
Children's Perceptions of Play Experiences and Play Preferences: A Qualitative Study

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KEY WORDS

- dynamic systems
- pediatrics
- play preference

This qualitative study investigated the perceptions of play experiences and rationales for play choices of 6 boys and 4 girls between the ages of 7 and 11 years. Individual in-depth interviews were completed and then transcribed, and the transcripts were coded and analyzed using grounded theory methodology. Fun emerged from the data as the core category explaining the choice of specific play activities for children, and 4 additional categories of characteristics surfaced as contributors to the children's perception of fun: relational, activity, child, and contextual. The relationships among the core category, the 4 characteristics categories, and the development of play preference and meaningfulness are illustrated in the Dynamic Model for Play Choice. Included is a discussion of the usefulness of the model in supporting the careful consideration of factors that will increase the perception of fun during therapeutic activities and facilitate client-centered pediatric practice.

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Play is a child's primary and most important occupation (Bundy, 1997; Parham & Primeau, 1997; Pollock, Stewart, Law, Sahagian-Whalen, & Toal, 1997; Reilly, 1974), and it has historically been regarded by occupational therapists as both an indicator of development and a means of intervention (Kielhofner & Barris, 1984; Missiuna & Pollock, 1991; Parham & Primeau, 1997). As the discipline of occupational science has emerged, the concept of play as an occupation and the study of patterns of play participation have been further explored. Recent occupational science literature has suggested that therapists must understand play as providing value and quality to children's lives as they freely engage in it (Parham & Primeau, 1997; Pollock et al., 1997). Occupational scientists believe that play should be viewed, studied, and considered in its naturalistic form and that it need not be broken down into components. These authors stress the importance of play as an end in itself and the benefit of play for its own sake (Parham, 1996; Parham & Primeau, 1997). Therefore, how children make play choices and assign meaning to the experience of this occupation is an important area of study for occupational therapists. To better understand this occupation and the use of play within practice, an expanded understanding of the complexities and nuances of play and play behaviors and how these affect occupational therapy practice is needed (Couch, Deitz, & Kanny, 1998).

Play choice can be affected by many variables, and one of the most studied is gender (Benjamin, 1932; Caldera, Huston, & O'Brien, 1989; Fein, 1981; Pellegrini, 1992; Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 2004). Research has frequently found play preferences that differ by gender. For example, girls have been shown to have a preference for doll play and boys a preference for car and truck play (Caldera et al., 1989; Fein, 1981; Serbin, Bohlin, & Berlin, 1999). Girls prefer dyadic play and interaction, and boys prefer vigorous and outdoor play (Benenson, 1993;

Pellegrini, 1992). Parental interaction with children using gender-stereotyped toys and labeling and familiarity of toys that are deemed gender specific may contribute to the gender differences (Caldera et al., 1989; Martin, Eisenbud, & Rose, 1995).

Another well-researched variable related to play choices is age (Benjamin, 1932). As children develop new motor and cognitive skills, they have the capacity to play in new and more complex ways, and those new abilities are reflected in their choices of more complex play over time. Infants use object play to explore and learn about the world around them (Baranak et al., 2005; Flavell, Miller, & Miller, 2002; Pierce, 2000; Scarlett, Nadeau, Saloni-Pasternak, & Ponte, 2005; Siegler, 1991). Relational play with multiple objects is then followed by symbolic and fantasy play (Baranak et al., 2005; Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 2004; Scarlett et al., 2005). Outdoor play preferences and the preference for rough-and-tumble play have been shown to change with age, as have pretend play and social play (Pellegrini, 1992; Scarlett et al., 2005).

It is difficult to determine whether children with disabilities play differently from typically developing children because of differences in preference or an inability to access and participate in certain choices (Clifford & Bundy, 1989; Howard, 1996; Missiuna & Pollack, 1991). However, research suggests that children with disabilities do play differently. For example, Okimoto, Bundy, and Hanzlik (2000) found that children with physical disabilities exhibit less playfulness, and Missiuna and Pollack (1991) suggested that children with disabilities may have less opportunity for free play. Clifford and Bundy (1989), however, found no difference in preferences between boys with and without sensory integrative dysfunction. Although it appears that children with disabilities do play differently from typically developing children, the issue of whether children with disabilities have different play preferences is unresolved.

