

Halina Sala-Wójcik  
Jolanta Sajdera  
Zbigniew Baran  
Department of Preschool and School Pedagogy  
Pedagogical University of Cracow, Poland

## **TOY AS A PLAY PROMOTING DEVICE**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Johan Huizinga (1938) defined play as *a voluntary activity executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding*. According to Huizinga's concept, play is >different< from ordinary life and it has its aim in itself. Monica Sachs (1972) has defined play as a joyful bodily or mental activity. Lately, Brian Sutton-Smith (1993) has written that play is any activity done for amusement, and Angeline S. Lillard (1993) has written that play is any activity that is engaged for the purpose of fun. Children's play is a spontaneous, voluntary, emotional, and imaginative autotelic activity that arises from the physical, mental, and may be social requirements of child. Acting is the essence of each play. And fantasy is the basis of each play. Fantasy is a >distinctive element< which is always presented in children's play. The genetic sources of play exist in dreams and fantasies of children. A five-year-old [or six-year-old] plays with fantasy. Alexander Sutherland Neill (1960) has written that *children live in a world of fantasy and they carry this fantasy over into action*. In children's play, both unconscious and unknown fantasies coexist with the fundamental facts of life and also culture of child coexists with classical culture.

Stimulation of playmates' cooperation is one of the functions of a toy. The research in the field of children social games illustrate the tendency to extend child's play activity domain on a partner by creating dyads and teams. In the beginning, children, while playing, act according to individual interests. Although they talk with one another, swap toys, they do not make an attempt to cooperate in order to achieve some goal. It is only during cooperative play that they start to play together, determining the relations between partners- *who is playing?*, giving meaning to the objects used at play- *what are we playing with?*, and creating a fictional play area- *what are we playing?* (Łaciak 1998). Games undertaken by younger children are object oriented while older children take up more complex ones, in which an object becomes a means of maintaining contact with the others. It is during this joint activity that children adopt their first social roles e.g. of an initiator, organizer, performer, consultant or corrector (Shugar 1992). Behavior models are acquired at play and next are applied in real life situations (Bruner 1980). On the other hand, reconstruction of the real life social situations at play,

helps consolidate acquired social knowledge and makes it possible to transform it according to the context of a particular game.

Child at play gains experience related to the idea of sharing one's activity area in agreement with other children, which is a condition necessary for a successful conduct of any type of games: make-believe, constructive, motor or cognitive ones. If a child obeys game rules and gives up impulsive reactions it will enjoy playing. In Wygotski's opinion (1993/1995) this condition leads a child to achieving self-control.

Any objects at children's reach may function as material attributes of game, as well as toys made by an adult. A soft, didactic toy presented here may also prove useful for a kindergarten teacher for reinforcing the process of social skills acquisition during individual and team activities and also organized and free forms of play. The shape of the toy, creature-like, its soft texture will make it useful as a mascot as well as an object forming older children's care-taking abilities. Children playing with this toy may store in it other accessories needed at theme play and also by applying animation try to find some role for this creature like toy. Constructive plays triggered off by the toy will involve individual exploration and handling of the toy's outfit and also attempts at "improving" its appearance according to child's own ideas. Group activities will encourage children to practice negotiation strategies such as: game theme choosing, task distribution, sharing and finally evaluating.

The size of the toy makes it possible for a pair of children to move it. When held by "hands" it will "walk" with the children around the room and take part in motor games. The shape of the toy may stimulate didactic games involving story making accompanied by a shadow puppet show illustrating the story. The didactic games the toy is equipped with will stimulate the acquisition of rule obedience skills.

All the features of the toy presented above prove its great usefulness for preschool child's play activity stimulation starting with individual explorative experience and leading towards the development of the feeling of being a part of a team.

One could still quote more definitions, although one thing seems to be quite certain: throughout the centuries all the toys have always been made by adults. Most of the time, however, they fail to appreciate the true function of a toy in a child's life. As S. Szuman (1930) argues, it is the child itself that is in fact a *bone fide* creator of its own toys.

An adult can only be instrumental in the actual implementation of some of the child's ideas, and this only by virtue of close observation of its interests and personal idiosyncrasies.

The Krakow Didactic Toys Laboratory, set up upon the initiative of the present Author at the Chair of Pre-school and Primary School Teacher Training, Higher Teacher Education

School in Krakow, has been endeavoring to make some inroads in that particular domain. A team of specialists representing different disciplines, i.e. arts, pedagogy, mathematics, applied psychology and Polish studies, is responsible both for the concept and the ultimate look of any such toys.

