2008

Perspectives about occupational justice: can poverty and occupational deprivation influence child development?

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Perspectives about Occupational Justice

Can Poverty and Occupational Deprivation Influence Child Development?

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This paper is concerned with the interrelation between poverty and occupational deprivation. These terms and the relations between them are complex and contextually bound. However, an understanding of the transactions between them offers a unique way of appreciating the long-term influences that poverty can have on the skills and competencies of individuals. To illustrate, we use the occupation of play as an example of how poverty can shape the developmental outcomes of children who are deprived of it, thus laying the foundation for potential skill deficits throughout their lifespan. During the course of this essay, we offer you some provocative questions to consider.

Poverty

Poverty is the state of not having enough resources to meet basic human needs such as adequate food, clothing, water, and housing in a particular time and place.[1] Poverty also includes a limited amount of nonmaterial resources possessed by an individual such as emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical skills.[2,3] Poverty leaves people feeling vulnerable to those in power with abundant resources, shame in their circumstances, anxiety about their families, and hopeless about changing their circumstances. While poverty may in some instances be considered a problem created by individual human behavior, more commonly forces beyond the individual in the social and political environment perpetuate socioeconomic inequities within society. Consequently, poverty must be addressed at both an individual and societal level. Poverty is a pervasive problem in the developing world with 218.7 million or 39% of children living in poverty.[4] In comparison, 13 million or 17% of children in the United States live in families below the poverty level.[5] While the number of children living in poverty is much lower in the United States, these children, like those in the developing world, experience the negative influence of poverty on the development of optimal human potential.[2,4] Government programming such as access to clean water, health nutrition, education, family, and child development programs can do much to buffer the effects of poverty on the lives of children and their families. Adequate and just distribution of basic resources across a society can ameliorate the abject conditions of those living in impoverished circumstances and improve their chances for engaging in those activities or occupations that not only support their health and well being, but also establish a developmental foundation for future adult competency.[6]

Occupational Injustice and Deprivation

The term *occupation* has a much broader meaning than merely employment. Occupations include all of the ordinary things people do every day, from caring for themselves and their families, to their work, to their involvement in community life, and to their play and leisure activities.[7] A lack of access to basic human occupations can lead to occupational deprivation, defined as "the prolonged preclusion from engagement in occupation of necessity and/or meaning due to factors that stand outside the control of the individual"[8] (p-222). The term occupational deprivation, therefore, draws attention to the broad social and political forces that deprive people from engagement in meaningful activities due to circumstances beyond their control.[9] These inequities when imposed upon individuals by external forces can be viewed as an *occupational injustice*, in that some members of society have greater privileges than others and more freedom to engage in the basic everyday activities or occupations of their choice.[10]

The Perspective of Play

A startling example of occupational deprivation that can have far reaching consequences is that of play deprivation in children. Play is defined as a self-initiated behavior with purposes that include exploration, enjoyment, and learning.[10,11] Play is observed universally; crossing all human cultures,[9,12] and

indeed, is also observed in other species.[13] Play, in different forms, can be observed as solitary, with peers, with older or younger children, with parents, or with other adults. Play has forms that use objects or toys, but some forms may transcend them; the only absolute regarding play is that it is self-directed, enjoyable, and has some inherent meaning. As a universal, purposeful behavior, play can also be considered a human occupation and like other occupations, play can stimulate and support optimal human development. Forms of play often have cultural norms and may look quite different in diverse contexts.[12] For example, Mayan children in Belize do not engage in play in the same way that middle class children do in the US. They often have no toys and are busy helping with family chores such as cleaning the floor, washing clothes, etc. before they are 5 years old. However, while engaging in these activities they do so in a playful manner that contains elements of play such as self-direction, enjoyment, and meaningfulness.[14] Thus, poverty itself may not always restrict participation of play.

On the other hand, poverty may jeopardize children's nutrition to the extent that they no longer have any energy to engage in play. Furthermore, poverty may require children to enter the work force at a young age. In both instances, poverty may have imposed a form of occupational deprivation by constricting choices in occupations that are atypical for age and culture. Similarly, we can also define play deprivation as an occupational injustice that should be addressed through political means in order to assure more adequate distribution of basic opportunities within cultural experiences across a society.[8] Play in childhood has special meaning because it is one of the most pervasive ways in which a child engages with his/her environment. Indeed, children, when given freedom to express themselves, often participate in play or playful behavior when they are engaged in some other form of activity such as eating, dressing, or a structured task like school work or household chores. Thus, play and playfulness set the tone for many of a child's transactions with objects and people in his/her environment.

