



PLAY- IT IS THE WAY YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

A generation ago kindergarten was supposed to get kids ready for school. But now everyone is talking about the importance of "school readiness" before kids even get to kindergarten.

That's why many parents, anxious for their children to succeed in school, want early education programs to have children sit at tables using work sheets, drills, and flash cards to learn letters and numbers and even starting to read, add and subtract.

Preschoolers learn differently from school-age children: **Play is essential to early learning.** Play is the main way children learn and develop ideas about the world. Play helps children build the skills necessary for critical thinking and leadership. Through play children develop self esteem, social and problem solving skills.

Early childhood experts agree that play is an essential part of a high quality early learning program. **Play is not a break from learning- it is the way young children learn.**

High-quality preschools provide lasting benefits

High-quality preschool programs have lasting benefits. Three studies, which followed children for many years, showed that taxpayers saved at least \$2.69 for every dollar spent on high-quality early learning programs, by reducing special education, law-enforcement, and other costs.

In all these programs, "child initiated" activities were important- highly trained teachers used children's interests and activities to guide learning. Kids got to choose from appropriate activities, rather than spending all their time following teachers' instructions.

Studies show that children learn more from educational activities that support their own interests and ideas. Researchers have found evidence that too much teacher-directed activity undermines you children's self-confidence and motivation to learn.

Play promotes school success in many ways

Research is finding more and more connections between children's play and the learning and social development that helps them succeed in school. For example, pretend play helps children learn to think abstractly and to look at things from someone else's perspective. Pretend play is also connected to early literacy, mathematical thinking, and problem solving,

When children play:

- **They test their developing ideas** with objects, people, and situations-the key ability for academic learning
- **They develop many kinds of skills together-** physical, social, emotional, thinking and language
- **They are doing things they are interested in,** so they have a natural motivation to learn
- **Concepts and skills are developed together.** For example as a child learns to write the letters in her name she is also learning the concept that each letter represents a sound. And she is very motivated by the meaning- her own name! Children are most likely to remember skills and concepts they have learned by doing things that are meaningful to them.
- **They learn from other children** and develop social skills by playing together

WHEN CHILDREN PLAY, THEY LEARN SKILLS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO SCHOOL SUCCESS

Using one thing to represent another

Through pretend play, children learn to use their imaginations to represent objects, people, and ideas.

WHAT YOU SEE:

A toddler flaps her arms, pretending to be a butterfly

A child picks up a banana, holds it to his ear like a telephone, and says “hello”.

A preschooler builds a firehouse with blocks

How it promotes school success:

If children can use one thing to represent something else, it’s easier for them to understand that letters represent sounds and numbers represent quantity. Later they will be able to use their imaginations to visualize historical events or scientific ideas.

Using language and telling stories

Through pretend play, children develop their skills in using language and in telling and understanding stories.

WHAT YOU SEE:

Children act out scenes in the housekeeping corner

A child makes her stuffed animal “talk,” telling a story

How it promotes school success:

Oral language skills and storytelling are the building blocks of reading and writing, as well as subjects like social studies and science.

Using experimentation and logic

When children play with materials such as blocks, clay, sand, and water they develop skills in logic, they experiment with cause and effect, with counting and sorting things and solving problems.

What you see:

Children experiment with blocks to figure out how to build a stable structure

Children count the number of cups needed for a “tea party”

Children pour sand into different sized containers

How it promotes school success:

This practice in experimenting, observing, comparing, and working with shapes, sizes and quantities forms the basis for understanding math and science and for all higher-order thinking.

Developing self regulation and social skills

As children share materials and play together, they learn to cooperate, listen to others, stand up for their own ideas, handle frustration, and empathize.

What you see:

Children negotiate over roles in dramatic play: “We can both be pilots if we have two seats.”

One child cries and another says, “Don’t worry; your mom will come soon.”

How it promotes school success:

Studies have shown that children with good social skills and emotional health do better in school and are more likely to avoid dangerous behavior as teenagers. Through play, children develop their ability to form relationships with other children and with their teachers.

Learning to enjoy learning

When children do activities they have chosen, learning is enjoyable. It’s based on their own interests and gives them a sense of competence.

What you see:

Classrooms organized with different activity centers (blocks, dramatic play, art, reading, science etc...)

Children encouraged to choose their own activities

How it promotes school success:

Studies show that children’s attitudes of curiosity, motivation, and competence are key to success in elementary school.

The teacher is key to play-based learning

Children learn more through play when they have well trained teachers who present a rich environment for learning. A teacher should know how to respond to, guide, and extend the children's play to increase learning. The teacher should also assess children's development by observing their play.

Teachers should:

- Provide a clean, safe, enriched environment with appropriate activities that challenge children's learning. Activities should change often to keep children's interested and involved.
- Guide and extend play to help children learn more
 - Respond to play:** A teacher sees a child playing and builds vocabulary by providing new words: "That's interesting. You have lined up the animals from tiny to gigantic."
 - Extend play:** A teacher hears children making silly rhymes: "you're juicy, goosey, foosey." She extends this play by teaching songs that play with the sounds of language, such as "Apples and Bananas" She knows that this helps children to learn to recognize the separate sounds in words. A teacher observes a child pretending a chair is a car and "driving." She encourages imagination by asking "Where are you going? What do you see along the way?"
 - Guide play:** one week a teacher turns the dress-up area into a shoe store. Children practice language and social skills by acting out "customers" and "sales people". The children learn new vocabulary (canvas, boot). They might use art to make signs for the store. Some older preschoolers may write letters and words for the signs, or practice simple math by making change for purchases.
- Assess children's development by watching them play
 - Observe the child's activities:** seeing a child line up toy dinosaurs by size shows her understanding of size comparisons and putting things in order.
 - Listen to the child talk:** Hearing a child talk about what letters "say" shows his understanding that letters represent sounds.
 - Take photos:** A series of photos of a child's block structure over time shows that she is learning more about spatial relations.

Importance of Play

Because play is so important to developing the skills, early concepts and approaches children will use throughout their lives, it is important that we support education that emphasizes play.

Learning standards should identify play as the primary method for early learning

The curriculum and learning materials should emphasize play

Young children's learning should be assessed through observation, not formal tests

More about play and learning

National Association for the Education of Young Children publishes Early Years are Learning Years, short articles including many on the importance of play and learning. <http://www.naeyc.org/>

Play at the Center of the Curriculum, by Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales and Alward, 4th edition, 2007 Merrill/Prentice Hall

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