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Children's Attitudes Toward Play: An Investigation of Their Context Specificity and Relationship to Organized Sport Experiences

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Beginning with the work of Webb (1969), a line of research has developed attempting to explain how the socialization experiences of children and adolescents help transform their attitudes toward play. In Webb's view, the transformation to a state of being "professionalized" has occurred when an emphasis on equity and fairness, which are pronounced at earlier stages of development, has been replaced by a focus on winning. The body of research that has developed from this original formulation has consistently identified age and gender differences (Loy, Birrell, & Rose, 1976; Maloney & Petrie, 1972; Mantel & VanderVelden, 1971) in play attitudes, with males being more highly professionalized than females, and adolescents and young adults more professionalized than preadolescents. Webb's research identified age, social class, and religious differences in play orientation and made a strong argument that attitudinal transformations represent a coming together of the-worlds of play and work:

Clearly, if nothing else, this investigation demonstrates that participation in the play world is substantially influential in producing that final result, the urban-industrial man. Although it is true that play attitudes, as demonstrated, are extensively influenced by other factors, it is the final isomorphism of the play arena to the economic structure, and the fact of participation in it, at a time when participation in other areas is virtually nonexistent, that makes that participation the significant factor it now appears to be. (Webb, 1969, pp. 177-178)

Whether or not one finds this interpretation persuasive, the content of the literature stemming from Webb's seminal work generally supports the conclusion that the professionalization of play orientations appears to be a function of gender, age, and athletic experience (Albinson, 1973; Vaz, 1974). However, there is some doubt as to which aspects of sport involvement account for attitudinal shifts and at what point in development the athletic experiences become critical. Much of the previous research identifying sport experience as a factor influencing play attitudes has either used college students (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1979), adolescents (Loy et al., 1976; Maloney & Petrie, 1972), or small convenience samples of children (Mantel & VanderVelden, 1971). The latter researchers found that 10- and 11-year-old boys who participated in organized baseball and football showed more professionalized attitudes than did peers who did not participate, but recognized that the attitudes of parents and coaches could have been "as important, if not more important, than the actual participation in the sport or game" (Mantel & VanderVelden, 1971, p. 177).

Aside from the unresolved issue about the influence of athletic experiences, one significant conceptual limitation of the research stemming from Webb's work pertains to the nature of play attitudes themselves. Orientations toward play have been treated as a generalized response to all settings in which sports and games take place, and the possibility that childhood play orientations may differ according to the social context in which play occurs has not been considered.

Although social context has received considerable attention with respect to its impact on the experience of play and its developmental consequences (see Kleiber, 1979; Polgar, 1976), and as a predictor of generalized play attitudes (Maloney & Petrie, 1972), the literature has yet to address the question of whether children may develop play attitudes that are themselves contextually specific. It is conceivable that ongoing cognitive and social development would permit many children to retain their emphasis on equity and fairness in one play context (e.g., neighborhood play) while shifting to a stronger outcome orientation in another (e.g., youth sports). Recent ethnographic research by Fine (1987) has shown that preadolescent boys participating in Little League baseball routinely alter their social behavior in response to contextual changes within the sport setting. Thus, it would not be surprising to find that many preadolescent children are able to distinguish between play settings and adjust their social behavior and personal priorities accordingly.

To address these issues, the objectives of the present research were twofold: (a) to determine the degree to which preadolescent boys and girls report different attitudes toward play in three different childhood contexts-neighborhood play, recess at school, and organized youth sports; and (b) to examine the relationship between the amount of experience in organized youth sports and attitudes toward play in each of the three contexts.

Method

Subjects

Fourth and fifth grade students (N=585) from six elementary schools in a midwestern metropolitan school district completed a questionnaire from which all variables of interest were drawn. The six schools were selected on the basis of geographical dispersion within the city and the willingness of school officials to cooperate in the data collection process. Family socioeconomic status, as determined by free and reduced lunch eligibility, ranged from 36.1 to 74.2 % , with a mean of 52.7 % . Ethnic and racial representation in the schools consisted of American Indian, Asian, Hispanic, Black, and White. The range of White representation was from 52.8 to 80.90% for the six schools, with an average of 72.75%. Blacks accounted for 19.55% of the sample schools' students while other minorities accounted for the remaining 7.7 % .

