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## COMMENT

# Does Pretend Play Matter? Searching for Evidence: Comment on Lillard et al. (2013)

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Lillard et al. (2013) have done a thorough review of published pretend play research from the past 50 plus years. However, they did not thoroughly address the reasons why this body of research has such flaws as well as the contradictory or minimal findings that call into question strongly held views and published assertions regarding the importance of the role of pretend play in fostering children's developmental progress. This comment addresses 3 aspects of the problematic nature of play research: First, I suggest that the research methods in most of these studies were unable to capture genuine pretend play, instead measuring "playful work." Second, I encourage rigorous research designs to better capture genuine examples of the pretend play phenomenon in order to gain deeper insights into these relationships. Third, I speculate on why pretend play development, as a valued behavior independent of its influence on other areas of development, is rarely undertaken and provide suggestions regarding this research direction.

*Keywords:* play development, pretense research, value of play

Lillard et al. (2013) have performed a thorough review of published pretend play research from the past 50 plus years, and they are to be commended for their rigor, dedication, and insights regarding this topic. Their challenge to early childhood theorists and researchers—to gain better evidence for their assertions that pretend play is the catalyst, or at least a relevant companion, of children's cognitive, language, and social development—is well made. Indeed, the methodological problems they discussed are ones that all empirical researchers should avoid. Also, the theoretical premises on which they based their analysis, involving whether pretense is the driver of such development (crucial), only one route supporting that development (equifinality), or merely an activity that is a by-product occurring along with that development (epiphenomenon), are clear and convincing.

However, the target article does not thoroughly address the reasons why this body of research has such flaws and contradictory or minimal findings that call into question the strongly held views and the voluminous published assertions regarding the importance of the role of pretend play in fostering children's developmental progress. This comment addresses three aspects of the problematic nature of play research, two of which were mentioned minimally in the article and one that was not suggested. First, perhaps the research methods in most of these studies were unable to capture genuine pretend play. That is, many of the studies really may have been measuring "playful work." If so, could that be a reason why Lillard et al. (2013) found problems with the state of the evidence

supporting the importance of pretense as a catalyst for other developmental areas? Second, there is more to be suggested about rigorous research designs to better capture genuine examples of the pretend play phenomenon in order to gain deeper insights into these relationships. If there were a greater focus on well-designed play research and the financial resources to support such research, would results be similar to or different from that found in these reviewed studies? Third, research focused on pretend play development as a valued behavior independent of its influence on other areas of development is rarely undertaken and, if undertaken, even more rarely published. Why isn't research that is focused on understanding what conditions enable children to become excellent pretense players as important as research focused on potential ways that pretense facilitates more creative, problem-solving, language competent, self-regulated, or socially cooperative children?

### Does Most Pretend Play Research Really Measure Play?

The definition of play that Lillard et al. (2013) cited (Krasnor & Pepler, 1980) contains a number of elements generally agreed upon by play theorists and researchers. These characteristics include flexibility, positive affect, nonliterality, and intrinsic motivation. Lillard et al. further stated that pretend play, only one type of the play phenomenon, includes a deliberate change of reality so that the players act "as-if" that reality, which they know, is not operative within the "play frame." Pretense involves a form of metacommunication in which the behavioral and verbal signals do not convey the same message as they would convey if used outside that play frame. Instead they convey the message: "This is play" (Bateson, 1956). Lillard (2001), Leslie (1987), Singer and Singer (1990), and many others have concurred that this "as if" characteristic is essential in pretense. Of course, the other qualities that

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define play, such as flexibility, positive affect, and intrinsic motivation, are also necessary if the pretense is play, not required "playful work."

