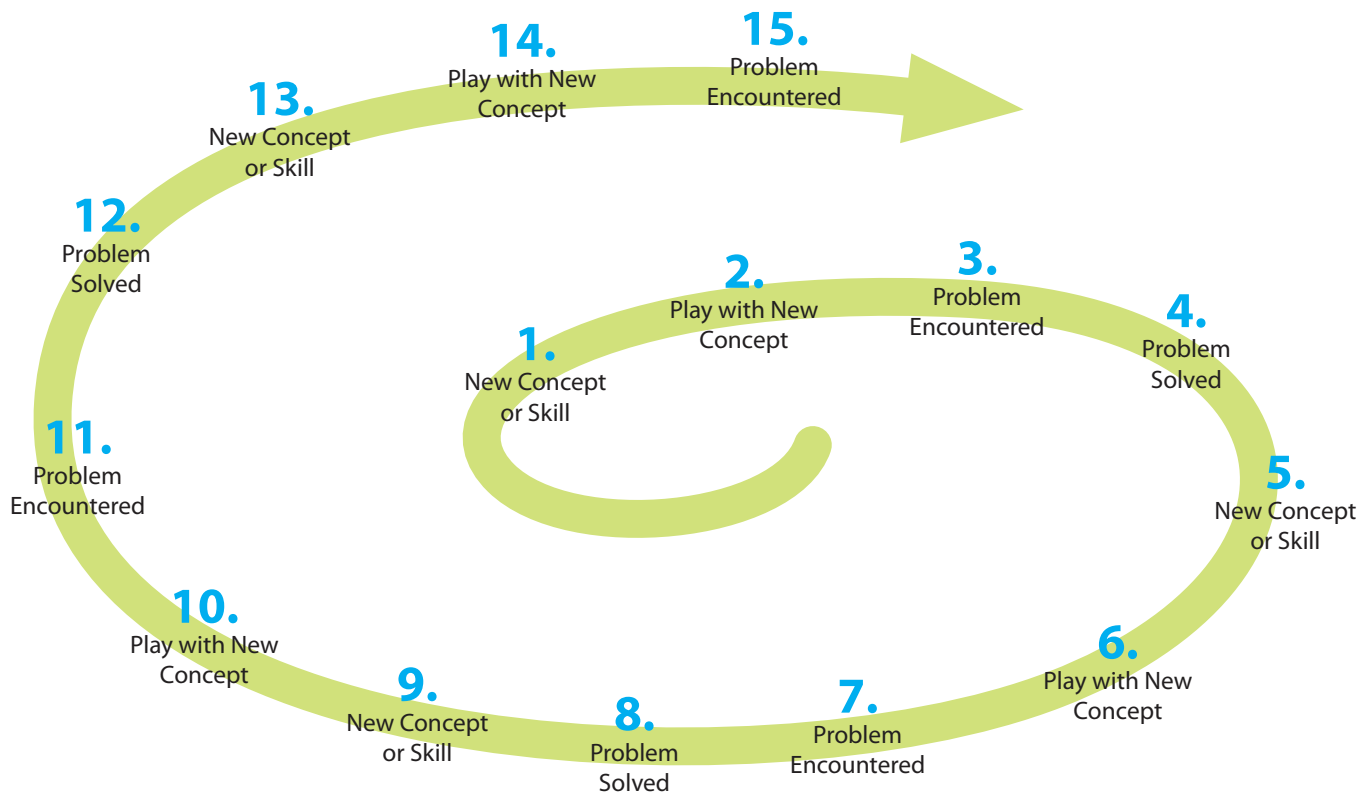
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Figure 1

Constructing Knowledge Through Sustained Play: The (Spiral) Play-Learning Process



'right'? A big face? A little face? As Jason masters each new challenge, he uses it in the next face he creates, which leads to his encountering new problems to solve and new skills to master as he gets better and better at representing faces. He then realizes he can explore how his new face-making skills work in another medium — with markers on paper at the drawing table. This two-dimensional format presents new challenges to play around with, figure out, and then use. Jason's growing expertise stays at the forefront when he enthusiastically jumps at his teacher's offer to extend his interest in faces by helping him write a 'feeling face' story.

