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Using play to “school” children’s emotions

Pretend play promotes
the development of
socio-emotional
competences in children
aged five and six.

Being socially and emotionally competent from an early age is likely to help children win acceptance by their peers, build better relationships with teachers, and facilitate academic learning. Pretend play is a pedagogical tool that can be used to stimulate a child’s socio-emotional competences. A curriculum based on this approach has been introduced in classes of pupils aged five and six by a research team from the University of Geneva (UNIGE), the Valais University of Teacher Education (HEP/Valais), the Vaud University of Teacher Education (HEP/Vaud) and the Vita-Salute San Raffaele University in Italy. The study evaluating the effects of the programme, published in the journal *British Journal of Psychology*, shows that pupils who followed the curriculum increased their emotional recognition capacities and emotional lexicon compared to a control group. The use of pretend play as a teaching tool enables children to acquire emotional skills, with a potential positive effect on their prosocial behaviour and, in the longer term, on their academic success.

When children start school, pupils with the ability to understand their own emotions and the emotions of others are more likely to regulate them and adapt their behaviour. Accordingly, it is thought that these young pupils will have fewer behavioural problems and will be more inclined to manage their interpersonal relationships in a prosocial manner. «These social and emotional competences foster acceptance by their classmates and allow them to build better relationships with their teachers,» begins Sylvie Richard, a PhD student in developmental psychology in UNIGE’s Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, and a Professor at HEP / VS. «Research has shown that these skills also facilitate their ability to focus on learning, and their academic results are better a few years later».

Potential leads for learning do exist, says Édouard Gentaz, full professor in UNIGE’s Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. «We know already that pretend play promotes the understanding and regulation of emotions together with prosocial behaviour in the early stages of schooling. But there are currently very few quantitative studies based on objective measures that systematically incorporate pretend play and its development.» This is why Professor Gentaz’s research team set up a study to evaluate the effects of implementing a pretend play-based curriculum in five HarmoS second-year classes in the Swiss canton of Valais.



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Sylvie Richard: «These social and emotional skills foster acceptance by classmates and allow to build better relationships with teachers. Research has shown that these skills also facilitate ability to focus on learning, and academic results are better a few years later.»

High resolution pictures

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Learning through pretending

Pretend play gives children the opportunity to use their imagination, in particular by means of scenarios that they invent and the roles they play. «For instance, they can pretend to be a wizard or a witch who's brewing a magic potion that will send a dangerous dragon to sleep. The child creates the rules himself, adjusts them to suit their scenario, and calls on their imagination,» explains Sylvie Richard. For this study, the researcher and her colleagues developed a structured curriculum to exploit this approach through pretend play sessions together with more systematised teaching / learning phases with the pupils around the competences being worked on.

Eleven sessions of around 60 minutes were taught by five teachers at a rate of one session per week. The teachers underpinned the play in terms of the scenario, roles, language, symbolic use of props and playing time. They also got involved in the play phases by giving the pupils challenges, such as playing at pretending to be bursting with joy, solving an interpersonal problem, and so forth. To do this, the teachers received approximately 20 hours of training in socio-emotional competences and on how to support pretend play. A team of control teachers and pupils also formed part of the study so that the researchers could compare the progress of the pupils in the five classes. «It was important that the control group also did the pretend play, although not necessarily focused on scenarios related to socio-emotional competences,» notes Sylvie Richard.

Better recognition of emotions

A total of 79 children took part in the research, with the results showing an improvement in the recognition of emotions, particularly anger. The children also enhanced their emotional vocabulary. «The results suggest, on the one hand, that it's essential to design a teaching system that takes socio-emotional competences and pretend play into account as areas of knowledge that should be taught. On the other hand, the study shows that using this kind of play as a teaching tool helps children experiment, re-apply themselves, and test and take ownership of these competences», concludes Professor Gentaz. Given its success, the study is continuing with a more extensive curriculum, which is being carried out now in the canton of Valais.

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