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Introduction

What is play? What role does it have in children's development? What factors influence the play that children engage in? These are the sorts of questions you need to be able to address when studying the topic of children's play. Play has long been considered a hallmark of childhood and many theorists have seen the value of play as being in the development of skills and abilities for adulthood. Play, it has been suggested, helps develop social, cognitive and psychological functions and, for this reason, you will need to link your study of this chapter to other areas of development. You also need to be aware that, in developmental terms, play is different from exploration. Exploration is seen as an information-gathering venture that allows children to get to know their environment and the objects within it. This knowledge is important because it provides the basis for play. Exploration therefore precedes play, dominating infant behaviour for the first nine months of life; a typical example of early infant exploration would be the simple manipulation and mouthing of objects. Play emerges alongside exploration at around 12 months, before becoming the dominating mode of interactions with the environment at around 18 months. A useful way of distinguishing between object-orientated exploration and person-orientated play is provided by Hutt (1966): in exploration children are guided by the question 'What can it do?', while in play they are guided by 'What can I do with it?'

→ Revision checklist

Essential points to revise are:

- Definitions and functions of play
- Ways of classifying the different types of play
- Factors affecting play behaviours

Assessment advice

- Assessments in this area tend to focus on the issue of the function of play for development. There are two main ways of considering this issue. The first is in terms of a developmental progression in play behaviours, while the second is concerned more with the importance of play for developing specific skills and abilities.
- Attempts have been made to show a developmental progression in play behaviours. However, more recent work has demonstrated limitations to such approaches. Far more focus is now given over to the way that play helps development to progress, so your task is to ensure that you have a very clear and detailed picture of how play behaviours reflect and enhance learning in other areas of development.

- Play is most often linked to relationship development in contemporary texts, with the emphasis on the interactive component of play behaviours. Play is therefore often presented as assisting relationship formation.
- A good student will recognise that in some instances play may reflect the current status of relationships rather than influencing them; it is important to remember that simply being able to link two behaviours does not mean one must cause the other.
- Finally, a good student will remember to look beyond the obvious and consider the ways in which all aspects of development – for example, motor skills, cognition and language – may interact within a play setting.

Sample question

Could you answer this question? Below is a typical essay question that could arise on this topic.

* Sample question

Essay

Play is essential to a child's development. Discuss.

Guidelines on answering this question are included at the end of this chapter, whilst further guidance on tackling other exam questions can be found on the companion website at: www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

What is play?

Defining play

The complexity of play means that definitions of play are notoriously difficult and it is generally considered that no one definition of play is necessary or sufficient (Smith & Pellegrini, 1998). One of the most commonly agreed criteria for defining play is behaviour that does not seem to serve an apparent immediate purpose. According to this definition, children are less concerned with the outcome of the behaviour than the behavioural processes per se. In dispositional terms, what matters is 'means over ends'. Although, as you will see in the next section, this does not mean that play has no purpose, simply that its purpose is neither explicit nor consciously recognised by the players.

Play has also been defined according to the circumstances that elicit and support play. Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg. (1983) suggest that the context must be familiar (in terms of objects and people), safe and friendly if play is to

occur and children must be free from stress, hunger and fatigue in order to play. According to Martin and Bateson (1993), spatial relations can also categorise behaviour as play – thus behaviours in the playground are generally considered play, because of the specific setting they take place in.

In the same way, play has been defined depending on consequences. For example, a behaviour may be categorised as play-fighting because the children stay together afterwards; the same behaviour may be defined as aggression if the children separate afterwards (Smith & Pellegrini, 1998).

Theories of play

Early theories of play focused on the possible origins of play.

- The surplus energy theory (Spencer, 1873) suggests that play originates from the build-up of excess energy in the body that needs to be expelled. Play is possible only when the biological system builds up an excess or surplus of energy. After such an accumulation of energy within the system, the organism engages in play behaviour to dissipate or release this surplus energy
- Preparation for life (Groos, 1898). Children play to imitate adult life and practise what it may be like. Many manufacturers sell toys designed on this premise – for example, toy ovens, construction tools, phones, dolls, dressing-up clothes, etc.
- Recapitulation theory (Hall, 1904) suggested that we play to replicate earlier stages of human history. The development of infants and their play re-enact elements representative of the historical development of all humanity.

Twentieth-century theories focused more on the importance of play to development.

