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Learning Through Play and Imagination: Expanding Perspectives

Conference Report

Society for Research in Child Development

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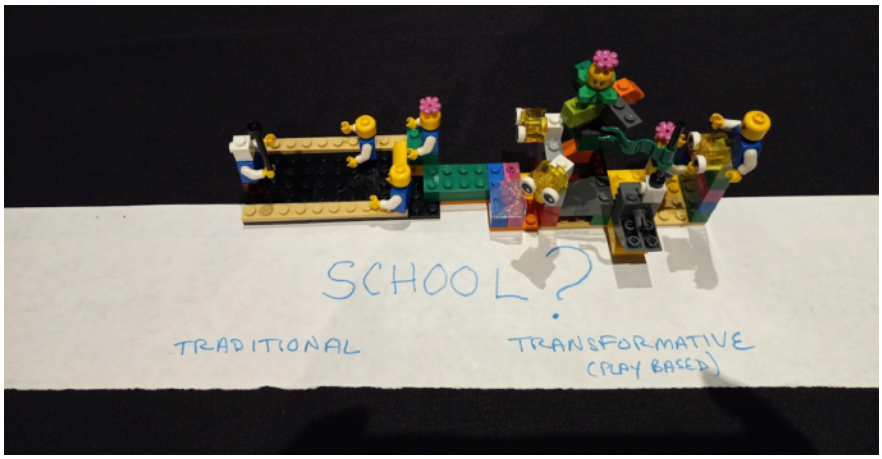
Our conference, “Learning through Play and Imagination: Expanding Perspectives,” was held April 1-2, 2022, in St. Louis, MO. It attracted 184 registrants in total, including 34 from outside of academia. Fifty talks and 74 posters were presented. This conference was held under the auspices of the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) and attracted funding from the National Science Foundation, the LEGO Foundation, the Wallace Foundation, and the Heising-Simons Foundation. Even with COVID restrictions and travel delays, it was a highly successful event that inspired many promising ideas for impactful outcomes. This report outlines the conference activities and synthesizes key questions about the ideas and perspectives that the meeting generated. The quotes that appear throughout are from conference attendees.

“How do we effectively communicate the power of play to those who don’t see its incredible value?”



Where We’ve Been

We developed the idea for this conference in response to several trends in the academic and public dialogue around play and imagination in childhood.

First, despite its importance, play seems under-studied and under-discussed as a central aspect of developmental psychology and education. The topic has not been historically well represented at major conferences or in major journals. This conference thus represents one of the few forums to bring together academics who study play across a wide variety of contexts and populations with practitioners and policy makers to present research and programs, discuss outcomes, and learn collaboratively from each other. As some of our attendees noted on our post-conference survey, “I liked the way that perspectives from practitioners, researchers, and industry were woven into invited sessions,” and “so many different professionals are interested in play intervention and supporting play, each from a slightly different perspective.”

Relatedly, much of the work that does exist about play within the academic literature is focused on the difficult (if not impossible) task of defining play, or on discovering which type of play is best for various developmental outcomes, or on debating whether play and imagination facilitate learning at all. While these are fundamental questions, focusing on deciding which

type of play is “best” for learning or on constructing the most precise possible definition of play may be missing the forest for the trees, preventing the application of the knowledge that we do have to the important problems of this moment. In light of this, we aimed to reframe conversations about play to incorporate more subtleties about how play happens in the course of children’s everyday lives, how play is connected across populations and contexts, and how different kinds of play can lead to different kinds of learning in different environments.

Further, the empirical literature on children’s play rarely if ever intersects with work on children’s imaginative thinking, children’s interactions with media, or children’s comprehension and production of narratives. Yet all of those are also ways in which children can (and do) learn playfully. Because these bodies of work have not been adequately integrated for scholars or the general public, we felt the field was missing valuable opportunities to showcase the importance of all of these related activities for learning and to integrate knowledge across different types of activities and mindsets.