In summary, a large body of literature exists on the global topic of play, and significant research has been accumulated on play preference with regard to gender and age; less research exists on the relation of play preferences to ability (Baranak et al., 2005; Caldera et al., 1989; Clifford & Bundy, 1989; Fein, 1981; Missiuna & Pollack, 1991; Pellegrini & Bjorklund, 2004; Pierce, 2000; Scarlett et al., 2005). Research on the meaning of play for children or on children's perspective and rationale for their play choices remains scarce (Lindqvist, 2001; Spitzer, 2004). The occupational therapy profession is undergoing a move toward client-centered practice (Moyers, 1999; Tickle-Degnen, 2002). To be client centered with children, occupational therapists must give children a voice and must listen to that voice. Therefore, research is needed to explore children's perceptions of play

choice, their feelings regarding play, and their assignment of meaning to their choices for play.

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore, understand, and describe children's perceptions of play, the meaning of play from their point of view, and the rationale for their choice of play experiences. Our findings will enable professionals working with children to better understand children's perceptions regarding their play preferences and how they experience and assign meaning to play activities. Such understanding may particularly enable occupational therapists to better conceptualize and use play as an occupation in pediatric intervention and improve the use of play in pediatric evaluation and intervention.

Methodology

We used a grounded theory approach to gain an understanding of how and why children choose certain play activities, how they experience these activities and assign meaning to them, and what might cause them to persist in these activities or choose them again, indicating a preference for the play choice. Research in the grounded theory tradition is intended to generate a new theory regarding a phenomenon or the engagement in a process related to this phenomenon (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method typically involves the use of inductive and then deductive cycles to analyze data, assign the data to categories, and systematically analyze the data to develop theory from emerging concepts and category relationships (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We chose this design to obtain information leading to the development of a theoretical model related to children's reasons for play choices and the development of play preferences. We conducted one-on-one interviews that focused on play choices, emotions associated with play, and reasons for play choice with children between the ages of 7 and 11.

Participants

We chose children who were capable of answering the types of questions we would be asking. Therefore, selection criteria included age, cognitive ability, and language skills. We selected children who were between ages 7 and 11, were typically developing, spoke fluent English and, per parent report, did not have any medical diagnosis to participate in the interviews. We chose the age range of 7 to 11 in consideration of the participants' ability to answer and understand interview questions and on the basis of whether a child could comprehend and express feelings and emotions related to the phenomenon (Flavell et al., 2002). This age range represents a period in which one type of play predominates, and it is also one defined period of cognitive development (Siegler,

1991; Takata, 1969). To generate theoretical information, purposeful sampling methods continued, and participants were selected throughout the interview process to further elucidate specific aspects of information being obtained (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, we chose children of both genders, those who lived in varying environments, and those with and without siblings, as these variables arose in early interviews as potentially being important. In meeting these needs, we completed a total of 10 interviews.

Procedures

After child assent and parent consent, each child participated in a one-on-one semistructured interview consisting of open-ended questions focusing on play choices and preferences, play experiences, and the meaningfulness of or emotions associated with play activities. We designed the initial questions and probes to be open ended to elicit and draw out the children's own thoughts and perceptions. Because the interviews were semistructured, their duration varied depending on the child's elaboration and the number of probes used by the researcher. On average, each interview lasted approximately 25 min. As expected in qualitative grounded theory research, questions and probes were modified and expanded throughout the process to further explore and saturate emergent categories and concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Examples of the types of content included in the interview questions are provided in Figure 1.

Interviews were conducted in an agreed-on location that was comfortable and familiar to the child, and a parent was present throughout the interview process. We are both pediatric occupational therapists with more than 24 years of combined experience, and we conducted all the interviews, which were audiotaped for later analysis and coding and then transcribed verbatim by a graduate assistant using a transcription machine. We each independently coded an initial group of five transcribed interviews with both boys and girls,

1. Tell me about some of your favorite things to play.
2. Why are those favorites? What do you like about them? What's special about them?
3. How do you feel when you are playing?
4. How do you decide what you want to play?
5. How do you play now compared with how you did when you were younger? What is the same or different?
6. How do adults play? Is it fun to play with adults?
7. How do boys and girls play the same or differently?
8. Who are your favorite people to play with? Why?
9. Where are your favorite places to play? Why?
10. Is play easy or hard? How? Why?

