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## UNIT 7 UNDERSTANDING PLAY

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### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

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Play is an integral part of growing up. All children play and have a right to play. While it may seem surprising to some of us adults, children learn through play. Play fosters development in all areas and is the most powerful medium for learning during the years of infancy and childhood. Though a lot of learning takes place through play, children do not play to learn – they play because they like to and want to.

Since play is a part of children's lives and central to their learning, as caregivers and educators, we need to understand it. In this unit, as well as the next, we will discuss different aspects of play. In this Unit, you will learn about the features of play, the various perspectives regarding why children play as well as the different kinds of play.

## Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to:

- explain the characteristics of play;
- understand the relationship between play, stimulation, interaction and exploration;
- know the various perspectives regarding why children play; and
- describe different kinds of play.

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## 7.2 WHAT IS PLAY?

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**All children play.** It would be unusual and very surprising to see a group of children sitting together quietly without playing! Even if a child is alone, you can be sure that she would find something or the other to play with. What do we mean by play? Let us look at some activities of children to understand the meaning of the play.

### Example 1

*Five-month-old, Shashi, is lying on a bedspread on the floor. She kicks her legs and moves her arms about and, in the process, the corner of the sheet comes into her hand. She tries to put it in her mouth. Her mother takes the sheet out of her mouth and gives Shashi a toy. Shashi puts it in her mouth, then presses it between her hands, and then tries again to put the toy in her mouth.*

### Example 2

*Three-year-old Abhinav, strolling in the garden, picks up the pipe that is used for watering plants. He holds it at a height and observes the water falling on the grass. He looks back at the mouth of the pipe attentively and puts his finger into it. This makes the water spray out in all directions. Some waterfalls on his clothes and some on the plants. He takes his finger out of the pipe and puts it back again. He remains engrossed in this activity for some time.*

### Example 3

*A group of eight-year-old boys is playing in the open. Two boys hold hands and run together and try to catch the others. They finally manage to catch one of them, who then joins them, and the three start chasing the others.*

If any observer is asked what the children are doing in each of the three situations, the answer would probably be, “*They are playing.*” Observers usually agree on which activities should be seen as play and which ones should not. Children play in many different ways. Despite these differences, the play has certain features which help us to identify activities that can be considered play and those which are not play.

## 7.2.1 Characteristics of Play

- a) **Play is fun** and enjoyed by the child. It is accompanied by positive affect (emotion). When a child plays, she does not do so to get something out of it. For example, when a child jumps from a step and then climbs to jump again, she is doing it simply because she is enjoying it. She is not showing off her skills to get praise or to win a prize. At the same time, the child's physical and motor skills are being refined though the child was not playing with the intention or a goal of developing physical and motor skills. Development of skills takes place on its own, spontaneously, as an outcome of the activity.
- b) Play is that activity in which **participation is spontaneous and active**. In other words, the child plays because the child wants to play – she is **not forced** to play; she plays of her own will. Also, the participation is active. Only if the child is engaged in doing something is she considered to be playing. Therefore, when children watch programmes on television, it is not play, even though they may be enjoying it.
- c) Though children play for fun and enjoyment, they **take their play very seriously**. Any interference or change made in their activity by someone who is not participating is usually not appreciated. **During play, children create their own set of rules, and many times objects used during play do not have their usual meaning.** That is why, during play, a table becomes a mountain, a structure made of wooden blocks becomes a ship and a mound of sand may represent a castle.

While the child takes the play seriously, **she knows that it is not real**. She knows that what she is doing is play. So, during play, the child understands the rules of the real world, while simultaneously following the 'rules' of her 'play world'. You may observe that during make-believe play, they may even signal in some way that they are now entering the play world. Entering into this 'play-frame' can be evident by behaviour such as smiling, laughing, or some other behaviour, as they give a signal or say words, such as "*You become the mother and I am the father.*"

- d) It is not the content of the activity which determines whether it is play or not. It is **how the activity is done, which helps us to identify it as play** or work. For example, when children spontaneously play a game of buying and selling, using coins of different denominations they are learning during their play to recognize different coins without even realizing that they are learning to differentiate coins. But if an adult set up the formal activity of teaching the child how to differentiate different denominations of coins, the child may not find the activity to play; rather she may see it as work or a task.

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## 7.3 DIFFERENTIATING PLAY FROM STIMULATION, INTERACTION AND EXPLORATION

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In this Section, we will read about play in relation to the concepts of stimulation, interaction and exploration.

### 7.3.1 Play and Stimulation

Stimulation refers to the arousal of the child's senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell through activity or an experience. Just living and experiencing life offers the child many opportunities of being stimulated. Also, the child herself is naturally attracted to things and activities which stimulate her senses. When children are stimulated, they gather information about their environment which leads to their learning. During the early years, stimulation has direct consequences on the child's development and also her survival. For instance, it has been found that when a newborn does not get adequate touch-based stimulation through stroking, cuddling, or holding, it can lead to higher rates of illness in the child and even death in some cases. Thus, as early childhood professionals, we need to understand stimulation, as well as, the activities and experiences which lead to stimulation. **Play provides stimulation**, which in turn leads to learning. **However, all stimulation is not play.** When the child sees the family members moving about in the house, she gets stimulation from observing them, though they may not be playing or interacting with her.

