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YOUNG CHILDREN'S OBJECT PLAY: A WINDOW ON DEVELOPMENT

Anyone spending time with young children knows that they like to play with toys and other objects. Observing their play can enrich our understanding of their development. The following discussion will illustrate ways in which developmental assessment of young children's object play can be useful to early childhood professionals. The focus will be on symbolic play, which involves the use of figures and related objects to represent actions and events.

USES OF PLAY ASSESSMENT

Screening. Brief (5 to 10 minute) observation of object play can give a rough estimate of a young child's developmental level. This can help preschool teachers, day care providers, pediatricians, child welfare workers, and others decide whether to refer a child for comprehensive developmental evaluation.

Supplement to formal assessment. Observing object play is a useful supplement to formal assessment completed by clinicians of various disciplines. For example, a speech pathologist or psychologist may observe a child's play with toys to gain information about symbolic capacities and readiness for intervention requiring understanding or use of symbols.

Assessment of "untestable" children. Some preschool children are very difficult to test. Sometimes this is because testing instruments do not present appealing materials or a sufficient number of easy items. Sometimes preschool children become distressed by imposed demands and cannot involve themselves in activities structured by someone else. (This is particularly true of children with pervasive developmental disorders.) Free play with toys, which is structured by the child rather than the adult, gives information about developmental levels and behavior even when children refuse to cooperate for formal testing.

Context for obtaining a language sample. Most preschoolers who have language will use it as they play with toys. Some will comment on their activities. The more advanced may create dialogue between dolls or action figures. Play provides a context for obtaining a sample of the child's spontaneous language.

DEVELOPMENT OF OBJECT PLAY AND EMERGENCE OF SYMBOLIC CAPACITIES

A number of investigators (e.g. Belsky & Most, 1981; Bond, Creasy, & Abrams, 1990; Jarrold, Boucher, & Smith, 1993; McCune-Nicholich, 1981; Westby, 1980, 1991) have described the development of play skills during early childhood. Although terminology and areas of emphasis differ among investigators, there is

fairly consistent agreement about the sequence of developmental stages. It should be noted that, although the following age ranges are provided as general guidelines, the range of normal is broad.

6-12 months. Before a child engages in symbolic play, there is initially a period of general manipulation of objects (mouthing, touching, looking). During the latter part of the first year, as finger dexterity and fine motor coordination improve, children modify their movements to fit features of objects (e.g., spinning the wheels of a toy car, or pushing a button to make a sound).

Before children can understand and use language or engage in representational play, they must be able to form mental representations of things they encounter. They must be able to remember that an object exists, even when they cannot see it, touch it, or put it into their mouths. During the latter part of the first year, a child will briefly remember that a toy is nearby even if the toy is covered by a blanket. When a child searches for a hidden toy, we infer that the child has formed a mental representation of the toy.

12-17 months. During the first part of the second year, children explore toys actively and try to discover their function. The focus is on physical characteristics of the toys.

17-24 months. During the middle part of the second year, the child with typical development will begin to use toys representationally. The first step is to relate toys to self (pretending to drink from a doll's bottle, trying to sit on a small doll's chair). The child recognizes that the toys represent meaningful objects. The toys are no longer things to be pushed, dropped, held, mouthed or explored for their physical characteristics. The child's actions are now based on understanding of function.

As representational capacities further develop, the child will relate objects to dolls rather than to self. The child may, for example, place a doll in a doll bed or pretend to feed a doll with a spoon.

24 months. By 2 years of age, a child with typical development should be able to understand, use, and combine several different kinds of symbols: words, pictures, and symbolic gestures. At about the time the child begins to combine words to create a phrase representing two or more ideas ("Mommy go"), he or she should begin to combine representational toys, for example relating toy cups, bottles, chairs, or beds to doll figures.

24-36 months. Toy play becomes more complex as the child matures. More toys are combined to represent an event. We begin to see evidence of decontextualization. Play becomes removed from the immediate situation. The child may play out events less frequently experienced. Decontextualization is also

apparent in use of objects whose physical characteristics do not indicate function, or the substitution of one object for another. For example, a child may use a stick to represent a spoon or a stone to represent a bed. A child may place figures on a table and call it a "bus". According to Westby (1980), object substitution emerges between approximately 30 and 36 months. Jarrold et al. (1993) have suggested that decontextualization can also be inferred from attribution of absent or false properties. For example, a child might say that an empty cup contains "coffee" or might talk about the presence of imaginary objects ("They're watching TV").

36-48 months. Three-year-old children with typical development can create sequences of themes and events during play with toys. Fantasy play emerges and they organize play scenarios involving events which they have never experienced but are able to think about. We begin to see evidence of planning ("They're gonna go to the store").

48-60 months. By the end of the preschool period, children can plan a sequence of pretend events, coordinate more than one event, and set up complex play scenarios without using realistic props. They can engage in complex fantasy play and create extensive dialogue, including changes of voice for doll figures.

