

Modern Problems of Children’s Play: Cultural-Historical Context

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The purpose of this article is to analyze the state of modern research on children’s play, approaches to its study, as well as existing methods of its evaluation. The relevance of the topic is due to the leading role of the play in preschool childhood and the complexity of this phenomenon. Play is actively studied, and play interventions are often used. However, the analysis of the literature shows confusion and uncertainty of terminology due to a large spread of theoretical positions and methodological approaches to the study of play. This creates great difficulties in planning and conducting research, and affects their results. The article deals with the issues of defining and classifying play, understanding its structure and development. The main trends of modern research and their connection with classical game theories, the role of cultural-historical approach and the contribution of E.O. Smirnova to the study of play are shown.

Keywords: preschool, children’s play, pretend play, development of play, structure of play, play theory, cultural-historical approach, playful learning, methods of play evaluation.

Funding. This research was funded by Russian Science Foundation grant number 20-18-00423.

For citation: Veraksa N.E., Veresov N.N., Veraksa A.N., Sukhikh V.L. Modern Problems of Children’s Play: Cultural-Historical Context. *Kul’turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya* = *Cultural-Historical Psychology*, 2020. Vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 60–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2020160307>

Introduction

Dedicated to the memory of E.O. Smirnova

Scientific interest in play is more than one hundred and fifty years old. However, both recently and decades ago, authors are forced to state that play is notoriously difficult to define, always “escaping” from researchers [18; 27; 29; 35; 44; 50; 55; 62]. The variety of forms, types, and hypostases of play is too vast.

The majority of modern authors approach the problem of play definition from the point of view of revealing and describing every specific feature of play (criterion-based definition). Thus, play is most often defined as being voluntary, internally motivated, process-oriented

rather than result-based, spontaneous, joyous and pleasant, active involvement with an occasional element of make-believe [21; 35; 44; 62]. Other authors [46; 51], based on L. Wittgenstein’s philosophical concept of “family resemblances”, suggest studying play without defining what play is or what it should be.

Despite its clearly ambiguous terminology, play is being actively studied — both in terms of theoretical conceptualization and in terms of collecting more and more new empirical data. At the same time, serious methodological problems are pointed out in empirical studies of play [13; 19; 35; 55; 58]. It is not always clear which aspect of play was in focus and why is it that different types and components of play are measured in many unrelated ways. The very methods of play evaluation are developed within the

framework of different theoretical approaches to its understanding, and accordingly, the attention of researchers is focused on different aspects of play, and they use different approaches to interpret its outcomes. That is why the mechanisms of play influence on development remain unclear and the chances for reproducing successful interventions are limited [55; 58]. In this regard, highly relevant is the analytical review of psychological papers that would highlight key contemporary problems of children's play: approaches in defining, classifying, understanding the structure and development of play, the methodology of contemporary research, and methods it uses to assess play. Moreover, this analysis is important from a historical perspective, since classical game theories and child development and particularly the cultural-historical approach, continue to guide contemporary research in this field on a grand scale. No such overview is currently available in the Russian or foreign literature.

Classic theories of play

For more than one hundred years, researchers of play have been trying to define the role of play in children's development which they see as an important factor in a child's emotional, social and cognitive development.

Table 1 summarizes some of the basic play theories in a historical perspective.

In the first half of the 20th century, two traditions began to develop that define the theoretical foundations of most modern play research. One of them is based on the theory of J. Piaget, who considers play in the context of cognitive development. Symbolic play is a form of assimilation; it interferes with accommodation and is a maladaptive process that children grow out of with time [33; 45]. For G. Piaget, play is an indicator of development rather than its engine. Its emergence in children of about 18 months signifies the development of the semiotic function — an ability to represent an absent object or an event that is not directly perceived through symbols or signs. Paradoxically, J. Piaget's impact on researchers who held play to be important for development was enormous, although he himself did not consider play critical for the development of logical thinking which he studied.

If in the spirit of constructivism, J. Piaget believed the child to be a creator of its own cognition, L.S. Vygotsky, the founder of the other tradition, showed that cognitive development in play is primarily due to interaction between the child and a sensitive adult and other children [2]. Because children are capable of imagining something only from their own available experience, role play is predetermined by what is in culture. That is, children play at activities and roles that exist in a given culture.