Instrumentation

An instrument was created and presented to the respondents as a "Kids Sports and Games Survey." The survey contained three sections identifying the contexts of interest-neighborhood play, youth sports, and recess-with each section containing a modified version of Webb's (1969) original forced-choice children's attitudes toward play scale (CATP). The reliability of the original CATP for a sample of youth from Grades 3 to 12 ranged from .90 to .96 (Webb, 1969). Loy et al. (1976) provided support for the construct validity of the CATP by reporting significant positive relationships to Rosenberg's (1955) "success orientation" and "faith in people" scales.

To clearly identify the context of interest, we named the three sections ' ' About Sports and Games in Your Neighborhood,' ' About Playing on Organized Sports Teams," and "About Playing During Recess at School." The modified CATP scales adhered as closely as possible to Webb's original wording, with the actual forced-choice alternatives appearing verbatim, that is, "to play as well as you can," "to beat the other player or team," and "to play the game fairly. ' ' However, to focus the children on each context,

Webb's original wording was changed from "What do you think is most important in playing a game?" to "When playing a game with other kids in your neighborhood what do you think is most important?" Similar alterations were made for the organized sports and recess contexts. To minimize reactivity and order effects, we embedded each modified CA TP scale within a series of questions related to the specific context (e.g., "In the neighborhood where you live, about how many kids would you say there are to play with?") All items were read aloud by a trained research assistant in the presence of classroom teachers who were available to assist children who needed help in understanding the questions.

Data Analysis

From the original rank-ordered ordinal level responses, a 6-point CATP index was generated, as described by Webb (1969, p. 166). Because of the unusual measurement characteristics of the CATP scores, both parametric and nonparametric analyses were employed to investigate context and gender differences. The former consisted of a 2 x 3 repeated-measures ANOVA with gender and play context used to predict CATP scores. Play context was treated as a within-subjects factor in this analysis.

Because the CA TP scale scores are not truly interval level data, a series of five chi-square tests were conducted using Friedman's analysis of variance for rank order data. The first three analyses were tests of gender differences within each play context, while in the fourth and fifth analyses context differences were tested within each gender. To examine the second research question we used a series of Pearson product-moment correlations to determine the relationship between amount of sport experience and CATP scores.

Results

Context Specificity of Play Attitudes

Results for the 2 x 3 (Gender x Play Context) ANOVA yielded significant main effects for sex, $F(1,456)=25.62, p<.001$, and play context, $F(2,912)=26.51, p<.001$, but no interaction, $F(2,912)=.84, p>.05$. The cell means and standard deviations reflected in this analysis are shown in Table 1. An inspection of this table reveals that the gender main effect was obviously the result of higher CATP scores among the males. Post hoc analysis using the Scheffe technique indicated that, for each gender, both organized sports and recess at school were perceived as more competitive contexts than playing with other children in the neighborhood.

Nonparametric analyses of the same variables yielded much the same result as the ANOVA. Significant gender differences were obtained for the neighborhood, $\chi^2(5)=24.96, p<.001$, recess, $\chi^2(5)=32.29, p<.001$, and organized sports, $\chi^2(5) = 12.96, p<.03$, contexts. More important, however, significant differences in CATP scores across the three contexts were found both for males, $\chi^2(2) = 12.05, p<.01$, and females, $\chi^2(2)= 13.81, p<.01$.

To further examine the issue of context specificity, correlation coefficients were computed between the children's CATP scores in each play context. These correlations are shown in Table 2. The lower correlations for the female respondents suggest that their attitudes differ somewhat more from context to context than do the attitudes of their male peers. This may indicate a greater degree of social sensitivity on their part. It is interesting to note that neighborhood play and organized sports were the most closely related contexts among the boys ($r = .53$) but the least related ($r = .25$) for girls.

Relationship Between Play Attitudes and Youth Sport Experience

To examine the relationship between youth sport experiences and children's attitudes toward play, correlation coefficients were computed between the number of years of each child's involvement in organized youth sports and his/her CATP score for each play context. These correlations, shown in Table 3, provide little evidence to indicate that continued involvement in organized youth sport has had a significant professionalizing effect on this group of children. None of the three CA TP scores was significantly related to organized sports experience among the females, while only a marginally significant relationship was detected in the organized sports context for boys ($p < .06$). To examine the possibility that it may be the intensity of involvement in youth sports, rather than its overall duration, that has an impact on children's attitudes, we computed similar correlations between the three CA TP scores and the number of sports teams per year in which each child reported being involved. Nearly identical results to those for duration of involvement were obtained.

