



WHAT IS PLAY?

By Diana O'Neill

The days of adults are filled with the serious business of work with often little time for leisure or play but in the life of a child, play and work are merged as one.

Play is a child's work. Through play children learn about the world. Children need to play; it is necessary for learning, living, growing and creating. The more children play, the better they will become at doing it and the more they learn the more capable they become of learning.

So how can we, as parents, encourage our children to play? Firstly, I think, by showing them that we value play as an activity in itself rather than dismissing it as unworthwhile with comments such as "go away and play, I'm busy" or "they're only playing".

If we are able to spend time with our children playing, we can share their interest and enjoyment. We can encourage their learning experiences by providing suitable materials and stimulation through new situations, ensuring challenges are met and not allowing the distress of constant failure. Unfortunately space is essential for play, and often a certain amount of mess is generated. We, as parents, sometimes become pre-occupied with tidiness in the home to the detriment of our children's play. It has taken me many years to accept visitors to our home may not mind the presence of play hut in the lounge! It is up to us each individually to decide the distinction between creating a play environment for our children and creating havoc in our home.

Social Growth

Many skills can be developed through play. Children have an opportunity through play to meet a variety of situations in which they learn to cooperate with others, to choose activities, to make decisions for themselves and to experience failure and success. Their social development is encouraged through play.

Through playing with others emotions growth is also fostered and children learn to handle a wide variety of feelings. Little children have to contend not only with the outside world but their own inside world of emotions. Their feelings are crude and intense – love, rage, hate, joy, curiosity, fear and pleasure. Fantasy play helps them to explore the world of feelings and relationships. Listen into the play conversations of three and four year olds to see how they deal with the emotions of everyday life! By playing out situations they have seen, and may not understand, children can come to terms with their world.

Outdoor play helps the child to develop physically as well as socially through interaction with others.

At each stage of development a child first masters a movement then elaborates it and practices it until satisfied, then moves on to learn something new.

Early Development

It is amazing to consider the physical development that takes place in the first few years of life from helpless baby to active toddler who can run, walk, climb, swing, balance, jump and crawl. At the same time these physical skills are being learned, mathematical ideas are also being introduced.

Size, shape, patterns, boundaries and distances are all learnt through experiencing with body movements – can I fit through that space? How far can I jump? My hand is bigger than yours! The language that flows from these activities is worth encouraging as it forms the basis for later mathematical understanding. Words such as “under”, in front of” “bigger”, “smaller”, are an important part of physical play.

Did you know that through water and sand play a child learns skills of co-ordination, concentration and quantity? Pouring, measuring, filling and emptying are important ingredients in the development of intellectual abilities and are encouraged by these forms of play. Through experimentation a child learns there may not be more water in a tall, thin container than a short, fat one. Very necessary to know when pouring drinks, if you want to avoid arguments.

So next time you get a chance to observe children at play, look closely, you are watching their work. Encourage them, they are developing socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually – exciting isn't it?

Diana O'Neill was the Play Education Officer based in Wellington with the Hillary Commission for Recreation and Sport. She has a background in primary school teaching and voluntary community work as well as being the mother of two sons, Andrew (14) and Timothy (12).