Play in Mayan Children

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KEY WORDS
• culture
• play activities
• playfulness

OBJECTIVE. The purpose of this study was to describe the characteristics of play activities and playfulness in a group of Mayan children in southern Belize.

METHOD. This qualitative study involved participant observation in the daily occupations of 20 children from five Mayan families over a 2-week period. Analysis of the field notes, using open and closed coding, revealed themes specific to customs of child rearing, play activities, and playfulness.

FINDINGS. The primacy of adult work is a major cultural principle that influences Mayan children's daily occupations. Parents did not encourage play but permitted play if it did not interfere with work. Children found ways to integrate play activities and playfulness into their daily occupations.

CONCLUSION. The statement, “play is a child's major occupation,” may not be a universally held belief. Parental values and customs of child rearing should be considered in order to provide culturally sensitive and relevant services.


“Whether play is as prevalent and serves the same functions in all cultures has never been adequately examined.” (Gaskins, 1999, p. 46)

In the field of occupational therapy, play is valued as a major occupation in which people engage throughout their lives (Parham & Primeau, 1997). Play is thought to be an essential ingredient of a healthy lifestyle (Parham, 1996) and is recognized as the primary occupation of children (Li, Bundy, & Beer, 1995; Morrison & Metzger, 2001). For these reasons, it is critical for occupational therapists to study play and how it varies with age, personal values, gender, culture, and context.

Much of play literature is derived from research on middle-class children in Western contexts (Fleer, 1996; Goncu, Tuermer, Jain, & Johnson, 1999). Such research has led to the development of developmental theories guided by the assumptions that play is a universal activity and that it promotes development. In the absence of extensive cross-cultural studies, taxonomies of play that are typically based on the American majority culture have been applied universally in the evaluation and intervention of children (Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994). When considering the origin of these dominant theories of play, we may need to relabel much of what we consider “play” as “Western play” (Fleer). In the United States, play activities are strongly valued for cognitive, social, and emotional benefits (Fleer). A concern with this perspective is that studies comparing and contrasting children from diverse ethnic groups with the American majority run the risk of placing value judgments on the minority group if its play differs. In many
instances, a deficit interpretation will be assigned to the minority group when compared with the majority culture (Fleer; Soto & Negron, 1994).

Confusion regarding a definition of play may exist because play is a very different phenomenon depending on the context in which it takes place (Harkness & Super, 1986; Parham & Primeau, 1997). Recent theorists argue that the content, structure, role, and development of play are not universal but culture-bound, which restricts the applicability of play theories developed by traditional developmental theorists such as Piaget and Erikson (Fleer, 1996; Goncu et al., 1999). Because of this, it is important for occupational therapists to learn more about variations in the range of play behaviors considered typical of children from diverse cultural backgrounds both in the United States and internationally (New, 1994; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994).

Historically, play has often been studied in laboratory rather than naturalistic settings (Fleer, 1996). To understand play as occupation, it is important for occupational therapists to observe play as it occurs in natural environments (Parham & Primeau, 1997). Primeau (1998) explored parent-child play and its orchestration within the daily occupations of a group of middle-class U.S. families in their homes. Findings suggest that parents use two strategies to orchestrate play and household work. Strategies of segregation are used when parents engage in household work during times when children are occupied in an activity and intersperse play periods between work tasks. Strategies of inclusion occur when parents integrate play into their household work resulting in enfolded occupations, parents participating in more than one occupation at the same time. Scaffolded play, the structuring of a work activity so the child can participate, is often used during strategies of inclusion. This strategy allows parents to spend more time with their child and may be viewed as the first step in teaching the child about adult occupation. Primeau’s work begins to deconstruct the notion of work and play being separate experiences and alerts occupational therapists that there are many different ways for parents to play with their children.

Naturalistic observations of play focusing specifically on the impact of cultural context are rare in occupational therapy literature. Studying children growing up in different settings where they represent the majority rather than the minority is critical for clarifying differences based on cultural diversity rather than minority status (New, 1994). For this reason, this study was conducted by occupational therapists to describe the context and characteristics of play activities based on naturalistic observations of Mayan children living in a small village in southern Belize.

**Previous Research on Play in Mayan Children**

Gaskins, an anthropologist, has written extensively about the development and socialization of Mayan children based on 5 years of accumulated ethnographic research over 20 years of study in one remote, traditional Mayan village in the eastern part of Yucatan, Mexico (Gaskins, 1996, 1999, 2000; Gaskins & Goncu, 1992). Gaskins’ earlier work focused primarily on the characteristics of Mayan children’s play (Gaskins, 1996). Her most recent work takes a broader look at how children spend their time throughout the day by describing the range and frequency of activities that are engaged in (Gaskins, 1999, 2000). Using spot observations and interviews with parents about what children do, four major types of daily activities were identified and described: self-maintenance, social orientation, work, and play (Gaskins, 2000). To ensure a cultural interpretation of the data, the descriptions of children’s behaviors were analyzed and interpreted based on three principles of engagement that reflect the Mayan cultural context: Primacy of adult work, parental beliefs, and independence of child motivation.

