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Social and Emotional Learning and Play in Early Years

Abstract

The aim of the paper is to briefly explain the relationship between *early and preschool-aged children's play* and social-emotional learning (SEL). Play, as the child's dominant activity, ensures his full and healthy development and SEL makes a significant contribution to it. As SEL is important for a children's healthy growth, it has recently been the subject of numerous studies and, as a result, has become an indispensable part of the curricula of educational institutions. Socio-emotional competencies enable children to make achievements and advance both academically and personally. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on symbolic and peer play and it is concluded that both types provide opportunities for enhancing all social and emotional competencies (responsible decision-making, social awareness, social skills, self-awareness, and self-management). The prerequisite for creating the conditions for appropriate SEL of early and preschool-aged children are socially-emotionally competent educators (and parents). It is necessary to enrich study programmes at universities where educators are trained in the field of social-emotional competencies and indirectly to enable parents of early and preschool-aged children to learn this as well.

Keywords: children, play, competency, educator, development, social-emotional learning

Introduction

Play is a fundamental children's activity that is usually associated with childhood. Given that it is the subject of interest of various scientific disciplines (pedagogy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, etc.), it is almost impossible to define it using a single comprehensive definition (Johnson et al., 2005, in Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008).

For the purposes of this paper, we opted for a relatively recent definition by Rajić and Petrović-Sočo (2015). Seen in the context of modern childhood, play is perceived as the child's practice, i.e. the child's free activities beyond ordinary and real life. No extrinsic gain is associated with it, but it is a process in which the child enjoys himself and is an end in itself. Play is a complex, multifunctional and intrinsic activity that contributes to the child's overall development (social-emotional, motor, cognitive and verbal ones). By playing, children satisfy their need for having fun, socializing, moving, exploring, collaborating, and building a positive self-image, they develop their creativity and the ability to successfully cope with and solve problem situations. As it is the dominant activity for early and preschool-aged children, which occupies most of their time, playing is also understood as "a state of existence that is largely focused on the current fun experience and less on the achievement of a specific goal" (Miljković, Đuranović & Vidić, 2019, p. 206). The benefits of children's play are multiple in terms of both specific learning (development of speaking, listening, and observation skills, development of the ability to follow complex instructions, to wait for one's own turn, of perseverance,

responsibility, etc.) and personal, i.e. social learning (building self-esteem and respect for others, developing tolerance, honesty, empathy, responsibility, recognizing and understanding one's own and other people's feelings, etc.). Depending on the child's age and development and his personal characteristics, he expresses a desire and a greater or lesser interest in involving adults in his own play activities. If included in child's play, adults may play different roles (Miljković, Đuranović & Vidić, 2019), e.g. an observer, manager and facilitator, mediator or active participant in the play. Adults (parents and/or educators-professionals) are those who are called upon to design optimal conditions, an interactive environment, and to offer appropriate materials that enable the start and development of children's play.

Numerous studies have shown that play contributes to learning in a variety of areas, and one of the most significant ones for the current and future development and success of a child is the social-emotional one. The term Social Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that enable children (and adults) to recognize and manage emotions, to achieve and maintain interpersonal relationships, and to reach effective decisions. It is linked to social-emotional competencies (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, social skills, responsible decision-making), and is enhanced by social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2008). In recent years, many scholars have become very interested in SEL and the importance of integrating it into official curricula has been recognized. The results of a series of scientific studies have confirmed that social-emotional competencies are key to the success and children's accomplishments in their private and professional lives (Takšić & Smojver-Ažić, 2016). Without a doubt, children with developed socio-emotional competencies progress better in the academic and social fields (Haggerty, Elgin & Woolley, 2011). The development of prosocial and emotional skills is reflected in school success, better physical and mental health, the child's self-esteem and greater confidence in the environment (Takšić & Smojver-Ažić, 2016).

Social-emotional learning

Through SEL, children and adults acquire and effectively use the knowledge and skills and express attitudes needed to understand and manage emotions. During this process, they set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy, establish and maintain good relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2017). Zhou and Ee (2012) state that the primary goal of SEL is to develop five interconnected cognitive, affective and behavioural competencies identified by CASEL (2017), namely: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Thus, SEL can be defined as the process of acquiring and enhancing basic social-emotional competencies.

