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The Significance of Activity in The Mental Development Of Preschool Children

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Abstract. This article examines the role of activity as a decisive factor in the mental development of preschool children. Early childhood is a sensitive period in which cognitive processes, speech, imagination, memory, attention, and elementary forms of reasoning develop intensively. In this stage, the child does not acquire knowledge passively; rather, mental growth occurs through purposeful interaction with objects, adults, peers, symbols, and the surrounding environment. The article substantiates the idea that activity-based experience serves as the psychological foundation of intellectual maturation in preschool age. Particular attention is paid to play, communication, productive work, exploratory behavior, and educationally organized tasks as leading forms of activity that stimulate perception, comparison, classification, generalization, and problem-solving. The paper also analyzes the pedagogical conditions necessary for strengthening mental development in preschool education: emotionally supportive communication, a rich developmental environment, age-appropriate tasks, integration of speech and action, and the active participation of adults in guiding children's independent efforts. It is argued that activity is not merely a background condition of development, but the core mechanism through which the child transforms external experience into internal mental structures. The article concludes that the effectiveness of preschool education depends largely on how consistently children are involved in meaningful, diverse, and developmentally appropriate activities.
Keywords: preschool child, mental development, activity, cognition, thinking, speech development, play, perception, memory, attention, preschool education.

Preschool age occupies a special place in human development because it is during this period that the child's intellectual, emotional, social, and speech capacities begin to form as an integrated system. Mental development in early childhood does not emerge spontaneously and cannot be reduced to the simple accumulation of information. It unfolds in close connection with the child's participation in various forms of activity through which the surrounding world becomes understandable, meaningful, and personally significant. The problem of understanding the significance of activity in the mental development of preschool children has remained one of the central issues in psychology and pedagogy because the child's future learning success, school readiness, communication skills, and adaptive potential are rooted in the experiences acquired in this age period [2, 22]. The preschool child is naturally active by nature: he or she explores, compares, asks questions, imitates adults, manipulates objects, engages in fantasy, tests possibilities, and seeks emotional contact. Therefore, mental development must be considered not as a detached internal process but as a dynamic result of the child's active participation in the world of objects, social relations, and symbolic meanings [4, 19].

The concept of activity is especially important because it explains how the child moves from immediate sensory impressions to more complex forms of cognition. A young child first learns through direct action. Touching, moving, sorting, building, dismantling, drawing, listening, repeating, and role-playing all contribute to the formation of cognitive structures. In these actions, the child begins to distinguish essential and non-essential features of objects, recognize relationships between cause and effect, and form initial representations about quantity, shape, size, sequence, and function [1, 14]. When a child builds a tower from blocks, for example, this is not only a motor task; it is also an exercise in balance, comparison, prediction, correction of error, and persistence. Similarly, when children classify toys by color or shape, they are practicing operations of analysis and generalization. Such experiences gradually create the basis for visual-effective, visual-figurative, and later verbal-logical thinking [6, 20].

In preschool age, activity acts as the main bridge between external reality and internal mental development. Through repeated interactions with the environment, the child internalizes patterns of action, speech models, rules of behavior, and elementary intellectual strategies. This process has been widely

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interpreted in developmental psychology as a transformation of social and practical experience into internal mental functions [3, 12]. The child first performs many actions with the support of adults, then carries them out jointly, and later becomes capable of independent execution. This gradual shift from shared activity to self-regulated action is especially significant for the development of memory, attention, thinking, and self-control. For this reason, adult participation in preschool activity should not be authoritarian or mechanically instructive. Its real developmental power lies in guidance, modeling, emotional support, and the creation of situations in which the child can act independently while remaining within a zone of achievable challenge [5, 18].

Among the many forms of activity in preschool childhood, play occupies a central place. Play is not simply entertainment; it is the leading activity of preschool age because it combines imagination, speech, emotional expression, role behavior, and cognitive experimentation in a unified process [7, 16]. In role play, children reproduce observed social relations, imitate adults, negotiate with peers, establish rules, and construct imaginary situations. All of these elements contribute to mental development. During play, children learn to keep a role in mind, follow a sequence of actions, coordinate speech with intention, and distinguish between real and symbolic meanings. A stick may become a horse, a chair may become a bus, and a doll may represent a patient or a student. This capacity for symbolic substitution is of great significance because it strengthens imagination and creates the psychological prerequisites for abstract thinking [8, 21]. Moreover, play develops voluntary attention: the child remains engaged in an imagined situation, follows self-imposed rules, and sustains concentration longer than in ordinary routine conditions.

