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Parent Cooperative Preschools International

Articles

Has P-L-A-Y Become a Four Letter Word?

You remember the four-letter words you were not supposed to say or punishment and doom were inevitable?

As a parent and educator, I have the same feeling about the word “play” when I say it around educators. If I say the word “play” to you, what does it conjure up in your mind? Does play mean enjoyment, no extrinsic goals, spontaneous, voluntary, active activity? Sounds like fun doesn't it?

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Published Spring 1982 in PCPI's Learning Together II Anthology

Play should be an integral part of an early childhood program. Think of play in terms of creativity, problem solving, language learning and development. It seems from the beginning of preschools in the United States that educators have been in conflict over what the pre-school curriculum should be a play situation or a work emphasis academic situation. The issue should not be “play versus no play” but the degree of emphasis on play in an early childhood curriculum.

PLAY CAN be viewed as a reflection of a child's development level. Play can be seen as opportunity to practice consolidation of a skill. The child learns about the physical things through manipulative and motor play. Children learn about the world of people through dramatic and other kinds of joint play. The child learns about himself or herself and develops physically or socially.

Play, self-initiated by the child, is lacking in structure other than that given it by interest and imagination. On the other hand, there is adult-

The parent cooperative model has long defended the role of play in early childhood education.

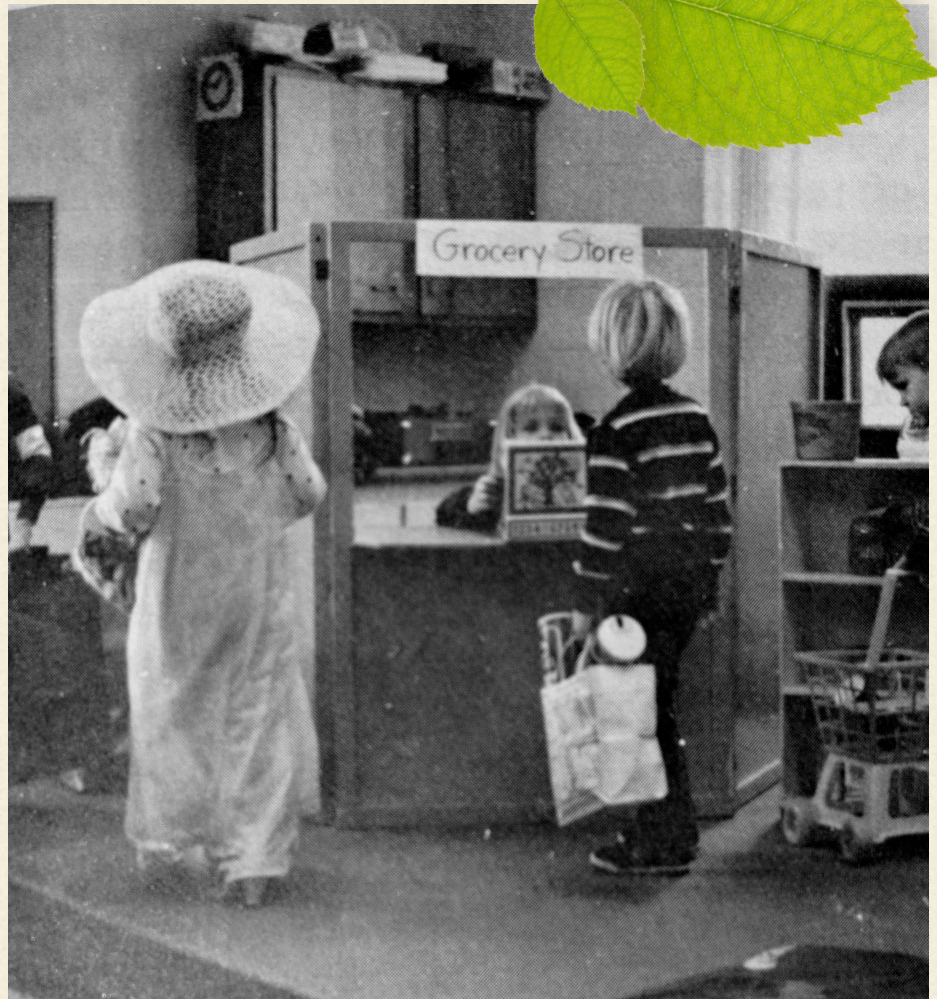


prescribed activity initiated and directed by the teacher's learning objectives, as modified by the availability of equipment. According to Piaget, the construction of logical thought depends not only on the child's activity with material things, but also on his social collaboration with other children. Play fosters physical development, intellectual development, enhances social development, contains rich emotional values, and develops the creative aspect of the child's personality.

PLAY IS the child's major way of learning from infancy. Therefore the most rational and efficient way for a child to acquire competency in any curriculum area is through play activity. Through play the child encounters the world and comes to understand it. The child attempts to achieve, feel comfortable and then be innovative enough to change his or her world.

Following are some examples of play used in the curriculum areas. **Language** develops from deciding what to do next with peers and adults through making-up stories and simple acting out. **Early map-making** begins as he lays out the town or the railroad tracks. **Science and math concepts** begin with blocks as he discovers the wheel, ramp, pulley, lever, amount and size needed. Sand and water play begin foundations of **volume, quantity, floating** and many others.

Play helps children, in a non-threatening environment, to find ways of dealing with their complex emotional reactions to themselves, peers and adults.



PLAY DEVELOPS intelligence through transformation and language. Through transformation of self, objects, people and situations, thought is developed and used. Language, in non-verbal and verbal forms, helps the student transmit and share meaning of play.

Studies have shown school activities occurring in a play-like environment encourage responses that promote divergent skills essential to problem solving, whereas a work-like environment inhibits such growth.

The emphasis on school readiness activities affords children less and less opportunity to use and expand their problem solving skills, thus adversely interfering with development of initiative behavior. In fact, the pressure for school readiness is seriously robbing preschoolers of spontaneous playtime and could cause the creative slump at five years of age to begin even earlier. Some kindergarten teachers in the United States can tell you about “school-burn-out” at age five!

EARLY CHILDHOOD programs should depend upon play for effectiveness. Attention needs to be focused on the ratio of self-initiated play activities to the total time children spend in school. The ratio of self-initiated play to teacher-prompted activity needs to be balanced.

We seem to be in a “Catch 22” situation – the schools say the parents are demanding less play emphasis and more work emphasis and the parents say the schools are demanding too much academic knowledge at the kindergarten entrance that they must start their children earlier in schools with more work emphasis.

What are we gaining in early academic ability against what we might lose? Let me off this merry-go-round that seems to be rolling over innocent children and their free playtime. It is time to re-evaluate the word “play” and put it back into the good graces of educational terms.

Louise Bates Ames and Joan Ames Chase, authors of **Don't Push Your Preschooler**, have succinctly pointed out that children can **learn** reading and other academic subjects before entering school, but knowing that a child can learn does not mean that he necessarily should or wants to learn to read and do other academic endeavors. There is a whole three-dimensional world of acting and doing to be explored and enjoyed. There will be time enough later on for the two-dimensional world of books, paper and pencil.



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