While stimulation for children may be planned or be accidental, the term 'early stimulation activities' provided by early childhood professionals generally refers to planned experiences created by the adult during the early childhood years which arouse the child's senses. Early stimulation activities are generally initiated by the child's caregiver, while play can be initiated either by the child or the caregiver. No matter who initiates the play, the child is engaged and involved in it. You will read more about early stimulation activities in Units 12, 13 and 14.

### 7.3.2 Play and Interaction

Interaction is any two-way communication or contact between the child and an adult or another child; the adult says or does something to which the child responds, and vice versa. So interaction can be talking to the child, smiling at her, patting her, or even any communication during daily caregiving routines. The child could also initiate an interaction to which the adult (or another child) would respond. Interaction also provides stimulation to the child. **Interaction is not play but interaction can lead to playing.**

**Play generally involves interaction. However, not all play is interaction.** For example, when a child is building a tower with blocks by herself, she is playing but there is no interaction. So when children play with their peers, parents, siblings or grandparents, they are also interacting with them. Thus,

social play is a kind of interaction. The kind of interaction that happens during play is positive and helps strengthen the emotional bond between the child and the playmate. When adults and children play during an interaction, it enhances the quality of the interaction.

### 7.3.3 Play and Exploration

Exploration is what the child does when she is introduced to a new object or area. **Despite exploration and play being different, sometimes these two concepts are used interchangeably.** This is because children's exploration and play many times appear similar and sometimes overlap with each other. They are difficult to distinguish, especially during infancy. To understand how these concepts are distinct, let us consider the following case:

*Zara looked on attentively as the water from the tap poured into the bucket. Curiously, first, she put her hand in the water in the bucket, and then, in the water flowing from the tap. She watched as the water spilled down her arm. She then removed her hand from under the tap, only to put the hand again in the flowing water. She repeated this action multiple times with keen concentration, smiling when the water spilled outside the bucket because of her game.*

- During exploration, children find out what a new object does and know its characteristics. On the other hand, during play, children aim to act upon a familiar object so that they can get pleasant stimulation. In the case above, when Zara first put her hand in the bucket and under the tap, she was exploring its various features — observing what happened when she broke the flow of water with her hand, where it fell, its sound, and experience the water pressure. However, when she started putting her hand in and out of the water, again and again, she had stopped exploring and was now playing. Her enjoyment was visible during play.

It is not always very obvious at what point exploration becomes play. During the years of infancy, as children are constantly exposed to new objects, people and surroundings, they are involved in more exploratory behaviours as compared to play. Sometimes the term '**exploratory play**' is used to describe the play during this period. Exploratory play is when the play and exploration happen together or in tandem with each other.

- In terms of order of occurrence, exploration typically precedes play. However, it is not necessary that exploration would always lead to play. In Zara's case, it was her choice that led exploration to transit into play. If she wanted, she could have ended her actions just after exploration. Furthermore, play can lead to further exploration by the child. For example, during Zara's play, water spilled on the ground, which eventually created a small puddle on the muddy ground. As the puddle grew in size, it attracted Zara's attention and her attention shifted to exploring the puddle.

You would find that while exploring, children have neutral and serious emotions (child is curious but as she is exploring the unknown, she is

also uncertain and maybe a little fearful). Whereas, play is always an activity that comes with positive emotions like happiness and fun (you can even observe the child laughing and smiling with joy).

During exploration, mental structures are changed and new neurological pathways are formed to accommodate the new information the child has gathered. Play strengthens these newly formed neurological pathways, as play allows the child to practice what she has learned. Play also involves assimilation. (Read Unit 9, MCD-001 to recollect the concept of assimilation and accommodation).

**Check Your Progress Exercise 1**

1) The words written below are characteristics of children’s play written in a jumbled way. Write them correctly in the space provided. For example, UTB-BUT.

- a) NUF.....
- b) TSPOANEONUS.....
- c) WNO WERARD.....
- d) VITECA.....

2) What are the characteristics of play?

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3) In the table given below, write two key points that bring out the differences between each of the following groups of terms:

Play and Stimulation	Play and Interaction	Play and Exploration

**7.4 VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES ON PLAY**

Not just children, even adults play; and not just humans, even animals play. Since play is an inherent part of human and animal behaviour, it has been studied over time by experts from different disciplines including Psychology, Education, Anthropology, Biology and Sociology. Understanding various

perspectives regarding play will help you to know how our understanding and attitude toward play have evolved. So let us discuss the perspectives and theories of play that focus on children, their development and learning.

