

## The Alarming Disappearance of Play from Early Childhood Education

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Play is being squeezed out of early childhood education in the US. A recent report from the Alliance for Childhood [Miller & Almon, 2009, p. 15] summed up the situation for kindergarten:

Too few Americans are aware of the radical changes in kindergarten practice in the last ten to twenty years. Children now spend far more time being instructed and tested in literacy and math than they do learning through play and exploration, exercising their bodies, and using their imaginations. Many kindergartens use highly prescriptive curricula linked to standardized tests. An increasing number of teachers must follow scripts from which they may not deviate. Many children struggle to live up to academic standards that are developmentally inappropriate ... At the same time that we have increased academic pressure in children's lives through inappropriate standards, we have managed to undermine their primary tool for dealing with stress – freely chosen, child-directed, intrinsically motivated play.

Is this picture too alarmist? Far from it. And the same tendencies have been transforming pre-kindergarten preschools as well [Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Berk, & Singer, 2009]. Across the board, play is being displaced by a single-minded focus on teaching academic skills through direct instruction. This emphasis on more didactic, academic, and content-based approaches to preschool education comes at the expense of more child-centered, play-oriented, and constructivist approaches, which are dismissed as obsolete or simply crowded out.

These tendencies add up to a broad-based movement whose protagonists and supporters include politicians, parents, school administrators, and other child-serving professionals. It has also been fueled by important trends in recent research – though it is worth adding that the implications of such research have often been exaggerated, misinterpreted, and misunderstood. This research has highlighted the extent to which the preschool years are critical in laying the foundations for later learning and development. There is also considerable evidence that the kinds of experiences, resources, and support that most effectively prepare young children for

formal education – for example, by promoting the early acquisition of emergent literacy skills – are more commonly available to middle-class children than to those from many low-income and otherwise disadvantaged backgrounds. There is thus a broad consensus on the need to use preschool to help overcome these gaps in school readiness, while at the same time middle-class parents also want their children to get the best possible preparation.

This sense of urgency is reinforced by a surprisingly widespread misimpression that research on early brain development provides a mandate for accelerating and intensifying direct instruction in preschool. In addition, the quest for accountability embodied in the No Child Left Behind Act has led to increased reliance on high-stakes standardized tests, pressuring teachers to train successful test takers at ever younger ages. In such a context, play can seem a low priority at best or a time-wasting distraction at worst.

These policies are often well-intentioned and might appear practical and realistic. Unfortunately, they fly in the face of much that we know about young children's learning and development and about the practices that most effectively promote them (between them, Miller and Almon [2009] and Hirsh-Pasek et al. [2009] provide a comprehensive overview of relevant research). Using preschool to enhance school readiness is an excellent idea. But young children learn differently from older children or adults, and their ways of making sense of the world rely heavily on play, exploration, and imagination (a point recently restated by Gopnik [2009]). Young children can certainly benefit from some direct instruction and from being taught various sorts of specific content, *if* that constitutes one element in a balanced preschool curriculum. But a one-sided, or even exclusive, focus on top-down training in specific academic skills is developmentally inappropriate and counterproductive. And given what we know about the importance of play for young children's intellectual, socioemotional, and physical development, suppressing it can have genuinely harmful effects.

A rigid dichotomy between play and learning may seem commonsensical, but it is deeply misguided. As Vygotsky and others have convincingly emphasized, young children's play is not simply frivolous; it is an intensely absorbing activity that serves as a powerful matrix for learning and development [for discussion, see Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Nicolopoulou, 1993]. A substantial body of research has confirmed the value of children's social pretend play, in particular, for promoting both cognitive development and the development of forms of social competence including cooperation, self-regulation, and interpersonal understanding.

### **Putting Play to Work**

Another misleading false dichotomy also needs to be overcome. Discussion of these matters is too often framed as though the only alternatives were didactic/academic teaching or unstructured free play. A certain amount of child-directed free play is indeed necessary and developmentally valuable. But that does not imply that the ideal preschool should be exclusively devoted to free play without any guidance or structuring by adults. Nor is the solution simply to alternate didactic/academic instruction with free-play periods. It is also important to devise educational practices that can systematically *integrate* the play element into the preschool curriculum

in ways that promote learning and development. These can be guided and facilitated by adults without smothering children's own engagement and initiative. As Hirsh-Pasek et al. [2009] correctly insisted, 'both free play and playful learning should command a central role in high-quality education for preschoolers' (p. 54).

This is so for three main reasons. One impetus for the growing academization of preschool is the recognition that young children's acquisition of literacy is critical to their long-term learning and school success. However, what is most important is not to train preschoolers in specific literacy-related skills, such as letter recognition and decoding, but to help them develop a broader range of cognitive and oral language skills and to foster their motivation for future learning. Those underlying intellectual skills and orientations are the most crucial foundations for emergent literacy, and their significance becomes increasingly apparent as the child moves from simple decoding to reading for meaning and comprehension. They can be fostered more effectively by play-based practices that engage children's interest and initiative (along with narrative practices like interactive book reading) than by top-down didactic transmission.

We also know that preschoolers' cognitive or intellectual development is not sufficient by itself. Certain forms of *social* competence are also crucial elements of school readiness, both in themselves and because they help promote children's cognitive achievements as well. Key dimensions include the *self-regulation* of behavior, attention, and emotion (also discussed under the rubric of executive function); the capacity and willingness for *cooperation*; and *social understanding*. Various forms of play have a critical role in promoting these socioemotional skills during children's early years.

Finally, children need a certain amount of self-directed free play – including physical play – and there is increasing concern that an exclusive regime of instruction, drill, and testing leaves many preschoolers overstressed, underexercised, and more likely to become anxious and overweight.

### **What Is to Be Done?**

In short, this campaign against play is not only bad public policy. It also ignores or repudiates some of the central principles and insights of developmental psychology. Developmental psychologists therefore can and should help to counteract it.

One way to do this is to bring existing knowledge to bear on public debates about early childhood education. Teachers and parents often feel that play is important for young children, but do not have a clear sense of *why* it is important. We need to do more to get the word out.

In addition, the case for play in preschool education can and should be strengthened by further research. Here are a few suggestions.

More work needs to focus on designing and evaluating effective play-based practices in early education that avoid the misleading either/or of direct instruction versus unstructured free play. Two promising examples are the Vygotskian-inspired 'Tools of the Mind' curriculum [Bodrova & Leong, 2006] and the narrative- and play-based storytelling and story-acting practice pioneered by Vivian Paley [Nicolopoulou, 2002].

We also need more play-oriented research that systematically analyzes the *effects* and *outcomes* of different preschool curriculum practices, play-based and otherwise, for children's learning and development. Such research will be most useful if it addresses long-term, not just short-term, outcomes. Of course, assessing the long-term consequences of preschool education is not easy, but an exclusive focus on short-term outcomes is likely to yield a misleading picture.

As noted earlier, a number of teachers, pediatricians, and others who work with young children have expressed concern that eliminating play from young children's daily lives may be harmful to their physical and mental well-being. Such concerns are plausible, but so far systematic research on these questions seems to be thin – and, again, it must try to examine long-term as well as short-term effects.

There are already some welcome signs of a public backlash against the anti-play campaign in early childhood education [e.g., Tough, 2009]. Developmental psychologists ought to support this backlash, while also helping to guide it in constructive directions, with substantial, concrete, and convincing research and arguments.

## References

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