

The Social, Emotional, and Intellectual Benefits of Play

Excerpted from “**The Vital Importance of Play in Early childhood Education**”

By Joan Almon

In the 1970s and 80s, Israeli psychologist Sara Smilansky conducted groundbreaking research on the role of *dramatic play* and *sociodramatic play* in cognitive and socioemotional development. She defines dramatic play as having four elements: the child undertakes a make-believe role; the child uses make-believe to transform objects into things necessary for the play; verbal descriptions or exclamations are used at times in place of actions or situations; and the play scenarios last at least ten minutes. In socio-dramatic play these four elements are present plus two more: at least two players interact within the play scene, and there is some verbal communication involved with the play.

Observing three to six year olds, Smilansky developed a method of assessing children’s play in pre-school settings. Using her assessment tools, she and other researchers observed and assessed children from three to six at play in a number of preschool settings in the U.S. and in Israel, observing children from a variety of socioeconomic settings. They also assessed children’s ability to organize and communicate thoughts and to engage in social interactions. In one study children were followed and tested in second grade in literacy and numeracy. Children’s ability to engage in dramatic and sociodramatic play was found to be directly linked to a wealth of skills all of which are essential for academic success. Smilansky’s findings are summarized below:

Gains in Cognitive-Creative Activities

- Better verbalization
- Richer vocabulary
- Higher language comprehension
- Higher language level
- Better problem-solving strategies
- More curiosity
- Better ability to take on the perspective of another
- Higher intellectual competence
- Better peer cooperation
- Reduced aggression
- More group activity

Gains in Socioemotional Activities

- More playing with peers
- Better ability to take on the perspective of others
- More empathy
- Better control of impulsive actions
- Better prediction of others’ preferences and desires
- Better emotional and social adjustment
- More innovation
- More imaginativeness
- Longer attention span
- Greater attention ability
- Performance of more conservation tasks

Smilansky concludes: Sociodramatic play activates resources that stimulate emotional, social, and intellectual growth in the child, which in turn affects the child’s success in school.