THE PLAY OBSERVATION SCALE (POS)

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY OBSERVATION SCALE

Early observational investigations of children’s free play preferences often focused upon the formulation of social participation hierarchies. Thus, in a now classic study, Parten (1932) discovered that social participation among preschoolers increased with the child’s age. Parten defined six sequential social participation categories: unoccupied behavior, solitary play, onlooker behavior, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative play. Preschoolers’ modal play preference from 2½ to 3½ years was parallel play, and from 3½ to 4½ years was associative play.

A second major early source of information concerning children’s play behaviors stemmed for Piaget’s (1962) classification of three successive stages according to the degree to which play remains purely sensorimotor or has some bearing on thought itself. Smilansky (1968) elaborated upon the original Piaget categories and labeled them as follows: (a) functional play—simple repetitive muscle movements with or without objects; (b) constructive play—manipulation of objects construct or to “create” something; (c) dramatic play—the substitution of an imaginary situation to satisfy the child’s personal wishes and needs; and (d) games-with-rules—the acceptance of prearranged rules and the adjustment to these rules. The four types of play have been thought to develop in a relatively fixed sequence with functional play appearing ontogenetically first in infancy and games-with-rules last (during concrete operations). Studies, however, have indicated that constructive and dramatic play develop simultaneously and follow the same developmental course (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983).

The Play Observational Scale (POS) described in this manual represents an attempt to relate the two long-standing play hierarchies, the one social (Parten, 1932), the other cognitive (Piaget, 1962). Researchers have shown that the scale has proven useful in determining (a) age and sex differences in children’s play; (b) SES differences in play; (c) effects of ecological setting of play; (d) individual differences in play; and (e) the social contexts within which the various forms of cognitive play are distributed. The scale has also been used to identify both extremely withdrawn and aggressive children who are “at risk” for later psychological difficulties. More recently, researchers have used the POS to study behavioral associations with temperament, attachment relationships, parenting, and children’s peer relationships. Investigators have also used the POS in studies of handicapped and learning disabled children. An abbreviated and selective biographical list of studies in which the play scale has been used is included in this manual.

DEFINITIONS OF PLAY AND NON-PLAY CATEGORIES

When coding a child’s behavior the first decision the observer must make is whether the behavior is play or non-play. The coding sheet is divided into play and non-play categories. The cognitive play categories (functional, constructive, dramatic and games-with-rules) are nested within the social play categories (solitary, parallel and group). One non-play behavior, exploration, is also nested within the three social play categories. Thus, there are 15 possible nested behaviors (solitary-functional, solitary-constructive etc.). The remaining non-play
categories are unoccupied behavior, onlooker behavior, conversations with teacher and/or peers, transitional, aggressive, rough-and-tumble, hovering, and/or anxious behaviors.

1. Social Play

When coding the social play of the focal child it is important to note (1) the proximity of the focal child to any other children in the area, and (2) the attentiveness of the focal child to his/her playmates.

(A) **Solitary Play:** The child plays apart from other children at a distance greater than three feet (one meter). S/he is usually playing with toys that are different from those other children are using. The child is centered on his/her own activity and pays little or no attention to any children in the area. If the child is playing in a small area the three-foot rule is often not applicable. In such cases the observer must rely upon the relative attentiveness of the child to others in his/her social milieu.

(B) **Parallel Play:** The child plays independently; however, the activity often, though not necessarily, brings him/her within three feet of other children. If the child is very attentive to others while playing independently, parallel play is coded regardless of the distance between the focal child and the other children. S/he is often playing with toys that are similar to those that the children around him/her are using. The child usually seems to be somewhat aware of, and attentive to, his/her playmates, and frequently engages in “parallel speech” (i.e., verbalizing his/her own thoughts for the benefit of the other children). In short, the child plays beside, or in the company of, other children but does not play with his/her companions.

(C) **Group Play:** The child plays with other children and there is a common goal or purpose to their activity. They may be following one another in a functional activity, or they may be organized for making some material product, striving to attain some competitive goal, dramatizing situations of adult or group life, or playing formal games. Whatever the activity, the goals are definitely group-centered.

2. Cognitive Play

In order to code the cognitive play level of a given activity the observer must first decide upon the child’s intent or purpose as s/he engages in that activity.

