International Journal of the Whole Child
2022, VOL. 7, NO. 2

Post-Pandemic Teaching in the Early Childhood Classroom: Supporting Children's Social Skills to Enhance Play Experiences

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Abstract

Some or most preschool-age children experienced 15-20 months isolated from others due to the Covid pandemic. The isolation has not allowed young children the opportunity to participate in a group care setting with similarly aged peers. While the isolation was prudent to maintain the health of young children, it has not allowed children to gain the skills necessary to play with one another. Children learn by doing, and they have not been able to participate in play-based interactions with others. In this article, I pose three scenarios demonstrating how teachers can intentionally scaffold young children's interactions, thereby, furthering their social skills.

Introduction

Comments are uttered repeatedly in early childhood classrooms about how young children today do not know how to interact with one another; forgotten how to play; or simply, cannot get along in group settings. Today, more than in the past, this is the reality of working with young children. The majority of children, three to five years of age, experienced some or most of 15-20 months isolated from others due to the Covid pandemic. They lacked the typical social skills building opportunities (visiting for play dates, attending pre-school events, shopping, eating out, interacting during sports activities, and participating at birthday parties for family members and peers) otherwise familiar for children previous to Covid-19 shut-downs.

As early childhood practitioners, it is time to bring back the basics of high-quality early care and education: play-based learning with a specific emphasis on supporting growth and development of children's social skills. Teachers frequently say, "these children just do not play with one another." The reality is, for two years, young children lacked opportunities to practice play behaviors such as entering, maintaining, and exiting a play event; rehearsing verbal and nonverbal social cues to approximate collaboration; and negotiating issues associated with conflict and/or compromise. Without the advantage of a group setting to play with peers,

children may require additional support from observing, caring, and understanding early childhood educators. Children play naturally; however, in this post pandemic era, some children may need additional support to achieve successful social interactions. The need for children to gain social skills requires teachers to tenuously balance supporting play experiences with the act of becoming intrusive which undermines the child's capacity to experience genuine quality play. In order to ensure adults do not dominate play and further subvert children's abilities to cooperate, create, and imagine, a review of the theoretical underpinnings for the potential of play becomes relevant.

Defining Play: A Theoretical Framework

Dewey, Montessori, Erikson, Piaget, and Vygotsky are theorists who believe play is how young children naturally and effectively learn (Mooney, 2000). Extensive research studies underscore the significant importance of play (Essame, 2020; Karlsdottir et al., 2019; Whitebread et al., 2009). Yet, defining play is ambiguous; even the Webster Dictionary states a plethora of ways to define this phenomenon that is commonly discussed in regards to children (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Critically, play is defined as active, dynamic, constructive, and important to the overall growth and development of young children (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971; Haight et al., 1999; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Play incorporates the use of objects, often referred to simply as toys (Haight et al., 1999). Play is referred to as purposeless in nature and an activity voluntarily engaged in by the child (Brown, 2009; Smith & Pellegrini, 2013-2015). Others describe play as purposeful because children master necessary skills through their playful actions and interactions (Miller & Kuhaneck, 2008).

Eberle (2014) states these activities exist for the sake of playing. Play is not sought out by individuals, rather it is a spontaneous, though not random, act that does not discredit the power the child has, while still acknowledging rule making and breaking. Eberle also cautions readers to not forget that a person cannot remove the where, when, and with whom that had previously been identified as part of the definition. Eberle went on to identify six elements that make up the basis for play:

- Anticipation: meaning that play begins with a tension, which is pleasurable, as an original storyline is created in a predictable way.
- Surprise: which is characterized by the sounds of laughter when an incongruity occurs in the play.
- Curiosity: the anticipation leads an individual to wonder, which leads to discovery of something new or novel.
- Pleasure: not only an incentive to begin or continue to play, but also is a defining element that must be present for the act to be defined as play.
- Understanding: which leads to an increased capacity for one to express empathy and insight into another person's emotions or motives. These understandings ultimately lead to the development of "theory of mind" (the developed ability to understand how one generates their thoughts).
- Strength: within our minds and our bodies, by improving physical abilities, increases our mental capacities, and deepens one's understanding of the social world around them.

- Poise: or a sense of balance, in which the child displays grace, self-assurance, ease, fun, achievement, and whim.

Smith and Pellegrini (2013-2015) indicate that the *process* of play is far more beneficial to the child's learning than is the end point of that play. Additionally, they explain that flexibility in the use and combination of tools must be present and the act must be filled with laughter and positivity on behalf of the children, for the act to be called play. Bodrova and Leong (2007) share how according to Vygotsky (1967), play involves an imaginary situation, during which the child acts out a role, which follows a set of predetermined rules for those roles, and incorporates social interaction with others.

Learning Through Play

The connection between play and learning is supported and emphasized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which has long espoused the belief that children learn through play, using the statement, "Early years are learning years" (NAEYC, n.d., para 1) as its registered trademark. In 2009, NAEYC issued a position statement emphasizing the importance of play and its connection to learning stating, "Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 14). Play describes the work conducted by children. In 2020, NAEYC released the fourth edition of the *Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Childhood Programs* in which the six principles of play are outlined. The third principle states, "Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive and social competencies as well as content knowledge across disciplines" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2020, p. xxxiii). This same document indicates that play includes the following types of interaction: self-directed, guided, solitary, parallel, social, cooperative, onlooker, object, fantasy, physical, constructive, and games with rules.