In response to these issues, we aimed to construct a conference that would consider the widest possible range of perspectives on play, imagination, and learning. We were guided by a diverse set of questions about how learning happens through play and imagination, when it happens, under what circumstances, and for whom. We aimed to determine which factors were malleable, which contextual variables were critical, and how our current knowledge of these issues could translate into best practices for formal and informal education.

To do this, we put together both an invited program and a submitted program. Our invited program was selected to represent a wide range of perspectives on play and imagination in order to help attendees to broaden conversations around how learning can happen through these activities. These talks are described in more detail in the next section.

The submitted papers and posters reflected and extended this variety of perspectives, including talks on using contemporary art to inspire children’s creativity, on how media encodes societal prejudices about body types, and on how wordplay and humor can contribute to children’s relationships. Together, presentations showcased the need for further discussions of these topics that will continue to incorporate multiple perspectives and generate translational implications.

What We Learned

Non-Western Play

One major flaw in the academic literature on play and imagination is its tendency to focus on so-called WEIRD populations: Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. While some work in developmental psychology and in educational sciences has moved beyond these foci, there are still too many studies that exclusively investigate these populations, hence too many recommendations about best practices made from this perspective. Our conference panel on Play in Non-Western Contexts focused on how play unfolds in cultures beyond those typically studied. The talks in this panel set into sharp relief the idea that it might well be impossible to define what play is or how it functions in context, because play can take so many forms. For example, Dr. Francesca Mezzaluna (University of Kent/Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society) began with the tantalizing and strong perspective that Runa children in Ecuador may not play at all. Instead, they tend to choose work activities, which fulfill their cultural notion that a good person is one who takes care of others. Similarly, Dr. Lynneth Solis (Harvard University) discussed play among Arhuaco, Kogi, and Wiwa children in Colombia, for whom play is specifically focused on becoming a member of the larger community. She noted while the adults in these cultures do not particularly like their children playing, as it may disturb the spiritual balance of the world, they also respect their children's choices and autonomy when they play. And according to Dr. Laura Shneidman (Pacific Lutheran University), Mayan children in Mexico play in large, mixed-age groups, with almost no parental scaffolding, creating a very different social context than children from Western cultures typically find themselves in. These three talks inspired larger questions about why play takes the forms that it does in Western cultures, since no single culture should be taken to represent a universal form of play. Given the wide range of how play is expressed across cultural contexts, it may be only at the broadest level that we can define what play is for humans: non-goal oriented, not necessarily connected to current circumstances, and crucially involving joy or pleasure.

> **"How do we rebuild social environments that leverage play to protect and support the continual cultural practices of indigenous peoples and immigrant peoples across different countries?"**

Non-human play

While it seems obvious that some non-human animal species play, like dogs and cats, this panel raised the very real possibility that play happens across a much wider spectrum of non-human animals, including fish and reptiles. This work can point those of us interested in human play to broader principles and definitions for understanding how play works and how it evolved, potentially allowing us to gain more insight into why and under what circumstances humans play. Along these lines, Dr. Gordon Burghardt (University of Tennessee) presented his