The first cultural principle, *primacy of adult work*, reflects the observation that children’s daily activities are primarily structured around adult work activities. Children learn early that adult work must get done, that work should not be interrupted, and that they should help when needed and able. Children are allowed to assist in only those parts of an activity where they already possess some ability. In addition, caregivers do little to create experiences for the child based on the child’s desires, and conversely, children tend not to initiate or control social interaction. The second cultural principle, *importance of parental beliefs*, considers the parents’ view of the world and thoughts about the nature of children. All parents share a common goal of raising a child who will be able to sustain himself or herself economically and function as a competent member of the society. Cultures vary in how they believe children become competent adults. These beliefs influence the kinds of interactions and experiences that parents construct for their children. For example, because the Maya believe that development is internally driven and automatic, parents are not concerned with monitoring children’s developmental progress or with intentional teaching or encouragement to promote it. It is believed that children will naturally learn to work and be safe by participating in daily life within the family compound and community. The third cultural principle, *independence of child motivation*, reflects the observation that Mayan children are given a great range of independence in deciding what to do from moment to moment. For example, when not engaged in work, children...
are usually expected to find something to do on their own or with their siblings. Over time, children learn that they are expected to act independently and as a result rarely display attention-seeking behavior or ask caregivers to help them find something to do. Gaskins (2000) argues that these three cultural principles are woven together to produce daily experiences that are distinct to Mayan children.

To determine the distribution of children's everyday activities, Gaskins (2000) observed children ages 1 to 17 from 13 families, a total of 60 children. Each family was observed for 4 hours, 2 hours on 2 different days. Spot observations of each child were made every 5 minutes resulting in 48 data points per child. Data were summarized by grouping children by age in 3-year intervals based on discernible patterns in the data. The category of behavior most consistent across ages in its frequency was maintenance activities, observed approximately 20–25% of the time beyond infancy. This category includes time spent eating, sleeping, bathing, grooming, and dressing. Mayan children are highly independent and competent in self-maintenance as early as 5–6 years, with little or no direction from their parents. This accomplishment is consistent with the cultural principles of engagement, which emphasize adult work and the belief that children's development comes naturally. Adults do not feel obligated to provide their children with overly supportive parenting attention and only assist when help is actually needed. At the same time, children become responsible for taking care of their own needs even if completed in a leisurely fashion (Gaskins, 2000).

The second most frequent category of behavior was social orientation, which includes both social interaction and observation of others. The majority of a Mayan child's social orientation is spent observing others in the family compound. In contrast, social interaction, especially with adults, is limited. Children do not initiate conversation with adults unless making a specific request for something they need and adults rarely speak to children outside of giving directives. Children are more likely to talk with other children, but even here, there are often long periods of silence. The emphasis on focused observation over social interaction is consistent with the three cultural principles of engagement. Mayan parents believe that children initially learn how to work by being attentive and watching, which in turn, allows parents to work with minimal disruption (Gaskins, 2000).

Play and work made up the third and fourth most prevalent activities for Mayan children. The amount of time in play peaks between 3 and 5 years at approximately 40% of the child's day. The majority of play at this time is divided between large motor play and play with objects, with very little time spent in pretend play. The amount of time spent in play gradually decreases after 5 years to roughly 5% of the child's time at 12 years and up, as play is gradually replaced by work. Overall, play is not considered important for development nor is it viewed as a major childhood activity by the Maya (Gaskins, 1996). Adults believe that play is something that children “just do” and beyond that, don’t reflect on the meaning of play. The primary activity of adult work is always emphasized over play. Play is discouraged if it conflicts with work, but may be tolerated if it prevents children from interrupting adults’ work. When children do play, they play independently without adult interference or support (Gaskins, 2000). In contrast, work activities increase in frequency with age, reaching approximately 60% of children’s time at age 12. All children older than 2 years are expected to complete whatever chores are requested of them quickly and effectively. Work takes precedence over all other activities. Over time, children learn that they are legitimate and valuable participants in household work. At age 6 children do a variety of household chores, run errands, and take care of younger siblings. By the time children are 12 to 14, they are capable of performing some chores as well as an adult and by 15 to 17 they can do all chores. Children tend to be motivated to work and often volunteer to help. Parents believe that as a part of responsible parenting, chores help children grow up to be competent and motivated workers.

