
Excerpt from:

Wink, J., & Putney, L. (2002, pp. 112-114). *A Vision of Vygotsky*, Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon

Children at Play

Vygotsky (1978) stated that “play creates a zone of proximal development of the child. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself” (p. 102).



After seeing this graphic, a bilingual teacher shared with us an example of her child at play. This teacher was learning sign language in order to communicate with her four-year-old son, Martín, who is hearing impaired. She and her husband watched in fascination as their son sat on the floor in the family room, signing to himself. Even though he was the only one in the room, he definitely appeared to be conversing with someone else. “When a child’s activity consists entirely of play, it is accompanied by extensive soliloquizing (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 55). The only difference in Martín’s case is that he is not soliloquizing by using his voice; he is signing his meaning. In the mother’s words, “We watched him with amusement because he appeared to be teaching someone, and he was going a mile a minute, totally in his own little world.”

Children at play are in a zone of proximal development. In play, children are acting out real-life situations in which they develop rules that move them beyond their current level. As Vygotsky (1978) stated, “It is incorrect to conceive of play as activity without purpose...creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought” (p. 103). We have all seen children pretending to be their parents. They act in the manner that the parents would act, sometimes responding with the very words they have heard their parents use.

Play mediates the learning of children, and through play, children develop abstract thought. *Mediate* means that in play, children reach beyond their real selves as they take on the roles of the characters they choose to be, and take action appropriate to the behavioral rules that govern those roles. Vygotsky (1978) further compared play to the focus of a magnifying glass, explaining that “play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development” (p. 102). During play children are reaching out and extending beyond what they are now, while they are projecting themselves. It is as if when children are in a “let’s play” mode, the very act of pretending makes it safe for them to reach beyond their actual level to more advanced levels. The imaginary play world enables kids to reach beyond themselves.

Play creates the
zone for children.