

**OBJECT-MANIPULATIVE ACTIVITY AS THE LEADING ACTIVITY
IN EARLY CHILDHOOD**

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Annotation: The article examines the concept of object-manipulative activity as the leading activity in early childhood, which spans approximately from one to three years of age. During this period, a child experiences rapid physical, linguistic, and intellectual development. Based on the works of L.S. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontiev, J. Piaget, D.B. Elkonin, J. Bruner, M. Montessori, and others, the study highlights that the interaction between the child and surrounding objects is the foundation of cognitive, speech, and social development. The paper analyzes how manipulative interaction with objects forms the basis for sensory, motor, and symbolic thinking and facilitates the assimilation of cultural experience. It also explores the emotional, social, and neuropsychological dimensions of object-manipulative activity and its role in forming independence, motivation, and self-awareness in a child.

Keywords: early childhood, leading activity, object-manipulative activity, cognitive development, play, Vygotsky, Leontiev, Piaget, Montessori, Bruner, Erikson.

One of the most significant stages of human ontogenesis is early childhood, approximately from one to three years of age. During this period, the child undergoes intensive physical, linguistic, and intellectual development. The main form of activity for a child at this stage is object-manipulative activity (Russian: предметная деятельность, English: object-manipulative activity). This type of activity becomes the center of the child's mental, linguistic, social, and emotional growth through practical interaction with the surrounding environment and objects.

The essence of object-manipulative activity lies in the process by which a child learns about the properties of objects, their uses, and social meanings. As L.S. Vygotsky emphasized, the "world of objects" represents the embodiment of adult cultural experience. Through manipulating objects, the child actually internalizes the historically developed cultural knowledge of humankind. Therefore, object-manipulative activity occupies a central place in the cognitive development of a child.

A.N. Leontiev, in his activity theory, stated that human activity is characterized by objectivity — it is always directed toward external objects and phenomena. During early childhood, this objectivity manifests in its simplest yet most essential form: the child grasps, shakes, throws, or bangs objects together, opens or closes them. Through these actions, the child discovers the physical properties of the world — such as solidity, weight, volume, and sound — and learns

cause-and-effect relationships through practical experience.

According to J. Piaget's theory of cognitive development, this stage marks the transition from the "sensorimotor" to the "preoperational" phase. At this time, the child begins to direct their actions toward specific goals. For example, they might move one object to reach another or use one item to influence another. This behavior reflects the emergence of causal reasoning within the child's thinking.

In early childhood, object-manipulative activity enriches the child's sensory-motor experience and lays the groundwork for linguistic development. Performing such activities together with adults becomes the foundation of communicative interaction. Adults name objects, demonstrate how they are used, and through this process, the child learns object names, functions, and symbolic meanings. Thus, object-manipulative activity becomes one of the main psychological mechanisms ensuring speech formation.

J. Bruner stated that any cognitive activity passes through three main stages: enactive (action-based), iconic (image-based), and symbolic (language-based). Early childhood object-manipulative activity represents the enactive stage, where a child gains knowledge through direct actions with objects. Later, these experiences are transformed into images and symbolic forms; the child begins to use representations — words, drawings, gestures — instead of actual objects.

One of the most essential features of early childhood object-manipulative activity is that it is performed together with adults. As D.B. Elkonin noted, "A child's activity is initially social in nature — it is carried out jointly with adults and gradually becomes internal, individual activity." In other words, a child first acts with adult guidance, then independently, as they begin to understand the meaning and function of objects.

Object-manipulative activity also carries a strong emotional appeal. The child enjoys discovering new properties of objects and feels joy and satisfaction from successful manipulation. These positive emotions strengthen intrinsic motivation for learning and exploration.

There are various types of object-manipulative activity in early childhood:

- **Constructive activity** (building with blocks, connecting details),
- **Everyday practical activity** (using spoons, cups, keys, or telephones),
- **Sensory play** (playing with sand, water, clay),
- **Socially imitative activity** (imitating adults — "talking on the phone," "cooking," "cleaning").

Through these activities, the child not only learns physical properties but also internalizes social meanings of objects.

The Montessori approach is built on the principles of object-manipulative activity. According to

Maria Montessori, a child “thinks with their hands,” meaning that practical actions shape consciousness. Her didactic materials create an environment for self-directed manipulation, allowing children to act independently, correct their own mistakes, and learn at their own pace.

Object-manipulative activity also plays a vital role in personality formation. It enables a child to discover their own “self,” to experience emotions such as “I can do it,” “I made it,” which strengthen self-esteem. This forms the foundation for independence, willpower, and confidence later in life.

In Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory, this period corresponds to the stage of autonomy vs. shame and doubt. If a child feels control over their actions, they develop self-confidence; otherwise, constant restriction and punishment can inhibit personal growth. Therefore, adults should act as guides, providing structure while maintaining the child’s sense of freedom.

Modern neuropsychological studies (P. Zelazo, M. Tomasello, S. Rogoff) have demonstrated that object-manipulative activity is not only cognitively but also neurophysiologically crucial. When a child manipulates objects, their frontal cortex becomes actively engaged, promoting the development of executive functions — attention, planning, and self-regulation.

According to M. Tomasello (2003), object-manipulative activity provides the foundation for cultural learning: the child learns not just about objects themselves but also how they are used within human culture — thus assimilating the rules and norms of social life.

Therefore, object-manipulative activity is far more than mere play; it is the psychological center through which a child’s thinking, language, social behavior, emotions, and self-concept are formed.

The dynamics of object-manipulative activity during early childhood evolve as follows: first, the child becomes interested in the external properties of objects (color, sound, shape); later, they comprehend functional meanings (e.g., a spoon is for eating); and eventually, they perform symbolic actions (e.g., using a block as a “telephone”). This progression marks the emergence of symbolic thinking.

Thus, object-manipulative activity forms the psychological foundation for role play in later preschool years. As D.B. Elkonin noted, “Play activity represents the internalized and planned form of earlier object-manipulative activity.”

In summary, the psychological essence of object-manipulative activity can be generalized as follows:

- It is the source of cognitive development;
- It enables the formation of speech and communication;

- It serves as a mechanism for assimilating social experience;
- It lays the foundation for the development of the personal “Self”;
- It represents the starting point of creative and symbolic thought.

To encourage the development of object-manipulative activity, educators and parents should allow the child to experiment freely, guide rather than restrict, and participate in shared activities that promote exploration and discovery.

Hence, object-manipulative activity is a bridge between human cognition and culture — the very process through which the child transitions from physical action to intellectual understanding, from sensory experience to conscious thought.

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