

WHY CHILDREN NEED TO PLAY *Julia Gabriel (Centre for Learning) - juliagabriel.com*

How do children learn? How do they grasp entire language systems, codes of communication, symbolic thinking, and mastery of the skills they need to read and write? The answer is so simple that it's sometimes too difficult to grasp.

They learn through play!

How can that be? Well, babies learn through play. Do you remember those first games that they played intuitively with us, the first pretend games of peek-a-boo? The elaborate, imaginative play of 3 and 4 year olds develops from this. The give and take of conversation develops out of baby's first playful smiles and our response to them. The manipulation and solving of puzzles grows out of a baby's first reaching and grasping of objects we use in play with him. If we play with our babies in a loving, nurturing, joyful way, they learn to grow up trusting in people, forming solid relationships with those around them. Knowledge of the world develops out of a baby's early -play.

When the two-year old begins make-believe play, it contributes to the goals of early education. Let's examine these.

Representational Thought

Through imaginary play the child practices many different ways of representing reality, by creating symbols. He'll make homes, farms, animals, people, food, or an outing to the "zoo" with paint, blocks, play-dough and sand, or by dressing up. His creations are symbols of representational thought. Symbols are things that represent something else - an object, idea or event. What's important is that all later education is based on the assumption that a child has symbolic competence. Literacy and numeracy are about understanding symbols. So, it's crucial to pay attention to this symbolic mastery in the pre-school years. Symbolic mastery is gained and practiced through involvement in a wide variety of play activities.

Conceptual Thought

Children at play are young scientists and mathematicians. They're exploring the boundaries of their worlds, asking what happens if I mix mud with water, red with blue, blue with yellow? When a child plays with sand and a bucket, or water and jugs, he is laying the foundations of mathematical understanding. It's only through experience that he will come to understand concepts like greater than, smaller than, density, gravity, weight, size and conservation of liquids. It is only through play that he will gain this concrete experience and knowledge.

Language and Communication Skills

During play, children's language is more complex than in most other activities. They're practicing using the adult language they've heard, by using it in role-play. A child "playing" at being the teacher, mother or father, will recreate the language patterns she's overheard, using correct grammar and a wide range of advanced communication



skills. I remember my surprise on first hearing my own words, expression and mannerisms coming out of my two-year old daughter Emma!

Early childhood literacy foundations are primarily about talking and playing with words and language. These natural forms of learning and development come before reading and writing or exposure to print.

Physical Development

Children at play are exercising their bodies and mastering physical coordination in the most natural way. Rhyme games for clapping, jumping, crawling, miming daily activities and "freezing" the movement are excellent ways to help your child develop mastery of gross and fine motor skills. He'll need these for later literacy. A child who can't sit at a table and cut, can't learn to write, so it's not only fun, but also beneficial, to enjoy cutting and making a collage together at home.

Social and Emotional Development

Through play, children learn to work cooperatively, solve problems collaboratively and how to win friends. Social rules are absorbed naturally by observation and practiced through play. Play can help young children deal with things they can't put into words: Distress at Daddy going away, fear of monsters or the dark or going to school. Tension, fear and anxiety can be acted out in play, and it can be re-played again and again while the child gradually comes to grasp, understand and master his emotions.

Yet, pressures from society and expectations of formal education encourage us to view with suspicion an early childhood education based on play. It's easier for the non-professional to see the value of the formal approach to

learning rather than one with play at its centre. But, structured activities that are heavily adult directed, such as work sheets and drills, are de-motivating and not the most

"Play is our brain's favourite way of learning."

effective way for pre-school children to learn and develop. They won't give children the skills they need to be able to adapt to the pace of change and demands of the future.

Today's children are preparing to enter a competitive, turbulent world of rapid change. What are the skills they need?

- Versatility and flexibility
- Imagination and creativity
- Self - motivation, so they're able to make their own choice and act on them
- Social skills, which enable understanding of self and collaboration with others
- Courage and confidence, so they're able to learn from their mistakes and try again

We believe that helping children to develop these qualities is the education, and that play is the perfect context for mastering these life skills.

What's the best environment to nurture them in? At home, within the family. We encourage all families to play hard at their homework, and enjoy it together!

What's the best homework?

- Reading bed-time stories, talking about them and extending them into make-believe games
- Imaginative play. Make a dressing up box to keep at home that stimulates role-play and drama
- Playing games together as a family, sharing activities and hobbies. Our children learn important social rules, like turn-taking and fairness, from games. They come to accept losing (someone has to) and learn to value failure as an opportunity to evaluate and try again
- Outings to special places. Planning together and preparation as a family are all part of the learning journey
- Family conversation. Let's show our children that we value them by listening to them, letting them practice talking and sharing their ideas.

What is play?

Play, for children, is serious work; an opportunity for learning all the skills they'll need for life.

- Play is created and directed by the players
- Play is free of external rules
- Play is enacted as though the activity were real
- Play is meaningful to the players

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