

Returning Play & Joy to Early Childhood Education



**The Importance of Allowing
Children to Be Children**

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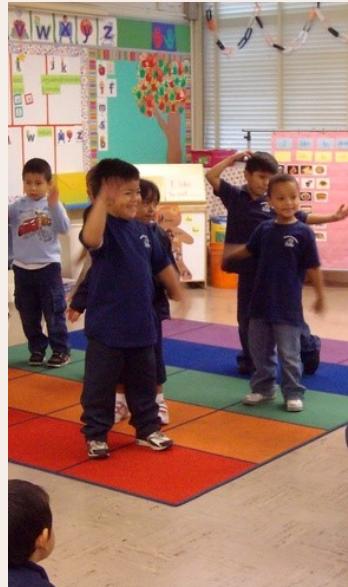
Why Are We Talking About This?

Anyone who knows young children knows they are joyful creatures who were born to play. How could joy and play *not* be a part of early childhood education?

Sadly, rather than being joyful and playful, these days young children are too often anxious, depressed, and frustrated by the unrealistic expectations placed on them.

Once upon a time, typical activities in the earliest grades included

- sorting and stacking blocks and other manipulatives (providing mathematical knowledge);
- singing and dancing, or acting out stories (emergent literacy);
- growing plants from seeds, exploring the outdoor environment, and investigating at sand and water tables (scientific knowledge); and
- trying on various roles and interacting with one another at housekeeping and other dramatic-play centers (social studies).



Today, activities like the ones pictured above are steadily disappearing. Due to an increased emphasis on academics and accountability, “instructional time” has become the priority, even at the earliest levels of education.

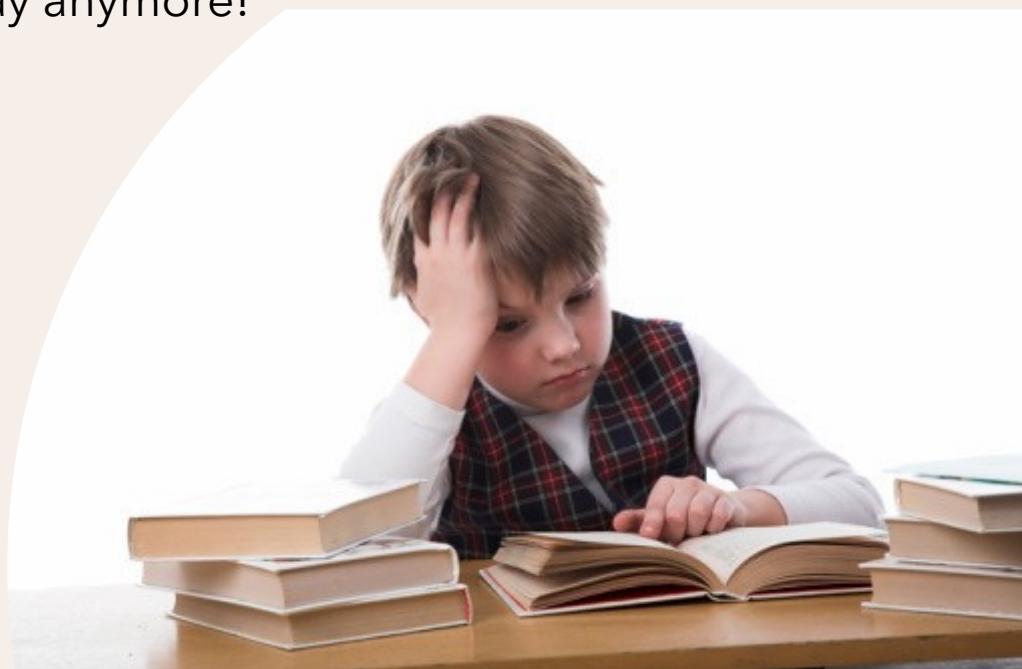
Due to a mistaken belief that “earlier is better,” policymakers demand more and more testing, and parents expect more and more evidence of what their children are “learning.” All of this results in a pushdown of the curriculum, with children sitting for endless hours, asked to do things for which they’re not developmentally ready.

As cited in a University of VA study, kindergarten has become the new 1st grade. The result of that pushdown means preschool

Has become the new kindergarten. Due to misguided beliefs that children must hurry up and succeed as soon as possible, play-based early childhood programs are fast becoming extinct.

