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Real play — play that is initiated and directed by children and that bubbles up from within the child rather than being imposed by adults — has largely disappeared from the landscape of childhood in the United States. There are many reasons for this, such as the long hours spent in front of screens each day or in activities organized by adults. In addition, preschools and kindergartens that used to foster meaningful play and exploration often spend long hours on adult-led instruction instead.

All of these are the outer manifestations of something deeper — a modern mindset that does not value play and is even afraid of it. Some fears are easy to identify. People freely admit they are afraid of accidents in play and want to minimize risk. Yet playgrounds that offer genuine risk, such as Berkeley’s adventure playground, where children build two-story play structures with hammers and nails, tend to have fewer accidents than traditional playgrounds. Give children real risk and they rise to it; they learn how to handle it. Give them sanitized play spaces, and children often are less conscious of risk and have accidents, or take outlandish risks for the sheer excitement of it all.

There is also a widespread fear of ‘stranger danger.’ Most parents will not let their elementary-age children go out unattended. Yet most crimes against children, such as abduction or abuse, are perpetrated by people the family knows rather than strangers on the playground.

These are the easily recognized fears. There are underlying fears that are harder to describe.

The current mindset in the U.S. leads us to create a life that is as safe and risk-free as possible. We want life to be ultra-organized, and we want to be in charge at all times. We’re taught from early on that life should be rational and measurable. No wonder people love to see young children sitting still and working on worksheets or at computer screens. It’s so tidy compared to play, which is messy, not only physically but also emotionally.

In play, the full range of human feelings and longings surfaces at one time or another, some of which are not very beautiful and can even be a bit scary. In addition, play is hard to track or assess. It wanders in and out of different realities like dreams. It may start out looking familiar, but will often go into deeper realms that are not easily understood. Play is full of symbols and metaphors. It has some elements that seem familiar and arise from our everyday life, but in the next moment it is full of magical thinking. It is a way of perceiving the world that is reminiscent of fairy tales and myths. It is the antithesis of didactic teaching and scripted lessons, which are highly predictable, although their outcomes tend to be much weaker than promised.

The urge to play arises from a deep place in the human being. It is like a wellspring that bubbles with life-filled water, much like the fabled fountain of youth. But sometimes springs get clogged and need to be cleared. Children’s play, too, gets blocked and adults need to help remove the blockages.

A certain amount of clutter happens in life. None of us is as fresh and pure as we were as young children. But it seems that we have gone out of our way to clutter our children’s lives with things and activities that deny them the time and space for playing freely. Of course, we do the same to ourselves. As Neil Postman put it, we are amusing ourselves to death. We fill our homes with huge entertainment centers and keep the television on all day — or the radio or the iPod®. It’s hard to free ourselves from our computers, our Blackberries®, our gimmicks and contrivances. We are afraid to be on our own, to enter our own silence where new things
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can well up. And we are afraid to let children have free time to explore their own ideas. We train them from infancy onward to turn to the screen rather than to their own creativity.

Also, adults are often uncomfortable with the themes of children’s play — birth and death, sex, and violence. As a teacher, I had to wrestle with such fears. For me the most poignant moments in my nursery/kindergarten classes came when children used play to confront death. My own father had died when I was 12, an age when I was too old to play it out. It was an era when no one thought of grief counseling, although I think my brother and I would have benefited greatly from it. So we suffered in silence and are still working things through.

I watched children approach death in play with some trepidation, but also with huge respect that they could approach it so freely. I especially think of Kirke. She’d been in my Waldorf preschool/kindergarten class for two years and was a great player, as were her friends. She came to school one Monday morning and her mother pulled me aside to say the family was very upset about the sudden death of a family friend. Kirke wanted to play it out. She turned to her friends and said, “Let’s pretend I’ve died and you want to help me.” They readily agreed.

I watched with concern as they laid Kirke out on a wide plank and carried her around the room in stately procession. They set her down gently and surrounded her with vases of flowers, candles, lovely stones, and other objects. Periodically they’d lift her up and carry her around again. Play time lasted an hour and they used all that time for this play and continued it over the next two days as well. Their play touched a deep chord in me. I had some reservations, but I kept an eye on it to be sure it was not getting too morbid. It seemed fine as the children were clearly engaged in the spirit of play. I was not certain how this would end and how long it should go on. Sometimes children get caught in a particular scenario and have trouble bringing it to closure, but that was not the case here.

On the third day, Kirke’s friend Christin came to me and told me that Kirke was dead. I expressed concern and said I would bring something. The first object I saw was a basket of painted wooden eggs, for it was nearly Easter. I carried the basket to Kirke, who was laid out on the plank with her arms crossed on her chest and her eyes slightly open to see what was happening. I knelt beside her and put down the basket. Before I could say a word, she sat up with her arms in the air and announced, “I’m alive again. I’m alive again.”

