

The Learning Team

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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY



Learning through play lays the foundation for future health and well-being.

Free play is important and powerful



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Close your eyes and think back to a time when you were engaged in some kind of playful activity. When I do this, what first comes to mind is how much fun it was to be fully immersed in the often spontaneous moments. Play at its essence is about having fun. It is also truly “free” when there are no parents or guardians hovering alongside, coaches intervening, umpires adjudicating, teachers directing or rule books guiding.

In her article, “The power of play: A research summary on play and learning,” child psychologist Dr. Rachel White outlines six distinct characteristics of play for children.

- 1. Play is pleasurable.** Children must enjoy the activity or it is not play.
- 2. Play is intrinsically motivated.** Children engage in play simply for the satisfaction the behaviour itself brings.
- 3. Play is process oriented.** When children play, the means are more important than the ends.
- 4. Play is freely chosen.** It is spontaneous and voluntary. If a child is pressured, [she/he] will likely not think of the activity as play.
- 5. Play is actively engaged.** Players must be physically and/or mentally involved in the activity.
- 6. Play is non-literal.** It involves make-believe.

White’s research also supports the notion that play is learning.

Elsewhere, we’re seeing evidence that free play is under siege. In 2004, University of Michigan researchers found that, since the late 1970s, children had lost 12 hours per week of free time, including a 25 per cent decrease in play and a 50 per cent decrease in unstructured outdoor activities. Meanwhile, here in our province, the Parkland Institute has found that Albertans are working longer hours and families are spending less time with their children.

So, this edition of *The Learning Team* is focused on the importance and benefits of play.

Let’s pause in our increasingly distracted, full and busy lives to remember that free play is important for our children and youth, that it should be fun, it unquestionably contributes to learning, is increasingly being put under siege and will need collective attention if we want it to be universally recognized as an essential part of human development and learning.

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In Finland, play is a skill that’s honed through experience



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Pasi Sahlberg

Finland has become the mecca of education pilgrimage since the first release of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results in December 2001.

Some visitors wish to discover the secrets of Finland’s high scores in reading, mathematics and science. Others hope to find out how great teachers are prepared or what successful schools look like. There are also those who want to take a first-hand look at education’s “ultimate slacker,” as Fareed Zakaria described Finland on his CNN news program.

When I ask these visitors what is the most important takeaway of the Finnish education system, a frequent answer is widespread trust exhibited by Finns in their schools. They also wonder how only a few Finns seem to be worried about whether teachers do what they are expected. What becomes obvious in school visits is not often found in visitors’ own communities: Finnish parents

seem to think that if there are schools that do not perform according to expectations, local authorities will find ways to help them get better.

In the global perspective, the Finnish education system seems to be a paradox. When much of the rest of the world is implementing more oversight of schools to assure teachers meet specific goals, lengthening the school day, toughening academic standards and increasing homework, Finnish children continue to enjoy a relatively short school day, a broad curriculum and a light homework load. In addition, Finnish children do not attend private tutoring sessions or spend any time preparing for standardized tests, as so many of their peers around the world must.

Perhaps the most surprising part of the Finnish educational philosophy is the central role of play in children’s lives, both in and out of school. Formal learning doesn’t start before the first grade when children are seven years old. Before that, children spend their time in play to develop a sense of independence and responsibility, and to learn about themselves and others. In the early years of elementary education, children furthermore learn to read and do math through various forms of play, music and drama. The old adage of “less is more” is carried out every day in Finnish schools, as I describe in

Finnish Lessons: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?

In many other countries, formal schooling is replacing informal play in children’s lives earlier than before. Standardized tests are introduced already in “early learning programs” to make sure children progress to be ready for school. But that hasn’t happened in Finland. The Finns regard play as not just a break from academic work but as a skill like any skill that one hones through experience. Much as the Swedish psychologist Anders Ericsson has famously concluded that mastery of any complex skill requires 10,000 hours of practice, Finnish education authorities consider play a skill that necessitates sufficient time over many years to develop. As children spend more and more time at play, they sharpen their capacity to imagine, improvise and collaborate. If Ericsson is right, it takes 10 years for children to achieve such heightened ability to use their minds to create new ideas.

Outside of school, Finnish society lays the foundation for proper educational development. Child well-being and happiness and the political empowerment of women are some of the conditions that help Finland’s school system work well. Finland is also a leading nation in economic competitiveness, good governance, scientific

inquiry and technological innovation, all in turn generating a climate of constant learning.

