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# Children's Work: The Less-Considered Childhood Occupation

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Children's work has largely been overlooked by researchers of many disciplines due to sociohistorical trends that fostered the notion that childhood should be a time free of work. Likewise, it has received little attention in occupational therapy most likely due to the influence of these historical developments on occupational therapy rhetoric and values. This paper begins by describing the influence of child labor laws and reformation on children's participation in work. Next, using a comprehensive review of the literature gathered from social sciences, a critical examination of the historical and current research on children's work is provided. This synthesis is framed in concepts of occupational science analyzing the evidence that describes the nature, form, function, and meaning of children's work. For occupational therapists working with children with disabilities, this research provides beginning guidelines for occupation-based work interventions and typical expectations for nondisabled children that may be applied using clinical reasoning to populations with disabilities.

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Although occupational therapists have published widely on the importance of play to child development (Bundy, 1991; Florey, 1981; Knox, 1996; Parham & Fazio, 1997; Reilly, 1974; Takata, 1974), the relevance of work to children's development has not received the same attention. Even in the social sciences, children's work has been examined in relation to how it contributes to the family economy (Cogle & Tasker, 1982; Miles, 1994; Schildkrout, 1980) rather than its developmental implications (McHale, Bartko, Crouter, & Perry-Jenkins, 1990). An interest in children's work as a phenomenon in its own right has arisen only fairly recently in history (Goodnow & Delaney, 1989; Morrow, 1995; Warton & Goodnow, 1995; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). The reticence to study children's work may be due to the exploitation of child labor in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Macleod, 1998), a phenomenon that formed the current cultural beliefs and social biases about what children's lives should be like. Child labor was decried as robbing children of not only their childhoods but also of potentially better futures by blunting their education and narrowing their career options to less desirable positions (Horan & Hargis, 1991; Schildkrout).

The U.S. historical record of child wage labor abuses may have dampened interest in studying the nature and developmental implications of children's work (Medrich, Roizen, Rubin, & Buckley, 1982). Yet, paid labor is not the only kind of work children do. Children engage in work in a number of environments. For example, in the industrialized Western culture of the United States, early elementary school children can clearly describe school tasks they do as work and not play (Cunningham & Weigel, 1992; King, 1982; Wing, 1995); in addition, family chores are engaged in by 90% of children by age 10 (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). In this paper, echoing Morrow's (1995) stance, children are viewed not merely as

“human becomings” but also as social actors whose activities, in this case work, are highly relevant in the present as well as the future. Children learn to work hard, do a good job and help out long before they take their first paid job. It is this non-paid work of childhood that will be the focus of this paper.

This paper provides an overview of children’s work for occupational therapists and scientists by: (1) reviewing historical influences that formed current beliefs, (2) presenting a critical synthesis of historical and current research describing the nature, form, function, and meaning of children’s nonpaid work from preschool to teen years, and (3) describing the developmental implications for occupational therapy practice and occupational science of this research. Using multiple database search engines (MEDLINE, PsycINFO, ERIC, and Anthropology On-line Index) for the key words of activity, work, and children, citation tracking from key articles, and children’s time-use studies, I gathered and examined the available research on children’s work, excluding wage labor. Studies were selected based on their contribution to the understanding of children’s work and the rigor of the designs. The majority of this research has been conducted with Caucasian children and families in the United States or Australia, although a number of other studies have used samples representative of the U.S. population.

Research on children’s work has not produced clearly defined lines of study. Rather it has been widely dispersed among fields whose interests in children’s work vary including topics such as children’s contributions to family economies, the effect of work on academic performance, and the development of responsibility (Manke, Seery, Crouter, & McHale, 1994; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Therefore, this synthesis will draw widely from diverse fields with varying theoretical perspectives. Overall this research has been high in quality using large sample sizes and sound methodologies in quantitative studies (e.g., Antill, Goodnow, Russell, & Cotton, 1996; McHale et al., 1990; Warton & Goodnow, 1995), and in-depth rigorous methods in qualitative studies (Wing, 1995).

