

## What Young Children Learn Through Play

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Children need a variety of play materials and companions if they are to develop normally. The best toys are not necessarily the most expensive ones. A discarded baby bath can make a very fine sand or water tray and an upturned table covered by a blanket can become an imaginative den. A cardboard box makes a wonderful train, boat or car. Cut down to size evening dresses or some old hats are ideal for dressing up. Cooking equipment, small gardening tools and woodwork tools teach the child how to use and respect proper equipment and perhaps develop a life long interest.

Through play the whole personality is developed- intellectually, emotionally, socially, morally, spiritually, physically and psychologically. In her book *The Significance of Children's Play*, Joan Cass says "Play uses every ounce of a child's energy. It encourages his imagination. It develops skills of both body and mind. It brings about understanding, warmth, and sympathy towards others.

How to compete, how to take hard knocks, how to win gradually; when to assert oneself and when to forget self interest are all learned through play. Perseverance, how to struggle through to a desired end, is as much a part of play as it is of work. Play offers healing for hurts and sadness. It breaks down tension and releases pent up urges towards self-expression. Play is the working partner of growth, for activity is as vital to growth as food and sleep.

The far-reaching significance of children's play has only lately been understood. Unless the deep lying impulses satisfied by play are allowed to express themselves in childhood, adult life suffers.

Some men and women are never able to take part freely in the life around them; they are stiff and lonely because they don't know how to mix with others. They cannot lose themselves in spontaneous fun.

Somehow or other their urges towards expression in play, were denied the chance to come to the surface in childhood" (Extract from: *Your Child from 6-12*, US Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1949 in Cass J.)

## **Serious Business**

If play does all this, it is a serious business and ought to be taken seriously both at home and at school. Of course, computers and video games have their place, but they do not represent the whole picture needed for a child's all round, complete development.

Through interaction with peers and interested adults and a rich variety of play materials, children begin to learn the skills for satisfactory social development. They learn about quarrelling and making-up, how to comfort one another, how to say they are sorry and how to help each other. They learn how to lend toys, to share, to cooperate, to wait their turn and to respect the rights and the needs of others.

Then there is emotional development. If a child continually ill-treats her baby, she may be projecting her own problems onto the doll and may need some help herself. Often children act out experiences that they have found painful or difficult to understand. At other times, they may just need an acceptable way to get rid of their aggression or frustration, just as adults do.

Language is a crucial tool for later learning in school, because language – both written and spoken – forms the basis of all other subjects. “Through language a child can make his wishes known and perhaps fulfilled. Through it he can begin to express his feelings even if at first he does so inadequately. He can to some extent satisfy his curiosity by asking questions and understanding the answers when things are explained to him. (Cass J.) He experiences frustration and stress when he fails to understand something or to make himself understood.

Then, of course, there is the child's intellectual development. “Psychology is agreed that play is the starting point for cognitive development in the infant child.”(Isaac,1930, Piaget,1951, Bruner, 1966, Similansky, 1968, Furth and Wachs, 1974). “It is argued that discovery, reasoning and thought grow out of children's spontaneous activity; this may take the form of bodily skills and movement, make-believe play, or direct concern with physical things, animals and plants, and direct enquiry into the why and wherefores. Children learn by active and direct participation in concrete situations where the basis of problem solving and creative thinking is laid.” (Manning and Sharp, 1977).

Physical development is enhanced by large toys such as climbing frames, slides, swings or play at the local park. Toys such as bats and small balls, large balls, skipping ropes, beanbags, quoits, skateboards, roller blades and scooters help develop coordination.

A child needs to play outdoors, to be able to run, skip, shout and jump and to explore and

investigate. Television, videos and computers have made us more and more sedentary, and our children are at risk of failing to develop the large and small muscles necessary for healthy growth and development. Becoming junior 'couch potatoes' have serious consequences for later learning at school. For instance, hand eye coordination developed by the use of the bat and ball is essential for coordination in later learning to write and read.

There is a proven link between physical development and intellectual development. Playing alone on the personal computer does nothing to enhance physical development, and impairs the ability to interact appropriately with others. There are, of course, benefits in carefully selected television programmes and computer studies that follow the children's interests, illustrate a wonderful story, or just pure fun. But these should not be the child's total play experiences.

So let us look at some different types of toys and see their potential for learning.

**Dressing up Clothes** - If these are selected by the parent to provide a rich variety of imaginative disguises, all sorts of language/cognitive development and role-play can take place quite naturally. For instance, a nurse's outfit promotes talk about illness, getting better, bandages and medicine. Bits of net curtain provide new vocabulary; as they become in turn, bridal veils, ball gowns, a queen's cloak, a mother's shawl, batman's wings, etc. Hats such as policeman's, fireman's or sailor's, will further stimulate the child's imagination, role-play and language acquisition. Shoes, bags, old feather boas, crowns, tiaras, cowboy outfits and Red-Indian headdresses will also provide a rich source of stimulation for the imagination.

