

REVIEWS

РЕЦЕНЗИИ

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Children's Play in the Limelight of Contemporary Psychological Concepts. Reflections after Reading the Textbook about Play

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Abstract

The article is devoted to consideration and analysis of the new textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play”, published in 2024. The authors strove to carry out such an analysis not simply in the framework of a review, but to consider the content of the textbook through the prism of contemporary views of psychologists on children's play in early and preschool age, taking account of classical and non-classical (in the terminology of V.T. Kudryavtsev) theories, primarily from the position of cultural-historical psychology. Thus, the main goal of the theoretical study was to analyze the content of the textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play”, identifying the positions of the authors on the key issues of the phenomenon under consideration in the context of current scientific ideas about play in early and preschool ages. The analysis conducted showed the presence of substantial differences between the authors in understanding and interpreting some aspects of children's play, which once more indicates the phenomenon complexity under study and its insufficient development of not only the external manifestations of children's play activity, but also the internal processes that generate this activity, both in theoretical and empirical aspects. At the same time, according to the authors of the article, the publication of the textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play” is undoubtedly a significant and essential step in psychological and pedagogical science to embrace both the well-studied aspects of children's play and still unresolved problems of this phenomenon.

Keywords: cultural-historical approach, children's play, early age, preschool age, adult intervention, digital games.

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Детская игра в оптике современных психологических представлений. Размышления по прочтении учебника об игре

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Резюме

Статья посвящена рассмотрению и анализу нового учебника «Игра ребенка раннего и дошкольного возраста», опубликованного в 2024 г. При этом авторы стремились осуществить такой анализ не просто в жанре рецензии, а рассмотреть содержание учебника через призму современных взглядов психологов на игру детей раннего и дошкольного возраста с учетом классических и не(о)классических (в терминологии В.Т. Кудрявцева) теорий, прежде всего с позиций культурно-исторической психологии. Таким образом, была реализована основная цель теоретического исследования — провести анализ содержания учебника «Игра ребенка раннего и дошкольного возраста», выявив позиции авторов по ключевым проблемам рассматриваемого феномена в контексте современных научных представлений об игре в раннем и дошкольном возрастах. Проведенный анализ показал наличие существенных расхождений авторов в понимании и трактовке некоторых аспектов детской игры, что в очередной раз свидетельствует о сложности изучаемого феномена и недостаточной разработанности как в теоретическом, так и в эмпирическом плане не только внешних проявлений игровой активности детей, но и внутренних процессов, порождающих эту активность. Вместе с тем, по мнению авторов статьи, выход в свет учебника «Игра ребенка раннего и дошкольного возраста» без сомнения является значимым и существенным шагом психолого-педагогической науки в освещении как хорошо изученных сторон детской игры, так и остающихся пока неразрешенными проблем этого феномена.

Ключевые слова: культурно-исторический подход, детская игра, ранний возраст, дошкольный возраст, вмешательство взрослого, цифровые игры

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Introduction

After careful examination of the textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play” (I.N. Galasyuk [et al.]; edited by I.N. Galasyuk, A.A. Shvedovskaya, E.V. Bodrova, O.V. Rubtsova. — Moscow: Yurait Publishing House, 2024. — 424 p.), some ideas arose related to the need not only to respond to this extraordinary event — the publication of a textbook entirely devoted to the problem of children’s play — but also to express some thoughts regarding the phenomenon of play under consideration through the prism of psychological ideas reflected in contemporary foreign and domestic publications.

Domestic researchers developed many theories of children’s play (Venger, Mikhailenko, 1978; Vygotsky, 1966, 2023; Kravtsov, Kravtsova, 2017; Trifonova, 2022; Elkonin, 1978). Starting from the works of L.S. Vygotsky within the framework of cultural-historical psychology (Vygotsky, 2023) and J. Piaget and his followers, who spoke from the standpoint of genetic psychology, time and again the focus of attention of psychologists has been on play. Many psychological articles and stand-alone

books have been published about it over the past hundred years in Russia and abroad. However, as V.T. Kudryavtsev justifiably notes, after the famous Symposium on the Psychology and Pedagogy of Children’s Play, organized by the Institute of Preschool Education of the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences of the RSFSR in October 1964, “no attempts were made to discuss the nature and development paths of children’s (preschool) play comprehensively in our country” (Galasyuk et al., 2024, pp. 12–13).