Research demonstrates all mammals engage in spontaneous acts of play (Brown, 2009; Smith & Pellegrini, 2013-2015). Brown found, while observing animals in their natural habitat, that many engaged in playful behaviors with one another. They shared an example about witnessing a grizzly bear, exhibiting signs of malnourishment, who playfully interacted with a sled dog rather than satisfying his hunger. The physical characteristics exhibited by both animals identified the actions as play. This playful interaction occurred for a length of time each day and through the course of several days.

Upon examining the brains of mammals engaged in playful behavior, researchers found them to be structurally different from brains of mammals not engaged in playful interactions (Brown, 2009). For instance, the brains of mammals engaged in frequent and ongoing instances of play were physically larger than mammals not engaged in frequent play. Particular areas of the brain that showed significant differences included the amygdala (which allows expression of emotion), cerebellum (which allows for control in movement and balance), and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (which allows for faster decision-making abilities). Additionally, in higher functioning animals, play led to the development of secondary emotions (e.g., empathy or sympathy) and a greater ability to participate in complex social interactions (Brown, 2009).

Research demonstrates play impacts all areas of a child's growth and development. Playful behavior begins with a young infant using solitary actions (i.e., shaking a rattle) and progresses to a child playing alongside another child with increasing levels of interaction and cooperation (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007; Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012; Hoffman & Russ, 2012; Piaget, 1959; Russ & Kaugars, 2001; Saltz et al., 1977; Vygotsky, 1967).

By the end of the preschool years (children who have not entered kindergarten), typically developing children are interacting with one another, collaboratively creating elaborate play schemes leading to themes (Fromberg, 2002). This elaborate play scheme is evident as children choose a play theme (such as playing restaurant). Together, children determine the necessary props (i.e., table, chairs, menu, dishes, food, etc.) and go on to create a storyline (for instance, two moms taking their children out to eat pizza). The children work together to assign roles to one another and gather the necessary tools (toys). Finally, the children play out the story line.

Each of these steps involves the children practicing specific skills. The children must remember what was involved when they went on a recent trip to a restaurant. They will use letters and numbers as they create a menu. The children need to problem-solve and use conflict resolution skills as they negotiate various decisions. Language and communication skills become necessary as they carry out a back-and-forth conversation during planning and play. Finally, storytelling skills are important so the child's story has a beginning, middle, and end. The children will use these and a number of other skills as their story unfolds, which will lead to successful learning. Each time they engage in any type of play, various skills become stronger.

Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) found children's play increased the neural connections within their brains. They reported that the more active a child's brain, the more neural connections found within that brain, and those connections become permanent more quickly in active brains. Brown (2009) reported that when children used more than one piece of information (coming from separate neural connectors in the brain), new ideas or solutions resulted, along with new neural connectors. This describes how learning occurs.

Play is the primary source of development in young children (Vygotsky, 1967). Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) discuss how no teacher- or parent-planned activity could substitute for the learning that occurs during child-led play. Samuelsson and Carlsson (2008) describe how learning occurs simultaneously with play. Hedges (2014) concludes children must be active in their learning and describes how children learned to understand their world most effectively by their active participation in play.

The simple act of playing allows children to practice challenges while risking minimal consequences (Brown, 2009). Tahmores (2011) stated children seek solutions to help them overcome difficulties during instances of play. Almon (2013), cofounder of the Alliance for Childhood, reports children express themselves best through play experiences when they practice new roles or work through incidents encountered in their everyday routine.

Vygotsky believes play promotes growth and learning specifically in the areas of cognitive, social, and emotional development (Scharer, 2017). Piaget (1976) describes how children, during interaction with objects and others, construct new knowledge. Piaget referred to

assimilation and accommodation to explain this constructive phenomena, i.e., when children encounter new information, objects, or situations they assimilate the new information into existing understandings and thereby, construct new meaning. This constant interaction with objects and diverse others ensures growth in the child's learning. Thus, play is any activity in which a child voluntarily engages, which leads to learning new information or furthering the development of skills.

Bodrova and Leong (2007) describe how Piaget and Vygotsky believe children gain skills and knowledge by their active participation in their own learning. They describe how children construct an understanding of various principles and concepts by interacting (i.e., playing) with equipment, materials, and/or individuals in their environment. Piaget (1959) and Vygotsky (1967) describe how children further construct their knowledge by continued active involvement with objects and others.

Several studies examined the topic of what children learn through play. Interestingly, when describing their own play, children in kindergarten do not separate the act of play from the learning that occurs (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Children discuss what they learn from their play as they talk about their play scheme, but they do not attribute learning new skills or knowledge to the act of playing itself (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Leong and Bodrova (2012) report improvement in all areas of development when a child is actively engaged in well-developed play.

Cognitive Learning/Language Development

Piaget (1959) defines cognitive development as children's ability to learn new skills, knowledge, and/or abilities. He describes how children make these particular types of gains by testing rules, concepts, and experimenting in their environment. Language development is an important part of cognitive learning because it is often through language that children can gain new knowledge as they interact with materials, equipment, and people in their environment.

Play allows a child to test rules and properties that may seem illogical or irrational (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971; Hurwitz, 2002). Bruner (1972) describes how children play to test ideas and rules with minimal consequences. Children use play to help them learn to live responsibly in the world around them (Tahmores, 2011).

