Beginnings Workshop

imaginative play during childhood: required for reaching full potential

by Karen Stephens

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At a brisk pace, research findings focused on children's play are finally reaching the light of day in popular media. No longer left sitting in archives of academic journals, the benefits of play to lifelong success have been touted in radio, television, magazines, and newspapers. It gives early childhood professionals a powerful, credible advocacy tool to use with parents and community leaders as we strive to put children's play back into the heart of early childhood curriculum.

In *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence*, (Hirsh-Pasek, et al.) a review of research confirms that children's self-initiated play nurtures overall development, not just cognitive development (such as learning to name colors, numbers, or shapes). In fact, research builds a very strong case that childhood play is a required experience in order to become a civilized, fully-realized human being.

The following points are upheld by research about important play outcomes. Put another way, these are skills, knowledge, and dispositions that children are at risk of *not* developing if deprived of enough free time, space, and opportunity for creative play:

- abstract and symbolic thinking, decision-making, creative problem solving and goal setting;
- complex language development and ability to 'self-talk' through learning steps;
- emotional awareness and competence, identity and self-image development, ability to maintain self-control through self-regulation, stress management and ability to delay gratification;
- social skills, such as patience, cooperation, negotiation, non-violent conflict resolution, teamwork, sharing, considering other's point of view; and,
- formation of a moral or ethical code that distinguishes right from wrong, respect for others' rights and ability to work toward the greater good.

In particular, research has shown that children who regularly engage in plentiful creative, imaginary play excel in the mental skill referred to as 'executive functioning.'

That term 'executive function' refers to mental processes through which children learn to regulate and control their own 'knee-jerk' impulses and emotional reactions. It means they gradually learn to think and control behavior before they act inappropriately. They gain competence in mentally solving problems so they learn to behave more reliably within acceptable social rules and conduct. And it turns out that the ability to regulate and control one's behavior is a very good predictor of success in school and adult life.

When children's executive functions are well developed, children aren't as dependent on 'outside' authority figures to constantly monitor and enforce rules and limits for appropriate behavior or social participation. In other words, children learn to internally 'police' their own behavior so others don't have to do it for them. Imaginative play gives children lots of practice in independent, autonomous thinking, so they gradually develop decision-making skills and master self-discipline.

During peer pretend play, children also help each other learn to concentrate and stay within a character's boundaries. Children remind peers when play is getting out of order and prompt them to get 'back into' character. For instance, if a child assigned to play a 'baby' doesn't conform properly and starts to run in circles, one would likely hear other children say something like, "No, no, babies can't run. Babies crawl!" In other words, children often coach each other in self control so a fantasy play theme can proceed and the fun continues.

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In addition, being able to pretend within boundaries means children learn to focus *not only* on what a character does, but they must also learn to resist engaging in actions that are not in line with a character. For instance, a child pretending to be a dog would bark, but at the same time would resist meowing or making another animal's sound. Thus, they would be exerting greater self restraint, maintaining a deeper concentration level, and developing a longer attention span by sticking to the mind-set of their dog character.

When children use symbolic play during pretend time, they also learn to stick within acceptable limits so pretend play can flourish. For instance, a child might hold a cup to his face and pretend it is a microphone he sings into. To fully enjoy the experience of being a singer, the child must conform to rules he sets himself — thus gaining invaluable practice in self control and self regulation.

It's very important to distinguish the type of play that nurtures all that positive development. It's not just any type of child activity that does it. For instance, some may call it 'play' when a child follows a teacher's step by step directions during a craft project. It might be a hands-on learning experience, but different from the type of authentic play researchers have concluded is most critical to early development.

True play in humans (and other mammals) reveals itself according to specific criteria. Of course, definitions vary slightly from one researcher or early childhood professional to another. But most would include the following criteria as a working definition. Authentic children's play is:

- pleasurable and enjoyable, voluntary, and self-initiated
- self-sustaining without needing extrinsic motivations, rewards, coercion, or reinforcement from others
- not dependent on extrinsic goals — the process of activity itself is more important than any particular goal or outcome
- spontaneous and flexible, involving fluid problem-solving that doesn't have one right or wrong answer and may include multiple or changing solutions
- involves active imagination where children create the 'rules' and boundaries of play on their own or cooperatively with peers, and rules may change during play depending on play partner perspectives and negotiations
- generally all engrossing and absorbs children's complete sustained attention and focused engagement
- often related to a private reality based on children's unique experiences
- non-literal in that it is not dependent on having a 'real' toy or item related to the play topic — symbolic representations of needed objects abound
- composed of flights of the imagination, such as pretend scenarios, fantasy, and make-believe plots
- possible whether a child is alone or interacting with peers
- not directed, dictated, regulated, formatted, or structured by a parent, supervising adult, or teacher

In other words, the best play is what comes to mind when you think of 'good, old-fashioned play." Those who worked in early childhood decades ago knew it as 'free play.'