Another quality of pretend play that is noted in some studies of child play and especially in studies of adult memories of their childhood play is that pretense is often "private play," which occurs outside of the knowledge and influence of adults (Bergen, 1988; Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999; Vygotsky, 1967). Rich examples of pretense generally involve long time periods (often lasting over days, weeks, or months), few restrictions on the materials used, great flexibility in theme direction, and an intrinsic feeling of player control and motivation. It seems clear from a scrutiny of the research studies reviewed by these authors that the methodology used in many of them may have resulted in what children would identify as playful work rather than measures of pretend play (see Fein & Wiltz, 1998; King, 1979). Fein and Wiltz (1998) stated that play observed in school settings is "not the play children describe with relish and delight many years later" (p. 47). In seeking evidence for whether pretend play is related to various development areas or whether experimental manipulations or training of pretend play behaviors can affect the quality of pretense and, thus, other abilities, it is important to ask whether relevant data really involves pretend play (having the characteristics defined by theorists) or whether the activity, although having some playful qualities, did not truly represent pretense.

In their in-depth analysis of the pretend play studies, Lillard et al. (2013) reported that in the majority of correlational studies, with the exception of parent report studies, the pretense data were collected in preschool classrooms. Such classrooms vary greatly in *the materials and time allotted for pretense*. Lillard et al. described the majority of experimental studies as involving pretense behaviors elicited by props presented by adults to children either in their classrooms or in laboratory settings, with comparisons to child groups who had different behaviors elicited. In the training studies, they reported that direct intervention by adults, involving modeling or other teaching techniques, attempted to increase child pretense, with assessment of expected effects on other developmental qualities. In the majority of all of these settings, adults were highly visible and often actively directive, and Lillard et al. did note that adult behavior may have been the dominant variable affecting the results in some of these studies.

It is likely that adult valuing of play by giving time, materials, space, and appreciation can positively affect the richness and depth of child pretense play and is also the case that adult engagement in pretense with very young children or with children who have not developed pretend play skills can facilitate its early development (Haight, 2006). However, genuine pretense of the type discussed by Bateson (1956) or Singer and Singer (1990), with elaborated scripts, themes that change often, long-term and intense internal motivation, and in-depth metacommunicative behaviors, appeared to be absent in many of the studies reviewed. The types of rich, elaborative, long-term, and often relatively private pretense play observed in naturalistic studies of preschool children's pretense (e.g., Traywick-Smith, 1998), and described by adults who recall their childhood play experiences (e.g., Root-Bernstein & Root-Bernstein, 1999), are quite different from the types of pretend play reported in many of these studies. Thus, the reported studies may not have elicited behaviors with a sufficient num-

ber of the qualities of pretend play that theorists have defined as essential. For example, was there really intrinsic motivation involved in the pretense directed by adults? Did the reality of the play succeed in overcoming child knowledge that they were being carefully observed by adults? Was the fluidity of pretense themes permitted as is characteristic in true pretense or did the pretenders have to stay within adult-designated themes? Was the time period of the pretense long enough to capture elaborated metacommunication?

With these definitional criteria in mind, a review of the studies cited by Lillard et al. (2013) indicates that over half of them appear to have had children engage in behaviors that lacked some of the crucial aspects of this play definition. Many of the activities labeled as pretend play were missing behavioral flexibility, intrinsic motivation, and/or metacommunicative intent. Although some of the observational and self-report studies may have captured child activity as true pretense, the experimental and training studies are particularly suspect on these grounds. Even the observational studies were conducted in settings where various constrictions on pretense, such as time or objects available for pretense, might have occurred. Some correlational studies used naturalistic samples of each child's pretense of less than 5 minutes a day; pretense time periods used in the experimental studies usually ranged from 3 to 9 or 10 minutes! Also, the researchers in many studies, perhaps unfamiliar with the children, provided specific sets of objects and gave directions for the child to begin pretending. Most adults would have difficulty feeling like pretending in such situations, much less children! Whereas the training studies usually involved longer time periods, they were still relatively short, covering about 15 to 30 minutes on 1 or 2 days over a number of weeks.