- **Psychoanalytic theories of play** (for example, Freud, 1856–1939) emphasise the importance of play in a child's social and emotional life. Psychoanalysis believes that play allows the child to gain mastery over objects and social situations by manipulating them in play. Play also allows the child to gratify wishes and desires that are not possible to fulfil in reality. So a little boy can 'kill' an action figure that is a soldier and then bring him back to life.
- **Cognitive theories of play** Piaget (1962) described three stages of play that were later elaborated by Smilansky (1968). These range from simple (that is, not intellectually challenging) to complex (that is, requiring understanding of rules and logic).
 - **Functional play** involves simple, repetitive movements that do not require constructing reality in symbolic ways. The infant who continues to drop objects from the highchair and laughs at the sound each one makes is participating in functional play. Piaget calls these repetitive behaviours, from which the young child derives pleasure, *circular reactions*.
 - **Constructive play** involves manipulation of physical objects to build or construct something. Constructive play may occur with peers. Most often

its importance is in teaching the child the mastery motive or that he or she can conquer a challenge.

- **Dramatic or symbolic play** appears in the preoperational stage of development and is when the child substitutes imaginary situations or objects for real ones. It is a direct result of the child acquiring figurative thought. Often during this stage of development children's creative energy and fantasies create imaginary playmates.
- **Games with rules** appear in middle childhood, as children enter Piaget's concrete operational stage. Negotiating the rules is often as enjoyable as the social interaction of the game.
- It is important to note that while Piaget believed play can facilitate intellectual development, he did not think it is not synonymous with it. For true cognitive development to take place, both assimilation and accommodation have to occur; in play, assimilation dominates over accommodation (see Chapter 7 for a definition of assimilation and accommodation).
- According to Vygotsky, through play children learn to give meaning to objects, to tease out relationships, to try and practise different roles.
- Play can also help meet children's needs for immediate gratification. Vygotsky gives the example of a child who wants to go horse riding but cannot, so instead uses a stick to represent a horse and plays at riding.
- Play also leads to development because during play children acquire and invent rules and, in this way, the child's conceptual abilities are expanded.
- Play also serves as a means through which children attain abstract thought. Initially, children's play involves games that are based on memories and recreating real situations. Then through the use of imagination and adhering to rules, children acquire abstract thought.
- According to Vygotsky, play creates a zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which the child can feel a sense of mastery, as in play they are able to function at the very top of the zone (see Chapter 7 for a definition of ZPD).

The function of play

Play has an integral relationship to early social, cognitive and linguistic development. It has been described as essential to mental and physical health and social and emotional well-being. Key theorists in psychology have ascribed many different roles to play.

Psychological well-being

- Freud and Erikson believed play helps master anxiety and conflict. Play relieves tension, allowing children to cope with life's problems.
- Play therapy is based on this idea and allows children to work off excess energy and release pent-up emotions. In therapy, play also provides an opportunity to analyse children's conflicts and ways of coping. Children may also feel less threatened and more likely to express their true feelings.

Cognitive development

- Piaget (1962) maintained that symbolic play advances cognitive development. Through play, children are able to practise their competencies and skills in a relaxed and pleasurable way. You can find out more about the importance of understanding symbolism for cognitive development in Chapter 7.
- Vygotsky (1962) also saw a value in symbolic play for cognitive development, especially during the preschool years. Imaginary play drives creative thinking.
- Play is also thought to be of value for language development, which it supports because play with others involves communication. In addition, play with language, although understudied (Crystal, 1996), seems to have a useful purpose. Children enjoy nursery rhymes and word games, which help them learn about the rhythm and patterns of spoken language. Young children have been observed engaged in playing with language through repetition of sounds, making up nonsense rhymes and generally practising manipulating language sounds and meaning (Garvey, 1990). More sophisticated language play, including puns and jokes, are seen as children grow older and start to understand the semantic and pragmatic aspects of language (Crystal, 1996). (Language development is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 5.)
- Conflicts in play and discussion and negotiation of rules when playing games have been suggested to influence the development of moral reasoning (Piaget, 1932). This topic is explored in Chapter 8.

