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Early Environments and Exploration in the Preschool Years

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Abstract

Childrens exploration is driven by opportunities for learning, and past research has suggested rational explanations for how early home experiences may affect childrens active learning (Yu et al., 2020) or willingness to wait for rewards (Kidd et al., 2013). However, less work has characterized the relationship between childrens environmental contexts and play. We pooled exploratory play data from past experiments in our lab (M(age)=56mos; N=278), and correlated play behavior with median income and education in the childs home zipcode. Children from lower SES areas played significantly longer, more variably, and spent a lower proportion of time focusing on demonstrated functions which traded off with length and variability of play exclusively for children from lower educated areas. Importantly, home income is confounded with daycare income; future work will disentangle distinct influences of family SES and daycare environment. This work lays critical groundwork for understanding early active learning across developmental contexts.