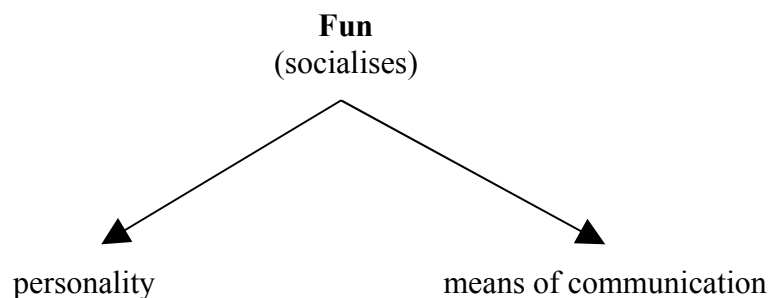
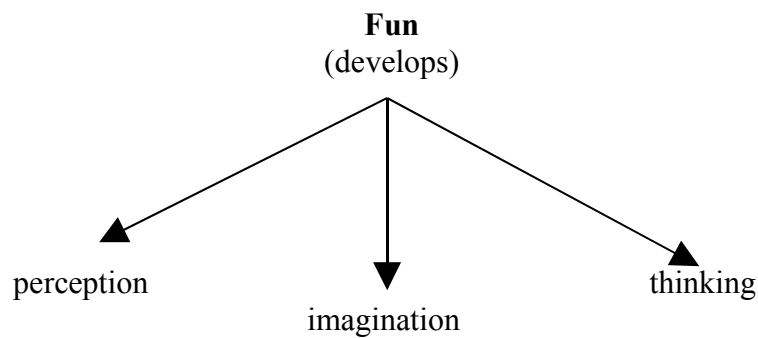


Psychological functions of free games for children in kindergarten

According to R. Kohnstamm (2002, pp. 191) *Although the words **fun** and **seriousness** are antonyms in our language, having fun is a very serious activity for a child. It means that, even though a child won't be playing when it is no longer eager to play, it will be doing it because it is necessary for its current development and further life.*

Introduction to the subject

Beginning with the early stages of life, random fun activities play an extremely important role in the development of many cognitive processes, most of all perception, imagination and thinking. While having fun, the child gets to know itself and its capabilities of reaction in real world, *the reality itself and its realisation*. According to J. Piaget (1926| 1992) *a child that is having fun assimilates world to its own ego, and does not adjust its activities to the reality*. While S. Szuman thinks that *the child fulfils the fun activities because its basic need is to be active – get to know the surrounding environment, make contact with objects and people – the ability for action*.



In the report the four psychological functions of fun are discussed:

- **cognitive**
- **symbolic**

- **semiotic**
- **adjusted**

Cognitive function

The appearance of symbolic fun is an important event in the development of a child. Fun is a kind of a contact of a child with the reality, constantly evolving, is a proof of a new stage in its development. To understand the levels of development of the cognitive processes through fun, the kind, the content, and the form of appearing random fun activities should be taken into account. The similarities of development are shown in such fun activities, that is why they have a diagnostic value. J. Piaget (1993, pp. 116-117) has shown that *there are three huge types of structures that characterise the fun activities of children and they specifically set their classification: exercise, symbol, rule.*

L. S. Wygotski (1978) thinks that the upper psychological functions like understanding the meanings, directed attention are created and sustained while having fun.