Social and emotional development

- Play is often described as reflecting social competence, although there is also a suggestion that play in fact promotes social competence (Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998).
- Play increases affiliation with peers by raising the probability that children will interact and communicate, leading to the development of friendships. Peer relationships and group affiliation are also important for the development of self-identity. The development of peer relationships is also described in Chapter 4, Attachment and relationship formation.
- Play may also reinforce gender roles, another aspect of identity development. Martin and Fabes (2001) found that the more time boys spent playing with other boys, the more their activity level and rough and tumble play increased. In contrast, the more time girls spent with other girls, their aggression and activity levels decreased. For both sexes, increased contact with same-sex peers was linked to an increase in sex-typed, toy/game choice. Gender role is explored in more depth in Chapter 9.
- Play (particularly socio-dramatic play) has also been linked to the development of self-regulation, which is the ability to control your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours.

Key terms

Social competence: this term usually refers to an individual's ability to get on with others, read social situations and interact appropriately with peers. Lack of social competence is often seen as a marker of maladjustment or atypical development. Social competence is an umbrella term that covers a diverse set of behaviours and skills, meaning that definitions vary depending upon the focus of a particular study. Thus researchers interested in the child's behaviour tend to define social competence in terms of behavioural competence, while others interested in cognitive processes may define it in terms of a child's perception of others. Social competence should be thought of in terms of the effectiveness of a child's interaction with others, as assessed in relation to the child's age, culture setting and social situation.

KEY STUDY

Elias and Berk (2006). Self regulation in young children: Is there a role for sociodramatic play?

This study tested the idea that socio-dramatic play can contribute to the development of self-regulation. A longitudinal design was used in which 51 three- and four-year-olds were observed playing in their preschool classrooms. Children were observed at the start of the school year (Time 1) then again, four–five months later (Time 2). Standardised measures were used to record the children's involvement in socio-dramatic play and self-regulatory skills. Child temperament and verbal abilities were also assessed. Children who were involved in more episodes of socio-dramatic play at Time 1 showed better self-regulation by Time 2. In contrast, those engaged in more solitary pretend play were less likely to show self-regulation at Time 2. The longitudinal nature of this study strengthens its predictive validity and strongly suggests that socio-dramatic play influences the development of self-regulation. Furthermore, because the researchers also measured each child's verbal ability, they were able to show that more interaction with others and self-regulation were not simply a function of better communication skills. This is important because there is evidence that verbal ability can influence both socio-dramatic play and self-regulation. Finally, it was found that the benefits of socio-dramatic play for increasing self-regulation were greatest for children rated as having an impulsive temperament. This suggests a potential interventional role for socio-dramatic play as impulsive children have been demonstrated to have less well-developed self-regulatory skills when compared with their peer group. However, there are limitations to the generalisability of the study, which was based on a small sample of white American children, all from middle- to upper-income families.

Elias, C. & Berk, L. (2006). Self regulation in young children: Is there a role for sociodramatic play? *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17, 216–238

Physical development

- Play also allows children to practise their developing motor skills. During the ages of two–four years, impressive gains in gross motor development and fine motor skills are seen (see Table 6.1 overleaf). More information on motor skill development can be found in Chapter 3.

- Better control of their bodies allows children to run, skip, ride a tricycle, enjoy the slides and swings in the park. Engaging in this type of play also has implications for physical growth in terms of strength, stamina and general health.
- Fine motor skills development allows children to draw, colour and construct and make things. Although this play can be a solitary activity, it can also be a social activity, especially in the preschool years.

Table 6.1 Fine and gross motor development in the early years

Age (years)	Gross motor skills	Fine motor skills
2	Walks well Runs Goes up and down stairs alone Kicks ball	Uses spoon and fork Turns pages of a book Imitates circular stroke Builds tower of 6 cubes
3	Runs well Marches Rides tricycle Stands on one foot briefly	Feeds self well Puts on shoes and socks Unbuttons and buttons Builds tower of 10 cubes
4	Skips Standing broad jump Throws ball overhand High motor drive	Draws a person Cuts with scissors (not well) Dresses self well Washes and dries face

Example of application of theory: play therapy

Play therapy is one of the most common applications of psychodynamic theory to child therapy in the UK and Europe. In the UK, play therapy follows the guidelines established by Axline (1971). These guidelines are based on the person-centred approach of Carl Rogers, which views the therapist as a facilitator who guides their client towards finding their own solution. In the same way, play therapists usually take a non-directive role during therapy, being guided by the child. The British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT, 2008) defines play therapy as:

the dynamic process between child and Play Therapist in which the child explores at his or her own pace and with his or her own agenda those issues, past and current, conscious and unconscious, that are affecting the child's life in the present. The child's inner resources are enabled by the therapeutic alliance to bring about growth and change. Play Therapy is child-centred, in which play is the primary medium and speech is the secondary medium.

