The Power of Play in a High-Tech World

Cari Ebert, M.S., CCC-SLP

Early Childhood Spring Conference
Mandan, North Dakota
March 23, 2017

Contact Information

Cari Ebert, M.S., CCC-SLP
Therapy, Consulting & Professional Development

Like my Facebook Page: Cari Ebert Seminars
Find me on Pinterest @carislp
Email: cari@cariebertseminars.com
Website: cariebertseminars.com

Why We Are Here

To gain an understanding and appreciation of the power of play in the development of young children being born and raised in the digital age

True play seems to be disappearing from our homes, neighborhoods, childcare centers and schools

How Young Children Learn

• Young children learn through discovery and exploration using all of their senses (whole body learning)
• Young children learn through social interactions with caregivers, siblings and peers
• Young children learn by doing, by experiencing, by manipulating real objects
• Young children learn through movement and play

5 Components of True Play

True play is...
• intrinsically motivating
• based more on imagination than rules
• child-directed
• more about the process than the end product
• fun

Cari’s Early Childhood Motto

Young children learn best through play that is relevant and meaningful to their life!

(not through direct instruction, drill work or flashcards)
**Children Learn Best in Context**

Best way to teach a young child what an apple is...

![](apple.png)

**Declarative vs. Procedural Knowledge**

Declarative knowledge is acquiring information

Procedural knowledge is knowing what to do with the information you have memorized

- Passing the written portion of the driver's test is an example of declarative knowledge while passing the actual driving portion of the test is an example of procedural knowledge
- Labeling flashcards out of context is an example of declarative knowledge while using words to request desired items is an example of procedural knowledge

**The iPad**

Apps on the iPad for young children are just animated flashcards!

We are still teaching concepts out of CONTEXT!

**Myths about Learning and Play**

Many adults in our society believe that...

- Learning must be work
- Learning occurs during adult-directed activities
- Play is frivolous, purposeless activity
- Play is what children do when they aren’t learning
- Play skills come naturally to children
- Children benefit most from educational toys
- High-tech toys are important for young children
- Academics should be emphasized as early as possible

**Quality of First Words**

- Letters, numbers, shapes and colors can be rote memorized and don’t necessarily indicate how “smart” a young child is
- Letters, numbers, shapes and colors aren’t “power words” to a young child
- 3 categories of “first words” for young children:
  1. Social words
  2. Power words
  3. Concept words

It seems as though childhood has become a race to see how quickly young children can learn their letters, numbers, shapes and colors...as if these are the things that matter most in life...
Preparing Children for School

There are 5 developmental domains and they are all equally important in preparing young children for school – we must strive to educate the WHOLE child

1. Cognitive
2. Communication
3. Social-Emotional
4. Physical
5. Self-Help/Adaptive

Developmental Benefits of Play

Play is critical for expanding cognitive, language, social-emotional, motor and self-help skills

Play is essential for healthy brain development

Play sparks creativity and curiosity

Play facilitates appropriate social interactions with peers and adults

Play allows young children the opportunity to practice new skills

“Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.”

Mr. Rogers

“Learning can only happen when a child is interested. If he is not interested, it’s like throwing marshmallows at his head and calling it eating.”

Katrina Gatleben

Play helps children gain a better understanding of the world around them

Play enhances problem solving skills

Play helps children learn to deal with frustration

Play provides children with opportunities to make choices and exercise control over their actions

Play is relevant and meaningful to the child and thus enhances his/her ability to concentrate

Play experiences provide learning opportunities

Play offers children a variety of opportunities for testing boundaries and exploring risks

Play provides sensory rich experiences

Play fosters self-esteem

Play provides children with opportunities to make choices and exercise control over their actions

Play is fun!
Play is Fun!

“A wonderful cycle of learning is driven by the pleasure of play. A child is curious; she explores and discovers. The discovery brings pleasure; the pleasure leads to repetition and practice. Practice brings mastery; mastery brings the pleasure and confidence to once again act on curiosity. All learning ... is accelerated and facilitated by repetition fueled by the pleasure of play.”
Copple and Bredekamp, 2009

All learning begins with curiosity!