**Playfulness: An Expanded View of Play**

In Gaskins research, work, play, and self-maintenance are described as separate activities. Play activities do differ from the obligatory nature of self-care and work in that play is self-chosen and intrinsically motivated (Bundy, 1997). Primeau (1998), however, has challenged occupational therapists to deconstruct the notion of work and play being separate experiences. In her ethnographic research of families, she observed play being interspersed with and embedded in household work. Bundy's work on playfulness further challenges us to expand our view of play. Playfulness can be described as a style of interaction characterized by flexibility, manifest joy, and spontaneity, as well as a tendency to seek out opportunities to play (Bundy, 1993). Since playfulness is defined by its characteristics rather than the activity, it can occur in the context of any activity including work. Bundy argues that it may be playful rather than play activities that provides therapists with the information they seek regarding the quality of a child's daily life (Bundy, 1997). For these very reasons, Jackson (as cited in Parham & Primeau, 1997) suggests that occupational therapists consider a movement away from role theory. “Occupational role” implies a given set of expectations for a particular role, which perpetuates an illusion that there is an appropriate
way to behave within a given role. This view may not only minimize the diverse ways in which people organize their occupations but may also marginalize people who do not fit traditionally defined roles because of culture, for example. Instead of viewing play as separate from other occupations, such as work and self-care, playfulness is viewed as an attitude that can permeate any occupation (Parham & Primeau, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to observe and describe play in a group of Mayan children living in Belize. This information will offer occupational therapists a view of how the nature of play is shaped in this non-Western cultural context. Based on Gaskins’ research of Mayan play and current occupational therapy discussions encouraging an expanded view of play, the following questions were specifically addressed in this study: (1) What are the characteristics of play among Mayan children in southern Belize? (2) Does play among this group parallel play as described by Gaskins? (3) How is playfulness embedded in the daily occupations of a group of Mayan children in southern Belize?

Method

Using a qualitative research approach, data were collected during a 2-week field study in a rural village of the Toledo District, southern Belize. Two occupational therapy faculty members, one physical therapy faculty member, and two occupational therapy students collected data on children's play as part of a larger, ongoing study of the occupations and health needs of indigenous Maya women. Knowledge, awareness, and affective-oriented educational experiences designed to familiarize the research team with southern Belize Maya culture and field study were provided prior to the trip. The research team attended a series of meetings led by occupational therapy and anthropology faculty on a number of topics including Maya culture, participant observation, and writing field notes. The discussion on Maya culture was led by a Mayan exchange student from Belize.

The Village

Belize is a small country on the coast of the Caribbean Sea bounded by Guatemala to the west and south and Mexico to the north. The Toledo District is composed of 36 Maya villages located in the lowlands and uplands of southern Belize. This study was conducted in a village with a population of approximately 800 people, primarily indigenous Maya Indians, although other ethnic groups were also represented such as Creole, Garifuna, and Eastern Indian. The Mopan and Kekchi Maya, who have lived on Belizean soil since as early as 1500 B.C. (Stupp, Macke, Monteith, & Paredez, 1994), are generally the poorest. The Toledo District is considered one of the most distant and primitive places in the country (Wilk, 1987).

Study Participants

Two criteria were used to select the families for this study. First, families were limited geographically to Mopan and Kekchi Maya living in a specified rural village of southern Belize and second, to maximize the study's credibility, the families needed to understand and speak English. Because of the communal nature of the Maya culture, we obtained permission to conduct the study from the village alcalde (mayor) and the leaders of three women's organizations. The leaders of the women's groups provided us with names of families who they felt would be interested in participating in the study. Five families were approached and gave informed consent for the researchers to observe and participate in their daily routine. Twenty children ranging in age from 3 months to 18 years were observed. Of these children, three were 3 months to 2 years of age, four were 2–4 years, nine were 5–12 years, and four were 13–18 years of age. One family had a total of 10 children. The remaining families each had 2 or 3 children. Mothers and their children were the primary focus of observation. However, because families tend to live in homes clustered near extended family, it wasn't unusual to have extended family members present during all or some of the observations, a cousin, sister-in-law, nephew, or grandmother. All of the mothers were homemakers. In three of the five families, the father came home for the afternoon meal and then returned to work. Three of the fathers were farmers, one worked construction, and one was an elementary teacher.