Something was freed in her and in all of us who took part. Years later when Christin was about 11 her father died. She came through it all so openly and beautifully that I couldn’t help but think that playing death for those three days had prepared her to meet the sorrows of loss as well as life’s resurrecting nature.

Children have a deep-felt need to play out the stories of their lives. If we deny them this right we do enormous harm. Often we do it with good intentions, for we want them to learn more about literacy, math, or other subjects. Yet with the loss of play they learn so much less about the real lessons of life.

Today there is a change in the air. Play is being rediscovered. Examples include the frequent articles in the press; the 2006 report on play by the American Academy of Pediatrics; the new PBS documentary...
“Where Do the Children Play?” (information available through www.allianceforchildhood.org); and the EPA’s short film about nature play called “Wetlands and Wonder” (available at www.epa.gov). A recent conference on play at the 92nd Street Y in New York was sold out with 900 people attending.

Another indicator of a changing mindset is new research by Dorothy and Jerome Singer, who surveyed 2,400 mothers in 16 countries and found that about three-fourths believe that children are ‘growing up too quickly.’ In the U.S., the figure is 95 percent, the highest of any country studied. The authors conclude that “mothers are deeply concerned that their youngsters are somehow missing out on the joys and experiential learning opportunities of free play and natural exploration.” (Available in the American Journal of Play.)

One can only hope that the change in the political mood in the U.S. will also support play. The Bush administration strongly favored didactic instruction and scripted teaching for young children. Recent surveys of teachers in full-day kindergartens in New York and Los Angeles found that the majority spent two to three hours per day instructing children in literacy and numeracy and preparing them for standardized tests. They offered less than 30 minutes per day for play or other freely chosen activities. The Alliance for Childhood has published a new report with these findings. Perhaps President Obama and his wife Michelle will favor more play-based approaches. Their own daughters attended the Lab School at the University of Chicago, which describes its preschool and kindergarten in these terms: “At the Nursery School and Kindergarten levels, we believe that confidence and self-esteem, as well as cognitive development, are best promoted along the natural pathways of play.”

It’s time to move forward and set our fears aside. There are several good ways for adults to get started on this. One is to share play memories from one’s own childhood. We remind ourselves that we are players at heart, and young teachers who may not have played learn from the older ones. When teachers share play memories with each other and with parents they help create a strong play culture in their school or child care center. Also adults can engage in play — with other adults or with children. Go out in nature and build a snow house, a sandcastle, a fort, or a tree house, or dam a creek. Get your hands dirty and your feet wet and remember the sheer joy of it all. Then come in and warm up and relish the pleasure of that, too. Play engages all our senses and gives us courage to be fully human again.
At the age of six, and because of television, I became enamored of Flash Gordon, a precursor to Spiderman and the whole raft of today’s superheroes. My mother had already taken me to see Walt Disney’s Peter Pan at a local movie theater, which I adored; and I became equally mesmerized by the musical version that was broadcast annually on NBC in the next few years. Flash Gordon and Peter Pan figured heavily into hours and hours of my pretend play. In my world they were great friends, joining forces with each other, and me, to fight the twin evils of Ming the Merciless and Captain Hook.

Play is so fundamental to children’s health and well-being — and so endangered — that the United Nations lists it as a guaranteed right in its Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). For children in the third world, societal horrors such as exploitation through slavery, child conscription, and child labor, deny children their right to play. In the United States and other industrialized nations, seduction, not conscription, lures children away from creative play. There are too many screens and too much marketing in the lives of too many children — and it’s not good for them.

There’s no credible evidence that screen time is in any way beneficial for babies. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time for children under the age of two. It is possible, however, for thoughtfully monitored screen viewing to have benefits for older children. And while screen media is not as conducive to encouraging creativity as books or radio, for instance, research does suggest that screens can be a springboard for creative play (see for example, Singer & Singer, 1990). What is a disaster for children’s creative play is the unprecedented and unfortunate 21st century convergence of increasingly miniaturized, sophisticated screen technology with unfettered, unregulated commercials. Loveable media characters; cutting-edge technology; brightly colored packaging; and well-funded, psychologically-savvy marketing strategies combine in coordinated campaigns to capture the hearts, minds, and imaginations of children — teaching them to value that which can be bought over their own make-believe creations.

