

ASSIGNMENT #1

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF PLAY

“Play- a dynamic, active, and constructive behavior- is an essential and integral part of all children’s healthy growth, development, and learning across all ages, domains, and cultures.” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002) In the following paper I have described some of my fondest memories of play experiences from my childhood. For each play experience I have provided a description of how the play episode relates to Levy’s characteristics of play. I have also attempted to relate my play experiences to the Reggio Emilia Approach to play. In addition, I have provided information about current brain research in regards to the relationship between brain development and play.

When I was younger, I loved playing house with my sisters. My sisters and I would take turns playing the roles of mother, father, and daughter. My sister, Sara, liked to assume the role of a non-family member, and usually pretended that she was a stray cat or dog that our family adopted, or she pretended to be a homeless person that we would take in. I especially enjoyed being the “mother” and running our household. As the mother I was responsible for keeping our house tidy, preparing the family meals, and taking my daughter to school.

Our “house” was confined within the walls of the long bedroom my sisters and I shared, and the hallway outside our bedroom was a street outside. We had a very small bathroom in our bedroom that served as our kitchen. I recall that we pretended that a bucket with crayons was a pot full of food. We used the medicine cabinet in the bathroom as our refrigerator. We used paper plates and plastic cups, spoons, and forks for our pretend-eating. One of the four twin sized beds in the room was our dining table and we would kneel around it to eat family meals together.

We would often create different scenarios and change roles each time when playing house. For example, sometimes I would be a neighbor instead of a family member, and drop by

the “house” to have tea. We also loved creating a scenario in which we pretended there was a terrible blizzard outside and either the mother or father would “happen” to come upon a homeless person (Sara) who would be sitting on the floor in the hallway, pretending to be shivering and wearing layers and layers of clothing, looking very sad and helpless.

I remember that often times my mother would be very upset when she saw Sara in such a state of “suffering” and she would scold us in a half-serious way, for subjecting Sara to such “cruelty”. My mother was using direct guidance when she intervened in our play by scolding us. “Direct guidance means the physical, verbal, and affective techniques used to influence a child’s behavior.” (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2005) Of course this would temporarily interrupt our play and we had to explain, or rather convince, my mother that Sara was not being “tortured” or “punished” and that she didn’t mind playing her part.

I also remember quite a few instances in which my mother decided to “rescue” Sara before any of my other sisters and I had a chance to, and she would pretend to be a random stranger who came upon Sara and she would say something like “Oh you poor puppy, you must be freezing out here. I’m going to take you to my house to live with me.” Sara would play along and stick her tongue out like a dog, and pant happily when this happened. My mother was directly facilitating our play and using affective guidance. “Affective guidance includes the social rewards of physical affection, smiles, attention, kind words, encouragement and approval.” (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2005) Also, my mother was showing empathy for Sara and her “situation”. “Empathy, the ability to feel as others feel, is important.” (Hearron & Hildebrand, 2005) Sometimes this would upset the rest of us because it was not part of our “plan”, but on the whole, we didn’t seem to mind and enjoyed it when our mom got involved with our play.

When my sisters and I played house, we completely suspended reality for ourselves. We were not sisters when we played house, instead each of us had specific roles such as mother, father, child, or pet, and we were completely absorbed in these roles. Our bedroom was no longer a bedroom, it was our house. The bathroom was not a bathroom at all, it was our home's kitchen. The hallway was not a confined space, to us it had no walls, and instead was a street outside our house. My sisters and I completely transformed our surroundings to suit our needs. For example, the bed was a bed when a family member wanted to take a nap, and it was a dining table when the family wanted to have dinner. Also we were very fortunate that our mom helped to facilitate our play by supplying the paper plates and plastic cups, spoons, and forks that were used in our pretend-eating.

I achieved internal locus of control when I assumed the role of mother. As the mother, I was in charge of running our household. I was in control and I decided when dinner was served and what was served, and I would decide when it was time for our daughter to go to school and be picked up.

