

Exploring Mothers' Beliefs about Preschool Children's Play

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Abstract

Background: Play is a key concept for early childhood development and education. As partners in the child's learning, parents play a vital role in how play is defined, appreciated, and practiced. So that, the aim of this study was to explore mothers' beliefs about the preschool children's play in Zagazig city. **Subjects and methods:** A cross-sectional design was utilized to conduct this study. A sample of eighty Egyptian mothers of preschool-children aged five to six years were interviewed and completed a questionnaire composed of four parts: (1) socio-demographic data, (2) child's play at home, (3) Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBS), and (4) scale of play's effects on children. **Results** of the present study clarified that 76.3% of parents were found to believe that play is an important vehicle for early development. On the other hand, 31.3% of the mothers believed more strongly in the importance of an early start in academic training for their children. This finding indicates parents might support children's play as teachers, rather than as playmates. Therefore, it is **recommended** that design and implement educational programs for preschool children's parents to raise their awareness about the vital role of play in a normal and healthy development of children.

Keywords: Parental beliefs, preschool children, play, Egyptian mothers

Introduction

Play is not just an invaluable activity to kill the time; indeed, play and toys are the words of children. Play for children is a way to make social communication and solve problems, a possibility for development of fancy and creativity and a method to relieve anxiety; because play itself is a kind of defensive mechanism. A child, who plays enough and freely is cheer, can learn more experiences and attains more progress in thought and overall growth (Tahmores, 2011). In adulthood, work is any activity in which time and energy are used to create a product or attain a goal. Play in childhood is similar to adult work in that it is undertaken by the child to accomplish developmental tasks and master the environment (James et al., 2013). Although, play is a central concept in early childhood development and education, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has proclaimed it a right of every child (Lin & Li, 2018), play is often seen in society as the opposite of learning. This dichotomy between play and learning is even reflected in our spoken language when using phrases like "Don't play with your pen", which suggests that play is something negative and unnecessary; or, 'If you finish this task, you can go and play', which means that the less important play can only be done if the important work is finished (Paes & Eberhart, 2019). The first playmates of children are usually the parents, and playing with children is a significant element of positive, proactive parenting. Parents' playing with their children from birth is an important part of the bonding process and has benefits for both the child and the parent. The extent and nature of parents' play with their children will affect the way in which children develop and form relationships as they grow up (Cole-Hamilton, 2011). However, most play-related research has strongly relied on researchers' observations of children participating in an activity that is believed to be play, based on scholarly definitions. To date, limited research has directly investigated how parents define children's play, although a few studies have used parents' beliefs about the value of play as a focal variable (e.g. Fogle & Mendez, 2006; Manz & Bracaliello, 2016). Parental beliefs about play vary greatly across different ethnic and cultural groups. During the early-childhood years, parents in European-heritage cultures readily consider play as a central component of learning; parents of non-European-heritage cultures do not value play as much (Roopnarine & Jin, 2012). Previous studies

have shown that, if parents believe in the functions of some forms or elements of play, they incorporate such play into culturally appropriate daily activities (Roopnarine, 2011). For instance, Parmar et al. (2004, 2008) compared Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Korean and Chinese) and Euro-American parents in terms of their belief in play and involvement in their children's play, and found that Euro-American children were reported to have more chances for free play in that study than their Asian counterparts, who spent a lot of time engaging in early academic preparation at home. Based on the above understanding and the vital role of parental beliefs in determining parental involvement and routines that are part of the daily life of children (Harkness et al., 2011; Roopnarine, 2015), it is critical to connect parental beliefs about the value of play with children's real play engagement in everyday situations, to observe both direct and indirect parental influences on children's play experiences.

Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the mothers' beliefs about the preschool children's play in Zagazig city.

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted in Zagazig city, Egypt and restricted on mothers of preschool children aged five to six-years-old. This age group precedes formal education, and is the time in which parents' values and beliefs carry the most weight in arranging and initiating play in a child's life. Participants were recruited through the nursery school of their children. Overall, questionnaires were completed mainly by eighty mothers.

