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LET THE CHILDREN PLAY:

Building Success with Blocks and Bricks

We need to get serious about play, say authorities in the early childhood field. “It’s not taking a break from learning when we talk about play,” according to Jack P. Shonkoff, a pediatrician who directs Harvard’s Center for the Developing Child. “Play is one of the most important ways children learn.”¹ And it’s an inborn part of who they are. “Children are natural players, right from the beginning,” says Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, a psychology professor at New York University who studies play and learning in young children. “We think that all domains of development are informed by children engaging in play.”²

Play leads to later success because it teaches children vital skills. Babies learn words when they handle things and motor skills when they climb, crawl or run. They pick up concepts of space when they pull books off shelves or play with blocks. And they learn to persevere and solve problems while putting together Legos, those brightly colored bricks you might remember playing with as a child.

THE PLUSES OF LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

Lego is still around and it’s building a solid case for the power of play. “Children should learn mainly through play until the

age of eight,” according to Anne Rasmussen, head of the Lego Foundation. Yet parents are pushing play out of children’s lives as they try to prepare their offspring for a competitive world. The current focus on the three R’s is depriving children of the play-based learning that helps them develop creativity, problem-solving and empathy. Though evidence for play-based learning has exploded in the past decade, most parents simply aren’t aware of it. “Both in the formal education system and in the homes of children, the focus on play is rather limited,” Rasmussen says. “It’s really something we want to work on—to improve the understanding of the value of play and what play really can do.”³

The data bears out the power of play to help young children succeed later on in both school and life. Over 20 longitudinal studies of play-based learning have shown its benefits for children, economies and societies alike. Together, they make a strong case for play-based programs over those that focus on academics. In the Perry Preschool Study, for example, the longer the data collection continued, the more apparent the pluses of play-based learning became. At age 27, people who had been in play-based programs when young were almost twice as likely to have graduated high school and four times more likely to have a college degree. The Abecedarian Project had similar findings that showed play-based learning led to higher employment, better economic outcomes, and more emotional competence. Other studies have shown that children in play-based programs score higher as adults on psychosocial tests, are more likely to be sociable and less likely to become angry or depressed.⁴

A PLAYING FIELD WHERE PERSPECTIVES MEET

Despite all the strong proof that play produces results, playful learning faces challenges. The preschool setting is a playing field where different perspectives meet. Parents, public agencies and educators don't always agree on how children learn best. So, tensions exist between playful learning and the prescribed curriculum in many child care settings. Those who see play as silly and off-task may think it gets in the way of efficient coverage of the curriculum. Meanwhile, advocates of play, who see it as the pathway to success, believe it deserves more time, resources and space. Many early childhood teachers feel this way. But their convictions clash with some powerful, current trends in education.⁵

TEACHERS' HANDS ARE TIED

At one time, teachers had more freedom to respond to every child's individual needs. But teachers increasingly must comply with government mandates that lay out standard curriculums—everything the same for every child, regardless of a child's disposition and interests. Children can seem more like data points than individuals, some critics suggest, in policies and programs like No Child Left Behind and the Common Core. Then

there's Race to the Top, words that assume everyone's on the same track. But education is not a race. It's a ramble. Real learning takes place when each child rambles down their own road.⁶

“We’re trying to train our kids to be better computers, but our kids will never be better computers than computers,” says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek

Yet kindergarten is now consumed with assessments as it comes to resemble first grade. This focus on academics has filtered down into earlier grades, so preschoolers are now also subject to assessments to ensure they're ready for the assessments to come. And early educators'

hands are tied, though most of them still favor a play-based curriculum for our youngest kids. They know that the point of preschool is not to provide rote learning and fill children's minds with facts. It's to impart a set of basic skills—linguistic, cognitive and social—that later help children learn to read, solve math problems and resolve conflicts.⁷

Children also build vital character skills through play. While pretending to feed dolls or put a puppy to bed, they glean what it means to be responsible adults. And they learn how to take turns while playing games. But this natural learning process is under siege as test prep encroaches more and more on the time for play. In recent studies of kindergartens in New York City and Los Angeles, teachers said there was much less time for running, jumping and bouncing. And a quarter of the LA teachers said there was no time for free play at all.⁸