Furthermore, many studies were, as noted by Lillard et al. (2013), highly directive in terms of play themes and play materials. Moreover, the presence of a potential "audience" in such studies may have changed the nature of pretense from an internally directed to an outwardly directed activity. Adult-designed research settings suggesting limited themes, a small set of pretense resources, laboratory environments, and directions that pretend play must occur in a specific time period can hardly be called research on genuine pretend play. In short, although Lillard et al. questioned some of the studies on the grounds that the children were really involved in construction or other types of play rather than pretense, they did not question whether having an adult telling children that they must pretend is the same thing as allowing children to have time to engage in pretense.

In summary, the studies reviewed by Lillard et al. (2013) may have intended to provide research evidence connecting pretense to other developmental goals, but it is premature to conclude that they provided a test of pretend play's influence on these areas of development when the quality and even actuality of the pretense was suspect. Lillard et al. have done an excellent review of methodological problems with many of these studies that purport to be about pretense, yet because many studies did not test genuine pretend play with essential qualities defined by respected theorists, it is premature to conclude that actual pretend play does not have an association with or effect on other developmental areas.

## Can More Rigorous Research Designs Be Implemented?

A second important issue is to consider what methodologies could foster better pretend play research. Lillard et al. (2013) gave excellent suggestions about ways to design better studies, especially those emphasizing longitudinal information, but, given the issues discussed earlier, it is still problematic as to whether the play under investigation truly captures pretense.

Next, most of the reviewed studies were small in scale with very limited sample sizes, relatively short data collection periods, and probably a limited amount of research funding. As Lillard et al. (2013) noted, a group of these studies were conducted at an earlier time period when research methodology was not as rigorous as it is at the present time. However, even for more recent studies, small sample sizes, limited data collection or training periods, and lack of masked experimenters may have been linked to small budgets. It is rare indeed to see calls for proposals from either governmental units or research foundations that focus on the role of pretense in fostering child development. Most researchers interested in play have had to conduct studies that did not require the extent of funding needed for rigorous, large-scale research.

Lillard et al. (2013) have given a number of suggestions for better experimental research and more carefully conducted training and correlation studies, but there are a few other suggestions that might further this inquiry. First, researchers who wish to continue exploring this topic might replicate some of the earlier studies using methods that eliminate the study flaws. For example, the Smilansky (1968); Dansky (1980); Saltz, Dixon, and Johnson (1977); Smith and Dutton (1979), and a number of other studies were primarily well designed but had a few flaws either in method of data collection, data analysis, or adult actions that made the findings unclear or suspect. By eliminating the flaws and making them longitudinal or cross-sectional studies with larger samples, the more reliable and valid results might clarify the role of pretense in supporting other areas of growth.

Another needed direction is cross-cultural replications of the research. Although Roopnarine and Krishnakumar (2006) reported that play has been observed in many cultural settings, often such play is interspersed with work activity, and if parents are not engaged in fostering pretense with their children, according to these authors, "siblings assume a pivotal role in directing and guiding children's make-believe play" (p. 282). There is a need for much more cross-cultural, comparative research on the ways in which pretense is facilitated, how elaborated it is, and how it influences developmental growth in other cultures.

Finally, the issue of children from "disadvantaged" backgrounds (Dunn & Hughes, 2001) and themes of violence in their play deserves more research attention. Theorists such as Erikson (1977) have asserted that pretense provides children with a valuable method of reenacting important emotional themes and conquering fears. Perhaps these themes need to be played out in safe ways by children who live in violent environments and, once the themes are conquered in pretense, their pretend play might lead them to other themes and greater growth in various developmental areas. Because they may not have had adults or siblings facilitating their pretend play theme development, some longer term research efforts to encourage their growth in pretending by providing peer and adult models using broader themes could be investigated. Such

youth may also need a greater range of life experiences (e.g., the zoo, a train ride, a library visit) so that they can build on these experiences in their pretense. Young children build their pretense on whatever experiences their environment provides. Longitudinal research involving both broadening of their experiences and modeling elaborated pretense could determine whether their violent-themed pretense and its destructive elements could be ameliorated, providing an especially important addition to the literature.