Figure 1. Sample content of typical interview questions.

varying in birth order but all of whom had siblings, before any discussion about results. We then conferred with regard to our independent coding to create consensus and develop the initial categories. After this first discussion and determination of initial categories, we selected additional interview participants 1 to 2 at a time to gather needed information to saturate the categories, answer further questions that arose, and explore different characteristics of play choice. We typically met weekly and discussed the prior week's results after we had each transcribed and coded them. Sampling, interviews, transcription, and independent coding continued over a period of 6 months until redundancy was consistently seen in the coding of the data, the developed categories were considered saturated, and the developing model-theory remained relevant in light of newly coded data. The length of the study was 10 months.

Data Analysis

We used the constant comparison method to systematically analyze and interpret the data according to three coding phases—open coding, axial coding, and selective coding—as discussed in Strauss and Corbin (1990). All coding was performed manually. In the open-coding phase, we identified select units of analysis from the data and placed them into categories. We noted emergent themes related to children's play choices and experiences and compared and contrasted them with each subsequent interview. The similarities and differences of the segmented data were considered as they related to the identified phenomenon, play choice and meaning.

We used axial coding to recode the data according to the phenomenon and its causal conditions, strategies resulting from interaction within the phenomenon, context, and intervening conditions and consequences. From this process, we grouped categories and analyzed them for relationships between them, and a core category emerged. Finally, we selectively coded the data to refine the core category and conditional categories and hypotheses relating them to the phenomenon of play experience and meaning from a child's perspective. From this data analysis process, we developed a proposed preliminary substantive-level theory related to the perceptions and experiences of play and play preference in typically developing children ages 7 and 11.

Creswell (1998) suggested that at least two strategies should be used to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of a qualitative study. We chose to use triangulation of authors and peer debriefing. We used triangulation of authors, as described by Krefting (1991), during data analysis to ensure rigor. We coded each transcript separately for data units and category identification and then met to compare notes and discuss coding and category formation.

We also used peer debriefing, including discussion of the model and theory development with other pediatric therapists with knowledge of grounded theory and access to the transcribed interviews, to establish trustworthiness of the data (Creswell, 1998).

Results

The final participant sample consisted of 6 girls and 4 boys between the ages of 7 and 11. All were White and from middle-class homes and lived in suburban to semirural areas with access within their towns to various parks and recreation activities.

The children's main consideration for designating an activity as "play" versus "not play" and their primary rationale for why a certain activity was chosen was whether or not it was "fun." According to *Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, n.d), adults define *fun* as "what provides amusement and enjoyment" and believe that fun "usually implies laughter or gaiety, but may imply merely a lack of serious or ulterior purpose." The children interviewed may not necessarily have been able to define the word fun, but their statements suggested that they understood fun when it happened and that their perception of fun was a key element in their conception of play and their choice of play. As Lucy (all names used are pseudonyms) said, play is "when you're having fun doing what you're doing and you like to do it." She also added that "when you play you can have fun and laugh and joke around." Fun was the reason children supplied for why they might persist in playing an activity. Play was described by many of the children as the opposite of being bored. Sabrina described a favored activity as something she and her friends could "play for hours straight, the same thing, without getting bored." Additionally, the perception of fun was associated with specific pleasurable emotions. Lucy stated, for example, "When I play something I like I feel happy and enthusiastic," and Jim described play as something that "makes me feel happy."

Not only was fun an important element in the description of play, but the word *fun* figured prominently in the children's responses regarding why certain activities were chosen. The children reported their favorite games to be sports, outdoor games, tag, board games, and computer and video games. This group strongly preferred outdoor play and play with others. Interestingly, none of the children reported television watching as a favorite activity. Sabrina stated flatly, "Watching television isn't playing." The lack of consideration of television watching as play was surprising given the amount of time many children devote to it; however, with further data analysis it became clear to us that on the basis of the children's perception of play, television watching

would not be considered play in most cases. Television watching was not necessarily considered by the children to be fun, and as we learned, one of the aspects of play that made it fun was a certain level of active participation.

Although fun emerged as the common theme regarding play choice and persistence, several categories emerged representing the children's rationale for why something was fun or worth choosing. One category was activity characteristics, including the level of difficulty and the amount of active participation or activity level. Other categories included relationships with others, child characteristics, and context. Within each category, a variety of characteristics figured prominently in the children's descriptions of their rationale for play choices (see Figure 2 for an overview of each category). An important concept, however, was the individuality of what was considered to be fun. Although this sample chose some overarching play categories, their rationales were highly individualized and spoke to the overlap of the categories and characteristics leading to fun.