I sometimes feel a bit hypocritical for cherishing my childhood affection for Flash Gordon and Peter Pan. I am, after all, the director of a national advocacy coalition working to reclaim childhood from corporate marketers. A major portion of my work is focused on the commercialization of children’s lives and the need to limit children’s access to screens, in large part because of their negative impact on creative play. My experience of beloved screen characters, however, was significantly different from the experience of children today. When I was a child, Flash Gordon movies were serialized on television, but only occasionally. I saw Disney’s Peter Pan only once on a trip to the movies with my mother. The TV adaptation of the Broadway play was broadcast annually for a few years. Children of previous generations, myself included, did not have unlimited access to the media programs we loved. Instead, we had unlimited access to our own imperfect memories of the stories and characters we saw on the screen. The only way I could satisfy my desire to immerse myself in the world created by screen versions of Peter Pan was to construct it myself. In a sense, I had to play; and in the process, I could make Neverland my own.

Too much access

Unlike my experience of seeing Disney’s Peter Pan once when I was six, and not again until I was 19, children growing up today can watch their favorite movies and TV programs repeatedly on cell phones, mp3 players, tiny DVD players, computers, in the backseat of their family car, and even in shopping carts. Such unlimited access to miniaturized screens means
that even when children are out and about, we are depriving them of opportunities to engage in the world and encouraging them to turn to screens instead. At dinner in a favorite diner a while ago I watched two families — each consisting of two parents and a toddler — cope very differently with the challenges of eating out with children ensconced in that stage of development where their delight in active exploration supersedes their delight in anything else, including eating.

One family came equipped with a bright red portable DVD player. Their son was immersed in Thomas the Tank Engine®, a highly-regarded television program for preschoolers, throughout their meal. He was completely silent and oblivious to his surroundings, absentmindedly chewing on the morsels of food his mom fed him from her fork. His parents were able to enjoy their meal uninterrupted. They were even able to carry on an extended conversation, an admittedly rare experience for parents of very young children.

The other parents had a less peaceful meal. After their toddler reached the limit of his tolerance for being confined in a high chair, rather than distracting him from the urge to explore the sights and sounds of the restaurant, his parents took turns walking him around. Clutching a plastic spoon, he spent several minutes with his nose pressed against a case of fancifully decorated pastries. He made shoveling gestures with his spoon and held it up to his mom. “Are you giving me a taste?” she asked. “Yum!” Laughing, he did it again. “Up” he said, pointing to the top row of cakes. “That’s right,” his mom said. “The pink cakes are up.” “Down!” he chortled, bending his knees a little as he pointed to the bottom row. Holding his mom’s hand, he trotted back to their table where he was handed over to his dad, ending up back at the pastry case while his mom finished her dinner. With his parents’ help, his inborn capacity for playful exploration transformed the restaurant into a laboratory for exploring color, spatial concepts, and make-believe.

What about the little boy engrossed in his own portable DVD player? What are the primary life lessons children absorb by regularly watching DVDs while eating in a restaurant? They learn:

- to look to screens rather than to their environment for stimulation
- to expect to be entertained rather than entertaining themselves
- that interacting with family during meals is so boring that they need the inducement of screen entertainment to get through dinner, and
- they learn that eating is something to do while you’re doing something else.
And, more importantly, they:

- miss experiencing the feeling those unsettling niggles of curiosity that lead to the delights of active exploration
- miss the exhilarating sense of mastery and pride that comes with discovery and problem solving
- lose out on chances to nurture and preserve their innate sense of wonder
- miss opportunities to practice delaying gratification, which is essential for any task that involves setting a goal and working toward it — from succeeding at work to saving for retirement
- miss opportunities to generate play in and with their surroundings in their own unique ways.

They don’t learn to discover what’s unique about them in the world — what piques their interest and potential passions.

Too many viewings

In addition to depriving them of time spent in creative play, unlimited access to screens means that children get to see the same programs repeatedly. They can become so locked into set characters and scripts that their play becomes quite constricted.

I was playing with four-year-old Abigail in the dress-up corner of her preschool, when she suggested that we ‘play princess.’ “Okay,” I replied. Then she asked, “Which princess are you?” I was puzzled. Her question implied a set of particular princesses and was a less open-ended query than, “What’s your name?” I glommed on to the first name that popped into my head. “Umm . . . I’m Princess Anna.” In a tone of amused exasperation, she responded instantly and authoritatively. “That’s not a princess.” “Really?” I asked, bewildered. She reeled off a list including Belle, from Beauty and the Beast; Ariel from The Little Mermaid; Aurora from Sleeping Beauty; and the eponymous Cinderella — the main properties in the Walt Disney Company’s stable of princess characters culled from animated movies based primarily on fairy tales.

A few days later when we were again ‘playing princess’ Abigail assigned me the task of scrubbing the floor. Looking up from my hands and knees I said brightly, “I must be Cinderella.” “No!” she responded authoritatively, “You’re Anastasia.” I remembered that in the Disney version of Cinderella Anastasia is the tall skinny stepsister. “Anastasia never scrubbed a floor in her life!” I retorted rather scornfully. “She does in Cinderella III,” Abigail replied sweetly. I stopped scrubbing. “There’s a Cinderella III?” I asked in amazement. “Of course,” she said, “after Cinderella is married.”