Finland’s success is a result of finding its own way of change rather than doing more of the same. This is particularly true in enhancing educational quality and equity. Some foreign observers claim that Finnish educational success results from the country’s smallness, cultural homogeneity and wealth. Those thinking this way often fail to distinguish the Finnish way from the global education reform movement (or GERM) that sees competition, standardization, frequent testing and privatization as the most effective drivers of change. This doesn’t mean that the Finnish model can be transplanted in other countries. It rather suggests that there is a lot to learn from the paradoxes, policies and common sense behind an education system that nine of ten Finnish taxpayers approve today. For the Finns, that is the most important accomplishment, not the top tier on international exams.

Dr. Pasi Sahlberg is a visiting professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and author of *Finnish Lessons 2.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* This article was originally published in *Education Week* on Oct. 31, 2013.

Impact of technology on play requires careful study



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While play can be seen as a fun diversion, the central and essential role it plays in children’s learning, socialization and growth has led developmental psychologists, pediatricians and human rights activists alike to assert play as a fundamental right of all people. Despite the critical importance of play, every year children are playing less. Relevant research reports have identified environmental, structural and behavioral changes that have contributed to this trend, including decreased (or eliminated) recess time, increased media use, lack of safe and accessible play spaces,¹ fewer “opportunities for unstructured or self-structured play,”² and less engagement with outdoor play.³ These reports share a common theme—screen time is viewed as a key contributor to the growing play deficit.

Screen media technology provides for a new type of play that is rarely examined in context with traditional play. A lack of consensus on or, in some cases, acknowledgment of how technology is changing play presents a major hurdle to understanding the causes of the play deficit. The increase in digital gaming has blurred the definition of play. Video games, mobile phones and tablets may displace or may be integrated into traditional play. Screen media may entice children into spending free-play time in a prescribed, prescribed environment, potentially missing out on the benefits of self-generated, pretend play. But used mindfully, these devices can facilitate longer and more engaging open-ended play sessions. We must understand how the changing play environment can shape our



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children. To do so, we must review what is known and what is not known about the impact on key developmental outcomes of traditional and digital play in the daily lives of children. **Cognitive outcomes** Pretend play that activates cognitive processes

such as symbolism, divergent thinking and narrative organization supports the development of cognitive skills and functioning, including problem solving, language, intelligence and creativity. Methodological limitations of this research, inconsistency in the

strength of its findings and its reliance on small sample sizes call for more research examining how different types of play influence the development of various cognitive outcomes.⁴ Current work has associated video game play and problems with attention and impulsiveness. While there is evidence that video games improve young people’s ability to receive and respond to sensory information,⁵ more research is needed to investigate whether the puzzle solving and cognitive engagement central to some video games is sustained and transferable to other settings.

Social outcomes Play has long been understood to provide children with the opportunity to cooperate and work together to overcome challenges and solve problems, all within a context of enjoyment and fun. When children participate in social play, they reinforce bonds with their parents, siblings and peers, and develop more complex social understanding.⁶

Some research has associated solitary play among preschool children with insecurity, negative self-perceptions, social anxiety, loneliness, peer rejection and academic and social problems in adolescence and adulthood.⁶⁻⁸ Other work has linked solitary pretend play with social competence.⁴ Given these inconsistencies, more work is necessary to explore the mechanisms of the complex causal relationship between play and social skills. The influence of violent TV, movies and video games on social behavior is one of the most studied areas of media effects. Meta analyses of this robust evidence base of longitudinal, experimental and survey research show consistent associations between use of violent media and increased fear and anxiety, desensitization to human suffering, and aggressive thoughts and behaviours.⁹

Since even very young children are now using mobile screen devices and pro-social “games for good” are being developed,¹⁰ longitudinal studies beginning in early childhood measuring positive and negative social outcomes are needed. **Affective outcomes** Imaginative play that includes exploration of affect (fear, loneliness, love, bravery, etc.) has been associated with improved ability to describe emotional experiences and understand the emotions of others. Interestingly, when children express negative emotions during pretend play, they demonstrate fewer affective problems later on.¹¹ Video game play, especially violent video game play, has been linked with negative mental health outcomes, most notably depression and anxiety.¹² What remains unclear is whether those suffering from negative moods are drawn to violent games or whether the games are influencing negative affect. **Future directions** The digital revolution has transformed not only the experience of childhood, but all of our lives, our lifestyles and our culture. In the short term, many parents are using technology to divert children while they focus on changing demands. But many parents worry that diversion, whether by technology or traditional free play, may cause their children to fall behind in the competition for ever-shrinking future opportunities. The resulting shift toward more “productive” structured activities designed to build knowledge may be at the cost of a growing play deficit. If play is the work of childhood, where children take risks, fail, try again and learn to be imaginative, collaborative and innovative, a play deficit mortgages their futures. Existing work in this field has laid the groundwork for more robust research on how children and their families play. We need to observe play in all its forms, as children move seamlessly between the physical and the imaginary, between traditional and digital play, and follow those children as they grow into their cognitive, social and affective selves. We need to study enough children in enough contexts over enough time to be able to make reliable predictions of what aspects of play are important to the healthy development of their bodies, minds and spirits. We need to understand what is nature and what is nurture, what are children’s inherent traits, and how play in the digital age can alter and optimize their potential.

