

PlayingIsMyJob

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## **PLAYING IS MY JOB**

It may seem like just a waste of time to adults, but the business of becoming master players is the most important task young children have.

During the past few decades, increased awareness of the importance of the preschool years has led to greater public interest and investment in early childhood education. In many programs, however, the developmental theory base for appropriate practice in the education of young children (Bredekamp, 1987; Elkind, 1986; Kamii, 1985) has been neglected in favor of the behaviorist theory which characterizes common practice in elementary education. A “push-down” of direct teaching, worksheets and drill is found in many kindergartens and even in preschools. Such programs, designed to give children a head start in school, fail to take into account the active-learning mode in which young children are most competent. Thus, for some children, early schooling may undermine rather than contribute to their competence and self-esteem.

The developmental stage theories of Erik Erikson (1950) and Jean Piaget (Labinowicz, 1980), which are basic to early childhood education, emphasize the different tasks to be accomplished at each stage. Infancy and toddlerhood offer the opportunity first to trust and then to separate from one’s primary caregiver, and to gain sensory-motor knowledge through active exploration of one’s own physical self and the physical world. Three to five year olds who have mastered these tasks move on to the exercise of initiative, making choices and learning to sustain their play, relationships and oral language – their modes for developing knowledge about the world. Primary school children are moving into the stage of industry, in which they practice tasks to meet others’ standards and develop greater understanding of the logical relations among the concrete objects in their world.

While the stages overlap, and their tasks recur throughout life, mastery of each task is the most important preparation for the next stage, rather than practice at the tasks of the next stage. Those will come in their own good time.

### **Mastery of play**

To become a master player is the height of developmental achievement for children ages three to five. Master players are skilled at representing their experiences symbolically in self-initiated improvisational drama. Sometimes alone, sometimes in collaboration with others, they play out their fantasies and feelings about the events of their daily lives. Through pretend play young children consolidate their understanding of

the world, their language and their social skills. The skillful teacher of young children is one who makes such play possible and helps children keep getting better at it.

Children at play are constructing their individual identities as well as their knowledge of the world. The choosing child is saying, in effect, “This is who I am. This is what I want to do. This is what I need to do it with. When I play with others, I can negotiate with them to include my experiences as well as theirs. We talk about what we’re doing, and we act it out. I need to keep playing until I’m done.” Play (for people of any age) is self-chosen activity. For young children, it is active; the child does what he or she is thinking about, using body language as well as words. Younger children (ages two to five) need life-size props, because they are the actors; older children (ages 4 to 8) increasingly create dramas in miniature, with themselves as puppeteers (though not necessarily with puppets; blocks, cars, and small animal and people figures also populate their dramas).

Play is open-ended; it builds skills in divergent thinking. Confidence in divergent thinking is a crucial precursor to the adaptation to convergent, right-answer thinking required of children in school. The child who has learned, through play, that he or she is a person-who-knows is then ready to de-center or to adapt to the knowledge of others-who-know, including teachers. Piagetian theory insists that significant knowledge is constructed by the individual knower, acting and reflecting on his or her own experience in interaction with other. Through play, children build such knowledge for themselves.

### **Development of representation**

Becoming a player is an intermediate stage in the development of representation, a complex sequence that culminates in becoming a writer and reader. Human beings, beginning in early childhood, not only *have* experiences, they *represent* them for purposes of personal reflection and interpersonal communication. Like the life cycle stages, these stages overlap, and all modes of representation continue to be used throughout one’s life. The later stages are more abstract, and the primary purpose of schooling has been to ensure the acquisition of the abstract modes of literacy and numeracy. In literate societies, however, children begin the construction of their understanding of literacy long before they are formally taught.

**Gesture** – body language – is the first mode of representation used by infants. As the child reaches for an object, the adult interprets the reach as pointing – a gesture used to communicate and responds as a receiver of communication. **Talk**, which follows not long after, develops in the same way, as the adult responds to random babbling by interpreting it as communicative language; and the child, made much of, babbles with increasing selectivity. **Play** likewise begins as exploration of the physical world. The toddler puts things in and dumps them out, picks up, stacks, and lets go. A cup may elicit the beginnings of make believe, as the child pretends to drink from it or give a drink to a stuffed toy. As the child continues to master play, a real cup won’t be necessary; if she’s decided the bear is thirsty, a block or an invisible cup will be sufficient to sustain the

play. Children at play are re-creating familiar scripts from their social and emotional lives. Through active representation, they practice the sequences that lead to mastery.