Children who were excited to go to preschool or kindergarten soon discover that “learning” is not as much fun as they thought it would be. The stories I come across and the emails I get from desperate parents and teachers tell a tale of miserable, frustrated, and depressed little ones who already hate school at age 4 or 5!

And as parents push for their children to become “productive,” even play during non-school hours is becoming a thing of the past. To the point where I’m often told that children don’t even know HOW to play anymore!



If you're reading this, you believe, as I do, that children deserve a real childhood! That they should learn as nature intended – joyfully and playfully! Their learning should be active, not passive!



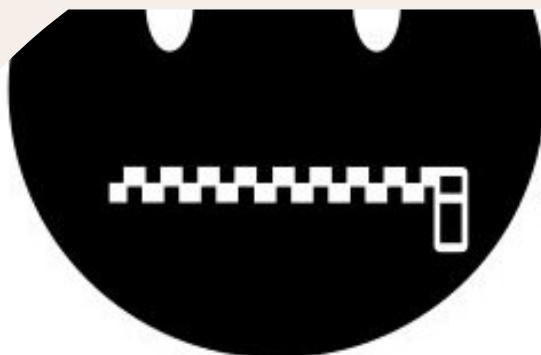
Children are born with a love of learning! Their whole early lives are *about* learning. But unrealistic expectations and a determination to accelerate child development (which isn't possible, by the

way), are stripping them of that joy and of what I call active (i.e., authentic) learning.

Parents & policymakers can't be expected to understand child development or to know the brain research about how children learn. That's why they should be counting on the experts – you! – to inform them! But they're not. They're making what seem to be arbitrary decisions and setting arbitrary standards based on false beliefs!

In *The Schools Our Children Deserve*, Alfie Kohn

wrote that he doesn't expect politicians to keep up with the research in education anymore than he expects them to keep up w/the research in kidney disease. The difference, he says, is that they're not telling the doctors when to prescribe dialysis. They ARE telling you how to do your job! That, too, is unacceptable.



SHUT UP

A colleague once said to me, "For too long teachers have been told to shut up and do their job – and for too long they've done just that."

And I've long wondered, what if they hadn't? What if they stood up to administrators who tried to bully them into harmful teaching practices? What if they clamored for a seat at

the table when decisions about early childhood education were being made? What if they made educating parents as much a part of their job as educating the children?

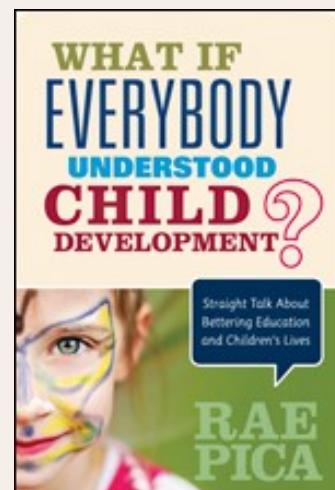
I'll tell you what: With all three of those scenarios, the children, their families, *and you* would benefit greatly!

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”

~ Margaret Mead

I love this quote. It gives me courage and hope that we can make the necessary changes in early childhood education. And, believe me, change is necessary.

Following are two chapters from my book, *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* One is about joy and one about play, and I hope they can help you advocate for both in early childhood education...



The Power of Joy

Music educator Emile Jacques-Dalcroze claimed that joy is the most powerful of all mental stimuli.

It's an interesting contention, especially considering the many non-joyful stories I hear from educators and parents about children crying over tests, children with so much homework that there's little time for anything else, let alone joy, in their lives, children discouraged by schooling as early as kindergarten, and children who are stressed out, burned out, acting out, and dropping out. Oh yes, and popping antidepressants at an astonishing and alarming rate.

Sadly, none of this surprises me anymore. After all, what part of today's emphasis on accountability and academics screams joy?



How much joy comes doing worksheets? How much joy do we witness from students bent over desks and filling in bubbles?

How much joy is experienced by students whose success, along with their teacher's, depends on how well they do on endless tests?

Granted, there isn't a whole lot of research to back up Dalcroze's joy contention – because there aren't many researchers who would have considered it a worthy topic. But there is some, including a study by two Finnish educators that points to several sources of joy in the classroom.

