

Guest Editorial

PLAY AND ITS SALIENCE IN CHILDREN

John Vijay Sagar Kommu*¹

*Corresponding author: Professor & Head, Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

Email address: sagarjohn@gmail.com

I had an interesting experience recently with a 12 year old child with whom I was interacting in our busy outpatient clinic. The child was brought by his parents with a history suggestive of dissociative symptoms of repeated brief spells of falls and unresponsiveness since one month. After establishing rapport with the child, I was asking specific questions to elicit any stressors. The child reported that his daily routine involves self care activities, attending school, attending multiple tuition classes, and completing homework. He lamented that there was no time to engage in any play activities and how he felt very bored with his current routine that involves only academic activities. He recollected and shared the joyful moments he spent in play activities in the past and how he was deprived of such experiences by his parents since the last two years. This was due to the opinion that engaging in play activities is a 'waste of time' that will lead to a decline in child's scholastic performance. The child requested me to tell his parents to allow him at least one hour of outdoor play every day.

Play ensures holistic development of a child across all the developmental domains, provides valuable learning opportunities, enables children to practice and strengthen their skill repertoire and provides a sense of

agency to children. Play is an important medium to initiate and maintain peer relationships. Play allows children to express their feelings and an opportunity to work with unacceptable feelings. Article 31 of the United Nations Rights of the Child mentions that play is the right of all children.¹ There are multiple factors that act as impediments to play activities in children. These include increased emphasis on academic activities, hectic daily routine, lack of spaces for outdoor play, long working hours of parents with limited quality time with children, access to gadgets like smartphone, laptop, tablet etc.

There is extensive research evidence supporting the positive influence of play on mental health of children. Play facilitates the formation of secure emotional attachment early in a child's life, healthy brain development, the regulation of emotions, the ability to show empathy, the ability to form emotional relationships, emotional resilience, and effective coping with stress.²

Children need safe environment to play with unhindered access to play materials that are provided with emphasis on their safety, durability, age appropriateness and cultural background.³ Play has to be made an integral part of every school curriculum. Mental health professionals have to educate parents about

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the importance of play in the optimum development and mental health of children.

Parents have to adopt a balanced approach to scheduling the daily routine of children with inclusion of leisure time for play activities. Play therapy has been used effectively for children diagnosed with psychiatric disorders, children who have experienced adverse experiences of trauma, loss, abuse etc. and for children diagnosed with neurodevelopmental disorders.⁴

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