### 7.4.1 Early Ideas about Play

The Greek philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE) was one of the first people in recorded history to have mentioned the importance of play in the context of children. **He believed play to be an ideal medium through which children would learn.** According to him, children should be involved in the play which promotes the growth of their skills and would prepare them for future participation in society, as he said, *“He who is to be a good builder, should play at building houses...”* Plato believed that each adult’s role in society should be decided in childhood itself, and during childhood, they should play only those games which will help in the preparation for their future role. Thus, the idea that play can be used for education can be traced to these early times. However, now we do not agree that children’s play should only be limited to the roles they are likely to play as adults; the role of play is much more in the child’s life.

### 7.4.2 Play in Theories of Early Educational Pioneers

During the 1600s and 1700s, specific theoretical positions about the role of play and its relation to education became more evident through the works of educational pioneers like Comenius, Rousseau and John Locke (see Unit 9 for details). Comenius (1592–1670) wrote two books in which he suggested that learning was fostered through play. He believed that children should be encouraged to play games; he emphasized that play was necessary for their all-round development. Rousseau (1712–1778) saw play as the child’s ‘natural’ activity which would lead to positive development in children. He stressed the necessity of play for learning. Locke (1632-1704), who saw children as a ‘blank slate’, believed that playful methods were more beneficial to the child’s development.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the works of Pestalozzi (1746-1827), Froebel (1782-1852), and Montessori (1870-1952) helped to bring play systematically into the early childhood programmes. Pestalozzi was influenced by the ideas of Comenius and Rousseau and wanted the practical application of these ideas. He suggested that children learn by ‘doing’ or interacting with objects. Froebel, a student of Pestalozzi, more specifically advocated play as a means of learning by creating a play-based curriculum in his kindergarten. He developed materials or ‘Gifts’ for children for them to play with and learn from. Like Froebel, Montessori saw the value of having an educational system where children had hands-on experiences with play materials. She too created many educational materials for children through which they learned various concepts and skills. She highlighted the importance of sensory experiences during play while at the same time, discouraged fantasy-based forms of play (like pretend play). You will read about these pioneers of education in detail in Units 9 and 10.

### 7.4.3 Classical Theories of Play

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many prominent theories were proposed that attempted to answer the question— why do children play? These theories are known as the classical theories of play. These are discussed briefly as follows:

- a) **Surplus Energy Theory:** This theory was proposed by German poet Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) and was further supported by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). According to this theory, all human beings have a certain amount of energy in the body necessary for survival. Children have an extra amount of this energy, as their survival needs are taken care of by adults. Thus, **children play to release the excess energy in their body.**
- b) **Recreation Theory:** This theory was first suggested by Moritz Lazarus in 1883 and was further extended by G.T.W Patrick in 1916. It is theoretically the opposite of the surplus energy theory. According to this theory, play is a way **to restore energy which has been depleted after doing labour or work** which is mentally tiring. So, play is a way for children to relax or have fun.
- c) **Recapitulation Theory:** This theory is based on Darwin's theory of evolution and was first introduced by G. Stanley Hall (1846-1924). Human beings are born with instincts that are genetically ingrained in us. The recapitulation theory believes that many of the instincts humans are born with are not needed in modern adult life. Through play, children can let go of these unnecessary instincts. For instance, while playing a game of chasing each other (tag or *pakdan pakdai*), children can get rid of their hunting instinct.
- d) **Practice Theory:** Karl Groos (1861-1946) originated this theory which suggests that children instinctually play as **play allows them to practice those skills that they will need in the future.** For example, rough and tumble play among children can help children practice skills needed for survival later. Or playing group games as a child helps to learn teamwork skills that would be needed later. (You would remember Plato also having similar views about play)

These classical theories were eventually found to have many weaknesses and lack significant supporting scientific evidence. For instance, you would have observed that children continue to play even though their energy is spent and they are tired. This makes one question the Surplus Energy Theory. Also, if we play to restore energy after work, then by that logic, adults would play more than children as they work more. However, this is not the situation in reality. So the Recreation Theory also has a weakness. Similarly, the Recapitulation Theory cannot explain why children play with modern gadgets (like toy cars) which have nothing to do with their instincts. Practice Theory does not answer the question — How can children 'practice' the skills they will need in adult life when they cannot predict the future or know what they will be as adults?



Despite having weaknesses, the classical theories have value as they formed the basis for the modern theories of play. Some of these classical theories are still considered to be relevant in explaining some play behaviour in children.

#### 7.4.4 Modern Theories of Play

Around the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more focused efforts were made to define play, understand the reasons behind it, know the factors influencing play, identify its characteristics, and understand its role in child development and learning. These led to multiple modern theories which look at the play. Let us understand some of the major theories of play.

##### a) Psychoanalytic Theory of Play

Psychoanalytic theory of play is based on the works of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and his followers, particularly Anna Freud (1895-1982) and Erik Erickson (1902-1994). According to this theory, play essentially has emotional value for children. Play is a way by which children express their emotions. This expression helps them to manage their emotions and also to cope with emotional conflicts they may encounter.

