

## Play it forward: Lasting effects of pretend play in early childhood

Psychologist cautions how modern society ignores best way to educate young children

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**Source:** Florida Atlantic University

**Summary:** As the school year revs up, a renowned child developmental psychologist highlights the robust benefits of pretend play on cognitive, social, and emotional development in children and cautions how 'learning through play' has changed with the demands of contemporary society. Given natural selection's shaping of childhood for the acquisition and refinement of species-adapted social-cognitive skills -- much through pretend play -- he says it's unfortunate that modern culture is ignoring the evolved wisdom of how best to educate young children.

### FULL STORY

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From developing social skills to fostering creativity, pretend play in young children is likened to being a "metaphoric multivitamin" in an editorial published in the journal *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews* by Florida Atlantic University's David F. Bjorklund, Ph.D.

As the school year kicks into full gear, Bjorklund, associate chair and professor in the Department of Psychology within FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science, highlights the plethora of robust benefits of pretend play on cognitive, social and emotional development in children and cautions how "learning through play" has changed with the demands of contemporary society.

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Given natural selection's shaping of childhood for the acquisition and refinement of species-adapted social-cognitive skills -- much through pretend play -- Bjorklund says it is unfortunate that modern culture is ignoring the evolved wisdom of how best to educate young children.

"Throughout our species' history and prehistory, and in hunter-gatherer and traditional cultures today, young children acquired important cultural knowledge and skills through play and observation, with much adult behaviors being imitated during play," said Bjorklund. "Pretend play is associated with a host of enhanced cognitive abilities such as executive function, language and perspective taking, which are important to education, making the minimization of pretend play unwise."

He explains that direct teaching of children by adults is rare in traditional cultures, and likely was for our hunter-gatherer ancestors. However, with the advent of increasingly complex technologies such as reading and mathematics and the need for universal education, formal schooling became necessary, and this has recently extended to early childhood.

"The prevalence of preschool education has increased over the decades in many developed countries, and unlike earlier days when 'learning through play' described the basic curriculum, contemporary preschool education instead often emphasizes direct instruction, characteristic of pedagogy designed for older children," said Bjorklund. "This reflects an evolutionary mismatch between young children's evolved learning abilities and the demands of contemporary society."

Pretend play occurs voluntarily and spontaneously, especially when the individual is relaxed and not under stress and typically lacks any immediate practical purpose.

"In the context of pretend play, skills encompass imagination, the ability to think about possibilities that differ from reality, mental time travel, and imitation, among other symbolic capabilities," said Bjorklund.

He explains that pretend play functions as an experience-expectant process, enhancing the brain's readiness for focused learning.

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"It's not clear whether the extended period of childhood and juvenile development created more opportunities for play or if this playfulness emerged as a result of that extended period," said Bjorklund. "However, this evolution of childhood, along with the prolonged neural plasticity it brings, may have been a crucial adaptation for the development of the modern human mind."

He says pretend play likely plays a crucial role in developing and refining psychological skills rather than being solely necessary for their emergence.

"Advanced pretend play is most evident during the extended juvenile stage in humans," said Bjorklund. "This extension has led to a distinct childhood stage, lasting until about age 7, characterized by greater independence and social interaction."

During this time, children engage in more complex play while their cognitive abilities continue to develop. Bjorklund emphasizes that this prolonged juvenile period and its neural plasticity are essential for fostering our unique social-cognitive skills.

Research comparing play-based preschool curricula to those focused on direct instruction has consistently shown that while direct instruction may yield immediate benefits, play-based approaches offer more significant long-term advantages in both academic performance and students' attitudes toward school.

"One of the most comprehensive studies on the long-term effects of direct instruction for preschoolers from low-income backgrounds found that although there were initial academic gains, these benefits diminished over time," said Bjorklund. "By third grade, children in the control group outperformed those in the direct-instruction program, and this gap widened by sixth grade."

These findings led the researchers to reevaluate the effectiveness of heavily drilling children on basic skills and to consider the potential benefits of play-oriented preschool programs, particularly for children at risk of intellectual challenges.

Bjorklund says recess and opportunities for free play for older school-aged children also have been declining in developed countries, sometimes replaced by adult-directed play, again at odds with what is known about children's evolved learning abilities.

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"These practices may not only make learning more arduous, but negatively impact children's sense of autonomy with respect to learning," said Bjorklund. "Pretend play evolved to enhance children's acquisition and refinement of important cultural knowledge and skills during an extended juvenile period. The abilities needed by modern children have changed and may require new means of learning, but we should not lose sight of the substantial benefits that pretend play can still afford our species' youngest members."

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### Story Source:

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### Journal Reference:

1. David F. Bjorklund. **The evolution of pretend play and an extended juvenile period and their implications for early education.** *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 2024; 164: 105805 DOI: [10.1016/j.neubiorev.2024.105805](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2024.105805)
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