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# Vygotskian Analysis of Fake Play in Preschools

## What Is It and How to Distinguish It from Real Play

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The author contends that, although most early childhood educators agree about the value of play for child development, preschools and kindergartens often do not reflect this belief, and she discusses this anomaly in the adult notion of play and how it manifests in classroom practices. She argues that it produces schoolroom practices in which adults use play merely as an instrument of teaching that are actually incompatible with play. Indeed, so-called “play-based instruction” misrepresents the true nature of play—the only activity through which young children fully express their own agency and in which they can truly participate in their own development. She discusses the teacher-initiated and teacher-driven pseudo or fake play that forces children to take on roles and enact pretend scenarios in ways pleasing to adults. And she seeks a remedy in the Vygotsky-Elkonin theory of play, which allows us to distinguish real play from fake play and helps restore the rightful place of true play to early childhood classrooms. **Key words:** Daniil Elkonin; early childhood education; fake play; Lev Vygotsky; make-believe play

Now I say that the human being and, in general, every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead, he must, in all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end.

—IMMANUEL KANT

**I**N 2021, I WAS INVITED to speak at an online conference held in Moscow. The organizers wanted to clarify what teachers mean when they talk about a modern child. Recently, this construct has frequently surfaced in pedagogical and parental discussions about education, suggesting that modern children differ from those of yesteryear. The conference organizers wanted to find out how exactly modern

children are different and what the professional community thinks about it.

According to the rules of the event, each guest speaker had to start by asking a question to which the participants were expected to send an answer by the end of the day. The speaker returned to the audience the next day to comment on the responses received and to provide the correct answer. The topic I discussed at this conference was “what is child’s play?” The question on this topic related to an Internet video that I showed the participants. The video was supposed to feature children’s role play in a preschool center, but in fact it was a blatant imitation of children’s play that had nothing to do with real play.

The title of the video read “Theme-based Role-play in Preschool: A Grocery Store.” The stage was replete with ready-made plastic props representing fruits, vegetables, and cakes. The children in the video wore store-bought uniforms. Clearly, all their dialogues were memorized and all their actions rehearsed. They kept glancing at the camera to check whether they had said and done everything correctly. They looked tense, scared, and tentative, and they tried hard not to forget anything and not to mess things up.

After showing the video, I asked those in the audience to determine if what they saw qualified as play and to explain their answers. By 2021, for at least twenty-five years the topic of children’s play had been one of the favorite topics of discussion in pedagogical communities; educators discussed the importance of play and its critical role in child development, and they expressed concern that today’s children do not play. The attendees of this conference consisted mainly of teachers motivated to grow professionally and become active in professional learning communities. Many of them held teaching degrees. I knew there would be some in the audience who thought what they saw in the video was indeed play, but I really expected their number to be very few.

Instead, about half of the audience responded that the video clip demonstrated children’s play, with many claiming that this play was very good and well developed. In explaining their point of view, they usually referred to Daniil Elkonin’s theory, which describes the main components of play: roles, scenarios, and interaction of characters (Elkonin 1978). It seemed that all these components could be found in the video. As it turned out, then, despite the interest in children’s play present in the professional community, many educators believe their practices are based on Elkonin’s theory of play but still cannot distinguish real play from its imitation. Could it be that even a good, comprehensive theory of play amplifies confusion instead of dissipating it?

Perhaps one of the main reasons play has been disappearing from the lives

of today's children is that we do not fully understand the nature of play. Is it enough to identify the components of play to define play? What does not lend itself to imitation in real play, and what are the possible criteria that will allow us to reliably distinguish play from its imitation—fake play?

The problem seems compounded by the fact that, precisely, in recent decades, the practice of “faking” children's play has become widespread. This occurs at the intersection of educators' attempts to promote play as a valued child activity, on the one hand, and the administrators demanding evidence of teachers promoting play, on the other. Teachers respond to these demands by staging numerous rehearsed performances that they try to pass off as children's play to satisfy their administrators. This practice, of course, does not necessarily contribute to teachers gaining insight into the nature of play or to their understanding of play's real role in children's development.

So far, I have observed instances of fake play, mostly in Russia and some of the post-Soviet states. However, with more countries legislating “playfulness” through their early childhood policies and curriculum guidelines (see Marilyn Fleer's article in this issue), it is possible that the practice of submitting records of fake play for accountability purposes becomes more common, further endangering the existence of authentic play in early childhood classrooms.