Many times, children cannot express the negative emotions they feel, as they fear the disapproval of adults around them. During play, they can express all their emotions without fear of adult disapproval or unwanted consequences. As children play, they create a world in which they can control and feel safe. So when they enact or role-play an emotionally difficult situation in the safe world of play, they understand their experience better, and also learn to deal with any negative emotional consequences of their experience. This process by which negative emotions are released, thereby providing relief to the child, is called **catharsis**. For example, a child may have been scolded by an adult for some action of hers. The child cannot scold the adult and cannot argue with the adult about why she has been scolded. She may even feel that she did not deserve to be scolded. She carries this negative experience within herself. In a play situation, during pretend play, she may enact the same situation, where she becomes the adult and the doll becomes her own self. She may scold the doll in the same way in this imaginary situation as she was scolded by the adult. This provides her a release and helps her to deal with her negative emotions.

The psychoanalytic theory of play is practically applied by clinical psychologists in **Play Therapy**. Play Therapy is a treatment that helps children who have emotional difficulties or have experienced some traumatic event. During the therapy sessions, the children are given the freedom to play. The play therapist is a trained person who understands that play is a form of communication for the child. So through the child's play, the therapist understands her anxieties, fears, and other emotions. Following this, the therapist helps children to resolve these negative emotions through various techniques.

Erickson extended the psychoanalytic theory of play by looking at the role of play in emotional development/ personality development, and also looked at the social role of play. He believed that children go through different stages of play which mirror (reflect) their psycho-social development. During the first year of their life, infants play and explore to understand their physical body. In the second year, as the child plays with toys and gains mastery over them, she develops greater confidence in her abilities. By the time the child has reached the preschool years, she can play more social games with her peers, siblings, or adults around her, which makes her confident in her ability to be successful in social situations. Erickson believed that during the preschool years, make-believe play lets children learn about their culture and social roles.

### b) Cognitive Theories of Play

While the psychoanalytic theory highlighted the emotional aspect of play, the cognitive theory of play focus on the role of play in the development of the child's cognitive and intellectual skills. There are different cognitive theories of play discussed by Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner. Now let's read about them in detail, beginning with Piaget's theory of the play.

#### i) Piaget's Views on Play

You would remember reading in Unit 11, 12 and 13, Block 3 of the Course MCD-001 about Piaget's theory of cognitive development. According to Piaget, children's play at different ages matches their level of cognitive development during that age. He described **three stages of play**, i.e. Practice play, Symbolic play and Games with rules. Let us briefly discuss each of these.

**Practice Play:** It is also referred to as 'sensorimotor play' or 'functional play'. This play is seen during the sensorimotor stage. In this form of play, children use repetition as play; that is, they repeat an action over and over again and this is their play. This repeated action can be physical, a way in which the child handles a toy, or even repetition in their use of language. For example, a child may pick up a block, look at it for a while and then throw it. Then, she would pick another block and throw it too. She would repeat this activity again and again — enjoying the play.

*Note:* Piaget's 'practice play' is different from 'practice play' as described by Kroos. In Kroos's case, children play to practice their skills for future use, while in the case of Piaget, during play, children repeat or practice skills they have already learned.

**Symbolic Play:** During the next stage of cognitive development, i.e., the preoperational stage, children engage in 'symbolic play' or 'dramatic/representational play', as children at two years of age become capable of symbolic thinking. Can you recall what is meant by symbolic thinking or representational thinking from your reading of Section 12.2, Unit 12, Block 3 of MCD-001? It means being able to represent objects and events in ones's

mind using symbols. Language is a symbol system wherein we use words to represent objects. Symbolic play involves role-playing or pretend games. A child may pretend that a piece of the stick is a bird, which ‘flies’ as she throws it (here the ‘stick’ is a symbol for the bird). Or she may pretend that she is ‘mummy’ as she puts a *bindi* on her forehead and then gets on to play that role.

**Games with Rules:** This is the most complex form of play which starts during the concrete operation stage. In this play, children can understand and accept the rules of a game and play according to those rules. During this type of play, children have social interactions with others and learn to control their behaviour according to the established rules. Piaget believed that games with rules, when played with peers, could promote moral development in children. Some common games with rules are hide and seek, *tag*, Chinese Whispers, and popular sports like football, cricket or *kabaddi*.

The stages of play identified by Piaget were later expanded by Sara Smilansky, an Israeli psychologist. She added ‘Constructive play’ to the list of play stages that she believed emerged sometime between practice play and symbolic play.

**Constructive Play:** This play involves creating or constructing something using the play material. This form of play is more goal-oriented as compared to functional play. Here, children are using their sensorimotor skills along with their creativity. An example of this kind of play is the child building a tower with blocks or drawing a picture.

For Piaget, the play was not just the reflection of developing cognitive abilities in the child, but also something that contributed to the development of cognition (thought). You would remember reading the concepts of assimilation and accommodation in Piaget’s theory of cognitive development in Sub-section 11.2.1 of Unit 11 in MCD-001. Assimilation is the process of fitting new information from the environment into already existing mental structures, or schemas. On the other hand, accommodation takes place when children change their existing schemas to fit in new information they are receiving from the environment. According to Piaget, during play, assimilation happens more than accommodation. So when the child imagines that a piece of the stick is a bird, she already has an idea about what is a bird. Now, she deliberately uses the stick to represent the bird so she is assimilating the stick with her idea of a bird.