PLAY ASSESSMENT APPROACHES

Lowe and Costello's Symbolic Play Test. The Symbolic Play Test (Lowe & Costello, 1988) was developed for children aged 12 to 36 months. All materials and a brief administrative manual are available in a commercially published kit. Administrative time is approximately 10 to 15 minutes. Four sets of toys are presented in standardized arrays. The child plays freely without adult involvement. Scoring criteria specify the actions and toy combinations which receive scoring credit. Although the test was normed for British children, the sets of toys will be familiar to most American children. Power and Radcliffe (1991) discuss use of the test for cognitive assessment.

Westby Scales. Westby's Symbolic Play Scale Checklist was initially published in 1980, and subsequently expanded to add further assessment categories (Westby, 1991). For most clinicians and teachers, the original 1980 version, which consists of a checklist showing the parallel development of symbolic play and language, will have greatest practical usefulness. Evaluators provide their own toys (dolls, utensils, doll furniture). There is no specified array or order of presentation. The child plays freely, and the evaluator uses the checklist to determine developmental levels suggested by toy combinations, sequences, decontextualization, and planning. Ten play stages, relevant to children aged 9 months to 5 years, are described.

HOW TO CONDUCT A PLAY ASSESSMENT SESSION

Materials. Play assessment can be conducted with the kinds of toys found in preschool classrooms, or miniature (doll house size) toys may be used. At a minimum, the following objects should be available: doll, table, chair, bed, spoon, cup, and dish. Additional utensils and dishes, furniture, a set of shelves, pretend foods, a doll family, and one or more

"ambiguous" objects are also desirable.

The presence of ambiguous objects invites object substitution and higher order representation. Ambiguous objects can be such things as a block, tube, piece of cloth, rod, or even a piece of furniture whose design does not immediately suggest a specific function. For example, children might use a set of shelves to store food or dishes (standard orientation), as showers for dolls (vertical orientation), or as sleeping spaces for dolls (horizontal orientation).

Procedure. Find a quiet place where the child will not be disturbed by others. Present representational toys (dolls, utensils, furniture) and invite the child to play with them. If previous observations suggest that the child is prone to overstimulation and disorganization, present very few toys initially, and add others gradually. Do not make any suggestions. Resist the temptation to ask questions or engage the child in conversation. Let the child have total responsibility for structuring the activity free of adult input. Do not invite interactive play. Some children will offer the adult "coffee" or "food". Accept them graciously, but try not to extend or elaborate the interaction. Keep yourself busy taking extensive notes. Record everything the child does with the toys, paying particular attention to combinations of toys and sequences of events. Record everything the child says while playing. Record any unusual behaviors (smelling toys, lining up toys, engaging in repetitive actions with toys). Let the child play freely for 5 to 10 minutes. Then remove the toys or let the child help put them away.

ANALYSIS

Developmental issues. The analysis of information gained from a play assessment session involves both developmental and behavioral dimensions. Use of a standardized instrument such as the Symbolic Play Test, or a checklist such as the Westby Scale, can help a clinician, teacher, or other professional estimate a child's developmental level within a play context. If the child's play skills are below his or her chronological age, the possibility of cognitive impairment should be considered. If a nonverbal child engages in general manipulation of objects (touching nonspecifically, sliding across a surface, dropping), and does not use toys representationally, the child's lack of language may be due to global delay. If a child with little or no language engages in representational play which meets age expectations, the child's language limitations may be due to specific language impairment or other cause rather than global delay.

Behavioral and diagnostic issues. Object play provides a useful context for observing young children's behavior. Answering the following kinds of questions can help to clarify and differentiate developmental problems:

1. Is the child's behavior different during adult-imposed tasks and self-structured free play with toys?

Some children will be very active and oppositional during formal testing or other adult-structured activities, and may show a decrease in activity level and oppositional behavior when adult demands are removed. Discomfort with demands may suggest the possibility of pervasive developmental disorder.

2. Does the child try out a number of different possibilities with the toys?

Children who exhibit a restricted repertoire of play behaviors, show little curiosity, or persevere on the same action may have cognitive limitations and/or pervasive developmental disorders.

3. Does the child focus exclusively on an irrelevant part of a toy?

A child's tendency to overfocus on an insignificant detail may suggest the possibility of pervasive developmental disorder. For example, a child with pervasive developmental disorder may become preoccupied with threads found on a doll blanket, twisting the threads rather than showing interest in the function of the blanket.

4. Does the child have trouble maintaining concentration for elaborating play themes?

While failure to elaborate play themes may reflect cognitive impairment, it may also indicate attentional problems. It may be possible to differentiate these developmental problems by observing whether the child introduces themes even when they are not well elaborated. A child with cognitive impairment is less apt to introduce a variety of themes.

5. Does the child exhibit unusual behaviors while playing with toys?

Children with autistic spectrum disorders may vocalize to themselves in a self-stimulatory manner while playing. They may count the toys rather than playing with them. They may sniff toys, line them up, arrange them by color rather than function, or jumble the toys together and listen to their sound.

CONCLUSION

Observing young children's object play can provide insights about their development and behavior. While not in itself diagnostic of specific developmental disabilities, play assessment can help identify children's need for evaluation and their potential responsiveness to intervention approaches. Utilizing

an activity which is enjoyed by most young children, play assessment can thus be a useful component of both screening and formal evaluation.

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