### **The Problem of Priorities: Play versus Instruction**

The topic of children's play as a driver of child development that largely determines the quality of such development has recently acquired a new significance. Children's play, which has already been treated differently by the educational community and the family, has recently become a bone of contention in an ongoing discussion. This discussion, in turn, can become a turning point in a much broader debate: Do we seek children's input when we make decisions about their education, activities, and—essentially—their future? In the traditional industrial education model, we did not ask children about their preferences and sought their opinions only on rare occasions. In contrast, today, educators and parents increasingly profess that a child has the right to choose; moreover, the ability to make choices is considered the basis for the development of essential child competencies such as initiative, autonomy, curiosity, activity, and—ultimately—freedom, and responsibility.

The debate about play, in a sense, highlights this dilemma with the most

incredible clarity. Although most adults agree that children love to play, the same adults deprive children of this opportunity in the name of their higher, adult goals. Considering this dilemma in a broader context, we actually witness a further intensification of the conflict between two concepts—the person as an end-in-itself and the person as a means to an end. Much has changed since Immanuel Kant made this distinction, but it remains relevant. Currently, it becomes increasingly more likely that adults will gradually realize children are human and treat them as humans, following the Kantian maxim, “Act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means” (Kant 1998, 36).

Everyone who has ever addressed the topic of children’s play knows that this is a rather tricky subject. Even without launching into a discourse about play belonging not only to the life of children but to the life of adults, and without discussing different kinds of children’s play and focusing strictly on make-believe play, we see many problems and unresolved arguments about this unique phenomenon. Especially in this issue of the *American Journal of Play*, which focuses on the treatment of play in the cultural-historical tradition, I find it worth noting that Vygotsky and post-Vygotskians frequently use the term “play” with no qualifiers. What they are referring to best translates as “make-believe” or “sociodramatic” play. These labels are the best approximations of the Russian term “plot role play” (*suzhetno-rolivaya igra*)—the kind of play that became the focus of the cultural-historical approach.

One of the frequent themes in the discussions about make-believe play is its relationship with other so-called serious types of child activities, which are often considered in terms of their value for learning (Barblett, Knaus, and Barratt-Pugh 2016; Whitebread et al. 2017). In these discussions, child’s play is either opposed to instruction and even perceived as incompatible with it or—in the mildest form—viewed as a possible resource for some forms of instruction. The latter position has given rise to such terms as “play-based instruction” and “playful learning.” It is usually not easy to understand what these terms mean and whether we can distinguish the play-based formats of instruction from those that are not play based but are nonetheless developmentally appropriate.

The conflict between play and instruction comes primarily from the belief shared by many of today’s adults that school readiness skills need to be taught to children starting at the earliest age possible and that these skills need to be taught using the same pedagogy routinely used in first grade and above. Although most early childhood educators believe in the concept of developmental appropriate-

ness, this concept often gets sacrificed in their everyday practice for the objective of school readiness. As a result, there are significant problems with play in early childhood classrooms where the schedule is so packed with skill-based activities that children do not have time to play. This problem is not new—it took several decades for the disappearance of play from the early childhood education (ECE) classrooms to reach its current state. The current situation in ECE, where children’s insane workloads are rather uncritically called “development,” has been the subject of multiple articles and several books (Christakis 2017; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Eyer 2004). The authors claim the idea that children should be extremely busy with cognitive and other formal educational activities robs them of their freedom, their independence, and—ultimately—their agency. Children are deprived of the opportunity to make their own choices. As a result, they are unable to discover their interests, try out different things, and advance in specific types of child experiences—especially in play.

Such an educational strategy (which has become widespread in different countries—Russia being no exception) is further fueled by parents’ nervousness. The condition has become so pervasive that it has earned a special name, “parental education anxiety” (Wu et al. 2021). Because society increasingly focuses parents’ attention on the competitive quality of the future that awaits their children and, thus, on the need for young children to acquire the knowledge and skills that guarantee them a competitive edge, parents will do everything in their power to help their children withstand this competition. They will spend all their resources on such education. Caused by this social blackmail, the concern of parents for their children’s futures goes far beyond the usual attention they pay to their children’s success and the care with which they attend to their children’s development. Indeed, this care and attention can take almost malignant forms.

What have we come to in the twenty-first century, when—in the face of increasing uncertainty—it is essential to teach children to analyze new situations, to make their own choices, to search for facts on their own, to find solutions, and, if necessary, to change their lives dramatically? While professionals discuss the importance of “soft skills,” we continue to implement the educational format of the industrial era, giving children as much information as possible (not knowing how useful it will remain in a year or two), teaching them skills (which they may never need), and not asking if they want all this. At the same time, we return not even to the twentieth century but to the eighteenth or nineteenth, depriving children of their childhood and turning them into miniature adults. Instead

of pitching in as members of their families the way children did in patriarchal societies, they are now working on their “careers.”