You may wonder how cognitive development takes place through this process of assimilation during play. Piaget believed that through play the children practiced or consolidated the concepts and skills they have already learned. This according to him was an important function of play, as without practice children would forget any new skill they learned. For example, while playing four-year-old Mohit pretended that some wooden blocks were bananas. He offered one ‘banana’ to his mother saying, “*You eat the banana mummy!*” When Mohit’s mother put the block near her mouth pretending to eat it, Mohit said, “No...You have to peel the skin first.” Then, both he and

his mother pretended to peel the block/banana. Here, Mohit is learning nothing new through his play. However, this pretend play allowed Mohit to remember and practice the skill of how a banana is eaten and gave him the chance to practice the language. Piaget believed that a lot can be understood about children's thinking processes by watching them play.

While Piaget's theory of play has been influential in our understanding of child's play behaviours, it also has some critiques. The idea that children go through fixed hierarchical stages of play based on their cognitive stage has been challenged by many later researchers. They say that the different types of play as described by Piaget are not restricted to particular age groups. For instance, while Piaget saw the 'Games with Rules' stage as a part of the concrete operational stage (i.e. middle childhood), many theorists (including Vygotsky) point out that children begin to play simple games with rules in the preschool years itself and as their age increases the complexity of the games with rules also increases. Another criticism is that Piaget's theory does not acknowledge the role of culture and society in shaping children's play. Despite these critiques, the types of play described by Piaget (and later expanded by Smilansky) help us in understanding how the development of thinking abilities and play are linked.

#### ii) Vygotsky's Views on Play

You have read about Vygotsky (1896-1934) and his views on play in MCD-001, Unit 14, Section 14.5. While Piaget saw the play as most relevant to the child's cognitive development, Vygotsky's perspective was more holistic. According to him, play promoted not just cognitive development, but also socio-emotional development and language development. According to him, through play children learn about the values and norms of their culture, and the social skills needed to live in society. In fact, he stated that children's play itself was influenced by their social setting.

You would remember reading about the role of play in creating the zone of proximal development. When children have an option to choose activities during play, they will choose activities that are just right for them with respect to their present skills. These activities would neither be too easy nor too tough — rather these will be challenging and interesting enough for them to try out. This 'just right' activity falls in the child's zone of proximal development. Play also allows the child to stretch the limitations of her ZPD, as during play, the child gets to practice and improve her own skills. So, play helps the child to move through the zone of proximal development, i.e., from a lower actual developmental level to a higher level of potential development.

Furthermore, Vygotsky believed that play provides children with the freedom to express themselves, and also an opportunity to practice self-regulation. For example, a child who would cry during bath time can subsequently practice not crying during her pretend play at about bath-time. In playtime, she can control whether she cries or not (unlike in real life).

### iii) Bruner's Theory on Play

According to Jerome Bruner (1915-2016), play has a role in fostering development in many areas including creativity, problem-solving, social skills and language. He also believed play allowed children to explore and learn abilities they will need as adults.

Unlike in the case of studying, where the goal is fixed; while playing children do not have any fixed goal in mind. This allows them the freedom to experiment — they try different combinations of actions and they can explore different roles and manipulate objects in different ways. This experimentation lets children learn new skills which they can later use to solve real-world problems. Bruner believed that play was particularly useful to children as it allowed them an opportunity to explore different things and behaviours safely. In play, children can make mistakes without any consequences.

### c) Arousal Modulation Theory

Daniel Berlyne (1924-1976) introduced this theory, according to which, children play in order to satisfy an internal need or drive to keep arousal at an optimal level in their central nervous system. There is an internal need that wants arousal to be at the right balance — neither too high, nor too low. The stimulation causes arousal. When there is an excess stimulation, the arousal reaches uncomfortably high levels. Then, the child needs to do something to reduce this arousal — namely, play. For example, when a child comes across a new toy, she gets too much stimulation which is reduced when she explores the toy, becomes familiar with it, and plays with it. In the case of the opposite scenario, i.e., when there is not enough stimulation in the environment, the child's state of arousal becomes very low, leading to her being bored. Thus, to raise the level of arousal to the optimal balance, and to alleviate boredom, the child plays.

### d) Parten's Theory of Play Stages based on Social Participation

When we see a group of children, we assume that they must be playing together. But this is not always so. Mildred Parten (1902-1970) identified certain stages of play children go through during the early childhood years. These stages show that children's social involvement with each other, especially during play, changes with age. Parten identified five stages of play based on the nature of social participation — Solitary play, Onlooker play, Parallel play, Associative play and Cooperative play. Let us discuss each briefly.

#### *Solitary Play*

In solitary play activity, **the child plays alone. There may be other children around the child but the child does not interact with them and seems unaware of them.** This kind of play can be more frequently observed in two to three-years-old children, than among older preschoolers. The child is completely involved in her own play activity, playing with toys and common household objects, and is not attentive to other children playing in

the same place. Her play takes all her attention. **There is no active interaction with other children.**

### ***Onlooker Play***

When the child watches other children play, the child is engaged in onlooker play activity. **The child is actively interested in watching the play activity of other children.** The child does not participate in other children's play, but might ask them questions while observing them. For example, while other children are on the merry-go-round, this child may sit on the bench with her mother and watch them keenly and enjoy that experience.