Table 1

Main theories of play

Theory Title	A brief summary of the theory
1	2
Early theories [38; 50; 56]:	
G. Spencer's theory of surplus energy (1878)	Play is an uncontrollable desire, a way to "let off steam", to spend excess energy in childhood.
M. Lazarus's Theory of Relaxation (1883)	Play stems from a lack of energy and is needed to restore strength after work.
Theory of Exercise by K. Groos (1899)	In a broad sense, play is the training of instincts and skills that will be needed in future adult life. For example, playing parents trains parenting skills.
Theory of recapitulation by S. Hall (1886)	Ontogenesis repeats phylogeny, and in play the child plays out the developmental stages of the human race: the animal, the savage, a representative of traditional society, etc. This helps the child get rid of primitive instincts that are superfluous in modern society.
Pedagogical theory of play by J. Dewey (1900)	Teaching should be reduced mainly to play and labor activity, where each action of the child becomes an instrument of his knowledge, his own discovery, a way of comprehending the truth. By reconstructing its experience in play, the child perceives the meaning of it and develops consciousness and skills.
Classical theories:	
The Psychodynamic Theory of Play by Z. Freud (1920)	Play is necessary for children's emotional development. In play children can live out the fulfillment of their wishes, cope with traumatic experiences and strong negative feelings [38; 50; 56].
L.S. Vygotsky's Cultural and Historical Approach (1933)	Play is a culturally conditioned phenomenon at the same time it is "imbued" with the child's personal meaning and imagination. Peer play is of special importance. It is a transitional stage from a child's thinking, limited by the properties of the current situation, to the thinking that is completely free from these limitations [2].
Cultural Theory by J. Huizinga (1938)	Human culture occurs and unfolds in play. Play is older than culture, because all the main features of play can also be observed in animals. Every game has certain rules, performs certain functions and brings pleasure and joy [38; 50; 56].
The theory of socialization by G.H. Mead (1934)	Play is a model of social interaction and a means of assimilating social attitudes, and thus is a means of formation of a socialized personality. Play role is the equivalent of a social role. Initial social attitudes arise in free role-playing with changing roles, more complex and generalized — in a game that has rules due to the fact that it is necessary to take into account simultaneously different role positions [4].

