

The importance of children at play

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In the early stages of life, peer play is an important factor in the developmental growth of a child. It is during play and children's interactions with peers when many essential and vital skills are learned, from social connections to emotional, language, and cognitive abilities.

Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Miami (UM) College of Arts & Sciences Dr. Rebecca J. Bulotsky-Shearer is fully aware of how interactive play is necessary for a [child](#)'s growth; her research centers on social and emotional development in [children](#) - especially children living in poverty or adverse life circumstances.

Within the Miami-Dade community, as in many urban areas, there is a large population of families that are living in low-income households

from Hispanic or Latino backgrounds, explains Dr. Bulotsky-Shearer, and there is a concern, on a national policy level, that children from low-income households are not ready for kindergarten.

To shift away from negative perceptions aimed at Latino children living in poverty and the disparities in school readiness at kindergarten entry, Dr. Bulotsky-Shearer and her colleagues focused on the strengths that the Latino children were displaying in preschool.

"National research suggests that there is an achievement gap at kindergarten entry, especially for ethnic minority children living in poverty, and many folks view this from a deficit-perspective," said Dr. Bulotsky-Shearer. "There are a couple of studies that we have been working on that show peer social competence is a strength of young children. We wanted to demonstrate this strength in the Latino children we work with in the Head Start Programs here in Florida. One of the measures we've been collecting is on children's play in the classroom, which is very important for learning during preschool."

The importance of how children learn in preschool is through interaction with their [peers](#): How do they share? How do they negotiate while playing? Do the children build together or engage in pretend play? All of these interactive play scenarios support learning in the classroom especially during early childhood.

To validate the importance of peer play for Latino children within the Head Start Programs, the researchers used The Penn Interactive Peer Play Scale (PIPPS), a behavioral rating measure used for understanding peer play behaviors. There are three different dimensions to the PIPPS used to study peer play behavior in children: Play Interaction (sharing, collaborative play, encouragement); Play Disruption (aggressive, antisocial behaviors); and Play Disconnection (withdrawn behavior during play).

Using the PIPPS measure to observe how Latino children in low-income households interact during peer play, researchers found that the children displayed a high level of interactive peer play in positive learning environments; the children were engaged, motivated and social.

"We also looked at how those three scales on the PIPPS relate to two other sets of measures that are important for children, in terms of kindergarten readiness skills," said Dr. Bulotsky-Shearer. The first is approaches to learning, learning-related behaviors for teachers to observe that show how children are eager and motivated to learn, and the second is a direct assessment of the children's language, literacy and math skills - both measures can help teachers assess the children in their classroom and provide feedback to parents.

Dr. Bulosky-Shearer, along with colleagues Dr. Lisa Lopez at the University of South Florida and Dr. Julia L. Mendez at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, presented the findings in a study published in the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* entitled, "The validity of interactive peer play competencies for Latino preschool from low-income households."

Provided by University of Miami

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