For media companies, the financial benefit to keeping children glued to screens is in marketing — not just commercials, but in inculcating a devotion to media characters which, in turn, are licensed as toys and other products. Because the goal is to popularize a character so that it sells products, companies like Disney have taken to making sequels of their original programs. In addition to Cinderella I, II, and III on DVD, there’s also Disney Princess Stories and Disney Princess Sing Along Songs, Volumes 1, 2, and 3; Disney Game World: The Disney Princess Edition; Disney Princess Party, Volumes 1 and 2; Little Mermaid I and II; Aladdin I, II, and III; Beauty and the Beast, Beauty and the Beast: Belle’s Magical World, and Beauty and the Beast: The Enchanted Christmas.

Too much brand licensing

Brand-licensed toys brought in $22.8 billion in 2006. It’s a huge business and it’s easy to understand the appeal to children of a toy that represents a beloved media character. It’s like owning your own personal piece of the magic that a film can evoke. In fact, another one of my vivid Peter Pan memories is spending hours painstakingly putting together a cardboard Captain Hook’s pirate ship a few months after the movie came out. I was thrilled to be reminded of the characters and the story. I also remember playing with a Peter Pan sticker set — but those two toys were the only Disney Peter Pan toys I had and there weren’t many on the market. It’s a significant difference from the 40,000 Disney princess items on the market in 2006. I found 235 items on the ToysRUs® web site alone, including Disney Princess Monopoly, A Disney Princess Magical Talking Kitchen with 11 phrases and 18 accessories, Leapster Educational Disney Princess Enchanted Learning Set, and Disney Princess Uno. And of course, Disney isn’t the only media company producing media-linked toys — today’s toys feature...
When selecting toys for your program, remember that the best toys are 90% child and only 10% toy.

Spiderman®, The Incredible Hulk®, Hannah Montana®, the Bratz®, and myriad other media properties. Equally troubling is the fact that many of the best-selling toys, in addition to featuring media characters — are embedded with computer chips that enable them to sing, dance, chirp, beep, and do back flips with just a push of a button. These toys advertise well because they look so exciting in 15-second commercials; but in fact they deprive children of the time, space, and silence essential for creative play.

The role of child care providers

Child care providers can play a critical role in ensuring children are provided with the time, space, and tools for make-believe. What we can no longer do is take play for granted:

- Make sure that your centers are commercial-free. Eliminate toys and books linked to media characters, and toys powered by batteries that chirp, beep, talk, sing, or do back flips on their own. When selecting toys for your program, remember that the best toys are 90% child and only 10% toy.

- Talk with parents about the importance of creative play for learning. Stock your library with books and articles for parents about the importance of play and how to nurture it.

- Encourage parents to limit screen time and media-linked toys at home.

- Engage in creative play with children. For children deprived of play at home, we can be models for playing creatively — they can catch on really quickly when given the opportunity.

Conclusion

Hands-on creative play is essential to children’s health and well being, yet in the 21st century United States, nurturing such play has actually become countercultural. The dominant, marketing-driven, media-saturated culture dictates against it. We can no longer assume that children even know how to play creatively. The greatest gift we can give to them and their families is to create schools, centers, and spaces for children that provide alternatives to commercial culture — places where creative play is nurtured, rather than stifled, where we provide children opportunities to explore themselves and the world, and give them a chance to learn to value their own creations above the things that corporations sell.

References


looking into children’s play communities

by Mark Mabry and Carolee Fucigna

We all need the patience and the vision to look into children’s play, not just at [children’s play].
— Harley, 1999, pg. 26

Play, particularly children’s sociodramatic play, is very much the cornerstone of early childhood classrooms in the United States. As early childhood educators, we learn and expound the ubiquitous mantras of ‘the value of play,’ ‘play-based programs,’ ‘children learning through play,’ and ‘play as child’s work.’ We strive to promote the importance of making a place for play in programs for young children, and to educate parents and broader communities about the benefits that children derive from engaging in play with one another.

Children’s social play is one of the most important venues for learning in the early childhood classroom. Through play with others, they develop self-direction and self-control, an understanding of symbolic representation, fluency in communication and cooperation, problem-solving strategies, and an understanding of cultural rules and social behavior (Meckley, 2005). Yet articulating the significance of dramatic play in terms of what unfolds daily in our own classroom can be a complex, multi-layered, and somewhat ‘slippery’ task. While this play is easily identifiable, understanding its meaning, especially from the children’s points of view, requires careful observation and analysis. Trying to uncover meanings from their perspective has the potential to yield insight into an aspect of classroom life that may not be apparent to teachers — the children’s play community.