### ***Parallel Play***

Preschoolers between two to four years of age can often be seen sitting together and playing. If you observe carefully, you will find that **while they may be sitting together, playing with the same kind of play materials and even using the play materials in similar ways, they are not playing together.** Each child is engaged in her play separately. However, they are aware of each other (unlike in the case of the solitary play) and may even occasionally talk to one another, or see how the other is playing. The given example will help you understand it better.

*Four-year-olds, Ravi and Priya, were playing in the sand pit in the preschool sitting next to each other. Ravi was picking sand in his fist and putting it in a bucket. Priya was using a small plastic shovel to dig and scoop up the sand, making a small hole in the sand pit. Ravi glanced toward Priya. He picked up some sand she had scooped out in his fist and put it in his bucket. Priya saw Ravi take the sand but carried on her digging game unconcerned.*

### ***Associative Play***

In this kind of play, **children interact with each other and play together but they need adults to help them organize their play.** This play is seen amongst older preschoolers – they seek out the attention and company of other children to play a game together, but most of the time, they need some supervision by an adult or an older child to organize them. For example, an adult helps the children to form themselves into a circle and then directs them to pass a ball from one child to the other in the circle (to play the game of 'passing the parcel'). It is unlike the parallel play because here the children are interacting with each other. The play is social in nature.

### ***Cooperative Play***

This kind of play is shown by older preschoolers, at five to six years of age. As children grow, they become more able to participate in such social forms of play. **Children start interacting actively and extensively amongst themselves and carry out play activities in an organized manner.** They can play games with rules and can form themselves into small groups and teams for play activities. In such a group, one or two children usually take on a leadership role. Then they take the lead in deciding the game that the group

will play, hand out toys, assign roles and tasks to each child and have a final say on the winner. All of this is accepted willingly by the other members of the group.

Parten’s stages have been supported by subsequent research. However, research has also found that children go through the stages earlier than Parten envisioned. Parten’s implication that solitary play is a sign of immature behaviour has also been challenged as older children also enjoy playing by themselves.

Modern theories of play have extended our knowledge about play and also have led to much research. While the above text discusses the theories of play, this list of theories is not exhaustive. The study of play is a vast subject area and it is not possible to cover it all in this Course. Nonetheless, the discussion above will give you an idea about how our understanding of play has evolved, (and continues to evolve) as well as know the major theories of play. Table 7a provides an overview of the theories of play and summarizes the above discussion.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

1) Fill in the blanks.

- a) When children play together but need adults to organize their play it is called.....
- b) When children are involved in play activities that require them to use a lot of energy, it is called .....
- c) Play that does not involve too much physical activity and helps children to relax and regain energy, is called .....
- d) When children play individually but are also aware of the presence of the other child is referred to as .....play.

2) How is the psychoanalytic theory of play practically applied by clinical psychologists in Play Therapy?

.....

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.....

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.....

3) Match the Following.

<b>Theorist</b>	<b>View’s on Play</b>
a) Erikson	i) Three stages of play – i.e Practice play, Symbolic play, and Games with rules.
b) Recapitulation Theory	ii) Play allows practice of those skills that they will need in the future

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
| c) Vygotsky              | iii) Fosters development in many areas including creativity, problem-solving, social skills and language |
| d) Bruner                | iv) Helps the child to move through the zone of proximal development                                     |
| e) Piaget                | v) Helps in emotional development/ personality development and also looked at the social role of play    |
| f) Recreation Theory     | vi) Children play to release the excess energy in their bodies.  |
| g) Practice Theory       | vii) Through play, children can let go of the unnecessary instincts                                      |
| h) Surplus Energy Theory | viii) Play is a way to restore energy that has been depleted after doing labour or work                  |

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## 7.5 KINDS OF PLAY

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Play activities of children can be classified in a number of ways. In this Section, we will read about the classification of play activities based on various criteria:

### 7.5.1 Classification Based on how Children Relate with Peers during a Play Activity

You have just read about Parten's theory of play stages based on the extent of social participation in the previous Section. In her theory, Parten identified 5 types of play based on how much interaction children have with their peers. These play types are — Solitary play, Onlooker play, Parallel play, Associative play and Cooperative play.

### 7.5.2 Classification Based on Adult's Role/Choice Provided to Children during a Play Activity

Based on the adult's role in the play activity, the play can be categorized as free play or structured play.

#### *Free Play*

Based on whether the child is free to play as she likes or is required to follow some rules and steps which are laid down by the adult, play is categorized as 'free' or 'structured'. Free play activities are initiated by the child and played with no goals in mind. For example, when the child is free to pick any toy she wants from the toy corner and play with it in any manner that she chooses, the activity is referred to as 'free play'.