They include

- active, engaged efforts from the children;
- desire to master the material – to become “expert” at something;
- students allowed to work at their own level and pace;
- finishing a task or solving a problem and the time to do so;
- the chance to make choices;
- sharing and collaborating with other students; and
- the opportunity to play.

We *do* have a great deal of research detailing the impact of stress on the learning process. Dr. William Stixrud sums it up quite nicely when he writes, “stress hormones actually turn off the parts of the brain that allow us to focus attention, understand ideas, commit information to memory

and reason critically.” Not a whole lot of learning going on when that happens. It’s darn hard to think straight when your system is poised for fight-or-flight.

Despite this evidence, the policymakers just keep demanding practices that create more stress and suck the joy right out of school. Former Education Secretary Arne Duncan admitted in a blog that too much testing can rob school of joy and cause unnecessary stress. But his solution was a one-year reprieve from test-based teacher ratings. (Seriously?)

I might forgive the policymakers for ignoring (or, if I’m giving them the benefit of the doubt, being unaware of) the research on the roles of stress and joy in learning, but Dalcroze clearly didn’t need research to reach his conclusion. During his time, there was no Internet to allow for large-scale surveys or the collection of anecdotal evidence. There were no neuroimaging and brain mapping scans to reveal that more pleasure areas of the brain light up when individuals are undertaking tasks they enjoy.

I imagine he based his opinion on how *he* felt when learning something new or when engaged in the act of creation. Perhaps he discovered that whenever he was fully engrossed in a project, he

experienced what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls “flow” – that wonderful occurrence when time passes without our noticing. Of being so involved in what we’re doing that we’re aware of nothing else. Each of us has gloried in such experiences on occasion – for example, in the act of writing, painting, cooking, or teaching.



Perhaps Dalcroze based his contention on the observation of children! He may well have observed them in the process of creating and learning. Watch any child involved in self-directed activity – whether it’s trying to write their name for the first time or experimenting with a chemistry set – and you’ll witness flow. There’s no one more engaged – or engaging to

watch – than children fully absorbed in an undertaking. They direct all their attention and effort into it. They put their heart and soul into it. And, if required to stop, the upset is profound, because who wants to stop feeling joy?

Wholehearted absorption doesn't describe much about what kids – or teachers – are required to do in school these days. And that is such a shame. Imagine the lost potential as kids

“Joy and enthusiasm are absolutely essential for learning to happen – literally, scientifically, as a matter of fact and research.”

~ Judy Willis

continue to struggle to learn when anxious and unhappy.
Imagine the

ever-increasing number of students stressed out, burned out, acting out, and dropping out if things don't turn around and quickly. Imagine the lost potential if children are kept from discovering the power of joy in the classroom.

Neurologist and teacher Judy Willis has written, “Joy and enthusiasm are absolutely essential for learning to happen – literally, scientifically, as a matter of fact and research. Shouldn't it be our challenge and opportunity to design learning that embraces these ingredients?”

What's a Teacher to Do?

- Be excited and joyful about the learning that takes place in your classroom. When you're excited, the children will be excited.
- As often as possible, use humor in the classroom to lighten things up. In a [BAM Radio discussion](#), Diana Loomans said that when you have a laughing classroom, you have students who are participating more, perform better, and retain more information. In that same segment, Ed Dunkelblau contended that human laughter and play are pleasurable experiences that attract and engage students, making it easier to teach. He said, "Humor is one of the few educational strategies that does as much good for the teacher as it does for the students."
- Employ some of Steven Wolk's suggestions for bringing joy to school. In his piece, "[Joy in School](#)," he offers such recommendations as:

- ✓ Give students choice.
- ✓ Let students create things.
- ✓ Take time to tinker.
- ✓ Get outside.
- ✓ Have some fun together.



Excerpted & adapted from *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* © 2015 Rae Pica

Play Is Not a 4-Letter Word

Recreation and leisure, to my knowledge, have never held a high value in the United States. Instead, we value hard work, achievement, and accomplishment. All are worthy of our respect and pride. But isn't it ironic that a country whose constitution calls for the pursuit of happiness seems to feel a collective guilt about the very idea of anything fun? And it's getting worse all the time. "Busy" is the new status symbol. "Overwhelmed" is the new normal, as a colleague of mine likes to say.