### **The Problem of Fake Play**

The challenges faced by play are not limited to the disappearance of play from ECE classrooms. Another and equally serious challenge comes from the replacement of authentic or real play with something we can only describe as “play impostor” or “fake play.” This kind of play can even be observed in classrooms where teachers are sincerely convinced of the benefits of play for child development and strive to make children’s play experiences as rich and stimulating as possible. These teachers often attempt to enrich play by directing children to take on preplanned roles, act out preplanned scenarios, and use ready-made props. They may also intervene in the already developed children’s play, seeking to improve it. As a result, we are faced with different expressions of the same phenomenon. We see something that may look like play, but, in fact, is a simulation, a kind of activity in which children are involved but only under the direct supervision of an adult. What we see resembles some sort of organized educational activity, a play lesson. It looks like play only on the surface. It does not develop at all or develops only when an adult intervenes. Children can diligently perform the roles assigned to them, they can even learn something new, but it is not the children’s own play.

This raises some critical questions. First, how do we know this is not play? We can feel that there is no famous play energy—children are engaged and even motivated, yet they are not motivated by play but rather by something else. This play is not child driven but adult driven—but, wait, are not adults expected to create the conditions for children’s play? We also know that play does not develop when help from adults is entirely absent. Are there any signs that can help us draw a reasonable distinction between real play and fake play, a distinction based not solely on our feelings but on our understanding of play?

It is evident that these simulation practices result from our interest in children’s play and our awareness of its critical importance for child development. We know that children’s play is key to the development of imagination, communication, reflective thinking, and much more. But many of these abilities can also be developed in productive activities, the name post-Vygotskian scholars assigned to activities that, unlike play, are not process oriented but

instead directed toward some product. This product can be tangible (e.g., a block structure or a painting) or intangible (e.g., a number that results from counting a set of objects). Is there anything in children's play that has a unique impact on the development of young children, an impact that no other activity can deliver? If it exists, can we, through the prism of this uniqueness, look at play to see immediately what we might lose if we do not promote children's play but simulate it?

The problem, perhaps, is that we do not fully understand the true essence of play. It is crucial to understand the aspects of play that do not lend themselves to imitation and the possible criteria that will allow us with confidence to distinguish fake play from true play. Perhaps one of the main reasons children's play seems endangered in modern society is that we do not fully understand the real nature of play, which prevents us from initiating an honest discourse that finally restores play to its rightful place in a child's world.

### **The Cultural-Historical Approach to Play: The Vygotsky's Contribution**

It looks as if children's play helps us resolve the conflict between the goals of child development as seen by the adults and the actual interests of children. Play can satisfy the interests of a preschool-aged child and, at the same time, provide the most beneficial context for such a child's development, supporting the new competencies ("neoformations") specific to a given age (Vygotsky 1998). It should be noted that in Vygotsky's time, children started school at age eight. Thus, the term "preschool" in his writings applies to children ages three to eight. In 1970 the age of school entry was lowered, so Daniil Elkonin, cited later in this article, used the term preschool to describe children ages three to seven (Bodrova and Yudina 2018).

From the cultural-historical perspective, the role of play in the development of children of preschool age cannot be compared to any other activity. In his famous article "Play and Its Role in the Child's Mental Development," Vygotsky (1967) subjected children's play to detailed analysis and set the direction of play studies for many years to come. He was mainly interested in why children want to play and why they love to play. To answer these questions, Vygotsky examined where play comes from, what motivates play, and which needs it satisfies. Vygotsky concluded that, in terms of affective (emotional) development, the

emergence of play is associated with the emergence of children's awareness of their "unsatisfied desires and tendencies that cannot be realized immediately" (7). While being aware of the impossibility of the immediate satisfaction of these desires, children can not give them up yet. A conflict arises between desire and opportunity—it is the first time a child becomes aware of this conflict.

Vygotsky posited that play gives children the opportunity to get what they want in another, transformed form—in the imagination that arises in the play. As he wrote, "The old adage that child's play is imagination in action can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action" (8).

Of course, not every desire prompts play. Vygotsky emphasized a child's ability to generalize as a necessary condition for the emergence of play. This generalized affect leads to the emergence and further development of play, which allows us to look at the development of play in terms of the "unity of affect and intellect"—one of the defining principles of the cultural-historical approach to human development (Elkonin 2005a; Vygotsky 1987). At the same time, such reasoning draws our attention to specific age frames, when make-believe play appears and when its childish form gets gradually replaced with others.