(A) **Functional Play:** This is an activity that is done simply for the enjoyment of the physical sensation it creates. Generally speaking, the child engages in simple motor activities (e.g. repetitive motor movements with or without objects). Specific examples are climbing on gym equipment; pouring water from one container to another; jumping on and off a chair; making faces; singing or dancing for non-dramatic reasons; ringing bells and buzzers, etc.
(B) **Constructive Play:** The definition of constructive play is the manipulation of objects for the purpose of constructing or creating something. Pounding on playdough for the sensory experience of the pounding is considered to be functional play; however, pounding for the purpose of making a “pancake” is coded as constructive. Similarly, pouring water in and out of containers is a functional activity; however, pouring water into a series of containers for the purpose of filling each container to the same level is a constructive play behavior. It can be seen, therefore, that one major distinction between functional and constructive activity concerns the child’s goal during play.

Additionally, construction may manifest itself as teaching another how to do something. This differs from exploration because the child already knows how to perform the task. For example, the target child shows another child how the elevator on an action figure activity set raises and lowers.

(C) **Exploration:** Exploratory behavior is defined as focused examination of an object for the purpose of obtaining visual information about its specific physical properties. The child may be examining an object in his/her hand or may be looking at something across the room. Also, if a child is listening to a noise or listening for something his/her behavior is coded as exploratory. As previously mentioned, this behavior has been nested within the social play categories because it can occur in solitary, parallel, or group situations. Generally, reading is coded when a child is reading or leafing through a book, or is being read to by a teacher or other person. Reading, or being read to, is a considered a constructive activity.

(D) **Dramatic Play:** Any element of pretense play is coded as dramatic. The child may take on a role of someone else, or may be engaged in pretend activity (e.g., pouring pretend water into a cup and then “drinking” it). S/he may also attribute life to an inanimate object (e.g., making a doll talk).

(E) **Games-with-Rules:** The child accepts prearranged rules, adjusts to them and controls his/her actions and reactions within the given limits. The child and/or his/her playmate(s) prior to the onset of the game may have decided upon these rules. There must be an element of competition either between the focal child and other children, or with him/herself. To illustrate, two children who are taking turns bouncing a ball against a wall are not necessarily engaging in a game-with-rules activity even if they have decided that dropping the ball constitutes the end of a turn. However, if these children are counting the number of bounces successfully completed before the ball is dropped and are trying to beat the other child’s (or their own) previous score, then they are playing a “game-with-rules”.
Non-Play Behaviors

The following behaviors are those that are not coded as play.

(F) **Unoccupied Behavior:** there is a marked absence of focus or intent when a child is unoccupied. Generally, there are two types of unoccupied behaviors: (1) the child is staring blankly into space; or (2) the child is wandering with no specific purpose, only slightly interested, if at all, in ongoing activities. If the child is engaging in a functional activity (e.g., twisting hair or fiddling with an object) but is not attending to the activity, then the child is coded as being unoccupied. If it is judged that the child’s mind is on the functional activity, the behavior would be coded as “functional”.

Similarly, a child may be surveying the playroom. At first glance, it may look as thought the child is unoccupied, however the child may actually be visually exploring his/her environment. It is important to distinguish between truly without focus, and actually looking at something (e.g., a poster, a camera, etc.), which would represent exploratory behavior.

(G) **Onlooker Behavior:** When onlooking, the child watches the activities of others but does not enter into an activity. S/he may also offer comments, or laugh with the other children, but does not become involved in the actual activity.

(H) **Transition:** Transition is coded when a child is setting up a new activity or moving from one activity to another. Examples are walking across the room to watch an activity or to get a drink of water, setting up a game, tidying up an activity, or searching for a desired object.

(I) **Active Conversation:** Conversation involves the verbal transfer of information to another person. Parallel and private-speech do not fall under this category as neither represent attempts at communication. Conversation is coded when a child is being spoken to by another child and is actively listening in order to respond or follow directions, and is also coded when more than one child shares laughter (eye contact must be made). However, a child who is listening to someone else’s conversation but is not specifically being spoken to is coded as engaging in onlooker behavior instead of conversation.

Conversation with a peer is differentiated from conversation with a teacher or adult.

(J) **Aggression:** Aggression refers to non-playful agonistic interaction with another child. Included are hitting, kicking, grabbing, threatening, etc.

(K) **Rough-and-Tumble:** This is a specialized type of play that involves playful or mock fighting, running around in a non-organized fashion, or playful physical contact (e.g., tickling).
The following are three examples are illustrations of behaviors for which rough-and-tumble is coded:

Example 1: Two children are sitting on the floor. One leans over and playfully flicks the other on the head. The second child laughs and returns the gesture.