## Historical Changes in Children’s Participation in Work

Through time our beliefs about children’s daily rounds have changed within a nexus of social, economic, and historical factors. In the United States in the early 1900s a large portion of families depended upon all their members to contribute to the family economy (Horan & Hargis, 1991). Children, even at young ages, worked along side their par-

ents on farms and in the family businesses. Children’s work was expected and needed, sometimes overriding concerns about the child’s future and schooling (Walters & O’Connell, 1988), although for most children the time spent in school was outweighed by time spent in work and play (Macleod, 1998).

With the shift to industrialism, fewer families farmed. In the 1930s, around the same time as this change in family economies, progressive reformers believed that child labor compromised school attendance. Reformers pushed to increase children’s school hours and decrease work participation (Macleod, 1998). These economic and historical factors led to a shift in the perception of what childhood should be and what children should do. Children became “precious,” the family’s future treasure to be carefully tended and prepared through education (Medrich et al., 1982; Zelizer, 1985).

These sociohistorical trends have altered Western ideas about children’s occupations. Modern thinking suggests that children should not work (in fact child labor laws determine at what ages children may work in paid labor); instead, the U.S. cultural view is that “play is the work of the child” (Hussey, 1948; Pitcher, 1966). This idea has become deeply embedded in the rhetoric of occupational therapy giving primacy to the occupation of children’s play. Play has been clearly recognized as the occupation of childhood, central to children’s development (Parham & Fazio, 1997; Reilly, 1974). Some have argued that play in childhood is equivalent to work in adult life, in its ability to foster personal growth and create meaningful experiences (Alessandrini, 1949; Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 1991). However, Ferland (1997) suggested that play cannot be conceived of as child’s work since it does not meet the criteria for work. Play is just one of the occupations in which children engage. Although children in Western societies may no longer be required to labor to sustain family economies, they still are enculturated into a social system that values work and the character byproducts it affords. The following sections describe and critique research that describes the nature, form, function, and meaning of children’s work.

## Nature of Children’s Work

The study of the nature of children’s work includes attention to its definition and the scope of participation in children’s work. It is important to put forth a specific definition to differentiate this childhood occupation from other occupations. Goodnow (1988), recognizing that children’s work cannot be defined in the same way as adult work (e.g., as paid labor engaged in for subsistence), defined children’s

work as “an activity that requires effort, is regarded as useful, involves relationships with family members [or others in the community]” (p. 7). This definition broadens our understanding of children’s work beyond the traditional conceptualizations of children’s wage labor such as newspaper delivery, service work, or odd jobs to encompass school-work, housework, chores, or caring for other family members (Morrow, 1995).

Children’s work may not appear to be an important occupation if we only consider the percentage of time children engage in work. No studies have examined the time that children engage in work across settings. Data from household work provides an idea of the scope of children’s participation in work. Overall children’s contributions constituted only around 15% of all labor in households (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991) or about 5 1/2 hours of work per week by recent estimates (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Both these studies estimating children’s work participation used broad representative samples of the U.S. population (5,000 and 3,563 participants, respectively), providing confidence in these estimates. Although this children’s work represents a small portion of daily time-use, the following sections will argue its developmental importance.

## Form of Children’s Work

An examination of occupational form describes: (1) The development of children’s understanding of the sociocultural habitus of work, specifically, their understanding of the physical, temporal, and social dimensions, and (2) the historical and current sociocultural constructions of children’s work, specifically regarding gender and ethnicity. Researchers have made assumptions about occupational form; participation in specific activities such as school work, dishwashing, picking up toys, or lawn mowing have been assumed to be work. This assumption leaves the occupational form unexamined, imposing a culturally-defined dichotomized conceptualization of children’s work and play. Educational researchers have led the way in identifying *child*-determined activities labeled work, and the features of the occupational form of children’s work.

Preschool children as young as 3 years of age identified the parts of their daily activities that were strictly play versus those that were work. Although statistical significant developmental differences in age could not be ascertained due to the small sample size of 14 children in one study, the analysis of semistructured interviews of preschool children clearly noted that they could identify play activities in their school day (Garza, Briley, & Reifel, 1983). Children identified pretense, nonpretense manipulation of materials,

sociodramatic play, and organized games as play in contrast to other classroom activities by default identified as work. Likewise, 50 Midwestern children 3 1/2 to 6 years of age sorted pictures of tasks on a work–play continuum similarly to their teachers, demonstrating a socialized understanding that different activities were either work, or play, or in-between work and play (Cunningham & Weigel, 1992). The differentiation of activities occurred along contextual lines with mandatory contexts identified as work and free-play contexts as play. However, as analyzed by an ANOVA (analysis of variance), children sorted significantly more activities than their teachers as belonging in the in-between category, as neither work nor play (Cunningham & Weigel).