As children engage in sociodramatic play in our classrooms on a daily basis, we notice that, rather than simply engaging in a sequence of unrelated play events or scripts, children are participating in the ongoing creation and maintenance of what Alice Meckley (1994) describes as a play community. In their play community, children build a shared repertoire of actions, scripts, and meanings. This social construction of shared rules, roles, players, and events evolves in a particular classroom during a particular school year. “A familiar group of children establish individual and collective routines of preferred play with objects, with play events, and with each other” (Meckley, 1994). While common play themes may surface every year in our classrooms, each group of children will develop a play community that is uniquely their own. It is important to view dramatic play not simply as individual children participating in individual play events, but as a group of players “collectively establishing cultural patterns as they play” (Meckley, 1994).

Meckley (1994) also notes that as children repeatedly play together, their shared play themes become more familiar to the players and their signals and cues to each other during play become less explicit and more idiosyncratic. This can make observing and interpreting dramatic play challenging as we may not be privy to the significance of this nuanced communication. In addition, children are often involved in multiple play events simultaneously, participating in the ebb and flow of various scripts and players that intertwine and influence each other.

In order to successfully understand the nuances and meanings children are establishing together in their dramatic play communities, it is necessary to dedicate ourselves to careful observation of the play over an extended period of time in order to understand the culture negotiated by the players. The work of Vivien Paley (1984, 1986, 1988) is perhaps the most familiar example of a classroom teacher-researcher who has diligently tried to reflect upon the communal sharing in the play communities that have emerged in her classroom over the years. William Corsaro’s (2003) research into peer cultures shows classroom communi-
ties most often based around children’s play with “a stable set of activities or routines, artifacts, values, and concerns that kids produce and share in interaction with each other.” (Corsaro, 2003, p.37)

If we wish to have a window into the world of our children’s developing play communities, it is clear that we must develop the disposition to carefully observe, record, and analyze the dramatic play in our classrooms over extended periods of time. We can find such a methodology embedded in the practice of documentation as inspired by the preschools of Reggio Emilia. Documentation is a key part of what the teachers in Reggio call ‘the pedagogy of listening.’ This listening requires not just careful observation by the teacher, but also the collection of artifacts (e.g., photos, running records, videos, and children’s products). These artifacts can then be pored over and used to construct a contextual narrative of the dramatic play events.

What sets documentation apart from merely reporting a dramatic play vignette as a sequence of events is its emphasis on analysis and interpretation of recorded events in order to make the meaning of the play clearer. “The intent of documentation is to explain, not merely to display” (Forman & Fyfe, 1998, p. 241). This effort also requires reflecting on documentation with colleagues, parents, and the children themselves in order to hypothesize about, and uncover possible meanings the children might be bringing to their activities. This reflective process allows for the integration of different perspectives on a particular event and may help us move closer to understanding the intent of the original players. For teachers and parents, reflecting on documentation of dramatic play may also raise awareness of events such as shifts in play interests or social relationships. For the children themselves, revisiting play documentation might bring into their consciousness a sense of how they negotiate common elements of their dramatic play themes, how roles and rules are assigned, what strategies they use to ‘keep the ball in the air’ during play, or how they fit into the evolving social world framed by their play community.

Meckley (1994, 2005) has identified some common characteristics of children’s play communities which documentation can be particularly useful in attempting to uncover. These rather ritualistic aspects of play communities allow children to use a mutually constructed and understood framework within which they can innovate and negotiate during their dramatic play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Without this balance of ritual and innovation, children would be forced to start from scratch every time they initiated their play. Using Meckley’s definitions, we can look at these characteristics through the following examples of documentation of ‘dog and owner’ dramatic play over the course of a month in one author’s classroom:

**Rules: Actions, objects, players, and words are repeated in distinct, predictable, and consistent patterns.**

- When engaging in dog-owner play, the ‘owners’ connect and control play dog leashes, organize habitats for their ‘dogs,’ and distribute treats. Collections of math manipulatives and plastic linking chains serve as symbolic treats.

- Dogs move on all-fours, communicate with expressive gestures and sounds (whines and barks, never words), and are generally submissive. When revisiting the documentation of this play, Carla comments, “She was walking me. Sonia was carrying the chains. She was walking me and I was a good dog and when I stopped she gave me a treat (a plastic link).”

**Order and Time: Activities occur in an ordered, sequential manner over time and within consistent settings.**

- Dog-owner play begins soon after the children arrive at school. A child interested in being a dog or owner initiates play with another interested child. “Miki, can you own me?”
It seems clear that focusing on the play community when observing classroom life affords unique insights about the children and their classroom play culture.

- A leash is obtained from the dramatic play supplies and attached to the wrist of the appropriate player using a circle of small plastic links.

- A home base is built with hollow blocks or negotiated within the room (e.g., pillows under the loft).