My intrinsic motivation is reflected in the pleasure I took in my role as the mother in the family. I enjoyed being nurturing and taking care of my family, it gave me personal satisfaction and made me happy. More specifically, "Research on the brain demonstrates that play is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means by which all children practice skills they will need later in life." (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002)

Another play activity I enjoyed a lot was playing restaurant. We used the kitchen as our restaurant. We only played restaurant at night because that was when we would have the most customers (when my dad was home from work). Each time we played restaurant my sisters and I

would alternate between different roles such as hostess, chef, and waitress, and my parents would be our customers.

My sisters and I would plan and discuss what the menu items would be together, but I was always the one who designed the actual menus to be handed out to our customers. I would take a piece of paper and fold it in half to look like a real menu, and I drew pictures of food items next to the names of the dishes.

We only served dinner at our restaurant and the typical items we served were “soup” (which was really ice cream that we melted and stirred till it had a “soup-like” consistency), cheese sandwiches (the real thing), and “pizza” (which was not really pizza and instead peanut butter and jelly sandwiches cut in triangle shapes, with the strawberry jam being the “tomatoe sauce” on the pizza).

We did have specific rules that my parents had to follow. One rule was that no one could enter the restaurant until we said the restaurant was open. Another rule was that our parents could not help with any of the cooking and could only eat what was served. My parents were very happy to go along with our play, and would often say things like “Tell the chef the soup was delicious” or “May I have the bill please?”

In playing restaurant, my sisters and I experienced suspension of reality in that we were no longer ourselves, each of us took on different roles. We were chefs and waitresses working in a restaurant, and we pretended that our parents were not our “parents”; instead they were strangers/customers dining at our restaurant. Food was not what it appeared to be in our restaurant. We pretended ice cream was “soup”, and it didn’t taste sweet, and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were not cold, they were “hot” slices of “pizza”. We suspended reality by transforming ourselves and everyday food, into something completely different.

Our parents helped to directly facilitate our play. They used physical, verbal, and affective techniques to influence our behavior. In terms of physical guidance, our parents body language was very relaxed, and this put my sisters and I at ease, and helped us feel competent and comfortable, instead of nervous. Our parents used direct verbal guidance when they encouraged our efforts and expressed appreciation, and direct affective guidance when they showed affection and positive regard for us (for ex. “Tell the chef the soup was delicious”). They allowed us to maintain suspension of reality by pretending to be customers and by following the rules we established. My mother was especially supportive and instrumental in directly facilitating our play because she allowed us to use real food and real dishes.

I achieved internal locus of control when I designed the menus. I would decide how the menus looked and I could be as creative as I wanted to be. As the waitress, I decided who was served first and who was served second.

My intrinsic motivation to play restaurant is reflected in the personal satisfaction I experienced when I was acted as the chef and prepared meals myself, without any assistance from an adult or my sisters. It was very gratifying for me to be able to freely express myself when designing the menus. Also, even though at such a young age I wasn’t aware of this, by drawing pictures, I was not only gaining personal satisfaction, but I was benefiting from this activity by stimulating my brain. Studies have found that, “Movement is critical to brain activity. When the hands are active, the brain is more engaged. Therefore, "hands-on" learning — building with blocks, drawing and painting, fitting puzzles together, exploring materials, acting out an experience — actually activates the brain.” (Dodge & Bickart, 1998)

The collaboration I had with my sisters in planning and discussing what the menu items would be was also very valuable to my cognitive development. More specifically it has been

found that, “Collaborative group work, both large and small, is considered valuable and necessary to advance cognitive development. Children are encouraged to dialogue, critique, compare, negotiate, hypothesize, and problem solve through group work. Within the Reggio Emilia approach multiple perspectives promote both a sense of group membership and the uniqueness of self.” (Edwards, 1998)

