

Diane E. Levin

PROBLEM SOLVING DEFICIT DISORDER

Programmed Play in Korea and the United States

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In November 2005, I participated in an early childhood educators' conference in South Korea. One of the highlights occurred on a tour of Seoul organized for foreign guests. In a parking lot, awaiting the opening of a very impressive palace, was a group of about twelve 8-year-old children on a school trip. They had gotten out of their bus and were standing by a large tree with beautifully colored autumn leaves. As I watched them, one child caught a leaf that was floating to the ground. He paused a moment, took off his jacket, and threw it up into the tree. As it fell, it brought down at least a dozen more leaves that he, and a couple of other children tried to catch. Several other children began to throw their jackets into the tree and they all tried to catch the resulting falling leaves. They began calling out. Our translator said the children were counting how many leaves they had

caught. They compared their catches with one another before throwing their coats up in the air again. After several throwing and catching cycles, the activity evolved into a game in which one child loudly called out what my Korean tour leader told us was "one, two, three." Then all the children threw up their coats in unison and cheered as they ran around catching the flood of leaves that came cascading down. After about 15 minutes, their teacher called them over to go into the palace that was about to open. The activity was over.

When the children lined up to leave, I marveled at:

- how resourceful they were at creating a game using nothing but leaves and coats;
- how the game evolved and changed over time in a natural and spontaneous way;
- how quickly it became a cooperative activity involving the whole group without discussion, stress, or rules;
- how even in a cramped space, no adult limit setting or intervention was necessary; and,
- how long it had been since I had seen a spontaneous, joyful and playful creation of this sort occur among children in the United States.

The Korean children's play reminded me of something I had seen a few months before in a classroom closer to home, at a preschool in the United States. The teacher put play dough on a small table. A child sat down, poked and squeezed it a few times, and left the table. Then

another child came over, poked it, and asked, "What does it do?" When I was a group therapist of emotionally disturbed young children and then as a kindergarten teacher many years ago, play dough was a favorite material for both the children and me. It offered endless possibilities that could grow, change, and evolve based in the age, stage, experience, and interests of each child.

When I describe to other teachers the bored or puzzled reactions to play dough I have observed among many children in the U.S., they often nod knowingly and say that they encounter more and more children who have trouble engaging in open-ended play. As I watched these children fail to interact with play dough, I worried that they were missing out on most of the social, emotional, and cognitive learning opportunities that the South Korean children created so spontaneously with the leaves.

Play in Development and Learning

Comparing Korean children's play with U.S. children's lack of play concerns me because play is a primary vehicle through which children learn to interact with, control, and master their world (Levin, 1997; 2003). Creative play has enormous power in promoting children's development and learning. It is in play that children find interesting problems to work on ("How can I make the most leaves fall from the tree?") and

develop the skills for solving them (“If we all work together and throw our coats up into the tree, we can get the most leaves to fall!”).

When children see themselves as *problem finders* and *problem solvers*, they develop curiosity about their world and confidence in their ability to figure things out for themselves. They come to look at the world with a lens that says, “I can do it!” and “I want to do it.” Solving one problem leads to a new problem, which they solve by using the skills they developed from solving previous problems. In the course of playing this way, children develop deep interests, improve at, and become “experts” at problem solving. This problem-finding and -solving process provides a powerful foundation that helps children be motivated, competent learners who are actively engaged with their environment in school and in life.

Problem Solving Deficit Disorder

What if children do not become problem solvers and experts in tasks of their own choosing over which they have control? They often develop what I call PSDD—Problem Solving Deficit Disorder (Lohr, 2003; Meltz, 2004).

What Is PSDD?

The concept of PSDD grew out of my work on the impact of contemporary society on children. Parents and professionals describe children who say they’re bored a lot. They have trouble

becoming deeply engaged in unstructured activities. They lack creativity and imagination and experience difficulty in playing cooperatively with others or resolving conflicts without aggression. They do better when they’re told what to do. They prefer structured activities at school or DVDs to watch or videogames to play at home. They ask for new things all the time but quickly become bored once they have them. When they’re able, parents often enroll their children in organized after-school activities so they won’t be bored or spend their free time watching TV. When their children are home, they worry that they use the TV and other electronics too much as babysitters.

PSDD describes the condition in which children are no longer active agents of their involvement with the world. It interferes with their ability to engage in play that promotes optimal development, learning, social skills, and conflict resolution. In the long run, it can lead to remote controlled people who exhibit conformist behavior, accept orders without questioning, and miss out on the joy the Korean children demonstrated in their play.

What Causes PSDD?

Several factors contribute to PSDD. These include:

- The replacement of free time and free-play activities with media such as TV, video games, computers and DVDs. It involves children in a

world of someone else's choosing rather than their own (Levin, 1998; Steyer, 2002).

- Highly structured toys, including sophisticated electronic toys and toys linked to media, that tell children what and how to play and that help them imitate the scripts they see on the screen (Levin & Carlsson-Paige, 2006).

- The growing emphasis on academic, skill-based curricula in early childhood settings that undermine children's creative play and problem solving.

- An increasingly commercial culture that teaches young children "I want it" rather than "I can do it" (Levin, 2005). "I can do it" is an essential part of problem solving, playing and learning. (See: commercialfreechildhood.org).

Finding a Cure!

Understanding PSDD and its causes and impact on children can give us a powerful tool for meeting children's needs through play. Parents and educators can:

- Limit children's involvement with electronic media;

- Encourage creative play in which children are the scriptwriters, directors, and actors;

- Help children find problems to solve and strategies for doing so;

- Choose toys and play materials that allow children to be the creators of what happens (see www.truceteachers.org);

- Create connections between parents and early childhood professionals supporting creative play and problem solving; and,

- Become advocates for creative play.

References and Resources

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Organizations

Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC) (www.commercialfreechildhood.org) A coalition of organizations working to raise public awareness about and counteract the harm caused by the commercial culture and marketing to children.

Playing for Keeps (www.playingforkeeps.org) Organization of early childhood professionals, academics, and toy industry people working to educate the public about the importance of play

Teachers Resisting Unhealthy Children's Entertainment (TRUCE) (www.truceteachers.org) Prepares materials for parents that can be downloaded from its website on how to deal with media and commercial culture and promote creative play.