How did this happen? When did productivity and busyness become our number-one priorities? Even given the Puritan work ethic, life in the States has become so unbalanced that one side of the seesaw is pretty much grounded.

If that's how adults choose to live, fine; they're able to make their own choices. But why must we



insist that children, who by their very nature are playful, share these particular values? Why are we so eager for our children to “act like adults?” Especially considering that adults can’t exactly be called happy or content these days. Far too many are fried from the effects of living a too-full life. So why would we want children to be subjected to anything remotely like that? Having experienced the many negative effects



of trying to do too much in too little time – of living lives that are contrary to human nature – why aren’t we adults doing everything in our power to *protect* children from a similar fate? Now more than ever, why aren’t we doing all we can to ensure children experience true childhood while they have the chance?

Instead, I hear from educators all across the country that children actually don’t know how

to play anymore. Children! These are creatures *born* to play – just as kittens and puppies are born to play. But because they’re so busy being scheduled and supervised and “schooled” – all of which are considered more essential than something as “frivolous” as play – children are losing the knack to do what comes naturally to them.

In *Keeping Your Kids Out Front Without Kicking Them from Behind*, authors Ian Tofler and Theresa Foy DeGeronimo bluntly write:

In the process of trying to prepare our children for a rapidly evolving and fiercely competitive world, we too often professionalize and adultify our children by taking the fun out of childhood. We have turned summer camps into training camps where kids work hard to learn and improve useful skills. We have stolen lazy Saturday afternoons spent daydreaming under a tree and replaced them with adult-supervised, adult-organized activities and classes. We have taken kids out of the neighborhood playgrounds and placed them in dance and music classes, in SAT preparation classes, and on organized athletic teams. There is no time that can be wasted on idle pastimes.

Why do we now insist that *accomplishment* and *achievement* be words associated with childhood? *Play* is the word that is supposed to be associated with childhood. And true play is nothing like what Tofler and DeGeronimo describe. True play is open-ended and intrinsically motivated. True play is not directed by adults. it has nothing to do with product (home runs, goals, grades, points, and wins) and everything to do with process (fun).

Process before product!

But true play is being pushed out of children's lives at an alarming rate. If it doesn't serve some "purpose" – like winning a sports trophy or creating a potential Olympian – today's parents have little regard for it. They are part of a culture that has come to see little value in fun.

It pains me to have to reiterate the many benefits children accrue from play – because that seems to reinforce the demands of those

who insist there be “results” from everything children do. I mean, I shouldn’t have to defend play for children any more than I should have to defend their eating, sleeping, and breathing.

But it bears emphasizing that the adult personality is built on the child’s play. Among the social skills learned are the ability to share, cooperate, negotiate, compromise, make and revise rules, and to take the perspectives of others. Play provides opportunities for children

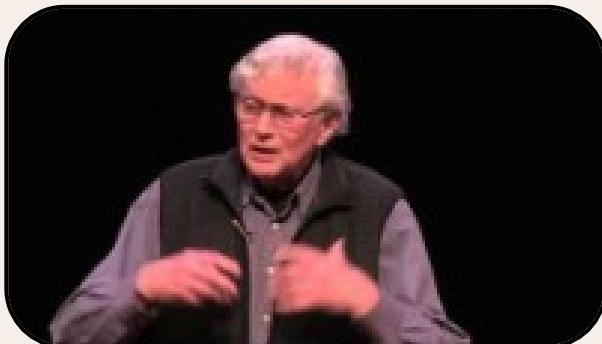
to meet and solve problems – the number-one ability they will most assuredly require in this rapidly changing

world. It helps children express their thoughts and feelings and to deal with stress. To cope with fears they can’t yet understand or articulate. Through play, children acquire literacy, mathematical, and creative skills. Make-believe play, in particular, has been linked to self-regulation skills, which in turn have been linked to greater academic success than IQ has. Self-regulation skills also help children with self-control and with managing stress while learning. Moreover, if children don’t

“I shouldn’t have to defend play for children any more than I should have to defend their eating, sleeping, and breathing.”

learn to play as *children*, they aren't likely to discover its value as adults. And just think about what a dreary, deadening existence daily life will become without a playful attitude.

Stuart Brown, MD, founder of the National Institute for Play, and psychologist and play researcher Dr. Peter Gray are among the experts who link play deprivation with hostility and depression among children, youths, and adults. They point out that as opportunities for children to play have lessened, aggression and depression have increased. There is no way that's a coincidence.



