

# Lev Vygotsky:

## Playing to Learn



Lev Vygotsky is often called the "Mozart of psychology." Similar to the famous composer, Vygotsky applied his genius early in life to many different areas. And like Mozart, Vygotsky died young, at age 37, after a battle with tuberculosis.

Born in 1896 in Belorussia, he began his career as an educator and a psychologist at the time of the 1917 Russian revolution. After moving to Moscow in 1924, Vygotsky set out to create what he hoped would become a new way to understand and solve the social and educational problems of his time.

At the core of Vygotsky's theory, called the Cultural-Historical Theory, is the idea that child development is the result of the interactions between children and their social environment. These interactions include those with parents and teachers, playmates and classmates, and brothers and sisters. They also involve relationships with significant objects, such as books or toys, and culturally specific practices that children engage in in the classroom, at home, and on the playground. Children are active partners in these interactions, constructing knowledge, skills, and attitudes and not just

mirroring the world around them.

Vygotsky opposed the psychologists who believed that children's development occurs spontaneously and cannot be affected by education. He also differed with those who claimed that teaching had the power to alter development at any time regardless of the child's age or capacities. Instead, Vygotsky felt that learning could lead development if it occurs within the child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD contains skills and concepts that are not yet fully developed but are "on the edge of emergence" emerging only if the child is given appropriate support. For the skills and concepts that lie outside a child's ZPD, even significant instructional efforts may fail to produce developmental gains.

Vygotsky recognized that the kind of assistance needed to help children develop new skills and concepts within their ZPD took different forms for children of different ages. For instance, fostering make-believe play with preschoolers could provide the same support that formal instruction offers for older students. "A child's greatest achievements are possible in play, achievements that tomorrow will become her basic level of real action."

Lev Vygotsky has contributed a wealth of ideas to early childhood education. Most important, he has shown us how children's efforts to understand the world around them, working in concert with teachers' sensitive, responsive interactions, rouses their young minds to life.

**Supporting Development Through Play For make-believe play to support development, the teacher should:**

- 1) Give children the opportunity to create an imaginary situation by offering nonstructured and multifunctional props and by modeling how to use them (for example, a paper plate may be used not only for playing restaurant but may also become a dial in a spaceship or a mirror in a hospital).
- 2) Encourage children to act out various roles by introducing different play themes and scenarios (so, when playing out a grocery store theme, children can be shelf stockers, baggers, shoppers, cashiers, and so on).
- 3) Be certain that children are aware of the rules that govern the relationship between specific roles in a play (for example, in playing hospital, the "patient" is not supposed to give a shot to the "nurse").