The three children who quickly go from the housekeeping area to the blocks, and then to other activities, illustrate quite a different 'play' pattern. In fact,

it probably should not even be called 'play,' because it is so limited in scope. They seem to be following a very tightly organized rote routine, at first with their orderly 'meal' in the housekeeping area, then with their minimal 'road trip' in the block area. There is very little that seems to be creative, or unique, or particularly engaging for them, about what they are doing. All three seem to be in sync with one another, following the same program with little or no variation or serious engagement, and no surprises or unexpected problems encountered that they need to solve through play. It almost feels as if they have done it all before, all taking the same roles, in the same way. Thus, there is little that can be called sustained, evolving activity or play, in either housekeeping or blocks, by any of the children. This is a very different situation than we see in Jason's play.

Why Does it Matter?

The problem-finding and problem-solving process we see in Jason's face play illustrates the kind of creative and sustained play Piaget describes as central to young children's optimal learning and development (1959, 1973). This process is illustrated in the Play-Learning Spiral (see Figure 1: Levin, 1996), whereby in play children: 1) master a new concept or skill, 2) bring what they mastered in play, 3) encounter a new problem, 4) work to solve the problem, 5) master something new, and, 6) bring what was learned into play. And, each time children incorporate the new item they have learned into their play, they encounter the next new problem to try to figure out, as the spiral continues to advance upward. We can think of this ongoing spiral process

that occurs in sustained play as both a motivator and cause for development and learning.

Jason starts by using what he already knows about play dough to try to figure out how to make a face. As he does, he encounters an interesting problem: how to slant the play dough thin line to make the mouth? He plays around with it and discovers that if its ends point upwards, it looks like a happy mouth, so he makes happy mouths. Then, without really planning it, as he is making a mouth he moves the ends of the play dough lines down, and is surprised when he realizes that he has made a sad mouth! He uses his new discovery to make sad play dough faces. He encountered a new challenge, what Piaget would have called “disequilibrium,” and he accommodated his thinking to now include sad mouths, too. This discovery gives Jason a new issue to focus on when making his faces: what emotion does he want his face to have? Jason is using his sustained face play **process** to work on and learn more about a rich play **content** that really engages him; both the play content and process are essential parts of quality sustained play and learning.

The teacher moves in to help Jason find yet another new and interesting activity to work on: a ‘feeling face’ book. She is trying to get him to use what he knows to find new challenges and problems to solve. That is, she gets him to ‘create a story’ about his feeling faces — thereby connecting his play interests to the literacy process. Her approach immediately appeals to him. Jason seems excited about connecting stories about faces to his representations of faces. This is a good example of how children’s deep and sustained play interests can be linked in meaningful and engaging ways to the foundations of early academic and other more formal academic skills.

We see Jason involved in exactly the kind of sustained play that is vital for optimal

What Can We Do?

Despite the pressures that can undermine sustained play, it is more important now than ever that we work to promote it. And there is much we can do to support it for both the children who already have plenty of skills at engaging in play and those who need extra help from us. We can:

