



By Joan Almon

The value of play in early education,
and how to get teachers on board.

Play is one of the primary approaches to learning available to young students. Sensory impressions and ideas bubble up from within them, much as they do in an artist or a composer. Children use the arts as a form of expression, but most often they use play itself to express their ideas. Through play, they try on every role and situation they've encountered in life. They explore the world around them and make it their own. Their play is often serious, but it is also enjoyable and deeply satisfying.

Yet despite its importance for cognitive, social-emotional, and physical growth, play has largely been pushed out of kindergarten classrooms and is currently vanishing from preschool classrooms as well. It has been replaced with teacher-led instruction. Research and commentary about this situation can be found in the Alliance for Childhood's report "Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School," and in an article, "The Crisis in Early Education," both by me and Edward Miller.

Play vs. Reading Instruction

One contributing factor that has moved early education in the U.S. away from play and toward cognitive instruction is the prevalent belief that children should learn to read at age 5. The assumption is that they will be better readers than if they wait until age 6 or 7. But there is essentially no evidence that this is true.

Fortunately, the Common Core Standards are a bit vague on this point. They call for kindergarten children to read "emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding." But there does not seem to be widespread recognition of what emergent-reader texts are, which leaves room for interpretation. The primary goal should be that young children begin building the bridge toward print literacy, not that they cross the bridge and stand firmly on the other side.

Many other countries do not begin formal reading until age 6 or 7. They use guidelines similar to those proposed by Bank Street College in New York. Bank Street, a highly respected college for early childhood educators, identifies three stages of reading: emergent readers in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade; early readers in first and second grade; and early fluent/fluent readers in second

and third grade. Using this approach allows time for preschool and kindergarten children to slowly, but effectively, build a bridge from oral language to written language. And it allows time for play-based learning.

What the Research Reveals

Play-based learning is a term that embraces two approaches simultaneously. One is that children are given ample time to carry their own ideas into play—with assistance from teachers as needed. The other is that their knowledge of the world has been enriched through appropriate content offered in interesting and experiential ways by their teachers. This can include reading books, storytelling, puppetry, music, and the arts, as well as encouraging hands-on activities and exploration of nature. The children's own play and the content offered by teachers enhance one another. One child succinctly expressed it this way: "At recess, I remember everything I learned."

Many studies documenting the value of play in early learning have been summarized in *A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool: Presenting the Evidence* (2008), by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and others. Among the studies they report is one by Herb Ginsburg of Columbia University. He and Kyoung-Hye Seo filmed 90 preschool children during free play. Each film lasts 15 minutes. The researchers found that regardless of children's social class, about half of the play scenarios contained mathematical activity, including patterns and shapes, magnitude of



different objects, and number or quantity. No one assigned them these themes; they arose spontaneously.

A Mandate for Playful Learning in Preschool also reports on several studies that indicate that heightened language skills are exhibited in connection with children's play. For example, a longitudinal study by David Dickinson and Patton Tabors, the Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development, followed 74 children from low-income homes from age 3 through middle school.

The research shows a clear relationship between the children's use of language during early childhood play and their later literacy outcomes.

There are other studies that show long-term gains for children in play-based programs. A striking example is the HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study (PCCS). It was a companion study to the well-known Perry Preschool study that shows the

importance of preschool education for children from low-income homes. The PCCS goes further and shows that play-based programs can lead to much better long-term outcomes for children than instructional programs.

PCCS researchers assigned 68 at-risk children to one of three preschool programs. The HighScope program and the traditional nursery were both play-based and yielded similar

kindergartens. The children were followed until age 10. The study, reported by Linda Darling-Hammond and Jon Snyder in the *Handbook of Research on Curriculum*, found that children from the play-based kindergarten classes excelled over those in the cognitive classrooms in all 17 measures used, including creativity, oral expression, and "industry." The study was so convincing that Germany, which was moving rapidly toward academic kindergarten classes, switched back to play-based programs.

Play and Early Learning

Why is play so important in early learning? Play has been likened to the inquiry-based approach of a scientist because both engage in "what if" thinking. The child is continually trying out new possibilities and learns as much from failure and mistakes as from positive outcomes. It is this process that is of great importance to the child rather than the outcome. However, it is difficult to assess this process, which is one reason that play has fallen out of favor in schools.

Creativity, curiosity, play, and problem-solving are all intertwined in early childhood. Social negotiation is also frequently part of the mix. It starts with "Let's play this way" and "No, let's do it my way," and then the conversation begins. At age 3 it might end in a tussle. But by age 5 children have become adept in their use of language in play and in their ability to negotiate socially. This holds true for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds.

