

The Genius of Play by Sally Jenkinson

2. *Let's play! – The social value of play*

is *thematic fantasy play*, in which children play fictional situations they have never seen but only imagine. The central element in dramatic and sociodramatic play is *imitation*, claims Smilansky: '...which paradoxically establishes a reality level for children. They try to act, talk, and look like some real adult person and recreate situations that are in their perception real.'¹⁸ Imitation combines with make-believe and imagination as children fill in the gaps of their experience and begin creating stories. In this kind of play children interact with each other in play episodes, they learn to persist in a role, they communicate verbally about what is happening, and they use objects symbolically (a basket, or circular bread board might become a steering wheel).

Smilansky argues that skilled sociodramatic players are more successful in all fields and are better at school integration. She gives eight compelling reasons in support of sociodramatic play:¹⁹

1. It demands the intellectual discipline of taking on appropriate behaviour for the role selected. (How do I behave as a nurse/spaceman/baby? I need to represent my role so that others can recognize my character.)
2. The child needs to grasp the essence of a play situation – the major features of a game. (What is necessary to include in playing a sailing game, for example, and what is not?)
3. Playing to a given theme teaches concentration. (I must be convincing and consistent over a period of time in my role, so I concentrate on it and immerse myself in it.)
4. Participation in sociodramatic play requires children to discipline their actions to fit in with the narrative and the roles they have assumed. (The dog [my character] may want to speak, but a speaking dog may be outside the imaginative terms of this game. The dog role requires communication 'in dog', so expressive gestures and sounds must be used – and the limitations imposed upon my human speech are accepted as a challenge.)

5. The story line can change with the input of others, teaching the child flexibility: there may be more than one right way to do things.
6. Play gives new approaches to problems and new concepts. 'For example, the child may learn that there may be other behaviour patterns for "father" than those with which he or she is familiar.'
7. The child moves toward abstract thought and symbolism. Smilansky's explanation is worth quoting here:
'We may observe the following procedure: the child begins with a toy that inspires imitative play – for example, a toy typewriter – and the child pretends to write a story. After a while, owing to the rapidity of spontaneous play and its growing complexity, the child substitutes a box or an anonymous chunk of wood for the toy typewriter. Later, having misplaced the wood, the child uses a gesture, perhaps drumming the fingers in the air. Finally, dispensing with the actions altogether, the child simply announces the writing of a story.'²⁰
8. Children who are accomplished sociodramatic players understand different interpretations and roles and different definitions of various situations and themes, both in school work and in a wider context. (In school work, active participation in new thought-worlds is a necessary part of learning. When playing together children teach each other to embrace difference; they imagine and play out different realities to their own.)

Success in sociodramatic play, skill in the use of good interventions, good interactions, and flexibility all develop social competence and prepare the child not only for integration into school but also for life itself. Good players learn to take their cue from others; are prepared sometimes to lead and sometimes follow, and, crucially, are willing to learn; *to change, to adapt, and to move on.*