### A NEW LOOK AT PLAY

ne of the reasons there is such resistance to play in school is the ambiguity about the nature of play. There are many different ways to look at it. Playing a sport is not the same as rough-house play. Playing house is not the same as putting on a play. What then is meant by the term play as applied to school?

For the most part, there is general agreement that play is a spontaneous, free, joyous, and satisfying activity that is not controlled by the expectations and directives of others. Play is an activity freely undertaken for the value it brings in and of itself.

Authentic play has the following characteristics:

#### Play is natural and instinctive

 All children play, no matter the environment or culture. However, it is tragic that for some children in the world, play is replaced by work to meet basic needs of survival. Play is as much a part of the landscape of childhood as nurturing. No one has to teach a baby how to play with her toes, or provide instruction to a toddler on how to play with blocks. Older children too retain the play instinct as they construct a clubhouse, make up a new ball game, or explore musical instruments.

The teacher in the classroom creates the environment for play and provides the opportunities for children take the play in their own direction.

## Scenario

At the science centre, students experiment with cars and ramp. They create a ramp and race the cars down the slope. After each car has been tested, the children start over by changing the slope and begin the next race. With playdoh, the children are creating a visual display about their favourite animal's habitat, what it looks like and what the animal needs to survive. If they make an error, it can quickly be changed.

Using Legos and K'nex®, Eric begins designing the Golden Gate bridge. As he nears completion, he places a car on top and it collapses. He rebuilds and talks with his classmates about how he can improve his design to make it more durable.

#### **Play is interactive**

Vygotsky (1976) argued decades ago that all play is social. Even a baby wants a play partner, not to show him how to play, but simply to have someone with whom to interact. Play is the way children learn to take their place in a social context. This cannot be learned any other way.



#### PRIMARILY PLAY

# Scenario

The class had been discussing healthy foods and plan on making a breakfast buffet for the class to enjoy. In the group discussion, Vida suggests creating a restaurant where the food would be just like a 'real' restaurant. The children enthusiastically embrace the idea. They make decisions about the menu, where to place the table and the chairs, where the cash register will go, how they will take orders, and how they will decorate the table to make it like a 'real' restaurant. As they engage with each other, they use language for different purposes. They negotiate as to who will be the servers and who will be the customers, who will count the money, and who will clean up.

#### **Play is repetitive**

 Repetition is an important aspect of play at any level. It is through repetitive actions that children integrate new learning into existing frameworks of understanding. They need to see the predictability that comes through repeating something over and over. This is the process that solidifies learning.



# Scenario

Boards and cars have been added to the block area, and each day a small group of children sets up ramps for racing vehicles. By repeating the experience, they learned which cars go the fastest, which ones go the slowest, and which ones just won't go straight at all. They also learned that cars will fly off the ramp if it is it too high. They discovered that when they set the ramp on the rug, the vehicles slow down at the bottom, but that cars travel a much greater distance when the ramp is set on bare floor. They worked out a system for a 'fair' start by placing a ruler in front of the cars and lifting it up. The teacher documented their learning and asked them to share their discoveries with others. Their reflections motivated the interest of their classmates.

#### **Play is inventive**

 Play sets the imagination in motion. It provides opportunities for the creative power to grow and strengthen over time and with experience.

## Scenario

Aaron is motivated by the story Galimoto which tells of a boy who collects wire and other objects to create a toy that moves. He chooses to go to the technology centre that is filled with nuts, bolts, wire, wheels to make his own toy with wheels. He selects some materials and sets straight to work. Aaron finds it challenging to fix the wheels and have them move so he asks for assistance. He returns to his creation each day, trying to get the wheels to balance and move smoothly. Teachers need a trained eye to recognize what is happening in play and the different forms that play takes. They must have knowledge of how play changes over the course of the primary grades, and the connection between these changes and overall development.

Essentially, there are three types of play activity - exploration, pretend play, and games with rules. Given sufficient time to develop an episode of play, primary age children often integrate all three types of play - they explore materials and ideas, and bring their imagination to bear within an implicit set of rules for participation. For example, a group of eight year-olds is given a new set of interlocking blocks. They explore the properties of these blocks as they play randomly with them. What can you do with this material? Before long, the children begin to build what they decide are going to be transformers. As they create these imaginative action figures, the children take on roles appropriate to the theme, and the pretend play blossoms.