We always try to make sure that any such concept or idea for a toy has actually been supplied by a child. Therefore all art designs for the prospective toys are based on the original children's drawings, and subsequently developed by the students into toys, under the close supervision of the present Author.

It is at this particular stage that the pertinent decisions regarding the didactic and cognitive function of any such prototype toy are being made.

The Krakow Didactic Toys Laboratory has been pursuing a comprehensive research project in this domain. It is predominantly focused upon the determiners of cognitive activities in children and supporting them with the aid of the adequately designed didactic toys.

The aim of the present research project is the designing, testing and making the prototypes of soft, didactic toys, with a view to providing an effective interface between a child's natural environment and the encroaching technology; this being particularly important as nowadays the toy market seems to be virtually swamped by all sorts of mobile gadgetry packed with high-tech electronics.

At the same time any such didactic soft toys may be used for stimulating children's activity in many other domains.

It should also be emphasized at this juncture that all prototypes of didactic soft toys are regularly supplied to the selected nursery and primary schools for testing purposes. The students also pursue the attendant behavioural research projects on the children entrusted with the actual testing and subsequently use the processed results for their own academic papers and the M. A. thesis.

Using toys during children's play is as important as fantasy. Jan Bujak (1988) has defined toy as *a material [substantial] object made for playing which is full of various >cultural< contents*. The toy is a >tool< in play. It is also very important as an >educational object< in children's learning processes. Many educationists, psychologists and teachers suppose that toy is an effective >instrument< in education. It help >to create< an environmental Microcosm in which the child can safely test and manipulate ideas, feelings and behaviour to understand the relationship between the inner and outer worlds and to learn about mysteries of nature and culture. Often, toys inspire >creative< activities and they provide opportunity for children to know the >miracles of the World<. Sometimes, toys diminish children's emotional difficulties

such as psychoneuroticism and anxiety, and they also help to reduce emotional and social behavioural disorders.

Often, playing children imagine that their toys (e.g. dolls) are really alive through their childish fantasy. These >alive< toys are partners of children's play and also they are friends of child in childhood-period.

This toy may be used e.g. to suggested plays:

### **Faster !, The fastest!**

We need two teams. The teams will be competing with each other. One team should stand one after the other in front of the REDWHITE. They take rings and will try to throw them into the hole in the REDWHITE's head. Second team holds little balls and will try to throw them at the target on the REDWHITE's body. On the sign both teams try to do it at the same time as fast as possible.

### **I won't lie to you !**

This is game for a few people. One person will draw a slip of paper out of the REDWHITE's pocket and try to read the sentence silently. After that he/she must decide if this sentence is true or false, and by saying "I won't lie to you that..." start a discussion. Then second person draw next slice of paper.

### **In the mirror**

Children will listen to a song and move their body at the same time. The REDWHITE will be "moving" its body too but children should do the opposite movements. For example : if the REDWHITE hold out its right hand child should do it by left hand.

## References:

- Berk L.E.** 1996, *Infants, Children and Adolescents*. Boston : Allyn&Bacon
- Bruner J.** 1980, *Beyond the Information Given. Studies in the Psychology of Knowing*. [W:] G. Shugar, M. Smoczyńska (red.) *Badania nad rozwojem języka dziecka* Warszawa: PWN
- Bujak J.**, 1988, *Zabawka w Europie. Zarys dziejów, rozwój zainteresowań*, Kraków.
- Huizinga J.**, 1938, *Homo ludens. Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*; Polish version: *Homo ludens. Zabawa jako źródło kultury*, Warszawa, 1967.
- Lillard A. S.**, 1993, *Pretend play skills and the child's theory of mind*, "Child Development", vol. 64, pp. 348 – 371.
- Łaciak B.** 1998, *Świat społeczny dziecka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak”
- Sachs M.**, 1972, Play, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, vol. 3, London.
- Shugar G.** 1992, Uczestnictwo dzieci w procesach nauczanie- uczenia się. [W:] B. Bokus, M. Haman (red.) *Z badań nad kompetencją komunikacyjną dzieci*. Warszawa: Energeia,
- Sutton-Smith B.**, 1993, Play, [in:] *The Encyclopedia Americana. International Edition*, vol. 22, Danbury.
- Vygotski L.** 1995, Play and its role in the mental development of the child. [W:] A. Brzezińska, T. Czuba, G. Lutomski, B. Smykowski (red.) *Dziecko w zabawie i świecie języka*. Poznań: Zysk i S-ka,