References have been withheld due to space constraints. For a complete reference list, please email managing editor Cory Hare: cory.hare@ata.ab.ca. This list and the full report will be available at <http://cmch.tw/> in early 2016. The full report and this article were made possible with support from Hasbro, Inc.

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Play-based learning a key to success

Statement released by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) in July 2012.

Play is the highest form of research
- Albert Einstein

At the recent World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, organizers, keynote speakers, scientists, experts and political figures underscored the enormous benefits of early learning. CMEC agrees with this position and believes that purposeful play-based early learning sets the stage for future learning, health and well-being.

Learning through play is supported by science.

The benefits of play are recognized by the scientific community. There is now evidence that neural pathways in children’s brains are influenced and advanced in their development through the exploration, thinking skills, problem solving and language expression that occur during play. Research also demonstrates that play-based learning leads to greater social, emotional and academic success. Based on such evidence, ministers of education endorse a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations. In fact, play is considered to be so essential to healthy development that the United Nations has recognized it as a specific right for all children.

Learning through play is supported by experts.

Learning through play is supported by early years experts. Lev Vygotsky identified play as the leading source of development in terms of emotional, social, physical, language or cognitive development. Psychologist David Elkind that “play is not only our creative drive; it’s a fundamental mode of learning.” Such experts recognize

that play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children: creating, doing and learning are inextricably linked. When children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating, improvising and expanding their learning. Viewing children as active participants in their own development and learning allows educators to move beyond preconceived expectations about what children should be learning and focus on what they are learning.

Learning through play is supported by children and parents.

Learning through play is supported by children. It is their natural response to the environment around them. When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles or experimenting with different materials, they are engaged in learning through play. Play allows them to actively construct, challenge and expand their own understandings through making connections to prior experiences, thereby opening the door to new learning. Intentional play-based learning enables children to investigate, ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking. Play is responsive to each child’s unique learning style and capitalizes on his or her innate curiosity and creativity. Play-based learning supports growth in the language and culture of children and their families.

Children are playing, children are learning.

Given the evidence, CMEC believes in the intrinsic value and importance of play and its relationship to learning. Educators should intentionally plan and create challenging, dynamic, play-based learning opportunities. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have always been done that way. Intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments — because when children are playing, children are learning.

Almost all creativity involves purposeful play - Abraham Maslow

Children learn a ton through play

It may just be child’s play for an adult, but for children, play is the principal way to learn about life.

“School, organized lessons and games are important,” says Coalhurst Elementary School teacher Laurie Ann Wilson, “but allowing children time for unorganized play is critical to learning. Play teaches children how they should behave in society and how to get along with other people. It’s a natural way for children to learn about life.”

“When a child has a tea party with her dolls, she’s really learning how people act in social situations. She’s also learning to share and to use different vocabulary. When you play school with a child, it prepares him for the situations he’ll encounter when he starts kindergarten. Pretending may seem like a game to an adult, but it’s a lesson in social skills for a child.”

Any kind of game with other children teaches kids how to take turns, follow rules and be both a follower and a leader, Wilson



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says. Such games also teach leadership skills and the importance of taking the initiative. Games also teach children to focus on a task and to stay with a single activity.

Children often learn skills more quickly and more thoroughly through play than they do in school or other organized learning situations because

they’re more motivated and more relaxed, and it’s a more natural way to learn, Wilson says.

“Today, there are so many formal, organized activities for children they have little time to just play on their own. But unorganized play is necessary for the development of imagination and creativity.”

“Play also requires the

development of motor skills and physical co-ordination, and these are basic ways to learn that we don’t use very much in school,” she adds.

Games played to music or with chanting are particularly good, because the rhythm helps the learning process.

“Children seem to have a natural inclination for

rhythmic patterns,” Wilson says. “Rhythmic patterns can help a child with reading, with learning basic concepts and analytical skills, and with an understanding of numbers. Counting songs are an excellent way to develop number concepts in young children, because math is really about the same kind of patterns as music.”