Types of Play

Active play vs. Passive entertainment
Child-directed play vs. Adult-directed play
Object play vs. Social play

Active Play vs. Passive Entertainment

• Active Play: an activity from which one derives amusement, entertainment, or enjoyment by taking a participatory. When a child is actively engaged in an activity, he is integrating his senses. WHOLE BODY LEARNING!
• Passive Entertainment: an activity from which one derives amusement, entertainment, or enjoyment by observing passively as something interesting happens. The child is seeing and hearing. SEDENTARY!

Examples

• Active Play: Child connects the track, then pushes toy trains around it, while making train sounds
• Passive Entertainment: Child watches as a battery operated train goes around the track while it makes some awesome train sounds
• Which one better facilitates learning and development? ACTIVE PLAY
**Adult-Directed Play vs. Child-Directed Play**

- **Adult-directed play** means the activity has been planned by the adult, is initiated by the adult and the ending point is determined by the adult.

- **Child-directed play** means following the child’s lead by playing with things of interest to the child - this type of play is often guided by the adult (use of scaffolding) in an effort to challenge the child & teach new skills.

**Scaffolding**

Support for children learning new concepts - comparable to structures erected alongside newly constructed buildings. The scaffolding (adult guidance) supports the construction (developing brain and body) and is taken away after completion (once skill is learned).

In the early childhood classrooms, some activities will be adult-directed but some activities should be child-directed...

Think about the difference between an ACTIVITY and an OPPORTUNITY.

**Arts & Crafts Example:** The power of “Loose Parts”

**Theory of Loose Parts**

Architect Simon Nicholson’s theory of loose parts (1972)

The more variables (or loose parts) in an environment, the more opportunities for interaction, discovery, and creativity.
In early childhood, some activities will be adult-directed but sometimes we should allow the child to take the lead – one way to do this is with loose parts.

Is Child-Directed Play Enough?

We want kids to be able to learn naturally during child-directed play time but some young children will require more structure and adult guidance early on in their development because their free play is not purposeful.

Children with special needs and some children from disadvantaged backgrounds may struggle developing purposeful play skills:
1. Wanderers
2. Holders
3. Organizers
4. Hoarders
5. Flitters
6. Search and Destroyers
7. Repeaters
8. Chewers

Object Play vs. Social Play

Object play refers to how children play with toys

Social play refers to how children play with each other

Stages of Object Play
(birth to age 5)

1. Random and exploratory play
2. Cause and effect play
3. Purposeful/functional play
4. Representational/symbolic play
5. Constructive play
6. Dramatic play

Object Play: Stage 1
Random & Exploratory Play

- Emerges soon after birth as babies reach and grasp – first for familiar people, then objects/toys
- Babies engage in this type of play using their senses while discovering and exploring the physical environment around them
- Involves repetitive motor movements: mouthing, shaking, banging, or batting at toys
**Random & Exploratory Play**

- A baby’s playground is the floor!
- Limit containers!
- Containers are developmentally inhibiting!
- All development occurs on the tummy!

**Object Play: Stage 2**

**Cause and Effect Play**

- Emerges around age 9 months/when child sits independently
- Child plays purposefully with objects in an intended repetitive manner – then repeats the action because he remembers the pattern...it is predictable
- Pushing, pulling, pounding & putting in are common behaviors necessary for activating cause and effect toys (often battery operated).

**Object Play: Stage 3**

**Purposeful/Functional Play**

- Emerges around age 15-18 months
- Child uses objects the way they are intended to be used (literal stage)

Examples:
- brushes hair with brush
- rolls ball
- pushes cars
- stacks blocks
What play stage?