Although play therapy has been in use since the early 1900s, it was not until the late twentieth century that systematic attempts were made to collect robust evidence of the therapeutic effectiveness of play. Studies are often limited by sample size, leading to a reliance on meta-analysis, a technique in which the results of a number of studies are combined and re-analysed. Results from recent meta-analyses (for example, Bratton et al. 2005; Ray et al. 2001) have shown moderate to strong effects for play therapy in improving children's emotional and social well-being. Findings have also indicated that including parents in the therapeutic process by teaching them to facilitate play sessions (filial therapy) has the greatest benefits (Bratton et al., 2005).

More information about play therapy can be found at: www.playtherapy.org.uk

CRITICAL FOCUS

Learning through play: a view from the field

According to Hewes (2010), many play advocates believe that play is 'under siege'. Educators are striving to secure a greater focus on play in the development and implementation of early years curricula. A major concern for all is that the decline of opportunities for unstructured free play in the early years may be a contributing factor in rising childhood obesity levels, as well as increased levels of anxiety and stress in young children.

Hewes is writing from a Canadian perspective, yet much of what she says holds true for the UK as well.

Do a literature search, using an academic search engine such as Psycinfo to find further evidence about learning and play. To what extent does the evidence support the importance of play for learning? Can you find any evidence to support the idea that free play is declining in today's society and being replaced by more structured activities – or even by computer games as is sometimes suggested?

A useful review of UK research and policy: S. Lester and W. Russell (2008). *Play for a change: Play, policy and practice: A review of Contemporary Perspectives*. London: National Children's Bureau. Available online www.education.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RBX-09-06.pdf

The original article: J. Hewes (2010). Voices from the field – learning through play: A view from the field. In R. E Tremblay, R. G Barr, R. De V. Peters, & M. Boivin, (Eds.), *Encyclopedia on early childhood development* [online]. Montreal, Quebec: Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development. Available online at: www.enfant-encyclopedie.com/pages/PDF/HewesANGps.pdf

? Sample question

Essay

Play has been defined as 'activity without a purpose'. To what extent is it accurate to say that play has no purpose or value to development?

Test your knowledge

- 6.1 How can we define play?
- 6.2 Describe the psychoanalytical, cognitive and learning theories of play.
- 6.3 What are the main cognitive, social and psychological advantages of play?
- 6.4 How do fine and gross motor developments allow children to try new play experiences?
- 6.5 How might motor skill development, play and cognitive development be linked?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at: www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

Further reading The function of play

Topic	Key reading
Physical play	Pellegrini, A. D. & Smith, P. K. (1998). Physical activity play: The nature and function of a neglected aspect of play. <i>Child Development</i> , 69(3), 577–598.
Motor skills and self-esteem	Bunker, L. K. (1991). The role of play and motor skill development in building children's self-confidence and self-esteem. <i>Elementary School Journal</i> , 91, 467–471.
Cognitive development	Vygotsky, L. (1933). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. <i>Psychology and Marxism Internet Archive</i> . Available online at: www.mathcs.duq.edu/~packer/Courses/Psy225/Classic%203%20Vygotsky.pdf
Cognitive development	Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Shannon, J. D., Cabrera, N. J., & Lamb M. E. (2004). Fathers and mothers at play with their 2- and 3-year-olds: Contributions to language and cognitive development. <i>Child Development</i> , 75(6), 1806–1820.
Functions of play	Smith, P. & Pellegrini, A. (2008). Learning through play. <i>Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development</i> . Available online at: www.pre-kventura.org/Portals/48/Learning%20Through%20Play.pdf

Types of play

A number of theorists have advanced elaborate classifications of play. Perhaps the most well-known is that of Parten (1932).

Social classification of play

In this model, based on observations of play during the preschool years, Parten describes six different types of play (see Table 6.2).

