



Prospective relations among preschoolers' play, coping, and adjustment as moderated by stressful events[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 September 2012
Received in revised form 20 December 2013
Accepted 7 January 2014
Available online 25 February 2014

Keywords:

Pretend play
Coping
Adjustment
Life stress
Moderated mediation

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the prospective contribution of preschoolers' pretend play to observer reports of internalizing and externalizing behavior problems one year later, as mediated by observed coping flexibility during a delay of gratification task and as moderated by children's exposure to stressful life events. Preschoolers' ($N=250$; $M_{\text{age}}=49.05$ months, $SD=2.95$; 50% female) fantasy and affect expression in pretend play were assessed during a laboratory visit. Moderated mediation models tested for conditional indirect effects of play fantasy and affect expression on behavior problems through coping flexibility as a function of the child's exposure to stress. Preschoolers' fantasy and negative affect expression in pretend play predicted lower rates of internalizing, but not externalizing, problems. Coping flexibility partially mediated this relation, particularly among children with relatively more life stress. These findings clarify processes by which, and contexts within which, preschoolers' pretend play influences later behavioral adjustment.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

Pretend play is a powerful mechanism of and context for children's cognitive, affective, and social development (Göncü & Gaskins, 2006a, b; Pellegrini, 2010). Researchers have documented relations between the cognitive features of children's pretend play, such as the quality of expressed fantasy, and varied outcomes, including creativity, divergent thinking, and coping skills (Christiano & Russ, 1996; Christie & Johnsen, 1983; Niec & Russ, 2002; Russ & Schafer, 2006). Studies also show that affective features of children's pretend play, such as the frequency and valence of expressed affect in play, correlate with similar outcomes (Russ, 1993, 2004). Together, these studies demonstrate that pretend play is critical for healthy development (Pellegrini, 2001). However, little is known about either the mechanisms by which cognitive and affective pretend play features foster development, or about if and how these processes vary across contexts. Clarifying relations between children's pretend play and adjustment, as well as adaptive mechanisms that underlie them, will inform empirically-based practice and intervention in educational and clinical settings.

The capacity to engage in flexible thinking and problem solving is a likely candidate for understanding the positive developmental effects of pretend play. Some research on pretend play and coping supports this hypothesis (Russ, 1998), but other evidence suggests that these relations may vary across contexts (Christiano & Russ, 1996). The current

study advanced extant research on pretend play, coping, and child adjustment by using a prospective research design and observational measures in a large and diverse preschool sample to clarify the extent to which the contribution of preschoolers' fantasy and expressed emotion in pretend play to children's internalizing and externalizing behavior problems one year later can be explained by enhanced coping flexibility, as well as if and how these relations vary as a function of preschoolers' exposure to stressful life events.

Theories of pretend play

Play is a universal, yet multi-faceted feature of child development. Theorists have long appreciated this diversity, emphasizing different dimensions of play to varying degrees. Some play typologies focus on sociocognitive factors, such as Parten's (1925) distinctions among solitary, onlooker, parallel, associative, and cooperative play patterns, which represent increasingly sophisticated social play behaviors as a function of children's developing cognitive abilities. Other theorists have categorized play based on its structure across functional, constructive, dramatic, and rule governed play types (Smilansky, 1968). More recently, Pellegrini and Smith (1998) emphasized the importance of context (e.g., school context, non-social context) when categorizing and defining play.

Despite their differences, play theorists typically view play as a childhood phenomenon that develops toward increasing complexity. Moreover, most recognize that children's emerging capacity to engage in symbolic thinking and pretense is central to this advancing sophistication, noting that the capacity to engage in playful pretense takes on special significance during the preschool period (Bergen, 2002; Pellegrini, 2010). Thus, the current investigation focused on preschoolers' pretend

[☆] Preparation of this work was supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation Developmental and Learning Sciences (ID 0951775) to the second author. We extend our deepest appreciation to the families and children who participate in the Child Representation and Regulation Project, as well as to our teacher, school, and organizational partners.

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play and *behavioral* adjustment because pretense 1) is central to most theories of play, 2) takes on heightened importance during the preschool period, and 3) is a well-established correlate of positive child well-being and adjustment.

In pretend play, children engage in fantasy and symbolism such that pillows can become forts and sticks can be used “as-if” they were swords. Pretend play encompasses cognitive, affective, interpersonal, and conflict resolution capacities (Russ, 2004). Akin to broader theories and typologies of play, theorists have emphasized these processes to varying degrees when discussing *pretend* play.

Psychodynamic theorists conceptualized pretend play as a way for children to communicate and negotiate their inner desires. Freud (1961) suggested that pretend play helps children cope with negative experiences, such as the departure of a parent or a visit to the doctor, by providing a venue to reenact and control stressful life events. Erikson (1964) also believed that pretend play allows children to create model situations to deal with their experiences, but he emphasized the interpersonal salience of pretend play to a greater extent than Freud's affective emphasis.

