Getting Back to the Basics of Children's Play

by Francis Wardle

Super babies. Learning the basics in preschool. Keeping five year olds out of kindergarten because “they are not ready to learn.” State-sponsored programs for all four year olds. Educational toys for infants. These approaches to infants and young children today reflect the public’s interest in schools teaching the basics, the state’s effort to give all children a head start in learning, and parents’ commitment to provide their children with an advantage in an ever more competitive world. They also reflect a widespread belief that young children can and should learn more earlier.

Not everyone agrees. Child psychologists such as Bruno Bettelheim advocate another approach: play.

Is play critically important for the normal development of children 0 to 8? Why? Is play even more critical in a world of computers, gifted programs, and super babies? If so, how can educators and parents encourage it?

A lot of what is passed off as play – educational play with educational toys; games that teach academic concepts; and puzzles for matching words, numbers, and colors – is not play at all.

What is play? Play involves a free choice activity that is non-literal, self-motivated, enjoyable, and process oriented. Critical to this definition is the non-literal, non-realistic aspect. This means external aspects of time, use of materials, the environment, rules of the play activity, and roles of the participants are all made up by the children playing. They are all based on the child’s sense of reality.

Thus two children go into the sitting room, put on their parents’ coats, and sit at the coffee table. The little boy declares, “I’m mommy at the restaurant.” The girl continues, “And I’m daddy, and we’re celebrating our anniversary.” They then pretend to eat a chicken dinner, using Lego blocks to represent food. Play is engaged in by children because they enjoy it – it’s self-directed. Once they get bored, they will no longer play, or will change their play.

Children who compete to make the best wooden ship are not playing. Children who are told they must use the block with an “A” on it to create a word are not playing. Children who are asked to label the colors of their paints, instead of using the paint to create a picture, are not playing. And a teacher who tells a little girl, “You can’t be a daddy,” when she plays in the dress-up area doesn’t understand play.

If play is free choice, self-directed, and void of adult reality, how can it be an important activity for children learning to be adults?

This question is asked by more and more parents and teachers, who believe children’s play is a waste of time, uneducational, taking valuable time away from more important activities, and allowing children to hide in fantasy play instead of facing the realities of the adult world.

The experts claim play is, in fact, the best preparation for adulthood especially in this highly technological, competitive society of ours. Play allows children to play with all the new concepts – social, emotional, moral, and intellectual – they are learning so rapidly as they develop. Children have never been exposed to so much, so early, as are children today. Play helps children make sense of and internalize this information.
Jean Piaget, the Swiss cognitive psychologist who developed a much accepted theory of intellectual development, maintains infants and young children learn new concepts through a tandem process: discovering the concept and then practicing it. Thus a child who discovers a rubber ball bounces when it is dropped will repetitively bounce the ball until this new idea is internalized in his mind. The child must internalize this new concept before he can discover another one. Thus play is critical to concept development.

Abstraction

Our world is filled with abstract symbols. Words are abstractions for things and ideas. Letters are abstractions for sounds, numbers for quantity. Three can mean three apples or three wars. Yet young children live in a concrete world. Mother is one person who feels and cares for the infant. Dog is grandpa’s longhaired English sheepdog. Playing is the process a child uses to slowly learn to move from a reliance of the concrete object in all his thinking to manipulating abstract concepts in his mind. Thus the doll at the center initially represents the boy’s baby sister, later is any baby that needs to be comforted, and, finally, a teacher might say, “Is that your baby?,” as the boy just rocks his empty arms.

Blocks are used to create cities; a banana is a telephone; a Lego block is an apple. Eventually the child can talk about cities, telephones, and apples without these symbols.

Social skills and moral rules

When young children play in the dramatic play area at child care, they usually select roles very different from who they are. They might choose to be a parent or teacher and direct the activity. Or, a more aggressive child might choose a servant role. In this way the children learn what it’s like to be the other person in a real life situation. Because play lacks the pressure of product, evaluation, and time frames, children are free to try out new roles.

They also learn to adjust their own roles for the good of the play activity. You can’t have two children directing the activity. They learn to repress their individual wishes for the good of the group.

Many play activities, especially ones that require children to cooperate – ball games, swings, skipping – teach children how to work together, how to take turns, and how to reciprocate.

Social skill development is closely related to moral development. One prerequisite for moral development is the ability for a child to put himself in the other child’s shoes. Another is for the child to realize he needs to follow some basic rules for the good of the group if he wishes to continue to play. Thus play helps children through the complex process of moral development.