Self-awareness – relates to an aspect of social-emotional competence that includes assessing, identifying and recognizing one's emotions. It includes beliefs, values, self-confidence, self-respect, curiosity, optimism, recognition of strengths and weaknesses as well as expressing emotions in line with the current situation (Zhou & Ee, 2012). Although pre-schoolers have a well-defined and stable sense of self, self-awareness is further developed during the early elementary school years.

Self-management – relates to the ability to cope with emotions in a productive way, being aware of one's emotions, monitoring and changing them when needed to help the child cope with different situations. This aspect involves dealing with stress and anger, persevering despite obstacles, expressing emotions appropriately, exerting self-control, setting and achieving goals, showing flexibility and adaptability. Empirical data show that children who can manage their emotional experiences in an emotionally exciting situation at play are more successful in their peer relationships (Zhou & Ee, 2012).

Social awareness – relates to the ability to understand others and appropriately respond to their feelings, the ability to empathize and to put oneself in the position of another, and to respect interpersonal similarities and differences (Zhou & Ee, 2012). Another important component of social awareness is a sense of belonging to one's family, community and culture. Emotions play a significant role in the ongoing process of children trying to understand their own and others' behaviour, and it is precisely the information that people receive and send to each other that determine the interaction. If a child is unable to interpret emotions, he may see his environment as confusing, uncomfortable, potentially threatening, and dangerous.

Social skills – focus on building and maintaining long-lasting healthy relationships with others, resisting unwanted social pressure and resolving conflicts constructively. Learning social skills such as starting and continuing conversations, teamwork, collaborating, listening, seeking help, negotiating, giving feedback, joining a small group, assertiveness and conflict resolution is intensively pursued in preschool and early elementary school years (Munjas Samarin & Takšić, 2009).

Responsible decision making – includes behaviours that are consistent with ethical standards and social norms and includes a sense of responsibility and respect for others and the community. It also encompasses taking responsibility, acknowledging mistakes and oversights, and includes leadership skills. This aspect is a complex task for children as it involves solving problems by analysing social situations, identifying problems, setting pro-social goals, and determining effective ways to resolve peer disagreements (Zhou & Ee, 2012).

The stated competencies are a *prerequisite for better adaptation* to different circumstances and situations. They also enable better academic success and the development of more prosocial behaviours, and fewer emotional and behavioural problems (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL promotes competency development, reduces the impact of risk factors, and increases the impact of protective factors with the aim of prosocial adjustment (Durlak et al., 2011). SEL programmes are key to gaining the competencies necessary for children's success and achievements in their personal and professional lives and advancement, both academically and socially (Haggerty, Elgin & Woolley, 2011).

The importance of integrating SEL into curricula has been recognized in recent years. The developmental potential of emotional intelligence and the understanding that emotional competence is crucial for adapting and functioning successfully in different areas of life, has encouraged the development of SEL programs.

Preschool-aged child's play in the function of SEL

There are several different types of children's play and their classifications. One of the more recent ones is by Klarin (2017, in Miljković et al., 2019), according to

which plays are divided into imitation/matching, body play/movement, object play, board games (including games with rules), imaginative and pretend play, storytelling-narrative play, and creative play. Recently, scholars have been increasingly focused on researching computer games whose dynamics of development is expanding. Klarin (2017) points out that virtual games allow children to leave the physical and enter the virtual world, which is a new zone of free movement. The main feature of virtual games is the breaking down of space barriers for communicating with other children. Numerous studies of the impact of computer games on children's development indicate positive (improving perceptual abilities, speed of decision making, sharpening their sight, etc.) and negative (*video game addiction*, developing violent behaviour, obesity, lack of direct social contacts, etc.) effects.

The concepts of play and learning have long been analysed separately. Playing was linked to kindergarten and preschool, while teaching was reserved for the school. However, research shows that there is no longer room for such thinking, and it is difficult today to determine the line between playing and learning. Learning results from each form of play and it is considered that these two concepts are an inseparable whole. Children integrate the playing and learning process and make no distinction because they do not care about the terminology – playing or learning as long as they are interested in and fulfilled by the process (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

Understanding children's play in the context of SEL seems significant in terms of how children's play contributes to the social and emotional development. Socialization is a complex learning process during which by interacting with the social environment an individual adopts the attitudes, knowledge, values, and behaviours necessary to participate in the life of a society. One of the most important effects of socialization is the development of a complete personality as a stable structure, his way of thinking, feeling and behaving as an individual (Mahmutović, 2013). Primary socialization takes place during the preschool age, from the birth of a child to school, through contacts with adults, and especially with peers, and this learning experience is irreplaceable. Preschool children have a strong need to socialize and the first true social relationships can be noticed around the age of two. Relationships in a group are important as early as the preschool period, so it is extremely important for children to what extent they are accepted by peers (Klarin, 2017).