Pretend Play

Saracho (2002a; 2002b) reports that pretend play leads to increased cognitive skills. As children become preschoolers, they use instances of pretend play to help them learn to group and categorize objects (Saracho, 2002a; Saracho, 2002b). Additionally, Sutherland and Friedman (2013) report that as children engage in pretend play utilizing toy dogs, they begin to categorize the dogs based on similarities and differences in size and color.

Hoffman and Russ (2012) conclude pretend play leads children to exhibit increased instances of divergent thinking. They also describe children who display a wide range of emotions during

their pretend play are better able to generate more solutions when they encounter problems in their play than children who do not demonstrate as many emotions.

Saltz et al. (1977) provided disadvantaged preschool-age children with opportunities to engage in pretend play activities based on everyday experiences or field trips (e.g., going to a grocery store or a doctor's visit) or on special outings (e.g., field trips to a fire station or zoo). Saltz et al. (1977) describe how these children's IQ test scores increased following their play experiences. The children could sequence events and identify reality from fiction more accurately, control their impulsive behaviors, and show an increase in empathetic behaviors toward their peers following their play experiences (Saltz et al., 1977).

Theory of Mind/Metacognition

One important component of cognitive learning is the development of theory of mind. Theory of mind encompasses the understanding of how one's own mind works, how learning occurs, and how gaining new skills and abilities affect one's behaviors and beliefs (Feldman, 2012). Pretend play indicates a significant impact on the development of a child's theory of mind (Leslie, 1987; Lillard, 1993; Smith & Pellegrini, 2013-2015).

Leslie (1987) describes one aspect of theory of mind as children's growing understanding that other people think, feel, and believe differently than they themselves do. Pretend play is the start of a child developing theory of mind (Leslie, 1987). Additionally, Leslie (1987) discusses the importance of a child understanding some individuals may believe or feel differently than themselves, represent a different opinion on any given topic, indicate a different perspective on an issue, or a desire to play in a different way. Children must have developed this aspect of theory of mind before they are able to engage in acts of pretend play (Leslie, 1987).

Additionally, as children continue to engage in acts of pretend play, further enhancing the development of their theory of mind, they expand their ability to understand that their own behaviors affect others around them. This allows a child to understand another person's perspective and distinguishes fact from fiction (Friend, 2011). Using pre- and post-test established measures, Burns and Brainerd (1979) show that even short-term engagement in pretend play scenarios improves a preschooler's ability to accept the perspective of another individual.

Initially, a young child needs realistic props in their play. As a child's brain is developing and learning occurs, the child develops an ability to use less realistic props to represent an actual object. For instance, a very young child will most likely need a plastic apple to represent a real one. However, by the time a child reaches preschool, the ability to use a block to represent an apple will have likely developed. Based on how a pretend object is used, teachers can surmise that a child understands it is not a real apple. A child shows this understanding by holding a block like an apple and saying, "I am going to eat this delicious apple," but then takes a pretend bite from it. According to Lillard (1993), these types of pretend scenarios show that children are able to hold in their brain the image of an apple and the properties of a block at the same time. It is through this type of play, with a variety of objects, that children gain the ability to pretend and

engage in play activities with less realistic objects, which in turn leads to further development and learning.

Sutherland and Friedman (2013), using quantitative assessment measures, found that children use play – particularly pretend play – as a way to learn about the world around them and tend to answer questions using information gained during their play. As pretend play skills increase, due to playing with a variety of materials, preschool-age children begin to explore more play topics leading to learning more about the world around them. Noteworthy from Sutherland and Friedman's (2013) study, is that children were selective about their take-away knowledge, particularly if information learned was contradictory to previously acquired knowledge. For instance, children given fictional information, via a puppet show about what a cat would eat, did not alter their prior knowledge of what cats really ate.

Burns and Brainerd (1979), using a pre- and post-test measure, allowed a group of children to engage in a structured play activity of counting blocks with the goal of learning a skill. Another group practiced drawing a picture with a pencil to reinforce proper grasp of a writing tool. Through the analysis of these test measures, they found that the children's performance improved on the desired skills (i.e., counting, or holding a pencil correctly).

Ilgaz and Aksu-Koç (2005) used qualitative analysis of three- and five-year-old children's narratives explaining their play. They found that children with more practice playing were able to provide a structured and detailed narrative account of their experiences. The five-year-old participants provided a more deliberate explanation of their play experiences than those who were three-years-old (Ilgaz & Aksu-Koç, 2005).

Howe et al. (2005) used quantitative measures to analyze play interactions of kindergarten-age children who had an older or younger sibling. They found that children with siblings were more skilled at playing with others and better able to build a narrative of their play than children with no siblings. This finding was particularly true with kindergarten-age children with an older sibling. This finding appears to indicate that children provided with many opportunities to engage in play activities with older siblings become more highly skilled narrators. They learn to tell a more detailed story.

Baumer et al. (2005) implemented a teacher-directed pretend play intervention strategy that included using children's books, discussions, and free play events with a group of children between the ages of five- and seven-years-old. They found through a post-test analysis that the narrative comprehension abilities of children who received a pretend play intervention strategy were higher than for children who did not receive an intervention. Children receiving a pretend play intervention provided longer, more coherent narrative explanations of their experiences than children who did not receive an intervention (Baumer et al., 2005). This is further evidence that children with strong play skills demonstrate an ability to share their perceptions of play and learning.