When I was younger I enjoyed playing camping with my sisters. We played camping in our bedroom. I remember that my sisters and I would work together to set up our tent in the empty space between two twin-sized beds. We used a blanket for the actual “tent” and were able to keep the tent up over our heads by laying it across the two beds so that it formed a kind of bridge between the two beds. To keep the blanket from falling down on top of us, we pinned the corners down with large pillows or heavy books. We created a “campfire” right next to the tent by using a bunch of pencils as our sticks for the “fire”. We pretended to make fire by rubbing pencils together and blowing on them. I also remember us pretending to roast marshmallows at our campfire. We would take white tissue paper and tape it to the end of pencils and pretend that the tissue was marshmallows and we would hold our pencils over the campfire to roast our marshmallows. To make “sleeping bags” we folded blankets in half and pretended to sleep in them. I recall that we all had a lot of fun crawling in and out of our tent. We played camping during the day and at night, but we had more fun playing at night because we were able to turn off all of the lights in the room and create a kind of scary environment that was very exciting for us. At night we used a flashlight for our “campfire” and it also served as the only light source in the room. I remember that we would sit in a circle and everyone took turns making up scary stories. We pretended the flashlight was a torch and the storyteller got to hold the torch while telling their story.

When my sisters and I were play camping we completely suspended reality. Everyday items such as pencils, tissue paper, and flashlights were transformed into sticks, marshmallows, and fire. Although my mother wasn't an actual participant in our play, she facilitated our play by providing us with blankets, extra pillows and a flashlight. "Although not all mothers actively engage in pretend play, they can have an indirect role. They can nurture pretend play by providing toys and materials that facilitate pretending." (Frost et al, 2005) During play camping I achieved internal locus of control when I was a storyteller. I controlled how long and how frightening my story was going to be. My intrinsic motivation to play camping is reflected in the excitement and pleasure I experienced when I told a scary story. Moreover not only did I gain personal satisfaction by being able to create my own scary story, but I also was unknowingly promoting my intellectual development. More specifically, according to the Reggio Emilia Approach, "[Children's] intellectual development is fostered through a focus on communication and exploration of their ideas. Children will use all of their natural "languages" or modes of expression, including words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, collage, dramatic play and music." (Connolly, 1999) Storytelling was a type of dramatic play that we each used during our play camping.

Another play activity that was entertaining for me was playing store. Whenever my sisters and I would go to my aunt's house we would play store in a corner of the living room where the bar was located. The bar was not actually used as a bar by my aunt (there was no liquor), and instead it functioned as a kind of storage area for toys and books. We always played store with my younger cousin Nina. I remember that we would all take turns being the cashier and customer(s). We only sold dolls and books at our store and the cashier would make up a price for the item when a customer showed interest in purchasing it. I recall that I especially

loved being the cashier and playing with the toy cash register that my cousin had. We had customers pay for their purchases with pennies and fake money from the game “Monopoly”. I had fun pushing the buttons on the cash register and putting money in the register drawer. I also remember that there was a window behind the bar that looked out onto the patio, and we would pretend that the patio was a street outside our store.

My sisters and I achieved suspension of reality when we played store by transforming my aunt’s bar area into a shop. We had suspension of reality because each of us took turns pretending to be either the cashier or customer. The books and toys in our store were assigned monetary value and were not “free”, customers had pay for items they wanted. I recall that the adults around us indirectly facilitated our play by allowing us to play uninterrupted. In playing store, I achieved internal locus of control when I was acting as the cashier and I decided what the price of an item was. As the cashier, I could make items as cheap or expensive as I wanted. When I acted as the customer, I was in control in that I decided whether or not I wanted to actually purchase an item, and was not forced to buy anything by anyone. My intrinsic motivation to play store is reflected in the personal pleasure and enjoyment I experienced when I was the cashier and got to handle the fake money and push buttons on the cash register. I could have opted to never be the cashier and always assume the role of a customer, but I chose to be the cashier because playing with the cash register toy brought me joy.

In reflecting on my play experiences from childhood I realized that many factors influence play such as the degree of direct and indirect involvement from individuals such as parents and siblings as well as the environment and daily activities to which a child is exposed. In addition, I am more aware of the importance of understanding how play can affect brain development and child development as a whole.

References

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