It was the kind of play that was abundant to children before the growth of profitable commercialization of children's time and toys, increased need to shelter children from random community violence, excessive pressure on parents to drill children's intellect 'early and often,' and excessive concern about legal liability costs should children's play result in an injury.

Recommendations for early childhood program practices

Pressures to get children ready for academic, intellectually-focused learning and standardized testing has caused many early childhood programs to abandon scheduling adequate time for free, imaginative play. Play has been squeezed out for an array of reasons. Sometimes it's due to parents' or sponsor's demands; other times it's due to insufficient or outdated staff training and lack of staff's continued education to keep up on current knowledge.

But make no mistake. Abundant research has shown that play during early childhood is necessary if humans are to reach their full potential. For children, and in fact, for society's well-being, true play is a critical need, not a fanciful frill. And so it requires ethical early childhood programs to advocate for and insist upon including play as part of their daily curriculum and teaching strategy. Following are recommendations for achieving that goal. Early childhood programs should strive to:

- require pre-service and in-service staff training to include the critical nature of play to children's overall

development: emotional, social, intellectual, physical, and ethical

- train staff on developmentally appropriate practices and require them to be consistently applied
- introduce staff to the criteria of authentic play
- train staff on importance of imaginative play, being especially sure to emphasize emotional and social gains as well as intellectual development
- create daily schedules that provide many opportunities for extended playtime throughout the day — both solitary as well as peer play.
- resist classroom play materials that suggest specific story lines or characters that superimpose ideas onto children's creative play, such as figures based literally on television or movie characters
- encourage imaginative play outdoors as well as indoors
- be supportive of children's play that bridges learning centers or combines learning center materials/toys; for instance, children can use dramatic play props from a family living center (such as dolls, scarves, hats, or baby buggies) very imaginatively in the block building, music, or literacy area
- emphasize peer interaction activities that spur on play rather than using passive media technology such as television, DVDs, computers, or battery-operated toys
- provide safe spaces for children to reap the benefits of rough and tumble play (this can be particularly important for boys and some cultures which value rambunctious play more than the typical female teacher in the United States)
- capitalize on children's spontaneous play ideas whenever possible; avoid letting an overly rigid schedule stifle children's playfulness
- capitalize on children's natural sense of curiosity, wonder, and awe; give in to playful serendipitous moments of childhood more and watch the clock less
- encourage children to become masters of their own fate; let children experience unstructured time and even some boredom so they learn to playfully engage and connect rather than rely on being entertained and directed by adults or media
- set the stage for cooperative 'give and take' play throughout the classroom; provide ample space, play options, and materials so children can successfully share, problem solve, negotiate, and utilize resources
- provide plentiful open-ended play resources that are malleable to children's desires and imaginative ideas; sand and water play or modeling with clay, play dough, or mud can stimulate a wide range of play scenarios depending on each child's unique interests and preferences
- give children access to natural and human-made 'loose parts' they can symbolically integrate into play (for instance, children can resourcefully use sticks and acorn tops during the symbolic play of a tea party); creative movement materials, such as hula hoops, scarves, wands, or streamers are other versatile items; children can use art center loose parts, such as buttons or pipe cleaners, to represent figures (whether human or animal) in the block area; problem solving skills bloom during play if teachers resist being heavy-handed by creating excessive, arbitrary limits or providing rigid directions that stifle imaginative play
- provide a few dramatic play spaces and props that suggest play, but don't completely prescribe it (for instance, resist providing manufactured dress up kits that provide every tool or piece of clothing needed for a play theme; commercial make believe kits, such a fire fighter, doctor, or a chef kit, can rob children of resourcefully thinking up ways to represent related tools and clothing using their own imagination, recall, and resourcefulness
- respect children's language and provide avenues for communication; dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, and even toilet-paper tube 'microphones' give children playful pathways to the imaginative stories they have within
- encourage teachers to follow children's lead by enthusiastically interacting with children during creative, imaginative play; teachers can serve as a role model for giving into the delights and demands of playing the very abstract skill of "let's pretend as if . . . "

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- observe and record examples of children's imaginative play in an authentic assessment process to document children's holistic development for other professionals and parents to review and reflect upon.

For centuries, early childhood professionals have advocated for the importance of imaginative play in nurturing early development. Today, a continuing stream of research backs up their wisdom. Now it's up to us to use it to advocate for children's fundamental need for authentic play. Play is an instinctual birthright designed to spur on and sustain human development. Children rely upon it; civilizations succeed by embracing it. Research resoundingly supports that message. It's just waiting to be used as we advocate for children's crucial need for authentic play.

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Play advocacy organization web sites

Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.net/

Association for the Study of Play: www.csuchico.edu/kine/tasp/

American Association for the Child's Right to Play: www.ipausa.org/

International Play Association: www.ipaworld.org

National Institute for Play: www.nifplay.org/front_door.html

Nature Action Collaborative for Children: www.worldforumfoundation.org/wf/wf2006_nature/

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