Table 7a: Overview of theories of play

S.No.	Theory of Play	Theorist/s	Main Points/ Reason for Play
<b>Classical Theories of Play</b>			
a)	Surplus Energy Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friedrich Schiller</li> <li>• Herbert Spencer</li> </ul>	Children play to release the excess energy in their bodies.
b)	Recreation Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moritz Lazarus</li> <li>• G.T.W Patrick</li> </ul>	Children play to restore energy that has been depleted after doing labour or work.
c)	Recapitulation Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• G. Stanley Hall</li> </ul>	Through play, children can let go of unnecessary instincts which are ingrained in us.
d)	Practice Theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Karl Groos</li> </ul>	Through play, children get a chance to practice skills they will need in the future.
<b>Modern Theories of Play</b>			
e)	Psychoanalytic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sigmund Freud</li> <li>• Anna Freud</li> <li>• Eric Erikson</li> </ul>	<p>Play has emotional value for children. Through play, children express their emotions and cope with any emotional conflicts they may encounter.</p> <p>Erickson believed that children had particular ways of playing at different ages.</p>
f)	Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jean Piaget</li> </ul>	<p>Children's play at different ages varies based on their level of cognitive development.</p> <p>During play, the process of assimilation happens more than accommodation.</p> <p>In play, children practice or consolidate the skills they have learned.</p>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lev Vygotsky</li> </ul>	<p>Play influences a child's cognitive, socio-emotional and language development.</p> <p>Play creates a zone of proximal development.</p> <p>Children practice self-regulation through play.</p>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jerome Bruner</li> </ul>	Play gives children a chance to try new behaviours safely. This leads to problem solving and creativity.
g)	Arousal modulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daniel Berlyne</li> </ul>	Children play to satisfy an internal drive to keep arousal at an optimal level in their central nervous system.
h)	Parten's theory of play stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mildred Parten</li> </ul>	Children's social involvement with each other during play changes with age.

### ***Guided Play or Structured Play***

Guided play is shaped by the adult and has two features: The first feature is the learning environment, which is carefully planned by the adult to lead the play in a particular direction. For example, the teacher creates different

activity areas, which foster particular abilities and give opportunities for different kinds of play — she may create a drawing and painting area; a block play area; or an area where material from the natural environment is placed — like shells, pebbles, stones, leaves, flowers. The second feature is that the adult intervenes in the child’s play in some way so that the learning is extended. This interaction may be in the form of a comment or asking questions to the children or pointing out some aspect to them. For example, when the teacher suggests, “Let us make a tower with these blocks,” to strengthen the child’s fine motor abilities, the play becomes structured. Similarly, if the adult directs the child’s play on the tricycle by asking her to turn right, left or go straight to strengthen her concept of directions and refine motor coordination skills, the activity becomes structured play. **Structured play activities are planned by the teacher with some goals and objectives in mind to foster the child’s development.** Therefore, the child needs to follow the instructions to achieve the goals and objectives.

Both kinds of play are essential for children. **Free play helps to sustain curiosity and initiative and fosters discovery. Guided play helps to draw the attention of the child to various aspects that she may miss during free play.** In this way, it helps to ensure that a particular goal is attained. However, the caregiver should be careful that the structured play activity that she has planned is enjoyable for the child.

### **7.5.3 Classification Based on the Location of the Play Activity**

Depending on where children play, we can classify play activities as outdoor or indoor play activities.

#### ***Outdoor and Indoor Play***

As the name suggests, games that are usually played in the open area are referred to as outdoor play while those that are played inside are indoor play. Outdoor play allows a greater degree of physical activity and freedom of movement as there is more space and fewer obstructions. Indoor activities are carried out in a limited space and do not allow much freedom of movement.

In a way, the distinction between outdoor and indoor play is artificial. Many indoor play activities can be carried out outdoors and outdoor games can be played inside too. A game of cricket can be played inside, with modifications. Children can play sitting inside the room and they can do so in the open. Sometimes, the indoor activities when conducted outside break the monotony and make the same activity new and interesting for the child.

### **7.5.4 Classification Based on Number of Children in the Play Activity**

#### ***Individual Play***

When the child plays by herself, it is referred to as individual play. Individual play gives the child time to engage in things that she finds most interesting and helps to develop her skills. Even while she is playing by herself, she is following the rules of the game, as in the example of a child playing with dolls by herself.

### ***Group Play***

When the child plays with other children, it is referred to as group play. Playing in a group requires the child to take into consideration another person's point of view and follow rules. These abilities, as you have read, develop with age. Till children are about three to four years old, they mostly play by themselves, interacting with others only for a short duration. But they also look forward to being with other children. As children grow older, they learn to play with others and a major part of their playtime is spent in group play. However, from time to time, older children also want to play by themselves and choose games or activities that they can play on their own.

How would you fit Parten's play categories into individual and group play?

### **7.5.5 Classification Based on Energy Expended**

Based on how much energy children expend on their play, play can be categorized as vigorous or quiet.

#### ***Vigorous Play***

Children enjoy play activities that require them to run, hop, skip and jump, that is, those that require them to use a lot of energy. These activities are called vigorous play activities.