Theory Title	A brief summary of the theory
1	2
Cognitive theory of play by J. Piaget (1945)	The development of play takes place spontaneously, according to the stages of intellectual maturation, which moves in the direction of an increasingly adequate reflection of reality. Spontaneous play is the prevalence of assimilation processes over those of accommodation. Three types of structures are typical for children's games: exercise – symbol – rule. The development of play is connected with the successive change of these structures [45].
D. Berlyne's Arousal modulation theory (1960)	Play helps to maintain optimum excitement in the child's central nervous system. Stimulation, such as the appearance of a new object, increases excitement. Playing with this object helps to reduce excitement, because it becomes familiar and customary in play. Lack of stimulation leads to boredom and search behavior [38; 50; 56].
J. Bruner's Theory of Development (1968)	It focuses on the drama function in developing behavioral flexibility. In play, children focus on their behavior and do it without looking at the end result, experimenting and creating new behavioral combinations and practices which would be unattainable if children were under pressure to achieve the goal. New behavioral strategies that appeared in play later become part of more complex activities [38; 50; 56].
G. Bateson's metacommunication theory (1955)	Play is based on interaction that children engage in by playing together. Children make it clear to each other that they are playing and what is going on is not real, and in doing so they learn to act simultaneously on two levels: the imaginary one and the real one. Children learn not about the roles that they take on in a game, but about the concept of the role itself, so they learn to learn through play. Play is a metacommunicative context of reality and gives birth to a cultural and personal identity [38; 50; 56].
Modern concepts of play:	
Playworlds (G. Lindqvist, 1995)	Playworlds is a concept based on L.S. Vygotsky's ideas. It is a collective role-playing game for children and the teacher, who play complex stories with problematic situations, taken from stories and fairy tales. Playworlds provide a context for educational interventions, but it is important that the teacher be fully involved as a participant or a character in the play. This enables him to put educational tasks in the context of an imaginary situation, thus not only achieving pedagogical goals, but also developing and inspiring the game [36; 40].
The ambiguity of play (B. Sutton-Smith, 1995)	Without associating himself with any of the theories, B. Sutton-Smith tried to view play from all possible perspectives. Among other things, he pointed to the duality of play and its "shadow" aspects: play may prove to be a very painful experience for a player, and children in play not only recreate the social order, but also destroy it. Play needs to be studied in the perspective of a lifetime because adults, like children, get involved in all types of games [61].
The cultural-activity concept of play (B. van Oers, 2013)	It is based on L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach and A.N. Leontiev's theory of activity, but it places even greater emphasis on the cultural foundations of play. As a phenomenon, play depends on cultural values and decisions. Play is an activity with a high level of involvement of its participants who follow certain implicit or explicit rules and have some freedom in interpreting these rules and choosing other elements of this activity (for example, attributes, goals, etc.). Each activity can in principle take the form of play if children participate voluntarily, follow the rules, and are at liberty to choose how to carry out this activity [42, 43].
Play as the Zone of proximal development (G.G. Kravtsov, E.E. Kravtsova, 2017)	Following L.S. Vygotsky, they consider an imaginary situation to be the criterion of play and emphasize its dual-positional aspect as its essential characteristic. Play has characteristics similar to those of the proximal development zone. Developmental preschool education is considered in terms of creating conditions for forming and developing the two-subject nature. It is to accomplish three objectives: to form psychological readiness for play, to teach how to play and to use play as a learning means [5].
Play as a form of freedom and autonomy (E. Singer, 2015; E.O. Smirnova, 2019)	Elements of play in early childhood are pleasure, a sense of freedom, and co-constructing a common meaning through rules and rhythms. Considering the features of early education, Singer argues that play and "playfulness" should be its key characteristics. But when there is predominant focus on educational tasks in play, this aspect of play is lost [30, 52]. In Russia, similar ideas were expressed by E. O. Smirnova, who emphasized that a child's personal development takes place in the child's initiative independent actions. And play is the main form of manifesting this initiative while adults' protective, gentle attitude towards children's safety and autonomy tends to block the child's display of initiative [9].

Classifications of play

In considering a child's natural (without an adult) play as a basis for the child's psychological well-being, B. Hughes describes 16 types of play: communication play, creative play, deep play, fantasy and imaginative play, dramatic play, exploratory play, locomotor play,

object play, mastery play, recapitulative play, role play, rough and tumble play, social play, social-dramatic play and symbolic play [15]. This totally descriptive typology contains the names of games generally accepted in foreign literature, and also shows how unlike it is, for example, compared to the domestic classification, which is built on different foundations: directorial, figurative,

storyline and role play, play with rules and play according to rules [5].

Games are also classified according to the degree of the child's socialization in play. Development is considered to evolve from solitary play (a child plays by itself with objects/toys) to parallel play (children play nearby with similar objects/toys, i.e., share their space playing a solitary game) and associative play (children interact with each other by exchanging play materials). The highest level of socialization in play is cooperative play that occurs between two or more children when they start exchanging ideas about play and toys. Rules appear in such a game and everyone knows what role he or she is playing. The key difference from the previous stages is the emergence of communication about play itself [54].

Researchers pay special attention to pretend play. The classics believed this particular type of play to be dominant in preschool age and, in general, never considered the phenomenon of play in the perspective of a lifetime, as they held that play is important for development only in preschool childhood. In foreign literature, pretend play is an umbrella term for variants options of games that include an element of make-believe, acting, or "as if" presentations: dramatic play, role play, fantasy play, and playing with substitute objects [33; 62]. At the same time, play may be solitary or social pretend play and may partially combine with other types of play. For example, locomotor play combines with pretend play if children pretend to be fighters in the ring [62].

Play structure

Consideration of different theoretical approaches to play shows that they focus on different aspects of pretend play: affect, interaction between players and an adult, treatment of objects / toys, the degree of role acceptance, the content of play, the themes and complexity of stories, the nature of play actions, the system of rules and ways of play organization, the frequency and duration of games, etc.

L.S. Vygotsky believed that pretend and role-play had three key characteristics: children create an imaginary situation, assume roles and act upon them, and also follow a set of rules dictated by their specific roles. Each of these aspects is important and contributes to the development of higher mental functions [2].