In early childhood, the brain and body are under construction; both do not mature in optimal ways without rich environmental experiences and sufficient nutrition. Play that offers curious exploration of objects and things in the environment enriches and enhances early brain development including neuronal differentiation, or the increase of interconnections between neurons in the brain. An increased number of interconnections in the brain supports more sophisticated cognitive and movement abilities, and is associated with optimal developmental outcomes.[4] Meaningful play also reinforces environmental learning which further strengthens key neuronal interconnections while eliminating others. This neuronal pruning is also a way that the brain becomes more efficient, and can only happen during childhood when the brain is shaping itself in response to environmental interactions. So, in other words, what looks like block building and a simple game of hide and seek in childhood, are really part of the human occupational experience that contributes to later skills in adulthood.

Given the importance of play occupations in development, what might be the implications of not being able to participate in play? And under what other conditions might play be restricted? We argue that under certain conditions of poverty, children may be *occupationally deprived* in play and that this deprivation can have long-lasting effects for later life. We offer three scenarios to illustrate this point.

Scenario One: Access to Safe Play Area

"He keeps gazing through the window wondering why he can't be at the playground."

Jerome's mother describes her fear of letting her son play with his peers in the nearby park in the wake of a recent spate in drug trading and gang violence. Jerome is an eight-year-old boy who lives in low-income housing in an inner city neighborhood of Detroit. Because he can't play outside, Jerome has resorted to watching TV and playing video games within the confines of his home. Children's engagement in outdoor play such as in public parks has a positive impact on their development of key physical attributes such as strength, endurance, motor skills and coordination.[15] At the same time, children in low income families who in effect live in predominantly unsafe neighborhoods are naturally restricted by their parents from playing outdoors.[16,17] Studies have revealed that parents who perceived their neighborhoods to be unsafe for playing were four times more likely to have children who were obese and unhealthy.[18] However, the creation of safe play areas for low income children in inner cities has resulted in notable increases in children's physical play combined with a decrease in sedentary activities.[19] What do you think are some of the short-term and long-term developmental implications for children deprived of outdoor play? As concerned citizens, what are some of our social responsibilities in helping create an atmosphere for safe outdoor play?

Scenario Two: Lack of Opportunity for Play

"My brother does the same, why can't I? We both keep our farm running."

Raj, a 10 year old child in rural India, was forced to leave school and now toils in the field with his brother. A year ago, his father committed suicide because he could not handle the burden of an agricultural debt. Raj used to value the time spent playing in the fields, but he acknowledges his pride about being the breadwinner for his family. One of the core factors of play deprivation in the wake of poverty is simply the lack of choice or opportunity. There is an anonymous saying that "labor ends at the time of child birth." For many children across the globe, a different form of labor dawns on them. Millions of children between the ages of 5 and 14 years, predominantly in the developing nations of Africa, Asia and South America, are forced into menial labor under inhumane and adverse conditions. These children at their prime age of play are driven by survival instincts to contribute to their household income, thereby sacrificing their opportunities to play. Their family in turn would likely consider play as an unreasonable and unaffordable *luxury or commodity*.[20]

Regardless of the economic and familial dynamics of child labor, the ramifications on play behavior and child development can be detrimental. What may be the socio-emotional consequences of foregoing play in one's childhood? How does forced labor strip children of their playfulness and how might it affect their personality, intellect and future outlook?

Scenario 3: Parenting Skills in Play

"She's a blob...I don't even know what to say to her. I can't wait for her to do more than just make goo-goo noises and stare at me."

Rosemary gave birth 3 months ago to Ocean, a little girl who was born thin and frail, probably due to her mother's smoking during the pregnancy. Rosemary is a single mother who dropped out of high school when she was 16 years old. Rosemary lived below the poverty level, has little contact with her own family and has no good role models for how to raise a child. As a result, Rosemary does not know how to or understand why she should engage her baby in vocal and social play and at the moment finds no joy in motherhood. Second to early nutrition, the quality of the care-giving environment has the most critical impact on child outcomes.[4, 21] Furthermore, maternal education is closely linked to memory and intellectual capacities in young children[22] as well as early language skills.[23] As a result, children who are born to parents who interact minimally with them are at a disadvantage from the beginning and are, in a sense, deprived of many of the rich and playful interpersonal occupations of early childhood. What other developmental implications might Rosemary's lack of parenting skills have for Ocean? What kind of programs would help Rosemary to develop more effective parenting skills? Are you aware of resources that could help this mother?

Conclusion

In this paper we described the concepts of occupation, occupational deprivation and justice/injustice and linked these to poverty. We discussed how play deprivation, one form of occupational injustice, could affect the life trajectory of individuals by impairing the early childhood development in mind and body. We presented three scenarios to help illustrate our point. We offer you the challenge to consider other occupations that might be affected by poverty at any time over an individual's lifespan. How might other forms of occupational deprivation affect human beings?

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