#### ***Quiet Play***

Play that does not involve too much physical activity such as scribbling with chalk on the floor, drawing, making objects from clay, or making a tower from stones helps the child to relax and regain some energy spent during vigorous games. These play activities are called quiet play.

### **7.5.6 Classification Based on Children's Developing Cognitive Abilities**

From reading Sub-section 7.4.4 of this Unit, you know that children of different ages played differently based on their developing cognitive abilities. You would remember reading about the different types of play based on children's cognitive abilities listed by Piaget (and later expanded by Sara Smilansky). These four types of play help us in understanding how cognitive development and play are linked. They are:

- a) Sensorimotor Play (Also called Practice Play by Piaget and Functional play by Smilansky)
- b) Constructive Play
- c) Symbolic Play (Also known as Representational Play and called Dramatic Play by Smilansky)
- d) Games with Rules

The various classifications of play described in this Section helped us look at children's play through different perspectives — be it the number of children

involved, the place they are playing, or their level of social interaction. However, you would have noted that some play types mentioned in the different classifications seem to be connected. For instance, both Solitary Play (in Sub-section 7.4.4) and Individual Play (in Sub-section 7.5.4) describe a play situation where one child is playing on her own without involving anyone else. In the same way, can you see any link between vigorous play and outdoor play?

Knowing the different ways of classifying play and thinking about the similarities and connections between the various play types described in these different classifications, can help you to understand play more holistically.

**Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

- 1) Fill in the blanks in the following sentences:
  - a) Play is a natural medium for the child’s ..... in the early years.
  - b) All early learning during infancy is through the ..... and the.....
  - c) Learning through..... made during play is the best way of learning all through childhood.
  - d) Reading and writing that happens spontaneously through play activities develops in child ..... that will be necessary when she attends school.
- 2) What is more important for children — free play or guided play?  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

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**7.6 SUMMING UP**

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Play is central to the life of the young child. It promotes the development and learning in all areas — cognitive development, physical and motor development, acquiring spoken and written language, social and emotional development. Through play activities, children develop imagination and creativity, exploration and curiosity.

There are certain characteristics of play that differentiate it from other activities, such as: play is fun and enjoyed by the child; participation in play is spontaneous and active; during play, children create their own set of rules and follow them seriously; and play is an activity where the means are more valued than the outcome. Play provides stimulation but, all stimulation is not played.

There are different perspectives and theories of play that focus on children, their development and learning. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, some prominent classical theories of play were proposed such as Surplus Energy Theory, Recreation Theory, Recapitulation Theory and Practice Theory, etc. However, the classical theories were eventually found to have many weaknesses and lack significant supporting scientific evidence. Later, multiple modern theories of play emerged which made focused efforts to define play, understand the reasons behind it, know the factors influencing play, identify its characteristics, types and understand its role in child development and learning. The modern theories of play include: Psychoanalytic theory of play — Sigmund Freud (Play Therapy); Cognitive Theories of Play- Piaget’s View, Vygotsky’s View, Bruner’s theory; Arousal Modulation Theory; and Parten’s Theory of Play Stages based on Social Participation

Play activities of children can be classified in several ways depending upon how children relate with peers during a play activity, choice provided to children during a play activity, location of the play activity, number of children in the play activity, energy expended, etc.

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## 7.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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## 7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) a) FUN
  - b) SPONTANEOUS
  - c) OWN REWARD
  - d) ACTIVE

- 2) Play is fun and enjoyed by the child. It is an activity in which participation is spontaneous and active. During play, children create their own set of rules, and many times objects do not have their usual meaning. It is how the activity is done, which helps us to identify it as play or work.

3)

<b>Play and Stimulation</b>	<b>Play and Interaction</b>	<b>Play and Exploration</b>
Play provides stimulation but, all stimulation is not play.	Interaction is not play but interaction can lead to play.	During exploration, children find out what a new object does and know its characteristics.
Early stimulation activities are generally initiated by the child's caregiver, while play can be initiated by either the child or the caregiver	Play generally involves interaction. However, not all play is interaction.	Exploration typically precedes play. However, it is not necessary that exploration would always lead to play

**Check Your Progress Exercise 2**

- 1)
  - a) Associative Play
  - b) Vigorous Play
  - c) Quiet Play
  - d) Parallel Play
- 2) Play Therapy is a treatment that helps children who have emotional difficulties or have experienced some traumatic event. During the therapy sessions, the children are given the freedom to play in the way they want to. So through play, the therapist understands children's anxieties, fears and other emotions.
- 3) a – v); b –vii); c –iv); d –iii); e –i); f –viii); g –ii); h –vi)

**Check Your Progress Exercise 3**

- 1)
  - a) learning
  - b) senses, motor movements / bodily actions
  - c) discoveries
  - d) academic readiness
- 2) Both kinds of play are essential for children. Free play helps to sustain curiosity and initiative and fosters discovery. Guided play helps to draw the attention of the child to various aspects that she may miss during free play. In this way, it helps to ensure that a particular goal is attained.