Example 2: Two children are pretending to be “super heroes”. At one point they engage in a “battle” and tussle on the floor.

Example 3: A group of children are playing “house”. One child, who is pretending to be the family dog, has been “bad”, and is being spanked by the mother.

(L) Hovering: Hovering behaviors often begin as onlooking. However, hovering is onlooking at very close proximity to the activity the focal child is watching. A child who is watching another(s) and approaches to within three feet and frequently appears to want to join in play, but is wary of doing so, is double coded as hovering.

(M) Anxious Behaviors: Behaviors indicating anxiety include crying, whining, and nail biting. Anxious behaviors include automanipulatives such as hair twisting, foot wiggling, nail biting, etc. Children displaying these types of behaviors would be double coded as anxious. For example, if a child refuses to let his/her mother leave him/her in the playroom for the experiment, anxious behaviors would be checked during those time intervals.

(N) Uncodable Behaviors: Uncodable behavior is coded when one of the following occurs: (a) the observer is unable to see what the child is doing (e.g., the child is off camera for an extended period of time or the lights are turned out during an interval); (b) the child leaves the room due to circumstances not in control of his/her will (e.g., s/he has to go to the bathroom); or (c) the experimenter or an adult enters the playroom for a portion of the freoplay session. Uncodable should never be coded with any other coding categories (i.e., do not double code when the child is “uncodable”).

The uncodable category was devised simply as a reference to time segments during which the child’s play behavior cannot be observed, and therefore, cannot be coded.

(O) Out of Room: Out of room is coded when the child leaves the room on his/her own accord (e.g. the child is too upset to stay in the room (crying) or the child leaves the room to go to see his/her mom). If the child leaves the room because he/she is upset/anxious this is double-coded as out-of-room and anxious for as long as the child is out of the playroom. However, if the child leaves the room because he/she is goofing around (wants to find the experimenter to tell him/her that s/he is bored), only out-of-room would be coded.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOR</th>
<th>GOAL OR INTENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Solitary</td>
<td>to engage in an activity entirely alone, usually more than three feet (one meter) away from other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel</td>
<td>to engage in activity beside (but not with other children, usually at a distance of three feet or less.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>to engage in an activity with another child or children, in which cognitive goal or purpose is shared amongst all group members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional</td>
<td>to experience sensory stimulation through simple, repetitive muscular movements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constructive</td>
<td>to create or construct something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>to dramatize life situations or bring life to an inanimate object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Games-with-rules</td>
<td>to engage in a competitive game-type activity following pre-established rules and limits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>to obtain visual or auditory information from an object.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>examining, exploring books and related materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unoccupied</td>
<td>there is complete lack of goal or focus during this behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onlooker</td>
<td>to watch (or to listen to) the behaviors and activities of other children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>to prepare for, set out activity, or to move from one activity to another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>to communicate verbally with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>to express displeasure, anger, disapproval through hostile means.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough-and-Tumble</td>
<td>playful physical activity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious Behaviors</td>
<td>display of wary/fearful behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hovering</td>
<td>onlooking at a close proximity.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING THE POS

1. The observer should watch the target child for 30 seconds before beginning to record behaviors in order to become familiar with contextual cues regarding the child’s behaviors. The target child is observed for a 10 second interval. The next 5 to 10 seconds are spent coding the predominant activity observed by placing a checkmark in the appropriate column on the coding sheet. The observer should attempt to keep the length of this coding time (or “off” interval) as close to 5 seconds as possible. Thus, it will take 1 ½ to two minutes to obtain one minute of recorded observations. In order to obtain a valid measure of the child’s general play styles, we recommend that only up to five minutes of the child’s behavior be recorded on any given day. We suggest that a minimum of 15 minutes of POS data be gathered.

2. When the child is involved in any interaction with another child or children (i.e., group play, conversation, aggression rough-and-tumble) the names of the focal child’s playmates should be recorded in the appropriate space at the right-hand side of the coding sheet.

3. For any of the above-mentioned interactions the affect, that is, whether the interaction was positive (+), neutral (0), or negative(-) should also be noted in the appropriate column.

   A positive interaction is one that is prosocial in nature and will ultimately leave the playmate with a good feeling. This includes help-giving, guidance, praise, affection, reassurance, protection, gift-giving, overt compliance or acceptance of directions and gifts, warm greetings, smiling and laughing, invitation to play, permission giving, promises of reward, joke telling, etc.