Cunningham and Weigel (1992) asserted that children recognized that it was the use and who determined the use of materials that made children sort activities as either work or play. When the teacher had determined material-use, such as using blocks for an obstacle course rather than dramatic play, children were less likely than their teachers to sort this activity as play. In a highly structured classroom, materials such as books, paper, paste, and crayons were used only in teacher-directed tasks and therefore associated with work whereas games, manipulatives, dolls, and the play-house that were used during free time were associated with play. One exception to the mandatory context distinctions for children of this age was clean-up activities such as throwing away paper and putting away toys, activities which at these young ages they perceived as more play-like than their teachers (Cunningham & Weigel).

Besides material use, the effort and requirements for a specific product further differentiated work from play activities. In qualitative studies where nine kindergarteners served as key informants and were observed over 2-month’s time, King (1976, 1982) identified qualifiers children used to describe work. These qualifiers included: (1) directed by the teacher, (2) required participation, (3) performed simultaneously with classmates, (4) used the same materials to produce similar products, and (5) completed with sufficient effort (Apple & King, 1981; King, 1979). The importance of work was emphasized to children due to the priority these activities were given in daily scheduling over other activities that could be terminated in favor of the work activity (King, 1979). Physically, play and work were not always separated in space in kindergarten, but play was interruptible. As children participated in the school year, the separation of play and work progressed to a division of time and space with play largely being relegated to recess time (King, 1979). Unfortunately, although interesting, the reports of these findings do not sufficiently describe the study methods or analysis of data.

Wing (1995), building on King's work, combined participant observation and multiple in-depth open-ended interviews with children and teachers to examine the child's perspective of the experience and functions of children's work using a wider age group of 28 kindergarteners, first-, and second-grade children. Wing asked children to describe their *perceptions* of the experience, and the contextual qualities they used to distinguish work and play, encouraging descriptions of in-between experiences. Wing's study does not specifically describe the study procedures for assuring trustworthiness, however the design appears to include methods for triangulation and the findings are detailed, rich, and compelling and have a utilitarian application that has been suggested to be another measure of the rigor in qualitative studies (Kvale, 1995). Children clearly described work as a different experience than play in its nature, the level of the child's involvement, and the level of the teacher's involvement, but also suggested a continuum or range on these dimensions. As can be seen in Table 1, for these children work varied largely from play based on distinctions of whether the child used effort and concentration to produce some type of product whose design was directed and evaluated by the teacher.

In Wing's study (1995), the observed social constraints of productive work included requiring the child to be quiet, be still, and focus on the activity with few peer interactions.

Teachers often hovered nearby during these activities, aiding the children in following directions and meeting performance standards. Teacher-structured, -designed, and -directed activities often involving pencil and paper focused on production and were evaluated according to teacher-identified standards. In King's study, however, the newest kindergartners who were being socialized into school tasks needed only to demonstrate sufficient effort to experience "work" rather than producing a certain standard of product (Apple & King, 1981). At different ages, different standards or a grading of expectations regarding work production appear to be applied.

In addition to the elements of occupational form communicated to children in school, there also are sociocultural expectations for children's work in the home. Gender is one of the most powerful determinants of the size of the child's workload and of the types of chores assigned (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997; Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Goldstein & Oldham, 1979; Manke, Seery, Crouter, & McHale, 1994; Mauldin & Meeks, 1990; Medrich et al., 1982; Propper, 1972; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b). Prior to 5 years of age, parents estimated that girls worked equal hours to boys; however, girls reportedly had rapid increases in time spent in chores, doing 50% more work activities than boys, or a total of 3.8 hours by the time they were 6 to 9 years of age (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b). In other stud-

