

**Back to Basics: The Right to Play**

By Jane Hewes, PhD

What’s happened to play? I feel like I’m in a “Where’s Waldo?” book trying to find extended episodes of socio-dramatic pretend play in early childhood programs these days. What used to be long blocks of uninterrupted time for free play is increasingly crowded out and broken up by routines, transitions, prepackaged curricula, and “choice” time. Children’s play has become short and episodic, and largely separate from the educational endeavour. At a recent pan-Canadian gathering, early childhood faculty commented that students coming into college programs no longer seem to have the rich diversity of play memories that they once had. Is play disappearing? Does it matter?

Indeed there is increasing concern in some influential circles about the erosion of play opportunities for children. In 2006, the American Academy of Pediatrics released a Clinical Report entitled *The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*. In it they call upon pediatricians to “advocate for children by helping families, school systems, and communities consider how best to ensure play is protected.”<sup>1</sup> In September 2007, a group of 270 child psychiatrists from around the world sounded the alarm about “an explosion in children’s clinically diagnosable mental health problems” resulting from “preschool curriculum in which formal learning has substantially taken the place of free, unstructured play,” “over-elaborate commercialized toys,” parents’ fears of “stranger danger” and the disappearance of unstructured outdoor play time from children’s lives.<sup>2</sup>

Advances in neuroscience remind us that social and emotional development of young children is as critical to success in school and in life as is intellectual development, in fact they are interconnected. Social emotional competencies develop in play. Heightened public awareness about the importance of early childhood and the impact of early childhood experience on social health, wellbeing and economic productivity and prosperity should be reaffirming the importance of play in early childhood programs. Ironically, new public policy is diminishing children’s opportunities for play.

The right to play is included in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – equal alongside the right to an education, a home and a family – and distinct from the right to recreation and leisure. The child’s right to play is worthy of our attention as early childhood educators, particularly in the emerging Canadian debate about appropriate educational curricula in the early years particularly in the emerging Canadian debate about appropriate educational curricula in the early years.

Early learning and child care programs are increasingly being held accountable for school readiness outcomes, provincially legislated curriculum frameworks for early childhood are emerging, and there is a trend towards universal full day kindergarten and pre kindergarten programs. Play advocates are now concerned that even very young children are beginning to lose control of their own play.

Play is not trivial pursuit – it is fundamental to the human endeavour. The right to play cannot be reduced to the need for fun, or what we let children do after we have finished the important work of teaching and learning. Noted play philosopher Johan Huizinga argues that “Play is a uniquely adaptive act, not subordinate to some other adaptive act, but with a special function of its own in human experience.”<sup>3</sup>

**Learning Through Play**

The phrase “learning through play” still comes trippingly off the tongue of many early childhood educators – it is the basis of our pedagogy, both in the front line professional practice and in the education of preservice professionals in Canada. And yet, it has lost its defining characteristics in our language and in our practice. And while there is a complex, organic relationship between play and learning, they are not equivalent concepts and they cannot be used interchangeably.<sup>4</sup> Not all learning is play; not all play is learning. It’s time for early childhood educators to join the early learning curriculum debate and speak up in a clear and knowledgeable way against accelerated academic learning in the early years. It’s time to go back to the basics of play.

The value of play is well demonstrated – it feeds every aspect of development in early childhood and beyond. Play provides a context for integrated learning and development – it is organic, integrated learning at its finest. We know that development in the early years is integrated, rapid, eclectic and individual, and that an integrated approach to skill development and learning in the early years is effective.<sup>5</sup> Play lays the foundation for formal learning.

The play context is responsive to multiple individual developmental levels and interests simultaneously. In play children engage with just the intensity and at the developmental level they are ready for. According to noted Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, “play is the leading source of development” in the early years.<sup>6</sup> We know that play is essential for complex skill mastery.<sup>7</sup>

There is a body of emerging research linking competency in play in the preschool years to school readiness and school success.<sup>8</sup> We know that the introduction of content and formal academic learning at too early an age does not benefit children in the long term.<sup>9</sup>

So, if it is truly this significant, why has it become such a challenge to find time for play in early childhood programs?