Object Play: Stage 4
Symbolic/Pretend Play

- Emerges around age 3
- Child begins to use symbolism in play - this is the beginning of pretend play

Examples:
Child pretends a large box is a house
Child pretends to feed his stuffed animal
Child builds a train out of wooden blocks
Child pretends to call grandma on the phone

Stage 3 vs. Stage 4
(literal) (pretend)

Symbolic/Pretend Play

- Symbolic play (Stage 4) has greater cognitive demands than functional play with real objects (Stage 3)
- Symbolic play is engaging in pretend activities out of context which means the child must rely on past experiences and memories

Object Play: Stage 5
Constructive Play

- Emerges around age 4
- Child manipulates objects for the purpose of constructing or creating something specific.
- The child has an end goal in mind and this is what dictates the play.
- Facilitates gross and fine motor skill development.

Examples:
Creating with play-dough, wooden blocks, sidewalk chalk, Lego's, etc.

Constructing a Zoo
Object Play: Stage 6
Dramatic Play

- Emerges around age 4-5
- Play is based on past events and typically involves sequencing of steps
- Child pretends to be someone or do something – takes on different roles
- Dress up and props are often involved

Examples:
- Play doctor
- Play restaurant
- Play house
- Play store
- Play school
- Play veterinarian

Social Play: Stage 1
Play with Adults

- A young child’s first play partner is his or her parent(s)
- We need to be aware of what kind of play is occurring; child-directed, adult-guided or adult-directed
- It is our job as to coach families, teachers and other caregivers about the importance of child-directed play

Social Play: Stage 2
Independent Play Skills

- Solitary play is when the child entertains himself
- This means the child is able to initiate play without direction from the adult
- All children need to be able to entertain themselves for at least short periods of time

Social Play: Stage 3
Spectator Play

- Child watches as other children play
- Child shows interest in peers
- Does not join in or interact

*Children with autism do not typically demonstrate spectator play because they do not show interest in their peers
Social Play: Stage 4
Parallel Play Skills

- Children play near each other, but they don’t interact – indicates children can co-exist
- Child may watch other children or may ignore them, but their presence is tolerated
- Typically developing 2 year olds have parallel play skills

Social Play: Stage 5
Associative Play Skills

- Children are engaged in one activity with some interaction, but each child ultimately does his own thing
- There is no formal organization, group direction, group interaction or definite goal
- The children may borrow or lend toys and they may imitate others in the group, but each child acts independently
- Associative play skills signify the emergence of social skills and this takes time

Remember...proximity leads to interaction! Think about this when structuring the activity and the environment.

Social Play: Stage 6
Cooperative Play Skills

- Children work together toward some common outcome or goal
- This means they are communicating with each other and planning the steps necessary to reach their intended goal
- This is the beginning of compromise, negotiation and conflict resolution
Cooperative Play with Lego’s

How Play has Changed
• What we did for fun when we were kids compared to what kids do today for fun
• More distractions today for young children
• Childhood seems to have moved indoors as a result of technology
• Play today seems to be more about store bought toys
• Today children expect 2 things from play: They expect to be entertained or instructed

Play in a High-Tech World
• With the advance of technology, electronics have become an essential part of play
• It is difficult to purchase a toy that does not require batteries or isn’t screen-based
• We need to ask ourselves if these high-tech toys are silencing a child’s natural curiosity

Traditional vs. Virtual Playground
Instead of playing on the traditional playground, today’s children are often playing on the virtual playground (in front of a screen), thus experiencing the world differently
• Direct vs. indirect contact with the world
• Real vs. pretend experiences
• Natural world vs. the cyber world
• Interactions with real people vs. simulated ones
• Actual consequences vs. pretend consequences

The Traditional Playground

The Virtual Playground
Technology has Limitations

- When children are learning through electronic media, their natural curiosity and creativity are being limited because the toys have pre-determined choices.
- Therefore, the play is directed by the person who designed the high-tech toy or wrote the app.
- We want to allow children a variety of opportunities to learn through exploration and discovery with all of their senses—not just seeing and hearing.
- We want the child to provide all the power, all the imagination, and all the sound effects (we don’t want toys stealing those opportunities away from the child).