**Table 1. Children's Perceived Work-Play Continuum<sup>1</sup>**

Play ←	in-between	→ Work
Nature of the Activity		
free exploration of materials	activities teacher-designed but allow for some discovery of creativity	teacher-directed & designed activities
generally involves manipulative or other objects	games with rules & academic content	product-oriented
does not require quiet	self-selected activities that require concentration or attention to detail	sometimes requires quiet
does not require finishing		projects must be finished
Child Involvement		
children's intentions central usually physically active	teacher's intentions usually central but more choices available to child	usually physically inactive
little mental concentration or cognitive activity evident to the child	can usually interact freely with peers	mental concentration & cognitive activity evident to the child
can interact freely with peers	usually fun	can sometimes interact with peers
always fun		sometimes fun
Teacher Involvement		
few teacher expectations	generally some teacher evaluation	teacher's expectations & intentions central
rarely evaluated by the teacher		outcomes evaluated by the teacher

<sup>1</sup> Wing, L. (1995). Play is not the work of the child: Young children's perceptions of work and play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 10, 223-247.

ies spanning nearly 15 years, findings suggest that girls completed more hours of chores per week than boys ages 5 to 17 years of age (Farley, 1979; Goodnow & Delaney, 1989; Manke et al., 1994; Mauldin & Meeks; Timmer, Eccles, & O'Brien, 1985; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b). Even on their own after school, girls from minority families were twice as likely as their male counterparts to do household chores (Medrich et al., 1982). The hardest workers were reportedly older adolescent girls who worked an estimated 6 hours per week in household tasks (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b). The large stratified rural sample and the inner-city minority families of Medrich's study may have had greater needs for child labor due to family economies and resources.

In several studies and even across cultures, sex stereotyping was strongly evident in the types of children's work. Girls were more likely to do tasks inside the home such as making beds, housecleaning, food preparation, dishes, and laundry and boys more likely to do outside work such as yard care, pet care, car maintenance, or taking out the garbage (Antill et al., 1996; Cogle & Tasker, 1982; Goodnow, Bowes, Warton, Dawes, & Taylor, 1991; Mauldin & Meeks, 1990; McHale et al., 1990; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Not only were girls more likely to do inside household tasks but they also engaged in tasks requiring more frequent repetition (Antill et al.). In one early study, Cogle and Tasker found that girls were twice as likely to participate in dishwashing and four times as likely to do laundry. Goldstein and Oldham (1979) noted that compared to boys, girls reported doing double the housework chores and dishwashing. In contrast, boys were more likely to do "extra" jobs for pay such as washing windows or cars. Further, girls earned less money doing these types of jobs, being instead encouraged to do household work for love of family rather than money (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b).

Research in the 1970s suggested that childhood experiences and expectations for work heavily influenced later marital divisions of labor (Thrall, 1978). Although Western cultures have increasingly promoted egalitarianism among men and women in work, only two studies suggested that gender expectations in children's household work have changed even slightly over recent years. Tasks such as putting away belongings, making own bed, and cleaning own room were equally expected of boys and girls (Antill et al., 1996). Goodnow and Delaney (1989) found that mothers desired that their sons contribute to household work and grow up capable of managing household tasks, but took for granted that daughters had these skills. Findings suggest that parents most strongly encouraged girls to do daily tasks whereas this was not true for boys (Antill et al.). Educated mothers of teenage boys, compared to less-educated moth-

ers, expected their sons to learn more domestic chores aiming to increase their son's domestic independence. However, this participation was still a 30% lower share of household tasks than their female peers (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). Outside work (car washing and garbage duty) continued to be significantly more prominent among boys and daily duties related to meals, laundry, and cleaning were more prominent among girls (Antill et al.; Mauldin & Meeks, 1990). The gender separation in children's work continues to be noted. This separation was only slightly influenced by parents' egalitarianism or modeling performance of cross-gender tasks (Antill et al.).