Likewise, cognitive theorists viewed pretend play as an important context for development, but emphasized cognition over emotion. Although Piaget (1952) did not believe that pretend play teaches children new skills, he appreciated that play could serve as a venue for children to practice and consolidate newly-acquired skills that could be lost without the practice of play. Vygotsky (1978) believed that pretend play could facilitate the acquisition of new skills by helping children to separate meaning from objects thereby facilitating their transition from concrete to abstract thinking. Similarly, other cognitive theorists, such as Bruner (1972) and Sutton-Smith (1967), viewed pretend play as a way for children to free themselves from the constraints of the real world to develop their creativity and explore different possibilities, including varied behavioral options in response to challenging situations (see also Hutt, 1978).

Pretend play and adjustment

Although theorists emphasize unique dimensions of pretend play and posit different mechanisms undergirding its developmental effects, they nevertheless converge on the assertion that pretend play is central to healthy child development. Research supports cognitive and psychodynamic play theories to show that *both* cognitive and affective features of pretend play contribute to development. The quantity and quality of fantasy and affect expression in pretend play are associated with an array of adaptive indices, including creativity and divergent thinking, problem solving and goal orientation, emotion knowledge and regulation, social and educational adjustment, and internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Alessandri, 2008; Butcher & Niec, 2005; Castro, Mendez, & Fantuzzo, 2002; Coplan & Rubin, 2001; Lindsey & Colwell, 2003; Pearson, Russ, & Cain Spannagel, 2008; Seja & Russ, 1999). Moreover, these relations remain significant when intelligence is held constant (Christiano & Russ, 1996) and carry forward over time (Antelmanová & Severová, 1990; Chiang, Wu, & Lee, 2006; Rogers & Pennington, 2008). Although some researchers have suggested that positive relations between pretend play and adjustment may be explained by intermediary outcomes, such as flexible problem-solving and coping (Russ, 2004), research has yet to evaluate these suggestions empirically.

Pretend play and coping flexibility

Coping, particularly the flexibility with which a child is able to employ varied strategies in the face of challenge (i.e., coping flexibility), is a candidate mechanism for understanding the positive effects of pretend play on development. As reviewed previously, both cognitive features of pretend play, such as the quality of the child's engagement in fantasy, and affective features, such as the amount and valence of

expressed emotion in play, are associated with improved divergent thinking skills (Butcher & Niec, 2005; Kelly-Vance, Ryalls, & Glover, 2002; Russ & Kaugars, 2001; Russ & Schafer, 2006; Susa & Benedict, 1994). Moreover, evidence suggests that divergent thinkers have better coping skills, at least in part, because they can employ varied coping strategies (Carson, Bittner, Cameron, Brown, & Meyer, 1994; Russ, 1988, 1998). Yet coping flexibility is distinct from divergent thinking because it captures the ability to engage multiple problem-solving strategies when negotiating a challenging situation, whereas divergent thinking refers to a broader capacity for flexible thinking that may or may not translate to coping behavior in the face of challenge.

Prior research has documented the important contribution of pretend play to problem-solving capacities, and, by extension, to varied adjustment outcomes. Russ, Robins, and Christiano (1999) found that children's ability to engage in imaginative and expressive play in early grade school was positively related to their ability to come up with more unique solutions when presented with problem scenarios (e.g., What would you do if you lost a book you need to study for a test?). In addition to heightened coping flexibility (i.e., number of strategies used), imaginative and expressive players were more likely than their less imaginative and expressive peers to evidence high quality problem-solving during a challenge task four years later. Similarly, in a sample of 55 first graders, Goldstein and Russ (2000) found that children's capacity for imaginative play was positively related to their use of varied coping strategies when presented with a challenging story task. Extending to in situ observations, Christiano and Russ (1996) found that grade school children who expressed more affect in their pretend play evidenced more positive coping strategies during an invasive dental procedure relative to their peers who were less expressive in play. Building on these findings, the current study examined whether cognitive and affective pretend play features (i.e., fantasy quality, positive affect expression, and negative affect expression) were related to children's flexible problem-solving and coping in the face of a challenging task.

Coping flexibility and adjustment

Coping flexibility may serve as an adaptive mechanism underlying expected relations between pretend play and positive development. Coping reflects “cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, p. 141). Previous studies of coping and adjustment have focused on specific types of coping, such as problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, or support seeking (Compas & Boyer, 2001). However, these studies have yielded mixed results, with some suggesting that coping strategies are similarly adaptive in all contexts (Eisenberg et al., 1993), and others indicating that the effectiveness of specific coping strategies may vary as a function of different factors, including prior stress exposure (Band & Weisz, 1988; Berzenski, 2011; Brand & Alexander, 2003) or resource availability (Grey, Berzenski, & Yates, 2012). Inconsistent findings in the literature on coping and adjustment point to the importance of looking at coping *processes*, such as coping flexibility, rather than solely on specific coping strategies.

In the present study, we assessed children's capacity to engage multiple distinct coping strategies in the face of a challenge (i.e., coping flexibility) as a putative explanatory mechanism underlying expected relations between children's fantasy and affect expression in pretend play and their behavioral adjustment one year later. Behavior problems are a salient index of adjustment during the preschool years, because children's capacities to regulate negative emotion (i.e., internalizing problems) and behavior (i.e., externalizing problems) take on increasing importance during this developmental period (Eisenberg et al., 1997; Eisenberg et al., 2001). The capacity to confront challenging situations with a flexible coping style was expected to support children's emotional and behavioral adjustment.

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