

# The Importance of Play



# THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

Funnydaffer makes an essential contribution to our world's children

## Play contributes to...

### ● social skills

While playing, children interact with each other and learn the nuances of language and cultural expectations that will help them communicate for the rest of their lives.

### ● emotional understanding

Play enables a child to pretend they are in another person's shoes. They can also express their feelings and gain an understanding of emotions.

### ● academic ability

The brain stimulation that occurs during play facilitates the child's ability to perform better in school.

### ● brain development

As a child plays, brain development occurs. Both sides of the brain begin "talking" and firing off messages that stimulate growth.

### ● healthy bodies

Children invariably get great physical exercise during free play. Running, jumping, etc. all contribute to a child's physical well-being.

### ● decision-making skills

During play a child is constantly making decisions. What to play? Who to play with? How to play? This process is critical in shaping decision-making skills.

### ● creative thinking

Play facilitates a child's ability to think creatively. The process of pretending and creating stimulates the imagination and allows a child to dream.

### ● self-regulation

Children begin to regulate their behavior during play. This involves getting along with others as well as participating in cleaning up.

### ● time-management skills

Although free play is inherently unstructured, children begin to learn that their play time has a beginning, middle and end.

### ● organizational awareness

In line with time management skills, children develop specific organizational skills during play. They organize their toys, begin to understand how play spaces are kept.

### ● spatial awareness

Play also provides a unique perspective on spatial awareness. Children can pretend that they are in a boat on a lake, but understand that the space is limited.

## Children have the right to play.

The United Nations says so.

Article 31 of the The Convention on the Rights of the Child guarantees,

"the right of the child to rest and leisure,

to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." (CRC/C/143, sect. VII, ar. 31) Not only do they have the right to play, but play is a vital part of both their physical and emotional development. It is critical that children have time to explore, discover, learn and challenge themselves...all of which they do during play.



## The impact

of play on a child's life is staggering. Recent research indicates that the bulk of our brain development happens from birth to 5 years old. And, what promotes and greatly influences the richness of that development is the **PLAY** that children engage in during this time. So what's the big deal, you ask? Kids play all the time, right? Actually, the amount of free play for American children has declined rapidly over the last 20 years. This can negatively affect just about every aspect of their lives and society in general. Our goal is to inspire the learning that happens during free play and offer a stimulating venue environment in which children can explore, learn and grow appropriately. We believe play is as important as a balanced diet, or a good night's sleep.

It is a child's job to play just as it is our job to care for them. **Learning is part of every minute of a child's life.**

*"We are beginning to demonstrate that children really are like little scientists. They use the same kinds of techniques - testing hypotheses, doing experiments, figuring out the result of those experiments...that scientists use. But, the important thing is that the way they do it is in their play."* (Alison Gopnik, Ph.D. Symposium Report from the 21st Century Learner Association of Children's Museums, 2003.)

The Funnydaffer Curriculum is designed to enhance a child's learning. Every daily schedule includes Center Time which gives the children time to explore and learn through play every day.

## SCIENCE



Observing  
Predicting  
Comparing  
Testing and Learning New Concepts  
Learning to Plan and Discover  
Drawing Conclusions  
Experiencing Sensory Activities  
Discovering How Things Work  
Increasing Language Development

## Range of Play...

Children begin by just observing what is in the science center. This is closely followed by using their senses to explore differences in texture, temperature, weight, etc.

Next, children begin to question "what will happen if..." and determine hypotheses and experiment with objects.

Finally, the children will be able to use tools in the center to understand scientific concepts, become aware of how things work and investigate on their own.

## how to engage...

How does that feel in your hands?  
Does it smell? What colors do you see?

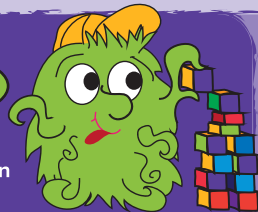
Where would you find this outside?  
What happens if... What do you think will happen next?

Challenge the child to think of discovery questions.



Science Center Props such as sand-filled hourglasses and egg timers lend themselves nicely to teaching the children about time. Additionally, growing plants over weeks also contributes to the understanding of weeks and months.

## BLOCKS



Using Imagination  
Testing Ideas  
Recognizing Quantity  
Number Concepts  
Using Fine and Gross Motor Muscles  
Classifying by Shape, Size and Color  
Experimenting with Balance and Forms

## Range of Play...

Small children begin playing with blocks by just holding them and carrying them around. They may even try throwing them like a ball.

Then, they begin to stack them. By this time, they are also figuring out the properties of each different shape block.

Next, the child begin to construct walls and then structures.

As their development progresses, blocks become a way to create imaginary worlds and can be an integral part of dramatic play.

## how to engage...

Have the small child try to roll a block, then a ball. Then let them try to stack the block, and then the ball. This will help them discover the difference.

Play with stacking individual colors... how high can they stack each one. Then, stack in patterns.