Research visits to families took place during morning and afternoons on both weekdays and weekends. Each family received one long visit averaging 5 hours. Four of the five families also received one to three additional shorter visits averaging 30 minutes. Participant observations took place primarily in the family home, but also in surrounding areas based on the nature of the family's daily activities. For example, four observers spent time at the nearby river where families wash clothes and bathe. One observer walked with two sisters and their cousin to school and spent the morning observing the students in the school.

Data Collection

Each observer recorded detailed field notes during and following each family visit to document observations. These notes consisted of drawings, descriptive phrases, quotations, and personal reflections on what was observed while participating in the family's daily occupations. Scheduled
meetings among the investigators took place each evening to offer an opportunity for further reflection on the day’s experiences.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data, in the form of field notes, were organized using a word processing program and then entered into a qualitative analysis database (Muir, 1997). The principal investigator analyzed the data using a combination of closed and open coding to identify themes related to children’s play activities and playfulness (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Closed coding, a strategy by which data are analyzed for fit with an extant theory or model, involved analyzing the data according to the “developmental niche” concept (Super & Harkness, 1986). This framework was used to ensure a cultural interpretation of the data. The developmental niche concept involves an examination of the following three subsystems that interact with other features of the culture to impact on child development: (1) The physical and social settings in which the child lives, including where the child spends her or his time, doing what activities, and in whose company; (2) culturally regulated customs of child care and rearing; and (3) the values, beliefs, and goals of the caregivers. Consideration of these distinct features enables a rich and vivid description of the context in which the child develops (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Field notes were also subjected to open coding, the naming and categorizing of phenomena without regard for pre-existing theory, for themes that relate to play activities and playfulness observed in this group of Mayan children. To confirm that the interpretations reflected the children’s play behaviors, three investigators individually coded the field notes to achieve triangulation of the data. Two additional faculty, who had also traveled to Belize, reviewed the transcripts and confirmed the researchers’ coding.

Findings

Observations of play are first discussed within the “developmental niche” framework with consideration of how the physical features of the environment as well as parental customs of child rearing shape the nature of play. Play themes revealed through open coding of the data are then presented.

The Physical and Social Setting

Physical Features of the Home Environment

One of the factors that shapes children’s play is the physical environment in which they live. In this village, the Maya live in thatched roof homes with packed dirt floors. One of the five families, with more financial resources, had a concrete floor. Although the village has electricity, only two of the families had it in their homes due to the cost of installation. One of the observers describes one family’s home:

The house had one large living area. I remember the welcoming smell of wood burning in the hearth upon entering. The home was simple with very few pieces of furniture. There was a wooden table at one end of the room that was used to eat at. Near the table were two wooden chairs and a stool. A treadle sewing machine was positioned against the same wall. Along the back wall was another narrow table used for cooking preparation and a shelf holding a small stack of plastic dishes, bowls, and cups. The hearth, which was set up in the corner, had two cooking areas, one held a large metal pot and the other a camal (flat griddle). In front of the hearth was a small, low, round table that was later used by the two older daughters to make corn tortillas. Low stools were positioned near the table for them to sit on. All of the wooden furniture looked handmade. Two bedrooms were located on the far right side of the house behind a wooden partition. Along the partition was a long wooden bench. In the center of the room was a long hammock for sitting or lying.

All of the homes shared this level of simplicity in terms of material possessions. Homes were uncluttered. Families seemed to own only what they needed for day-to-day life. Cooking materials and food items were organized neatly except for one home where the woman reported that she didn’t like homemaking tasks. A couple of the women had outside cooking hearths positioned near the home under a thatched roof. The family with 10 children had a second thatched house near the main in which the sons slept. All of the families had some land surrounding the house that was used as a yard to raise chickens, hang laundry, and grow fruit trees. Since none of the families had running water, water for cooking was pumped from a nearby well. Each family had an outhouse in back of the house.

Commercially made toys were not observed in any of the homes except one. In this home, the 4-year-old girl had a small doll and a handful of plastic building blocks, which were gifts from her aunt who is currently an exchange student in the United States.

Social Setting

Family homes were clustered together with extended family and within walking distance of the river. This clustering allowed for frequent, informal social interaction among the women and children. One observer noted:

When families are home, their doors are open and extend- ed family and friends seem to wander in freely without invitation. There are no fences dividing yards or windows to shut out the outdoor sounds. When I was in Maria’s house, I felt like I was in a house, yet outside too. Dogs,
chickens, and neighbors came in and out. The sound of the cicadas, roosters, and the neighborhood donkey seemed loud and provided a constant background noise. At one point during my visit, a woman walked in and sat on a chair by the table across from where I was sitting. I later found out that this was Maria’s sister-in-law. She established eye contact with me and smiled but didn’t talk. Another woman came by with a small boy (about 3 years old) and sat on the front doorstep.