Fantuzzo et al. (2004) studied children in an urban Head Start classroom who were described by teachers as demonstrating strong play skills (i.e., abilities to interact with other children in a give-and- take manner and use materials with the same general purpose or goal as others). They

found these children evidenced significantly larger vocabularies than peers described as having limited play skills. Playing with blocks, in particular, indicated significant positive impacts on language development (Dansky, 1980; Dansky & Silverman, 1973; Saracho & Spodek, 1998), especially in children from middle and low-socioeconomic homes (Christakis et al., 2007).

Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2012) utilized quantitative measures and reported that children participating in a Head Start program who had positive play interactions with their peers achieved higher learning outcomes by the end of the school year than children who did not. Additionally, children who indicated problem behaviors in the fall and were not able to interact positively with peers demonstrated lower learning outcomes, particularly in literacy and math (Bulotsky-Shearer et al., 2012).

Sacha and Russ (2006), utilizing a quantitative methodology, found that when play was incorporated into the introduction of dance instruction, children were better able to recall the skills necessary to complete dance steps than children taught in a more traditional teacher-demonstrated format of dance lessons. Children in a play-centered environment took longer to recall dance steps in the second week of instruction, but by the third week, they recalled dance steps quickly and required less direct instruction from their dance teacher. Children taught dance steps through play activities were more attentive during the first and third weeks of instruction. Additionally, this same group responded more positively to their dance activity during the third week of instruction than children from the more traditional teacher-demonstrated instruction group.

Social/Emotional Development

Children learn to manage their feelings in socially acceptable ways through the safe expression of conflicting emotions (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Brown (2009) found that play energizes and enlivens its participants, as well as renews their optimism; play helps a child see new possibilities and allows children's temperaments to become apparent, thereby enhancing their sense of self. Tahmores (2011) found children use play as a means to display a variety of emotions (e.g., kindness, anger, insecurities). Tahmores also showed that during their play, children were able to express a wide range of emotions, which helps them to achieve a sense of emotional calmness.

Craft et al. (2012) describe how through repeated play experiences, children generate new ideas and scenarios, leading to more play possibilities, which then creates more play experiences, which leads to new learning. Increased play experiences help children learn to maintain focus and the interest of all participants, which leads to extended experiences and a continued play cycle. Playing leads to increased social skills, which in turn extends to an increase in play activities (Craft et al., 2012).

Kindergarten-aged children expressed through narrative descriptions that they learned how to get along effectively with one another when playing with peers (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007). Brown (2009) reports that children discover their world and learn how to develop and maintain friendships through play opportunities. As children gain play skills, they learn to work

collaboratively with one another; children often ask, “what if” questions or make “as if” statements, which help them generate new possibilities for their play (Craft et al., 2012).

Children, highly skilled at playing with peers, exhibit more persistence and motivation than children less skilled; children skilled at play also exhibit a more positive attitude toward learning than children who are less skilled than their age-mates (Coolahan et al., 2000). Coolahan et al. also describe children who are disconnected from play or disruptive during play interactions display increased behavioral problems and decreased levels of motivation to learn across time. This understanding indicates children who enjoy playing also enjoy learning. It appears there is a significant link between children's developing social and emotional skills and their cognitive abilities.

Fantuzzo et al. (2004) report preschool-age children who are more skilled at playing with their peers become better able to regulate their emotions during conflict, exhibiting higher incidents of prosocial behaviors (e.g., turn taking and sharing), and are less disruptive in their urban Head Start classrooms than children less skilled at play. These play-competent children are more likely to invite their peers to participate in an activity and show more initiative, autonomy, and creativity in their play.

Assessment data (Fantuzzo et al., 2004) describe children who exhibit competence in play interactions are less aggressive, shy, or withdrawn at the end of their preschool education. Play-competent preschool-age children, more skilled in peer relationships at the beginning of their Head Start year, show significantly higher gains in cognitive, social, and motor skills by the end of the academic year than their lesser skilled peers. Bulotsky-Shearer et al. (2012) discuss this to be true for children who exhibit externalized problem behaviors (e.g., aggressive types of behaviors), as well as children with internalized behaviors (e.g., introverted or shy children).

Russ and Kaugars (2001) demonstrate that the type of play a child engages in significantly impacts the affect or emotional impact displayed by the child. For instance, when teachers asked children to use puppets to act out a play scenario that included angry characters, the children involved in the play more often report feeling angry when they finished playing, while children engaged in acting out a scene involving happiness indicate feeling happy. These findings indicate children’s emotions become impacted by the type of play in which they engage.

Through analysis of kindergarten-age children’s narrative descriptions of their imaginative play and visual depictions through artwork, Ahn and Filipenko (2007) found that children establish their gender, moral, social, and cultural self through play. The children in Ahn and Filipenko’s study built hypotheses about their own world and self. Ahn and Filipenko further showed that the children were struggling with abstract questions involving science, philosophy, and moral issues. During later episodes of play, these kindergarten-age children often went back to their earlier questions, and through modifications in their play, continued to work through their feelings as they developed a sense of their own identity (Ahn & Filipenko, 2007).

Researchers describe infants, engaged in mimicking play with their parents, as more persistent and motivated when attempting to engage that parent in a later encounter (Fawcett & Liszkowski, 2012). However, this persistence and motivation did not transfer to other adults.