- Walks commence, which sometimes leads to new play settings (for example, the book area as a place to stop and eat).

Shared Knowledge is demonstrated.

- One of the clearest demonstrations of the children’s shared knowledge emerges when they are all looking at documentation of dog-owner play and commenting on what they are observing. They are forthright about things such as roles and event sequences, for example:

  C: “Alejandro was my owner.”
  H: “But before he was her owner, I was her owner.”
  C: “Then we switched it up and Ana was Alejandro’s owner.”
  E: “Why is your tongue out (in the picture)?”
  H: “That’s when the dog gets tired.”
  L: “It helps them cool down.”
  D: “When they get hot they need to cool down.”

  Clearly there is shared knowledge of dog behaviors, such as panting, expressed here.

Interconnected and Shared Events: Varied play events are interconnected due to the shared common interests, cooperative social interaction, and communication between play groups.

- Dog-owner play is often happening simultaneously along with ship play in the hollow block area. Dogs and owners may come on the ship at the discretion of the child designated as ‘first captain.’ Dogs then transform into ‘boat dogs.’ Owners and other captains establish resting places for the dogs on board.

Roles: Children’s play roles reflect individual and collective reality.

- Roles in dog play: owner, dog, differentiated member of dog family (i.e. sister dog). There have also been babysitters for dogs (they walk multiple dogs at the same time), a ‘king dog,’ and a ‘wild and nice cat.’

Control: Control and ownership of specific play events is shown.

- If you are an owner, you are in the dominant role in dog play. If you are the first captain, you determine the roles (second captain, boat dog) and events on the ship. Others check in with you: “Can he be on the ship?”

So how might our classrooms benefit from us devoting the time and resources necessary to gaining a deeper understanding of our children’s play communities? Reflecting on the consistent rituals found in a group’s recurring dramatic play scripts might allow the teacher to fine-tune her understanding of the more provocative events that occur within the play. For example, in dog and owner play, dogs act ‘wild’ by running outdoors and refusing to be walked. They might mess up their food, disobey their owner, or toss away treats. By making an effort to examine these consistent play frames and the underlying themes being explored, the teacher might view this as a reasonable exploration of ‘dog-ness’ or stretching the typical frame of the dramatic play (Corsaro, 2003), rather than disruptive behavior that requires intervention.

Similarly, as we see children engage in the same dramatic play script over many days or weeks, we can appreciate their construction of a collective landscape, rather than worry about children being ‘stuck’ in their scripts. Documenting and revisiting this play helps develop a disposition to ‘look before you leap,’ and trust more in children’s competence to negotiate, collaborate, and construct a community.
When we begin to see that children negotiate consistent roles, actions, sequences, and rules in their dramatic play, it allows us to become better at interpreting the meaning that the play has for the players. Rather than seeing play episodes as spontaneous bursts of play, we may be able to become more skilled at interpreting dramatic play as a shared language and culture that children have negotiated. We might become clearer in our perception of the more esoteric aspects of their play — the verbal and gestural shortcuts that may seem on first blush to be nonsensical or extraneous might begin to be seen as a vocabulary that children have developed to signal and cue each other in sustaining their play. For example, in the dog game, two children kneeling and rapidly slapping their hands together while smiling and bobbing their heads, is a sign of two ‘dogs playing.’ The way to communicate to a friend he is your owner is as follows: “He is up and I am down and I look up into his eyes and he tells me what to do.” Without carefully observing these play rituals as they construct them over time, we might miss out on the meaning these subtle cues convey.

We often look to dramatic play for curricular topics that children might be interested in further exploring. Investigating play communities allows us to make better and more deeply researched judgments about the direction of the emergent curriculum. As teachers, when we are tracking the players, the scripts, etc. over time, we are better prepared to plan investigations and activities that reflect the true interests of the children. For example, planning for dog-owner play isn’t just about brainstorming ‘all about dogs.’ Maybe what is really interesting to the children in their ongoing scripts is expanding their repertoire of what dogs and owners do together (e.g., dog grooming).

It seems clear that focusing on the play community when observing classroom life affords unique insights about the children and their classroom play culture. It most certainly requires time — unstructured time during the school day to enable children to construct a play community and have the opportunity to develop into what Sutton-Smith (1997) calls “autonomous and cooperative social beings.” It also requires us to dedicate time to documenting the ongoing dramatic play and reflect on it with each other, as well as with the children. Corsaro (2003) notes that when engaging in this process, we can develop a greater respect for the competence of children and for the importance of their participation in these communities. Looking into children’s dramatic play with this lens on the play community yields a precious and unique view of a complex, child-owned and child-constructed classroom culture, distinct from the community they share with adults.