Peter Gray's 16-minute Tedx Talk is a must-watch!

Really, we have to ask ourselves: If children begin living like adults in childhood, what will there be left to look forward to? And what joy will they find as adults if striving to "succeed" has become life's sole purpose? To my way of thinking, a life without joy can't be considered a successful one.

What's a Teacher to Do?

- If you're a preschool or kindergarten teacher, do all you can to ensure your curriculum is play-based. Even acquiring knowledge about academics can – and should – be achieved through play. Sorting and stacking blocks, for example, is both mathematics and science. Doing it with another child brings in social studies – and, if they're communicating about what they're doing, emergent literacy.
- If you're an early childhood educator being pressured by parents to have a more academics-oriented curriculum, educate them. Help them to understand the value of play. Also, reassure them that their children will not fall behind. Studies have shown that there are neither short-term nor long-term advantages of early academics versus play and that there are no distinguishable differences by first grade.

- If you're being pressured by administrators to have a more academics-oriented curriculum, educate them too. Join with other like-minded teachers and show your administrators the research. Someone with wisdom and knowledge has to stand for the children!
- If you're a teacher in the primary grades, find as many ways as possible to incorporate play and creativity into the curriculum. Use project-based approaches that allow for a certain level of freedom and experimentation. Take brain breaks during which the kids can sing or dance. Allow them to act out the plots of stories or to hold mock debates. Incorporate divergent problem solving so kids get to "play" with a variety of responses to challenges.
- Never withhold recess as punishment. Recess may be the only time during which a child can experience free play.

Excerpted & adapted from *What If Everybody Understood Child Development?* © 2015 Rae Pica

Play's Benefits

Here are the benefits cited on page 19. In no way is this list *complete*! Through play, children learn to:

- share, cooperate, negotiate;
- make and revise rules;
- take the perspective of others;
- meet and solve problems;
- express their thoughts and feelings;
- cope with fears;
- self-regulate and manage stress.



Moreover, through play, children acquire literacy, mathematical, and creative skills.

Here are two of many podcasts on [BAM Radio Network](#) that explore the topics of play and/or joy for young children. The expertise of these outside sources can help back you up and add credibility to your messages.



Play and Learning: Still Misunderstood

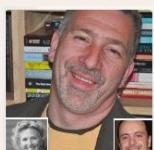
Rae Pica with Kristen Kemple, Amanda Morgan

Why do we still misunderstand the connection between play and learning? How can we solve this disconnect?

Follow on Twitter: @bamradionetwork @raepica1 @NotJustCute

#edchat #edreform #ece #earlyed #AskingWhatIf

<https://www.bamradionetwork.com/track/play-and-learning-still-misunderstood/>



Five Ways to Make Joy a Part of Learning: Why It Matters

Rae Pica with Susan Engel, Steven Wolk, Tony Sinanis

Our guests tell us that joy is an essential component of learning. Tune in as we explore the role of joy in learning and discover how to create more of it in our classrooms.

Follow on Twitter: @TonySinanis @bodymindchild @bamradionetwork

<https://www.bamradionetwork.com/track/five-ways-to-make-joy-a-part-of-learning-why-it-matters/>



Basics of Becoming a Champion for Play & Joyful Learning in ECE

Excerpted & adapted from Rae's online
course, ["Become a Champion for Play &
Joyful Learning!"](#)
(see page 31 for more information)

These first two points will help you be seen as the professional you are. Until people respect the early childhood profession, they'll be less inclined to heed your recommendations.



We say this to children all the time. In this case it means it's important to use words that show a respect for yourself and the profession! You are an early childhood *teacher*, *educator*, or *caregiver* not a "daycare worker," for example – and certainly not a babysitter! Also, if you're in a center, as opposed to a public or private school, don't refer to it as a "daycare" center. Nobody is taking care of days. You should call it a childcare or early learning center.

This aligns with the last recommendation. Everybody thinks they know what a teacher does – because they all went to school. It's ridiculous. And because early childhood professionals work with the youngest children, much of the public believes that they do nothing but play and blow noses all day. That's why it's important for you to tell your stories! By that, I don't mean you have to get behind a podium. I simply mean we put our fondness for talking to good use! Take advantage of opportunities to tell your stories to friends, neighbors, businesspeople, and more!