Several studies have compared children's work across ethnicities yielding inconsistent trends. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) found differences among Hispanic, White, White non-Hispanic, Black, and Asian children under 12 years of age in participation in household chores. Hispanic children did significantly more work than children of other ethnic groups. Black and Asian children spent less time in household work than the other groups. However, in comparing White and Black families, Goldscheider and Waite (1991) found that Black children did 21% more chores than White children, and were involved in more responsible roles such as grocery shopping or child care. These differences may also be related to family economies and community development.<sup>1</sup>

## Function of Children's Work

Children's work arguably functions to foster development and occupational competence, assist in household labor, and foster social relationships. Parents may request or demand work from children for reasons ranging from needs for assistance to fostering the children's moral and social development (Rogoff, Sellers, Pirrolta, Fox, & White, 1975; White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). In many cultures children have begun to assist in household work when they reached an "age of reason" in which adult community members believed children were capable or teachable, somewhere between 5 and 8 years of age (Goodnow, 1988; Whiting & Whiting, 1975). Until children reach some level of competence, parent's investment in teaching, development and oversight of children's work in the home may in fact add to the parental workload (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a).

From an occupational science perspective, it could be argued that children learn to perform household tasks by observing and participating in household work and that mastery of occupational forms is a gradual and develop-

<sup>1</sup> For a worldwide review on this topic that is more extensive than can be presented here see Larson and Verma (1999).

mental process where children become increasingly independent requiring less supervision and assistance. Primeau (1998) demonstrated how parents introduced and interwove household work with play, using occupational scaffolding to assist young children's participation in household tasks. By providing just the right level of assistance, taking on part of the task, giving just the right cues, anticipating needs and problems, parents allowed their children to participate in household tasks as independently as possible (Primeau).

For younger children, it has been suggested that it is often less trouble to do a task than to nag, supervise, or help a child (Straus, 1962) although at very young ages children showed an interest in helping parents. In a laboratory study from the 1980s, children as young as 18 months of age spontaneously helped their parents in simulated household tasks such as picking up magazines or picking up bits of paper (Rheingold, 1982). By 2 1/2 years of age, 89% of the children helped their mothers or fathers complete a simulated household task, interpreted by the researcher as demonstrating their understanding of the need, process, and completion of the work. More recently, Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) estimated that children less than 2 years of age spent more than 4 1/2 hours per week in household work (this included time spent accompanying the parents shopping as participation in work). Older studies from the 1960s–1980s noted that more than two thirds of children less than 4 years of age were doing chores (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b) with participation in household tasks amounting to a 6% share of family household labor (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991).

Research suggests that parents graded children's participation in work by assigning slightly more chores to children from first grade (two chores) to seventh grade (three chores) with increasing responsibilities (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991; Goldstein & Oldham, 1979; Goodnow & Delaney, 1989; Goodnow et al., 1991; Warton & Goodnow, 1991). In Western societies, children's household work reportedly began by children assuming responsibility for themselves such as picking up their own toys or room, making their own beds, and making their own breakfast (Goodnow & Delaney; Goodnow et al.; Warton & Goodnow, 1991) and later doing work that contributes to the family.

As children get older, expectations regarding their participation in household work changed to include tasks helpful to the household. For 6–11 year olds in 1970s, the majority of children (67%) in one study participated in household tasks such as house care, meal preparation, and after-meal clean up (Walker & Wood, 1976). According to Hofferth and Sandberg (2001), this trend continued in

1997, 80% of 6–8 year olds spent about 4 3/4 hours weekly in housework. By 9 or 10 years of age, participation in chores appeared to become almost universal. In Straus's classic study (1962) of European-American boys from rural, fringe, and small town areas, most reported being assigned household chores around 8 years the age. Ninety percent of children aged 9–10 years engaged in regular chores (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). A current and rigorous study also finds that 88% of children 9–12 years of age participated in housework (Hofferth & Sandberg).

By 10 years of age, parents expected children to clean up after themselves and in addition contribute by doing family chores such as setting the table or washing dishes for girls and taking out the garbage or doing yard work for boys (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b). By adolescence, children can potentially replace adult workers with the necessary skills to complete more complex household tasks independently such as doing laundry or cooking meals. During the teenage years, parents were more likely than at any other ages to report that children did chores because their help was needed although the most frequently mentioned reason by parent was still developmental (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). There was a slight decline in participation in chores in late adolescence when young adults began to participate in more activities outside the family (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981b).