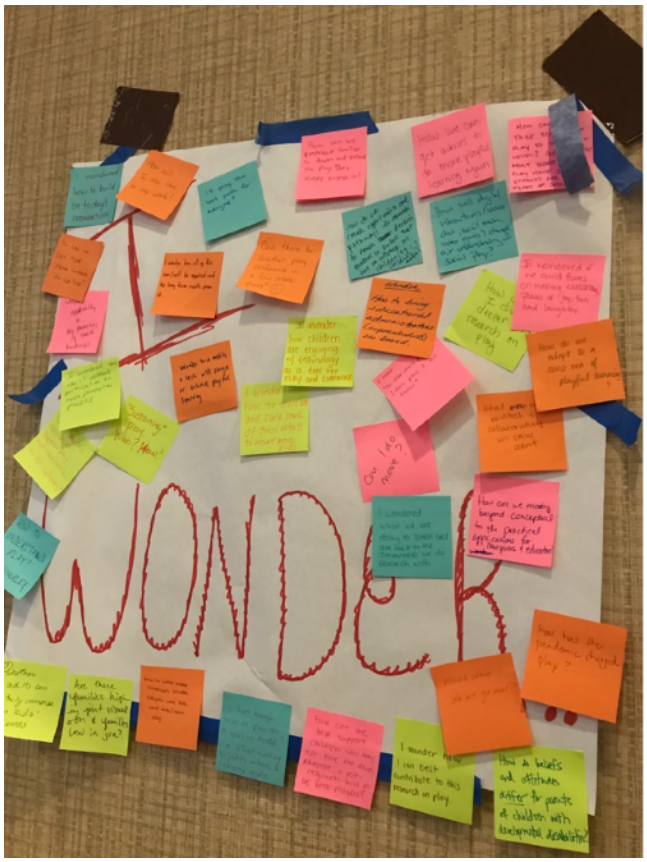
five criteria for categorizing an activity as play, which can function across species. First, play is not functional in the form or context in which it is expressed. This is related to the idea that play isn't meant to fulfill a particular goal in the moment for an animal. Second, play is spontaneous, voluntary, and/or pleasurable, and is likely done for its own sake. Third, play is incomplete, exaggerated, or precocious. Simply put, play activities don't look like activities that are undertaken for serious reasons. Fourth, play involves repetition, although the actions may not take exactly the same form every time. This distinguishes play actions from goal-oriented or "serious" behaviors, which are repeated for the sake of a particular goal. Finally, play is initiated when animals are well fed, healthy, and free from acute or chronic stressors. The more animals' needs are taken care of, the more they play. All of these criteria can be applied to the human case as well: Play is joyful, non-serious, not necessarily functional, involves repetition and variation, and is more likely to occur when needs for food and safety are met. These features were dramatically illustrated in the talk by Jill Katka (Louisville Zoo), which included videos of baby gorillas playing in cardboard boxes — just like human children. To add to this conversation, Dr. Robert Mitchell (Eastern Kentucky University) discussed human-dog interactive play routines, which exhibited many of these features. Looking more broadly at play across the animal kingdom can remind and reinforce for researchers and policy makers that play does not necessarily have to have an educational bent or even a specific goal (although it can be used for that purpose). The more we look for play in non-human species, the more we see it, and the more we can learn about the fun and joyful aspects of play for humans.

Physical Play

Play can take many forms. But when researchers are investigating potential developmental outcomes of play for children, they tend to focus on the kinds of play that are easily brought into a lab and reduced to an experiment, such as pretend play or structured games. However, expanding our understanding of when, where, and for whom play happens is critical to building

theory and advocacy for the role of play in development. On this panel, Meghan Talarowski, a playground architect from Studio Ludo, discussed how playgrounds work best when they can accommodate a wide range of users, since half of playground users are not children. Playgrounds are also most effective and enjoyable when they are designed with shade trees, places to climb, and easy sightlines to encourage children to engage in call-and-response with caregivers — not to mention easy access to coffee and bathrooms. Continuing this focus on the role of the physical world in shaping how play happens, Omowale Moses of MathTalk and Dr. Andres Bustamente (University of California - Irvine) illustrated ways in which integrating playful framing of content such as math into everyday spaces can increase parent-child engagement with positive emotions. By integrating a community's games into its physical spaces, playful learning comes home and takes on meaning and relevance for children and their families. Bo Stjerne Thomsen from the LEGO Foundation similarly showed how engaging in both heavy work (full body) and small work (with LEGO pieces) can help children and adults understand complex issues in their lives. He emphasized that while researchers care about reliability and validity in their measures, as they should, kids care about the "fun-lidity" of their building toys, honing in on what feels right for them in the moment as they're playing. Taken together, these talks argued that playful activities can happen anywhere and everywhere with the right materials and prompts. Thinking more broadly and inclusively about how play is incorporated into our environments can help to construct playful activities that can be psychologically healthy and helpful at all ages.