While infants were unable to repeat the exact mimicked behavior later, they were able to successfully encourage a social interaction with their parents (Fawcett & Liszkowski, 2012).

Connolly and Doyle (1984) report teachers describe children who engage in pretend play activities as more socially competent than their peers who engage in fewer instances of pretend play. Connelly and Doyle characterize children who engage in pretend play as more activity-oriented in the classroom and more popular with peers. Findings by O'Connor and Stagnitti (2011) describe children engaged in complex pretend play as highly capable of sustaining play with others for longer periods of time than children engaged in more simple pretend play. Children in O'Connor and Stagnitti's study also show more affect in their play when they assume a variety of roles. These children demonstrate improved social interaction skills, less disruptive behaviors, and remain more connected to themes and storylines of their play than less involved children (O'Connor & Stagnitti, 2011).

Children will interact in a playful way with their peers, parents, or adults in their early education setting leading to more refined and elevated social interactions with one another. One important outcome of this type of socially interactive play is a growth in a child's language skills, including making more intricate speech sounds as the child grows and learns; a significant increase in the semantics of language, using more complex words; improved grammar; and using the newfound language skills in social interactions with others (Smith & Pellegrini, 2013-2015). Sociodramatic play increases a child's pre-literacy skills primarily by being structured, especially through instances of guided play, much like a story is written: with a beginning, middle, and end. Smith and Pellegrini (2013-2015) also make a connection between pretend play and an increase in a child's ability to work through difficult emotions. The acts of play can help a child to understand their own anxieties and lead to a resolution of them.

Guided Play as a Teaching Strategy

Teachers can guide socio-dramatic play by providing materials that lend themselves to telling a story. For instance, a teacher may read a book about taking a pet to the veterinarian. Then set up a veterinarian clinic complete with the doctor's tools, stuffed animals, clipboards/paper to chart notes, etc. During the play, the teacher could inquire about the symptoms of the animal to the owner, guiding them through telling the pet's story to the veterinarian. Then, the teacher may ask the veterinarian about the diagnosis process which leads the child through communicating with the pet owner. If the teacher determines the children involved are highly skilled in social interactions, they can step back and allow the play to unfold. If, however, the teacher notes the children are not continuing to interact with one another, teachers could ask additional probing questions to re-engage the children in the play scenario.

While children naturally engage in play, it involves a process and set of skills, which require practice, rehearsal, and approximation. Children, depending on past experiences, require different levels of adult support in learning how to effectively play with others. Zosh et. al. (2018) indicates play is on a spectrum. Self-Directed play, sometimes referred to as free play, which is child-directed and - initiated activity without an explicitly stated learning goal is at one end of the play spectrum. The teacher purposefully prepares the environment to allow children

an opportunity to freely explore the materials it contains. Self-Directed play leads to improvements in social skills, problem solving, and motor skills (Zosh et al., 2018).

Zosh et al. (2018) describe Guided Play as next on the spectrum, which involves learning experiences purposefully and intentionally planned by the teacher. The experiences are teacher-initiated, in that it is the teacher who makes the materials available in an inviting way for children. The teacher deliberately chooses materials that will allow the child to learn and grow in a specific domain of development. The child may then choose to interact with the materials, in their own way; thus, directing their own play. Games (adult initiated/child directed), co-opted play (child initiated/adult directed) and playful distractions (adult initiated/adult directed) are the final three aspects of Zosh et al. (2018) spectrum of play.

Guided play activities require the child to be mentally active and engaged as they manipulate and process information in a way to make new decisions (Zosh et al., 2018). The child should not be acting as a passive learner in these situations; rather, the child actively engages mentally with the play in which he or she is embedded and leading or co-leading with a peer.

Guided play requires that children be actively engaged, meaning not only is their mind active and focused on the play itself, but as well, the child's brain remains engaged in that play (Zosh et al., 2018). The child is able to avoid distractions and "getting lost" in their play. Avoiding distractions and remaining mentally engaged lead to an increase in self-regulation skills.

Another important component of guided play is that it must involve meaningful information, which is currently relevant to the child's life, connected to a familiar item or event, and the child must be able to transfer that information to other situations or events (Zosh et al., 2018). Meaningful learning leads to achievement of skills and gains in knowledge more effectively than rote learning or memorization. Therefore, the teacher's role is to guide/scaffold the child past the surface learning that can occur while they play to a deeper level of knowledge and understanding of the knowledge and skills. Practicing essential skills at a time when the child is actively engaged in play makes the knowledge meaningful and lends itself to a deeper understanding of the 'how' and 'why' the skill is necessary; it allows for the new skills and knowledge to be transferable to other similar situations; and helps to scaffold the child's learning to the next level.

Guided play can lead to growth in specific developmental domains, skills, and content knowledge. In guided play the child is clearly the leader of the play; the teacher only guides the play to a higher level by asking intentional questions or making purposeful statements. As described next, guided play allows educators to scaffold children's social skills without taking control of the play away from them.

