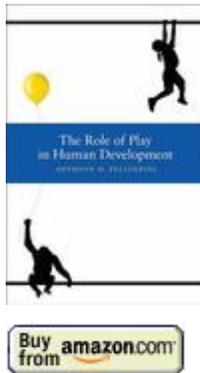


## Critical Implications of the Role of Play in Human Development

A review of



### **The Role of Play in Human Development**

by Anthony D. Pellegrini

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Reviewed by

[Sherri McCarthy](#)

[Yolanda Mora](#)

[Albertina Aros](#)

As its title suggests, *The Role of Play in Human Development* provides readers with an in-depth look at the importance and implications of play in human development from multidisciplinary perspectives. Anthony D. Pellegrini notes that play offers an excellent example of the ways in which biology and culture influence each other. He extols the novel possibilities directly linked with different forms of play behavior during childhood that may influence individuals' skill acquisition and possibly also influence development of the species based on phylogenetic history. Pellegrini relates the importance of the play experience in its broadest functional and antecedent sense to phylogenetic and ontogenetic development.

This book is an excellent introduction to the critical role of play in early childhood development and would be a valuable resource for use in graduate seminars on play and early childhood development. Pellegrini posits that in order to have effective prologue and integration of a construct in and across disciplines there must be a consensus of how play is defined. All too often, differences in the definition of play are at the root of misunderstandings across and even within disciplines. He cites an example found in education: Play is defined as crucial for healthy early development, yet at the same time, within the classroom context, play is continuously being frowned upon and diminished as less worthwhile to learning than are structured phonics or other examples of the “three Rs.”

Pellegrini suggests that a definitive working definition that is multidisciplinary may help to avoid misunderstandings among and across disciplines and allow integration and understanding of the implications and importance of play in human development. Pellegrini takes an explicitly theoretical perspective and applies it to childhood play in an ethological context. He tackles the controversial task of defining the role of play in development through a coherent theoretical framework. He then elaborates and dissects the functions of play in relation to associated benefits for social, emotional, and cognitive areas. Pellegrini concludes his book with a precise summary of his arguments, theory, and applications for further research.

*The Role of Play in Human Development* is relevant for anyone interested in developmental psychology, educational psychology, evolutionary biology, and play theory relating to anthropology. The theories and methods that Pellegrini provides can be used as tools for a variety of situations by people who work with children, including not only researchers but also parents, educators, administrators, pediatricians, social workers, and child psychologists, to name but a few. Another population who would find this book educational and beneficial is students in advanced undergraduate and graduate-level psychology, social work, and education courses interested in examining and learning about the complexities of play in human development.

In short, the book is written for people interested in how to examine and describe play as well as for those interested in creating educational environments for childhood development. It is comprehensive yet readily understandable, well organized, and clearly presented.

The methodology Pellegrini uses consists of taking a categorical stance between means/end and nonfunctional criteria to differentiate playful activities and functions of play. He develops a theoretical framework, including both social and cognitive dimensions. Since he perceives play as a multidimensional construct, he applies structural, functional, and causal criteria concurrently across domains. These dimensions include forms, duration, and sequence as functional behaviors overlapping social, locomotor, pretend, and object-directed domains of play. One example Pellegrini uses is that of two children pretending to be doctor and patient. When a shoestring is used as a stethoscope, the play is considered both social and object play and may thus fit in a number of categories.

The crux of the problem with the definition of *play* is that it is defined by the particulars of the focus on hand, from anthropology to zoology. The only true consensus as evidenced in the book is that play is difficult if not impossible to define. Pellegrini draws his data on empirical studies by developmental psychologists, ethnologists, anthropologists, sociologists, early childhood educators, pediatricians, and professionals from other fields. He also contextualizes research on play in developing prosocial behavior and aggression. Pellegrini suggests that the most applicable definition resonates from the main function of play, which he considers to be characteristically behaviorally flexible.

Pellegrini successfully links ontogenetic and phylogenetic history to the study of play as a necessary component in order to understand the long-range implications and necessity of play in human development. Play is not just a childhood manifestation of adult mimicking behavior but a purposeful part of the evolutionary process of individual and group survival.

When a child is at play, he or she is actually setting the framework for future social adaptability and development of phenotypes that will expand into adaptation of the individual's current and subsequent environments. The function of play then provides three types of dimensional aspects that include immediate, deferred, and accelerated benefits. An example of this would be social and pretend play in which the immediate benefits of play may be peer association, connectedness, and eventually social dominance.

## **Connections Between the Role of Play and Psychology**

For a psychologist, this book may be of great value because it expands on the role of play in healthy childhood development. Currently there is a trend in public schools that is continually reducing the time allowed for play. Policy makers and administrators restrict school budgets and overemphasize testing in order to meet standards. At the same time, school administrators are forced to eliminate recess, gym classes, sports, art, and free play periods, seemingly unknowing of the developmental detriment for the children they are supposed to serve. This constrictive environment is a breeding ground for developmental and social dysfunctions. This is evidenced by the growing need for counseling and behavioral plans for children in the school system.

Psychologists may be able to capitalize on the information from *The Role of Play in Human Development* in order to better serve their child and school populations. Play has been shown to lower behavioral problems in children because it forms a crucial part of developing a child's adaptability, bonding, and resiliency skills. Pellegrini places research on play in the context of prosocial behavior and aggression. He also addresses the importance of play for species survival by adaptation of social skills and dominance, which allows for future positive relationships in the experiences of males and females (see Gjerde & Cardilla,

2009). His work is very relevant to the social and emotional aspects of ontogenetic development.

Pellegrini has conducted careful studies regarding student attentiveness and performance within programs that have recess periods and those that don't. The data show that students need recess in order to release energy and interact with each other in an unstructured environment in order to grow socially. In addition, free play allows children leisure time in which cognitive skills are improved because they are learning for pleasure. This work has been replicated by many others (see Nippold, Duthie, & Larsen, 2005).

Pellegrini makes a case for asking ourselves if we have been depriving children of the normal, noncompetitive forms of social play that are essential for developing healthy emotional and social interaction, connectedness, and adaptability. Are current trends such as increasing incidence of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, aggression, and delinquency simply the symptoms of a society that has forgotten how to play?

## **Pitfalls and Limitations**

Pellegrini intends to provide readers such as educators, policy makers, ethnologists, psychologists, and parents of children an expository look at the importance of play in human development. He covers solitary activity as well as play with peers, siblings, and parents. Pellegrini addresses the nature of development, functions of play, and gender differences in early play patterns. But how does one use this knowledge without clear-cut suggestions for application? The book lacks ideas for practically applying the knowledge in the context of schools, counseling, parenting, and child care.

The interest in play and acknowledgment of its critical role in human development is, we hope, on the upswing among psychologists, educators, and the general public. Unfortunately, play is still not well defined in the public's perception, and the application of play theories in education is not understood. This book does little to remedy that.

Play in of itself has to happen in a certain context and at critical times for it to be beneficial in childhood development. Under what guidelines will the concept of developmental play fall? Pellegrini cites an example of improperly applied play in teaching that was didactic and not spontaneous. Are we opening doors for the educational system to incorporate techniques that are misunderstood? The integrity and effectiveness of training for interventions that incorporate play need solid foundations from which to pull their resources (Edwards, Varjas, White, & Stokes, 2009).

Unquestionably, the role of play is of unlimited value to human development, yet *The Role of Play in Human Development* leaves no doubt that it is still a broad subject that needs further refinement. Further research is needed to justify the changes that may be needed in social, educational, and home systems from the standpoint of play to enhance development.

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