

Play it Forward Keynote

(from slideshow notes)

Kim Adams

Play and Its Importance

Play is so important that at the “Convention of the Rights of the Child” the United Nations, stated that **all children have the right to play**.

Play is a legitimate right of childhood, representing a crucial aspect of children’s physical, intellectual and social development. Therefore, it must be protected!

According to an article in Psychology Today titled “the Value of Play”- Peter Gray Ph.D., research professor at Boston College and author.lists 5 characteristics of play:

1. Play is self-chosen and self-directed;
2. Play is activity in which means are more valued than ends; process over product
3. Play has structure, or rules, which are not dictated by physical necessity but emanate from the minds of the players;
4. Play is imaginative, non-literal, mentally removed in some way from “real” or “serious” life; and
5. Play involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind.

Characteristics of Play-Based

Edith Dowley Founder of Bing Nursery School and Research Lab At Stanford University

Freedom of choice
Freedom of movement
Freedom of time

Play is an ideal state of mind for creativity and learning.

The mind is focused on means not ends (process not product) so fear of failure is absent and players feel free to incorporate new sources of information and experiment with new ways of doing things.

During play, a child’s brain takes in information using all five senses... These combine to create connections in the brain that create the foundation for future learning and development.

Each region of the brain consists of a highly sophisticated neurological network of cells, dendrites and nerves which interconnect one portion of the brain to another.

The brain changes physiologically as a result of experience. New dendrites are formed every day, “hooking” new information to old experiences. As the child experiences an event for the first time, new dendrites have to be formed. As other information is gained, the brain looks to associate the information to existing dendrites

Sergio Pellis, a researcher at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada suggests "The experience of play changes the connections of the neurons at the front end of your brain, And without play experience, those neurons aren't changed,"

We used to believe that play was “practice” for adulthood. Experts have come to believe play has a another important role: "The function of play is to build pro-social brains, social brains that know how to interact with others in positive ways," Jaak Panksepp at Washington State University.

Similarly Experiments on rodents suggest that play and exploration trigger the secretion of BDNF (brain-derived neurotrophic factor), a substance essential for the growth of brain cells. And animals given more opportunities to play grow more brain tissue in the cerebral cortex. (Social deprivation stress is a triggering factor for the emergence of anxiety- and depression-like behaviours and leads to reduced brain BDNF levels in C57BL/6J mice)

Alessandra Berry, Veronica Bellisario, Sara Capoccia, Paola Tirassa, Arianna Calza, Enrico Alleva, Francesca Cirulli

The late Dr. Karyn Purvis, Director of Texas Christian University’s Child Development Center stated, “Scientists have recently determined that it takes approximately 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain – unless it is done with play, in which case, it takes between 10 and 20 repetitions!” (still fact checking this one)

What is Happening to Play?

The American Academy of Pediatrics supports play (specifically recess) as key in the development of kids’ social, emotional, cognitive and physical skills as well as health.

Creativity Study by George Land

They gave the test to children (1600 children) age 4-5 98% tested at genius levels

Turned the study into a longitudinal study and re-tested 5 years later. Same children tested at 30%. Followed up 5 years later... 12%

Adult sampling scores are at 2%

Why? In school we teach Divergent and Convergent Thinking at the same time.

- High stakes testing
- According to the CDC diagnoses of ADHD, obesity, depression and anxiety are all on the rise as the amount of time children are forced to sit in the classroom increases.
- Minority and low income populations may have children with high levels of parent stress, impact of poverty, and english as a second language make it difficult for a child to be “free” to play. infographic shows; the impact of child poverty is far reaching into their future.
- If a person is experiencing a high level of stress, he or she will not be able to access the parts of the brain that are responsible for higher order thinking skills, creativity, empathy, problem solving etc. (all important components of real play)
- quote from Peter Gray PhD “...The most straightforward explanation for the rise of depression and anxiety in children and adolescents is that, as a society, we have increasingly forced them into settings that make them unhappy and anxious and have deprived them of the activities that make them happy.”

How can we Support Play?

The same way we do with every other aspect of ECE, we facilitate learning.

- We offer space, materials and time.
- We scaffold the learning with “good questions”.
- We become a fellow explorer while keeping the group safe.
- We learn to trust kids.
- We acknowledge that we are not the givers of information, we are the documenters of learning.
- We learn to observe more, talk less, and spend our time enriching the environment for inquiry and meaning making.
- We spend less time on managing the clock, preparing lessons, and cutting out shapes for kids to glue on that cute project we found on pinterest.
- We are not “day care providers” we don’t care for the days. We are Early Childhood Educators.

Challenge to Defend Play in ECE

Now that you know. You have a responsibility to “play it forward.”
It starts with your own practice - look for ways to allow play,
such as:

- take a look at your schedule find ways to extend the time,
- say “yes” more,
- provide more open-ended materials,
- ask “do you need anything else?”,
- stop interrupting the play trying to teach them something,
- and for the love of all that is good, stop asking stupid questions

***Then find ways to make the children’s learning visible in the environment. (pages
templates for documentation)

Advocate for best practices at your center, in your community, in the world.
Lastly take good care of yourself and find ways to remain playful as an adult.