D.B. Elkonin made a distinction between the theme of play (the sphere of reality that is reflected in the game) and its content (what from this sphere is precisely reflected in play). To describe the levels of play development he used four parameters: the content of play, roles, character and logic of play actions, and also the child's reaction to the breach of play logic [16].

B. Thompson and T. Goldstein attempted to formulate the hierarchical model of play based on the analysis of almost two hundred modern articles on the relationship between play and child development. They identified the following stages/components of play: (1) object substitution (using an object as if it were not what it really is), (2) attributing imaginary properties/animation

(attributing the properties of a living thing to an object that does not have them), (3) social interactions within a pretend act (two or more children agree to replace an object or attribute imaginary properties verbally or non-verbally), (4) role acceptance (the child pretends to be someone when interacting with other children) and (5) metacommunication involved in play (planning, agreements, rules, role distribution in order to organize role-play that includes complex scenarios and stories). In the authors' opinion, it is sufficient for a child to demonstrate any of these components to enable him or her able to say that there is pretend play going on. In this case, more advanced components include all lower levels [58].

Play development

It is noted that when talking about the development of play most foreign researchers somehow reproduce the sequence described by J. Piaget: from sensorimotor to symbolic play and then to play with rules, the central element of which is symbolic representation and use of objects in an unusual, non-literal way. According to J. Piaget, typically developing children start to engage in this type of play before the age of 2 years and it reaches its climax when they are 3–4 years old and gradually fades away before the age of 6 years, although some children continue to play at an older age [42; 45].

In line with the cultural-historical approach, there are more meaningful concepts. One of them has been developed by E.E. Kravtsova and G.G. Kravtsov [5] and traces play development up to the adult age. The first kind of independent, "real" children's play is directorial. It is still very similar to the object-manipulative activity, but already has all the features of play: dual-subjectivity (the child controls the progress of a game, but is also a participant in it), an imaginary situation (actions with objects gain meaning in its logic), toys and objects are used as means for plot realization. Then at the age of 3–4 there emerges imaginary play when a child identifies itself with someone or something and tries in its behavior to reproduce what it has identified itself with. There is neither pretend or role relations typical for pretend and role play which is due to emerge at the next stage – at the age of 4–5. This kind of play combines figurative and directorial lines of play development and mental development. If the previous two play types were mainly individual, then pretend and role play, even being realized by a single subject, is collective in its nature and implies obligatory interaction with other people, play partners. At the next stage of development comes play with rules (5–6 years) in which play actions are strictly subordinated to a concrete set of rules, and the rules define the character and features of the game itself. Appearance of play with rules coincides with the end of preschool age. Based on the two-subject criterion the authors, however, consider play development further: play according to rules (younger schoolchildren), literary play (teenage age), theatrical play (older teenage age), play with the image of "I" and playing at jobs (youth age) and, finally, adult games.

B. van Oers [42] offers his own view of play and its development in ontogenesis, based on A.N. Leontiev's theory

of activity. He believes that from the point of view of activity, play appears to be an absolutely cultural construct based on cultural traditions, practices and beliefs about how, when and why it can take place. In this case, play development is a process of self-regulation development through mastering more diverse and increasingly complex rules. It is the development of the ability to continue to play in increasingly complex and culturally regulated activities under the conditions of freedom admissible by established practice. Indeed, anthropological research has found pretend play to be present in all cultures. However, the frequency, themes, and parental involvement in these games vary from culture to culture. Family and social values are an important source of these differences [33; 46].

Contemporary play research

Over the past few decades, a large amount of data has been accumulated to support L.S. Vygotsky's thesis about the key role of play in the development and education of preschool children [35]. Pretend play is believed to contribute to the development of social skills, creativity, intellect, theory of mind, executive functions, emotional regulation, counterfactual reasoning, symbolic thinking, and the ability to solve problems and provide arguments [1; 6; 22; 24; 28; 32; 34; 35; 39; 48; 53; 57]. There are also studies linking play and academic results [41; 59; 60]. At the same time, based on the outcomes of extensive research analysis, A. Lillard and colleagues had to state that if play was really related to a child's development, it was still not obvious how critical this connection could be as there was a lot of evidence in favor of equifinality (play helps development, but it is only one of possible routes of development – other activities may work the same way or even better) and epiphenomenalism (play is an epiphenomenon or a by-product of another activity or condition that actually contributes to development) [35]. Much of this uncertainty is due to methodological difficulties in evaluating play and the imperfection of the tools that exist for this end. In addition to finding links between play and child development, contemporary research also examines play in the context of learning: how an adult can participate in play and use it for educational purposes.