“We’re trying to train our kids to be better computers, but our kids will never be better computers than computers,” says Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, who directs the Temple University

Infant Language Lab. Besides teaching children facts, she explains, we should look to strengthen their human skills, helping them learn to explore new ideas, and later to navigate the world of work. “These are things humans do better than computers, and play helps us develop that.”⁹

A BALANCED APPROACH TO PLAY

The human factor also fills an important role in letting children get the most benefits from play. A comprehensive approach to playful learning must recognize the value of skilled teachers in designing settings that encourage children to discover and explore new activities or ideas. Teachers should provide children with materials that lend themselves to hands-on engagement. They should give children enough time for uninterrupted play. And while doing so, teachers step into multiple roles: stage manager, mediator scribe, assessor, communicator and planner.¹⁰ They might also play an active role in children’s play, depending on their comfort level or personal point of view.

Adult-child involvement in play is a balancing act, according to recent surveys. In some studies, educators maintain that adult-led activities should dominate the classroom. In other cases, educators see play first and foremost as a child-led and child-initiated activity with no adult intrusion. In between these positions, there are teachers who support a more nuanced view in which play-based learning is a form of adult-child cooperation. In one study, a teacher expressed her opinion that play-based learning means putting children in charge:

“They should not just sit down and listen. They should have pleasure in directing and managing their learning.”¹¹

Teachers like this believe they set the stage by giving kids the right materials and props so they can choose what they want to play with and when. Knowing just when and how to intervene demands knowledge, experience and skills, as many teachers point out. So, some are most at ease with structured play activities since they’re reluctant to disturb kids who are absorbed in role play or games of pretend. The timing of the intervention can be tricky, said a teacher who found herself thinking constantly about her role in play. Despite her commitment to meeting children’s needs, she sometimes kicked herself for stepping in too soon instead of giving kids the time to resolve a puzzling issue for themselves.¹²

FEELING THE PRESSURE IN PRESCHOOL

But we’re not just cutting into children’s playtime. We may also be crushing their childhood, according to an early childhood teacher in Western Australia as she considered the impact of formal learning on one little boy. “As I carried around a sobbing child this morning, he cried for his mum (first time away from her) wrapped around me like a baby koala, totally overwhelmed by this strange new place called ‘school.’ And I had to wonder who on earth genuinely believes these precious, little ones need rotations, formal structure and academic rigor at such a young age. Have any of those who are pushing for less play and more structure in a kindy class spent time in a kindy class and actually seen how vulnerable our youngest children are?”¹³

This push toward more structured learning in early childhood settings has alarmed teachers and childhood experts who are increasingly banding together to fight changes they say are harming young children. Child advocates and parents from around the world responded to a social media post from a teacher in Perth who wanted to sob like that small boy on his first day away from mom. “They are still babies in so many ways,” she wrote. “And yet I read about schools where their rest time is being rolled into their lunch time, so they don’t waste educational time.”¹⁴

The pace of preschool was stressing out her son, the mom of a four-year-old wrote in response. She had noticed that her son worried about getting in trouble, giving the wrong answer in class and failing to make his parents proud. So, she went to see the teacher and find out what was wrong. While there, she noticed there was no corner for play and was shocked after finding out why. “The teacher told me directly that play-based learning does not work,” the mom recalled, “and there was no time in the children’s daily schedule for play other than recess or lunch.” No wonder her boy—like other young children—wasn’t enjoying school. “He is feeling that pressure because it is so intense. They’re asking so many questions of them all day. And there’s no let-up, no chance for their little minds to refresh.”¹⁵

THE KEY POINT FOR PARENTS

Unfortunately, many parents don’t get it since they miss the link between learning and play. In a 2010 survey, 45 percent of parents said they didn’t have enough time to play with their children and failed to see that

children who are “just playing” are actually learning at the same time. Though parents tend to want what is best for their kids, they think learning should look like school. So, they don’t understand that babies who are pulling books off shelves are investigating gravity and the properties of books. They don’t realize that the sandbox and the bath can serve as science experiments for kids, that children learn from tasks that may look simple or meaningless to adults.¹⁶

This means that families have little incentive to make room for play, so educators face a challenge as they try to convince them how important it is to their children’s future success. The best way to get the message across is to present play in a way that appeals to parents’ wishes for their children’s well-being. So, teachers should promote it on traditional grounds and show parents how play brings young children the pleasures of freedom, creativity and movement.¹⁷

