

Let the children play: Nature's answer to early learning ^[1]

Author: Hewes, J.

Source: Canadian Council on Learning: Early childhood learning

Format: Article

Publication Date: 31 Dec 2014

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Introduction

Play is a universal phenomenon with a pervasive and enduring presence in human history. Play has fascinated philosophers, painters, and poets for generations. Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes the significance of play in the lives of children, acknowledging play as a specific right, in addition to and distinct from the child's right to recreation and leisure.

Early childhood educators have long recognized the power of play. The significant contribution of play to young children's development is well documented in child psychology, anthropology, sociology, and in the theoretical frameworks of education, recreation, and communications. Being able to play is one of the key developmental tasks of early childhood. Play is, "the leading source of development in the early years": it is essential to children's optimal development.

Children's opportunities to play are under threat

Ironically, play is persistently undervalued, and children's opportunities for uninterrupted free play—both indoors and out—are under threat. The physical and social environments of childhood in the Western world have changed dramatically over the past several decades. Many children are spending substantial time in peer-group settings from a very young age. Many of these settings focus on structured educational and recreational activities, leaving little time for participation in open-ended, self-initiated free play.

Children's play advocates are concerned that access to outdoor play opportunities in natural environments in neighbourhoods is vanishing. Technology, traffic, and urban land-use patterns have changed the natural play territory of childhood. Parents are increasingly concerned about safety and children find themselves in carefully constructed outdoor playgrounds that limit challenge in the name of safety.

The priority currently given to the early acquisition of academic skills is another threat to children's play. This emphasis often constrains and limits the scope of the learning that unfolds naturally in play. The question of how and what children should learn in preparation for formal school is a subject of vigorous debate in Canada. It used to be that children spent their preschool years playing, whether at home, in child care, or in preschool social settings. Many now advocate for early childhood programs focused on literacy and numeracy experiences, particularly in cases where social and environmental circumstances potentially compromise children's readiness for school.

In recent years the trend has been to introduce more content via direct instruction into the practice of early childhood professionals. Research demonstrates that this approach, while promising in the short term, does not sustain long-term benefits and, in fact, has a negative impact on some young children. Long uninterrupted blocks of time for children to play--by themselves and with peers, indoors and outdoors—are becoming increasingly rare.

The developmental literature is clear: play stimulates physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development in the early years. Children need time, space, materials, and the support of informed parents and thoughtful, skilled early-childhood educators in order to become "master players." They need time to play for the sake of playing.

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