

**THE ROLE OF PLAY IN ACQUISITION OF SOCIAL SKILLS IN YOUNG CHILDREN
IN PUBLIC ECDE CENTRES IN BUURI DIVISION, MERU COUNTY**

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NUC/012/MECD/00004**

**A RESEARCH PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE
AWARD OF DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN EARLY CHILDHOOD
STUDIES OF MOUNT KENYA UNIVERSITY**

JUNE 2015

ABSTRACT

Play gives children meaning of life and acts as a therapy to them through which they release their energy. However, some teachers regard play as waste of time while others are ignorant and therefore deny children their right to play, be creative and socialize with others. In some schools, play has not been possible due to failure in allocating time to play, lack of space and play materials. The general objective of the study was to establish the role of play in acquisition of social skills in young children. The study objectives were to identify play activities that promote acquisition of social skills in young children, to determine the extent to which the types of play materials available influenced acquisition of social skills in young children, establish the extent to which the amount of time allocated for play promotes involvement in play that facilitates acquisition of social skills in young children and to establish the extent for which the teacher's involvement in children's play promotes acquisition of social skills in young children. The reviewed literature revealed that play helps children to acquire social skills. This study adopted descriptive research design. The population included public ECDE centres. The researcher used simple random sampling to ensure representativeness. The sample included 10 schools in Buuri division in Meru County. Data was collected through semi-structured questionnaires and observation schedules. Data were analyzed using SPSS and thereafter presented using frequency tables and percentages. The study revealed that availability of play materials influenced children's social skills development. The study findings also indicated that children were involved with physical items such as toys and balls. It also indicated that majority of the teachers allocated 1-2 hours for children's play in the timetable. This time was however deemed inadequate for children play. Findings also revealed that most of the respondents agreed that children should be grouped into age and ability to assist them acquire social skills. Most teachers took children out for play 5 times a week. It further revealed that there were teachers who did not take children out for outdoor activities on daily basis. Most teachers did not participate in children's play. It was also revealed that different types of play enhanced children's social skills development. Based on the findings it was recommended that schools should be provided with the required learning resources which include play materials to enhance acquisition of social skills. It was also recommended that teachers should be encouraged to get involved in the children play so as to help the children acquire social skills. The study also recommended that teachers should strictly follow the recommended timetable and involve children in play as stipulated in the curriculum. The study also recommended further research on the effects of teacher training on children's play and on other areas influencing social skills development among young children.