The four main categories that related and contributed to an activity being identified by a child as fun were activity characteristics, relational characteristics, child characteristics, and contextual characteristics. The categories related to one another in a dynamic process that produced a choice of activity, a meaning or emotion associated with that activity choice, and the development of preference. Each category is described individually in the sections that follow.

Activity Characteristics

Activity characteristics emerged as influential factors in children's play choice. One activity characteristic that children frequently mentioned as creating fun (and therefore choice) was the activity level or amount of movement it provided. Kathy stated that fun was "when you get to run around," and Lucy said one of her favorite games was special because "it's fast and it's really interesting." Kathy also enjoyed playing tag and chase with her dog specifically because "he's really fast, and I like to catch him." Kathy summed up many of the comments made in this category by saying that play was when "you get to move, run, and play on the swings."

		Category		
Activity		Relational	Child	Context
Characteristics	Difficulty	Peers	Age	Location
	Active or passive	Adults	Ability	Weather
		Siblings	Gender	
		Cooperation		
		Shared or deferred choice		

Figure 2. Categories and characteristics.

Work, on the other hand, was when “you have to sit down and write.”

Although this activity characteristic was important to the children, the primary concept they spoke of with regard to activity characteristics was the level of challenge the activity provided. The children enjoyed challenges and sought them out. They preferred play that provided them with an appropriate challenge and that was not too easy or too difficult. The desire for challenge was noted whether the play was with others (team sports) or alone (computer games). Comments from the children included statements such as Sabrina’s: “I always like challenges” and “I’d rather it be easy, well, like not really easy but not really hard either. In the middle so that I’m being challenged but I’m still doing good.” She continued, “It kinda needs to start out being easy enough so I can have fun with it, then it can get hard.” Whether an activity was perceived as fun seemed to be based on a delicate balance in the challenge level. The activity could not be perceived as too hard or too easy for it to be preferred.

Relational Characteristics

Friends, siblings, and even pets figured prominently in the descriptions of play and fun in this age group of children. The relational aspects of play involved whom to play with and who decided what to play. This group of children also frequently mentioned aspects of teamwork and bonding.

Peers were a primary motivator in the children’s play and in their description of fun. All the children preferred to play with others rather than alone and felt that play was more fun with their peers. Matt expressed the depth of the importance of peers to children at this age with the statement “If I’m not playing with my friends, I can’t play.” Children who had siblings or pets considered them playmates equal with peers and frequently chose them as preferred. Several responses from participants of both genders, however, suggested the competitive nature between siblings. Jack preferred to play with his younger brothers, for example, “because I always beat them.” Participants also expressed the opposite, reporting feelings of interdependence and support associated with peer and sibling relationships during play. For example, Lucy stated that “everybody depends on me to catch the ball,” and Jane responded that she liked to play on a team because “you have more people to help you out.”

Others, both peers and adults, were important in the children’s choices of what to play. The children did not feel that it was extremely important that they themselves chose what to play, as long as they agreed it was fun. Peers could choose what to play, adults could choose what to play, and even siblings could choose what to play, as long as it was fun. Many children also spoke about shared decision making.

Kathy discussed the cooperativeness of play decisions: “We both try to decide on something we both want to play.” Sabrina’s response regarding choice was “[my brother] has always had favorites . . . sometimes even Dad picks the game, we take turns.” Jane’s choices seemed based on her brother: “[My brother] and I play videogames, and if he’s home I play basketball with him.”

When asked whether they preferred to play with children or adults, all children preferred other children. When asked about adult play, however, some children did not note differences between adult and child play, based on their understanding of play. Because their conception of play is merely that play is fun and because adults have fun, too, the children felt that both children and adults could play in the same way. For example, Lucy stated, “It is as much fun to play with adults as it is kids because when you play with kids they run around and laugh and stuff like that and the same thing happens when you play with adults.” Others clearly expressed a preference for peers or siblings. Kathy answered that kids are “more fun” and that adults are “boring sometimes.” Specifically, she responded that “kids like to play and run a lot and grownups don’t.” She also thought that adults were too serious to play with kids and that they should “act more like a kid” if they want to try to play with kids. The inconsistencies appeared to be related to characteristics of the adults who were available to play with the children. Some children had access to playful adults, who were fun, and others did not. Although some children did not specifically note differences in the way in which children and adults play, none of the children indicated that an adult would be a preferred playmate over another child.

