

Developing a play assessment for Australian Indigenous children

Alma Dender¹, Karen Stagnitti¹

¹*Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia*, ²*Deakin University, Geelong, Australia*

Introduction

There is little written about Australian Indigenous children's play and what is written is fleeting observations which have been interpreted through Western eyes using classical theories of play. Indigenous Australian children belong to an ancient culture where community and kinship ties are important. Working as therapists from a non-Indigenous background has raised the issue of culturally sensitive assessments for Indigenous Australian children. Research into culturally sensitive and appropriate assessment is well overdue.

Objectives

This paper presents the first study into the development of an Indigenous play assessment for Australian children. The aim of the study was to identify culturally sensitive play materials and administration for an assessment of a child's spontaneous pretend play ability.

Method

Twenty-three children aged 4 to 6 years from three remote Indigenous communities in North West Australia were presented with four combinations of play materials. These were: the play materials from the Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment, unstructured play materials, play materials nominated by Elders of the communities, and a combination of play materials. All children were videotaped to allow for analysis of data.

Results

Results indicated that the most frequently used play materials used in pretend play actions by the children were: indigenous Australian animals, dark coloured dolls, truck, trailer and fences. For the unstructured play materials nine of the 23 children used the materials. In terms of administration, advice from the community Elders was that children should come in pairs to play and all children enjoyed playing in the 'cubby' house (a sheet thrown over two chairs).

Conclusion

From the data analysis, a selection of play materials for a standardised Australian Indigenous play assessment has been identified. Further research will be undertaken on the unstructured play materials. A social scale is being constructed to use alongside the quality of play scale.

Contribution to practice

The Indigenous Child-Initiated Pretend Play Assessment is the first occupational therapy play assessment that is designed to be culturally sensitive and developmentally appropriate for Australian Indigenous children. Further research will examine the construct validity of the assessment using an Australian Indigenous language assessment.