Mothers and children work closely together to maintain the household. Children spend all day with their mother and other siblings, except for time spent at school. When home, school-age children must be available to supervise younger siblings when the mother is busy with a household task.

A similar rhythm in the daily routine of all of the families was noted. Women begin their morning routine at about 5:00 a.m. by building a fire in the hearth, preparing corn tortillas for breakfast, and making lunches for their husband and school-age children. Daughters as young as 8 years of age help with all of the morning work routines. Major cleaning tasks are left for Saturday; sweeping and patching the dirt floors and smoothing the cooking hearth with a paste made out of ash and water. After breakfast, the husbands leave for work and mothers and children get ready to go to the river to wash clothes and bathe. Dirty clothes, laundry soap, and a clean change of clothes are packed in plastic buckets and carried by the mother and children down a dirt path to the river. Women and children wade into the water with their clothes on. Older children and their mothers position themselves near a flat rock and immediately begin washing clothes. Younger children either sit at the bank of the river and watch or if old enough, swim in the water. When all of the clothes are washed and wrung out, the mother will bathe younger children and dress them in clean outfits. Older children and the mother will bathe and may spend some time swimming in the river before changing into clean clothes. After walking home and hanging the wet clothes outside, school-age children walk to school. Corn tortillas are typically prepared for lunch. Women spend afternoons working on crafts or sewing while their small children nap. Dinner preparations begin about 4:00 p.m., and involve cooking rice or tortillas and chicken or fish stew. Families usually go to sleep when it becomes dark, about 8:00 p.m.

Parental Customs of Child Rearing

“Customs are sequences of behavior so commonly used by members of the community that they are not given conscious thought” (Super & Harkness, 1986). Gaskins (1996) states that one of the most important factors influencing child rearing is the nature of activities children will be expected to engage in as adults. In these Mayan families, “adult roles” are generally assumed between 16 and 22 years of age when most males and females begin to work side-by-side with parents, marry, and start families. Farming is the major occupation of men in the village. Men generally walk 2–3 miles to work their fields. Corn, beans, and rice are the major crops that are grown. The primary occupation of women is to manage the household and raise the children. Many customs were observed to prepare children for these gender-based occupations.

Mothers’ Role With Infants and Toddlers

One theme that emerged from the field notes is that the mothers’ role with infants and toddlers focused primarily on attending to basic child-care needs, such as food, hygiene, safety, and sleep and encouraging them to be independent. In this study, the term “toddlers” refers to children from 1-3 years. Even in families where there were older daughters who could assist in these major child care activities, only the mothers were observed bathing, feeding, and putting infants to sleep. Older daughters mainly helped by holding and carrying the infant outside of these major tasks. Beyond meeting these basic needs, mothers were not observed engaging in play activities with their infants or toddlers. One observer described how Rosa bathed 3-month-old Benny:

After Rosa fed Benny, she took him outside to bathe him. She sat on a low stool in front of a tub of water. She had Benny on her lap and soaped him up starting with his head using her hand and some dry laundry soap. After his head was all sudsy, she scooped water with her hand and splashed it on his face repeatedly to rinse it. She did this quickly without talking to him. Benny fussied a little, but she continued to bathe him from head to foot and then dressed him in a clean outfit.

Unlike Primeau’s (1998) descriptions of parents using strategies of inclusion to integrate play into child-care occupations, we found overall that these Mayan parents did not. At the same time, however, the mothers were sensitive and responsive to their infant’s needs as noted during this observation of Rosa putting Benny down for a nap:

Rosa rocked Benny on her lap while she sat in the hammock and then got up and put him in the lopop (cloth sling) that was supported on Marta’s head (11-year-old daughter) with Benny positioned toward her back. Benny cried and fussied as Marta walked around with him. Rosa didn’t let him fuss long. After about 1 minute, she took him out and rocked him again on her lap while she sat on the hammock. Rosa reacted to all of this in silence without showing frustration. She held him and he gazed at her and reached toward her face; she smiled back. He started to
make cooing sounds and she responded with the same cooing sounds. Then she offered her right breast and he sucked for about 5 minutes until his body became calm. Again, she put him in the lopop and hung it from a wire attached to a wooden beam. This time he was quiet and fell asleep.

Although mothers weren’t observed initiating playful interactions with their infants and toddlers, when the child initiated playful interactions, parents generally responded in a playful manner as noted in this observation of another mother putting her toddler to sleep:

Juanita laid Angela (16 months) in the sling and positioned it on her head with Angela at her back and began to sway back and forth in a rocking manner. Angela began to babble “mama, mama” over and over. Juanita said “papa, papa.” There was a long pause, then Angela said “papa, papa.” Everyone in the family laughed.

