Five Essentials to Meaningful Play

By Marcia L. Nell and Walter F. Drew

“One of my clearest childhood memories is slithering through the tall grass like a snake with my brother and sister.”

When you think back on your childhood, what happy play memories come to mind? Adults today tend to think back on their childhood play memories with nostalgia and often call them the “good old days.” Memories of joyful and meaningful play experiences help bind families together emotionally, even long after children are grown. Are our children experiencing the same kind of joy, meaning, and family bonding in their play?
Here are five elements essential to meaningful play that create those rich memories we treasure:

1. Children make their own decisions.

When children choose how to play for themselves, they experience freedom in making those choices. They also begin to see connections between choice and the consequences or results of that choice. The type of toys or materials parents offer can help their children make more meaningful decisions. Open-ended materials can be used in many ways so children can decide for themselves how to use them. For example, a child can imagine a block to be a fire truck or any number of things. On the other hand, a toy fire truck is usually used as a fire truck. Foam pieces, little wooden sticks, ribbon scraps, and other reusable resources are all open-ended materials that inspire creative thinking and delight when children use them to make something no one has ever made before.

2. Children are intrinsically motivated.

The impulse to play comes from a natural desire to understand the world. This play impulse is as strong as your child’s desire for food or sleep.1 It is this intrinsic motivation that allows a child to regulate her own feelings and desires in order to keep playing. Because children eventually find it more important to be part of play with their friends than to satisfy their own wants and needs at that moment, children learn self-control. And self-control has been shown to lead to success in later years, especially in today’s information age, where distractions are part of daily life.2

3. Children become immersed in the moment.

In true play, children are so fully engaged that they lose awareness of their surroundings, time, and space. In this risk-free atmosphere where reality is suspended, children have the security and safety they need to experiment, try new ideas, and investigate the laws of nature. Although they are immersed in their play, children still can recognize reality versus fantasy, something parents often wonder about.

4. Play is spontaneous, not scripted.

Often, play is totally unplanned. Other times, play is planned, but a child impulsively makes a change. One child changes his mind, or perhaps a toy does not cooperate. This sense of the unknown provides children with opportunities to develop flexibility in their thinking and decision-making, which is a vital life skill.

5. Play is enjoyable.

Play always has an emotional response attached to it. Without this emotional connection, the experience is simply an activity, not PLAY. Enjoyment is the direct result of engaging in play. It is FUN! These five essential elements of play outline why play provides your child with a rich experience. And isn't that what we want for our children, to develop play memories that will become the "good old days"?

Read Walter and Marcia's book From Play to Practice: Connecting Teachers' Play to Children's Learning.

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