For the purposes of this paper, guided play is considered as a means to help grow children's social skills. Social development was one area of development impacted for many young children due to pandemic-imposed isolation. In setting up guided play learning experiences, teachers purposefully arrange the environment with the intention of guiding children through various social situations allowing them to grow their skills. The child directs and is in control of all aspects of their play; however, the teacher initiates the play through the intentionally chosen materials in the environment or purposeful and intentional questions and/or statements. While

the adult targets specific goals for the child, sets up the materials, and works to maintain the child's focus in the play; it is critical for the child to be engaging in self-discovery by directing the play itself (Weisberg et al., 2013). It is important for the child to direct their own play; otherwise, the play will be co-opted by the adult and the benefits of the play will be lost. Weisberg et al. (2013) argue that the teacher may guide the play by commenting on discoveries the child makes; being an active participant in the child's play; posing open-ended higher-level thinking questions; and even exploring the materials in their own way alongside the child. The child, however, must be directing and in control of the play at all times. Another hallmark of guided play is that the child is an active team player seeking new discoveries, rather than a passive receiver of information (Weisberg et al., 2013). Weisberg et al. (2016) further exemplifies the need for the play to be directed by the child by referring to the teacher's role as keeping the learning goal as his or her focal point, as he or she acts as a mentor in the experience. Mentor is defined as "a trusted counselor or guide; a tutor" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary); lending their role to not be directing or even guiding the play but following the child's lead in the act.

Zosh et al. (2018) cautions teachers to not interfere in the play and allow the child to continue to lead the play in which they are actively engaged, but to pose questions that may further the child's learning. It is necessary that the primary characteristics of play (i.e., the child's mind is active and engaged, the activity is meaningful to the child, and social interactivity with the environment not be disrupted (Zosh et al., 2018). Additionally, there is an emphasis on the importance of teachers not interfering with the joy or iteration that is fundamental to a child's play. The joy that a child may experience while playing, according to Zosh et al. (2018), acts to reinforce the learning gains for the child; while the learning reinforces the child's desire to seek out the joy in the play.

Children' Growth and Learning Post-Pandemic

The isolation caused by the Covid pandemic severely interrupted children's ability to interact with other individuals and thereby, undermined children's capacity to construct understandings of how to interact with one another. In other words, because of the social isolation during the pandemic, some children may lack prior opportunities to engage socially through play with peers of the same or mixed age, which negatively influenced their social development. The children remain deficient in the necessary skills to effectively engage in play with others. It is critical that educators complete focused observations on the young children to determine what, if any, social skills need additional support.

Vygotsky (1967) describes using *scaffolding* to intentionally build on a child's current skills to grow them. In this instance a teacher would be scaffolding (building) the child's social skills by providing a small amount of support, via modeling or asking a probing question, and then, stepping back to observe the social interactions between the children to determine if they are able to continue the play on their own or need additional support.

Verenikina (2008) outlines three steps for teachers to follow when scaffolding a child's learning: using dialogue to allow for a co-construction of knowledge; planning an appropriate activity; and the using of artifacts to be able to show the knowledge growth. By providing support to a child

who is playing with other children allows the child to build his or her social skills. When using guided play with preschool age children, the teacher uses questions or statements allowing the child to co-construct the knowledge by demonstrating and providing concrete examples of what the child is to say to peers. The child then practices by actually saying the words to a peer; as contrasted with merely agreeing with the teacher's summary. For some children, there may be times when the teacher may want to sit in close proximity to the children who are engaged in the social interaction and play event. It is imperative teachers do not interrupt the children's play with suggestions for possible scenarios or compel specific use of materials not selected by the child.

For instance, a teacher is observing Jamal and Lucas as they build with blocks, when Lucas grabs the long block out of Jamal's grasp. Jamal, understandably, gets upset with Lucas. The teacher may intervene saying, "*Jamal, say to Lucas, 'I am using that block.*"' and then wait patiently for Jamal to say the words. Using their prior knowledge of Jamal and Lucas's social skills will help the teacher decide how close to be to Jamal and Lucas (i.e., at the edge of the carpet if they are highly skilled or next to them with a hand on both of their backs if they are initially building their social skills).

If the play resumes, the teacher may return to observing the social interaction. If, on the other hand, Lucas continues to pull on the block, it would be appropriate for the teacher to continue intervening by offering further conflict resolution skills. It would not be appropriate for the teacher to interrupt Lucas and Jamal's play suggesting to Lucas that he could create a structure alongside Jamal's. This action would take control away from Jamal and Lucas by altering the social interactions occurring in the play. During young children's social interactions (play), there remain specific and essential skills necessary for collaborative social play to be effective. In this instance, an observant teacher may be supportive but must strive to not co-opt the play.

Verenikina (2008) explains the amount of support provided depends on the child's current social skill level or *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The less mature the child's skill level, the more scaffolding (i.e., support) a teacher provides to meet the child at his or her individual ZPD, resulting in the child building his or her skills with limited frustration. Additionally, it is important for teachers to be strategic in their interactions when scaffolding children's learning – especially during play. When preparing the environment for play, teachers may want to consider reflecting on the ZPD of individual children; going beyond what the child *should* be able to do based on knowledge of typical child development and consider each child's unique and true exhibited abilities. During the planning phase, teachers may want to postulate situations that may arise and create an intentional plan to scaffold individual children's learning through the interactions that may occur. It is crucial to be cognizant of the delicate balance between teacher's support to further a child's growth and learning and co-opting the play. Supporting a child, only to the level necessary for success, will enhance a child's social interaction skills; whereas co-opting the play will stunt growth. It is necessary to intentionally consider the least amount of support offered while allowing the child to grow and develop their own skills. When is some support too much? When is providing children with words most appropriate? What may it look like when a teacher is supporting a child's understanding of another's perspective? These questions and others are important for a teacher to intentionally consider when planning for children to interact socially with one another. It is the teacher's duty to protect the integrity and

importance of children's control of their play and determine when and where to balance scaffolding a children's social skills before and after play.