Mothers and older siblings encouraged the toddlers to be independent in self-care tasks as soon as they are able. At 16 months, Angela was being toilet trained. Her 8- and 10-year-old sisters were observed seating her on a little plastic bucket outside the back door every couple hours. Angela appeared familiar with the routine. She was also observed during the family meal:

At some point before dinner, Juanita put some rice and mashed up chicken stew in a bowl for Angela. She sat Angela on the floor with her back up against the wall and placed the bowl between her legs. Angela fed herself the rice using a large tablespoon. She ate quietly without talking or a fuss. Her mother stayed nearby and gave her verbal prompts every now and then. She ate neatly without dropping any food on the floor.

Mother’s Role With Older Children

Children’s daily activities were observed to be structured around their mother’s work routines. Young children, from 3–8 years, have daily opportunities to learn necessary home maintenance activities such as cooking, washing clothes, and patching a dirt floor. In the following excerpt from field notes, Kelly (4 years) is beginning to learn how to smooth cracks in the dirt floor by observing her mother complete the task and by helping do small components of the activity:

Rosaria used a paste made of dirt crumbs and water to patch the cracks in her dirt floor. As she did this, she asked Grace to help in small ways. When she needed a bucket or small bowl, Rosaria quietly asked Grace to get these items from the other hut. Grace would run and get whatever Rosaria asked her to get. She seemed happy to help. Rosaria said that Grace never leaves her side.

Young children were also seen taking part in work activities without being asked to help. Girls as young as 4 years were observed scrubbing clothes against a rock in the river. A young 4-year-old boy helped his grandmother pick small debris out of rice for the family meal. When young children were not helping out, they were expected to stay out of the way or find some way to occupy themselves.

Children 8 years and older were observed taking on a greater role in household work, especially the girls. Young 8- and 10-year-old girls were seen carrying infant siblings around while the mother cooked. They were also observed carrying buckets of fresh water home from the well, washing clothes in the river, and making corn tortillas. This narrative describes how a young girl washed clothes in the river:

Natividad (10 years) worked alongside Jaunita [mother] without being told. She washed clothes using the same process and at the same tempo as her mother. They would take a piece of clothing, wet it in the river, sprinkle dry detergent on it, and then rub and knead it against a flat rock until it foamed up. Each piece was scrubbed several minutes and then twisted into a long piece and slapped against the rock several times causing soap suds to splatter. After being rinsed thoroughly in the river and wrung out, the article of clothing was placed in a plastic bucket.

This same 10-year-old girl displayed skill and efficiency in forming corn tortillas for the family meal:

Natividad made corn tortillas using the same hand movements that Juanita used. She took a ball of dough about the size of a small egg and flattened it with her palm on a circular piece of plastic. Once it was about 5–6 inches in diameter, she rounded the edges using her finger and the plastic until it was a perfect circle. The tortilla was flipped over onto one palm and then the plastic pulled off from the bottom before placing it on the hot comal. She worked quickly and skillfully. Natividad was much more skilled than Filomena (8 years), even though she was only 2 years older.

In contrast to the girls, boys appeared to have more free time. They were observed carrying laundry buckets home from the river and walking to the neighborhood market to buy needed food items. Frequently, boys were seen chopping down palm fronds and vegetation with machetes along the road. There were no observations of boys helping cook or clean house. One boy was seen washing clothes at the river. Reportedly, his mother only had one daughter to help.

Older daughters, over 12 years, were even more proficient and self-directed in home maintenance activities. In the family with 10 children, the 15- and 17-year-old daughters completed most of the morning cleaning activities while Rosa cared for 3-month-old Benny:

When I arrived, Isuella (15 years) was kneeling near the hearth. She gathered some ashes together and added water to form a paste. It almost looked like cement. Then, using her hand, she smoothed the paste over the hearth until it was completely smooth. I asked her how often she does this and she said one time a week. Manuella (17 years) was at
the other side of the cooking area washing dishes in two buckets of water—One for washing and one for rinsing. The two girls worked steadily without talking, like they knew exactly what to do and in what order. After Isuella smoothed the hearth, she swept the entire floor and then used some crumbs of dirt to make another paste. She smoothed this over cracks and rough areas of the dirt floor. As she did this, Manuella went outside and set up a bath area for her mother to bathe Benny. In watching this morning routine, I was aware that Rosa was able to give all of her time to meeting Benny’s needs since Manuella and Isuella completed the major home maintenance activities. Their actions directly support their mother’s role.

