

The Purpose Of Play

By Krystyann Krywko

The purpose of play is often misunderstood in the early childhood classroom. Comments such as, "I can't believe I spend money to have my kid play with sand and water," or "My child is in preschool, but it is really more like babysitting. They don't teach him anything, he just plays all day!" are often heard by early childhood educators. Comments (and attitudes) like these can make it difficult to justify a play-based program to parents who often expect "more for their money."

What Does Learning Look Like?

Many of the misunderstandings surrounding the purpose of play in the early childhood classroom arise from a narrow definition of what learning is, and a pre-conceived notion of how learning is best promoted. For many parents and administrators, learning is often measured by what a child can reproduce on a worksheet or in a test booklet. These opinions are often confirmed and exacerbated by media reports on the specific knowledge and skills children need to be successful, and by administrators and politicians who are under pressure to show some sort of accountability. The American Academy of Pediatrics believes this increased pressure on young children has coalesced into an "earlier is better" atmosphere in many early childhood programs. Their recommendation is to supplement the focus on academic preparation with a broader view of education that allows for social, emotional, as well as cognitive development.

Why is Unstructured Play Important?

Unstructured play is developmentally appropriate for the needs of young children in classrooms. In her book, *A Running Start*, Rae Pica states that movement is the "young child's preferred mode of learning." Children at this age use all their senses to acquire information. Therefore, "the more senses that are involved in learning, the more information is retained." Children from ages infant to five years often engage in free time or unstructured play in classroom settings. However, by the time a child reaches the early grades, recess is often the only time allowed for free play – and even this opportunity is disappearing from the lives of many children as recess periods are often co-opted for increased academic periods. Kindergarteners to third grade students need to have increased opportunities for active learning and less emphasis placed on seatwork.

Another important consideration is that the open-ended materials used during unstructured play allow for a wide range of children to learn from the same materials. Meredith Gray, co-director of the Downtown Little School in New York City, has observed the difficulties that occur when whole group lessons and activities are presented. "Some children find the activity too easy, some too difficult, and some are simply not interested. Unstructured play provides the opportunity for children to engage with materials at their own level."

How Does Unstructured Play Affect Child Development?

Social Development

In the social domain free play allows for the development of cooperation, sharing, and language acquisition. When children create and participate in games of their own choosing they learn how to resolve conflicts and develop respect for rules and the opinions of others. It is through play that children begin to gain a sense of self and an appreciation for their abilities. For example, one preschool class I observed was involved in acting out stories that had been read during story time. *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* came to life as the appropriate scenes needed to be built, roles needed to be assigned, and a particular sequence had to be followed. While there was some teacher involvement to smooth out some direction, the children were in charge of working together and creating space for differing opinions.

Emotional Development

Unstructured play provides children with an outlet for reducing anxiety. Children learn to manage stress and gain self control. They also have an opportunity to express themselves to others by rehearsing behaviors and practicing skills that assist in monitoring their own emotions. Mona Weiner, a preschool teacher in New York City, recalls one child who was upset her mother was away on a business trip. "The children were developing and creating a house in the block corner and were ready to introduce small figures into their play. The child picked up a female adult figure and announced, 'This is going to be the mama. Pretend she is on a trip, because my mama is on a trip.' The child expressed feelings of frustration and disappointment that her mother was not around; however by the end of the play session the child appeared to be surer of her coping abilities in her mother's absence."

Cognitive Development

This area is the most overlooked when it comes to play. Unstructured play allows for the development of cognitive understandings through hands on experiences, exploration, and the use of manipulative materials. The context of play provides the most appropriate scaffolding for children as they develop their skills. After children practice their skills in play situations they are ready to use these newly acquired skills in different contexts. A child who experiments with different sand and soil mixtures at the water table is able to understand concepts such as, erosion, water holding capacity, water movement; and apply this knowledge to create the optimal soil mixture for use in a classroom garden.

Methods/Ideas on How to Promote Unstructured Play in Classroom

Unstructured play does not mean that children are let loose in an unstructured classroom. The prepared environment is an important part of having successful free play periods.

- Have a balance of open ended activities such as dramatic play props and clothing; an assortment of blocks, LEGOs, magnetic and felt boards for acting out and telling stories, puppets, scarves and art materials.
- Think of materials that children can use to construct and solve problems with.
- Ensure you have sufficient quantities so that numerous children can engage in the same activity simultaneously.
- Remember to include a variety of self-correcting materials, such as puzzles, pattern cards and matching games where children can engage in a task independently and will know if they have succeeded.
- Children are most successful in free play when they are provided with large blocks of time – 45 minutes to one hour is best. This extended period allows children time to recruit other children to participate, to thoroughly negotiate roles and rules, to agree on a storyline, and to construct the elaborate structures that are often included in dramatic play (Young Children, 2007)
- Unstructured play time does not mean that it is “free time” for the teachers. Teachers and classroom assistants need to be actively involved with the children during this time. This is an opportunity for teachers to engage in “sustained-shared thinking” and open-ended questioning in order to extend children’s thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, et al. 2002).
- Structure your day so that children have free play time both indoors and out.

Resources

Ginsburg, Kenneth R, et al. (2007), *The importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. American Academy of Pediatrics.

Gray, Meredith, Co-director of The Downtown Little School, Manhattan. Interview conducted by author, Feb, 2008.

Montie, J., Claxton, J. & Lockhart, S. (2007). “Multinational Study Supports Child Initiated Learning: Using the Findings in Your Classroom” *Young Children*, Nov 2007, Vol 62, Iss 6, pp. 22-26.

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Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Giden, R., & D. Bell. (2002). *Researching Effective Pedagogy in Early Years*. Institute of Education, University of Oxford.

Weiner, Mona, Early Childhood Teacher, Downtown Little School, Manhattan. Interview conducted by author Feb, 2008.

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