   A negative interaction is defined as an agonistic or anti-social act that will make the playmate feel unhappy, bothered, and frustrated, etc. Examples include overt noncompliance, disapproval, rejection, blaming, teasing, insults, quarreling, yelling, ignoring, taking or damaging property, physical attack, and threats.

   Neutral interactions are the everyday, commonplace interactions that occur between children and that involve contain none of the above prosocial or agnostic behaviors. Theses interactions are frequently communicative in nature and often involve an exchange of information or ideas.

   These affect categories are drawn directly from Furman, Rahe, and Hartup (1979).
SELECTING THE DOMINANT BEHAVIOR

During each 10-second interval, only one behavior is coded. If more than one behavior occurs during a 10-second interval, the behavior expressed for the majority of the time sample is coded. If behaviors are of the same length, the observer “codes up” (i.e., s/he codes the most mature social and/or cognitive category).

The hierarchy for “coding up” is as follows:

1. Any *Group* behavior supercedes all other behaviors.  
   (Group Games>group drama>group construction>group exploration>group functional).

2. Conversation

3. Parallel Play – within parallel play the same cognitive hierarchy is used as in example 1 (e.g., drama>construction).

4. Solitary – within solitary play the same cognitive play hierarchy is used as in example 1(e.g., drama>construction).

5. Onlooker

6. Unoccupied

7. Transitional

*Aggression, anxious behaviors, hovering, and rough-and-tumble are not included in the above described hierarchy.* They are coded every time they occur. If aggression lasts longer than any other behavior in a 10-second interval, then only aggression is coded. However, if it lasts less then another behavior, both aggression and the other behavior are coded.

The same procedure is used for rough-and-tumble play.

RELIABILITY

Inter-observer reliability has been reported in many of the sources listed in the bibliography. Percent agreement has ranged from approximately 80%-90%. Kappas computed on various data sets have been uniformly high.
1. **Solitary vs. Parallel Play:** As previously mentioned, a distance of three feet (one meter) is considered to distinguish between solitary and parallel play. However, the three-foot proximity rule is not absolute. In some situations, the observer must consider other factors when deciding whether to code a behavior as solitary or parallel. For example:

   The focal child is playing at a table and a second child is playing on the floor within three feet of the focal child, but they are back to back and are paying no attention to one another.

   In this situation, the focal child’s play would be coded as solitary because of the complete absence of attention to the other child.

   If the play space is limited, i.e., if the children are playing in a very small room and/or there is only one table at which they can play, they may not have any choice but to be within three feet of one another. In this situation, the observer must rely on the absence of parallel speech by the target child, and the child’s position at the table relative to other children at the table.

2. **Parallel vs. Group Play:** In some situations it may appear as if a number of children are engaged in a group activity when actually they are playing in a parallel manner. For example:

   Two children are going to build a house together out of “Lego” blocks. One decides to take some “Lego” blocks and build a garage for the house, while the other works on the house itself.

   In this example the children are actually engaging in parallel play because at this point they have two separate goals for building with Lego. One child’s goal is to build a house, while the other child intends to build a garage to attach to the house. When the time comes that they have finished their separate constructions and are joining the two together (i.e., when they have a common goal) they will be engaging in group play.

   Similarly, in a dramatic situation when two children are play-acting the roles of “mommy” and “daddy”, they are coded as engaging in group-dramatic play. However, if “daddy” goes to “work” and the “mommy” stays “home” their play may be reduced to parallel-, or even solitary-dramatic play levels depending on their proximity to each other and the extent to which they engage in mutually directed communication.

3. **Parallel vs. Rough-and-Tumble Play:** As previously noted, rough-and-tumble play refers to playful physical contact or mock fighting with another child. This implies that rough-and-tumble play, by definition, occurs in group situations only. However, in the following examples the behaviors of the focal children cannot be considered to be rough-and-tumble in nature.
Example 1: The focal child rushes over to another child (who is colouring a picture) and pretends to engage in a sword fight with him. The second child completely ignores the focal child and continues drawing.

Example 2: The focal child has a paper airplane and is throwing the airplane at children around her. She throws the airplane at a passing child, runs, picks it up and throws it at another child.

In both of these examples there is no common goal between the focal child and his/her playmates; consequently, the activities are not coded as rough-and-tumble play. Therefore, in the first example, the focal child would be coded as parallel-dramatic, and the second as parallel-functional. If, during these intervals, the second child had joined the focal child, rough-and-tumble play would have been coded.