RESEARCH



Gather research to back you up! That way it's not your word alone.

Whether you're presenting the research to parents, policymakers, or administrators, it's critical not to inundate them. Choose the information and articles that best and most succinctly make your point! This will show respect for their time.

Remember WIFM

If you're addressing administrators or policymakers, don't go it alone! There's always strength in numbers. And whether you're addressing a superintendent or a senator, you'll be less likely to be viewed as a lone "kook" if you have backup!

LONG
BRIEF

It's human nature to consider what our own reward is at the end of an action taken. Most people simply are more inclined to respond to something that benefits *them*. That's why it's important to be able to place yourself in the shoes of the person from whom you're requesting attention and action. What matters most to them?





Being respectful of your audience will get you a lot further than disrespect! As the saying goes, you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar!

Focusing on one issue at a time helps us keep our remarks brief AND be respectful of our audience's time. It also ensures that we don't overwhelm them. In this case, the phrase "too much information" doesn't relate to oversharing, but rather to keeping our audience from becoming distracted.



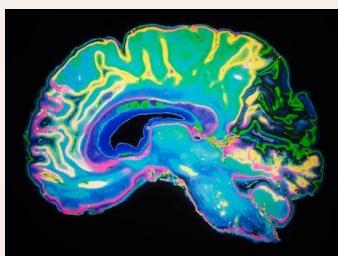
Rae Recommends...

As you do your part to return play and joy to early childhood education, it's important to know you're not alone! Here's more "backup" for you!



"Expert organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Academy of Sciences, and the Centers for Disease Control agree that play and physical activity are critical foundations of childhood, academics, and future skills--yet politicians are destroying play in childhood education and replacing it with standardization, stress, and forcible physical restraint, which are damaging to learning and corrosive to society."

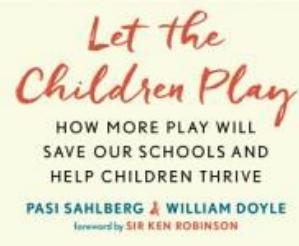
<https://amzn.to/3oBLIFS>



"The Neuroscience Behind Stress and Learning"
by Judy Willis
<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/neuroscience-behind-stress-and-learning-judy-willis>

This organization's name says it all! Founded by two of my ECE heroes – Nancy Carlsson-Paige & Diane Levin – they are a non-profit organization working for a just, equitable, and quality early childhood education for every young child.

www.dey.org

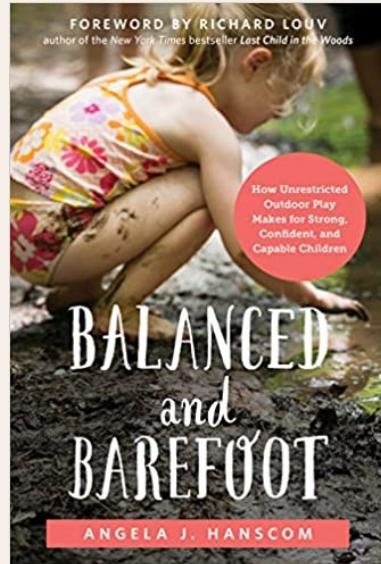


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Rae Recommends...

This book, from pediatric occupational therapist Angela Hanscom, offers advice for offsetting the “virtual” by ensuring children are fully engaging their body, mind, and all of the senses. Angela explains why unrestrained movement and outdoor play are vital for a child’s cognitive and physical development.

<https://amzn.to/3oEA3X1>



You’re welcome to print and distribute any of my blog posts to help you return play and joy to ECE...and childhood to children! I only ask that you include a credit and, if possible, my website url.

#AskingWhatIf



What If We Took Control
of Our 2021?



What Are Today's Children Learning from Their Childhood?

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BECOME A CHAMPION FOR PLAY & JOYFUL LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



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Take the 1st step in “Rae’s Revolution!”

Tired of policies that replace play and joyful learning in early childhood education with worksheets and arbitrary standards? Saddened by the children’s anxiety as they struggle to comply with expectations beyond their developmental readiness?

