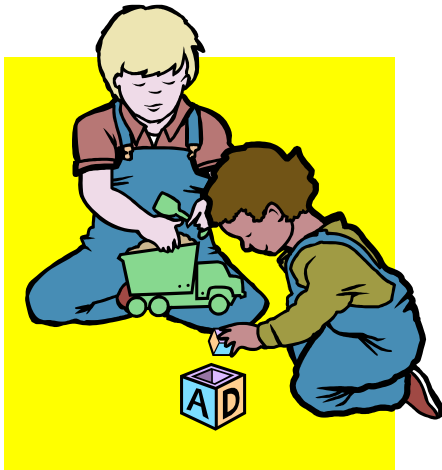


Just Playing: Your Child at Work

from the March/ April 2004 issue of Early Childhood News

By Eleanor Reynolds

Mark and Jenny are in the housekeeping area at preschool, setting the table. "I have to eat fast and go to work," declares Mark. "Me, too," adds Jenny. "I'm a doctor." Mark thinks for a few seconds and then sadly says, "My baby is sick, doctor. Can you fix him?" Jenny goes to the doctor kit and pulls out a large plastic syringe. "Sure," she says as she pokes the doll. "This will make him feel better."



Many of us would describe Mark and Jenny's activity as "just playing." We might think of it as cute and funny, but not as educationally serious as learning the alphabet. Decades after we learned the value of play, we still make a distinction between playing and learning. Play is seen as frivolous; real learning must be work. But look again at Mark and Jenny. In a few minutes of play they have dealt with a number of life's larger issues: preparing and eating a meal, going to work, making interpersonal connections, and coping with health issues. In what other way could children experience so many aspects of reality?

Play is the child's own style of learning in a free, expressive, and safe way. The act of playing provides everything a child needs to pursue knowledge and skill. Intelligence develops as a child incorporates the outside world into his internal system of thought. During play, children use their senses, explore their environment, solve problems, symbolize, and improve their vocabulary. Play also advances social development. When a child pretends, she experiments with many roles without risk of failure because it's only make-believe. Children at play learn to cooperate, negotiate, share, take turns, and wait for a desired outcome. They experience the various temperaments, personalities, and tolerance levels of their playmates. During play children learn that they must control their aggression or lose their friends. Play also permits the child to work out emotional problems in safe, non-threatening way. Fantasy play is an extremely positive way for a child to develop a healthy emotional life.

Play also challenges the child's body. Children develop hand-eye coordination and both large and small motor skills by climbing, jumping, running, working with manipulative toys, and creating with art materials. Music is also an important stimulus as well as an accessory to play. Moving to rhythm, playing instruments, and singing enrich the learning experience.

At different stages, children play in different ways. For your infant, play will usually mean interacting with you or another adult and typically, it is you who initiates the play. In fact, when you play with your baby, it may seem that you are the one who is play-

ing while you try to elicit a response from you baby. Your reward is a smile, a gurgle, or a laugh. Use facial expressions, voice, and movements that appeal to your infant. As you child becomes a toddler, she will play side by side with other children but will tend to see them as objects to grab, crawl over, push down and sometimes bite. Older toddlers and preschoolers begin to see each other as people with needs and feelings. They can verbalize more cooperatively and negotiate with each other to solve problems that arise.

Many preschoolers are sacrificing the basic tenets of child development and the respect for the learning process we all learned; they are pushing academics far before children are ready for them. When researching preschools for your child, ask about play. Seek out a program that is balanced, with adequate time for free, unstructured play and that provides imaginative and creative materials to be used whenever a child makes that choice. The most valuable and long-lasting lesson your child can learn is how to get along with other children, something he can only learn through play.

Eleanor Reynolds is the editor of *The Best of the Problem-Solver: Articles for Parents and Teachers* and the author of *Guiding Young Children: A Problem-Solving Approach*. She can be reached by email at problem@blarg.com.

Yolo County Child Development Conference

Join us at this year's Yolo County Child Development Conference on **April 24, 2004**. Featuring renowned educator, author & artist **Bev Bos**. This event will culminate the National Week of the Young Child (April 18-24). For more information about the conference and the Week of the Young Child please call Child Care Services at (530) 757-5695 or (800) 723-3001.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Awareness Month

**You are invited to attend the 2nd Annual
Child Abuse Prevention Walk!**

Friday, April 30, 2004

Place: Freeman Park Woodland

2:30 p.m.: Walk Starts

3:30 p.m.: Community Speakers

4 pm-6 p.m.: Free Entertainment
& Refreshments

For more information on this event, call Michelle Ellis-Hutchings at (530) 669-3285 or visit americorps@yoloconnections.org