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Play and Disabilities in Preschoolers

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For centuries play has been viewed as a means of relieving stress and enabling children to experiment with their creativity in their surroundings. Whether that be through pretend play, blocks, humor, or other creative outlets that lead to the development. Play has the potential to serve as a means of achieving success in a preschooler's development. This entails their cognitive, social-emotional, and mental development. It is important to understand how these developments could play a role in assisting preschoolers to succeed in the long term.

In Frosts book on child development, he states that our social intelligence is impacted to show expression (2017). This is a particular concern for preschoolers as it has a significant impact on their social development through the creation of peer relationships and dramatic play, which in turn contributes to their social development. During the preschool age, "Play is at first described in terms of the infant's sensory and motor modalities, but during the second half of the first and second year of development, cognitive development adds new dimensions to the young child's play activities" (Frost, 2017, p. 101). A mix of unstructured play, imaginative play, and planned learning activities for preschoolers cultivates a stimulating environment that fosters cognitive development. Mental development encompasses various aspects that include cognitive, social, and emotional that influence development. Preschoolers that prioritize play provide structural learning that could impact their overall development.

As play is a significant factor in the development of social, emotional, cognitive, and mental development in preschoolers, it is important to note that its impacts may not always be the same for children with varying abilities. These children may require specialized equipment or resources that facilitate their interaction with their peers or engage in play that fosters their growth. The varying abilities in children could include autism, down syndrome, hearing

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impairment, specific learning disability, visual impairment including blindness or other causes that could affect their development in a learning environment. By choosing the preschool population, readers will gain an understanding of why that peak of development is important in order to accommodate different abilities.

Vygotskys Theory and Development

Vygotskys theory is one of the many theorists learned throughout this course that describes the impact play has on a child's physical, emotional, cognitive, and psychosocial development. Children with special needs may engage in play differently than their peers, which often leads to understanding why play is important. Educating teachers, child life professionals, or other individuals on these opportunities of play could be great for long term development. Vygotskys theory describes the zone of proximal development that could be introduced as what a child can do independently, and what support is needed. For children with disabilities, this concept is important to assist them to their full potential. Play with children who have disabilities could have an impact on their wellness over time.

Cognitive delay is one of the characteristics most often seen in children who have Down syndrome or mental retardation. This makes play in classrooms modified and accommodates their needs. With cognitive delays, it could have a negative impact on academic challenges, motor skills development, and social interactions. These obstacles in comprehending and employing language may impact the child's capacity to engage in conversations and establish bonds of friendship within their immediate surroundings. Emotional regulation could be difficult be challenging, due to not being able to process information which could lead to frustration, anxiety, or other difficulties expressing themselves. Promoting play could stimulate cognitive functions, promote language development, and encourage problem-solving skills. It is imperative

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to initiate prompt identification, intervention, and provide education to families regarding these delays.

According to current research, many children prefer “child-centered or child-initiated activities to adult-directed activities” (Frost, 2017, p. 333). Children who have a disability require the involvement of adults in their sessions to assist with future interventions. Frost states, “Techniques used for children with cognitive delay are adapted to use a range of directive to playful strategies. In a directed play, the teacher, or adult guides the child through the process of engaging in a play activity. An adult uses a playful approach when they are engaging in a play activity with a child and playing alongside them. These strategies are taught to parents and used by caregivers in intervention programs. Parents and adults involved in intervention are taught to be playful and responsive to their children” (Frost, 2017, p. 333). By enhancing the skills of families and peers in playing with children with disabilities, it is possible to enhance and empower children to realize their full potential.

Addressing physical delays in preschoolers in a collaborative approach embraces the uniqueness that each child has. Physical disabilities may have an impact on the development of motor skills, resulting in a lack of participation in activities with peers. Recognizing how genetic, environmental, and social factors interact could help make interventions that promote physical development. Considering adapted play environments for preschoolers who have disabilities allows them to feel empowered. However, with the lack of opportunities for children who may be in wheelchairs or other specialized equipment, it may be difficult to engage. Because of this, it is difficult for them to develop their psychosocial and cognitive aspects of play. As previously stated, play is limited when it comes to playing on a playground, especially for children who have physical disabilities. In a playground setting, “children’s awareness of their environment is

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developed, and while playing, children can learn social norms and values” (Prellwitz et al, 2007, p. 144). Educators and other support systems in a preschoolers life could support their engagement and participation. During interventions with children who have disabilities, the role of adults in the child's life and creating a universal play area for all children could have a positive impact on social and cognitive development.

It is mentioned in current research that involving universal play within a playground or an indoor environment could create diversity and aid in development. According to Endicott et al, “Creating a universal play area requires integrating the needs and abilities of all children into the design of play areas... the diversity of both physical and social environments is the key to accommodating the variety of users in the play area. The attainment of physical diversity entails incorporating a diverse range of challenges within the play environment. Such an environment will allow more children to participate, make choices, take on challenges, develop skills, and, most importantly, play together.” (Goltsman, 2001). The significant variables that contribute to the inclusion of individuals in play environments are the guidelines that coexist. Many manufacturers, engineers, or designers are not inclusive in providing accessibility for children with disabilities (Endicott et al, 2010, p. 1822).

Recommendations

An inclusive playground is essential for ensuring that children of all abilities can play together, fostering interaction, physical activity, and a sense of belonging among peers. As previously stated, incorporating diversity in a playground has the potential to influence the growth and development of preschoolers. Some recommendations that Spencer et al recommended for children who have physical disabilities are to provide an environment that “surfacing on the play areas and surrounding paths are accessible: consider path width and

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surface texture so that walkers and wheelchairs easily traverse all areas, and provide access to mixed-use play equipment or free-standing accessible play equipment, like slides, elevated sandboxes, and spring riders” (Spender et al, 2014, p. 31) Within Frosts novel, he stated that teachers, child life professionals, and various relationships within a childs life that shows support could assist in aiding the child to their full potential.

In conclusion, play is a valuable and inclusive tool for supporting cognitive development in preschoolers, including those who have delays. Varying disabilities could impact numerous ages. Children may not be receiving the adequate amount of support needed from their peers or other significant family members who could be there for the child. Being aware of the disabilities could affect their long-term development. The creation of an environment that is conducive to the various disabilities has the potential to significantly enhance their growth and overall development.

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