

the playful mind newsletter

the developmental importance of play

CREATIVE PLAY MAKES BETTER PROBLEM-SOLVERS

Think back to the happiest moments of your childhood. Chances are they were times of carefree play and moments with little to do besides think your own thoughts.

Remember sitting on the grass watching ants scurry about; rounding up friends for a pick-up game of kickball; curling up with a comic book; testing out a new paper airplane design?

To adults, it may seem that these activities weren't particularly important. But child development specialists say they were crucial in cultivating your creativity and imagination, as well as expanding your intellectual, emotional and social skills.

In other words, unstructured child's play - the kind with no rules, few gizmos and little or no adult direction - packs a powerful developmental wallop.

Jane Healy, a psychologist, educator and author of 'Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds and What We Can Do About It,' says too many parents and policy-makers just don't understand the importance of play in children's development.

"Learning the multiplication tables and the alphabet are very important. But those skills need to reside inside a mind that has been expanded by the imaginative and joyous exploration of our environment and the possibility that it offers for fun," Healy says.

Play can be hard to define because it takes many shapes, from physical play to mental play to imaginative play.

But most experts agree that it can be divided into two main categories: child-initiated unstructured play and adult-led play.

Most children do lots of adult-led play. This includes organized sports, physical education classes and extracurricular activities where rules must be followed. Even the most preferred playthings, such as computers, video games and other electronic toys, are generally scripted by adults.

"I feel as if we are creating a culture where we are giving children all the content that we think they need for their imagination, without realizing that in the process we are stifling their imagination," said Joan Almon, an educator who heads the U.S. Alliance for Childhood.

With such a lack of child-initiated play, "we are short-circuiting a lot of their development," Healy adds. "That's because play is the way that children work out their emotional issues, their fears, their anxieties. It's the way they develop a self, a way they develop a sense that they are important people who have ideas to share and who can get along with other people."

There is, obviously, a role for parents, teachers and other adults in most child-initiated play. Adults must ensure children's safety. And they can provide materials or introduce new play opportunities, such as taking a child to a playground or helping a child meet other children.

But many well-meaning parents believe they must be "program directors for their children's intellectual development," Healy says.

Children, of course, have been playing for centuries. It was the 20th-century work of Jean Piaget that underlined the importance of play in children's development.

Diane Levin, the Wheelock College professor and author of 'Remote Control Childhood? Combating the Hazards of Media Culture,' gives an example of Piaget's theory. She describes watching a kindergartner named Tanaka carefully draw lines of various colours to create boxes of different sizes and shapes on pieces of scrap paper.

the playful mind newsletter

the developmental importance of play

Inadvertently, Levin said, Tanaka dropped paint into the middle of one box. Dismayed, she stared at the drip for a minute. Then she smiled and began making dot patterns in her other boxes.

Levin notes that Tanaka began her playtime with something she found interesting - painting. As she painted, Tanaka tried out new colours and different sizes of boxes. Suddenly, she was presented with an unexpected challenge: a paint drip in the middle of a carefully wrought painting. Tanaka had to figure out what to do and gained a sense of "mastery" by solving the problem.

"We might even conjecture," Levin said, "that she would probably not have become as skilful at the tasks and concept she is working on without this rich play process."

Such creative play vividly contrasts with what experts call the "imitative" play of so many children these days.

More and more toys are "licensed," meaning they are based on television shows, movies and sometimes books. Unlike "open-ended" toys, such as clay and blocks that can be used in numerous ways, media-based toys are generally single-purpose playthings.

"They 'tell' children how to play and can channel them into playing particular themes in particular ways - merely using the toys to try to imitate what they see on the TV and movie screen," Levin says. "As a result, their imagination, creativity and ability to find interesting problems to explore and solve - the very foundation that contributes to children's success in school - can all be undermined."

Since the deregulation of children's television, there has been an explosion of licensed toys. At least half of all new toys this year are licensed, and experts predict that the number will continue to increase.

"To the extent children's toy shelves become dominated by these highly structured toys, their play and learning can suffer," Levin argues. "Still worse, because many of the most popular shows linked to toys have violent themes, what children often are channelled into imitating is violence."

Levin and others worry about the long-term consequences of such play. But they also remain optimistic that the situation can be changed.

"While it is unfortunate that in today's world of increased time constraints, parents and teachers need to take a more active and deliberate role in ensuring that children's play meets their needs, in the long run their efforts will pay off," Levin says.

"Children will demonstrate increased levels of independence, resourcefulness and competence as a result of creative play."

Rhonda Clements, a Hofstra University professor and head of the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, adds that no one knows exactly what academic or life skills are going to be necessary 20 years down the road.

"But one thing we can bet on is that we will still need people who can solve problems, which is one benefit of play. The people who brought us the technology of today were obviously wonderful players," Clements says.

(Extracted from an article by Karen MacPherson, Post-Gazette Staff Writer, 2 October 2002)