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At a brisk pace, research findings focused on children’s play are finally reaching the light of day in popular media. No longer left sitting in archives of academic journals, the benefits of play to lifelong success have been touted in radio, television, magazines, and newspapers. It gives early childhood professionals a powerful, credible advocacy tool to use with parents and community leaders as we strive to put children’s play back into the heart of early childhood curriculum.

In A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence, (Hirsh-Pasek, et al.) a review of research confirms that children’s self-initiated play nurtures overall development, not just cognitive development (such as learning to name colors, numbers, or shapes). In fact, research builds a very strong case that childhood play is a required experience in order to become a civilized, fully-realized human being.

The following points are upheld by research about important play outcomes. Put another way, these are skills, knowledge, and dispositions that children are at risk of not developing if deprived of enough free time, space, and opportunity for creative play:

- abstract and symbolic thinking, decision-making, creative problem solving and goal setting;
- complex language development and ability to ‘self-talk’ through learning steps;
- emotional awareness and competence, identity and self-image development, ability to maintain self-control through self-regulation, stress management and ability to delay gratification;
- social skills, such as patience, cooperation, negotiation, non-violent conflict resolution, teamwork, sharing, considering other’s point of view; and,
- formation of a moral or ethical code that distinguishes right from wrong, respect for others’ rights and ability to work toward the greater good.

In particular, research has shown that children who regularly engage in plentiful creative, imaginary play excel in the mental skill referred to as ‘executive functioning.’

That term ‘executive function’ refers to mental processes through which children learn to regulate and control their own ‘knee-jerk’ impulses and emotional reactions. It means they gradually learn to think and control behavior before they act inappropriately. They gain competence in mentally solving problems so they learn to behave more reliably within acceptable social rules and conduct. And it turns out that the ability to regulate and control one’s behavior is a very good predictor of success in school and adult life.

When children’s executive functions are well developed, children aren’t as dependent on ‘outside’ authority figures to constantly monitor and enforce rules and limits for appropriate behavior or social participation. In other words, children learn to internally ‘police’ their own behavior so others don’t have to do it for them. Imaginative play gives children lots of practice in independent, autonomous thinking, so they gradually develop decision-making skills and master self-discipline.

During peer pretend play, children also help each other learn to concentrate and stay within a character’s boundaries. Children remind peers when play is getting out of order and prompt them to get ‘back into’ character. For instance, if a child assigned to play a ‘baby’ doesn’t conform properly and starts to run in circles, one would likely hear other children say something like, “No, no, babies can’t run. Babies crawl!” In other words, children often coach each other in self control so a fantasy play theme can proceed and the fun continues.
In addition, being able to pretend within boundaries means children learn to focus not only on what a character does, but they must also learn to resist engaging in actions that are not in line with a character. For instance, a child pretending to be a dog would bark, but at the same time would resist meowing or making another animal’s sound. Thus, they would be exerting greater self restraint, maintaining a deeper concentration level, and developing a longer attention span by sticking to the mind-set of their dog character.

When children use symbolic play during pretend time, they also learn to stick within acceptable limits so pretend play can flourish. For instance, a child might hold a cup to his face and pretend it is a microphone he sings into. To fully enjoy the experience of being a singer, the child must conform to rules he sets himself — thus gaining invaluable practice in self control and self regulation.

It’s very important to distinguish the type of play that nurtures all that positive development. It’s not just any type of child activity that does it. For instance, some may call it ‘play’ when a child follows a teacher’s step by step directions during a craft project. It might be a hands-on learning experience, but different from the type of authentic play researchers have concluded is most critical to early development.

True play in humans (and other mammals) reveals itself according to specific criteria. Of course, definitions vary slightly from one researcher or early childhood professional to another. But most would include the following criteria as a working definition. Authentic children’s play is:

- pleasurable and enjoyable, voluntary, and self-initiated
- self-sustaining without needing extrinsic motivations, rewards, coercion, or reinforcement from others
- not dependent on extrinsic goals — the process of activity itself is more important than any particular goal or outcome
- spontaneous and flexible, involving fluid problem-solving that doesn’t have one right or wrong answer and may include multiple or changing solutions
- involves active imagination where children create the ‘rules’ and boundaries of play on their own or cooperatively with peers, and rules may change during play depending on play partner perspectives and negotiations
- generally all engrossing and absorbs children’s complete sustained attention and focused engagement
- often related to a private reality based on children’s unique experiences
- non-literal in that it is not dependent on having a ‘real’ toy or item related to the play topic — symbolic representations of needed objects abound
- composed of flights of the imagination, such as pretend scenarios, fantasy, and make-believe plots
- possible whether a child is alone or interacting with peers
- not directed, dictated, regulated, formatted, or structured by a parent, supervising adult, or teacher

In other words, the best play is what comes to mind when you think of ‘good, old-fashioned play.” Those who worked in early childhood decades ago knew it as ‘free play.’