One explanation for the failure to find any professionalization effect could well be the restricted range in the years of organized sport involvement (see Table 4). It is evident that while the average respondent in this study had between 1-1/2 to 2 years of organized youth sports experience, approximately one third of the sample had 3 or more years of experience, while one third had no organized experience. A better test of the effect of organized sports experience on attitudes toward play might be obtained by selecting older respondents who would likely have more exposure to high level competition.

Discussion

These results are clearly consistent with the conclusion that treating attitudes toward play as a generalized disposition may be a questionable practice if one wishes to understand attitudinal transformations in response to childhood play experiences. The data indicated that the preadolescent respondents reported more professionalized attitudes toward play in some social contexts than in others. As one might intuitively have predicted, many children reported that winning was more important when playing organized sports than when playing with peers in the neighborhood. Perhaps the truly professionalized child is one who ignores or fails to recognize such contextual distinctions, transferring the values more appropriate to organized sports contexts to more informal settings such as neighborhood play.

Also worthy of comment are the findings concerning school recess as a play context. The schoolyard context was generally perceived as similar to organized sports in that winning was valued and seen as significantly more important than it was in the neighborhood context. This result may be of considerable interest to teachers and administrators in elementary education, although its explanation is not totally clear. One possibility is that school itself is perceived by many children as a context in which social comparison is inevitable, and that classroom rivalry spills over into a concern for the status associated with physical prowess in the schoolyard. Another possibility is that the presence of adults, even in a supervisory capacity, serves as a cue signaling the appropriateness of social comparison. Whatever the explanation, it seems clear that a different set of play priorities were expressed in the schoolyard versus the neighborhood.

Some developmental theorists (e.g., Devereaux, 1976; Kleiber, 1979; Polgar, 1976) have argued that informal neighborhood play settings are superior learning environments in terms of their potential contribution to social and moral development during childhood. Our results may be encouraging to

those who hold that position, insofar as they suggest the possibility that such contexts may be "robust" or relatively resistant to the professionalization process set up in more formal, adult-directed achievement settings.

One issue arising from these results is the interpretation of findings from previous studies using the generalized CA TP scale. The meaning and significance of much of this literature may require reexamination in light of the present findings . It seems possible that the context in which respondents have been contacted or recruited (e.g., Little League, intramural sports) could have considerable influence on their CATP scores through the creation of an implicit contextual cue. Although more research is obviously needed, it seems reasonable to recommend that future studies consider social context more carefully in investigating the development of attitudes toward play. The results at hand suggest that these attitudes are more complex and varied than was previously thought.

Table 1
CATP Means and Standard Deviations for Three Play Contexts

Sex	N		Neighborhood	Sports	Recess
Males	256	<i>M</i>	2.23	2.66	2.81
		<i>SD</i>	1.57	1.65	1.76
Females	253	<i>M</i>	1.66	2.21	2.05
		<i>SD</i>	1.07	1.39	1.37
Total	509	<i>M</i>	1.93	2.43	2.43
		<i>SD</i>	1.37	1.54	1.62

Table 2
Correlations Between CATP Scores for Three Play Contexts

Context	Boys			Girls		
	Nbhd.	Sports	Recess	Nbhd.	Sports	Recess
Neighborhood	1.00	.53	.52	1.00	.25	.30
Sports		1.00	.40		1.00	.47
Recess			1.00			1.00

Note: All correlations significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3
Correlations Between Years of Organized Sport Experience and Degree of Professionalization of Attitudes Toward Play

Contexts	Boys	Girls
Neighborhood	.01	.00
Sports	.10*	-.04
Recess	.02	-.07

* $p < .06$

Table 4
Years of Organized Youth Sports Involvement

Years	Boys		Girls	
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
None	68	26.6	76	30.0
1	58	22.7	60	23.7
2	41	16.0	46	18.2
3 or more	89	34.6	71	28.1

Boys: *M* = 1.98; *SD* = 1.76.

Girls: *M* = 1.67; *SD* = 1.58.

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