

**Make-believe Play vs. Academic Skills:  
A Vygotskyan Approach to Today's Dilemma of Early Childhood Education**

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This presentation will focus on the Vygotskyan approach to high quality early childhood education in the light of the challenges facing early childhood educators in Russia and in the West. One of these challenges is the constant pressure to start teaching academic skills at a progressively younger age at the expense of traditional early childhood activities. The presenter will discuss the implications of this trend for the changes in young children's social situation of development and the potential results of this change. An alternative to this artificial "acceleration" of development is the idea of "amplification of development," which is a cornerstone of post-Vygotskyan theory of early childhood education. When development is "amplified" rather than "accelerated," young children have the opportunity to develop critical underlying competencies, such as symbolic representation and self-regulation, in the context of authentic developmentally appropriate activities. This approach does not preclude early childhood educators from teaching the beginnings of literacy and numeracy to young children, but rather helps them utilize the power of "uniquely preschool" activities for helping children acquire essential cultural tools and develop higher mental functions. The concept of "uniquely preschool" activities such as make-believe play will be further elaborated on from the perspective of its impact on school readiness as well as its general impact on children's learning and development. The example of the Vygotskyan approach to learning and teaching early literacy will be used to demonstrate how essential cognitive and social competencies can be acquired in an authentic early childhood context.