Build a corral and put the animals inside. Then build a zoo and let them try to make some buildings in the zoo. What buildings are in a zoo?

Among the props provided in the block area should be animals. When a child is capable of distinguishing the difference between the spots on a leopard and the stripes on a zebra, she is ready to recognize letters and numbers.

## ART



Expressing Creativity  
Increasing Language Development  
Learning Cooperation and Sharing  
Enhancing Hand-eye Coordination  
Exercising Fine Motor Skills  
Demonstrating Point of View  
Bringing Ideas to Life

## Range of Play...

Scribbling is the first stage in a child's world of play in the art center. This extends to experimenting with different colors and types of media such as crayons, paint brushes, chalk, etc.

Next children begin to make shapes and marks that mean something to them. The drawing does not yet have any recognizable features until the child explains them.

Once the child has confidence holding the writing/painting utensil, their drawings become more recognizable. Repetition of certain pictures is very common and helps to reinforce and advance the child to the next stage.

Finally, a child's drawings become more detailed and are representative of the subject matter. For example, they may draw themselves with a torso as well as arms, legs, hands and feet. They are no longer just a stick figure.

## how to engage...

Encourage as much scribbling as possible. Scribble with them. Sing songs and talk while you draw.

Begin with circles. Make smiley faces, the sun, balls, a pizza, a peace sign, round flowers, or anything else that is circular. Name them.

Have the child describe the picture. If the child says it is a bunny, then ask questions like, "what did the bunny have for breakfast?" "What color is the bunny's house?" etc. Write questions and answers on the back if the child says it is okay. ALWAYS get the child's permission before you write ANYTHING on their picture!

Did you know that a child who can draw a smiley face by the age of two is considered to have a very high IQ?

Encourage the child to draw a picture and create a story.

## SAND & WATER



Experimenting  
Discovering  
Focusing on Sensory Experiences  
Refining Observational Skills  
Measuring  
Weighing  
Fine Motor Skills

## Range of Play...

The range of play in the sand and water center mirrors closely the stages of play outlined by Smilansky:  
Functional - children explore how things work, feel, and react.

Constructive - during this stage of play, children create based on their discoveries. They may build a sand castle or try to construct a swimming pool

Dramatic Play - this stage expands on the constructive stage and the child begins to create scenes, worlds, and characters. This extends to experimenting with social and emotional situations.

## how to engage...

Encourage the children to try to fill up cups with water then pour it out. Hide objects in the sand and let them dig to find them. *This stage requires little engagement. Children will typically explore quite extensively on their own.*

Provide molds to fill and use to create shapes.  
Ask questions about how high they think they could build a castle. What would happen if it rained?  
Then...make it rain with a watering can.

Sand and water play is frequently used in Play Therapy because it allows children to express themselves by creating a world outside of their problems that is non-threatening.

Explain what a moat is and see if they can build one around the castle. Use animals from the block area to live in the castle or world they create.

## MANIPULATIVES



Learning New Ideas  
Increasing Language and Cognitive Skills  
Enhancing Hand-eye Coordination  
Exercising Fine Motor Muscles  
Learning to Estimate  
Classifying and Sorting  
Counting and Comparing  
Recognizing Patterns and Shapes

### Range of Play...

Little children begin playing with manipulatives similarly to their play with blocks. Exploring, trying to pick them up, roll them, throw them and even chew on them. This activity helps to build the fine motor skills and build up the muscles in their hands.

Next, children sort the shapes, thread beads, place puzzle pieces and use the manipulatives the way that they were designed to be used. Play is still predominantly solitary during this stage.

Once the child has mastered the properties of the objects, she begins to use them together to create new ways of building and hooking together pieces. With puzzles, the child will seek out harder puzzles to conquer.

### how to engage...

Have the child transfer objects from one place to another and then back again.

Encourage the child to make patterns with colors and shapes. Ask about the properties of the manipulatives...what is heavier, how many will fit into a bucket, etc.

Make a sculpture with the manipulatives.

Did you know that the human being is the only creature on the planet that has a fully opposable thumb? Some primates have opposable thumbs, but they are not considered "fully" opposable.

## LITERACY



Pre-Reading Skills  
Developing Language Skills  
Sequencing Events  
Recognizing Meaning of Letters  
Learning Care of Books  
Experiencing Quiet Moments  
Learning to Create Stories  
Gathering Information  
Using Imagination

### Range of Play...

Literacy begins the moment you begin speaking or cooing to a baby. Language is learned by not only letters and their sounds, but by understanding emotions and body language. Little children turn pages of a book, point at pictures and interact with the person reading to them. The story is of little importance

As children continue to play with books, they become the readers and mimic the way that they are read to. They begin to exert their independence over the content of the pages and focus predominantly on pictures.

Gradually, children begin to focus more on the letters and words in the book. They may ask questions about the story and try to guess what is going to happen. Memorization of the story is a large part of the way that they interact during this stage.

