

Why Play Matters

Dear Parent –

In the past, based on what they knew about and observed in young children, preschool and kindergarten teachers designed their programs to meet the children's developmental needs. Play and active learning were considered key tools to accommodate those needs and to facilitate children's education. These were some typical activities in the earliest years:

- sorting and stacking blocks and other manipulatives (providing mathematical knowledge)
- singing and dancing, or acting out stories (emergent literacy)
- growing plants from seeds, exploring the outdoor environment, and investigating at sand and water tables (scientific knowledge)
- trying on various roles and interacting with one another at housekeeping and other dramatic-play centers (social studies)

Today, because it's seen to have little value, play is being pushed out of children's lives at an alarming rate. But is it without value? All young animals play. It is actually a biological drive. Can you imagine trying to keep kittens and puppies from playing, when that is so clearly what nature intended?

The adult personality is built on the child's play. Among the social skills learned are the ability to share, cooperate, negotiate, compromise, make and revise rules, and to take the perspective of others. Play provides opportunities for children to meet and solve problems – the number-one ability they will most assuredly require in this rapidly changing world. Play helps children express their thoughts and feelings and to deal with stress. To cope with fears they can't yet understand or articulate. Through play, children acquire literacy, mathematical, and creative skills. Make-believe play, in particular, has been linked to self-regulation skills, which in turn have been linked to greater academic success than IQ has.

Really, we have to ask ourselves: If children begin living like adults in childhood, what will there be left to look forward to? What joy will they find as adults if striving to "succeed" has become life's sole purpose?

You can take comfort in the fact that studies show children enrolled in play-oriented preschools do *not* have a disadvantage over those who are enrolled in preschools focusing on early academics.

One study, in fact, determined there were neither short-term nor long-term advantages of early academics versus play, and that there were no distinguishable differences by first grade. The only difference was that the children who experienced early academics were more anxious and less creative than their peers who had been in traditional, play-based preschools! In another, 4th-graders who had attended play-oriented preschools in which children often initiated their own activities had *better* academic performance than those who had attended academics-oriented preschools.

Playfully yours,
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Rae Pica, Early Childhood Author & Consultant

www.raepica.com