Many studies of household economies have started with the premise that children were one source for providing working mothers with needed assistance in the home. Cogle and Tasker's cross-sectional study (1982) found that 6- to 17-year-old children of full-time homemakers participated in more household work (91%) than children of full-time (88%) or part-time employed mothers (76%). Between 6–11 years of age, when mothers were employed outside the home, only minor differences in children's time spent in work were noted—an increase from 1 hour to 1.1 hours per day (Walker & Wood, 1976). In a more recent large comprehensive study of children's time-use, children less than 12 years of age did not participate in more chores regardless of family size, family configuration (two-parent, mother-headed household, father-headed household), or mothers' employment (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). It appears that mothers protect younger children from increased family household burdens due to maternal employment.

For older children more capable of contributing to the household when mothers are employed, the evidence is also dated and mixed regarding the influence of maternal work on children's participation in work. One study, conducted in 1981 of 389 children ages 3–17 years of age, found that children did not make up for the decreased time in maternal

housework for employed mothers (Timmer, Eccles, & O'Brien, 1985). In another current study, fourth- and fifth-grade girls were found to parallel their working mothers by increasing their housework participation from 15 minutes per day on weekdays up to 35 minutes on weekends whereas boys of the same age had consistently low involvement in work across the entire week (Manke et al., 1994).

In mother-headed households or large households, teens were more likely to increase their participation in household work. Twenty-four percent of the families where the parent felt overburdened, most often single parents, working mothers, or those with large households, were more apt to request work from their children (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). In the case of single mothers, children reportedly helped out more often on weekends with housework but this difference in time spent was small, only 5–15 minutes more total of household work per week (Timmer et al., 1985). In another study of mother-headed households, teenage boys who otherwise contribute no more than their younger male counterparts, doubled their participation in household work to help fill the gap in household labor (Goldscheider & Waite, 1991). Similarly, teenage girls in this same kind of household demonstrated an increase in their participation in household tasks, compared to peers, to relieve their mother's home work load by 40%. Walker and Wood (1976) and Goldscheider and Waite found that in larger households teenagers increased their work hours. In the first study, this increase was small from 2 to 2.2 hours per day when mothers were working. Teenagers spent more time doing family care when they had siblings who were younger. Because both these data sets used large samples (N = 1,292 and 5,000, respectively), smaller differences such as the influence of household size and age of siblings could be detected.

Several studies examined how these small increases in children's work affected the children's participation in other activities. When mothers participated in paid work there was only a slight increase in the amount of children's work contributions in the area of baby-sitting, but this household assistance did not alter children's involvement in activities with friends or activities outside the home as reported by 764 sixth-grade, mostly Black, children (Medrich et al., 1982). Due to household work, slight decreases in the group means were noted for adolescent girls' participation in outside activities (Propper, 1972); however, this decrease may also reflect a generational difference in the freedom of girls to participate in activities outside the home. Although some studies suggest that the amount of mothers' paid work was related to the amount of children's work, overall these results appear to suggest that mothers may buffer children from work demands requesting only small amounts of addi-

tional assistance when needed or in service of the child's development. It appears that mostly girls rather than boys increased work time in the home when their mothers were employed except in the cases where mothers were head of household.

In summary, it appears that in Western culture, children's work functions to develop the child's abilities to clean up after themselves and restore order where they created disorder and later, when some independence is gained, to contribute to the family household by taking on part of the workload. The demands on children for household work still appear to be influenced by the rhetoric of the 1930s suggesting that children shouldn't work except when it serves their development. Mothers, even those with the heaviest burdens, buffered their children from substantial participation in household work.

## Meaning of Children's Work

The meaning of work can be described from both the parents' and child's point of view. Studying children's subjective experiences of work presents a challenge to researchers who have used qualitative methods to uncover the meaning of work to children. In contrast, researchers have used surveys of parents to examine the meaning of this occupation in the lives of families.