Child Characteristics

Characteristics inherent in the child also emerged as a factor influencing children’s play choices and whether an activity was viewed as fun. The children made many comments about their age, ability level, gender, and the opposite gender in relation to play choices. They were able to perceive the changes in their play choices as they got older. Kathy noted that “when you grow up, your mind changes and you like different stuff.” She also stated that “littler things are kinda boring when you get older.” Throughout the interviews, the children made comments that indicated that their ability to participate in and have a level of success with the activity influenced play choices and likelihood of perceiving an activity as fun. When comparing play choices now to those when they were younger, many children cited ability level as a reason for change. For example, Joe said that when he was younger he played board games as opposed to a current favorite, football, “because it [was] really the only thing I could be able to play.”

The children were very aware that girls played differently from boys. Lucy specifically said, "They [boys] like to get dirty and roll on the ground. . . . They like to push each other around and roughhouse." She stated that girls "like to walk around, and they talk or they play tag or four square." Olivia said, "Boys don't like to play girls things mostly." Kathy stated "boys act weird" and that "they don't listen, they don't share, and they argue." Girls, on the other hand, according to Kathy, "don't argue as much and they share too."

In addition to being aware of the differences in play by gender, most of the children reported that they preferred to play with their own gender. Jim's response when asked why he preferred to play with boys was "they like the same stuff that I do" and "girls for some reason like makeup and stuff and dolls; boys sort of think that's weird." Jack specifically said that he preferred playing with boys to girls "because I'm a boy" and "cause they [girls] don't really know how to play." One girl in the sample, however, was reported by her mother to be a "tomboy" who preferred to play with boys, specifically older boys who were the peers of her older brother. This child was reported to excel at sports, and she preferred to play sports with her brother and his peers. This preference speaks to the importance of child characteristics in the choice of fun and the individuality of the conception of fun related to play.

Contextual Characteristics

The contextual issues that emerged included the effects of environment and location of activities in time and space. There was a definite preference for outdoor play over indoor play because outdoor play was considered to be more fun. Outdoor play also provided the opportunity to run and move. For example, Kathy stated that she preferred the outdoors because "there is more room to run and have fun." Preference for outdoor play was also explained by Lucy, who commented that outside

you can yell and you can scream . . . and you can run around and chase each other and you could, you could play on like the playscape and . . . inside you have to sit down and play a board game or something.

Jim also favored outdoors because of its "big open spaces" and the ability to just "run around." Last, Kathy stated that the opposite of fun and play was "sitting inside and doing nothing," equating inside with boredom. It follows, then, that the weather factored prominently in decisions about where to play and when. Given the preference for outdoor play and the belief that outdoor play was more fun, the choice of indoor play was specifically frequently related to the weather. Kathy commented that she plays inside only "when it's a rainy day."

Discussion

The interpretation of the study results is presented as the Dynamic Model for Play Choice (see Figure 3), which illustrates the interaction among the four characteristic categories (relational, child, activity; and contextual); the core phenomenon or category of fun; and their relationship to play choice, persistence, and the development of preference.

Theoretical Basis for the Model

As shown in Figure 3, a child's choice of play is a dynamic interplay between the four categories and their relationship to fun. According to the Dynamic Model for Play Choice, play activities perceived as fun are more likely to be repeated because of positive emotions associated with them. This repetition creates a pattern or preference, and continued engagement in the activity contributes to mastery. Occupation, including the occupation of play, can be considered in terms of dynamic systems theory, which has been articulated as an ongoing process that is subject to the concepts of nonlinear dynamics and systems theory (Gray, Kennedy, & Zemke, 1996; Lazzarini, 2004; Royeen, 2003). Dynamic systems are complex systems with circular causality that demonstrate self-organizing characteristics when displaced from their state of equilibrium. This displacement