Finally, once the child can read, the play involved during reading and writing can be either solitary or with their friends in the form of creating stories, and making books of their own.

### how to engage...

Read frequently with the child. Show them lots of different size books. Point out pictures of people in magazines and let them play with the pages. *(Magazines are great because little children tend to tear books.)*

Point out colors in the pages. Ask them questions about what is on the page like, "How many flowers do you see?" These questions don't have to do anything with the story.

Let the child read to you. Ask questions about what will happen next or what happened yesterday, etc. Get the child to use their imagination.

A child gains a tremendous amount of cultural understanding through their play in the Play Village. What are the accepted rules of engagement of other children? What do other children feel and think? Which children play alone, and which play in groups?

## DRAMATIC PLAY



Learning Cooperation  
Using Language Skills  
Verbalizing Ideas and Concepts  
Understanding Emotions  
Communicating with Others  
Observing Others  
Using Fine and Gross Motor Muscles  
Understanding Feelings of Others  
Acting Out Real Life Situations

### Range of Play...

Children begin using this center by exploring the different props and then perhaps trying them out...then leaving. Attention span for creative thinking is short at this age...there is just too much to discover. As they become used to the area they may begin solitary play by feeding a baby doll or pretending to eat and drink the play food. They may also use the props in the wrong way, which is normal AND acceptable.

The next stage involves using the props more accurately and consistently with a purpose and story they are creating as they play. Interaction with other children is still minimal. Dressing up and becoming someone else is common.

Then, the children will begin to interact with each other and assign roles, such as the mother and the father, the policeman and the mailman, etc. Frequently, the roles will be make-believe characters such as the dragon or the wizard.

As the children get older, the dramatic play becomes much more sophisticated. Costumes become important and the children may even write down the story and want to perform it for others.

### how to engage...

Sit with the children in the area and talk, talk, talk. Ask them to bring you things. Have them put things in places that you specify.

Ask about who they are, where they were born, if they have siblings, etc. Find out if they are happy or sad, rich or poor, old or young, etc.

Ask about the drama that is unfolding. Give a scenario and have them tell you what would happen next.

Math and literacy concepts are incorporated into all areas of play. As a child plays, he/she engages in exploration and discovery that are intrinsically linked to skills necessary for reading and writing and mathematics.

## MUSIC & MOVEMENT



Expressing Creativity  
Learning Different Cultural Music Styles  
Practicing Rhythm  
Focusing on Listening Skills  
Experiencing New Instruments  
Following Directions

### Range of Play...

Children begin playing with music and movement by vocalizing and bouncing to the beat. Clapping and waving their hands is also common. Frequently, if a child is engaged in another activity and music is turned on, the child will stop what they are doing to dance.

Next, children begin to memorize the words and motions of a song. They may also recognize the melody and be able to begin the motions before the words have started. Their rhythm is much more refined by now and stomping, jumping and speed changes are also present. Children will frequently incorporate songs into their dramatic play at this stage.

Now, children begin to know all of the words of a song and respond to tempo and volume variations. They may even create a dance to accompany the song and perform it for others.

### how to engage...

Play music of all different types. Clap your hands with them and pat their backs to the rhythm. Give them scarves to play with that are colorful and they can throw as they move.

Create stories with the songs. Make up motions and ask questions as you go. Example, "Who likes meatballs on their spaghetti...who likes cheese...do we sneeze into our hands?" *(On Top of Spaghetti)*

Suggest a song, then watch and be amazed at their creativity.

A research study on the benefits of music in young children indicated that a child's ability to perform in verbal and math skills is greatly increased by their exposure to music lessons beginning at the age of 4. Fujioka, T. Brain, Sept. 20, 2006; vol 129: pp 2593-2608. News release, Oxford University Press.

# MILDRED PARTEN NEWHALL

## 1902-1970



In her dissertation (1929), Mildred Parten Newhall detailed her observations of children ages 2 - 5 playing. She developed a theory of the development of play in six stages. Four of the six are explained below. Pay attention to your students and try to identify which stage they are engaged in. Certainly there will be a variety of play regardless of age, however, children do seem to play according to these stages based on their age.

### SOLITARY PLAY



It is the lowest level of social play. The child plays alone and independently even if surrounded by other children. It is typical of two-year-olds play.

### PARALLEL PLAY



The child plays independently at the same activity, at the same time, and in the same place. The child is aware of the presence of peers but each child plays separately.

## PARTEN'S THEORY

### COOPERATIVE PLAY



It is described as a high level of play that represents the child's social and cognitive maturity. The children can organize their play and/or activity cooperatively with a common goal and be able to differentiate and assign roles.

### ASSOCIATE PLAY



It is described as common among three, and especially four-year-olds' play. The child is still focused on a separate activity but there is a considerable amount of sharing, lending, taking turns, and attending to the activities of one's peers.

## QUOTES

We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing.  
George Bernard Shaw

Work and play are words used to describe the same thing under differing conditions.  
Mark Twain

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.  
Plato