

The Importance of Play

By Randy Allen

One of the greatest sights for young parents is when their child begins to discover the blocks they left out and they start building a tower, or when their friends come by with their kids and the children break out into a game of make believe. Instagram and Snapchat are filled with pictures of kids taking out pots and pans and plastic dishes and setting up a restaurant, or pull out their cars and trucks and set up a city, or even lining up teddy bears and dolls for a tea party. What most parents don't realize is that while their children are busy playing, they are also learning very important life skills.

With the current push toward common core standards, there has been a shift away from free play in preschools across the country. There are standardized tests to measure their proficiency in subjects like Math and English, and an increased focus on time spent on didactic learning, but at what cost? We are spending more time with structured learning which means less time for play... where kids can be kids.

Many adults think of play as down time. They look at kids at play and think this is their time to recharge or that at their early stage of development they need time away so they can focus on the next task. As the article Importance of play in early childhood education (2015, www.Fisher Price.com) points out, "Nothing could be further from reality, however, for a great deal happens when children are 'just playing.'" The benefits of play and the impact it has on the development of habits and attitudes that will shape who they become and how they learn throughout their lives is critical to their success later in life."

There have been a tremendous number of studies done on the importance of play for preschool children. The topic of play is covered extensively in the D.A.P. NAEYC position statement where it states "Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, condition, and social competence." It also goes on to explain that it gives children "opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities and practice emerging skills. (NAEYC 2009, 14) A tremendous amount of learning is really taking place during a "break in the day."

Just take a look at some of the simple games kids play and the different levels and skills that are able to be developed. Building blocks can be used to make a castle so children can play out fairy tales they have heard (or even better read) complete with knights, dragons and beautiful damsels in distress, but they do much more. Grouping them by size and shape introduces basic counting, math skills like addition and subtraction and concepts of geometry.

It also adds basics of physics showing them what happens when we build too high with too small a base, and ways to make the structures stronger and bigger. By adding in a skilled teacher or instructor, proper set up and guidance can promote even further learning by asking questions such as why something seems to work a certain way, or what if we change something, how will that impact the dynamics.

But even these skills are just the tip of the iceberg. By setting up the area so that it can have multiple students, they are learning socialization skills, how to work with a group, and interact and compromise with other students. They also benefit from the skills of the other children in the group, learning from their peers. They are building creative skills through these activities as well, building their imagination as more complex and detailed scenarios develop. They are also developing fine and gross motor skills, working on their co-ordination, building their balance and strength as their creations grow.

Even their Emotional skills are being developed during this “free time.” In their presentation *The crucial role of play in early childhood*, (April 2011), it points out that “Unstructured play helps children develop self-regulation skills, social knowledge and self-confidence.” Learning how to interact with a group, teamwork and co-operation are all built through this activity. Add in the self-confidence and pride in being able to build a huge tower or intricate bridge and we have a well-rounded child with a jump start on life.

Fast forward to today and we are starting to see a number of studies showing that this push into academic learning at an earlier age is having the opposite effect later in life. In the New York Times Article, Let kids Learn through Play, they site several studies that showed there was no impact on math, reading and science scores when children compared who had started structured learning programs at later stages of development. It also cited a study by Rebecca A. Marcon who studied 343 children from different preschools and found “by the end of fourth grade, those who had didactic instruction earned significantly lower grades than those who had been allowed more opportunities to learn through play.” (New York Times 05/2015)

While we have the right intentions, science is starting to show that there are physiological reasons that this push is having the opposite effect. There are also number of countries around the world that are starting structured learning programs at later ages than we are here in the US that have higher academic ratings later in their school careers. And as science continues to reveal more information about the development of the human brain, we are finding that pushing students to progress before they are ready can have the opposite effect.

Two other areas of concern have also increased over the past few years as a result of the shift from active learning (play) to the more sedentary learning style (structured learning

programs.) Childhood obesity has been on the rise, and as children are becoming less active at home with parents work schedules increasing and technology such as video games exploding, the reduction of play during the school day is further reducing the amount of physical activity that these children are experiencing. Also, we are seeing a tremendous rise in serious incidents of bullying taking place in our schools across the country. As children have more issues with self-esteem and socialization skills that are not developing fully, the incidence of kids feeling unworthy and excluded are growing, resulting in these incidents of bullying.

Finally, there is one other benefit to having both directed and free play during the early school years. When children like something they become excited to do it. If they believe school is a place where they have fun and growth and learning are linked to excitement, they WANT TO DO IT! You won't fight every morning to get your child to the bus stop, because it is taking them to a place they want to be. Making math or reading fun and exciting will lead to them doing it more which will only increase their abilities in these subjects. When they experience success in any area, it creates a desire for success in others.

With all of the evidence coming out about the benefits of play for young children, one can only ask if maybe the pendulum has swung too far in the opposite direction toward a more structured teaching style. Maybe we need to ensure balance in our approach to learning, where we add in didactic learning and supplement it with additional opportunities for play. With the push to full day kindergarten programs, adding in additional structured learning around reading, science and math are great, but we also need to maintain our balance with the activities that help them grow in these other critical areas; growth that occurs best through play.

Works Cited

Caldwell, Dr Bettye, M, (2015) *The Importance of Play*, Retrieved from www.fisher-price.com

Kohn, David (May 16, 2015) *Let the kids play*, The New York Times, Retrieved from www.nytimes.com

National Association for the Education of Young Children, (2009) *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, www.naeyc.org

The crucial role of play in early childhood, (April 2011), Blog Post, Retrieved from youtube.com/watch?v=8KtUHKVFjJI