Not surprisingly, children of different ages have differing perceptions of what experiences constitute work (Bowes & Goodnow, 1996; Wing, 1995). Children learn about the subjective experience of work and are socialized into school-work through their first experiences in school, but this conceptualization changes as children develop. In a study in the late 1970s, when asked what they did in school, none of the participating children entering kindergarten answered with the word "work," but by the following month more than half of the children responded that they "worked" in school (Apple & King, 1981). The language of school personnel reinforced the idea that work was effortful, required concentration, and a best effort when they said things like "good job" when a task was completed or "work harder" to students who had lost their focus on the task (King, 1982; Wing). It is likely that these prompts to children begin to form their ideas of work and develop the work habits that will be expected in adult society. According to LeCompte's ethnographic study (1978), the so-called "hidden curriculum" of school fostered work values, responses to authority, orderliness, and behavior patterns that socialized children for future work.

The contrast between work and play seems to appear sharply as children are socialized into school. As their ability to perform these activities changes, so does the meaning

of the occupation. Difficulty in activities promoted perceptions that activities were more work-like for children (Wing, 1995). So whereas in King's study (1976) kindergarten's considered coloring to be work (done under the teacher's direction) and in Wing's study early elementary school children considered reading and writing to be work, at older ages these same tasks may no longer be defined in the same way.

In early elementary school, combining writing or reading with an otherwise more play-like activity such as manipulation of materials led to the children's perceptions that it was work-like. For example using sand and measuring devices to estimate quantity makes the activity work-like since a product, an assignment, had to be completed. Children's views contrasted with teachers who believed that exploration, experimentation, and discovery of school materials led to play-like experiences and that it was the difficulty of the task that made it work. Adding elements of fun or manipulation of materials did make work activities more play-like according to Wing (1995). However, both Wing and King (1979) suggested that when an activity had standards, such as requirements for performance and endpoints that must be met, even if it was done in a playful manner, it was viewed by children as work. King argued that teachers who attempted to insert playfulness turn "play into work, not work into play" (p. 86).

At younger ages, children reportedly were more sensitive to the contextual requirements such as teacher direction and supervision that constrained the activity and made it "work." Yet these early elementary school children, in contrast to cultural norms, found work also to be pleasurable and did not necessarily associate it with difficulty (Wing, 1995). In contrast, the degree of pleasure of the activity was a predominant criterion for older children in describing the differences between school activities that were described as work or play (King, 1982).

From the parents' view, work is seen primarily as a character-building occupation that develops a sense of responsibility. More than 72% of the parents gave this reason for assigning their child chores (White & Brinkerhoff, 1981a). Another 25% of parents described the child's duty to do chores as essential to integrating family and was part of being a family member. This may be related to the cultural belief in a "domestic democracy" where family members were expected to perform their fair share of both household, paid, and educational work (Zelizer, 1985, pp. 209–233). Reciprocity in family work was learned by children as young as 5 years of age (Goodnow & Warton, 1991).

In a mixed methods study that included interviews of 45 Australian mothers, children's work was described as necessary to belonging to the family. Mothers defined being

a member of a family as following two major rules (Goodnow & Delaney, 1989). The first rule was "people should clean up after themselves and not expect others to do so" and the second was "you should clean up part of the disorder that others have generated. To take away only one's own plate when asked to 'clear the table' was not acceptable" (Goodnow & Delaney, p. 222). Not performing as requested violated family relationships when a child failed to contribute, refused reasonable requests, or asked another to do something he or she could do for himself or herself (Goodnow & Delaney). Expecting their mothers to be the maid and cook or failing to respect the mother's feelings and appreciate her work were violations of the parent-child relationship. When children did chores without reminders, mothers felt that their children were successfully developing into thoughtful, considerate, and caring beings (Goodnow & Delaney).

Participation in some household tasks was expected as part of the child's development of independence and responsibility, whereas other household tasks that contribute to the family were desired but not required. Answers of 8-year-old Australian children, when asked to sort tasks that belonged to them and respond to vignettes describing family household work, appeared to internalize the view that certain chores were their responsibility and that it was fair to be expected to remember to do these jobs (Warton & Goodnow, 1991). Similarly, in a study that combined interview and survey data, Australian mothers described more frequently and firmly delegating self-care chores to their children as their work. By contrast, children were more likely to be *asked* to assist in family work (Goodnow & Delaney, 1989). Mothers reported that 11-year-olds expected to be paid for *extra* jobs but not ones that were theirs to do (Warton & Goodnow, 1995). This suggests that, for mothers, attitudes toward chores differed with self-care chores being expected, whereas contributing to the family work was hoped for by mothers and sometimes paid for by families.

