

Free Play

by Amelia Fontein, Lower Elementary Assistant



"Let the children be free; encourage them; let them run outside when it is raining; let them remove their shoes when they find a puddle of water; and, when the grass of the meadows is damp with dew, let them run on it and trample it with their bare feet; let them rest peacefully when a tree invites them to sleep beneath its shade; let them shout and laugh when the sun wakes them in the morning as it wakes every living creature that divides its day between waking and sleeping." - Maria Montessori

If you travel to Hilltop Montessori School around noon on a weekday, you might be surprised to hear chatter and laughter coming from the forest adjacent to the parking lot. Walk the short dirt path into the woods, and you'll encounter children darting among the trees, building forts from bark and fallen branches, collecting fistfuls of acorns and pinecones, and creating a magical world of their own making. This environment offers lessons that are just as valuable as those taught inside our classrooms. Just as our morning classroom work cycle gives students the freedom to choose the "work" that they are developmentally ready for, our Elementary recess and after school time lets children choose any activities from fantasy play in the woods to developing their skateboarding skills.

In the increasingly structured and technological world in which we live, it is of utmost importance to provide children with unstructured play time in the natural world. At Hilltop, Elementary Recess and After Care are both designed to offer this time for children to engage in imaginative, free play within a safe, supervised environment -

often in "Haytown". The name "Haytown" has been around for years! Originally children collected cut grass from the freshly mowed fields and used that as their currency.

For our elementary students, social-emotional learning is a component of free play that we support during Recess and After Care. Children are constantly driven to resolve conflict with peers, collaborate on long-term projects, negotiate around shared resources, and make decisions to reach their own goals. We repeatedly see children devising compromises to divvy up bricks, logs, acorns, etc., working in a group for weeks at a time on elaborate forest dwellings, and learning to navigate the socially tricky ins and outs of running a Haytown business. Outside of Haytown, we often observe groups of students working together to develop rules and guidelines for games like Four Square, Capture the Flag, and Monkey Bar Tag.

Another enormous benefit of unstructured play is physical fitness and dexterity. Practicing pull ups on the monkey bars, lugging logs through Haytown to build a fort, learning how to ride a unicycle, balancing on a fallen log in the woods; these activities allow children to build their strength and coordination through play.

Finally, playing in the natural world allows children to expand their sense of wonder, creativity, and imagination. The economy within Haytown is living testament. Children open restaurants, antique shops, insurance agencies, newspaper publishers, general stores, arcades, and drive throughs. Customers looking to buy goods or services can use quartz stones, known as "crystals", to make their purchases. Children are continuously dreaming up original business schemes, finding new uses for old materials, and using their imaginations to create a true culture and community within Haytown. This is a genuine joy to observe.

So, next time you pick up your child take a moment to observe some of the amazing structures that have been built and the learning that's occurring during that unstructured time. As Maria Montessori reminds us: "Play is the work of the child."

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