It is important for young children to 'role play' to avoid stereotyping. A young boy can imagine what it is like to be a ballet dancer, a mother or a cook. A little girl needs the chance to play football, use the woodwork bench and tools and imagine what it is like to be a car mechanic. I once had a little boy in my class who always wanted to wear glitzy, frilly dresses from the dressing up box. He was learning what it was like to be his mum, to stagger about in high-heeled shoes and cook dinner!

**Playhouse** - A house of some sort of the important pieces of equipment you can provide. It doesn't have to be an expensive, purposely built playhouse. An upturned table covered by an old blanket serves as well. This will stimulate enormous creative and imaginative use, especially if children are encouraged to change the den to represent different places, by the addition of a few appropriate toys. Their den or home can then be changed into a castle, a hospital, a restaurant, a

hairdresser's salon, a fort, a grocer's shop, a dentist's or a doctor's surgery or a puppet theatre. One of my five year olds decided to convert the den into a pub! And the language development was superb.

**Water** - Playing with water offers all sorts of opportunities for experimentation, investigation and problem solving. By providing a variety of items that float or sink, children begin to learn about some of the properties of water. By giving them different sized containers, children begin to learn something about volume and capacity. They learn about conservation of quantity, when they discover that there is the same amount of water in a container even when it is poured into different shaped containers and then poured back into its original container. They learn about absorbency/non-absorbency from sponges, rubber gloves, cotton wool and feathers.

**Sand** - Wet sand and dry sand have different properties; dry sand pours, wet sand cannot be moulded. The provision of all sorts of moulds (jelly moulds, yoghurt pots), pattern makers (combs, potato mashers), buckets and spades teach comparisons of shape, size, space, weight and number. For dry sand, all sorts of funnels, sieves containers, scoops and spoons of different colours, sizes and shapes draw comparison between the different objects and give an introduction to the meaning of full/empty and capacity.

**Clay and Dough** - Clay and dough provide lots of pre-mathematical experience such as sharing, comparing size, shape, colour, pattern and texture. Dough can be made at home from flour, salt, water and cooking oil; and for variety, different food colouring may be added. Children learn that dough can be stretched, divided and moulded into different shapes and weights.

**Woodwork** - Woodwork provides an excellent opportunity to introduce new words. Off-cuts of wood, dowelling rots, cotton-reels, a workbench, hammers, saws pincers, screwdrivers, nails, screws and glue are all needed. Also, a few basic rules need to be taught: never hit anyone with a hammer; returning tools to their proper place. For some children the joy of hammering without making anything in particular is sufficient in itself.

**Painting** - Painting, finger-painting, printing and drawing; these are essential activities for developing the child's creative ability. Painting is a process of maturation and so children need lots of opportunities to experiment. Purchasing good quality paints is essential – not a small palate box with tiny colours, but large pots with thick paint that make splashes of colour, large sheets of paper and thick brushes. Children also need to experiment with paper of different weights, colours,

shapes, sizes and textures. Old bun tins can be mixing palates. Finger painting is essential for pre-writing exercises as lines, curves and squiggles can be tried out and perfected, long before the child has to hold a difficult tool like a pencil. Experimental printing can be done with the hand or foot, a potato, an apple, a carrot, or an old cabbage.

**Cooking** - So much valuable language development, cognitive learning and practical mathematical experience can take place through this activity, to say nothing of the sheer enjoyment of making a finished product that can be eaten! Let them use all types of cooking utensils, cake tins, bun tins, rolling pins and try out simple recipes.

**Books** - Books, stories, poetry and puppets: some children are starved of these. Yet they are so important to their all round development. Having stories read to them every night is the stuff of later success at school. This develops both written and spoken language, listening skills and concentration. Books stimulate the mind and imagination. They bring joy and pleasure while developing memory and recall. Children learn that squiggles on a page actually mean something. Pictures can be looked at in minute detail. They can act out stories or practice new found vocabulary by becoming the characters through puppets.

There is so much I could tell you. How about letting your child have his own bit of garden. He can watch things grow and as plants wither, return to earth and have new life through seeds, he will see how death is a natural part of the cycle of life. Let him have his own pets, so that he can learn to care for vulnerable, living creatures. Let him make music and create a variety of sounds. Let her dance and sing. Give them all kinds of junk materials to make models. Let them play with all kind of construction toys, bricks, floor and table toys that enhance their manipulative skills, observational skills and skills of judgement. Never underestimate the value of play. An ambitious parent of a child in his first year of schooling asked me if her child would go to university? She did not want him messing about in this playing nonsense. He was at school to work and she made him work at home too.

How easily we can rob our children of childhood. These precious years can never be recaptured, except perhaps, through therapy in later life.