## Does Pretend Play Matter?

In evaluating the many studies discussed by Lillard et al. (2013), one is struck by the intensity of effort made by these researchers, who believe that play is an important phenomenon, to demonstrate its value in regard to other developmental phenomena that the culture has deemed more important than play. This issue, which is rarely addressed even by early childhood professionals who value play, is whether play, and in particular pretend play, has to be justified with evidence that it improves other developmental goals.

In the early to mid-20th century in the United States, when Parten (1933) and others studied the play of children, it seemed to be sufficient to study the phenomenon of play as a valued behavior in itself. As part of the child development movement, play often was seen as one aspect of children's behavior that was of study interest, not in relation to how it helped some other area of development but as an intrinsically important part of young children's lives. Unfortunately, during the latter half of the 20th century and even more so in the early part of the 21st century, play as a "right" and a valued developmental aspect for children has been increasingly threatened by adult-imposed ordering of children's lives (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001).

There are a number of organizations and authors who have pointed with alarm to the changes in American culture that have combined to make the type of extended periods of pretend play that older adults report experiencing when they were young less and less available to children today (e.g., The Association for the Study of Play, the International Play Association). Members of these organizations have noted that the amount of time children have for self-directed play of any type has been decreasing rapidly as after-school lessons, team sports, and technology-driven activities have escalated. Also, outdoor play experiences for children have been greatly reduced (Rivkin, 2006). Much of the time for play experiences in preschools and kindergartens has been co-opted for "learning" activities. Lillard et al. (2013) suggested that schools should not give up "child-centered" learning approaches, describing such environments as involving free choice, interesting hands-on activities, peer interactions, and child intrinsic motivation. That is, they recommend "playful work" classrooms because research indicates such classrooms increase academic outcomes. Although such environments may help children develop adult-desired skills, are they harming the development of another important human skill—the ability to pretend?

It is true that not all young children show a great amount of observable pretense and that many older children engage in pretense only in settings not observable by adults. Still, these private pretense experiences may be a vital element in those children's lives. Present day fascination with video games and other technology-supported pretense, which is now pervasive especially in older children's and adults' private activity, clearly shows that

much pretense involves nonobservable mental activity, with the only observable indication being the click of fingers on keyboards or the pressure of fingers on apps. In explaining why play has been such a pervasive human activity, Ellis (1998) has noted that it may be an adaptation that enabled humans to survive the many environmental uncertainties they have encountered over centuries. He suggested that the most playful humans, who developed the greatest range of adaptive behaviors to draw on when environmental or social conditions changed, are the ones that survived to reproduce in the future, and that these good players are our ancestors.

Unfortunately, American researchers who believe that play, and especially pretend play, is its own phenomenon worth studying as a vital part of children's lives have been increasingly forced to justify play by trying to find evidence of its value for other developmental areas that are deemed more important. But why must researchers find evidence of play's being crucial to other constructs to justify the value of pretense? Instead, they might focus on investigating the essential properties of well-developed pretend play or do longitudinal studies of how various developmental manifestations of play are expressed effectively throughout life. I suggest that research should examine how the increasing emphasis on preschool or kindergarten phonics instruction is negatively affecting pretend play, rather than investigating whether pretend play supports some academic goal!

In sum, although Lillard et al. (2013) have provided a good review of the evidence (and lack of evidence) that pretense fosters academic and cognitive skills, perhaps they also should question whether pretend play has to be studied only as a phenomenon that may or may not affect other developmental domains, or whether it should be studied as a valued phenomenon in its own right. As Dylan Thomas's (1954) description of the intense meaning and relevance of his early pretense suggests, whether or not it is crucial, equifinal, or epiphenomenal for other areas of child development, pretend play does matter:

Though it was only a little park, it held within its borders . . . as many secret places, caverns and forests, prairies, and deserts, as a country somewhere at the end of the sea. . . . And though we would explore it one day . . . from the robbers' den to the pirates' cabin, the highwayman's inn to the cattle ranch . . . yet still the next day, it remained as unexplored as the Poles—a country just born and always changing. . . . (pp. 4–5)

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