

# Childhood: A Time for Play!

PLAY is an integral part of the learning process.  
The National Kindergarten Alliance

For the purposes of this paper play does not refer to organized teacher-directed sports, scripted activities, theatre, nor electronic games.

Play is one of the most significant means by which children learn. Through spontaneous activity they create roles that emulate adult behavior. Children think, create, imagine, communicate, make choices, solve problems, take risks, build physical skills and take on a variety of roles as they interact socially. Play is intrinsically motivating and offers children the freedom to explore an activity unfettered by adult parameters of measured outcomes, testing and accountability.

Play supports learning, promotes language and social development and enhances creativity in children and adults. Children who learn healthy play skills feel capable, have successes, make friends and learn nonviolent ways to interact with others.

*Playing is fundamental to how children learn. If our society is to be serious about preparing our youth for their eventual roles in the increasingly complex adult world, then education needs to be serious about making sure that our children PLAY.*

Ronald Mah

According to the survey of the National Kindergarten Alliance (2002-2004), early childhood educators across the nation are concerned that the pressures of academic requirements and formal assessments are crowding out children's play in school. From the thousands of responses NKA received, it is evident that active learning experiences through play are being replaced by scripted lessons and structured academics. Play, particularly in preschool and kindergarten, needs to be an integral part of the educational process. Children learn more efficiently and effectively through play than one can imagine.

*The first seven years is a sacrosanct period for leaving the child alone and allowing him or her to "just play."*

*The period from four to seven years of age is the time in which children develop a metaphoric, symbolic language structure upon which later operational and creative thinking is based; that early academic training disrupts the development of this language structure.* Joseph Chilton Pearce

Given time and open-ended materials in a safe, supportive environment, play allows children to explore their world and discover their unique place in that world. In the school setting teachers and administrators should be obligated to provide time each day for both outdoor and indoor play.

## Rationale for Play

**Neurological** A newborn brain is made up of 100 billion neurons making about 1,000 trillion connections. (Wolfe, 2001) Children investigate their environment through their physical senses. The neurons are stimulated, integrated and connected across the hemispheres of the brain through a network of dendrites. Scientific studies of the brain have shown that essential neurological pathways occur in an environment free of stress, fatigue, and anxiety.

Informal play settings allow children to practice language skills involving vocabulary, syntax and grammar. English language learners particularly benefit from language exchanges during play. These language skills later assist with reading, writing and math development.

All the processes involved in play such as repeating actions, making connections, extending skills, combining materials and taking risks provide the essential electrical impulses to help make connections and interconnections between neural networks, thus extending children's capabilities as learners, thinkers and communicators.

*Play integrates the brain's regulatory systems and contributes to the unity of mind*

*and personality through the development of self-systems (self-esteem, self-worth, self-image and self-competence).*

Elizabeth Wood and Jane Attfield

**Physical** Play is an integral part of the growth of a healthy child. It fosters opportunities to develop large and small motor skills as well as coordination, balance and muscle tone. Active movement provides an outlet for children to release energy and challenges their developing physical bodies. The ancient Greeks recognized the value of play in the developmental and growth period of childhood. Experts in today's world of education also believe that play is essential.

**Social** Educators know children learn best in situations that are non-threatening, flexible and fun. Self-selected play joins children of like interests in situations where they can engage in self-directed conversations.

Creating opportunities for play can lower stress and help prevent violence by offering safe and acceptable situations for interaction. In the early childhood classroom most students engage in age-appropriate conversation with their peers. Shared interests encourage them to pay attention to others, ask questions, offer help, make suggestions and provide feedback.

*Making friends is a skill that is difficult to learn after childhood.* Lawrence E. Shapiro

Early friendships and relationships lay the groundwork for developing lifelong skills for building healthy social connections among families, on the athletic field and in the workplace and the community

### **Intellectual**

Children benefit greatly when they are engaged in interactive play and are free to share their knowledge with other children. Curriculum is more effective when presented with materials that are open-ended can be easily manipulated. Through spontaneous and creative play with a minimum of teacher intervention children are free to grow and manifest their understanding of concepts.

*Through play children categorize and generalize new experiences, test and revise conceptual understandings, solve*

*problems, engage in mental planning, think symbolically and test hypotheses.*

Jaelyn L. Cooper and Martha Taylor Devers

**Emotional** During play children are able to control situations that are not theirs in the real world. By exploring possibilities in play situations, children display confidence and competence as they plan and make decisions. Play provides a place where children can act out feelings about difficult emotional events they may face.