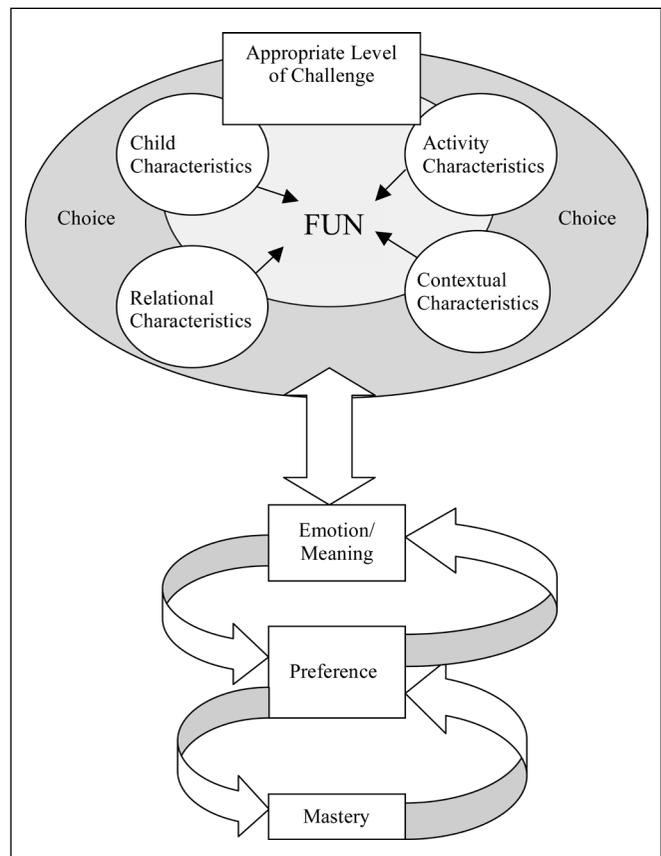


Figure 3. Dynamic Model for Play Choice.

may also be referred to as *perturbation* (Kelso, 1995; Royeen, 2003). Circular causality suggests an interrelationship among all variables in the system; each variable has an effect on and is affected by the others (Kelso, 1995; Royeen, 2003). In a dynamic system, parameters are created and influence other parts of the system. This process of mutual influence is represented in the Dynamic Model for Play Choice as the interrelationship between all the characteristics and the level of challenge in influencing the perception of fun.

As the system moves away from equilibrium and toward self-organization, it may take many directions. Attractor states draw the system toward them and represent emergent states or patterns of preferred behavior (Gray et al., 1996; Kelso, 1995). Attractor states may be shallow or deep. Deep attractor states represent patterns of behavior that are highly preferred and repeated. They are states of behavior to which the system is most likely to return (Gray et al., 1996). The perception of fun represents a deep attractor state in this model. Patterns arise and contribute to the self-organizing process (Kelso, 1995). As the child repeats play activities that are perceived as fun, he or she experiences positive emotions, thus leading to repetition of the choice or a pattern of choice, which can also be denoted as a preference for that play activity. Viewing play and play choice from the standpoint of nonlinear dynamic systems theory allows the complex and variable nature of the process of play to be conveyed.

Application of the Model

According to the model, meaning occurs within the dynamic process as the perception of fun during the activity is connected with emotion. Children reported feeling happy, laughing, and enjoying favored activities. The perception of fun is a strong source of influence, or a deep attractor, in drawing the child toward a particular play choice. Persistence of a play choice represents a pattern, and pattern repetition can be viewed in terms of a preference for that choice. However, the system may reorganize, and the choice may change with changes in any of the contributing components or, in this case, the characteristics. This phenomenon can be seen in the reported changes exhibited in play choice when age, gender, environment, or play partners changed.

The Dynamic Model for Play Choice suggests that the choice of play activity is dynamic in nature and that the development of play preference is the result of a never-ending, nonlinear process. Choices that are at the right level of challenge and are considered fun are repeated. The repeated pattern of play choice, with fun as the outcome, allows emotional meaning to develop in relation to that play choice. In this model, activity characteristics, relational characteristics, child characteristics, and contextual characteristics all interact and affect each other to draw the child toward a particular

play choice that he or she considers to be fun. Our findings echo a previous study of older children with disabilities (Pollock et al., 1997) that also highlighted the importance of fun in the perception of play and the individuality of what is considered fun and play.

Each category influenced what the child considered fun. The concept or idea of fun, in turn, influenced the children's play choices. The emergence of each category was not surprising given our knowledge of human development and the available literature on play. For example, the finding that the children in this study preferred to play with friends or others rather than alone was not unexpected given their age range, which placed them in the play epoch of "games with rules" (Takata, 1969). This period of play is characterized by a preference for social games that have formal rules and many of the typical games of this period require peers to play. It is possible, therefore, that children report a preference for peers because peers are required for the games they prefer. However, some preferred games, such as computer games, do not require peers to play. Given the children's clear preference for playing with others even though the computer allows the option of playing alone, these two preferences (i. e., games with rules and playing with peers) appear to be separate preferences.