Tool for data collection

A four-part structured interview questionnaire was developed by the researcher to collect the necessary data, including: Socio-demographic data, child's play at home, Parent Play Beliefs Scale (PPBs), and scale of play's effects on children.

Part I: Socio-demographic data: Involved

- **General characteristics of the child** such as: child's age, sex, siblings, and birth order.
- **Family data** such as: Parent's age, educational level, occupation, family income, residence ... etc.
- **Personal data** such as: Child's relationships with parents, siblings & classmates, child's habits as watching T.V., and using mobile. Besides that, there are three questions about the dietary pattern of the child and one about the child's sleep.

Part II: Child's Play at home

It was developed by the researcher through a review of related literature, which included questions for gathering data on play of the child at home such as: Type of child's play, mother's reaction towards her child's play, and duration of child's play daily... etc.

Part III: Parent Play Beliefs Scale [PPBS] (Fogle & Mendez, 2006a, b)

The parent play Beliefs scale (PPBS) is a reliable and valid scale used to evaluate the beliefs of parents about the play of their preschool children and developed by (Fogle & Mendez, 2006a,b). This scale measures two factors: (1) Play Support, which reflects the view of parents about play as a pleasurable activity with numerous developmental benefits and (2) Academic Focus, which captures parents' beliefs that play is not essential for general development or for the development of academic skills like reading. The scale was originally designed with only mothers but since then it has been used with fathers as well (Lin & Yawkey, 2013). Items were selected to depict different parent beliefs about play to include the developmental significance of play, parent participation in play, enjoyment of play and the relative importance of academic skills. This self-report scale is regarded a brief form tool and is a 25-item parent questionnaire. The first factor includes 17 items with examples being "play can help my child develop better thinking abilities", and "playing at home will help my child to get ready for kindergarten and school". High scores on this factor represent positive beliefs about the significance of play, its value as an enjoyable activity, and its many developmental benefits for children; where, parents show that they enjoy

play, see play as a priority and an opportunity for teaching. Given the nature of these items, this factor has been dubbed Play Support. The second factor comprises 8 items such as “reading to my child is more worthwhile than playing with him or her”. This factor describes negative beliefs about the value of play. Parents with high scores on this factor are likely to perceive play as unrelated to the development of cognitive and social abilities and are more likely to value academically focused activities than play activities. Parents here stress on the importance of academic skills like letters learning or numbers, and point out that play has no a central role in facilitating the development of these skills. Therefore, this factor has been named Academic Focus. The PPBS was translated into Arabic using the translate-back-translate technique to ensure its original validity.

Part IV: Scale of play’s effects on children as perceived by parents

The researcher here was guided by the Al-Beblawy Questionnaire on the Effect of Video Games on Children (Al-Beblawy, 1987), but selected the appropriate sentences for the current study under each major item and references to these statements as pertaining to the effect of play on children in general (circulated them to play in general) and not the influence of a specific type of play such as video games. The scale is intended to sum up the parent’s perception about the different effects of play on the child. It consists of five domains: The nature of the effect of play on children, cognitive effect of play on children, emotional effect of play on children, social effect of play on children, and the effect of play on the scholastic work of children.

Procedures

Official permissions were obtained from the Education Directorate at Zagazig city based on the letter from the post graduate affairs, faculty of nursing-Zagazig University explaining the aim of the present study. The General Director referred the researcher to the directors of the selected nursery schools with approval letter. Then the researcher met with each of them and explained the aim of the study and the nature of tool used for data collection. The researcher gave the director of each nursery school a copy of the tool and the formal letter. The researcher interviewed mothers in the nursery school of their children, asked them for basic demographic information about their families, and solicited their views on the importance of play for childhood development. Also, asked them to estimate the amount of time their children engaged in play at home. The researcher stayed with mothers to answer any questions that arose during filling out the questionnaire. The time needed to complete the questionnaire was approximately 35 minutes.