It is recommended that teachers intentionally and purposefully plan activities which include guided play opportunities. In guided play, the educator sits on the edge of the play, but does not direct nor assume a leadership role. The educator is using his or her vast knowledge of child development combined with specific knowledge of the individual child's developmental abilities, and comments on or asks questions about what the child is doing while playing. The teacher is guiding the child, within the parameters of his or her own play, to increase knowledge or abilities. In many ways, this support opportunity might be regarded as scaffolding, as described by Vygotsky (1967). The questions posed should guide the child to think about something in a deeper way or encourage the child to practice a new skill.

Scenarios

In the following three common play scenarios, social interactions in which a child lacks the necessary skills and needs support to successfully play with another child will be explored. The teacher will scaffold each child differently, based on a child's individual skill level, during the social interactions.

Block Play Scenario

Teacher Rippi is a veteran teacher in a preschool classroom. She is watching Jason build a barn that he recently observed while visiting the petting area of the local zoo. Teacher Rippi listens to Jason as he uses self-talk to guide the construction of the barn from his memory. Teacher Rippi notices Olivia is watching Jason build and listening to his self-talk. Suddenly, Olivia runs over and plops herself down, right next to Jason; unintentionally knocking Jason's barn wall over with a crash. Jason scrunches up his face, draws in a deep breath, opens his mouth, and screams, "get out of here" at Olivia. Olivia looks sad.

Teacher Rippi could use her teacher voice to sternly tell Jason to use an inside voice; she could walk over, pick Olivia up, carrying her over to sit down in the calm down area and tell her to think about why she knocked over Jason's barn; or use the incident as a teachable moment to further Jason and Olivia's social skills by scaffolding their learning and teaching them play skills with intentionality. Teacher Rippi knows neither Jason nor Olivia possesses much experience in a group care setting. She also reflects on how Olivia has been really trying to play cooperatively with other children and yet, several of these situations resulted in frustration and tears. Jason has been somewhat more successful in his attempts to socially interact with others, although he still prefers solitary play. Based on this knowledge of the children, Teacher Rippi decides this could be an opportunity to build both Jason and Olivia's skills. This might look like:

Rippi: *Oh, dear, it looks like the barn got knocked down and it sounds like this caused feelings of anger* (intentionally not placing blame on either child).

Jason: *Yeah, Olivia ran over and she… she kicked down my barn. On purpose.*

Olivia: *I didn't mean to do that. It was an accident.*

Rippi: *Olivia, can you tell me why you stood up from your play over there and sat down over here?*

Olivia: *I liked the barn.*

Rippi: *Hmmm, are you saying that you liked the barn Jason was building and you wanted to help?*

Olivia: *mm-hmm*

Rippi: *It is a nice-looking barn and Jason looked like he was having fun building it.*

Jason: *I was, and then she kicked it down and wrecked it.*

Rippi: *I did not see Olivia's feet kick it or her hands hit it. I saw the barn fall when Olivia sat down. Why do you think Olivia sat down so close to you and your barn?*

Jason: *So, she could knock it down!*

Olivia: *No!*

Rippi: *Olivia, you liked the barn and sat down really close to Jason and the barn. Did you want to help him build the barn?*

Olivia: *yeah*

Rippi: *Ok, so Jason, Olivia wanted to help build the barn. If she had asked you if she could help before she sat down, what would you have said?*

Jason: *I would have said "sure". I like to play.*

Rippi: *Let's do a re-do and see if this can turn out differently. Olivia, I want you to go and sit over there where you were playing. Jason, I want you to sit here and build with your blocks.*

Give time for the children to get into their places.

Rippi: *Now, Olivia, stand up just like you did before and quickly walk over here, but this time, where do you think there is a better spot to sit?* Allow Olivia to approximate where to sit. *Now that you have a safe spot, say, 'Jason, can I build with you?'*

Olivia (looking at Jason): *Jason, can I build with you?*

Jason looks at Teacher Rippi.

Rippi: *Jason, Olivia is asking to build with you. Is that ok?*

Jason looks at Teacher Rippi and then at Olivia.

Jason: *Sure, you can help me.*

Olivia sits down, carefully, beside Jason, and they begin the repairs on the barn. After they have been building for about five minutes, Teacher Rippi, who is sitting beside them this whole time, but not interrupting their interactions or play, says *"You are working so hard to build that barn."* Then, Teacher Rippi moves away from Jason and Olivia allowing them to script the rest of their interactions to continue their play. She continues to observe from a distance to be available if they need additional support.

Based on Teacher Rippi's knowledge about Jason and Olivia's desire to play cooperatively and their lack of prior collaborative experience, Teacher Rippi strategically planned to be near them while they played, but only as an observer, in the event they needed additional support. Teacher Rippi scaffolded their social skills during play by providing each child specific guidance, the appropriate words to say, and staying close to them as they engaged in the social interactions. Due to Jason and Olivia's lack of experience in social play interactions, Teacher Rippi needed to intervene; however, she was careful to not make suggestions about the play, only offer the needed level of support and she withdrew as soon as possible to allow the play to continue to unfold.

