

Let Them Play

For most of us, our first memories begin at about the age of five. Think about your earliest memories. Aren't they happy events, maybe with siblings and parents playing a silly game or camping in the backyard? Now try to recall your first schooling memories. Do you immediately see yourself sitting at a table drawing letters and numbers? Or are the memories of playing, such as a game of tag or on the playground swinging so high your feet touch the sky?

When I think back to my kindergarten experience I think of playing in the little kindergarten playground, sitting on a rug to listen to the teacher read, and at an easel painting. I have to really work hard to remember academic activities. Certainly there must have some because I learned to count and write my name. Or maybe my mother taught me those things, and I don't remember because it was a natural experience.

Why is it that most of us remember fun and games of childhood, rather than the drudgery of workbooks? I think it's because fun sticks with us, not what is boring. In focusing on teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic at younger and younger ages, many have forgotten the importance of play.

Play, Work, Learn

Play is a child's work. Play is a child's way of learning. Far too many parents and educators believe Jean Piaget's theory of play: play is for pleasure and is based on what is previously learned. Piaget didn't think play necessarily teaches anything new. But studies are proving that Piaget was wrong.¹

The reliance on Piaget's theory of play has been in part responsible for changes in the preschool and kindergarten classrooms. The other part is the push for academic results, even testing, at the end of preschool or pre-kindergarten programs. Play-oriented preschools programs, or programs where the child is allowed to initiate learning experiences through play, are being changed to academic-oriented programs, where learning experiences are initiated by the teacher using a set standard or curriculum. The change is taking place in spite of research that indicates academic preschools do not produce lasting academic results.

Play vs. Academic

Germany began the move from play-oriented kindergartens to academic-oriented kindergartens in the 1970s. During that time a comparison study was done of 100 kindergartens, fifty of which were play-oriented and fifty that were academic-oriented. The children were followed until the fourth grade. The children who began their education in a play-oriented kindergarten not only excelled in academic development, but also in physical, emotional, and

social development. The difference was most striking among children from low-income families.

A more recent study (2002) conducted by Rebecca Marcon of the University of North Florida found similar results. Ms. Marcon's study followed children from three types of preschool environments: academic-oriented, play-oriented (Marcon labels these as child-initiated), and middle-of-road, which uses a combination of both. At the end of the children's fifth year of school, there was no difference in academic performance. But at the end of the sixth year of school, children in the play-oriented earned significantly higher grades. Students in middle-of-the road had no significant differences from those in an academic program.

Ms. Marcon's research also indicates that children in the academic-oriented programs lagged behind in social development. She also hints at what every mother of boys knows, young boys learn better in an active, hands-on environment.²

In Germany the response to such research was to return to play-oriented kindergartens. In her paper "The Vital Role of Play in Early Childhood Education," Joan Almon says ". . . it is alarming that play has lost so much ground in young children's lives during the past thirty years."³

Even more interesting is a study done in Michigan which compared at students, ages three to four years old, in two play-oriented programs and one academic-oriented program. I.Q. scores of all three programs rose, nearly thirty points higher than average scores. These students were followed until the

age of twenty-three and the social indicators were very telling.

By the age of fifteen, students from the play-oriented schools had half as many delinquencies as those from the academic-oriented program. Further along, at age twenty-three, the play-oriented students had fewer felony arrests and fewer hours in special education for emotional impairment.⁴

Grim Outlook for Play

Since that time things have become grimmer with full-day kindergartens, lower compulsory attendance age, and, at the beginning of 2010, recommended national academic standards put forth by governors and state superintendents of schools. These recommendations were accepted by more states in order to receive more federal education money.

The new standards seem to take the delight out of learning. Here are some examples of kindergarten standards for English language:

- Name the author and illustrator of a text and define the role of each in presenting the ideas or information in a text.
- Compare and contrast the most important points and key details presented in two texts on the same topic.
- Read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding.
- Create engaging audio recordings of stories or poems that demonstrate fluid reading at

an understandable pace; add visual displays when appropriate to emphasize or enhance certain facts or details.⁵

There are other standards that deal exclusively with facts and sequences. None about imaginative stories that young children love to create.