It used to be thought that these categories were developmental – children progressed from solo to more social play. Recent research, however, suggests that this is far from the case. All these types of play are seen in the preschooler; five-year-olds spend more time in solitary or parallel play than in co-operative or associative play; parallel play is as common at five years as it is at three years of age (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Furthermore, there is evidence that parallel play is not an immature form of play but a sophisticated strategy for easing your way into an ongoing game; successful integration into co-operative play involves observation of others at play, followed by playing alongside before interacting with other players (Rubin et al., 2006).

Table 6.2 Classification of play behaviours

Type of play	Description of play behaviour
Unoccupied play	Child is relatively stationary and appears to be performing random movements with no apparent purpose. A relatively infrequent style of play.
Solitary play	Child is completely engrossed in playing and does not seem to notice other children.
Onlooker play	Child takes an interest in other children's play, but does not join in. May ask questions or just talk to other children, but the main activity is simply watching.
Parallel play	Child mimics other children's play, but doesn't actively engage with them. For example, they may use the same toy.
Associative play	Child now more interested in other children than the toys they are using. This is the first category that involves strong social interaction between the children while they play.
Co-operative play	Some organisation enters children's play. For example, the playing has some goal and children often adopt roles and act as a group.

Source: adapted from Parten (1932)

Activity-based classification

It has also been argued that this model is limited by neglecting the cognitive aspects of play (Bergen, 1988). A more useful way of classifying play may be to focus on the type of activity rather than the social aspects. Rubin et al. (1998) describe three main activity types emerging from this way of thinking, as shown in Table 6.3. The different levels of social interaction described by Parten can be seen in each of these activity types – solitary play may be functional (for example, bouncing a ball) or constructive (for instance, building with Lego). All these activities are popular throughout early childhood, but the social play that is seen most often in the preschool years is socio-dramatic play. Indeed, many experts in play consider this period of development the peak time for make-believe or fantasy play (Fein, 1986).

Table 6.3 Types of play activity

Activity type	Description of play behaviour
Functional play	Physical activities such as bouncing a ball, rough and tumble
Constructive play	Building and making things, drawing, colouring
Socio-dramatic play	Role play or 'let's pretend'

Functional play

- Includes activities such as 'practice play', as it involves the repetition of behaviour when new skills are being learnt or mastered. Practice play can be engaged in at any age (practising a new sport in secondary school, for example), although it is most popular in preschool years, then declining in the primary school years.
- The sensorimotor play described by Piaget and which refers to play in infancy is functional. In this type of play, infants engage in exploration of objects from about three months of age. By nine months they will select novel objects for exploration and play, especially responsive toys that make a noise or move.

Constructive play

- This occurs when children engage in the self-regulated creation of a product or solution. It increases in the preschool years as sensorimotor play decreases and is also very common in the primary school years. It can include creative activities such as painting as well as jigsaw puzzles, building blocks, etc.

Socio-dramatic play

- Socio-dramatic is perhaps the most complex form of play as it involves sharing a fantasy world with others. Children need to negotiate roles ('I want to be the mummy' – 'No it's my turn'), agree on the development of the narrative ('my baby is poorly and needs to go to the doctor'), rules ('my Power Ranger can jump over houses, but yours can't) and symbolism ('the chair is my car').
- Socio-dramatic play is thought to reflect a high level of cognitive skill, including meta-cognition.
- It requires a sophisticated level of interaction and is thought to foster children's understanding of other minds (Dunn, 1988) because of the opportunities present for discussing thoughts, feelings and motivations. It also helps the child develop their sense of who they are as they practise different social roles and learn about how others see them.

Key terms

Socio-dramatic play: is probably the most studied type of play. It is sometimes also labelled as pretend play, because it involves an element of make-believe or pretence. However, strictly speaking, pretend or make-believe play does not have to involve other people and therefore it seems more appropriate to consider socio-dramatic play as a specific type of pretend play. You may also come across the term 'symbolic play' used to describe socio-dramatic play. This is because children may use one object to represent another during socio-dramatic play, thereby demonstrating symbolism. However, symbolic play can also take place without involving others. For example, Sammy sits alone in a cardboard box, pretending that the box is a

car that he is driving to town. This play involves symbolism and pretence, but is not socio-dramatic play until Jessica comes along and joins in the game. The difference between socio-dramatic play and other forms of pretend play is that the child shares their intentions with another person.