Play also gives young children the chance to learn social skills, and most parents want their kids to have good interactions with others. Success in social relations is a measure of well-being, shown by the ability to make and keep friends, to cooperate, to follow, to lead. And unstructured active play with others, including, parents, siblings and peers, provides a major way for children to gain the social skills that make for a warm, fulfilling life. All parents want their children to be happy. It may matter even more to them than having their kids be smart. So, it is the happiness that children get through play that may be the key point to convey to parents.¹⁸

Time constraints and too much focus on technology pose some challenges, according to NYU’s Tamis-LeMonda. “I’m very concerned that screen time is substituting for active playtime,” she says. Children need

to engage with real objects, handling them, building with them, dropping them, throwing them. And parent's own screen time can get in the way of them engaging with their kids. In a 2017 study, mothers taught their two-year-old children two novel words in a set time period. When a cell phone call disturbed these interactions, the children didn't learn the new words.¹⁹

What young children need most is the give-and-take they have with another person, as they told researchers in several studies. The activities they liked most in preschool were playing with friends, working with open-ended materials and being outdoors. They also revealed the importance they put on feeling secure, making choices, feeling free and having fun.²⁰

LEARNING IN THE LOCKDOWN

Their preferences haven't changed as COVID-19 has promoted distance learning in preschool. Our current health crisis has given remote learning a new platform with stay-at-home orders closing early childhood settings across the country. Yet the core principles of play-based learning can still prevail if educators work with families to merge technology with traditional modes of play.

In one preschool, for example, teachers noticed a trend in the photos and videos they were receiving from families. Several children were playing with trains, trucks or cars at home. This gave one teacher the idea to hold a virtual class in which she sang automobile-related songs and posted videos of the children playing with their cars so kids could see their friends. Other teachers at the school hosted sing-alongs with families or sent parents daily

emails with child-friendly cooking recipes and directions for how to use household items to make paint or construct cardboard buildings.²¹

The point was for educators to treat parents like partners who are also committed to giving kids what they need most. And educators who need some guidance can turn to the Council for Professional Recognition, a major player in the credentialing of early childhood educators worldwide. The following tips from the Council will help teachers promote play-based learning at home:

- Make a list of strategies educators themselves use to join children in play and share it with parents.
- Provide new props or suggest new strategies that expand the scenario.
- Acknowledge that it can feel strange to join in play at first, but that the discomfort wanes very quickly.
- Explain that children learn from playing with someone with more advanced skills, such as a parent. Playing can be pretending, rolling a ball back and forth or trying out a new ball game.²²

Parents should also turn to time-honored types of play. Children can express their feelings through sand and water play. Those trusty blocks can help children experiment with math skills such as volume and patterns.²³ Hide-and-seek can become a letter game in which parents conceal letters in corners of the home and have the children find them. If the children are old enough, they can learn to spell out words from the letters they see. And don't forget the Legos. They can be an excellent learning tool that encourages kids to calculate the number of blocks they need to make a formation.²⁴

A PRESCRIPTION FROM THE PROFESSOR OF PLAY

More advice comes from Dr. Paul Ramchandani, a child psychiatrist who serves as Lego's first professor of play at Cambridge University. And his job doesn't involve playing with little plastic bricks all day. Instead, he leads the storied university's research on the role of play in child development, and he's concerned that formal education seems to be creeping down the age range. "I don't think there's any evidence it does anybody any good. I think we ought to be stopping and potentially reversing it," he says. And he considers the COVID-19 closures a chance for parents to follow their children's lead instead of subjecting them to

formal study. "Life with coronavirus closures offers opportunities for home learning, and with many parents on hand during the lockdown, play can come into its own."

"Rough and tumble play and other types of physical play can be great fun and can help children learn lots of different skills, such as physical coordination and self-control," Ramchandani says. He's also in favor of playing fun games and singing songs with children. But parents shouldn't worry too much about the type of play since "children will learn and enjoy different things from different kinds of play. Taking the time to play with your children is the most important thing," as he concludes.²⁵ Perhaps the grownups who loved playing with Legos when they were young will get the point: Let the children play!

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