Cross-cultural research by anthropologists Whiting and Whiting (1975) suggests that children's work provides opportunities to engage in challenges and to be altruistic and helpful to others. This increased altruism in children was especially true in societies where children performed family-centered rather than just self-care chores (such as cleaning up after oneself or making one's own bed) (Whiting & Whiting). Through experiences in school and guided participation in household work, children may learn not only the means and methods of work occupations but also the cultural values that surround them (Goodnow & Wharton, 1991). The mastery of the "how to" of children's work may not be nearly as complex as the social rules that govern them.



## Implications for Occupational Therapy and Occupational Science

It is useful for occupational therapists to understand research on children's work as a guide to clinical reasoning. Even very young children can articulate the circumstances that create a work experience. The constraints and opportunities of the situation, the self-directedness or other-directedness, the use of materials, and the effort or focus required all dictate whether the child will perceive the occupation as work or play. Occupational therapists need to take into account the occupational contexts they construct in pediatric practice and the expectations they have for children's participation. Constructing therapeutic frames for intentional work or play experiences requires an understanding of the qualities of work and play as previously articulated.

For example, because handwriting was described by kindergarten, first-, and second-grade children in one study as the *ultimate* work activity (Wing, 1995), occupational therapists who assist children in developing writing skills need to recognize the implications of this finding for practice. Although attempting to motivate children to participate in handwriting skills by making the task enjoyable is deemed desirable, it may be preferable to treat this activity as a work context, promoting quiet and concentration, setting standards, and encouraging students to achieve them through persistent effort. Using strategies that are in line with the children's experiences of work and play rather than dissonant with these experiences may foster better understanding, mastery, and social participation in occupations for children with disabilities.

The age of reason when children with disabilities are believed to be "teachable" and able to participate in work may differ widely among individuals with different disabilities. Parents and professionals may not know when to support participation in children's work. At home, by 10 years of age, the majority of typically developing children are doing some chores. In line with current educational programming that encourages the timing of interventions to be age-appropriate, therapists need to consider when to facilitate participation in work for children with disabilities. Ideally, future research could identify when children with disabilities could successfully participate in work and the benefits they may derive from this participation. Children with disabilities may be perceived as less capable and thus constrained fully or partly from responsibilities in the home. This lack of work involvement may be a disservice to their families and to the children's development of future skills. Often, children with severe disabilities need frequent and early practice to master skills including self-care and family chores. The ability to contribute to the family by

doing self-care chores as well as doing family chores, may alter the child's relationships with other family members. Being able to contribute to the family as well as learning to master these household occupations may be argued to be in service of the child and family's needs. Yet, as with younger children, this training in household work comes at a cost to the parents who must supervise the activity since the activity can be performed much more expeditiously by an adult. Therefore, the family's values and priorities need to be carefully considered when designing interventions that promote children's work for children with disabilities.

In addition, disability may deny individuals of the full range of opportunities available to others; for example, opportunities for risk as well as opportunities to be altruistic are often curtailed by caretakers and circumstances (Jackson, 1996; Missiuna & Pollock, 1991). Given research that provides a better understanding of the contexts and circumstances that create a work experience, the developmental progression of children's work, and the role of children's work in family relationships, occupational therapists can collaborate with parents to design and implement occupation-based interventions that include children's work.

Further research on children's work is needed to illuminate other issues, for example comprehensively examining the scope of children's participation in work—not only the time-use in the home but also in other settings. Understanding the breadth and amount of children's work and the developmental trajectory of participation can assist us in understanding the developmental implications of participation in work. In addition, the form of children's work has been studied only in school settings; research examining children's work in the home and community would enhance and enlarge our understanding of occupational form and how it may vary by setting. Ideally, future studies of children's work would include examining the work's form as well as the subjective experience of this occupation for children as they develop. Research along these lines could improve our understanding of balance in children's occupations by illustrating how children's time is budgeted in work and other occupations, how work is subjectively experienced as children develop, and how the amount and types of work children participate in are related to outcomes such as health and well-being, character development, and family cohesion.▲

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