Vygotsky considers an "imaginary situation," the hallmark of make-believe play, to be one of the main drivers of play, its engine and the central principle and criterion that allows one to distinguish play from any other activity. The imaginary situation proves essential not only because it encourages the development of children's imagination but also because it contains specific rules that encourage children to behave in accordance with this situation and with the roles they assume. The role and the corresponding rule do not allow a child to slip into the real behavior in the visible (real) field and force the child to act according to the logic of the imaginary situation. The cultural-historical tradition of studying play posits that the imaginary situation is coupled with rules in all kinds of play. Children's make-believe play is characterized by explicit (visible) imaginary situations and implicit (hidden) rules. Games with rules (sports and board games, for instance) that appear later in development have explicit rules and a hidden (collapsed) imaginary situation.

Vygotsky notes that, though an imaginary situation in play replaces a real one, even play itself is not symbolic. That is not the point of play. Because of the imaginary situation, a child's behavior is now influenced not only by the child's perception of real things but also by meanings. The situation is imagined; it does not exist. But it dictates the rules of behavior and its meaning. A child obtains the



experience of acting within the realm of meanings, which is artificially designed and does not coincide with the realm of visible perceptions. In play, a child creates another reality and, in it, acts according to its rules. As Vygotsky put it, “I think that in finding criteria for distinguishing a child’s play activity from his other general forms of activity, it must be accepted that in play, a child creates an imaginary situation. This is possible on the basis of the separation of the fields of vision and meaning that occurs in the preschool period” (6).

Continuing his thought about the critical role of play in the development of a preschool child, Vygotsky defines the significance of play as the context in which all the main accomplishments of preschool age mature and develop. He concludes that it is precisely make-believe play that deserves the status of a leading activity in preschool age: “Play is the source of development and creates the zone of proximal development. Action in the imaginative sphere, in an imaginary situation, the creation of voluntary intentions, and the formation of real-life plans and volitional motives—all appear in play and make it the highest level of preschool development. The child moves forward essentially through play activity. Only in this sense can play be termed a leading activity that determines the child’s development” (16).

Play as a zone of proximal development provides an opportunity for preschool children to manifest their new achievements. First appearing in the context of play, these achievements get generalized to other activities later.

Ordinarily, a child experiences subordination to a rule in the renunciation of something he wants, but here, *subordination to a rule and renunciation of acting on immediate impulse is the means to maximum pleasure* [italics added]. . . . Hence, it follows that such a rule is an internal rule, i.e., a rule of inner self-restraint and self-determination. . . . In short, play gives the child a new form of desire, i.e., teaches him to desire by relating his desires to a fictitious “I”—to his role in the game and its rules. Therefore, a child’s greatest achievements are possible in play—achievements that tomorrow will become his average level of real action and his morality. (14)

The view of play as a leading activity of the preschool age was, until recently, universally shared by scholars working within the cultural-historical paradigm. Moreover, Soviet and later Russian preschool education was based on such a vision (Bodrova and Yudina 2018), which is why make-believe play in one form

or another remained part of the lives of children. However, the situation has changed over the past decades, and many scholars are now wondering whether play is still essential to the development of children. These scholars suggest that children are no longer interested in playing make-believe and are much more interested in electronic gadgets and video games. They also highlight the importance of other activities in which today's children love to engage, such as exploration and experimentation.

These arguments prove nothing because no one disagrees that children are interested in all of the activities scholars listed. If not pressured too much, usually children are interested in many things, if to varying degrees, depending on their preferences. Arguing his assertion about the unique role of play, Vygotsky notes that it is not based on the predominance of play in the child's life, because play does not necessarily dominate other activities. It is play's role in child development that cannot be overestimated.

In play, children rebuild the relationship between an object and its meaning, between an action and its meaning. In play, they can detach meaning from an object to which it was previously attached and transfer it to another object. By doing so, children start acting not so much in the world of objects as in the realm of meanings and abstractions. This happens both with play props substituting for real objects and with play actions replacing real actions. The same applies to other abilities that develop in play with the help of an imaginary situation. Children are given an opportunity to act according to rules rather than following their immediate impulses, which forms the basis for will, voluntary action, planning, and, thus, the ability to make their own decisions responsibly.

According to Vygotsky, as play develops, the imaginary situation becomes relegated to the background, putting forward the rules that were previously a part of the imaginary situation dictated by its meaning. These rules are learned in play. Vygotsky calls a child's freedom in play illusory because play is always governed by rules, so children can never act as they please. But the secret is that children in play want to do something they would not do elsewhere. They want to overcome themselves, following the logic of play. Such nonfreedom is, in a sense, more important than any freedom, because children obey these rules voluntarily and take great pleasure in doing so. We know that this logic can compel a child to give up something ordinarily very desirable (for example, something tasty) or to do something very difficult (for example, to stand still for a long time).