4. Constructive Play vs. Transitional: While setting up or getting ready to do an activity is generally considered to be transitional behavior, sometimes the setting up stage constitutes a type of activity in itself. For example, if a child elects to play with a toy hospital s/he may spend a great deal of time putting the hospital beds and equipment in specific places in the hospital before commencing dramatic play. Indeed, this “setting up” may be the only activity the child does with the hospital. In this case constructive play is coded instead of transitional activity. It may be said, therefore, that setting-up which is not merely preparation but does, in fact, involve some creativity, is considered to be constructive play. Other examples include dressing dolls, snapping together train tracks or road pieces on which a car or train will “drive”.

Secondly, some constructive activities have transitional behavior nested within them. For example, when drawing, painting, or building with blocks a child has to take some time to select new markers, refill his/her paint brush, get another block, etc. If these activities last for very short periods of time in between long constructive periods then they are not considered to be transitional. Rather, they are considered to be part of the constructive activity. However, if, for example, a child draws for three or four seconds but then spends the rest of the 10-second interval selecting a new colour, transitional activity is coded. In other words, if this type of behavior is predominant in a 10 second interval it is considered to be transitional.

5. Dramatic vs. Functional Play: It is sometimes very difficult to tell if a child is engaging in dramatic or functional play; (e.g., a child is pushing a toy car around the floor). In this example, the observer must use contextual cues to help make a decision regarding the type of play behavior to code. The most obvious clue is whether the child is making any playful sounds – engine noises, tires squealing, etc. If so, then the behavior is coded as dramatic. Similarly, if the child seems to be driving the car along a “road”, or is driving the car over to pick up some “passengers”, then dramatic play is coded. However, if there are no contextual cues available, or if the action seems to be for sensory stimulation only (as in aimless
pushing and pulling of a truck along the floor), the observer should code functional play.

6. **Dramatic vs. Constructive Play or Transition**: In some situations a child is engaging in an activity that would normally be coded as constructive or transitional [e.g., putting plates out on a table (constructive); putting playdough into a cupboard (transitional)]. However, if the child is, at that point, in a dramatic role or is engaging in some types of pretense play, then these behaviors are coded as dramatic. In the above two examples, this applies if the child is in fact pretending to be a “mommy” who is setting the table, or is actually putting the playdough in the “oven”. Again, it is important to try to discern the purpose behind the child’s actions.

7. **Games-with-Rules**: There is a tendency to code any activity that involves a board game as game-with-rules. However, a child can use a board game in a number of ways that do not involve competition or following pre-established rules. For example, if the game has a buzzer or a bell, the child may spend time “buzzing” or “ringing” merely to enjoy the sound. This would be coded as functional behavior.

A child who finds the actual games-with-rules aspect of the board game too complex or difficult may simplify his/her use of the board game to a constructive type of activity. For example, one game currently on the market requires children to put a number of varied shapes into corresponding places on a board during a set period of time. If the child does not stop the game timer before “time has run out”, then all the pieces that have been put into their designated positions are ejected. A child who tries to “beat” the timer or his/her pieces or others’ previous completion times is engaging in games-with-rules. However, if the child is merely putting the pieces in their appropriate positions without use of the timer, then s/he is treating the game as a puzzle rather than a game; his/her behavior is coded as constructive.

Also, some board games must be set up before game-playing can commence. There may be cards or pieces, etc., which must be put into specific locations, or piece of equipment may need to be wound or set in some way. If these activities are done in preparation for playing with the game in some manner then “transition” is coded; if the activities are carried out for their own sake then construction is coded.

8. **Games-with-Rules vs. Onlooker**: A child will watch an on-going game for one of two reasons: (1) S/he is not actually playing the game him/herself but is interested in watching it; (2) S/he is involved in the game-playing and is waiting for his/her turn. In the first example, the child is not an active participant; therefore s/he is coded as onlooking. However, in the second example, the child is actively involved in the game, in spite of the fact that s/he is, at the point in time, merely watching the others take their turns. Group-games-with-rules is coded