Play and learning

All variations of approaches to the construction of "playful" learning are based on the cultural-historical theory of L. S. Vygotsky and the works of D.B. Elkonin and A.N. Leontiev. In particular, L.S. Vygotsky's thesis that an adult (teacher, educator) is needed to expand the cultural and social experience of a child that could form the basis of his or her imagination and enrich the child's play, acquaint the child with new forms of play and support its development [17; 43; 46; 47].

In foreign literature, there are a number of terms that reflect the use of play in the education of preschool children: playful learning, play-responsive learning, play-based learning. In general, play-based learning is a peda-

gogical approach that combines playful, child-initiated elements with the intervention of an adult who pursues some educational objectives [47]. Playful learning is an umbrella term that includes what is called both free and guided play [31]. Both types of play promote learning, but in guided play the adult pursues a certain educational objective and structures the gaming space accordingly. He can do this in two ways by simply providing suitable materials (e.g., paints to help them learn how to distinguish colors) or by joining the play. The adult's participation in play, however, requires certain conditions to be met. In order not to ruin the child's play, the adult should not restrict the child's freedom or impose rules that contradict children's playing needs at that moment [42; 43].

P. Hakkarainen identifies criteria for a successful adult intervention in children's role-playing game: the idea of play should come from children while the adult actively participates in the discussion and helps to develop it; the adult grows into his role and plays too; the adult is emotionally involved in the game; he enters into spontaneous dialogues from the role and participates in the play events; he supports dramatic tension in the story, helps to develop a coherent and fascinating story; he promotes dynamics and involvement (for example, when the game might have become boring, the adult introduced a new character or a turn of events) [29].

Based on their interviews and observations in kindergarten groups, A. Pyle and E. Daniels identified five different play types that form a continuum in adult involvement: free play; assistance in a game where the teacher expands the children's free play by making thematic "inputs" (e.g., bringing books about planes to children building an airplane); and collaborative play with a shared locus of control (the teacher and children together devise a context for a game, including the topic and necessary materials); play-based learning as an integration of skills that do not normally occur in play in a natural way (e.g., counting and recording the number of flowers in a flower store); didactic games designed to teach certain mandatory mathematical and linguistic elements [47].

M. Fleer also uses free play observations to formulate a typology that reflects a teacher's actions and position in relation to the imagined situation: the teacher's proximity to the game; the teacher's intention is parallel to that of the children; the teacher follows the children's game; the teacher is involved in conversations with the children about the imagined situation in their game; the teacher is inside the children's game [37].

In the domestic tradition, the role of communication with an adult in the development of play was highlighted by M.I. Lisina: the emergence of role-playing is genetically associated with the formation of object actions under the guidance of adults in early childhood and with a change in the nature of communication, when a child begins to look for an adult's attention and approval of his or her own play and object actions [3]. E. O. Smirnova, a student of M.I. Lisina, introduced and analyzed the concept of "a teacher's play competence". She considered different variants of the educator's position in children's play: detached, didactic and supporting, all of them being based on play competence. A teacher with a detached

position does not pay attention to children playing, taking a “let-them-play-as-they-want” attitude to it and regarding it a useless activity. When he assumes a didactic position, all the teacher’s activities are aimed at teaching children to play. Being aware of the importance of play for development, the teacher wants children to play correctly, so he himself allots the roles, provides the game plot, prompting them who is to say what, etc. Such an educator is characterized by confidence in his or her judgment and desire to pass their knowledge and experience to children. And if children deviate from a given course by showing initiative, it is perceived as a violation of the norm which has to be suppressed.

The teacher’s supportive attitude aims to back children’s initiative in a game. The teacher is both a partner in, and organizer of, a game. The degree and nature of his or her involvement depend on children’s situation and play skills. To show children examples of higher-level play, the teacher may address them on behalf of a new role, to suggest a new turn of the plot if the game gets “stuck”, and to take on an additional role that stimulates plot development.