Results

Table 1: Parents’ characteristics of children in the study sample (n=80)

Parents’ characteristics	Frequency	Percent
Mother’s age (years):		
<30	30	37.5
30+	50	62.5
Range	23.0-48.0	
Mean±SD	32.2±5.4	
Median	32.00	
Mother’s education:		
None (Illiterate)	8	10.0
Basic/intermediate	50	62.5
High (University)	22	27.5
Mother’s job:		
Housewife	64	80.0
Working	16	20.0
Father’s age:		
<35	27	33.8
35+	53	66.2
Range	28.0-60.0	
Mean±SD	37.7±6.5	
Median	38.00	

Father's education:		
None (Illiterate)	8	10.0
Basic/intermediate	45	56.2
High (University)	27	33.8
Father's job:		
Employee	42	52.5
Worker	38	47.5

Table 1 describes parents' characteristics of children in study sample. The table clarifies that 62.5% of the mothers aged 30 years or more and 66.2% of fathers aged 35 years or more. Related to the educational level of children's parents, 33.8% of fathers graduated from university compared to 27.5% of mothers. Regarding the work of children's parents, 80% of mothers were housewives while 52.5% of fathers were employees.

Table 2: Mothers' perceptions and practices related to their children's play in the study sample (n=80)

Items	Frequency	Percent
Believe child's playing is beneficial	76	95.0
Child's play disturbs mother:		
No	17	21.2
Sometimes	54	67.5
Yes	9	11.3
A part of the family's income spent on buying toys for the child	62	77.5
What in mind when buying a toy for child: @		
Just a toy	34	42.5
Increase child skills	27	33.8
Develops his/her mind	24	30.0
Child enjoyment	4	5.0
Look for safety of the toy/game	72	90.0
Mother play with child last week:		
None	13	16.3
Daily	18	22.5
Most days	21	26.2
Some days	20	25.0
Once	8	10.0

(@) Not mutually exclusive

Table 2 describes mothers' perceptions and practices related to their children's play in the study sample. It was found that 95% of mothers believed that playing is beneficial for the child. In addition, 42.5% of them when buying a toy for the child, they thought that it is just a toy the child wants.

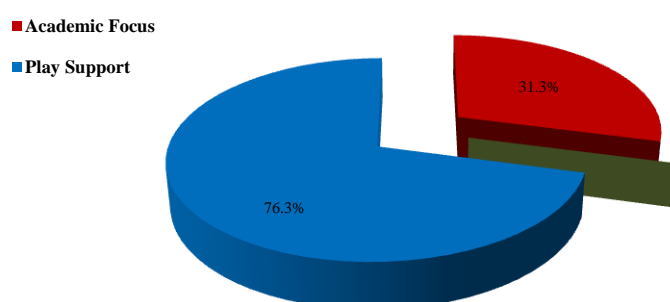


Figure 1: Parental beliefs about play and academic training activities of their children in the study sample (n=80)
As shown in Figure 1, 76.3% of the mothers had high scores on the first factor (Play Support). This indicates mothers' positive beliefs about the developmental significance of play; they view play as a priority, an enjoyable activity, and a crucial teaching opportunity.

- Results are not mutually exclusive
- High (60%+)

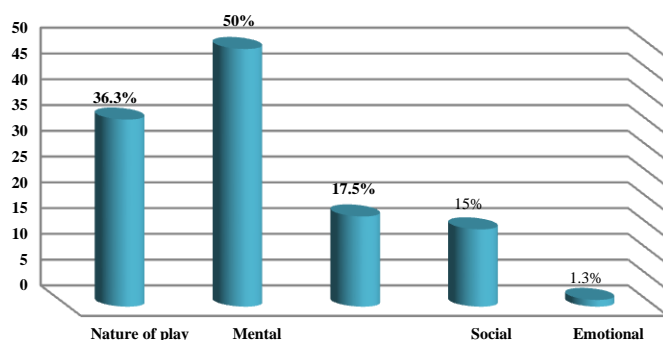


Figure 2: The effects of play on children in the study sample as reported by their mothers (n=80)

Figure 2 gives a picture of the mothers' agreement upon the different effects of play on their children. Mothers had the highest agreement scores on the cognitive/mental effect (50%), while they scored the lowest agreement on the emotional effect (1.3%).