The publication of the textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play” has partly compensated for the absence of discussions and debates on this issue for the past half-century and more and enables not only students but also all specialists interested in this topic to familiarize themselves with a whole range of views on the phenomenon of children’s play from different sides and in different aspects, collected under one cover. This fact seems to be extremely important for some reasons. Despite a significant number of studies of this phenomenon, conducted both in our country and abroad, the secret of children’s play remains not revealed completely. More-

over, one can probably state that the deeper it is studied, the more it generates new enigmas. In connection with the foregoing, the semi-legendary story comes to mind about Albert Einstein, who having met and talked with Jean Piaget, a great Swiss psychologist, exclaimed: "How simple is what I do compared to what you do! Theoretical physics is child's play compared to the mysteries of children's play!"

It should be noted that when analyzing the content of the textbook, one can identify not only the key topics clearly outlined by the authors, but also those scientific categories that stay in the limelight among many of the specialists who undertook the writing of this serious academic piece of work. These are such categories as the structure of preschoolers' play, typology of play, parental responsiveness, play in the era of "digital childhood", adult intervention in children's play, and many others. Among these categories, such a category as children's subjectivity was mentioned, but it was not analyzed thoroughly. In several paragraphs, the authors turned their attention to the fact that the child's subjectivity manifests itself and develops in play, but the essence of this concept, its characteristics, psychological mechanisms, and the possibilities of play in the development of children's subjectivity were not given in detail.

In this regard, the authors of the article set their main objective: to carry out the analysis of the contents of the textbook "Early and Preschool Child Play", trying to determine the viewpoints of the authors on the key issues of the phenomenon under consideration in the context of contemporary scientific ideas and concepts about play in early and preschool age.

Content analysis of the textbook "Early and Preschool Child Play"

The structure of the textbook is subject to the thematic principle: the main text was divided not into sections or parts, but into the three most important themes, which contain paragraphs. Each of the paragraphs deals with a certain aspect of the corresponding topic and ends with questions about the text, an educational assignment, and a reference list. Almost all paragraphs were written by different authors (with few rare cases when one or two authors are credited with writing two or even three paragraphs). Perhaps there is no need to describe in detail how the paragraphs were distributed between the authors of the textbook — the reader can find out from the preface of the book at will.

It is not possible to analyze the content of each paragraph in detail due to the limited volume of the article. Let us pay attention only to some of the texts which, in our opinion, are the most significant.

This primarily concerns two paragraphs that open the first theme and, in fact, set, like a tuning fork, the meaningful tone for all subsequent educational materials. This first theme was "Fundamental and Applied Problems of Children's Play". It is not surprising that the first "ringleaders" entering the problematic "field of

play" were two renowned specialists in preschool childhood, two doctors of psychological sciences V.T. Kudryavtsev and G.G. Kravtsov.

The first of them draws the reader's attention to how play influences the development of a child's imagination. He convincingly proves that "reducing imagination to one of its components — the operation of sign-symbolic substitution — is a principal one, but, alas, hitherto a widespread psychological prejudice" (Galasyuk et al., p. 23). This issue was partly touched on by him earlier (Kudryavtsev, 1999).

G.G. Kravtsov proposes no less profound and fundamental approach to the problem of children's play. The same way as V.T. Kudryavtsev, paying tribute to the primary imagination as a prerequisite for children's play and imagination in the ultimate result as an independent psychological function (according to L.S. Vygotsky), G.G. Kravtsov pays special attention to the relationship between play and learning. At the same time, the author believes that "... the groundless use of play in teaching children often does more harm than good, adversely affecting the natural development of a play activity itself and does not ensure effective learning, which entails the mental development of children" (Galasyuk et al., p. 36).