Media



Children's engagement with multiple forms of media (traditional, new, and social) as a way of playful learning is not new. But the pervasiveness of media and the wide range of choices children now have to curate their own media landscape are unprecedented. This panel focused on ways to harness media's strength in allowing children to play with different possibilities, which can make it a powerful tool for learning and for enacting real-world change. Award-winning author Dr. JaNay Brown-Wood discussed how people of color are often under-represented in media and spoke of the power that books can have for children and their families when they present representations of characters that are realistic and inspiring. Similarly, Dr. Yalda Uhls (University of California - Los Angeles/Center for Scholars and Storytellers) reported on ways that the implicit messages included in

media include can be impactful. Based on her involvement with industry, academia, and youth advisory councils, she noted that media needs to be authentically inclusive, not tokenizing – the specificity of experience children and teens see depicted on their screens matters. Further, because media have narratives, they can present explicitly educational messages. She explained that creators and consumers are hungry for research that will help them to do their jobs better and more responsibly. Television in particular is ripe for a translational, research-based approach that will allow content creators to take best advantage of the power of this medium to reach and teach children at a range of ages. On this topic, Anne Lund (PBSKids) discussed how media is most impactful when it involves the adults in children's lives, replicating their authentic culture and the ways they act at home. While the kind of heavily fantastical media that is common in Western cultures may not be universal, what can translate across cultural boundaries is the idea that we can effect real-world change by harnessing media to reflect a better version of the world that we would like to live in.

"What are ways to change the mindset of adults to play like children?"

Where We're Going

This conference was intentionally structured to break down disciplinary boundaries and encourage dialogue about the role of play and imagination in learning, both by including panels of experts from outside of traditional academic fields in child development and by ending each day with an all-group discussion of larger themes. These end-of-day discussions provided opportunities for conference goers to engage in small group conversations, to reflect on their individual experiences and knowledge, and even to play a little themselves, collaboratively keeping beach balls in the air and using LEGO bricks to construct representations of the intersections among play, imagination, and learning.

Discussions at these end-of-day discussions and responses to a post-conference survey allowed us to synthesize several major themes that emerged from the conference.

How can we convince educators, policy makers, and members of society at large that play is an important part of development?

Over and over again at the conference, we heard from attendees how refreshing it was to be in a room full of people who didn't need to be convinced about the value of play at the beginning of every conversation. A major goal for all of our fields moving forward should be to create more spaces like this, where everyone arrives with an understanding how important playing, playfulness, and imagination can be for learning. More work should be done to translate research into practice, empowering parents and educators to support children's playfulness and to see the value in playful and imaginative activities.

How can we incorporate multiple perspectives on play into this dialogue?

A set of key points that emerged from our invited panels emphasized the importance of building more inclusive definitions of play and expanding the contexts we think of as allowing for play and imaginative thinking. Much of the attention in the academic sphere has been on early childhood, but playfulness is important across the lifespan. Similarly, much of the work on incorporating play into education (whether in formal educational spaces or in media or apps) has focused on children, and especially on so-called Western cultures, but play exists in important ways outside of these contexts. Taking advantage of the full spectrum of playful and imaginative behaviors we find across the age spectrum, across cultures, and even across species can help us to better take advantage of these processes for learning.

"How does the field of developmental psychology better connect with research and literature in other fields related to this topic?"

How can we understand what play is and what imagination is so that there can be productive research and dialogue within and outside of the academy?

As was evident from the dozens of submitted talks and posters at this conference, developmental psychologists and education researchers already know quite a lot about how play and imagination function in development — especially that these activities can and do support learning. Although there will always be more to discover about these topics, we need to be prepared to share what we know from science with individuals who can put that knowledge into practice.

Building on all of these considerations, a productive next step would be to collaborate on a public dissemination effort aimed on expanding perspectives on play and imagination and the ways that they can benefit learning in a wide variety of contexts and for a wide variety of

individuals. This dissemination effort should be focused on parents, educators, pediatricians, policy-makers, and researchers, encouraging all of these stakeholders to think about play as a mindset, as a context for learning, and as a topic for further study. We should aim to illustrate the multitude of ways play can be framed, used, and engaged with; to show that play and imagination are available to everyone; and to highlight that imagination's flexibility as a mindset and a framework is its strength.

Playing is "the way the child relates to the world."
Play is "a mindset as much as an activity."
Play supports "the development of the entire person."