*Adults reflect through discussion, literature, writing and meditation. Children reflect through concretely acting out past experiences or preparing for them.*

Bruce, Hodder and Stoughton

*Vygotsky believed that children involved in imaginative play will renounce what they want, and willingly subordinate themselves to rules in order to gain the pleasure of the play. He argues that in play they exercise their greatest self-control. In a Vygotskian model, if we accept the distinction between 'play as such' and 'play in schools' we can see that in order for play to be valued it needs to be located securely within the curriculum structure and organizational framework. Clarifying the role of adults in this process is, therefore, essential.*

Elizabeth Wood and Jane Attfield

### **The Role of the Teacher**

The teacher plays a vital role in the unfolding of human intelligence for every child in the classroom. The teacher should be an active observer and assessor of children as they interact with the environment in which they are playing and with their peers. It is of paramount importance for teachers to

- Be aware of current research and resources that validate the essential nature and importance of play,
- Designate a consistent time and space for creative and imaginative play,
- Provide open-ended play materials,
- Structure activities to facilitate children's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development,
- Withhold judgment of nonstandard answers or interpretations by the students.

To this end the teacher provides guidance and stimulates play that is healthy and educational in nature.

### True Authentic Assessment

Observing play is a teacher's first level of assessment. It is the teacher's responsibility to be an active observer and assess children's interactions with the environment and with peers. The information the teacher collects can provide important data to be used for enrichment, remediation, and/or for sharing with parents.

### Stages of Play

Play is spontaneous, observable, solitary or parallel, associative, symbolic, and cooperative. Positive unrestricted play can be a joyous activity that reaps many rewards.

Children generally play by building on their previous experiences. They may engage in any of the different types of play at any time.

When children are in a healthy environment, they progress through each stage at their own level of development.

- **Unoccupied Play.** Children learn by observing others without interaction.
- **Onlookers.** Children focus intently on watching others play. They may engage in conversation but do not otherwise participate.
- **Solitary or independent play.** Children play by themselves with no interest in what others are doing even if they are physically close.
- **Parallel play.** Children play alongside others with similar objects such as blocks; however, they do not play with each other but side by side separately.
- **Associative play.** Children engage in the same play activity without an organized goal. They may share blocks or tools but do not build the same structure.
- **Cooperative Play.** Children are organized, have a specific goal and have a sense of belonging to a group. It is the beginning of teamwork and doing projects where they work or play together.

### PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS:

State standards describe what young children should know and learn. A strong play-based program can help children develop knowledge and skills. Keeping play as an integral part of the early education program is important not only to the children but to society as a whole.

**Educators should inform parents, administrators and other decision makers of the value of non-structured play in support of healthy child development.**

The school play environment can have a tremendous impact upon the education of children. As some new schools are built with minimal playgrounds, what may appear to be wise budget decisions may actually rob children of vital opportunities to engage in non-structured social situations.

Academic pressure has caused blocks, easels, and even dramatic play areas to be left unused or be totally eliminated in many classrooms. However, it is through make-believe that children are able to manipulate their environment and create imaginary places of their own. In the real world adults control the experiences of children. In the children's world of play a stick becomes a horse, dolls become students in a classroom, and blocks become ships at sea or airplanes roaring through the sky.

To support emergent literacy it is appropriate that the play environment include literary objects, e.g. typewriter or computer, cash registers, notepaper, markers, pencils, telephones, coins, mailboxes, classroom and library books. These materials spark children's imaginations and prompt a variety of responses to enrich their play experiences.

*There's no formula to ensure that children become happy and accomplished adults. But it seems clear that even as technology proliferates, simple unstructured play should be a priority, enriching children and their imaginations for the rest of their lives.*

Claudia Kalb

## Resources

### Just Playing

When I'm building in the block room, please don't say I'm "just playing," for you see, I'm learning as I play about balance and shapes.

When I'm getting all dressed up, setting the table, caring for the babies, don't get the idea I'm "just playing," for you see, I'm learning as I play. I may be a **mother** or **father** someday.

When you see me up to my elbows in paint, or standing at an easel, or molding and shaping clay, please don't let me hear you say, "He's just playing," for you see, I'm learning as I play. I'm expressing myself and being creative. I may be an **artist** or an **inventor** someday.

When you see me sitting in a chair "reading" to an imaginary audience, please don't laugh and think I'm "just playing," You see, I'm learning as I play. I may be a **teacher** someday,

When you see me combing the bushes for bugs, or packing my pockets with choice things I find, don't pass it off as "just play," for you see, I'm learning as I play. I may be a **scientist** someday.

When you see me engrossed in a puzzle or some "plaything" at my school, please don't feel the time is wasted in "play," for you see, I'm learning as I play. I'm learning to solve problems and concentrate. I may be in **business** someday.

When you see me cooking or tasting foods, please don't think because I enjoy it, "it's just play." I'm learning to follow directions and see differences. I may be a **chef** someday.

When you see me learning to skip, hop, run and move my body, please don't say I'm "just playing." I'm learning how my body works. I may be a **doctor**, **nurse** or **athlete** someday.

When you ask me what I've done at school today, and I say, "I just played." Please don't misunderstand me, for you see, I'm learning as I play. I'm learning **to enjoy and be successful in my work. I'm preparing for tomorrow. Today, I am a child, and my work is play.**

Anita Wadley  
Gateways to Learning,  
Edmunton, Oklahoma

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