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Learn more or enroll [here!](#)

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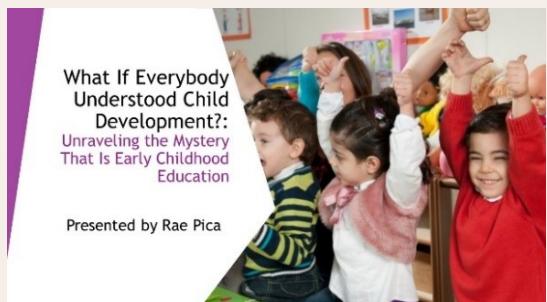
NURTURING
CHILDREN IN
CHALLENGING
TIMES

RAE PICA



What If Everybody
Understood Child
Development?
Unraveling the Mystery
That Is Early Childhood
Education

Presented by Rae Pica



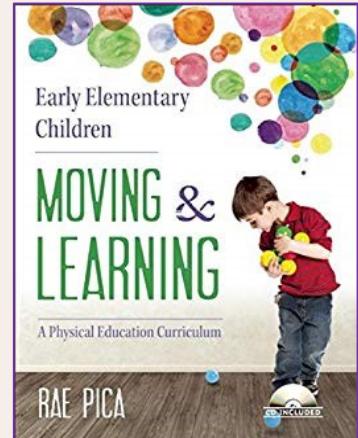
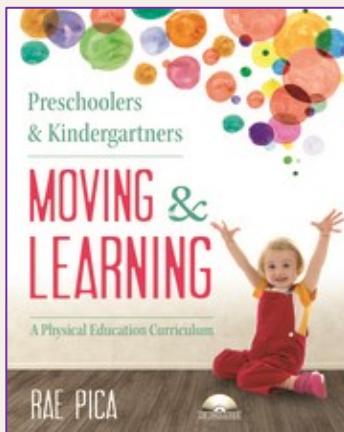
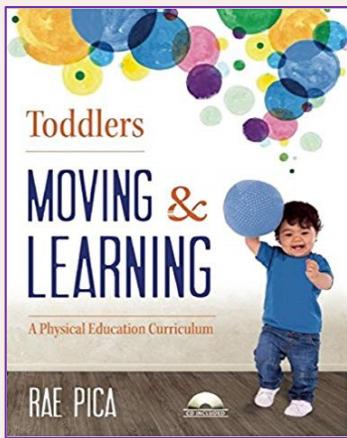
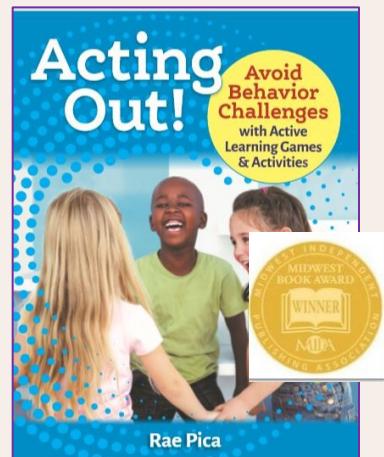
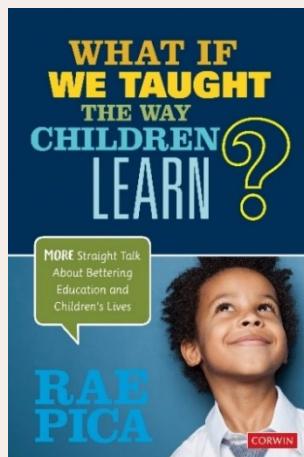
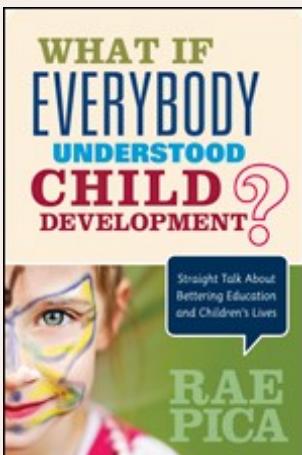
Webinar, handout, &
certificate of
completion!

For elementary school
principals & admins!

