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Personal Philosophy of Play

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"But the time has come for us to recognize why play is worth defending: It is essential to leading a happy and healthy life" (Elkind, 2008).

Play is a fundamental part of life, a vital one for children. Play allows children to express their creativity, imagination, curiosity, emotions, beliefs, and connection to others. Play is essential to children's intellectual, social, emotional, language, and physical development. Unfortunately, society is robbing children of their childhood by expecting too much of them at an earlier age and replacing play with push-down academics. It is my joy and responsibility as a teacher to defend children's need for play so that they can reach their full potential.

Play's Effect on Children's Development

Play is a wonderful activity in its own right but it does offer myriad benefits to children (and adults). Play is a tool for learning. Children reach their optimal growth through play because it hones every area of their development.

Freud theorized that play was a form of therapy (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010). Bruner believed play allowed children to practice real-life scenarios in a safe environment. Dewey stated that play prepares children for amusement through work as adults, while Montessori touted child's play as child's work, emphasizing child-directed learning. Piaget introduced the stages of child development and said that children progress intellectually through play, while Vygotsky heralded play as a means for children to grow socially. Each of their theories holds some truth.

Cognitive and Language Development

Development is more apparent in play than in typical academic activities and that play is more reliable for predicting "later scholastic abilities" (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 133).

Children who engage in mature play show improved literacy and math skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2003, p. 3), abstract thinking, self-regulation, language development, and imagination (Bodrova, 2008, pp. 361 - 363). According to Smilansky and Shefatya (as cited in Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 51), play increases children's "verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, imagination, concentration, impulse control, curiosity, problem-solving strategies, cooperation, empathy, and group participation"

Social and Emotional Development

As Vygotsky notes (as cited in Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 132), "In play, the child is always behaving beyond his age." Children become more empathetic and kind through play, learning about other's experiences through role-playing (Heidemann and Hewitt, 2010). "Within play, children are learning the skills that will form a foundation for learning and social interaction in their future lives" (p. 16). Socio-dramatic and fantasy play improves children's social competence (Stegelin, 2005, p. 84) and "perspective taking ability, group cooperation, social participation, and impulse control" (Rogers & Sawyers, 1992, p. 65).

Role playing also encourages self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2007, p. 134), a necessary skill because we want our children to be able to think before they act or speak, sit attentively when required, and learn how to express themselves appropriately. Playing games gives children opportunities to improve resilience, emotional control, conflict resolution, verbal expression, and winning and losing with grace (pp. 137, 154).

Physical Development

Through active play and exploration, children build their fine and gross motor skills. Throwing, kicking, catching, balancing, running, jumping, climbing, dancing, building, sorting, and pretend play offer opportunities to hone their muscle functions.

Play's Place in the Curriculum

Zaporozhets, (as cited in Bodrova and Leong, 2007, p. 142) states that "optimal educational opportunities for a young child to reach his or her potential…are not created by accelerated ultra-early instruction aimed at shortening the childhood period;" play should be expanded. He touts "amplification of development" over "acceleration of development," lamenting the push to deprive children of a childhood by forcing early instruction on children (p. 358). Preschool programs should be just that: preschool programs with play, socialization between children and adults, and open-ended art.

To foster high-quality play, early childhood programs should offer an environment that celebrates play, ample amounts of free time, a variety of props and materials, and planned play experiences. Children need opportunities to follow their own interests, initiate activities, and be self-directed with the support of their teachers. Adults should not interrupt children's play unless necessary for a transition to other activities, but I believe they need at *least* 45-minute blocks of uninterrupted play twice a day. Teachers are the "stage managers" (Heidemann & Hewitt, 2010, p. 32) and we set the stage for play through our environment and the materials we offer. Play with objects, social play, and socio-dramatic play are integral to children's development. Dramatic play allows teachers to determine a child's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and provide appropriate scaffolding to enhance their emerging skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2007).

A child-directed approach facilitates children's inherent desire to learn instead of forcing it. Play based learning does not replace intentional teaching, rather complements and enhances it.

Play's Importance in the Lives of Young Children

Play creates opportunities for children to explore, imagine, connect with others, and to grow physically, emotionally and socially. It helps children discover talents, spark creativity,

inspire thinking, gain confidence, build relationships, problem-solve, resolve conflicts, expand language, understand rules and limits, and define themselves. Children make sense of their world through play; it is the natural way they learn.

Play in Nature

Children also have an innate desire to connect with nature. A variety of research provides sizeable evidence that play in nature improves children's health and physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and understanding of nature.

The health benefits of outdoor play include a lower risk of obesity in children, preventing and alleviating asthma, reducing diabetes risks, boosting immune systems, and improving cardiovascular health (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Pretty, et al., 2009). Children who play regularly in natural environments show more advanced motor fitness, including coordination, balance and agility, and they are sick less often (Fjortoft, 2001).

Play in outdoor environments reduces or eliminates bullying (Malone & Tranter, 2003), stress, aggression, boredom, and antisocial behavior and increases happiness, compromise, teamwork, peace, empathy, flexibility, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Moore & Wong, 1997; Burdette & Whitaker, 2005). Children who play in nature have more positive feelings about each other (Moore, 1997). Nature buffers the impact of life's stresses on children and helps them deal with adversity (Wells, 2000).

When children play in natural environments, their play is more diverse with imaginative and creative play that fosters language and collaborative skills (Fjortoft; 2004; Moore & Wong 1997; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 1998). Bixler, Floyd, and Hammitt (2002), Burdette and Whitaker (2005), and Mikkelson (2011) showed the children's creativity and problem-solving skills improved with play in nature.

Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) have lessened and more manageable symptoms and are better able to concentrate after contact with nature (Kuo & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Taylor & Kuo, 2011; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2001; Taylor, Kuo, & Sullivan, 2002).

Children thrive in natural play environments, where they are free to explore, discover, climb, run, and connect with nature and each other.

Personal Revelations

Play is not a luxury but a fundamental part of learning and far better preparation for school than "academics." Children learn primarily through active exploration and sensory interaction: learning by doing is more effective than learning by observation. Adults should play, too, for fun, and because being silly--and human--helps children feel safer and more connected.

In my preschool, I strive to enhance the physical, emotional, and cognitive growth of each child. Children have the opportunity to develop and enhance their own areas of interest along with lasting friendships with others. When we focus so much on the product, instead of the process, we take those opportunities away from our children…and ourselves. Jardine, Clifford, and Friesen (2008) say we must "be precisely what we hope our students will be: curious, knowledgeable, adventurous, well read, questioning creative, and daring in their intellectual ventures" (xxii). In my program, the emphasis is on learning through FUN.

Through child-directed play, children develop a love for learning, build social and emotional skills, hone their physical skills, and ignite creativity that is necessary for a joyous childhood…and adulthood.

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