Speech development is also deeply connected with activity. The child's vocabulary, grammatical competence, communicative initiative, and coherent expression are not formed through memorization alone. They develop most effectively in meaningful contexts where speech serves real purposes: asking, explaining, negotiating, describing, comparing, retelling, and problem-solving [9, 23]. When children participate in construction games, storytelling, drawing, dramatization, or collaborative tasks, language becomes a tool of thought. In such settings, the child learns not only new words but also the mental operations expressed through language. Naming features, comparing objects, explaining causes, and planning actions all require the coordination of speech and thinking. Therefore, activity-based communication is one of the strongest conditions for intellectual development in preschool years. A quiet environment with minimal interaction may preserve order, but it cannot provide the rich linguistic and cognitive stimulation necessary for full mental growth [10, 24].

Another important dimension of activity is exploratory behavior. Preschool children are naturally curious, and curiosity is one of the earliest forms of cognitive motivation. They want to know how things work, why events happen, what changes when objects are mixed, moved, broken, or combined. This exploratory drive should not be suppressed by overly rigid instruction; rather, it should be directed into safe, pedagogically meaningful forms [11, 15]. Observation of plants, simple experiments with water and sand, comparison of natural objects, sensory games, and practical problem situations all encourage children to think actively. In such experiences, the child learns to observe carefully, notice differences, formulate assumptions, test them, and draw simple conclusions. This strengthens not only perception and memory but also the first forms of reasoning. The educational significance of such activity lies in the fact that knowledge gained through direct investigation is usually more stable, conscious, and transferable than information received in passive form [13, 17].

Productive activity, including drawing, modeling, cutting, constructing, and making simple objects, also has major importance in mental development. These forms of activity unite sensory experience, imagination, planning, and motor coordination. When a child draws a house, molds an animal from clay, or builds a road system from blocks, he or she is not merely creating a visual product. The child must imagine the result, select materials, sequence actions, correct mistakes, and evaluate the outcome. These actions develop constructive thinking and the ability to hold a mental image while transforming it into a material form [14, 22]. Productive activity also stimulates the development of fine motor skills, which are closely linked with speech and cognitive functions in early childhood. In addition, creative tasks promote independence and confidence, both of which indirectly support intellectual initiative.

The role of communication as a special form of activity should be emphasized separately. Preschool mental development is impossible without interaction with adults and peers. Through communication with

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adults, the child gains access to cultural meanings, language norms, moral evaluations, and methods of action that would not emerge from isolated experience alone [3, 25]. Adults interpret the world for the child, answer questions, model appropriate speech, and help organize attention. At the same time, peer interaction creates a different developmental field. In communication with other children, the preschooler must coordinate viewpoints, defend ideas, resolve conflicts, and follow common rules. Such situations stimulate perspective-taking, flexibility of thought, and social forms of reasoning. They also help children understand that one and the same situation can be interpreted in different ways. This ability is closely related to the growth of reflective thinking and communication competence [5, 20].

Mental development in preschool age includes the formation of several interrelated cognitive processes, each of which is strengthened by purposeful activity. Perception becomes more differentiated when children compare, sort, observe, and manipulate objects. Attention becomes more stable and voluntary when tasks are meaningful, emotionally engaging, and structured by clear goals [6, 18]. Memory develops more effectively when information is embedded in action, story, image, or practical necessity rather than isolated repetition. Thinking grows when the child faces problems that require choice, explanation, prediction, or transformation. Imagination expands when activity includes symbolic representation, creative variation, and emotional involvement. Thus, activity should be understood as a multidimensional mechanism that supports the development of all major psychological functions simultaneously [7, 21].

An important question in preschool pedagogy concerns the role of adult guidance. If adults dominate every task, the child may become dependent and passive. If adults withdraw completely, the activity may lose developmental direction. The most effective position is one of sensitive pedagogical mediation. This means that the adult organizes space, materials, and situations in such a way that the child's own mental effort becomes necessary and productive [8, 17]. For instance, instead of giving ready-made answers, the educator may ask questions that encourage comparison, inference, and explanation. Instead of correcting every mistake immediately, the adult may invite the child to notice the inconsistency and try a new strategy. Such an approach supports autonomy, persistence, and reflective thinking. It also respects the individuality of each child, since preschool mental development is influenced by temperament, previous experience, language environment, emotional security, and pace of maturation [11, 24].