Such a teacher plays along with children and his or her play competence consists of three main abilities: developed imagination that makes it possible to overcome stereotypes and create new images and plots; emotional expression and artistry that involve children in an imagined situation; and, finally, support for children’s own initiative and autonomy and confidence in their own abilities [8]. In doing so, E.O. Smirnova contrasts play as an independent activity and play-based learning tools. The use of play-based learning methods implies not only an adult’s initiative but also his or her direct guidance. For example, games based on adult-developed scenarios, the use of toys or fairy-tale plots in class have nothing to do with real play and do not lead to the development of a child’s independence [7].

Play research methods

To assess preschoolers’ play activity, E.O. Smirnova developed a method that procedurally consists of observation in specially created conditions [6]. After an object environment has been modeled in the playroom, a group of 2-4 children are encouraged to play on their own. Observers assess a game which is free from adults’ suggestions or images that are embodied in toys. Among the materials offered to children, are the multifunctional, “open” materials: fabrics of different textures, a roll of fabric, clothespins, ropes, ribbons, ribbands, elastic bands, small logs and sticks, wooden rings, cup liners, chestnuts, cones, cardboard boxes of different sizes, etc. All these materials are placed within the children’s reach. On average, a group of children is observed for 40 minutes. The following blocks and indicators are assessed in conditional points from 0 (total absence) to 3 (a high degree of manifestation): substitution level (object, positional, spatial ones); interaction (organizational and intra-play); and the play plan (level, extent, execution and sustainability of the play idea).

Let us also consider several frequently mentioned and widely-used foreign methods [20; 23; 25; 48; 49; 55; 58].

Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment (ChiPPA) is an observation-based methodology that both assesses play in specially created conditions and excludes adult intervention. But unlike the previous method, it assesses solitary play. First, the child is offered toys with clear functionality (for example, miniature animal figures) and then unstructured materials such as pieces of fabric and sticks. The observation lasts for 18 or 30 minutes. The observers assess the level of complexity and self-organization in the game: the percentage of specific play actions, the number of object substitutions and the number of imitation actions. The tool was created for therapeutic practice and it also makes it possible to define play themes and styles that indicate possible deficits in the game.

The Affect in Play Scale – Preschool (APS-P) is another standardized observation-based tool that focuses on affective manifestations and cognitive components of play. The child is told a short unfinished story and then is asked to play on his or her own and simultaneously is provided with a set of plastic animals, cups, a car toy and a rubber ball. The session is recorded on video.

Same as in the previous method, solitary play alone is assessed here. The scale of cognitive assessment includes play organization (quality and complexity of the plot), imagination (novelty and uniqueness of play), comfort in play (engagement in, and pleasure from, play). The scale of affect estimation includes frequency of affective manifestations, variety of affective manifestations (from 11 affective manifestations: happiness/ satisfaction; anxiety/fear; sadness/pain; frustration/dissatisfaction; care /bonding; aggression; oral aggression, etc.), the intensity of affective manifestations (on a scale of 1 to 5). As seen from the list of the indicators being assessed, the methodology is developed in line with the psychoanalytic approach in order to, first of all, provide information for planning therapeutic interventions and tracking their effectiveness. Therefore, here play serves rather as a context for assessing the psychological state of the child.

The Test of Pretend Play (ToPP; formerly known as the Warwick Symbolic Play Test or WSPT), unlike previous tools, is a structured test method that focuses on the symbolic aspects of play and offers verbal and non-verbal test options for children aged 1–6 years: with items from everyday life, with toys and unstructured materials, with toys only or without toys and materials.

During the test session, the tester invites a child to play and provides standardized hints if necessary. Three types of symbolic play are assessed: object substitution (for example, a napkin as a blanket), referring to a missing object as if it were there (for example, drinking imaginary tea) and assigning imaginary characteristics to an object (for example, the doll is sick). In addition, the child’s ability to link several symbolic actions into a meaningful sequence is assessed. Raw test scores can be translated into age norms. The theoretical basis of this test is also evident from its design and assessed parameters – the theory of J. Piaget and the psychology of development, where play is an indicator of the child’s level of cognitive development.

