

CORNELL UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF HUMAN ECOLOGY  
DEPARTMENT OF  
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# The Parenting Project:

*Healthy Children, Families, & Communities*



## Parenting and Play

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# Overview of Parenting and Play

- Developmental Benefits
- Contexts
- Research
- Parental Beliefs
  - Parental level of education and socioeconomic status (SES)
  - Play vs. school readiness

# The Power of Play

- The American Academy of Pediatrics encourages that pediatricians write prescriptions for play at well child visits
- Research demonstrates that play with parents and peers builds important academic and social skills
  - Social-emotional
  - Cognitive
  - Language
  - Self-regulation

# The Power of Play

- Risks of focus on achievement-based activities
  - Play time decreased by 25% from 1981 to 1997
  - Children aged 3-11 have lost 12 hours/week of free time
- As a result of academic pressures 30% of kindergarten children no longer have recess

# Parents and Play

- Play is an opportunity for parents to engage with their children:
  - Observe and understand nonverbal behavior
  - Participate in serve and return exchanges
- Fosters children's curiosity
- Develops self-regulation skills
- Facilitates language development
- Encourages imagination
- Promotes dyadic and reciprocal interactions that are crucial for healthy social relationships

# Contexts of Play

- The Nordic Model of Play
- Free play
- Outdoor play
- Guided by the child and supported by a pedagogue
- Classic developmental psychologists such as Piaget and Vygotsky theorized that children learn through play
- However, looking at play from a comparative perspective (play and learning in Scandinavian countries and play and learning in the U.S.) presents disparate pictures

# Research on Play: Infants

- Infants learn through hands-on play
  - Infants learn through exploring objects
    - Linked to understanding of objects and understanding of others' goals
  - Interventions of object play linked to advances in infant learning
    - Play with blocks promotes spatial perception in 8-month-old infants
    - Parent-infant object play enhances infant attention

# Research on Play: Toddlers

- Children also learn through hands-on play
  - Toddlers who spend more time building jigsaw puzzles have stronger spatial skills as preschoolers than toddlers who do not
  - Toddlers who create more object constructions later have a larger vocabulary for locative terms (e.g. “in”)
  - Prek children who play linear board games show gains in early math skills



# Electronic Toys

- Play with electronic toys reduces caregiver-child communication relative to play with blocks and books
- Yet, children from low-income homes spend more time with sound-producing toys than their higher-income peers
  - Infants from low-income homes also engage in less object play

# Parental Beliefs about Play: Toddlers

- We explored the relation among parental beliefs about child learning, their toy preferences, and their education and socio-economic status (SES).
- To assess parental beliefs of child learning and play, we surveyed parents ( $N = 339$ ) of children 2 to 5 years of age via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) on their views about toys and child learning
- Results from the survey demonstrate a clear distinction between play and school readiness:
  - Parents who rated allowing their child time to play as important also rated play with a parent, puzzles, blocks, readings, arts and crafts, outdoor play, unguided play, and play with other children as important, and use of tablets and video watching as significantly unimportant.

# Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

- In a second study, we recruited 32 families and their toddler or preK child
- Parents chose among several toys and were videotaped playing with their child for 10 minutes.
- Parents then completed portions of the MTurk Survey and engaged in an interview

Which toys would you pick to play with your child?

Definitely  
yes

Probably yes

Maybe

Probably not

Definitely  
not

0

1

3

4

5

6

8

9

10



VTech Little Apps Tablet



Wooden Blocks



Play food & shopping basket



Play Smart Phone



Number & Counting Matching Pairs

# Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

- Most parents selected a combination of traditional toys and electronic toys
  - Typically, two traditional toys and one electronic toy
- In contrast, their survey responses reflected much stronger preferences in toy types
  - No relation between their rating of toys as preferable and the types of toys they chose for play with their child

# Parental Beliefs about Play and their Choice of Toys

- Parents' ratings of the traditional toys were highly correlated to each other
  - Their ratings of the electronic toys were related to each other as well.
- Parents' ratings of the traditional toys were unrelated to their ratings of the electronic toys
  - Parents differed in their preferences for each type of toy.
- Parents who did not endorse electronic toys as a toy for play with their child had children with higher vocabulary scores.

# Research on Play: Infants

- Individual differences in infants' motor skills have a cascading effect on their development
- Infants' exploration of objects is associated with more advanced cognitive skills and is linked to academic achievement at 14 years
- Training studies that enhance infants' motor experiences for several weeks result in significant gains in their object exploration, attention, and spatial skills with some benefits evident one year later SES affects oral and manual exploration. These results highlight the importance of infants' object play in promoting cognitive skills

# Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

- Current research study examines parents' choice of infant play materials
- Do parents select toys that allow for object exploration and manipulation (e.g., building blocks, shape sorters, block puzzles)?
- We examine parents' rationale for their toy selections
- We also test if product packaging can influence their toy choices
- Finally, we consider whether parents shift in the value they attribute to object play as their child transitions from infancy into preschool



# Parental Beliefs about Play: Infants

- Results will document parents' choices of play materials and the factors that shape these choices
- The proposed work will also yield insights into parents' understanding of infant learning to inform programs designed to empower parents to promote their infants' cognitive skills
- We are conducting this study with first time parents and their infants of 6 to 18 months

# Parenting Tips for Play and Child Learning

- Children learn through play.
- Difference between learning through play and learning through school-readiness activities. )
- Parents show a preference for non-electronic toys when talking about play and electronic toys when engaging their child in school-readiness activities.
- Parental beliefs about the importance of play impact amount of time for play, type of play (with parents, outdoor), and selection of toys (puzzles, blocks, etc.).