It was the kind of play that was abundant to children before the growth of profitable commercialization of children’s time and toys, increased need to shelter children from random community violence, excessive pressure on parents to drill children’s intellect ‘early and often,’ and excessive concern about legal liability costs should children’s play result in an injury.

**Recommendations for early childhood program practices**

Pressures to get children ready for academic, intellectually-focused learning and standardized testing has caused many early childhood programs to abandon scheduling adequate time for free, imaginative play. Play has been squeezed out for an array of reasons. Sometimes it’s due to parents’ or sponsor’s demands; other times it’s due to insufficient or outdated staff training and lack of staff’s continued education to keep up on current knowledge.

But make no mistake. Abundant research has shown that play during early childhood is necessary if humans are to reach their full potential. For children, and in fact, for society’s well-being, true play is a critical need, not a fanciful frill. And so it requires ethical early childhood programs to advocate for and insist upon including play as part of their daily curriculum and teaching strategy. Following are recommendations for achieving that goal. Early childhood programs should strive to:

- require pre-service and in-service staff training to include the critical nature of play to children’s overall
Abundant research has shown that play during early childhood is necessary if humans are to reach their full potential.

- Train staff on developmentally appropriate practices and require them to be consistently applied.
- Introduce staff to the criteria of authentic play.
- Train staff on the importance of imaginative play, being especially sure to emphasize emotional and social gains as well as intellectual development.
- Create daily schedules that provide many opportunities for extended playtime throughout the day — both solitary as well as peer play.
- Resist classroom play materials that suggest specific story lines or characters that superimpose ideas onto children’s creative play, such as figures based literally on television or movie characters.
- Encourage imaginative play outdoors as well as indoors.
- Be supportive of children’s play that bridges learning centers or combines learning center materials/toys; for instance, children can use dramatic play props from a family living center (such as dolls, scarves, hats, or baby buggies) very imaginatively in the block building, music, or literacy area.
- Emphasize peer interaction activities that spur on play rather than using passive media technology such as television, DVDs, computers, or battery-operated toys.
- Provide safe spaces for children to reap the benefits of rough and tumble play (this can be particularly important for boys and some cultures which value rambunctious play more than the typical female teacher in the United States).
- Capitalize on children’s spontaneous play ideas whenever possible; avoid letting an overly rigid schedule stifle children’s playfulness.
- Capitalize on children’s natural sense of curiosity, wonder, and awe; give in to playful serendipitous moments of childhood more and watch the clock less.
- Encourage children to become masters of their own fate; let children experience unstructured time and even some boredom so they learn to playfully engage and connect rather than rely on being entertained and directed by adults or media.
- Set the stage for cooperative ‘give and take’ play throughout the classroom; provide ample space, play options, and materials so children can successfully share, problem solve, negotiate, and utilize resources.
- Provide plentiful open-ended play resources that are malleable to children’s desires and imaginative ideas; sand and water play or modeling with play dough, or mud can stimulate a wide range of play scenarios depending on each child’s unique interests and preferences.
- Give children access to natural and human-made ‘loose parts’ they can symbolically integrate into play (for instance, children can resourcefully use sticks and acorn tops during the symbolic play of a tea party); creative movement materials, such as hula hoops, scarves, wands, or streamers are other versatile items; children can use art center loose parts, such as buttons or pipe cleaners, to represent figures (whether human or animal) in the block area; problem solving skills bloom during play if teachers resist being heavy-handed by creating excessive, arbitrary limits or providing rigid directions that stifle imaginative play.
- Provide a few dramatic play spaces and props that suggest play, but don’t completely prescribe it (for instance, resist providing manufactured dress up kits that provide every tool or piece of clothing needed for a play theme; commercial make believe kits, such as a fire fighter, doctor, or a chef kit, can rob children of resourcefully thinking up ways to represent related tools and clothing using their own imagination, recall, and resourcefulness.
- Respect children’s language and provide avenues for communication; dolls, stuffed animals, puppets, and even toilet-paper tube ‘microphones’ give children playful pathways to the imaginative stories they have within.
- Encourage teachers to follow children’s lead by enthusiastically interacting with children during creative, imaginative play; teachers can serve as a role model for giving into the delights and demands of playing the very abstract skill of “let’s pretend as if . . . .”
Play is an instinctual birthright designed to spur on and sustain human development. Children rely upon it; civilizations succeed by embracing it. Research resoundingly supports that message. It’s just waiting to be used as we advocate for children’s crucial need for authentic play.

References


Resources


Play advocacy organization web sites

Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.net/

Association for the Study of Play: www.csuchico.edu/kine/tasp/

American Association for the Child’s Right to Play: www.ipausa.org/

International Play Association: www.ipaworld.org

National Institute for Play: www.nifplay.org/front_door.html