



Developmentally Appropriate Practices

Play

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Professionals in early childhood education understand the importance and the role that play has in the lives of children. Unfortunately, academic pressures, accountability issues and misunderstandings about how children learn best have caused play to be questioned and minimized in many classrooms. Teachers are being asked to justify any time they devote to play and it is becoming extinct in many classrooms. Experts from a variety of fields including medicine, child development, psychiatry, psychology, evolutionary biology, and education are now joining early childhood educators in communicating the vital need for play and the benefits children gain from it.

However, it is important to note that not all play is good play. For optimum impact, play must be purposeful, high-level, and mature (Gronlund, 2010). The role of the teacher is to move children from low-level, somewhat chaotic or simplistic play to more purposeful, engaging play. This can be done through observation; modeling and posing problems that cause students to engage with materials in a new and different way. According to Gronlund (2010 p. 24) children's high level play is characterized by the following:

- Children are highly engaged for extended period of time ranging from 15 minutes to over an hour.
- Children assign roles to each other and play out those roles within the general flow of play.
- Few behavior problems arise and disagreements are negotiated and compromises are reached.
- The noise level is at a reasonable volume.
- Teachers are called upon only to meet specific needs, which facilitate the continuation of play.
- Teachers are asked to watch and provide feedback, but ongoing involvement is rarely needed.
- Materials are used creatively. Real objects are not necessarily needed.

Play is not just something children do to get rid of energy but, when fostered by the teacher, it is a vehicle that allows children to gain powerful knowledge and useful social skills. As early childhood educators, it is our job to set aside time within schedules for children to engage in extended, meaningful play. We also must continue to advocate for its presence as the achievement stakes continue to rise, knowing that it is the best way for children to develop higher level thinking skills and assimilate new knowledge into meaningful applications.

The following is a list of ten things children gain from play adapted from the article *Play, Ten Power Boosts for Children's Learning* by Alice Sterling Honig (2007).

1. **Play enhances dexterity and grace-** Preschoolers learn eye-hand coordination fine motor manipulation, and large muscle coordination through play.
2. **Play with peers promotes social skills-** Turn taking, sharing, working with others, negotiating and problem solving are beneficial, life long skills that are best learned through play.
3. **Play sharpens cognitive and language skills-** Play promotes learning through causal relations and also language mastery as the children talk together to complete their play scenarios
4. **Preschoolers acquire number and time concepts through play-** By playing with toys with large separate parts, a preschooler learns that whether he stacks them high or spreads them out he still counts the same number of pieces. Concepts of before and after can be learned when a preschooler has to figure out which block pieces must be put together first to stabilize the structure and then which can be added later as the design elements.
5. **Play promotes spatial understanding-** As children play, they learn to navigate boundaries and pathways as they move in and out of objects in their environment, bend down to pick objects up, and attempt to negotiate a doll stroller or tricycle through small spaces such as doorways.
6. **Play promotes reasoning and cause and effect-** Playing with a variety of materials supports if-then reasoning, scientific thinking, and experimentation. Children learn how different items with different properties interact, they begin to group objects based on similarities and learn that things exist within larger groups (i.e. plates and cups are dishes, chairs and tables are furniture)
7. **Dramatic Play clarifies pretend versus real** – Young children are not always sure what is real. Through acting out scenarios with friends, children begin to see the boundaries between the super human powers of a TV character, for instance, and the real abilities of a playmate. Dramatic play also enhances imagination as children attempt to recreate events or activities they have seen or experienced by using the materials they have available to them. For instance, a young child putting blocks on a plate and claiming it's a birthday cake show both their ability to use their imagination and know that the blocks are a "pretend" representation of the real thing.
8. **Play enriches appreciation of the arts-** Listening to various music genres and dancing along or exploring color combinations through paint develops an appreciation for beauty within young children

9. **Play extends attention span, persistence and mastery-** When absorbed in play, even children with short attention spans often stretch out their play times. Skilled adult play-partners can help children with short attention spans extend their play by providing engaging materials geared to individual students' unique interests
10. **Play helps children regulate emotions and relieves separation anxiety-** Sometimes children will repetitively play out emotional concerns that can provide a release for emotions and bring comfort when coupled with appropriate adult support.

The hard copy version of this packet contains the following articles:

- Myck-Wayne, J. (2010). In defense of play: Beginning the dialog about the power of play. *Young Exceptional Children*, 13(4), 14-23.
- Diablo, C. F., & Vagianos, L. (2009). Using child preferences to increase play across interest centers in inclusive early childhood classrooms. *Young Exceptional Children*, 12(4), 31-39.

Those professionals who work with children with disabilities in Kansas may contact KITS for a copies of the articles (kskits@ku.edu) or they may be purchased from Sage Publishing (www.sagepub.com)