

To Be Successful—Let Them Play!

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Upon observing her son's class, a parent of a kindergarten child asked the principal, "These kids are just playing—when are they going to start learning something?"

All parents reach a point when they anxiously wait for their children to begin "real school." Up until that time, many parents view their children's activities as nothing more than mindless play. It is no surprise to parents that healthy young children devote much of their time and energy to play. After all, to adults play is just for fun; it's relaxing and recreational, not work. They perceive child's play as just that, play. And more important, many feel there is no learning value in their children's play.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Play for young children is creative, spontaneous, unpredictable, and absolutely fun. While play may seem like a frivolous activity, it is an important medium for young children's learning. It is a significant contributor to the child's cognitive, physical, emotional, and social development.

Play is the natural and best way for children to learn as they investigate for themselves and observe others at play and work. They are natural anthropologists who have a need and desire to investigate their world through real experiences and natural environments.

Take a moment to remember your own childhood. How did you spend your time? In play, of course! Outside or inside, quietly or loudly, with a big mess or no mess at all, play is

the way children make sense out of the complicated and complex world in which we live. Play is the medium children use to take risks, to challenge themselves both physically and mentally, to create something new, to deal with fears, and to enjoy the moment as they construct new meanings.

For children, play is at the very heart of their learning and development. Five qualities distinguish play for young children from other activities:

- It is a process. The outcome is not as important as the process itself.
- Play is child-initiated. The activity is done for no other reason than the child wants to do it.
- In play, everything and anything can happen: a sheet over a table becomes a castle and the little girl inside is the princess. There is no question that the functions of objects are transformed during play—a process called nonliteral play.
- Play becomes the arena for testing rules, both logical and illogical. Rules freely appear and disappear in children's play; they may be simple or complex, and they are created from children's previous knowledge. An example of rules in play is the "rule" of roles. For example, when young children play in the housekeeping area, you will often hear one of the children assigning roles to each of the other children ("You be the baby").
- Play is very much an activity of the mind. Children may become deeply engrossed in their play and

find it difficult to stop when asked. Engagement in play involves the mind in an active process as a child investigates, explores, and inquires during play.

Within a classroom setting, play and the curriculum should be deeply integrated; experienced teachers should be in a position to observe as children's cognitive, social, and physical learning takes place. A quality curriculum should rely heavily on play. Research supports the importance of play for young children, but it must be tempered with what we know about the individual child and what is age-appropriate for the child.

Children need multiple opportunities for meaningful play in a variety of settings and environments. Through many experiences, children begin to construct their knowledge and understanding of multiple skills, including creativity, cognitive competencies, social skills, and physical skills. These play experiences force children to constantly reexamine what they know to be true, and they challenge them to construct a new understanding based on new information. This "constructing" is repeated many times in a young child's life and helps him/her to construct a personal understanding of the world. It sounds simple enough, but the trick for parents, caregivers, and teachers is to provide multiple meaningful and appropriate experiences for the child within a safe environment.

When parents, caregivers, and teachers provide opportunities for children to play, they also are providing them with learning opportunities. During play, children may expand their expressive language proficiency; develop number sense as they build with blocks and other constructive materials; develop creativity through art activities and problem solving; and develop important social skills, such as taking turns and cooperating. They develop the eye-hand coordination necessary to hold a pencil and learn to read and write; develop a strong body through fine and gross motor activities; and develop early essential math skills, such as number concepts and classification skills. The dramatic arts area and the manipulatives area provide skills essential for an understanding of how things work, the library corner provides children a place for developing story sense and comprehension, and the manipulative area offers opportunities to learn about the properties of a variety of objects. This list is not comprehensive, but it demonstrates that play is an essential for young

children as they construct their own knowledge about the world in which they live.

Parents, caregivers, and teachers see children play in many ways. Learning to identify different types of play may give you further understanding of their importance. The many different play categories include:

- Practice Play—play that children do repeatedly, solely for pleasure, such as playing in sand and pouring it through their fingers
- Constructive Play—play where children construct or create something, such as block building
- Rough and Tumble Play—play that involves laughing and pretending; as the name implies, it can get a little rough (it is not aggressive play and, when done in a safe area, is an acceptable form of play)
- Dramatic Play—play that gives children the opportunity to take on the role of another person or of an object.
- Games With Rules—play governed by a set of rules, such as a game of "Duck, Duck, Goose."

Understanding these categories helps teachers plan appropriate play activities to meet the developmental needs of the whole child.

Many forms of learning are influenced in part by the belief that play is a beneficial component of young children's learning. A large body of research supports the value of play for a child's development. The research demonstrates that play promotes: cognitive development, problem solving, language development, creativity, discovery, reasoning and thought, group cooperation, social skills, and fine and gross motor skills. So the next time you see your children engaged in play, remember that they are practicing and developing the skills necessary to be successful students and members of the community. Let them have fun and play!

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