Play is a dominant process in early childhood and the title of a friend is given to the child who participates in the play process with another child. The dominant activity between friends is a symbolic play that plays a big role in SEL. It teaches rules, social roles, and relationships. It also teaches how to anticipate the other persons' behaviours. Playing requires children to communicate and collaborate, which thus deepens the relationships between children. In addition to social development, friendship has its influence on both regulation and control of emotions (Klarin, 2017). In joint activities that intensify between the ages of three and five, the number of children involved in playing activities increases, which encourages a more complex social and emotional development. Children who participate in playing with children of the same or different age, expand their own understanding of the social world, the relationships in it and its linguistic diversity, and learn to cooperate, share and respect each other (Rajić & Petrović-Sočo, 2015). By setting

rules, discussing, negotiating and resolving conflicts, children spend more and more time in conversation and thus encourage the development of social skills (Klarin, 2017).

Much scientific evidence confirms that playing with others is necessary for the development of social competence and indicates a high development risk in adolescence and adulthood if the child has not reached the minimum level of social competence by the age of six (Stegelin, 2005). Other researches indicate that socio-emotional, academic and cognitive development, as well as civic awareness, are enriched if the child is regularly exposed to numerous opportunities for building social competence during childhood (Stegelin, 2005).

In order to gain and maintain pleasure in playing together, children need to develop a range of competencies (understanding others' perspectives and feelings, sharing their own ideas and feelings, expressing empathy, etc.). Children sometimes use play to understand and express emotions regarding situations that are too complicated for them to verbalize. The more children play, the more they learn about the causes, consequences and expressing emotions. These competencies enable children to anticipate and understand the behaviours of others and to respond to those behaviours through emotions and facial expressions. Research shows that children who exhibit less empathy have more difficulty participating in play and continuing to play with other children (Uyanik et al., 2018).

Galyer and Evans (2001, according to Uyanik et al., 2018) emphasize the relationship between expressing empathy in everyday life and the frequency of symbolic play. Thus, preschool children who often participate in symbolic play are extremely successful in regulating and properly expressing their emotions. Symbolic play encourages intrinsic motivation, flexibility, positive emotions, the ability to release negative experiences from life and focus on the process rather than the result of an activity. It makes it possible to manipulate and relive different emotions, thus becoming a space for learning.

Children learn a lot about emotions interacting with adults, and then engage in further emotional interactions with peers, especially during the pretend play. By quarrelling with siblings, but also listening to parents' explanations and negotiating with them, children become more sensitive to the feelings of others. The knowledge that children have about emotions helps them in social relationships and in getting along with others, and they become more willing to apologize or cooperate to maintain relationships, recognizing the importance of respecting other people's emotions. Through play, especially those that have rules, the child learns to delay pleasure and thereby gains control of his own emotions and behaviour. By playing, the child learns to self-regulate his behaviour by developing different mechanisms and evaluating his own emotions in order to adapt to a particular situation (Klarin, 2017).

Symbolic play is an appropriate space for learning how to regulate and properly express emotions, and thereby self-management and self-awareness. The various exciting and tense situations at play require the child to persevere, to be flexible and adaptable, thus opening up space for SEL. The more competent the children are, i.e. the better they regulate and express their feelings, and also the more they understand other people's feelings, the easier it will be for them to socialize and to be more successful.

Conclusion

The importance of SEL on the child's overall and healthy development is indisputable, as is the importance of child play in this context. Bearing in mind the results of scientific research that supports the importance of children's play in the process of SEL, adults and experts, in particular, are responsible for designing an optimal space-material environment that will allow and encourage free children's play and peer interactions, and for offering the games and activities that will promote SEL to all children and especially to those in deficit in this area of development.

A well-educated educator, himself, should have developed social and emotional competencies in order to enable the development of the same competencies in children. One of his primary tasks is to create a context that allows a complex play scenario, which enables the children's play to last long and not be interrupted, to ensure the choice of materials and teammates, and to provide playtime. The educator's task is also to inform and educate parents in order to develop an environment and atmosphere in the family that facilitates and encourages quality parent-child-other children interaction and ensures enough time for socializing with children. Playing together, discussing, planning, communicating with each other, resolving and/or preventing conflict while playing are all valuable social experiences for a child.

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