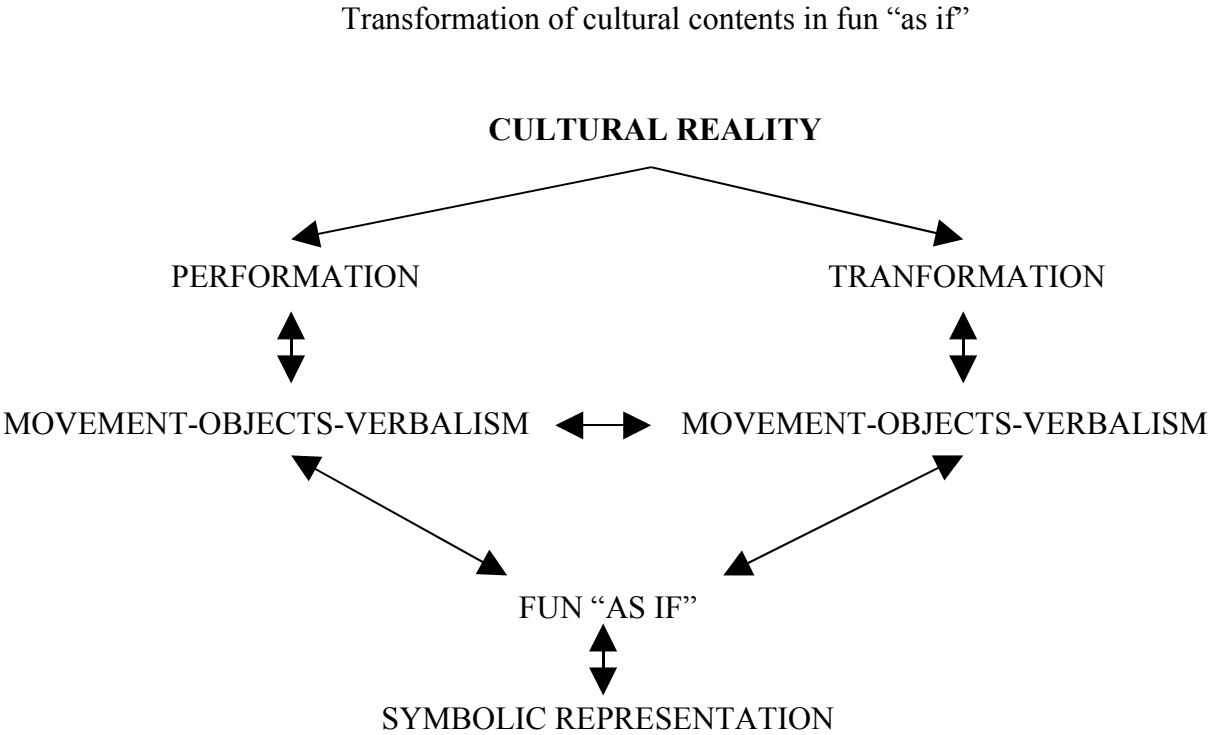
The surrounding world is received by a child as a tangible reality that exists. This surrounding world is formed and sustained by a human being as a result of perception, sensomotoric processes, memory, attention and emotions. Through the enumerated processes human beings as a group have at their disposal certain representations of reality that are being created during the process of socialisation. The child in a kindergarten socialises mainly while having fun. As a result of having fun the child directly experiences the reality, acquires new information involuntarily.

Symbolic function

The symbolic function appears during the 18th month of life and it initiates the directed imitation. Thanks to the development of the symbolic function, meaning the ability of recalling the missing objects, people or events, the child has a possibility of action that positively affects the development of its imagination, in the beginning the reproductive imagination, later on anticipating imagination. The symbolic function develops mainly in the random fun activities. L. S. Wygotski (1978) wrote a very interesting report on physical objects that became the props in every symbolic fun activity. When a child uses a stick as a horse, this stick for this particular moment loses the identification of a stick in the eyes of a child, and gains the aspect of a real horse. It is a form of substitutional pretending, which means that a certain object becomes something else than it really is. It proofs the ability of differentiation between the reality and the representation of this reality. The semiotic function is developed during the fun activity of pretending, which leads to differentiation between the “significant” element and the “signifie” element, that is why the meaning of “the horse” represented by a stick becomes a new meaning. “The horse” being a prop activates its function. That is why the child rides the horse, which triggers a symbolic movement, and the fact of using the stick as a symbolic replacement shows the integrated mental representation of “being a horse”. In the symbolic fun activities everything can be labelled and performed as a substitution of something else, that is why a child simultaneously uses different symbolic categories of: objects, movement, verbalism. By using the real objects the child gives them symbolic meaning, performs symbolic gestures and movement, uses certain words and creates structures of sentences which accompany the “as if” activities. The fun activity which is in a way maintained by symbolic categories of objects, movement and verbalism can be called phenomena, which support the understanding and recognition of cultural symbols. The range of experience connected with fun activities is very wide. “The formula” of such fun is mainly a subject taken from a film, literature or art. Being a part of a certain cultural group gives the

child an opportunity to set new meanings to the symbols created by many generations of this culture. Without any doubts this process is strictly connected with the level of development of cognitive processes of a child that condition the ability to decode the symbols and meanings.