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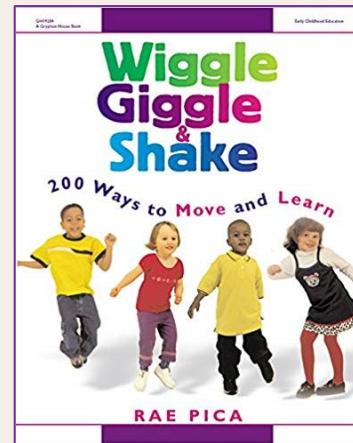
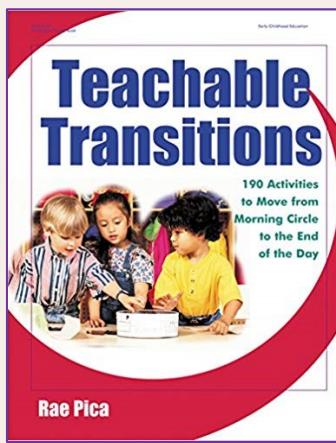
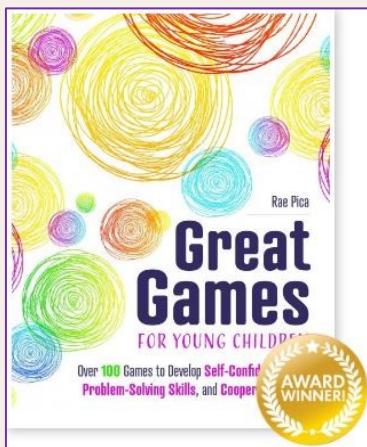
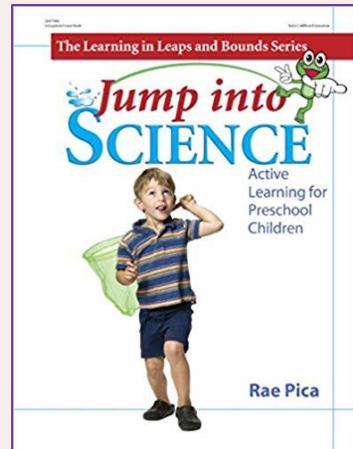
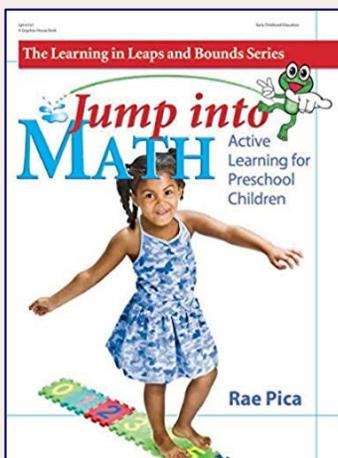
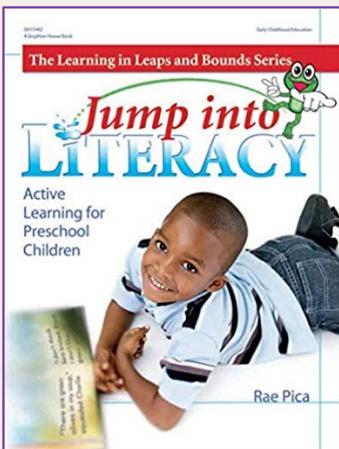
OTHER RESOURCES!

Below are books I've written to make your job as an educator easier. Click on the images to learn more.



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Below are books I've written to make your job as an educator easier. Click on the images to learn more.



A PLAYFUL WAY TO EDUCATE & ADVOCATE!



RAE PICA



Rae has been an early childhood education consultant since 1980. Dedicated to developing and educating the whole child, she is the author of 22 books, including the text *Experiences in Movement & Music* (in its 5th edition), and two of her latest, *What If We Taught the Way Children Learn?* and *Acting Out! Avoid Behavior Challenges with Active Learning Games & Activities*.

Rae is a former adjunct instructor for the University of New Hampshire and is currently a blogger, online course creator, and popular virtual presenter. The National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association for Family Child Care, Eric Jensen's Learning Brain Expo, state WIC organizations, education conferences, resource and referral agencies, and schools in 46 states and Canada are among those who have invited Rae to address their groups.

As a consultant, Rae has shared her expertise with such groups as

- ✓ Sesame Street Research Department
- ✓ Head Start Bureau
- ✓ Centers for Disease Control
- ✓ Nickelodeon's *Blue's Clues*
- ✓ Gymboree
- ✓ Hasbro
- ✓ Mattel
- ✓ Nike
- ✓ Bright Horizons
- ✓ Canadian Broadcast Corp.
- ✓ Chicago Children's Museum