

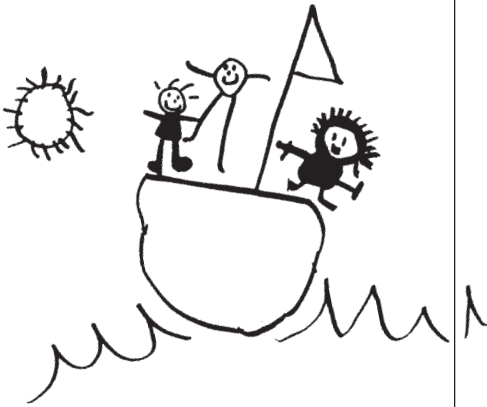


Shifting the Argument for Play

• Montgomery Child Care Association •

• The Heart in Child Care Since 1968 •

What are children missing when they are missing out on play?



Everything gained from teacher-directed academics can be learned through play,

but much of what is gained from play can NEVER be learned through teacher-directed academics.

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For years, Montgomery Child Care Association and others who care about young children have been promoting the value of a play-based curriculum. Mounds of conclusive research (and our own childhood memories!) prove the long-term positive developmental outcomes for children whose lives are filled with safe, stimulating and supported play experiences.

Despite the unified voice of all respected early childhood theory, the push-down of academic pressure persists. Early childhood advocates worry as growing numbers of programs follow the public schools' lead, reducing the amount of play in their curriculum, and replacing it with teacher-directed instruction. Parents understandably worry: *Is my child missing out on something in a play-based program?*

We think it is time to shift the argument for play in childhood. The truth is that everything gained from teacher-directed academics can be learned through play, but much of what is gained from play can *never* be learned through teacher-directed academics. So, in our efforts to "leave no child behind," we should really focus our worry on the long-term developmental outcomes for children who are having playtime *cut out* of their lives. *What are children missing when they are missing out on play?*

Children who aren't given their "recommended daily amount of play" are at risk in the following areas:

1) Cooperation and social problem-solving

Imagine a group of preschoolers as they work together to plot out a complex pretend play scenario. Play is the forum where children learn and practice the social negotiation skills that they will need for the rest of their lives. No form of adult instruction can offer the rich experience in problem-solving, inclusion/exclusion, sharing, sensitivity to peers and socialization that children receive through play.

2) Autonomy, initiative and confident decision-making

Children at play are making countless choices about their own needs, interests and desires. It is through play that children are first able to see themselves as capable, self-confident decision-makers who can make a plan and see it through to the end. In play, children learn to structure their time, focus their attention, and occupy themselves independently. When we take away free play time, we eliminate the time when young children *should* be allowed to make choices, plans and decisions for themselves. Without play, where will they develop and exercise those skills?

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A Tradition
of Caring
Since 1968

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3) *Sensory integration and motor planning skills*

In a stimulating world, our bodies are constantly flooded with sensory information: sights, smells, sounds, tastes and touches, and information about our position in space. The young child's nervous system must learn to filter and process these sensations, and to plan and coordinate motor responses appropriately. The way the body "learns" sensory integration is through active play: touching and manipulating objects, running, jumping, spinning, rolling, climbing, getting fully engaged with materials and getting messy! There is evidence that sensory integration is also linked to attention span and the ability to regulate emotion. Children at free play are adept at exploring and engaging in *exactly* the kinds of sensory experiences their developing brains crave—and those skills cannot be developed by any amount of time sitting and listening to adult direction.

4) *Empathy and understanding*

As all parents and early childhood educators know, young children have a developmental tendency to be egocentric—they are limited in their ability to see another's point of view. Most children develop a wider capacity for empathy in their early childhood years—and much of this development occurs through play experiences with other children. In play, children practice taking on roles and perspectives of other people. Play is usually the *first* context where children show the ability to delay gratification and wait for a turn without adult direction. Indeed, play experiences seem to be an essential factor in the development of emotional intelligence. Are we really willing to eliminate that factor so readily from children's lives?

5) *Creative representational thinking*

In early childhood, children begin to develop the ability to make and use *representations* of their ideas. All later academic skills—reading, writing, math, the arts, science, geography—depend on representational thinking. Most early childhood theorists agree that representational thinking is an *outcome* of play, not a precursor to it. If children's opportunities for extended imaginative pretend play experiences are limited, they will be at risk for later deficits in the fundamental representational skills that develop from these experiences.

Any program that reduces play time for young children should be held accountable for explaining how they are meeting these critical early childhood needs. We cannot afford to take any of these skills for granted. Together they represent some of the most important attributes of successful, well-adjusted and productive adult citizens in a democracy. As we continue to build a global economy and information-rich society, our need for learners who are adaptable, creative, cooperative problem-solvers will *increase*, not decrease.

We believe it is critical that every child has ample opportunities throughout childhood to "play at the highest level." Play has always been the primary way that young children learn about our world and their place in it. Never before has our society been so focused on academics in the early years at the expense of play—and this focus is equivalent to trying to re-write the developmental needs of early childhood.

The progressive removal of play time from childhood poses a significant threat to the development of healthy, creative, curious, cooperative, motivated human beings. Any program designed for young children should be called on to provide ample opportunities for developmentally appropriate play experiences—and any program choosing *not* to provide these experiences should be called on to defend that decision.

We aren't just playing—we're playing for keeps.