Imagination and Pretend

Free and imaginative playtime has educational benefits that are rarely reported. Sara Smilansky, an Israeli psychologist, conducted studies during the 1960s and 70s. She looked at the sociodramatic play of three- to six-year olds in Israel and the United States. Smilansky found that not only did this type of play promote positive social development; it also promoted intellectual development as well.

Smilansky examined children's ability to organize and communicate their thoughts. One particular study, which followed the children through second grade, indicated that this type of play developed thinking skills that are important to later academic work. She concludes,

For example, problem solving in most school subjects requires a great deal of make-believe: visualizing how the Eskimos live, reading stories, imagining a story and writing it down, solving arithmetic problems and determining what will come next. History, geography, and literature are all make believe. All of are

conceptual constructions never directly experienced by the child.⁴

What about adult involvement in children's playtime? Should it be avoided completely? No. Adults can be involved as much as the children want them to be.

One of my sons was a child who was often thought of as “spaced out.” He would enter his world of imagination and tune out all that was going on around him. He rarely invited anyone else, other than those in his imagination, to take part in his play.

His daughter on the other hand likes to invite adults to join her. Not particularly to get on the floor and play with her, but to be available when she wants the involvement. She loves to pretend to host a tea party.

She will spend several minutes making tea and snacks, either in the same room as adults or in her bedroom. After the preparation, she serves adults the product of her work. And she does expect a response. It may be as simple as thank you or a complimentary comment about the quality of the tea and snack. After serving each person she wants to, she'll clean up and return to her solitary play. While she invites us into her pretend world, she doesn't want any of us to take over and direct her pretend.

My son learned to think outside of the physical world during his imagination play. As an adult he can now study a problem, seemingly being in another world, and imagine possible solutions. The development of thinking outside of time and space has

served him well. And, in spite of what some people may think, my son is not a loner who had to be taught to relate to other people. I believe he developed social skills while playing in an imaginary world.

My granddaughter also plays in an imaginative world. Hers is a little more concrete in that tea parties, serving other people, and cleaning up are all activities that are done by adults. Through her pretend play she is thinking creatively and learning important life skills.

Free Play

All of these numbers and studies don't mean parents or schools should plan more playtime. Planning playtime, in the minds of many adults, means that the adults need to provide the materials, structure, and rules. What children really need is for parents to provide more playtimes for spontaneous and self-directed play.

All too often we adults have our own idea of what is fun and important for children's playtime. And just as often it is not play at all. As we become obsessed with our young children learning, we tend to turn every activity into a learning activity. Of course it's what we have come to equate learning with specific subjects such as reading or math. We forget that learning goes beyond the three Rs.

I admit to getting on the floor with a child to make the play educational. When a child is learning to stack blocks, does knowing the colors of the blocks make a difference? I now know that sometimes I should have stayed in the background.

My granddaughter and I went to a weekly playgroup when she was three and four years old. Generally, the children played at a variety of activities of their own choosing. Some played in small groups; others played by themselves. While the children played, moms visited on the sidelines.

One particular playgroup day, a mom had an idea for the children to make unique gifts for their fathers. Not a bad idea. However, the children were called from their playing to “have fun” making the gift. My granddaughter came when the children were called. The activity intrigued her enough for her to investigate it. But it was not nearly as appealing as the climbing apparatus. My granddaughter, after spending a few minutes on the craft project, was ready to return to the jungle gym. We packed up the supplies to finish the project at home.

Toys

A room full of toys, even educational toys can be overwhelming to a small child. Very young children will move quickly from one activity to another. Having a limited number of choices may help cut down the flurry of activity, which comes from a toddler trying to experience everything. Three- and four-year-olds may become bewildered by so many choices. How many times have you noticed your child has gotten out dozens of toys, one at a time? The toy will hold attention for a short time, and then your child goes on to the next one. This is toy overload. There are just too many things to choose from.

Children want to have free and imaginative play; that is play in which rules are made up and changed as needed. Play that can be taken up and quit at any time. Following examples set by the adults in their lives, children play at real life. A child learns social skills and mores by playing the adult roles that have been modeled in front of them.

Toys labeled as educational aren't always conducive to the type of play that helps a young child learn and mature. Too many of these toys are narrow in the way they can be used and don't really challenge the imagination. Some parents become anxious when a toy isn't being used as the toy company intended, but rather in a way the child finds intriguing.