Let us consider some more important ideas formulated by the authors in different paragraphs and in different topics covered in the textbook. The idea of the necessity for children's development of free, independent, spontaneous, creative play, initiated and "generated" by the child himself, literally runs through the entire textbook as a common thread. For instance, E.V. Trifonova quotes a very important assertion by A.V. Zaporozhets that play "...equips a preschooler with accessible methods of active recreation, modeling with the help of external, objective actions of such content that would be unattainable under other conditions and, consequently, could not be truly mastered" (Zaporozhets, 1986, p. 241).

In the first theme, we found the paragraph devoted to children's play in the context of digital transformation to be quite interesting (by the way, the authors address the issues of play in the digital age, children's use of games on various gadgets, and "digital childhood" in different places in the textbook).

This theme is extremely topical at present. The analysis of play in "digital childhood" by O.V. Rubtsova, the author of this paragraph, is worthy of note.

In addition, she examines such an important concept as digital toys and gives their classification. Here, one of the latest and most popular classifications is of great interest, within which digital toys are divided into three categories: interactive, smart, and connected. This classification is based on the following criteria:

- 1) the level of technological complexity of a toy.
- 2) the way of interaction with a toy.
- 3) possible types of activities with a toy (the degree of autonomy and interactivity of a toy) (Hall, Paracha, Flint, 2021).

In the framework of the second theme "Play interaction between a child and an adult", the latent discussion that unfolded on the pages of the textbook about the

degree of possible adult intervention in children's play is of undoubted interest. The position of I.N. Galasyuk appears to be very important, which shows that in play and the play space, the leading role should be given to the child, and the adult only creates conditions for his self-realization and the embodiment of his capabilities in play actions. For example, the work of A.N. Yakshina, T.N. Le-van (Yakshina, Le-van, 2023) is devoted to the study of the issue of guidance in children's play by an adult, in particular, by a teacher, in contemporary conditions. It is impossible not to pay attention to the fact that there is a new round of interest in spontaneous, creative play of a child in contemporary research projects (Aleksandrova, 2023).

In the third theme "Children's play in diagnostics and remediation" the most interesting material is related to the "Fairytale semantic differential" technique developed by V.F. Petrenko and O.V. Mitina. Due to a lack of psychodiagnostic techniques for young children and the obvious complexity of carrying out a diagnostic assessment during this period (V.A. Yakimenko, among others, wrote about this (Yakimenko, 2021)), the emergence of this technique is an important event in the problematic field of children's play.

The technique "Playing House" proposed by A.A. Shvedovskaya is no less interesting tool for studying the child's experiences and perception of parent-child relationships. One of her first publications on the problem of using games as a psychodiagnostic tool came out more than twenty years ago (Shvedovskaya, 2003).

The developments by N.V. Zvereva and L.V. Tokarskaya, dedicated to the diagnosis of parental perception of a special child's play, as well as the characteristics of the play activities of children with limited abilities (CLA) and approaches to its evaluation will undoubtedly be useful for specialists working with children with limited abilities. It should be noted that in recent years, there is an upsurge of specialists' interest in studying the games of children with various somatic and mental disorders (Kolyagina, Kozlova, 2023).

A vast array of methodology tools placed in the Appendices can be considered a tremendous advantage of the textbook under consideration. Here students and specialists who are already working will find the most interesting psychodiagnostic techniques for studying and evaluating children's play, as well as recommendations for parents on interacting with the child in the process of play.

A brief analysis of the content of the multi-page textbook "Early and Preschool Child Play" allows us to speak about many fruitful ideas expressed by its authors and those categories that were considered and discussed above.

Such concepts as "subject", "subjectivity" and "subjective perception" are rarely found in the text. However, no detailed analysis of the manifestation of subjectivity and its development in the process of unfolding children's play could be found in the textbook. On page 315 there is a reference to the Diagnostics of subjective manifestations of preschool children in play activity pro-

posed by O.V. Akulova and O.V. Solntseva. They suggest identifying the following indicators of preschoolers' subjective manifestations in the process of sociodramatic and directing games:

- interest in participating in story games
- interest in story games, their content
- selectivity, independence, and creativity
- communicative and play skills
- social circle in a game (Galasyuk et al., 2024).

