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Play-based learning in early education

By Chloe Learey

A few years ago a parent called to let me know that her child, who had just finished pre-school at Prouty, was considered 'behind' in kindergarten because he could not read yet, and thus at risk of needing intervention.

While this is one of my only experiences of essentially being told that our pre-school program was not preparing children for school, it sticks out in my mind as a warning for what is happening in early education. More activities that look like "sit-at-your-desk-and-do-worksheets" can be seen at earlier ages as pressures mount for good test scores. This type of 'learning', especially if it is the primary approach, effectively silences creativity, curiosity and engagement, and focuses on rote learning and memorization. One could argue that this can be harmful at any age, but when it is applied in the earliest years it means that other skills which are critical for learning are not being developed. For instance, some studies have shown that play helps children develop the social-emotional skills that help them focus and regulate. Without those skills they cannot sit and do a worksheet! A strong foundation for learning begins with helping children learn how to navigate all aspects of the world, and at a young age this is done through play.

There is a continuum of thinking about play-based learning that ranges from "free-range" with no adult interaction to play that involves adult guidance. Some might distinguish this as the difference between "child care" and "early education", although that delineation seems better suited to keeping children safe vs. providing intentional programming. Of course many would say that education is always happening for young children given the rate of brain development they are experiencing – they are learning something from every interaction they have! Regardless of the language the word "intentional" comes to mind as a way to describe how to approach play-based learning in terms of considering it early education. Understanding child development and providing an environment designed to help them maximize their learning and development, including the type of materials, the schedule, and the activities is the hallmark of early education. This means understanding play as the primary mechanism through which children learn, and creating that environment accordingly. A language-rich space that includes books, storytelling, paper and writing utensils will build the foundation a child needs to learn to read, for instance. Learning to take turns and share those books helps a child develop some of the skills needed to be successful in a classroom. An adult being available to respond to the interests of the child and extend the opportunities for learning helps children continue making progress. For instance, reading a book like *Go, Dog. Go!* is a great activity in and of itself, and noticing something that interests the children from the book and creating an activity around it, like coming up with their own party, or making hats, or drawing dogs, or counting all the cars in the book makes it a more robust child-directed, adult-supported learning opportunity. Someone observing that activity without understanding child development might think the kids are "just drawing", not knowing that they are learning academic, social and other skills that will help them be successful in school and beyond.

So was the child who could not read "not ready for kindergarten"? Hopefully the early literacy skills he developed in preschool, along with the lessons he learned about how to be part of a group and be engaged in learning will serve him well.

For great information on this topic, check out the resources listed in this document from The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute: <http://scriptnc.fpg.unc.edu/resources/handout-resources-support-incorporating-playful-approaches-learning-and-development>

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