What Technology is Displacing in Young Children

- Face to face interactions with their caregivers.
- Movement: rolling, crawling, walking, running, climbing, jumping, skipping.
- Manipulating and playing with objects.
- Exploring the environment.
- True play (today children expect 2 things from play: they expect to be entertained or instructed).

The lure of technology is powerful...when given a choice between screen play and non-screen play, which one will the child choose?

We live in the Digital Age

- Today’s children are being raised in the “digital age” and electronic media is here to stay.
- The best thing parents, caregivers, and teachers can do is be sure that electronic media is never allowed to replace true play.
- Electronic media can be a part of our world—though we shouldn’t let it dictate our world...we are social creatures and we need to physically interact and communicate with each other.
- Technology in addition to...but never in lieu of.

High-Tech Gadgets and Toys

- Young children need multiple opportunities for meaningful play with interested, patient caregivers in a variety of settings and with a wide range of activities.
- If we deprive a child of appropriate play experiences, we run the risk of that child becoming dependent on things to entertain him.
- We need to place an emphasis on experiences, activities, and interactions/relationships—not fancy high-tech THINGS.

Instead of interacting with caregivers (eye to eye)...

Many infants & toddlers are interacting with technology (eye to screen)
Children can learn some concepts through educational TV programs, apps, and online games, but it is important to understand that young children learn best through hands-on, interactive sensory-rich experiences with real people.

A child’s first and most important toy is his or her parent - there is no app you can download or high-tech toy you can purchase that will ever be more important to your child’s development than the TIME you spend interacting with, talking to, and playing with your child.

In this digital age parents, caregivers and teachers must work harder than ever to build strong relationships with young children because we live in a world filled with distractions.

Digitally distracted parents and caregivers are not “truly present.” Being truly present requires more than just being in the same room with a child – it requires us to be engaged.

Be Engaged: Talk to the child, look at books with the child, play with the child, get down on the floor, follow the child's lead, respond when the child tries to get your attention, imitate the child’s actions and sounds, be interesting and be interested.

Be Playful: Interact with the child in a fun, light-hearted manner; be animated and avoid being too serious – laugh with the child and enjoy making him or her laugh, be childlike (not childish!); strive to be a play partner instead of a play director; focus on the relationship instead of a specific toy or skill.

Be Intentional: Look for teachable moments that naturally occur throughout the day; embed learning opportunities into everyday activities (bath time, grocery shopping, dressing, play time, meal time, story time, etc.) rather than setting aside special time to work on specific skills out of context.

Be Sensitive: Respond appropriately to the child’s pace, emotions, interests, language level & sensory needs in a pressure free manner; avoid instructing the child to say words or perform on command; limit the number of questions (life is not a quiz!).

I am not built to sit still, keep my hands to myself, take turns, be patient, stand in line, or be quiet.

I need motion, I need novelty, I need adventure, I need to engage the world with my whole body.

Let me play (Trust me, I’m learning).
Resources on the Power of Play

- Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School accessed at www.allianceforchildhood.org
- Developmentally Appropriate Play by Gaye Gronlund
- Last Child in the Woods by Richard Louv
- Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul by Stuart Brown
- Playful Parenting by Lawrence Cohen
- Play = Learning by Dorothy Singer, Roberta Michnick Golinkoff, and Kathy Hirsh-Pasek
- The Read-Aloud Handbook by Jim Trelease

Resources on Technology

- Einstein Never Used Flash Cards by Kathy Hirsh-Pasek & Roberta Michnick Golinkoff
- Glow Kids by Nicholas Kardaras
- Into the Minds of Babes: How Screen Time Affects Children from Birth to Age 5 by Lisa Guernsey
- The Elephant in the Living Room: Make Television Work for Your Kids by Dimitri Christakis and Frederick Zimmerman
- The Plug-In Drug by Marie Winn
- Wired Child: Reclaiming Childhood in a Digital Age by Richard Freed

Kids Story Books about Technology

- Doug Unplugged by Dan Yaccarino
- Hello! Hello! By Matthew Cordell
- Chloe by Peter McCarty