On the other hand, if, instead of watching the game while waiting for his/her turn, the child in the second example is watching some other activity or engaging in some other behavior, then that other behavior is coded.
9. Conversation:
   A. Parallel Speech: As previously mentioned, parallel speech, or verbalizing one’s thoughts and/or actions to no one in particular, is not coded as conversation. It is sometimes difficult to tell if a child is merely verbalizing to him/herself or is, in fact, attempting to speak with another child. Some clues that may help the observer to decide if a child is communicating are:
      1. the focal child refers to the other child by name or by the pronoun “you”;
      2. the focal child asks a question or makes a demand of the other child;
      3. the focal child establishes eye contact with his/her playmates when speaking.
   B. Dramatic and Game Speech: In group situations some forms of speech may be communicative in nature, but are required in the maintenance of the ongoing group play activity. For example, in group-dramatic play it is necessary for the play characters to talk to one another. Similarly, during a group game activity, there is a certain amount of talking that goes on in order to maintain the interest in and momentum of the game (e.g., “It’s your turn.”; “I got a four.”; “You always beat me.”; etc.). As such, communication during dramatic and game activities is not coded as conversation because they are an implicitly part of the group activity. On the other hand, if the target child, while engaged in a group-dramatic or group-game session, speaks to a child about a totally unrelated matter, then peer conversation is coded.
   C. Active Listening. In order to code active listening (i.e., conversation), the observer must be certain that the focal child is being spoken to and is listening for the purpose of replying or following directions. Some clues that the child is actively listening are:
      1. the focal child establishes or maintains eye contact with the speaker;
      2. the focal child responds in some manner to the other child when that child has finished speaking.

10. Exploratory vs. Onlooker Behavior: As previously mentioned, the major distinction between these two behaviors is that exploration involves receiving visual or auditory information from an object, while onlooking refers to receiving visual information regarding another person. In the following example it is possible to confuse the two behaviors.

   The focal child is watching another child drawing a picture. The “artist” stops drawing and moves his hand back from the picture, while the focal child continues to look at the drawing.

   In this example, the target child is, at first, engaging in onlooker behavior. When the second child stops drawing, however, the behavior of the focal child becomes exploratory in nature because s/he is no longer watching the person, but is instead examining the picture. If the focal child’s attention had moved with the other child
himself when he stopped drawing, then this behavior would represent a continuation of onlooking.

11. *Simultaneous Activities*: It is possible for a child to engage in two activities simultaneously. For example, a child may be walking toward a group of children (transitional) and watching them at the same time (onlooker). Similarly, a child may be drawing a picture (constructive) and singing (functional) all at once. In a situation such as this it is important that the observer should make a strong attempt to determine the focus of the child’s attention. In the first example, the child is probably concentrating on the activity of the children s/he is watching; therefore *onlooker* is coded.

The second example is more difficult to code and depends on contextual cues (i.e., is the child just lightly humming bits of songs while drawing or is s/he singing loudly and pausing in his/her picture making to sing choruses). At any rate, the observer should make a strong attempt to determine the focus of the child’s attention. If this is impossible, the “code-up” rule should be invoked.

Similarly, a child may converse with another and engage in another behavior simultaneously. If the “other” behavior is of a *group play* nature (e.g., group exploration or pretense), it is the group play category that is coded. One only codes *conversation* when it occurs in the absence of play or other ludic activities.
References


BIBLIOGRAPHY

The POS has been used extensively in studies of children’s play and socio-emotional development. The bibliography presented below is by no means exhaustive. Nevertheless, it should give the reader a good idea of the specific content areas studied via the POS.

Normative and Descriptive Manuscripts


**Children with Developmental Delays or Impairments**


Reliability/Validity Studies


Peer Relationships


Parenting


Aggression


Social Withdrawal
Early Childhood


**Middle Childhood**


**Early Adolescence**


**Social Reticence**


**Emotion regulation**


21
Physiology


Play Observation Scale Coding Sheet (2001)

Name of Child: __________     ID _______  Cohort ___  Age ___

Free Play Session _____________

| Time Sample |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| :10 | :20 | :30 | :40 | :50 | :60 |

uncodable
out of room
transitional
unoccupied
onlooker

**Solitary Behaviors:**
- Occupied
- Constructive
- Exploratory
- Functional
- Dramatic
- Games

**Parallel Behaviors:**
- Occupied
- Constructive
- Exploratory
- Functional
- Dramatic
- Games

**Group Behaviors:**
- Occupied
- Constructive
- Exploratory
- Functional
- Dramatic
- Games

**Peer Conversation**

**Double Coded Behaviors:**
- AnxiousBehaviors
- Hovering
- Aggression
- Rough-and-Tumble

**Conversation/Interacting With:**

1  2  3  4  5  6