Also not surprisingly, we identified gender and age as important contributors to choices for play and for what made play fun. As stated earlier, a large body of literature supports the notion that play preferences are affected by age and gender (Baranak et al., 2005; Pellegrini, 1992). As children develop and gain new skills and abilities, their play changes. Although very young children may play more similarly, gender-based play differences are apparent from an early age and continue throughout adolescence. This sample of children demonstrated awareness of these issues, which suggested their growing cognitive capacity and their increasing ability for self-awareness and the beginning of reflection.

Many of the categories suggested by the children's comments appeared to influence each other. Age affects ability, for example, and the children reported that they perceived gender as affecting preference for active play, with boys being more active than girls. Perhaps the most important interrelationship, one that was stressed by all children, was the relationship between ability level (a child characteristic) and the activity's difficulty level (an activity characteristic). The importance of the match between the child's ability level and an activity's difficulty level is what occupational therapists often call the "just-right challenge," particularly those who use Ayres's (2005) sensory integrative frame of reference in their intervention. Ayres (2005) believed that one of the most important things therapists could do in treatment with

a child was to find the activity and environment creating this match between ability and activity so that the child could be successful. The children interviewed repeatedly voiced the importance of this match for their preferences and their ability to have fun. The just-right challenge allows a child to persist in an activity and creates a state in which the child may prefer and repeat the activity until mastery happens. However, as many of the children stated, when an activity becomes too easy, it becomes boring. Activities that were considered boring were not preferred and thus not repeated.

Implications and Limitations

This study's findings provide a preliminary theory for the dynamic process involved in play choice and the development of play preference. The model presented is congruent with the occupational therapy perspective and incorporates current viewpoints on occupation from a dynamic systems theory perspective. When viewed in this manner, it becomes clear that therapists need to pay particular attention to creating the just-right challenge, being fun and playful in approach, and using peers and others in therapy. If these children were able to tell therapists anything, it would be to "act more like a kid" and be more playful. They spoke about the importance of fun in terms of what makes an activity choice play. If occupational therapists want to be occupation and client centered in their pediatric practice, they must choose play as the occupation to focus on, consider the preferences of the children they work with, and consider the importance of fun in their choice of how to spend their time.

Interestingly, the concept of intrinsic motivation in terms of the specific choice of what to play did not appear to be as significant a contributor to play choice as expected. In some cases, the children conveyed the opposite, stating that it did not matter who chose the activity as long as it was perceived as fun. This finding has implications for therapeutic intervention, because adult therapists can choose what children are to play and still have the children consider it play as long as the children perceive what is chosen as fun. It appears that children's intrinsic motivation is fun, not necessarily specific activities. Therefore, therapists must strive to understand what characteristics of activities are perceived as fun to make appropriate choices for therapeutic activities.

This study's primary limitation was the demographics of the sample. Although some previous research has not found differences in play preferences based on social class or nationality (Finegan, Niccols, Zacher, & Hood, 1991; von Zuben, Crist, & Mayberry, 1991), we recommend that this study be replicated with children of different socioeconomic

status, culture, and race. Because this was a grounded theory study and the interviews were completed to saturation, size of the sample was not a concern; however, replication of this study could reinforce and extend the appropriateness of the model and improve the transferability of the findings to a wider population.

Future Research

It would be beneficial for therapists to understand the long-term implications of play choices in children and their impact on development over time, and we recommend further study in this area. Perhaps early play choices influence further socioemotional development and even adult occupational choices. We wonder about the relationship between a child's sensory processing and his or her specific play choices; this area could be important for study. Additionally, not one child mentioned the availability of play objects or materials as a factor in what he or she chose to play. Although this finding may be in part because of our middle-class sample, it may also be related to children's cognitive capacity and their lack of awareness of how adults structure their environments to allow them options for play and activities. Not one of the children mentioned money or the ability to buy toys or games they wanted—again, perhaps because of the sample's socioeconomic status. Last, because some children mentioned that they felt adults were adequate play partners and others did not, we wonder about the influence of parental playfulness, family dynamics, and adult participation on children's play choices and their development over time. ▲

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