Such deliberate behavior becomes possible only based on the rules set by play. Directions given in a nonplay context are less likely to make children sup-

press their immediate impulses and act deliberately (Manuilenko 1975; White et al. 2017). Therefore, play not only creates a zone of proximal development for children but also makes volitional behavior possible in the zone of actual development where the children are able to obey the rules, acting by their own—free—will. All this makes play the space where children are truly free because this is the space they own.

Returning to our goal—to understand the nature of children’s play and how it differs from its simulation or fake play—we can now define play as a space a child owns. Moreover, by and large, the only space a child of preschool age can own is the space of play. This gives us a general criterion to distinguish real play from its simulation.

### **Many Shades of Play: Leading Activity, Free Play, Archaism, and Play-Based Instruction**

Objections to the status of play as a leading activity started to appear at the end of the last century and were associated with the attempt by researchers, scholars of child development, and even education practitioners to present modern childhood as something unique, unknown, and qualitatively different from everything that we knew about child development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They tell us that we are now dealing with the differences not so much in cultural but literally in an anthropological sense—that the very nature of children has changed. This trend is also visible in public spaces. First, journalists and writers, and later, the general public, keep marking the new generations with the last letters of the Latin alphabet. As a result, we get generations X, Y, and Z, not too clearly described but bearing an imprint of some exclusivity. The alphabet may run out of letters, but hopefully the generations will not run out and a civilization containing different cultures will continue to develop.

Of course, this whole debate does not come out of thin air. We are indeed at the center of critical civilizational changes: the transition from an industrial to an information society is accompanied by truly tectonic changes in civilization itself and in culture, which, however, have not yet affected the anthropological foundations of our species despite some already visible risks (Yudin 2018). It is reasonable to assume that our children, as representatives of the species *Homo sapiens*, adequately respond to changes in the ecosystem in which they live but have not changed their nature yet and, therefore, still love to play.

So, we are faced with the claim that modern children are not inherently motivated to play and that they are much more interested in various types of productive or real activity (Taggart, Heise, and Lillard 2018). Note that this bizarre logic is not used when it comes to any specific productive activity: nobody expects that, if adults do not interact with children, they will somehow develop a lasting interest in mathematics, drawing, modeling, or dancing. Everyone understands that while such cases are possible, they are an exception. We know that to develop children's interests, it is necessary to engage children, expose them to new experiences, provide them with an opportunity—both with adults and individually—to try a variety of things. In other words, we understand that for children to acquire culturally determined practices, they must have a guide in the world of culture—an adult or another child—who introduces them to these practices and engages them in the collaborative process of mastering these exercises and skills.

It now seems, however, that play is being denied its place in human culture even though play can be considered a universal cultural practice because it exists in all cultures. Even in places where childhood is brief, play is nonetheless present: adults play with children, and children's play still exists, even if in rudimentary form. At the same time, it is expected that if children love to play so much, they should start playing on their own, without adults creating conditions for play and supporting it.

It seems obvious that the main reason for such discrimination against play might be the adults' pragmatic, almost utilitarian, attitude toward children's development that has grown in recent years. There is an overwhelming desire on the part of parents to use every minute of their children's lives to provide a useful resource for the child's future—the future, as we already understand, we know nothing about. We, as old generals, always prepare for past wars.

One manifestation of this false pragmatism appears when the conflict between the importance of education and the value of play results in continuous attempts by adults to use play as a learning resource. This logic is reminiscent of the Russian satirist Zhvanetsky's old skit, in which a character proposes connecting a dancing ballerina to a dynamo machine to generate electricity. The attempts to marry play and instruction take numerous forms, from using toy figurines for counting to decorating worksheets with cartoon characters to intervening in children's restaurant play to make sure they do not forget to say "please" and "thank you." The list goes on and on.

The problem with the unnatural use of play for educational purposes gets

discussed in the educational community. For example, Nome (2015) notes that instructional methods based on play (or simulation play) are systematically criticized as violating autonomy, play spontaneity, and its changeable and elusive nature. Critics of play-based instruction emphasize that genuine play is motivated from the inside and independent of external goals or interests. It is not instrumental but authentic (Deci and Ryan 1985).

This criticism, although mostly justified, occasionally uses a somewhat exaggerated argumentation, romanticizing the concept of free play. This concept appeared precisely in the context of the play-instruction opposition and was intended to clarify the difference between the so called play-based instructional methods and real play. In attempting to determine the true nature of free play, researchers and theorists sometimes claim that real free play is entirely independent of the context in which it exists. Obviously, this is not possible, and thus, the essential difference between real play and imitation play designed to serve adults' utilitarian purposes cannot be captured. It seems that the failure to differentiate between real and imitation play can be attributed to the choice of the wrong discrimination criterion.

