

SPEAKING OF PLAY ...

With holidays fast approaching we thought it fitting to consider some elements of play - play in the sense of spontaneous, imaginative and open-ended activity.

Some thoughts about play -

- Play is universal. Children from different cultures, speaking different languages can still play together. Play is central to the lives of healthy children.
- Play has been called the "work" of childhood because it is intimately with language, creativity and cognitive development.
- "The ability to play is one of the principal criteria of mental health." Ashley Montagu
- When children are seriously ill, parents report that their resuming play is a sign they are getting better
- Play can occur in small and large spaces, with many or few resources.

Are we "squeezing" play time out of childhood?

- Should we turn off the TV and limit electronic games?
- Do we "program" children too much with organized activities at a very early age? Do children still have enough opportunity to "let their imagination go"?
- With efforts to ensure academic success are we putting pressure on children before they are ready?
- Are families too busy to stimulate, facilitate and tolerate children's play?
- Are we so concerned for the safety of our children that we deny them the freedom of independent play?

How do children benefit from play?

Play provides time for

- thinking
 - experimenting
 - investigating objects and materials
 - problem solving
 - acting out life experiences, - which builds and reinforces the schema
- e.g. eating out at a restaurant - what to expect, how to order, how to behave etc
- talking about actions and intentions
 - taking on different roles
 - sharing emotions with others, noticing their reactions, anticipating and accommodating others needs and wishes.
 - communicating with others
 - planning, initiating and carrying out your own ideas

Adults have an important role in children's play

- recognize when children want to play
- observe signs of when they want to stop - even when it is your "only" free time!
- follow the child's lead rather than telling them what to do or doing it for them
- recognize when to support or suggest and when to step back and let the child persist on his/her own
- show your interest by commenting on what they are doing or taking on an imaginative role if you are 'invited'
- offer open-ended materials e.g. dress up clothes, large cardboard boxes, blocks, natural materials such as sand,
- show your interest and involvement through what you say, your facial expression and your body language.

Development of Play

Writers such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Westby differ in their terminology relating to play, but there is considerable agreement about its developmental sequence.

Westby's *Symbolic Play Scale checklist* (1980) is useful for identifying the parallel development of symbolic play and language - giving insight into developmental changes and a child's readiness for academic tasks.

The Newsletter of the Early Intervention Raining Institute provides a useful description of play development from birth to 5 years. *Young Children's Object Play: A Window on Development* www.aecom.yu.edu/cerc/EITmain.htm

Baby play - there is an excellent website at www.babyhearing.org outlining the importance of baby's play and ideas for promoting it. This site is supported by the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders in the USA. One appealing discussion is about toys - toys being anything that we play with. There is a delightful group of headings - Mum and Dad are definitely toys, water is a toy, clothes are toys. Playing is eating, Play is bath time, Play is communicating, Play is watching and helping and so on. You can almost remember what it felt like to be that baby!

Of course play changes as children grow older.

There are many different types of play -

- manipulative play,
- fantasy play,
- physical play outdoors and indoors,
- dramatic play acting out social roles,
- language mediated play -
 "Let's pretend we've been Christmas shopping and now ..."
- word play in song, rhyme, poem

- play with rules set down or play that is open ended with rules evolving
- play alone, with another, with a group or in a team
- play with or without toys/props
- play without a time limit that is continued in 'episodes' over time

This list is by no means exhaustive.

"Food for thought"

A quote from Vygotsky (1978)

"In their play children project themselves into the adult activities of their culture and rehearse their future roles and values. This play is in advance of development... In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour, in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself."

- We believe that there is a danger in pushing children too early into formal and structured activities.
- Research has shown that children with well developed play skills (representing ideas, actions and objects with words) make a good transition to abstract academic tasks.
- Play influences children's early reading skills as well as their ability to understand what they read.
- In her article *Using Symbolic Play Abilities to Assess Academic Readiness*, Roberta Schomburg writes "... we should all encourage schools to incorporate play activities into the curriculum, making it clear that there is an academic pay-off for doing so."

LONG LIVE PLAY!

References/Resources

Almon, Joan *The Vital Role of Play in Childhood*

www.waldorfearlychildhood.org/article.asp?id=5

Montagu, Ashley (1981) *Growing Young*. New York: McGraw Hill

Schomburg, Roberta *Using Symbolic Play Abilities to Assess Academic Readiness*

www.earlychildhood.com/articles (see under Child Development)

Westby, Carol (1980) *Assessment of Cognitive and Language Abilities through Play*. LSHSS 11, 154-168