The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play (SSEDSP) assesses peer play through in vivo observation of free play. The duration of

the observation is 20 or 30 minutes, this time is divided into short intervals. Qualitative and quantitative assessment allows one to draw conclusions about the level of development of the storyline and pretend-role playing. The test assesses the presence or absence of six pretend play elements, four of which are typical for solitary play, two for peer-only play: imitation (figurative) pretend-role play, object substitution, make-believe when referring to actions and situations, duration of role play (at least, 10 minutes long), interaction (at least, two children interact in the context of a play episode) and verbal communication in play. The play environment should include materials associated with a household, a hospital, a store, unstructured materials, clothes for changing and a set of tools. The scale was originally designed to assess the development of play among children at risk level from low-income families.

The Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS) is a 32-point questionnaire with versions for parents and teachers. Just as the previous scale, it was designed to do research on children from low-income families. The teacher/parent should note how they observed a particular behavior in a child's free play. Three parameters are evaluated on the Likert scale: disruption of the play process, quitting the game and active participation in play interaction. That is, it is not play itself that is evaluated, but the nature of interpersonal interaction with peers in the context of play.

From this brief description we can see how the understanding of play and the content of methodology depend on the purpose of its creation and the theoretical basis. Most methodologies focus on the child and not on play. Play serves as a means or context for diagnosing the child's social adaptation, affective or cognitive spheres. Of the methodologies described in this article, only two are directly focused on the evaluation of play and its significant components, and both of them are developed within the cultural-historical approach, reflecting the definition of play given in the works by L.S. Vygotsky and D.B. Elkonin (the Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play and E.O. Smirnova's Method of Evaluating the Level of Play). Their comparative description is provided in Table 2, which shows that the national method allows for the most complete and differentiated assessment of the level of children's play development. It is noteworthy, however, that none of the methods reflect how a child experiences play and play events [37] and record the theme and content of play [16].

From the point of view of the application procedure the methods can be divided into several categories: observation in vivo; observation in laboratory (specially created) conditions; structured task-based methods; a questionnaire for adults from the child's environment (teachers, parents). There are also methods that are based on self-reporting, but they are usually designed

Table 2

Comparison of play evaluation methods: The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play and E.O. Smirnova's Method of Assessment of the Play Activity Level

Description of the method	The Smilansky Scale for the Evaluation of Dramatic and Socio-Dramatic Play	E.O. Smirnova's Method of Assessment of the Play Activity Level
1	2	3
Procedure	Observation in the natural environment	Observation in specially created conditions
Object of observation	Free play – solitary and with peers	Peer play
Duration of observation	20 or 30 minutes long, divided into 5-minute intervals	40 minutes
Materials	Toys and role play attributes imitating real objects	Polyfunctional “open” materials
Scale of evaluation	The Likert Scale from 0 (total absence) to 3 (vivid degree of manifestation)	The Likert Scale from 0 (total absence) to 3 (vivid degree of manifestation)
Evaluation result	Level of pretend play development	Level of pretend play development
Evaluated Play Components according to Thompson & Goldstein, 2019		
(1) Substitution of objects;	+	+
(2) Assignment of imaginary properties/animation;		+
(3) Social interactions within make-believe;	+ (actions and verbal communication in play)	+
(4) Role acceptance;	+ (image role play and make-believe about actions and situations)	+
(5) Metacommunication related to play organization;		+
	+ duration of a play episode	+ Spatial substitution (creation and semantic differentiation of the play space)
		+ evaluation of the play plan (level of the idea, its expansion, execution of the idea and sustainability of the play idea)

for older children and adults. An example of this method is the Fantasy Play Interview/Imaginative Play Predisposition Interview, where a child is asked about his or her favorite play, what he or she likes to do alone, about talking to himself or herself and thoughts before going to bed, etc. The interview assesses play orientation to find out if it is fantasy-oriented or reality-oriented [20].

Conclusions

1. Play in childhood is an extremely complex phenomenon. It starts and becomes more complex in ontogenesis at a preschool age, it may take different forms and serve purposefully for developmental and educational goals. Play is actively and widely studied by using different methods including a formative experiment. The literature analysis demonstrates confusion and vagueness of the terminology due to a large scattering of theoretical views and methodological approaches to play research. This creates major methodological difficulties in the development and conduct of empirical research and influences the results of these studies, and, consequently, the ideas about the impact of play on a child's life.