### **The Changing Face of Early Childhood**

The experience of early childhood is changing. There is no question that play is changing along with it; it is becoming institutionalized. Canadians don't feel like their neighbourhoods are safe for children to play independently anymore. More children are spending significant time in non-parental care settings. More young children are in organized, structured activities prior to formal school.<sup>10</sup> Parents and public policy makers are focused on school readiness. Increased public investment carries with it new expectations for accountability in early childhood settings. The early childhood sector is professionalizing. Early childhood educators promote early literacy during centre time and circle time; they are increasingly disengaged from children's play as facilitators, copleayers and observers. Spontaneous free play, once the centerpiece of early childhood practice, is becoming unimportant in the educational and developmental endeavour.

There are an increasing number of institutional obstacles to play. The structure of institutional time and space is a problem. Institutional space is not typically a diverse sensory environment. We struggle to deliver early childhood programs in facilities and environments that are inadequate and inappropriate. Institutional time fragments experience – adult time requires coffee breaks and shift changes. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>11</sup> describes the experience of “flow” in play as a feeling of losing track of time – children's play happens in an infinite present. We need to change the way time is structured for children in early childhood environments in order to make room for play.

According to Edward Zigler and his colleagues at *Zero to Three*, “play is under siege,” and it is the early learning agenda that is now competing with play for children's time.<sup>12</sup>

What are the conditions that support play and can they flourish in early childhood programs? Can we redefine institutional time and space to make room for play? Can we articulate a pedagogy of play that truly respects the agency of the child? Children need to own their own play. The role of the adult educator is critical. If play is under siege, how can we protect it? What is the role of early childhood educators?

### **Towards a Pedagogy of Play**

What is play exactly? Most of us think we know. We have all experienced it as children. When we recall our childhood play, we talk about feelings – of freedom, of power, of control, and of intimacy with friends. Many of us remember endless, delicious time spent in secret places – the time and place still palpable – we remember the feel of the wind, the touch of the grass, the sound of creaking stairs, and the smell of a dusty attic.

However common an experience, play remains a difficult concept to define precisely. The most widely accepted scholarly definition for play was developed by psychologists Rubin, Fein and Vandenburg.<sup>13</sup> in 1983, after reviewing the scope of psychological research on play. They identified several defining characteristics of play. Play is:

- Intrinsically motivated
- Controlled by the players
- Concerned with process rather than product
- Non literal
- Free of externally imposed rules
- Characterized by the active engagement of the players

The early learning agenda creates a new awareness of, and opportunity for play to facilitate learning. Play is being linked with instructional goals. The idea of educational play and play based learning are driving much of the popular parenting discourse in the development of educational toys and specialized preschool programs. It is time to be precise with language. Play based learning is not a substitute for play – it is a different thing altogether – usually adult directed. We need a common framework and a common language of understanding.

Is a pedagogy of play possible without destroying play? Jim Greenman, Child Care Consultant and author of *Caring Spaces, Learning Places: Children's Environments that Work* writes “...play is not work – ...play is voluntary, spontaneous, and undertaken without instrumental purpose. What appears to be play becomes work when it is compelled or bound to exterior goals or restrictions.”<sup>14</sup> David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child*, writes “...children need to be given an opportunity for pure play...If adults feel that each spontaneous interest of a child is an opportunity for a lesson, the child's opportunities for pure play are foreclosed...children need the opportunity to play for play's sake.”<sup>15</sup>

The best play happens when adults protect the time and space children need to play. It's time to reconnect with play as the centrepiece of good early childhood practice. Early childhood educators need to reengage with play by ensuring sufficient uninterrupted time, providing an organized environment with interesting materials in sufficient quantities to support extended play, paying close attention to children's play and making the learning in play visible, rather than using play to achieve learning goals.<sup>16</sup> We must let children control and direct their play. And we must find a way to reassure parents and convince public policy makers that children who are competent players are ready for school. And we must be prepared to be accountable for children's competencies in play.

Children have the right to play and early childhood educators have a responsibility to protect that right. Play is a deeply satisfying experience for children - emotionally, socially, physically and intellectually. It has intrinsic value. Children have a strong natural desire to play and we must trust them to play. Play is a legitimate foundation for early learning. As David Lloyd George, former statesman and Prime Minister of the UK, aptly put it many years ago "The right to play is the child's first claim on the community. Play is nature's training for life. No community can infringe that right without doing deep and enduring harm to the bodies and minds of citizens."

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