It would be absurd to assume that there is a kind of children's activity that does not depend on the environment in which such activity occurs. The idea of the complete independence of play looks like an assumption about the nature of free play that is too abstract. Free play can be conceptualized as play controlled by a child, but also by a child who lives in the real world and depends on it. In our view, the best way to discern the difference between play and imitation is to ask who controls play. Play is not an abstract phenomenon; it is a living experience embedded in the existing reality but one initiated by a child. As we have already mentioned, the play space is the space owned by a child and a child alone; moreover, play is the only space where a child of preschool age is its sovereign.

The challenge for adults is to create the conditions for play, but we never know what kind of play will develop after the adults provide these conditions. The main problem seems to be that we must keep in mind two apparent contradictions. On the one hand, play belongs to the child; on the other, play may not emerge all by itself. When creating the conditions for play, we do not control the result that emerges in these conditions.

On the play instruction axis, one end will be represented by an adult-driven activity (nonplay) and the other by something completely unaffected by adults and thus nonexistent (free play). Genuine play, born of a child's love of play and filled with a child's creative energy, lies between these two poles. The

boundary between our intervention in child activity and a child's freedom will move depending on our understanding of real play, where it ends and becomes something stripped of the nature of play only designed to solve the pragmatic goals of adults. Thus, to determine whether an activity is play or simulation, one needs to establish who initiated this play and who owns it.

The true problem we face in connection with play is not so much the battle of these two extremes (complete freedom of play versus total suppression of play) as it is the need to understand play as a real-life phenomenon instead of a theoretical construct. Note that the strong, positive emotions a child always experiences during real play cannot be used as a criterion to distinguish play from nonplay. Imagination, creativity, curiosity, passion, and the joy of participation are not inherent in play alone—they are a natural part of many children's activities. Vygotsky used this argument when he criticized an approach that deemed the pleasure principle to be the main mechanism of play. According to Vygotsky (1967), pleasure is not only nonspecific to play and found in many other childhood activities, but most importantly, it does not reflect the true role of play in child development.

The proponents of the concept of free play convincingly show that play does not tolerate coercion. However, adult coercion can also destroy or distort other children's activities, stripping them of their natural human meanings. This does not mean that any adult intervention in child development equals coercion.

In early childhood classrooms, we often encounter either the absence of play (because the most basic conditions for play are not provided) or what could be called the imitation of play, or fake play, an activity that pretends to be play without being so.

### **How Do We Distinguish Play from Nonplay?**

A possible answer to this question can be found in the works of Daniil Elkonin, Lev Vygotsky's colleague and thought partner. Elkonin spent most of his scientific career researching make-believe play, and he developed a comprehensive theory of play. Building on Vygotsky's work, Elkonin designed and conducted a series of experimental studies focusing on the make-believe play of children ages two to seven (Elkonin 1978, 2005b). These studies enabled Elkonin to identify the structural components of play and the major patterns in its development. Elkonin's analysis provides a framework for distinguishing real play from fake play.

First, Elkonin demonstrates that the make-believe play of children, which is the most important kind of play in regard to child development, has its own history. Having shown that play passes through several stages, he further analyzes the final, developed form of children's play, demonstrating its fundamental importance for preschool-aged children.

Elkonin begins by analyzing the content of the play, seconding Vygotsky's insight that at the heart of play lies the relationship between people: "We have thus come to the conclusion that human play is an activity in which the *conscious relationships* among people are recreated *outside the conditions of direct utilitarian activity* [italics added]" (Elkonin 2005b, 30). Although the 2005 translation of Elkonin's term *socialnyè* uses the word "conscious," the translation most consistent with the language of the article would be "social." It is important that this is not a social relationship in the sense often understood as the social context of play. The author emphasizes that play does not set the utilitarian goals of introducing children to the actions adults perform at home or in the workplace. Play is not about vocational training or anything like that. The content of the play involves the relationships between people; they are the children's primary interest, and the play does not copy them, does not study them, does not explore them. Instead, it tries to penetrate them, to capture their essence by means that are only available to it.

We understand that if we were talking about the utilitarian mastery of these relationships, they would cease to be a kind of play. In particular, the factual errors inevitable in play will in this case become undesirable, and the play will aim for some end result—something we know is not essential in play. What is important in play is its process. In fully developed play, an action planned by a child (to feed a doll, to pick up an imaginary daughter from day care, to give a shot to an imaginary patient) becomes folded and abbreviated. Children can be heard saying "let's pretend I have already eaten" or "let's pretend they went away and came back." This shortening of actions is needed for children to refocus their play from what people do to how they relate to each other. As Elkonin phrased it: "Human play is the re-creation of human activity, which isolates its social and purely *human essence*, that is, the tasks and standards of relationships among people [italics added]" (31). Thus, Elkonin quite clearly denies the narrowly didactic role of play in modern society, which does not change its central role in the development of the preschool child.