The modern preschool environment should therefore be designed as a developmental space rather than a place of routine supervision. A rich educational environment includes materials for sensory exploration, construction, role play, creativity, storytelling, observation, and collaborative problem-solving [9, 16]. However, the mere presence of toys and didactic materials is not enough. Their developmental value depends on how they are used in activity. A well-chosen object can remain cognitively empty if children manipulate it mechanically without guidance, meaning, or variation. Conversely, simple materials can become powerful instruments of development when they are integrated into tasks that require thinking, communication, and imagination. This is why pedagogical design must focus not only on resources but also on the structure of children's activity: what motivates the child, what problem must be solved, what speech accompanies the action, what emotional response is evoked, and what independent choice is allowed [12, 19].

The issue of school readiness also demonstrates the significance of activity in mental development. Children who have participated in diverse, meaningful, and developmentally appropriate activities usually enter school with better speech, stronger attention control, richer imagination, and more flexible thinking. They are more capable of listening to instructions, completing tasks, communicating with adults, and regulating their behavior in structured learning situations [10, 23]. By contrast, when preschool education is reduced either to passive care or to premature formal instruction detached from activity, important aspects of mental development may remain insufficiently formed. Early academic pressure without a proper activity base can lead to superficial knowledge, reduced curiosity, and emotional fatigue. Therefore, the goal of preschool education should not be the mechanical acceleration of school-type learning, but the cultivation of mental readiness through play, exploration, communication, creativity, and practical action [13, 25].

It is also necessary to consider the emotional side of activity. Mental development cannot be separated from emotional well-being because the child thinks most actively in situations of interest, trust, and psychological safety. Positive emotions increase engagement, persistence, and openness to new experience, while fear, shame, and excessive pressure narrow cognitive initiative [4, 15]. In preschool age, emotional tone is especially influential because the child's motivation remains closely tied to immediate experience. An

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educator who creates supportive, encouraging, and respectful interaction helps preserve the natural link between curiosity and mental effort. This makes activity not only effective but personally meaningful. In such conditions, children begin to experience intellectual success, which strengthens self-confidence and the desire to learn further.

From a pedagogical perspective, the development of children's thinking in activity should rely on several principles. First, tasks must correspond to age characteristics and individual abilities; overly easy tasks do not stimulate growth, while excessively difficult ones weaken motivation. Second, activity should move from direct manipulation to symbolic and verbal representation, allowing children to gradually transform concrete experience into conceptual understanding [2, 18]. Third, repetition should be varied; children need to return to similar operations in new forms so that mental actions become generalized rather than tied to one isolated situation. Fourth, speech should accompany activity because verbalization helps children become aware of what they are doing and why. Fifth, collective and individual forms of activity should be balanced, since some cognitive qualities are best developed in cooperation while others require independent effort [1, 20]. These principles make it possible to use everyday educational practice as a systematic means of strengthening children's intellectual potential.

In contemporary preschool education, the idea of activity-based mental development remains especially relevant because society increasingly values flexibility, creativity, communication competence, and problem-solving ability. These qualities cannot be formed through passive transmission of ready-made knowledge. They require children to act, explore, imagine, discuss, and make sense of their experience from the earliest years [6, 24]. Therefore, the mental development of preschool children should be viewed not as an isolated psychological phenomenon but as the result of a well-organized system of interactions in which activity plays the leading and structuring role. Through activity, the child discovers the world; through activity, he or she acquires language and concepts; through activity, thought becomes organized, purposeful, and increasingly independent [7, 22].

In conclusion, the significance of activity in the mental development of preschool children is fundamental and multidimensional. Activity is the primary mechanism through which perception, attention, memory, speech, imagination, and thinking develop in interconnected ways. Play, communication, exploration, and productive work each contribute specific developmental functions, but all of them are united by one common feature: they engage the child as an active participant in the construction of knowledge and experience. The most effective preschool education is therefore built not on passive instruction but on meaningful, emotionally rich, socially supported, and cognitively challenging activity. When children are given opportunities to act independently, communicate freely, explore purposefully, and create imaginatively, their mental development becomes deeper, more stable, and more harmonious. For this reason, activity should be recognized as both the condition and the inner engine of preschool intellectual growth.

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