- plan the daily schedule with generous amounts of time for play and long enough play periods for children to become engaged in the kind of rich, sustained play that is at the heart of optimal learning — just like we saw Jason engaged in during Scenario I.
- provide a rich range of open-ended play materials and toys, including recycled scrounged materials, and be prepared to help some children learn how to find interesting ways to engage with them in play.
- make facilitation of sustained play and play interests, as well as learning through play, central aspects of the teacher’s role during playtime.
- observe children as they play to identify those children who need special help learning how to expand their narrow, imitative play into more elaborate, sustained play interests — like the children in Scenario II.
- connect children’s play and play interests to the concepts and skills that are part of the more formal curriculum, just as Jason’s teacher linked his sustained face play to literacy by helping make a “Feeling Face Book.”
- minimize activities that teach academic skills and concepts in isolation or by rote or at younger ages, because this information is not easily brought into play where it can be expanded upon and more meaningfully mastered.
- try to determine if and how technology is affecting the content and process of the children’s play and then work to counteract whatever harmful effects you identify.
- keep the goal of promoting sustainable play in mind when making decisions about the use of technology in the classroom. Facing the Screen Dilemma: Young Children, Technology, and Early Education (Linn, Almon & Levin, 2012) provides the information to help with this.
- work closely with parents to help them understand the value of sustained play and how to promote it at home.
 - Share Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children’s Entertainment materials, which are designed to help parents promote play and manage screens (available at www.truceteachers.org).
 - Your school can participate in the annual Screen-Free Week, a national mobilization when children, families, schools, and communities turn off all screens, sponsored by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (www.commercialfreechildhood.org).

development and learning — building over time, out of his own unique interests and experiences, benefiting from carefully planned input from an adult that helps him find new ways to extend and build onto what he already knows (Piaget, 1973).

Factors Undermining Sustained Play Today

The three children in Scenario II, who quickly go from a 'very simple meal' in housekeeping, to a 'very simple road' in blocks, show little evidence of engaging in the kind of rich, sustained problem finding and solving play spiral process that Jason did. They are doing very limited and prescribed activities, what Piaget would have called "imitation." They already seem to know what to do in a very constricted way, showing little evidence of encountering meaningful problems that they try to solve. It is hard to say much about what new concepts or skills they might be learning through play. They almost seem to be following some sort of simple 'program' for eating a meal or making a road. Teacher facilitation is needed to help the children engage in sustained, creative play here and which may also help them learn how to sustain play on their own in the future.

What might account for the differences we see between Jason's and these children's play? Why are these children not becoming engaged in sustained play of their own making? Among the factors that might be involved are:

Media and Technology. Media and technology are playing a greater role in children's lives at younger and younger ages (Levin, 2013). This means that children are often seduced into using



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screens during playtime, instead of playing. Thus, they have fewer opportunities to learn how to become good at engaging in sustained and creative play. In addition, more of the content children bring to their play comes from screens. When they use media content for their play, what results often seems rote and does not become sustained play, as children try to **imitate** what they see on screens and have a hard time taking it any farther. While the three children in Scenario II are not imitating a media script, their play has a similar rote quality, whereby they seem unable to move beyond a very simple, prearranged script.

Toys and Play Materials. Many of today's popular toys have bells and whistles to capture children's attention, or are linked to popular children's media like Princesses and Superheroes (for instance, see the *TRUCE 2015-16 Annual Toy Selection Guide: Toys of Value and Toys to Avoid*). Such materials can take control of play away from children and channel them into playing in only one way, or trying to imitate the media to which the toys are linked. It is hard to use these toys in the service of a creative, child-controlled, sustained play process

as they provide such strong messages about how they are to be used. Once children become dependent on these kinds of play materials, it can become hard to use any toy, even open-ended toys, in more than one way, as seen with the children in Scenario II.

School Reform. In the last several years, many preschool and kindergarten programs have been mandated to spend more time on academic teaching and less time for creative play (Carlsson-Paige, McLaughlin & Almon, 2015). This means that at a time when many young children have a greater need to become engaged in sustained, creative play than ever before because of what is happening in society, they have less time and fewer opportunities to develop quality play at school. And, teachers often are experiencing increasing pressure to spend more time on the academic aspects of teaching and less time promoting and facilitating children's sustained, high-quality play. This seems to be the case for the teacher in Scenario II and helps explain why she did not try, or rather was not able, to facilitate the play of the three children. In addition, in order to fit in all the required curriculum areas, she schedules short activity periods during the day. Thus, there are rarely opportunities for children, even those who have the potential, to become deeply engaged in sustained play.

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