After these morning activities, the family walked to the river to wash clothes and bathe. The mother and four daughters all washed the clothes. The remaining children watched their 3-year-old brother and kept out of the way. Later, Manuella and Isuella made all of the corn tortillas for the afternoon meal. Although these young girls worked independently without requiring their mother’s supervision, they acknowledged her authority in making decisions as depicted in this narrative:

Manuella and Isuella deferred to their mother on numerous occasions. One example is when I was purchasing some of the crafts that they had made. They always talked to their mother in Kekchi before giving me a price for an item. At another time, when I asked Manuella whether we were going to the river, she said that she needed to talk to her mother first. Rosa was the person that orchestrated the family’s activities.

The Nature of Play in Mayan Children: Themes That Emerged From Open Coding

Children’s Engagement in Play Activities

In this study, play activities were defined as non-obligatory activities engaged in for the primary purpose of having fun. Using this definition, none of the parents who participated in this study were observed encouraging their children to engage in play activities. The only observation of adults encouraging play with traditional play objects was during the students’ recess at school. A teacher brought the students a burlap bag filled with soccer balls, baseballs, and bas. Without adult supervision, the boys and girls played baseball and soccer in several groups in the open school yard. At home, in an environment without commercially made toys, children found ways to integrate play into their daily routine with objects that were naturally available to them as noted in this observation:

While Rosaria was busy smoothing the hearth, Grace (4 years) roamed in and out. She placed her belly across the hammock and swung, holding school papers from one of her brothers. She handed the papers to me and smiled. Then Grace sat on a stool by a pot full of corn and played with the wooden spoon. She spilled some of the corn and Rosaria told her to stop and put the stirrer down. Grace didn’t, but she stopped spilling corn. That seemed to be okay with Rosaria. Grace then got into a plastic bag of beans and started spilling those. In a soft voice, Rosaria told her to stop. She continued to play with the beans but only spilled a few more.

Children also integrated play activities into the primary occupations of washing clothes and bathing in the river: A teenage girl and young boy washed clothes side by side with their mother. Occasionally, the boy stopped and made large bubbles with his hands. He made big bubbles that floated slowly to the sky. The other children and women watched and smiled.

Another observer noted:

While Olivia washed clothes, her three young children bathed and played in the river. They would climb out on a tree limb over the river, and then jump in. Olivia kept reminding them to get ready for school. Finally she had to yell at them. She continued working as she told them to get ready, keeping the same rhythm. The children would bathe for a bit, then go off and play some more before being reminded again to get ready for school. Finally they were all clean.

In these examples, the mothers allowed their children to play as long as it didn’t interfere with their work. Although children found ways to integrate play into their daily lives, one observer described a child who seemed to struggle to find a meaningful activity.

While Rosa and her older daughters cooked, the middle-age children were seen climbing on a tree trunk behind the house. At one point, Narcisia (6 years) came in and began to poke the dog with a stick before being shooed out by her mother. It didn’t seem like there were a lot of options for what the children could do, but it was apparent that they were expected to amuse themselves. A little while later, Narcisia came in and laid on the floor and just rolled around. Rosa talked to her sternly in Kekchi and she went outside again.

If play is defined as a separate occupation, there were not a lot of examples of actual “play” in these data. In fact, one of the occupational therapy student observers commented that the children really didn’t seem to play much.

Playfulness Embedded in Daily Life

When play was viewed from the perspective of playfulness, however, a much broader understanding of Mayan play was obtained. In this study, playfulness was defined as a style of interaction characterized by flexibility, joy, exploration, spontaneity, and a “ludic” (meaning playful) attitude. Given this definition, playfulness is an attitude that
can be present during any activity. Toddlers were often observed expressing their playfulness through physical activity.

We walked as a group (9 children and the mother) on the dirt road to the river. Leon (3 years) ran ahead of us laughing, chattering, and acting silly. His mother and siblings laughed, which encouraged him to continue.

In this scenario, the mother and other children were receptive to Leon’s playfulness. In other households this type of high activity was discouraged.

Marlin (5 years) was extremely active the whole afternoon—Running in and out of the house, chasing the chickens, poking the dog, jumping onto his grandmother’s lap, and hugging his baby sister. His grandmother tried to discipline him, but he wouldn’t listen—He would stop the activity for a minute and then start something new. She disciplined him by saying his name and something else in Kekchi using a stern voice. Towards the later afternoon, she brought out a thin reed about 2 feet long and kept it by her as a threat. However, Marlin seemed to dare his grandmother to use it by running up to her and then quickly away from her. When his father came home, his behavior changed. He sat quietly on the hammock.