Control of the environment

A playing child selects toys and play materials to create an interesting activity. As he gets bored, he will either select new materials or use the original ones in novel ways. Because a child does not like being bored, and because play is self-motivated, the child will continually select and manipulate materials in the environment to keep from being bored, to stay stimulated. He learns how to control his environment for his own use. The more varied and flexible the play materials, the more extensive play use will be made of them by the child.

In a world of passive TV watching, this active learning through play is critical.

Emotional release

Children use play to come to terms with traumatic experiences in their young lives. A child who has witnessed death will reenact the event until it is no longer so traumatic. A child who is abused will take his anger and frustration out on a substitute object or material. A child who feels always at the bottom of the picking order will create superman play activities where he is in control. The child can work out his own fear, anger, and frustration through a fantasy world he creates and directs.

Many children are under extreme stress. Play provides the emotional release from this stress.

Creativity and flexibility

Once a child has fully explored the brightly painted wooden blocks – matching colors, dropping each block on the carpet, and trying to roll them like balls – she starts making all sorts of creations with them: towers, patterns of alternating colors, walls or roads, and artistic patterns on the floor. She is learning objects and materials, once understood, can be used as building blocks to create all sorts of fantastic creations. They can be combined in different ways, mixed with other materials, and manipulated for her enjoyment. Through the non-pressure trial and error of play she is learning the flexible nature of objects and materials, and how they can be combined to make limitless creations.

Play allows children to experiment with ideas, language, rules, and moral concepts in the same way. Children can try out more sophisticated language, a higher order of moral reasoning, or a new way of sharing toys. If they don’t work, no one loses; if they do, the child can then try them out in the real world. Play provides the flexibility for children to experiment, grow, and discover, with-
out the pressure of failure or evaluation.

**Physical play**

There is an ever increasing amount of research documenting the poor physical ability and condition of young children today. Physical play activities – climbing, running, jumping, ball games, gymnastics, swimming – develop healthy bodies while teaching children to enjoy exercise. Because these activities are engaged in voluntarily by the child, encouraging physical play is a good way to offset these negative research results.

**The child's world**

Today’s young child is controlled by the expectations, schedules, whims, and rules of adults. Child care schedules, nap time, meal times, homework, good behavior, appropriate social skills, academic success, and clean clothes are all adult expectations. Even children’s TV programs are adult ideas of what children want and what will sell children’s products. Play is the only time a child can totally control her world. She can ignore the time; use materials as she wants; become whatever character she needs to be; and create constructions, dramatic fantasies, and social interactions that satisfy her at that moment.

This is critically important for a child’s sense of control and for her self-concept development.

Remember, a child’s reality is both very different from the reality you and I understand and is a child-created reality very necessary for the child’s well being. Because a child is being bombarded continually by new concepts of science, language, rules, moral codes, and social expectations, she must be allowed to regularly take refuge in the security of her own reality.

What can teachers and parents do? Teachers and parents of young children must understand the critical importance of play in the normal development of young children. They also need to know what play really is and how it can be encouraged. Here are a few specific ideas:

1. Understand that adult concerns about cleanliness, order, use of materials in a very narrow way, and returning all materials to their appropriate storage space are in direct opposition to the child’s play reality.

2. Children do not learn very specific academic skills -- labeling of letters and numbers, learning letter sounds, writing numbers – through play. Children will not learn the alphabet using alphabet blocks. They will learn how to build fantastic structures.

Insisting on the child learning the letters on the blocks will actually slow down the child’s play progress, which goes from an interest in the individual blocks to using them as material to create something bigger and more exciting. Puzzles requiring children to place cut-out numbers into their respective places in the puzzle do not teach the child numbers. Be wary of educational toys.

3. Give young children lots of time, space, and materials to play. Short play periods within the program day are not very productive. Children should be encouraged to select toys and materials from a large amount available to them. Don’t restrict these choices.

4. Encourage fantasy play. In fact, and this is not a contradiction, adults at home and in the program setting should be involved in the play activity. Set the tone, play along. Also help expand the play by asking questions – What job do you do? Where do you work? What are we going to eat for dinner? – depending on the activity.

5. Don’t use play as a reward, or removal of play as a punishment.

6. Insist centers and schools don’t short-change your child’s needs for a variety of play experiences by insisting on more time for academic instruction, tests, learning facts, and homework.

7. When selecting play materials, choose those that are versatile and encourage children to play together. Balls, blocks, crayons, dolls, paper, woodwork tools, skip ropes, and dress-up clothes are good, inexpensive play materials. Be cautious about buying TV generated toys and toys directed to parents (cute infant toys and educational toys).

We need to get back to the basics, back to play!

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