Similarly, they first explore and then make conscious representations with two- and three-dimensional media. Markers and crayons, paint, clay, wood scraps and blocks all serve the child in **image-making**. Scribbles are given names and move toward increasingly recognizable approximations of the thing represented. Drawing, like all other early representations, is self-corrected by the child as both his or her motor skills and perceptions continue to mature.

**Writing** evolves as “children discover that people draw not only things, but speech.” (Dyson, 1989) Children as young as three both “draw” and “write,” identifying some of their scribbles as writing as they play at drawing signs, making lists and writing letters. A reader begins not with decoding, but with the sequence, learned by watching adult readers, of picking up a book, turning it right side up, opening it, turning the pages one by one and saying remembered words if the book is a familiar one.

Children invent writing in a process very similar to their invention of talking, if they receive comparable response from adults. (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Harste et al., 1984; Bissex, 1980) Talking begins with babbling; writing begins with scribbling, and so the provision of varied tools with which to scribble is a necessary part of the process. Early talkers move from spontaneous babble to conscious imitation of the sounds made by mature talkers; similarly, early writers move from spontaneous scribbling to conscious imitation of the print in their environment. The errors made in each case are not random; they reflect the child’s systems of knowledge at that point in his or her development. Young children are logical thinkers, though their logic may not be the adult’s. They are investing their energy in constructing a mental world to make the physical world understandable.

### **Appropriate learning environments**

Adults who value the developmental process look for ways to support it, not interrupt it. Young children need **response** to their explorations in all modes of representation, **models** of more mature representations, and well-timed **challenges** to their thinking, which may come from peers or adults. Because each child’s construction of knowledge has its own pace and sequence, practice tasks assigned to a whole group of children are seldom as educational as access to self-selected tasks and individualized responses and challenges.

A developmentally appropriate classroom for three-to-five year olds has a play curriculum. Children choose their activities during extended periods of time, act physically on materials and talk to each other. The environment is rich in props for dramatic play, tool for image-making and print. Teachers spend only brief periods talking with the group as a whole; while children are playing, teachers circulate, respond, mediate, enrich, observe and plan (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Whole-group activities add to the experiences which children may choose to represent or to incorporate into the

structure of their play; thus stories and songs, field trips and visitors, group problem-solving and classification activities all may later appear within children's spontaneous action.

Children are ready for the challenges of the primary grades not when they have memorized colors, shapes and numbers, but when they have mastered play and the dynamics of being a member of a group. A developmentally appropriate classroom for six-to-eight year olds continues to build on all the skills of representation which children have been practicing since infancy. Dyson (1989), studying children as writers in the primary grades, describes the ways in which talking and drawing, skills previously mastered, are essential components of the writing process for young children, because their still-limited capacity to express their experiences in writing is supported and enriched by their pictures and conversations. Similarly, continued opportunities to act out experience, both in spontaneous play and in "plays" created by the children with teacher guidance, build on children's mastery of play, talk and gesture, enabling them to continue to do what they do best even as they are tackling new and difficult areas of learning.

Integrated curriculum in the primary grades (Katz & Chard, 1989) encourages children to reflect on their meaningful experiences through many different modes of representation. Children in a coastal town who have many reasons to be interested in fish, for example, will gain both in basic skills and in general information if they visit the fish market, talk with a visiting fisherman, feed goldfish, build a fishing boat with large blocks, play at working on the boat, read fish stories, sing chanteys, and draw, paint and write their own related experiences, with broad choices of focus within the general theme. If children are to become skilled representers, they must have meaningful experiences to represent. Such experiences can happen at school, in in-depth explorations of the natural world or in the community.

Other such experiences are each child's own. School should be a place which provides tools and time to reflect on personal experiences, to understand them and to communicate about them. (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Johnson, 1987) Children are highly motivated to talk, play, draw and write about the important people, places and events in their lives outside of school. In this work each child chooses his or her own topics and elaborates on them over time. (Graves, 1983; Dyson, 1989)

From a developmental perspective, children learn to write by writing and to read by reading. "Readiness" activities which break down global tasks into incremental practice are likely to be both irrelevant and confusing to children. Development, both physical and intellectual, proceeds from whole to part, not from part to whole. Young children spend hours approximating behavior globally before they get around to the details. A babbling infant acquires the inflections of her family's language before she breaks it down into words; a three-year-old plays competently at the drama of reading a book long before she becomes interested in its words on paper. In each case, the global practice provides the necessary context for later skill development.

“Ready” children come to school with a repertoire of play skills based in scripts which represent their understanding of the world as they have so far encountered it. A developmentally appropriate school acknowledges and expands that repertoire while extending children’s skills in creating representations of their experience.

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