Elkonin identifies the role and the play actions as a central unit of play: "It is precisely this role and the actions associated with its performance . . . that represent

the basic, undecomposable unit of the developed form of play” (37, 40). The more generalized and abbreviated the play actions, “the more deeply they reflect the meaning, goal, and system of relationships in the adult activity that is being recreated” (40). On the other hand, when the (pretend) play actions are highly detailed and exactly replicate the actions they represent, these actions signal an immature play that focuses on what people do and not on how they relate to each other.

Elkonin thus distinguishes the content of the immature play that focuses on “the object or its use or alteration by humans” and the developed or mature play that focuses on “interactions that occur as people interact with objects.” As he writes: “And because the re-creation and thus the mastery of these interactions occur through the child taking on the role of an adult, this role and the integrally associated actions form the unit of play. . . . Of course, the specific nature of interactions among people that are reproduced in play may vary greatly. These include collaboration, mutual aid, division of labor and care, and consideration for other people; however, they may also include wielding power, even despotism, hostility, disrespect, and so forth. Here, everything depends on the specific social conditions of the child’s life” (44). At the same time, we must understand that the play’s “penetration” of a child in the relationship between people does not affect this child’s own qualities or emotions. Here, we are dealing with some kind of play magic. Children can master different relationships, filled not only with positive emotions but with aggression and even malice, injustice, and cruelty, but children can act out these feelings without appropriating them. In play, children master the general meaning of these relationships.

Having analyzed various forms of make-believe play at different stages of its development, Elkonin identified the main structural elements of play. These include: play action, role, imaginary situation, scenario, rules, and object substitutes (that is, unstructured or repurposed objects and materials). All these elements are present in the developed form of make-believe play. The play always starts with children creating an imaginary situation that determines the rules they will follow. They take different roles and perform the (pretend) play actions associated with these roles. A play scenario shapes an imaginary situation, and objects-substitutes (play props) make pretend actions possible. At the stage of its origin and development, the make-believe play has a relatively detailed character, with item substitutes playing a huge role in its emergence. As play develops into a director’s play or play with rules, players begin to indicate the objects with which they seem to perform the play action simply by gesturing or making motions in the air without the item substitutes.



Now, having listed the main structural elements of play, we will attempt to answer the important question: Can using these elements help us distinguish real play from fake play? Before answering, we need to revisit our earlier discussion about the nature of children's make-believe play. We have established that the owners of play—children—although subject to the laws of play, are nonetheless completely free in their play, starting and leading it on their own initiative, even if the conditions are created by adults. In play, no adult can assign children their roles, and there are no preplanned scenarios—everything is developing in the here and now. Even when children play for hours or even days or weeks on end, they continue to act as the creators of their play—the scenario develops, the roles evolve and can be renegotiated, new props are made, and the old ones get repurposed. It is also important to remember that make-believe play is not directed at a result. The motive of play is in its process.

If adults begin to use children's play for their own utilitarian purposes, injecting it with, for example, preacademic skills, this often results in play simulation. Real play does not follow the rules alien to its nature. If adults enter uninvited into the space of children's play, this space disappears—disintegrates, collapses, dissolves. In this case, play either falls apart or turns into a fake play. It is worth repeating that, up to a certain age, a child can own one and only one space—the play space—and this is why children like to play so much.

Sometimes, all of play's structural elements seem to be present, but instead of genuine play, what takes place is a play impostor or simulated play. To distinguish these two kinds of play, one needs to look at these elements through the lens of Elkonin's theory of play. According to Elkonin, the role and the play action are the central elements of make-believe play. In this play, relationships between people are acted out, and children begin to act in accordance with their roles. In play, object substitutes are used, and the imaginary situation gives rise to children's roles and corresponding play actions. When children interact according to the logic of the characters they play, a scenario emerges.

In this case, when children's actions are based on the roles they have chosen on their own, they know how to act based on the roles they play. They make up an imaginary situation. They create and use object substitutes. They interact with each other in a way consistent with their roles. They interact with each other regarding roles, play scenarios, and props, and when the play stops, they step out of their roles to discuss its further course. They can develop play scenarios together or independently. For example, in so-called director's play (a term Elkonin used for solo play), a child acts simultaneously as director and the entire

cast of actors, assigning different roles to dolls, stuffed animals, or LEGO pieces.

When adults take control of children's roles, fake play results in which play actions are suggested by an adult, not by a child; an adult creates an imaginary situation; the object substitutes are usually either purchased or adult made; the interactions between children are either nonexistent or exist only as the interactions between the characters children are playing. Children do not talk to each other about their play. No meta-play is present.