However, the indicators of children's manifestations of subjectivity in play were not disclosed in detail. Meanwhile, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the phenomenon of subjectivity in the context of children's play. Reading the textbook "Early and Preschool Child Play" gave rise to a wish, which is justified in our opinion, to complement the authors' reasoning with a reflection on the relationship between play and the development of children's subjectivity.

The content of the new textbook in the context of modern psychological concepts of the game

A wide range of opinions about the essence, structure, criteria, nature, dynamic characteristics, and other attributes of play emerges, as a consequence of the enigmatic character of the phenomenon of play in early and preschool childhood (however, this enigmatic character persists in older ages).

When a textbook is created by a large team of authors (and by the way, there are 25 of them, all of them are excellent specialists in the field of preschool children's play), the situation of different opinions inevitably arises. It is connected, apparently, with the situation natural for any scientific milieu (it seems, for the psychological one especially), when researchers have different views on one and the same subject.

When it comes to such an extremely complex psychological phenomenon as children's play, opinions turn out to be not only different in some respects, but often simply a polar opposite. The authors also evaluate differently the views of quite authoritative experts in the field of children's play. For example, someone criticizes E.O. Smirnova's position, and someone constantly quotes her works, considering the understanding of arbitrariness in children's play proposed by her as the only correct one.

Perhaps, one thing that unites the positions of the authors of the textbook under consideration is the reliance on the ideas of the cultural-historical approach and, first of all, on the most important scientific statements and postulates on the essence of children's play formulated by L.S. Vygotsky. However, sometimes both the understanding of these postulates and the conclusions arising from them, according to the authors, turn out to be different again.

When dealing with the most important problematic issues raised in the first theme of the textbook "Fundamental and Applied Problems of Children's Play", we paid attention to the first paragraph of this theme writ-

ten by V. Kudryavtsev. His main idea, in our opinion, is not that he analyzed the role of play in the development of a child's imagination (L.S. Vygotsky wrote about this as early as L.S. Vygotsky), but in a new understanding of the essence of children's play in its connection with meaning.

Pointing out the fact that the “non-(neo)classical” ideas of L.S. Vygotsky should underlie the understanding of children's play, he emphasized (partly engaging in a controversy with D.B. Elkonin) that play is not just handing down to children and their comprehension of historically given “canons of adulthood” or a way of modeling social relations, for the child it turns out to be “a form of self-attitude, where the immediate and more distant prospect of personal growth is constructed and conditionally “tested” in terms of meaning” (Galasyuk et al, 2024, c. 29). In other words, the category of meaning for V.T. Kudryavtsev, which is closely connected with the categories of imagination and personality, comes to the fore in understanding children's play. In this respect, his ideas are consonant with the position of A.G. Asmolov (The Worlds and Meanings of Alexander Asmolov (Conversation with a Scientist), 2024).

Such an authoritative scientist as G.G. Kravtsov advocates no less original and, to a certain extent, unexpected position. For example, he believes that didactic games do not exist at all from the psychological point of view, that this is a special activity. Moreover, he adheres to a fundamentally different position, as compared to the representatives of the activity approach, regarding will and arbitrariness, which, of course, play a very important role in children's play, but cannot be considered as different abilities, which E.O. Smirnova wrote about, for example. G.G. Kravtsov asserts that there is a significant and essential connection of genetic continuity between will and arbitrariness. The author discerned external, activity consciousness and internal introspective consciousness. Then there is an extremely important statement that contradicts A.N. Leontiev's point of view: “From these positions, what we are used to calling children's play activity in fact is no activity at all, but introspection of the emotional and semantic sphere of the psyche but carried out in a form accessible to preschool children, namely, in external expressive actions with substitute objects and with their bodies” (Galasyuk et al., 2024, p. 46). Of course, even many of the authors of the textbook in question may disagree with this position, but, in our opinion, it is quite convincing and deserves careful attention.

In general, G.G. Kravtsov's criticism of the approach of A.N. Leontiev and his followers regarding the understanding of the essence of motive and the role of the child's motivation and need sphere in the play process seems, in our opinion, to be very well founded.

