

Leveraging Play to Foster Healthy Social-emotional Development in Young Children in Poverty

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Abstract : Play is an innate, player-centric, joyful, fundamental activity of early childhood development that significantly contributes to social, emotional, and academic learning. Leveraging the power of play can enhance these domains by creating engaging, interactive, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences for young children. This research aimed to systematically examine young children's play behaviors with a focus on four primary objectives: (1) the frequency and duration of on-task behaviors, (2) social interactions and emotional expressions during play, (3) the correlation between academic skills and play, and (4) identifying best practices for integrating play-based curricula. To achieve these objectives, a mixed-method study was conducted among young preschool-aged children in low socio-economic populations in the United States. The children were identified using purposive sampling. The children were observed during structured play in classrooms and unstructured play during outdoor playtime and in their home environments. The study sampled 97 preschool-aged children. A total of 3970 minutes of observations were coded to address the research questions. Thirty-seven percent of children lived in linguistically isolated families, and 76% lived in basic budget poverty. Children lived in overcrowded housing situations (67%), and most families had mixed citizenship status (66%). The observational study was conducted using the observation protocol during the Oxford Study Project. On-task behaviors were measured by tracking the frequency and duration of activities where children maintained focus and engagement. In examining social interactions and emotional expressions, the study recorded social interactions, emotional responses, and teacher involvement during play. The study aimed to identify best practices for integrating play-based curricula into early childhood education. By analyzing the effectiveness of different play-based strategies and their impact on on-task behaviors, social-emotional development, and academic skills, the research sought to provide actionable recommendations for educators and caregivers. The findings from study 1. Highlight play behaviors that increase on-task behaviors and academic, & social skills in young children. 2. Offers insights into teacher preparation and designing play-based curriculum 3. Research critiques observation as a data collection technique.

Keywords : play, early childhood education, social-emotional development, academic development

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