Toys that require little or no instruction, such as blocks, cars, or dolls, allow for your child to make up games and role-playing activities. With a pile of blocks, your child can build a tower for a while, then move on to creating an airplane, and maybe have a game of matching letters.

When my granddaughter was three, she was fascinated with stair steps and ladders. She experimented with her Legos® to build steps. For several days we had various forms of steps and ladders around the house. She didn't need instructions; instead she wanted to figure it out on her own.

When playtime is structured or guided, that free flow of pretending is lost. The time to practice what they have watched is gone. Think of it this way: It's time for you to relax and someone tells you, "You must do this to relax, and these are the rules you must follow to relax." How relaxed would you feel?

Thus far we've only looked at indoor play. Outdoor play is just as important, and is being changed or abandoned.

Play Outdoors

The reasons for the decline in outdoor play are numerous, including the limiting of playtime in favor of formal academics. Preschools and kindergartens are shortening recess and playtime to meet academic standards.

Since the mid-1980s some states have prescribed such stringent academic standards on kindergarten programs that play has become a casualty. In the state of Pennsylvania, kindergarten teachers are told how many minutes to spend on each subject. One teacher commented, "I break the law every day and let my children play for fifteen minutes." ⁶

There was a time in this country when children went out to the backyard in the morning to play and came in for refreshment or a change of activity. In today's culture, children have little opportunity for this kind of free play. One of the reasons is their time is highly scheduled with lessons, soccer practice, play dates, pencil and paper work, church activities, and so on and on.

Children need free time outside, whether it's in the backyard making roads for toy cars or at the playground playing on swings and slides. Playing outdoors offers more room for imaginative play. Even the confines of a backyard are a large world to a three- or four-year-old.

Playing outside gives children needed exercise for healthy bone and muscle growth. Running, jumping, or bounding a ball contribute to the maturity of a child's perceptual motor abilities, balance, and eye-hand coordination—all firm foundations for later academic work. Playing in the sun offers health benefits, such as vitamin D absorption. Playing in the dirt contributes to a healthy immune system.

The hygiene hypothesis states that lack of exposure to germs and bacteria in early childhood contributes to allergies, asthma, and other autoimmune disorders later in life. First given a scientific background by David P. Strachan in an article in the *British Medical Journal* in 1989.⁷ There is now even a website dedicated to the hypothesis (www.hygienehypothesis.com).

Since that time other scientists have studied the hypothesis, and some have drawn a conclusion that we are now keeping children too clean. Dr. Marc McMorris, M.D., a pediatric allergist at the University of Michigan Health System says common sense is needed in allowing children to play outside, get dirty, and in contact with germs.⁸

Organized Sports

Rather than several children getting together in a backyard to play touch football or other impromptu sports, children are now organized into teams and leagues. Have you ever watched a soccer game with five-years-olds on the field? It's great fun. The little ones are usually running helter-skelter after the ball, few staying in their assigned positions. There also

seems to be one or two youngsters who are playing their own game, not even related to soccer. By themselves, they may be running in little circles, digging in the grass, or lying down watching the clouds.

Not so fun is watching the adults at such an event. While some parents are enjoying the randomness and inventiveness of the children on the field, others are in a fury. Running up and down the sidelines, they cajole, holler, and in some sad instances threaten when the rules or strategies aren't being followed. When the game is over, some of the children will throw themselves on the ground crying. Not because they've lost the game, but because they have disappointed an adult.

My children played organized sports, but only as long as it was fun for them. And as a parent I was willing to confront an over-zealous coach. Children can learn about teamwork and following rules playing on an organized sports team. When adults take the game too seriously, the sport is no longer a game for children. I think we've all seen a dejected child leave the field when a coach or parent has expressed disappointment.

Young children in sports leagues can be especially vulnerable to feelings of rejection because they lack the maturity to grasp the technicalities of the rules. Four- and five-years-olds want to please adults, especially parents. Even when nothing is directly said, they know when an adult is disappointed. The game is stripped of fun.

Play, indoors and out, offers many benefits emotionally, mentally, and physically for young children. Play also provides the beginnings of good memories that will last a lifetime. What do you want your child's first memory to be? Sitting at a table trying to craft the letters of a word or romping hilariously with you?

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