Alternative classifications

Authors often define their own categories of play, although it is usually possible to see how they fit into Rubin's typology. Smith and Pellegrini (2008), for example, define the following types of play:

- locomotor play
- social play
- object play
- language play
- pretend play.

Test your knowledge

6.6 How did Parten classify play? What are the problems with this scheme?

6.7 What are the advantages of a classification based on activity?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at:

www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

Further reading Types of play

Topic	Key reading
Functional play	Bober, S. J., Humphry, R., Carswell, H. W., & Core, A. J. (2001). Toddlers' persistence in the emerging occupations of functional play and self-feeding. <i>American Journal of Occupational Therapy</i> , 55(4), 369–376. Available online at: http://ajot.aotapress.net/content/55/4/369.full.pdf+html
Socio-dramatic play	Bergen, D. (2002). The role of pretend play in children's cognitive development. <i>Early Childhood Research and Practice</i> , 4(1), 193–483. Available online at: http://teacher.edmonds.wednet.edu/aecc/arecato/documents/rolepretendplay.pdf

? Sample question

Information provider

You have been asked to develop a short marketing film for your local preschool nursery. They want to show the parents of current and prospective pupils the high-quality teaching and learning that takes place in the nursery. The headteacher's ethos is that young children learn best through play and

she is very keen to promote the school's 'outdoor classroom' as well as the other work the school does. Write a short brief, explaining what type of activities you would expect to include in your video and why. Are there any ethical issues to deal with before making the film? If you would like more information about the outdoor classroom in the UK, Teacher's TV has some interesting resources (at: www.growingschools.org.uk).

Factors affecting play

Family influences

- A recent study found that children living in low socio-economic status (SES) neighbourhoods in the USA were significantly more likely to be video game users than those living in high SES neighbourhoods. They also found that girls living in low SES neighbourhoods watched more TV than girls living in high SES neighbourhoods. The same relationship was not observed for boys. (Carson et al., 2010).
- However, this may relate in part to access to appropriate facilities for other types of play. A positive association has been found between the proximity of parks and playgrounds to the home and children's engagement in physical activity (for example, Sallis et al., 2001).
- Ellaway et al. (2006) suggested that outdoor play is more limited in areas of deprivation in Glasgow, not because these areas lack facilities but because the quality of play areas is poor.
- Parental perception of danger (for example, the number of roads to cross, the volume of traffic) has also been found to influence children's use of outdoor play areas (Timperio et al., 2004).
- Securely attached children engage in more sophisticated socio-dramatic play, which also tends to have more positive themes (Roggman, Langlois, & Huhhs-Tait, 1987).
- Mothers play an important supportive role in the development of early pretend play interactions (Haight & Miller, 1993).

Gender

- Gender differences in toy play have been documented among preschool children with studies indicating that, by age three, children prefer to play with toys deemed appropriate for their own gender (for example, O'Brien & Huston, 1985; Smetana & Letourneau, 1984).
- It has been proposed that these early behaviours may affect later skills and abilities. For example, play with masculine toys has been suggested to

affect the development of spatial skills and interests (Linn & Peterson, 1985; Signorella, Jamison, & Krupa, 1989).

- Parents (particularly fathers) have been noted to engage in more rough and tumble with their sons than with their daughters (MacDonald & Parke, 1986).
- As noted above, girls are often observed to engage in more sedentary activities than boys. In a school-based study it was found that primary school-aged girls engaged in 13.8 per cent more sedentary activity and 8.2 per cent less vigorous activity than their male peers during break time (Ridgers, Fairclough, & Stratton 2010).
- Socio-dramatic play is seen in both males and females, but is more frequently seen in females (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).
- Girl's pretend play tends to revolve around domestic themes, while boys engage in more fantasy-type play involving superheroes (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1987).
- Boy's play with female-typed toys such as dolls is less sophisticated than it is with male-typed toys such as blocks (Pellegrini & Perlmutter, 1989).

Age

- As you learnt in the previous section, children engage in all types of play at different ages. However, there is some evidence that different types of play are more popular in different age groups:
 - Physically vigorous play such as rough and tumble play peaks in early childhood, both in the home (MacDonald & Parke, 1986) and in school contexts (Pellegrini, 1990).
 - Practice play is most often seen in preschool years.
 - Constructive play is popular in the primary school years.
 - Socio-dramatic play is usually first seen in the second year of life, peaking during the late preschool years and then declining (Pellegrini & Smith, 1998).
 - Computer/video game play increases during the early school years (Case-Smith, 2008).

