



Learning Through Play

By Shelley Butler

One sunny summer day, I looked out the window to see my son and a friend spinning and laughing, playing at something known only to the two of them, unfettered by time, expectations, or adult rules. Never before had I seen such pure expressions of joy. Were they playing to learn or consciously seeking new information or skills? No, but if you look closely, they were exploring spatial relationships, honing motor capabilities, practicing social skills and language, creatively thinking, gathering information about the world through their senses, or to put it simply, learning through play.

Play may be as old as the existence of humankind. Playthings have been discovered in the artifacts of ancient civilizations and many believe that the earliest chess pieces date back to 6,000 B.C. Though the link between play and learning was more fully investigated in the 20th century by theorists such as Jean Piaget, the connection was made as early as the first century B.C. by Plato, "You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation."

What is now undeniably clear in the 21st century is that play is essential, vital, critical, and fundamental to a child's social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development. Without adequate, healthy play, children run the risk of entering school unprepared, growing into teens and adults without needed skills, and failing to meet their potential. Experts at the Institute for Play believe that healthy play in childhood can even prevent violence.

Through joyful, healthy play, children begin a love of learning and prepare for life itself.

What is Play?

Play is recreation, amusement, or fun. Even more says Jeanne Bassis, founder of PlayReflections® (www.PlayReflections.com) who offers "playshops" for adults, "Play is not just about doing, it's about being. Play is a state of grace, innocence, wonder and creativity... and happens when anyone is truly living in the present tense."

The natural activity of early childhood, play is what children do and their way of life. For young children, there is no distinction between play and learning; they are one and the same. Playing is a priority in early childhood, yet not all play is the same.

Most experts agree that children's play can be divided into these categories:

- Active play: running, jumping, climbing, riding, and other use of large muscles.
- Quiet play: reading, stringing, coloring, etc.
- Cooperative or social play: games and activities that involve more than one.
- Solitary play: drawing, dreaming, or any activity that involves only one.
- Manipulative play: putting together puzzles, building with blocks, cutting and pasting, or any activity that involves eye-hand coordination or fine motor skills.
- Creative play: painting, molding, solving problems, making music, telling stories, or any activity that involves a child's imagination.
- Dramatic play: dress-up, make-believe, or any play that involves pretending.

The categories overlap and any activity will likely fall into more than one. For example, playing "Tag" is active and cooperative at the same time. Though children could care less which category their play falls into, it is valuable for parents, teachers, and adults who work with young children to understand the types in order to provide opportunities for children to engage in them all.

Has Play Changed?

Yes, according to the Alliance for Childhood and others. Overscheduling, emphasis on academics in preschool, too much sedentary screen time, lack of safe place spaces, and violent TV/movie-based toys all threaten healthy playtime, putting play at risk. In the wave of expanding accountability in education, millions of preschoolers are taking standardized tests now; if children are taking more tests, then they are playing less.

The digital age has had a huge impact on children's play, as well. Dr. David Elkind, noted child development expert, theorizes that a faster speed of life characterized by instant access to information via the Internet and to each other through cell phones has garnered a sense that people can do more, leading to booking more commitments for children. In addition, this acceleration of life has contributed to the idea that earlier is better leading to more academics for young children.

How to Promote Healthy, Valuable Play

Even though research has proven the value of play, play is at risk, making it more important than ever to support healthy play for all children. Here's how:

- Create safe play environments and toys; lobby for clean, safe outdoor play spaces for all children.
- Focus on the learning that happens through play; use play as the means to teach and foster development.
- Provide a wide variety of play experiences and materials through which young kids can try new things, experiment, ask questions, talk, read, sing, dance, get messy at times, explore, and listen.
- Fuel creativity, curiosity, and the desire to know more.
- Allow time for free play in which children are choosing and directing play, balanced with structured play.
- Monitor play and step in with an idea if a conflict arises, offer a new prop when enthusiasm wanes, or redirect play as needed.
- Offer opportunities to play safely outdoors as well as indoors.
- Adopt a playful attitude, and model playing.
- Most importantly, **value play!** Notice and comment on children's healthy play to show that you recognize the importance and meaning of play in their lives.

When children have this kind of support, the benefits include gaining confidence as well as self-esteem, building relationships, problem-solving, conflict resolution, expanding language, understanding rules and limits, discovering talents, sparking creativity, inspiring thinking, defining personality, and sorting out likes and dislikes. In fact, healthy, valuable play touches on every area of a child's development.

Expanding the Vision of Play

Traditional ideas of play include setting aside time for children to play games or with toys, yet circumstances for play are everywhere, most all the time. Everyone can play everyday by extending the idea of play to include a playful approach to life and looking for play opportunities in ordinary places, as well as in traditional ways.

Consider the story of Shau-yu, who asks her father for permission to play, but is told she must go on an errand first. In *On My Way to Buy Eggs* by Chih-Yuan Chen (Kane/Miller), a child takes a playful journey through the neighborhood, imitating a cat walking on a roof, turning the world into an ocean with the help of a colored marble, and more. She finds chances to play and learn wherever she goes. After reading this book together, take a walk with a child and see how many ways to play that you both can find along the way.

Then, take a lesson from Billy, who only wanted a bucket for his birthday but has to talk his parents into giving him this seemingly meager gift instead of a new computer game or a bike. *Billy's Bucket* by Kes Gray and Garry Parsons (Candlewick) shows that play is in the eye of the beholder and that everyday objects make great playthings. An unadorned bucket is the gateway for Billy's imagination to blossom. Though the adults in his life don't see it at first, the bucket becomes home to sea lions, fish, barracuda, and possibly a mermaid. After reading together, give children empty buckets and ask them for ideas on how to play with it, what could be inside, or let them fill it up with their own treasures.

Discarding notions of "play time" and turning every part of the day into playful time, sometimes using everyday objects for children, increases the potential for learning. Here's a few ideas:

Spoon Surprise When setting out spoons, ask children to do a simple science experiment. Look at the back of a shiny spoon until a reflection is seen. Then, turn the spoon over and look into the bowl of the spoon to find a reflection again. What happened? Seems like magic to children but from this simple play with an ordinary object, they can learn much about how reflections come from light, and when light hits a surface that is concave, it reacts differently causing your reflection to appear upside down.

Name That Sound When driving, walking, or anytime you need to establish quiet time or create a calm transition, ask children to be still, listen for sounds, and identify as many as they can with your help.

In and Out Show children an example of something that is “in” such as a car in a garage or a bear inside a toy box, and an example of an object that is out. Ask children to find as many “ins and outs” as they can. Great for children who are bored or stuck in a place they don’t want to be. Works well with other pairs of concepts such as above/below, long/short, etc.

Playing for Life

The president of the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play and professor at Hofstra University, Dr. Rhonda Clements, says, “It is important to maintain a healthy sense of play throughout childhood and into adulthood. Our complex society requires clear thinkers, playful attitudes, humor and creativity for complex problem solving.” Not only does play help children grow and develop as well as begin a lifelong love of learning, but the healthy play that you support today helps prepare children for the world that they will work, play, and learn in as adults.

For more information:

- *The Promise of Play* series, PBS. Available on video: call The Institute of Play at 1-800-242-0000 or visit their web site, www.instituteforplay.com, to learn more or order.
- Visit the Playing for Keeps organization web site for information on play and an extensive library of resources for parents and educators, including a great list of books with play activities: www.playingforkeeps.org

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