O.V. Rubtsova suggested important ideas and gave relevant information that would undoubtedly be of interest to all those who are immersed in the problems of contemporary children's play.

Her analysis of the foreign researchers' works oriented to our domestic theories of play is very interesting.

Firstly, O.V. Rubtsova notes that in English-language literature, such terms as connected play and digital play are used to describe contemporary children's play. Thus, when considering play from the standpoint of the cultural-historical concept, O. Marsh (2017) acted as a supporter of the theory of connected play, and M. Fleeer (2016) developed the idea of digital play. Secondly, it is worth paying attention to a very important idea suggested by O.V. Rubtsova (Rubtsova, 2019, 2024), that a virtual game situation is by no means an analogue of an imaginary situation in a traditional game, which L.S. Vygotsky wrote about. We can find similar ideas about “digital” games and toys in other modern publications (Tokarchuk, Salomatova, Gavrilova, 2024).

In the second theme, in our opinion, the paragraph written by E.G. Yudina is of particular importance. As E.G. Yudina points out, an opinion shared by almost everyone has emerged in recent years that the “disappearance” of children's free play is related to the utilitarian-pragmatic position of adults, expressed in constant attempts to use play as a learning resource for preparing children for school and, in general, for the future. Owing to parents' demands, teachers of preschool educational institutions are forced to take control of children's play into their own hands. However, E.G. Yudina showed in her studies that the reason for the “oppression” of play in kindergartens is not the parents' attitude to the priority of preparation for school (in the survey to determine the list of the main objectives of preschool educational institutions, compiled on the basis of parents' opinions, preparation for school as an objective of a nursery school lies in fourth or fifth place among parents), but the fact that the current generation of parents was deprived of play in childhood and therefore they do not understand why their children need play. That is why, they put children's play in last place in the list of preschool educational institution tasks (Galasyuk et al., 2024). It is worth noting that among the issues raised in the textbook and those problems related to preschoolers' play that, in the opinion of the authors, are still awaiting their solution, the issue of the child's subjectivity development in the process of children's play was not considered deeply enough — contrary to what it deserves.

Conclusions

1. The publication of the textbook “Early and Preschool Child Play” (I.N. Galasyuk [et al.]; edited by I.N. Galasyuk, A.A. Shvedovskaya, E.V. Bodrova, O.V. Rubtsova. — Moscow: Yurait Publishing House, 2024. — 424 p.) can be considered an important event both for those who are just studying psychological science and for the scientific psychological community in general, especially for specialists dealing with the problems of early and preschool ages and the psychological content of children's play.

2. The textbook brings up several questions regarding the phenomenon of children's play that have remained unresolved in psychological and pedagogical science: the

structure of play in early and preschool childhood, the criteria and typology of play, the manifestation and development of various mental functions in play, the role of an adult in children's play and the required and sufficient degree of his intervention in children's play, the specific features of contemporary play of preschoolers and its specificity in the space of "digital transformation" and many others. The positions of the authors on these issues sometimes differ quite significantly, which gives an opportunity us to consider the new textbook as some sort of the field for scientific discussions.

3. Among the abundance of the categories examined in detail in the framework of the above-mentioned issues (parental responsiveness, play in the era of "digital childhood", adult intervention in children's play, etc.), a very important problem of children's subjectivity was left out of the discussion, that develops in the process of play.

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4. The study prospects are, first of all, the organization and implementation of experimental studies aimed at examining children's play as a space for the development of the child's subjectivity.

Limitations. When generalizing the results, the following should be identified as limitations: consideration of psychological problems of play in early and preschool childhood is mainly based on the content of the textbook "Early and Preschool Child Play" and sources related to its content, therefore some significant works devoted to these problems were left out. The main theoretical postulates on children's subjectivity in the context of play were formulated without involving empirical data; the theory of human subjectivity cannot be recognized to be developed completely, which determines some schematic character, incomplete coverage of all the specifics of the subjectivity development in the early and preschool ages, outlined in this textbook.

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