Because reading is such an important part of learning in school, Wilson suggests parents use play as a way to develop reading skills.

“Games like Snakes and Ladders are fun, but they also teach prereading skills,” Wilson explains. “Children have to follow the game from top to bottom and from left to right, just as we do on the printed page. Physical games, like throwing and catching a ball, or dressing a doll, also develop the hand/eye coordination necessary for writing and other school tasks.”

Having children help with domestic chores can be a game for them, but it’s also an excellent way for them to learn.

“When you ask a child to find packages in the supermarket with certain words or letters, it teaches letter recognition. When they help fill a bag with apples, they learn to estimate numbers and sizes. When they help put away the groceries, they learn classification and sorting.”

Wilson also suggests that parents read with their children, rather than to them.

“You can involve more of the senses when you allow the child to interact with the story. You can read part of the story and ask the child to suggest what happens next, or point out common words and have the child find them elsewhere in the book. Every child from the age of two knows the M in the McDonald’s sign. You can have them look for other “m” words. It teaches young children that letters are associated with sounds.”

This article was originally published as part of the Alberta Teachers’ Association’s Summer Series in 2002.

Essential elements of indoor play spaces

Illinois-based architect Charles M. Schwab, who specializes in universal design with sustainability, has researched and written articles outlining the elements of inclusive and welcoming play spaces for children. When it comes to indoor play, Schwab recommends that families have a designated “play-away room.” Ideally, such a room would be visible from the home’s common areas while providing kids their own space to play and grow.

Elements of a welcoming play-away room include the following:

Safe and resilient flooring

It’s desirable to have a soft floor finish so kids can fall gently when roughhousing a bit. Rubber interconnecting floor tiles are a good choice. When

the kids get older, it can be replaced with thin, tight-looped, allergen-free and stain-resistant carpet that will still allow for wheelchair use, if necessary. Carpet also helps absorb excessive noise.

Colour

Colour has a powerful impact when used with intent and can really fire your kids’ imagination and creativity. Take a little time to research the qualities of various colours and let your kids explore their favourite colours with crayons and watercolours. Simple wall paint provides another easy and affordable way to make a colourful impact.

Window

There should be a window or other source of natural light in the play-

away room for it to be successful and enjoyable as a play space. If possible, light from two wall sides is most pleasing. Consider creating a special spot by building a window seat.

Storage

Some form of shelves or storage within the universal reach range of 18 to 48 inches above the floor will provide a place to organize toys and books and encourage your children to pick up after themselves.

Table and chairs

Kids need a place to sit and create, so appropriately sized table and chairs are essential. A variation of sizes are beneficial for kids of varying sizes. Don’t forget seating for you so you can join your children at play. It’s best to sit down at their level.

Shelter

We all know kids love shelter and like to make cubbie forts most anywhere. Ideas for unique forts include opening up the underside of a stairway and using cardboard or plywood to build a hollow tree trunk, a subway or skyscrapers.

Detailed explanations of the above concepts can be found in Schwab’s article, An Indoor and Inclusive Play-away Room Can Be a Building Block For Happy Children, which appeared in the July 2015 issue of EP Magazine, at www.eparent.com. It’s also available on Schwab’s website: www.universaldesignonline.com.

Three ways to foster a child’s creativity outside

Provide a playhouse

Kids’ playhouses are blank canvases that children fill with their imaginations. They might choose to build a castle or magic dress-up box that they can stock with dolls, shoes, costumes and clothes. They can create their own time machine or furnish an armory with armour, soldiers and more. A kids’ playhouse can transform into a pirate ship, space vehicle or disco dance floor.

Create an outdoor studio or clubhouse

A kids’ playhouse can serve as a haven for all types of outdoor adventures. It can be a naturalist retreat, hobby shop, flower shop, clubhouse or art studio. Help to organize playhouses for kids by providing the basic tools then turning things over to the children. Kids who develop hobbies or organize social clubs will quickly show initiative by adding their own improvements, collecting specimens and furnishing spaces with cool décor.

Spend quality time playing outdoors with kids

Take time to interact with children by working or playing with them on projects, but give them some alone time to encourage the development of new ideas. You might stage a play of a favourite story, plan a garden outdoors or create a mini recreation and sports centre where skateboards, sports equipment and bikes take active roles. Answer kids’ questions with a question to get them thinking. Encourage children to describe their work, play and feelings to stimulate creativity.

Source: www.playworks.org