What do play actions look like in real play? The real play action is symbolic. Children act "as if;" the play actions look folded and imprecise, more like a hint of an action. At the late stage of play development, play actions are generalized and abbreviated even more, making play highly symbolic. The objects with which children operate are not real, and children operate with object substitutes, using unstructured and natural materials. The relationship between the roles played by different children is symbolic, as if. In the developed form of play, children will never represent the relationships between their characters by engaging in highly detailed pretend actions. As the play develops, so do play actions, and they change according to changes in the scenario and the logic of the relationship between the characters. Play actions are initiated and performed by children.

In the case of fake play, play actions look different. Children's actions are not realistic but are not symbolic either. They seem to copy real actions, performing these too precisely and following all of the steps. The actions usually do not reflect the real relationship between people; they look staged and sometimes unnatural. The actions do not develop. When acting out similar scenarios, children keep repeating the same action all the time.

As we have mentioned, it is important for children to own their play. Any attempts by adults to use external (not related to children's play) motivation in initiating make-believe play destroys play or generates fake play motivation. What does such fake play motivation look like in an ECE classroom? How do we distinguish the internal (real play) motivation from the external motivation forced by teachers on children without their consent? If we are dealing with an external (nonplay) motivation for children's actions, it is easy to notice that when the person (typically an adult) who motivated children to play disappears, the play immediately stops. That is a sure sign the play is fake. In contrast, if play is motivated internally, when the external influence withdraws (e.g., in the instance of a teacher who enters the play as a player and exits it after suggesting a new turn in the scenario), children will continue with their play.

Thus, an independent observer can use the structural elements of play

identified by Elkonin to distinguish between real play and its simulation. We see that the main reason for the appearance of fake play is the attempts of the adults (teachers or parents) to use play as a means of solving external tasks, alien to the nature of play and often having a utilitarian, unnecessarily pragmatic character. Nevertheless, if we focus on the provision about the crucial importance of play in the development of a preschool child and on the nature of its leading activity—creating a zone of proximal development for the child—it will become obvious to us that play creates fantastic opportunities for child development, provided we do not attempt to rush it and thus violate its nature. At the same time, in today's early childhood classrooms, the main problem is not just the existence of fake play but the absence of any play.

### **Conclusion**

The current situation with children's make-believe play looks quite contradictory. Overall, education in the twenty-first century encourages adults to cultivate freedom and autonomy in children, starting at an early age. But we are faced with the opposite tendencies associated with families who worry about their children's ability to succeed. Parents often try to relieve their anxiety by forcing education on children, sometimes at the expense of their children's interests. With professionals we often see a willingness to meet the educational demands parents voice (whether these are developmentally appropriate or not) without engaging in any discussion that might disagree with these demands. In the end, all this leads to a clash between two very important and, in fact, not mutually exclusive tasks of early childhood education—the task of educating children and the task of developing their play.

The situation gets exacerbated by the fact that many parents do not understand the importance of play for the development of their children and consider play not as a resource for the children's future but rather as an obstacle to their development. This view is undoubtedly archaic despite the general orientation toward the future propagated by the educational-industrial complex. Today's educators, who are taught about the importance of play, do not necessarily apply this knowledge to their everyday practice and seem to have forgotten what genuine play is. This is especially evident in how teachers mistake an adult-organized activity in which children play the role of puppets for the children's own play. One of the reasons for such misunderstanding may be the fact that we are dealing

with a generation of parents and teachers who did not play as children and thus who did not have the feeling that firsthand experience of play creates.

This quite common practice of simulated play—fake play—is a relatively new phenomenon. In videos flooding the Internet in the last few years, preschool teachers have shared how they use children’s make-believe play to teach counting, color names, or good nutrition habits. Driven by the desire to improve play, to make it more useful, these teachers cease to distinguish their “enhanced” play from real children’s play and may sincerely not understand why we call it simulated and fake.

It is important to note that only real play can meet the essential goals of child development, and it was this characteristic of play that prompted Vygotsky to assign it the status of the leading activity of the preschool age and to argue that play creates young children’s zones of proximal development. An important discovery made by Vygotsky is that children’s play constitutes the key to the emergence of meaningful actions in a child, and it is important that a child becomes increasingly aware of the meaningful nature of these actions. In play, a child learns to act meaningfully and consciously, and it is hard to overstate the importance of this fact the modern world, where adults often suffer from a lack of meaning in their lives and have no resources to obtain it.

Thus, the development of preschool children, including their mastery of culturally determined skills and concepts, is much more successful in play than in standard instructional formats. There is only one necessary condition: it must be real play and not fake play.

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