J. Piaget (1993) said that a child has an imaginative representation of reality, initiated in the first place by the presence of props in the fun activity. According to Piaget the difference between the practical (meaning functional) fun at the stage of infancy, and the symbolic fun at the stage of kindergarten is connected with the level of exercises of symbolic imagination. The ideas created by a child are not limited, and simply represent everything the child wants to express in a certain moment. The cultural contents are transformed in the process of having fun and therefore have a reflection in the usage of words, which again reflects naming, stating, and creation of scenario of action, of a body language, and mimic and pantomimic expression. The transformation of cultural contents in fun activities can be represented as shown:



(B. Górecka-Mostowicz)

While having fun the child performs and transforms the surrounding cultural reality in three categories of: movement-objects-verbalism. By doing that, the child restructures the cultural contents, and on their basis builds their mental representation that is unique. The reception of cultural contents gives the child an opportunity to set new meanings to symbols and create their combinations, which mainly depend on the child’s imagination. The fun activity that is performed by a child also with the elements of pretending, in activities connected with movement, objects and verbalism, can be described as phenomena influencing the understanding and recognition of symbols.

According to D. B. Elkonin (1978) fun is mainly the activity that triggers the socialisation. *In kindergarten, children have fun by playing roles. That is how they absorb the behaviour of adults and that certainly help them to understand the behaviour of other people.*

Semiotic function

The semiotic function appears and develops in the “as if” fun activity. The child starts to understand that one object, a “significant”, e.g. a brush, can substitute another object, which is a “signifie”, e.g. a doll. M. Przetacznik-Gierowska (1993) distinguishes three phases of this function. In the first phase the symbolic schemes are created, e.g. a child that is laying in the bed pretends to be asleep. Later on, the child uses those schemes, turning the gestures and activities into a ritual which symbolises falling asleep, e.g. the child rocks a cot with a doll to make her fall asleep. The second phase is between the fourth and the eighth year. During that time, the symbolic fun improves, its structure becomes more settled, the roles of participants are fulfilled. In the third phase between the year seven and eighth until the age of seventeen the symbolic fun is regressing, because the more important role is played by the games with rules.

Adjusted function

According to J. Bruner (1972) the activity of having fun serves to the benefit of adjustment. Treating the objects and people in the fun activity as if they were not real, gives the child a chance of connecting different stimuli and combining them in various ways. The child can concentrate on what it does and how it does it. It can use new ideas in the conditions of a fun activity. Through that, the child shows not only the stage of development of its cognitive processes, but also its various abilities.

Having fun creates a very personal zone of child's development. While having fun, the child is always taller than its medium height, above its everyday behaviour; the child, while having fun, is taller than it really is (L. S. Wygotski, 1966, pp. 74)

While having fun the children cross the border of their own abilities, they find out for themselves how independent they really are. J. Piaget (1966) says that in the random fun activities the assimilation processes are far more important than the accommodation processes, which causes the child to notice the ways of action and forget about aim of that action. Getting to know its own ways of action is an important aspect of adjusting to the reality.

Experimental research

The *pedagogical experiment* has been carried out to examine the child's ability of transformation and usage of substitutes.

The experiment:

This experiment has been carried out in a kindergarten in Krakow. Every child has been individually shown an object and asked a question: *What is this?* The new meaning has been given to the already known objects e.g. *Let's say that this brush is a doll.* The children were observed while playing with “a doll”. The spontaneous verbalisations have been registered. The researchers also took account of the fact whether the child was looking for a real doll among the other given objects. This experiment has been carried out on a group of six girls and six boys age 4, and six girls and six boys age 5.

Experimental situation

The researchers observed the ability of using various objects as substitutes. Three questions were considered:

How is the child going to transform the brush into a doll?

Is the child able to do certain tasks with “the doll”?

What words are being used during every task?

Observation of the fun activity concerning the transformation of a brush into a doll

The adult's instruction:

Put the doll in the cot

Make the doll fall asleep

Comb the doll

Diagram 1

Usage of a brush as a substitution of a doll by instruction of the adult

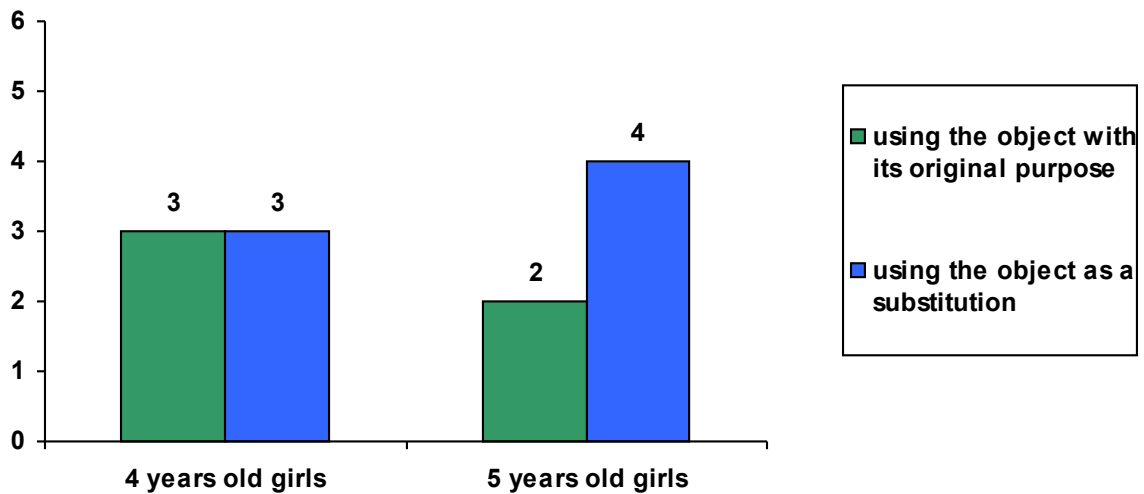
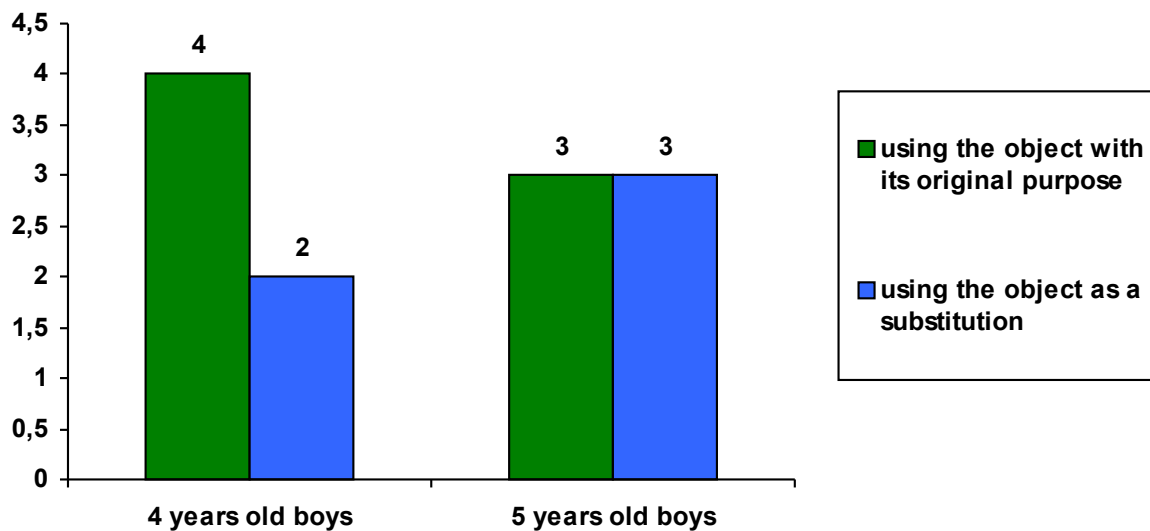


Diagram 2

Usage of a brush as a substitution of a doll by instruction of the adult



Conclusions

The five years old girls did better with the assignment of substituting the doll with a brush than the four years old girls. In every task they kept the meaning of the object. Performing the task was not a problem, all the time they were able to name the activity they were about to do. When asked to put the doll into a cot they were singing a lullaby, hugged “the doll”, or even said: *Now I am going to put you in a cot and you will sleep, or lay down doll because your legs are hurting.*

While the four years old girls didn't say much, words were used sporadically e.g. *Now sleep, or Goodnight* and they combed “the doll's” hair.

Boys did not do as good as girls, both four years old boys and five years old boys. For example a four year old Paul when asked to *comb the dolls hair* found a real doll and started to brush her hair with the brush that was meant to be the substituted doll.

The conclusion is that the fun activity plays an important role in the development of symbolic and semiotic functions, which is visible when a child can substitute one object with another. Through such activity the child absorbs knowledge about the features and functions of an object. This knowledge is used in the process of understanding and interpreting the events that occur in the surrounding environment.