All of the children showed an interest in the U.S. observers and made frequent attempts to interact:

While the older daughters and mother cooked, the other children came in and out of the house. Sometimes they would just stand near me and smile. Leon liked to come up to me and lightly touch my arm or hold my hand.

Another observer noted:

As we walked down the path, Filomena kept looking up at me and smiling. Once we were at the road, she looked up at me and asked quietly “What would you do if you saw a cow in the road?” What an unexpected question, but of course this scenario was entirely possible since animals roam freely in the roads. I laughed and said that I’d probably say, “shoo, shoo.” She laughed too.

These behaviors demonstrated the children’s curiosity about a person from another country who dressed and looked different from them, but also showed their openness to interact. Children and adults smiled and laughed easily when they perceived something to be humorous. Another observer described a family’s appreciation of a humorous situation:

I was learning how to make corn tortillas next to Juanita, but it wasn’t as easy as it looked and it seemed to take me a long time to form just one. At one point, the teenage son said something in Kekchi and Filomena (8 years) promptly turned to me and said, “He said he hopes to be able to eat dinner sometime today.” The whole family laughed because she told me what he had said. After that, the father playfully called Filomena “the little interpreter.”

Discussion and Implications

Results suggest that Mayan children’s play in Belize is comparable to Gaskins’ descriptions of Mayan children in Mexico (Gaskins, 2000). Children’s daily activities are primarily structured around adult work rather than play and children are expected to independently occupy themselves during their free time. In addition, commercially made toys were not available in family homes. These findings suggest that the Mayan families we observed also viewed play as a naturally occurring behavior that is tolerated but not outwardly encouraged. The phrase “play is a child’s primary occupation” that is traditionally cited in occupational therapy literature (Bundy, 1992; Morrison & Metzger, 2001) may not, in fact, be a universally held belief. Instead of assuming that all parents share this belief, it is important for occupational therapists to develop a culturally informed understanding of a child’s daily occupations by considering the physical context and parents’ values and beliefs about child rearing.

Our expanded view of play leads to some conclusions that differ from Gaskins. How one defines play influences the understanding and evaluation of a child’s play. When play is traditionally defined as an activity separate from work and self-care, play assumes a minor role in a Mayan child’s life compared to work. But when play is also viewed as a style of interaction, we made multiple observations of how playfulness is integrated throughout the child’s daily occupations through the use of humor, smiling, social interaction, and a playful manner. Considering a child’s playfulness, then, may help the occupational therapist gain a fuller appreciation of the role of play in a child’s life.

In Primeau’s study of middle-class U.S. families (1998), parents were interviewed and observed to determine how they orchestrated play and household work. The examples of parent-child play in her study suggest that middle-class U.S. parents value play as an important childhood occupation and one that should be encouraged. In Belize, however, the parents did not create play experiences for their children. Instead, we observed that the children used various strategies for integrating play into their life. Strategies of segregation were observed when the children engaged in play activities once their work was completed; for example, swimming in the river after washing clothes. Strategies of inclusion were recognized when a play activity (making bubbles while washing clothes) or a playful attitude was embedded in their work.

A limitation of the study is that play observations occurred over a brief 2-week period. More time spent with
the children would have allowed for a fuller appreciation of their play activities and how playfulness is incorporated into their daily occupations. Also, observations were not made in the late afternoon and evening, times when there were less structured work responsibilities. Another limitation is that the observers’ presence in the homes may have altered children’s typical play behaviors.

Conclusion

This study describes how the physical environment and parental values and beliefs about child rearing influence the nature of play in Mayan children living in Belize. Mayan families who value the primacy of adult work over play do not share our traditional view of play as a primary childhood occupation. Mayan parents expect children to become self-sufficient and learn work skills that are necessary for success in their gender-based adult roles. Our observations indicate that the children found ways to integrate play activities and playfulness into work and self-care. We identified numerous examples of how playfulness is embedded throughout the child’s occupations in observations of Mayan children’s curiosity, appreciation for humor, and openness to socialization.

This study offers an example of how occupational therapists can expand our thinking beyond a Western perspective by spending time with people of other cultures. From our immersion experience in Belize, we observed the potential relationship between an early life emphasis on work and the development of independent living skills. Further research could focus on parental beliefs about work and how Mayan families teach children to value work and develop work skills for success in adult roles.

Lastly, it is important to view this study from the perspective of the occupational therapist practicing in a culturally diverse society. One does not need to travel to other countries to encounter different cultures. Reflections on the influence of the physical and social setting and family values and beliefs on play activities and playfulness could occur in all areas of the United States. The findings of this study point out the need to learn and reflect upon the cultures of the people we serve in order to provide services that are culturally sensitive and relevant. ▲

Acknowledgments

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