

The Meaning of Maternal Support and its Effect on the Complexity of Play for Children with Cognitive Deficits

Chrysta Storm
UC Davis Children's Hospital
CAARE Center
Anh Dao-Tran
Michelle A. Culver
Susan G. Timmer

Pretend play is an important indicator of normal cognitive development. It is typically seen as early as 24 months, increasing until about 48 months, and declining as children enter school (Fein, 1981). Warm and supportive parenting behavior is an important predictor of greater complexity in children's play (Beckwith, 1985; Fiese, 1990); and the quality of children's play is strongly related to healthy cognitive development (Smith et al., 2000). Studies suggest that children, regardless of cognitive differences, will show increased symbolic play if they have a sophisticated social partner during play (Cielinski & Vaughn, 1995). Mothers of children with cognitive deficits have been found to be more controlling and intrusive during play than mothers of cognitively normal children (Cielinski & Vaughn, 1995). However, it is possible that mothers' controlling behavior is a response to the children's greater need, encouraging more complex play. We do not know whether warmth and a supportive presence encourage greater complexity of play in children with cognitive deficits as it does among typically developing children.

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between the complexity of children's play and mothers' emotional availability in children with normal vs. below average cognitive functioning. The participants were 87 biological mother-child dyads who were referred to Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) for treatment of the child's disruptive behaviors. Dyads were separated into two groups based on the child's cognitive functioning level: 45 with low cognitive ability and 42 in the average range, per scores on either the K-BIT or PPVT-III. Mother-child interactions were coded using the Child's Play coding system (CP) and the Emotional Availability Scales (EAS, 3rd Ed.; Biringen, 2000). Results of analyses revealed that the relationship between mothers' passivity and the amount of time NOT playing varied by children's cognitive ability. The more passive mothers of children in the low cognitive group were, the less time children spent playing (i.e., the more time they spent NOT playing), while children in the average range spent more time playing when mothers were passive.

First Author

Chrysta Storm
UC Davis, Children's Hospital
CAARE Center
3300 Stockton Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95820
cmstorm@ucdavis.edu
(916) 734-4205

Subsequent Author

Anh Dao-Tran
UC Davis Children's Hospital
CAARE Center
3300 Stockton Blvd.
Sacramento, CA 95820
akdaotran@gmail.com
(916) 734-4205