2. The two classical views on preschool children's play continue to significantly determine modern research trends in this area. According to the first point of view formulated in J. Piaget's operational theory of intellectual development, play is seen as an indicator of development rather than its driving force. The followers of the second point of view, which is based on the cultural-historical concept of L.S. Vygotsky [1; 2; 5; 39; 53], describe play as a leading activity for preschool children in the course of which the child development takes place (L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Elkonin, etc.).

3. The scientific literature presents various play classifications. Their differences are determined by the interpretation of the phenomenon of play, which is based on the author's theoretical positions, the age group of the participants in play, and other characteristics [5; 15; 18; 27; 29; 35; 44; 50; 55; 62]. The absence of a generally accepted classification and play theory indicates the relevance and necessity of research into this problem.

4. Modern research presents two sets of data, some of which confirm the leading role of play in child development [22; 24; 28; 32; 34; 57]; others indicate a limited impact of play on child development [35].

5. The publications reflect a strong trend towards a search for ways to use the play format in preschool education [43; 46; 47]. At the same time, it is noted that an

educator can take different positions ranging from that of an active participant and leader of children's play to that of a neutral observer [26].

6. There is a variety of scales for assessing the level of play development. Most of them focus on the assessment of the child rather than that of play itself [20; 23; 25; 48; 49; 55; 58]. An informative assessment of a child's play is made possible by using the scales based on L.S. Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory of [6].

7. We believe that further research into children's play issues could focus on a detailed study of options for using play in the education of preschool children: what and how can be purposefully formed through play, what play components are the most significant, i.e., what is the mechanism of forming these or those new structures, how children themselves experience and what they think about play and their learning through play. An important task of future research is also to create a valid and reliable tool for play assessment that would also be conveniently used in large-scale research.

Final conclusion: E.O. Smirnova's contribution to the study of play

Elena Olegovna Smirnova (1947–2020), a continuator of M.I. Lisina's scientific school, made a great contribution not only to the scientific but also practical study of play. Under her guidance, a method of psychological and pedagogical examination of toys and play materials was developed, and a cycle of studies was conducted to examine the impact of toys on children's play as well as various aspects of modern children's play activities [10; 11; 12; 14]. In her works, Elena Olegovna showed the importance of play for a child's personal development and drew attention of the professional community to a serious problem – the displacement of play from preschool education. She emphasized that play as an independent activity is now being replaced by play-based learning tools and she studied the conditions for play formation and development in the preschool education system [9].

E.O. Smirnova understood like nobody else that the improved quality of play research design is possible only if there are adequate assessment tools corresponding to the conceptual foundation of the theoretical basis developed on the principle of the cultural-historical approach and activity theory. The work that has been done by Elena Olegovna Smirnova provides a sound base and opens up a wide horizon for further research into the play activities of preschool children.

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Современные проблемы детской игры: культурно-исторический контекст

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Цель настоящей работы заключается в анализе состояния современных исследований детской игры, рассмотрении подходов к ее изучению, а также существующих методик ее оценки. Актуальность обращения к теме обусловлена ведущей ролью игры в дошкольном детстве и сложностью этого феномена. Игра активно изучается, в том числе с использованием формирующего эксперимента. Однако анализ литературы показывает смешение и неопределенность терминологии вследствие большого разброса теоретических позиций и методологических подходов к изучению игры. Это создает большие трудности при планировании и проведении исследований, сказывается на их результатах. В статье рассмотрены вопросы определения игры, понимания ее структуры и развития, классификации игр. Показаны основные тенденции современных исследований и их связь с классическими теориями игры, роль культурно-исторического подхода и вклад Е.О. Смирновой в изучение игры.

Ключевые слова: дошкольник, детская игра, сюжетная игра, развитие игры, структура игры, теории игры, культурно-исторический подход, игровое обучение, методики оценки игры.

Финансирование. Работа выполнена при поддержке проекта РФФ № 20-18-00423.

Для цитаты: Веракса Н.Е., Вересов Н.Н., Веракса А.Н., Сухих В.Л. Современные проблемы детской игры: культурно-исторический контекст // Культурно-историческая психология. 2020. Том 16. № 3. С. 60–70. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2020160307>

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Получена 01.07.2020

Received 01.07.2020

Принята в печать 20.08.2020

Accepted 20.08.2020