- Results are not mutually exclusive

Discussion

Some researchers have argued that parental beliefs about play are related to the types of cognitive and social activities provided to children within particular ethnic niches (Gaskins & Miller, 2009). If beliefs about the importance of play influence parental socialization practices and goals, then they undoubtedly exert influences on childhood development as well. But the way in which beliefs about play influence childhood development has not been sufficiently explored. In promoting childhood cognitive development, parental beliefs about the value of play for development may assume moderating and mediating roles. That is, parental beliefs about play are more likely to have indirect effects on childhood development (Roopnarine & Jin, 2012). Be this as it may, the primary goal of this study was to explore parent's beliefs about play. The existing study findings clarified that the majority of mothers (95%) believed that play is beneficial to the child. This finding might be explained by the fact that children's upbringing and childhood development among parents are changing and evolving under increasing interaction with social networks, and institutional practices in the community which adopt a new culture that highlights more child-centered principles and focuses on play-based education, especially in the early childhood. In the same vein, Holmes' (2011) findings in the Hawaiian island of Lāna'i revealed that caregivers found play was important for overall children development and acknowledged its benefits as well as believed that they should play with their children. Additionally, a study conducted by Roopnarine and Jin (2012) in New York City found that the majority of mothers and fathers (96% and 93%) respectively confirmed that they considered play was important for the development of children. Furthermore, Turk (2015) found that almost all participants in Midwest State (chagrin Falls, Ohio), indicated that play activities are vital elements in the early development of the child. The existing study results made it clear that slightly over three-quarters of mothers were certain that play is "important" for the development of their children's cognitive abilities and it is more valuable in their children's lives than academic activities (PPBs). Similarly, Shiakou and Belsky (2013) undertook a descriptive study, in Nicosia, Cyprus, showing that Greek/Cypriot parents valued play over and above academic training and considered it important to their young children's development. In the same context, Horwath-Oliver's (2015) findings in Alaska showed that both mothers and fathers who adopted egalitarian gender role attitudes have had a higher valuation of play. Moreover, the result of this study is supported by the findings of Lin and Li's (2018) research, which revealed that Chinese parents support children's play and have a positive view regarding play and its value in the learning of their children (academic purposes) and lives (in terms of their children's interests, fun, and freedom). Also, The present study results are congruent on the one hand and contrary on the other with the findings of a study conducted in the United States in a sample of Indo Caribbean Immigrant

parents, showing that mothers and fathers had differing beliefs about the value of play in their children's lives, as mothers valued play for its cognitive and social developmental contributions, while fathers valued the physical and recreational benefits of play more than mothers did (Roopnarine & Jin, 2012). The current study results revealed that half of the mothers valued the cognitive effect of play on the child's development. This might be attributed to that parents nowadays acknowledge strongly or slightly with the idea that time spent playing is also time spent learning, but, in the same time a significant proportion of them think that a child's time needed to be complemented with other planned and scheduled activities to complete a child's education. The results of the present study are matched to a great extent with the findings of a research conducted in New York by Roopnarine and Jin (2012) cleared up that, parents valued play for many different purposes including cognitive, social, and emotional development. Conversely, a research carried out by Holmes (2011) on the Hawaiian island indicated the majority of caregivers considered play are very valuable and important in developing social skills. This difference in findings can be due to the fact that a qualitative design was used in the latter study, and information was obtained through surveys consisting of five open-ended questions. What's a more, variation in geographical nature and ethnic might be the cause.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the majority of mothers believed that play is beneficial to the child. Additionally, although the children's mothers mostly had positive beliefs about the developmental significance of play; as they viewed play as a priority, an enjoyable activity, and a crucial teaching opportunity, some mothers perceived play as unrelated to the development of the child's abilities and were more likely to value academically focused activities than play activities.

Recommendations

On the basis of the current study findings, the following recommendations can be suggested:

1. Conduct educational programs for parents of preschool-children to raise their awareness regarding the critical role of positive parental beliefs about the children's play, and the significance of play in the child's overall life and healthy development.
2. Replicate the study on a wider scale in other settings to permit for generalization of findings.

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