This scenario was not an isolated incident. Every day the children in this classroom saw and heard Teacher Rippi scaffolding the social learning of children in their classroom in the dress up area, with the manipulatives, while they created works of art, outside, at mealtime, and throughout their day-to-day experiences. Teacher Rippi knew it would take much practice for the children to successfully ask one another before barging in on the play; therefore, she planned several activities throughout the classroom that provided children a natural opportunity to practice socially interacting with one another.

Mud Kitchen Scenario

Teacher Michael intentionally creates play experiences that encourage the children in the classroom to play with one another. He documents their growth in social and emotional development. Lately, he notes some children need more practice.

Teacher Michael is outside with a group of preschool-age children. Samara is pretending to make mud pie soup in the outdoor kitchen area. Teacher Michael, is digging in the large mud planter beside three other children. Out of the corner of his eye, Teacher Michael notices Jamie running towards the mud kitchen area. Teacher Michael watches and is ready to offer support to Samara or Jamie, if necessary. Jamie's social skills for cooperative play have greatly improved; however, Teacher Michael knows that Jamie still struggles and becomes frustrated easily and quickly. Teacher Michael sees Jamie run up to Samara and stop just a few feet away from her. Jamie stands and looks at Samara and at the mud pie soup on the counter. Jamie smiles at Samara and says "*hi*", Samara is intently focused on writing 'MOM' with dry sand on top of the mud pie

soup and does not hear Jamie. Teacher Michael starts to walk over to offer support just as Jamie reaches out one hand and taps the edge of the mud pie soup, causing it to fall to the ground; splattering mud all over the ground and Samara's legs.

Samara, looking Jamie right in the eye: *Hey, knock it off. I worked hard on that.*

Jamie: *Yeah, well, you were ignoring me.*

Samara: *No, I wasn't. I was making mud pie soup for my mom.*

Teacher Michael arrives just as Jamie was lifting her hands up and pushing them toward Samara.

Teacher Michael: *Whoa, what's going on here?*

Samara, pointing to the mud pie soup all over the ground and her legs: *Jamie hit my mud pie soup and it fell on the ground and broke all over.*

Teacher Michael, looking at Jamie: *Tell me about this*.

Jamie: *I wanted to help make it pretty and it, well, it just sort of fell down. I didn't mean it. Really!*

Michael: *Are you saying you wanted to play with Samara?* Jamie nods. *Did you ask Samara if you could play?*

Jamie looks down and quietly says: *I said "hi" to her.*

Michael: *Hmmm, Samara did you know that when Jamie said "hi" she was asking to play with you?*

Samara: *No, I didn't even hear her.*

Teacher Michael: *Jamie, Samara says she didn't know that when you said "hi" it meant you wanted to play. We have been practicing how to ask someone to play. If you were to walk over here again, what would you say differently?*

Jamie: *Samara, could I help you make the mud pie soup pretty for your mom?*

Teacher Michael: *Samara, what would you have said?*

Samara: *Yeah, you can help make one for my mom and we will make one for your auntie.*

Teacher Michael steps back and allows Samara and Jamie to continue to engage socially with one another.

In this instance, the teacher scaffolded Jamie's social skills, offering a minimal amount of support. Due to the prior observations the teacher knew to watch and be prepared to intervene. Teacher Michael waited to see if Jamie was able to enter the play on his own, but when it was clear they would not be successful, the teacher intervened with minimal support. Notice, the teacher did not directly comment on the play or either child's actions, so as not to disrupt or change the play. Teacher Michael did support Jamie, which led Jamie to successfully enter the play and continue to enhance her own social development.

Game Area Scenario

For months, Teacher Janna intentionally guides the social aspects of the children's cooperative play efforts and frames ways to support their ability to form friendships. It is late in the day and the class has just finished hearing a story. Teacher Janna tells the children they can choose to play a game, put together a puzzle, or read a book until they go home. Henry has enjoyed the many play scenarios involving puppets practicing their play skills with one another. Last night Henry's grandparents arrived from France and he was up past his bedtime. When playing today, he become\easily frustrated and struggles to engage socially with friends. Henry picks up his favorite game and walks up to Maya. Henry drops the game on the table beside Maya. Just then Teacher Janna caught Henry's attention and smiled at him.

Henry draws in a deep breath and says: *Hey, Maya, wanna play the game with me?*

Maya: *Yeah, this is your favorite game and I love it, too.*

Teacher Janna smiled and patted Henry on the back as she walked behind him. After school, when Henry is picked up, Teacher Janna makes a point of saying that even though he had had a tough day, he remembered how to ask someone to play and together Henry and a friend enjoyed a game. Later that day, the teacher made a note about how Henry successfully entered a social encounter all on his own.

Concluding Thoughts

Children deserve a teacher who understands how to guide them socially to be successful players. Learning how to effectively engage in social interaction to enter play with others and then, to sustain the play allows children opportunities to practice behaviors, develop skills, and negotiate a range of emotions and situations. Today, more than ever, our young children need teachers who are willing to take the time to support their learning social skills necessary to successfully interact with one another. The key is for teachers to balance the effort of supporting children through various social interactions to grow their skills as needed, while being cognizant of not interfering with the play itself. It is crucial for teachers to remember play belongs to the child. Teachers may scaffold learning through support, but they must know and understand the unique social development needs of each individual child and only offer the support needed. Children learn so much through their play interactions; they do not need or want teachers to control their play, only help them gain the necessary social skills to play successfully and then allow the learning to occur.

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