Other factors

- Pretend play is more sustained and complex when playing with friends rather than acquaintances (Howe, Moller, & Chambers, 1994), suggesting that the emotional commitment of friends motivates sustained co-operation.
- Children with developmental delays show higher preference for rough and tumble play and object exploration (Case-Smith 2008).
- Children with developmental delays show lower preference for drawing and colouring, construction and doll and action figurine play than typically developing children. (Case-Smith 2008).

- 'Rejected' children are less likely to engage in play with same-age peers at school, tending to seek out younger play partners (Ladd & Price, 1993). These children also show less consistency in play partners and have play preferences that are less likely to be reciprocated (see Chapter 4, Attachment and relationship formation, for a definition of 'rejected children').
- 'Popular' children are often 'key players' who suggest, maintain and terminate playground games (Blatchford, 1998). Boys tend to be viewed as key players because of physical prowess, whereas girls dominate because of social skills and imagination. (See Chapter 4, Attachment and relationship formation, for a definition of 'popular children'.)

Test your knowledge

- 6.8 What are the main factors that influence the types of play behaviours children engage in?
- 6.9 Describe how age influences play.
- 6.10 What are the differences in play behaviours of boys and girls?
- 6.11 To what extent does family background affect play?

Answers to these questions can be found on the companion website at: www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

? Sample question

Essay

Is there a developmental sequence in play behaviours or do factors other than age influence children's play?

Further reading Factors affecting play

Topic	Key reading
Gender	Ridgers, N. D., Fairclough, S. J., & Stratton, G. (2010). Variables associated with children's physical activity levels during recess: The A-CLASS project. <i>International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity</i> , 7:74. The electronic version of this article is the complete one and is available online at: www.ijbnpa.org/content/7/1/74
Family	Veitch, J., Bagley, S., Ball, K., & Salmon, J. (2006). Where do children usually play? A qualitative study of parents' perceptions of influences on children's active free-play. <i>Health & Place</i> , 12(4), 383–393.

Chapter summary – pulling it all together

- Can you tick all the points from the revision checklist at the beginning of this chapter?
- Attempt the sample question from the beginning of this chapter using the answer guidelines below.
- Go to the companion website at www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress to access more revision support online, including interactive quizzes, flashcards, You be the marker exercises as well as answer guidance for the Test your knowledge and Sample questions from this chapter.

Answer guidelines

* Sample question

Essay

Play is essential to a child's development. Discuss.

Approaching the question

Your answer should aim to provide an analysis of the main functions of play that have been described in the literature. A discussion of the possible threats to play that have been suggested in recent times will help illustrate the importance often placed on play in contemporary Western society.

Important points to include

- Begin by defining play and discussing the difference between immediate and delayed purpose for activities such as play.
- Discuss the theoretical approaches to play, comparing classic views, which considered the origins of play, to more current approaches, looking at the benefits of play to development.
- Discuss the ways in which play behaviours might benefit later functioning such as:
 - cognition
 - peer relationships
 - gender identity
 - psychological well-being.
- For each you will need to:
 - highlight the different types of play
 - explain the possible consequences of play behaviours
 - include other factors that will influence children's engagement in play activities.

Make your answer stand out

It is important to remember to take a critical approach to this question. While there is a lot of theory surrounding the purpose of play for development, the empirical evidence is more limited. This does not, however, mean that the ideas cannot be critiqued and a good student will approach this question with an inquiring eye. Can we be sure, for example, that play enhances cognitive skills or does it simply reflect a child's current abilities? Does play help relationships flourish or do other factors (such as a child's motor skills or verbal abilities) mediate both play behaviours and acceptance by peers? The importance of linking your answer to other areas you have studied cannot be highlighted enough. Introducing some of the current debates happening across the Western world concerning the rights of children to play and the impact of government-imposed curricula will demonstrate your ability to apply your theoretical understanding of psychology and make your answer stand out.

Explore the accompanying website at www.pearsoned.co.uk/psychologyexpress

- Prepare more effectively for exams and assignments using the answer guidelines for questions from this chapter.
- Test your knowledge using multiple choice questions and flashcards.
- Improve your essay skills by exploring the You be the marker exercises.

Notes