It is increasingly the case, however, that children from all backgrounds enter preschool with poor play skills. One reason is that they have too many hours of screen time during which they view other people's creativity rather than developing their own. In addition, modern toys are often related to films or television shows and come with a clear story line, making it difficult for children to create their own stories. Instead, it is helpful

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outcomes. The third classroom was heavily cognitive in orientation and used a scripted program. At the end of the first year, it seemed that all students advanced equally, but the youngsters were followed until age 23. Over time, the children who attended the cognitive class needed special education far more often than those from the play-based programs (47 percent compared with 6 percent). The students from the cognitive class were also more likely to later commit felonies (34 percent versus 9 percent) and more likely to be suspended from work (27 percent compared with 0 percent).

Long-term gains for children from play-based classrooms were also found in Germany in a study done in the 1970s. In that case, children from 50 kindergarten classes that were play-based were compared with the same number from cognitively oriented

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✦ **The Literacy Guide**, developed by Bank Street College, describes the stages of literacy development in preschool, kindergarten, and the early grades, and what to expect from children at each stage.

✦ **Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School**, a report by the Alliance for Childhood, examines research on how much time kindergarten classes spend on **cognitive instruction vs. play-based learning** and some of the ill effects of current practices.

for children to engage with open-ended play materials. Almost anything becomes a good toy in the hands of a playful child—blocks and other building materials, ropes, cloths, household items, and simple dress-ups are used in new ways every day.

Incorporating Play

Many children play well in school as soon as they realize it is allowed. Others need help from teachers, who themselves need to understand play and ways to cultivate it in children. Young teachers often did not grow up with much playtime and benefit from experiences with creative play. Even older teachers who did play as children may need some prompting to recall open-ended play strategies. Sharing play memories with one another is helpful, as is engaging in actual play.

Many teachers are fearful of play in the classroom. In their minds, play is synonymous with chaos. But when children are deeply engaged in play, they tend to be focused and fairly quiet. There is a “hum” of play that fills the room, with occasional loud voices that then quiet down again. This is true of young children, but also of school-age children.

For the PBS documentary *Where Do the Children Play?* (2008), we organized a play session for fifth graders at a public school in Flint, Michigan. At the end of the hour-long film shoot, the teacher, who had been quite apprehensive about play, remarked that it had not been chaotic at all. The children had played with enormous concentration using cardboard boxes, old sheets, ropes, and tape, and they played with children with whom they did not usually socialize.

Given all the benefits of play, as well as hesitance on the part of some teachers, what can principals do to support play in early education? Here are five suggestions:

- **Create opportunities for teachers** to learn about play in early education

from mentors, visits to programs with effective play-based approaches, and workshops.

- **Provide time for teachers** to observe each other during playtime and to share play experiences with one another.
- **Create beautiful play environments**, indoors and outdoors. Equip them with simple, open-ended play materials, but avoid clutter and overstimulation.
- **Schedule time for play every day.** Ideal playtimes last 45 minutes or longer to give children a chance to enter deeply into play.
- **Help teachers address the concerns of parents** who think young children should master more cognitive skills than is developmentally appropriate.

Make No Excuses

The Common Core State Standards do not preclude play for kindergarten students. And they should not serve as an excuse for removing it from preschool classrooms even though anecdotal reports indicate that that is happening. Research by Sara Smilansky, described in her book with Edgar Klugman, *Children's Play and Learning*, showed that children who engaged well in socio-dramatic play experienced more gains in language usage and in understanding what others meant than children who were not strong players. Such abilities are needed to meet standards calling for written expression and for comprehension of what is meant in a text.

The Common Core Standards were created to help graduates enter the workplace and college. A recent IBM Institute study asked 1,500 CEOs around the world what they most sought in employees. The answer was simple: Creativity. There is no better way to foster creativity than to keep it alive in early childhood when it is naturally strong and expresses itself through play. Yet, teachers tell us that if they give their children time to play, some have no ideas of their own, or

do not know how to engage in make-believe play.

Further, Kyung Hee Kim at William and Mary College, using scores on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, found that creativity levels had risen from the 1950s to 1990, but then began to decline, especially among children. She is now frequently asked by business schools to help them develop courses that will stimulate creative thinking. The irony is not lost on her that we are driving creativity out of young children and then trying to restore it in college students.

Play-based education in preschool and kindergarten gives children a chance to develop their creativity in balanced ways. It supports the overall healthy development of children and prepares them for the 21st century workplace where creativity is highly valued. 

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