The ability to sustain an episode such as this begins around age five but the play becomes increasingly more complex with time and experience. By the primary grades, children can sustain a play episode over a period of days and even weeks.

### EXPLORATORY PLAY

xploratory play is the stuff of curiosity and inquiry. It begins as soon as the baby is aware that something shiny ■ is dangling over her head and she reaches out to examine what it is. Exploratory play is highly physical in the early stages as the infant or toddler uses all of his body to explore the world around him. By age four, exploratory play is soaring. Children who have been encouraged to explore freely and without undue limits will continue to use exploration as a means of learning about the world in which they live. By the middle years, as any teacher of the Junior Division knows, there is nothing that holds more interest for many at this age than taking things apart and putting them back together.

Materials are an important part of exploration. Children learn about the characteristics of materials as they interact with them and this knowledge is important for scientific experiments. They learn about the characteristics of shapes as they build with blocks – an important learning for understanding geometry.

With or without materials, children explore position as they move themselves and objects in different spatial configurations. Position is



relevant to movement and dance, as well as geometry.

Exploration flourishes in an emotional environment that encourages initiative, curiosity, and problem-solving. Placing too much emphasis on the end product or on using tools in the "correct" way causes children to lose confidence in themselves and inhibits risk-taking. Teachers will know when to interject prompt questions or demonstrate how some tools work so that the exploration does not become frustrating for the child.

As the child matures, all five senses are engaged in exploring and learning about the world. Children use their senses so much, it might be said that they are keen observers of the world as a result. They absorb a great deal of information as they watch the emergence of the butterfly from the chrysalis, as they listen to the seeds shaking in their pod, as they smell the fragrances of the different flowers, and as they touch a sample of snake skin. They bring this world knowledge to their reading and writing, and they use this 'data' to make comparisons.

Children have been involved in some form of inquiry from infancy as they explored their effect on objects in their world. Inquiry is an



important component of the kindergarten program and the primary grades as children continue to experiment in an effort to discover more about a particular interest that intrigues them. By the end of the Intermediate Division, exploration is the essence of scientific inquiry. It is the process that enables the researcher to find solutions for the many challenges in our world, and the artist to create innovative works.

The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Science and Technology uses the words investigate through experimentation. The Ontario Curriculum Grades 1-8: Mathematics refers to children developing problem-solving strategies as they pose and solve problem and conduct investigations. While exploration is acknowledged in these curriculum areas as an important component of learning, it is not explicitly connected to the elements of play.

#### PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is the genesis of creativity and imagination. Self-directed pretend play begins around age two when a toddler uses one object to represent another – a block of wood becomes a car as the toddler zooms around the room. This is the beginning of symbolic thinking, an essential component of higher-level thinking skills.

Young children use what they know and understand of the world around them as a resource for pretend play. They will often place themselves in the role of mother, father, or baby. Even in the early stages, children use their burgeoning imagination to rework what they have experienced into new sets of actions. Through pretend play, children create new roles and situations. As the ability to play develops, these new situations become increasingly complex and beyond the realm of their own experience. For example, children give their favourite characters from a storybook or TV series different roles and new adventures.

Until approximately age four, pretend play tends to be personal, that is, it revolves

around what the individual child brings to the play. They may co-operate in sharing space and even toys, but the actions are personal rather than collaborative. Collaborative play happens when children join together around a common theme with interrelated actions and roles. Young children want others to join them at play, but each player is working through his own story. It is not until the primary grades that children have sufficient language and social skills to truly engage in collaborative play.

Sociodramatic play is a unique form of collaborative play. It is both imaginative and highly social. An episode of sociodramatic play is a sequence of make-believe in which two or more players collaborate to construct roles and actions around a common theme. The episode begins when a player signals a transformation, either through an explicit statement or an implicit action. The episode continues so long as two players remain with the theme. It ends when all the players abandon the theme or time runs out.

### Scenario

Gerald calls out, "You're it! We have a new dragon. Let's run away to the new hide-out so he doesn't get us." The children rush to a new hide-out. Gerald is on the lookout, ready to make a run when the dragon approaches. They yell, "Run for it! Get away from the dragon before he eats you!" The children run in every direction until someone is captured and brought to the dragon's den. Then, someone else takes on the role as the dragon.

An episode of sociodramatic play involves four basic elements:

- theme: what the episode is about;
- action plan: a series of actions or rituals appropriate to the theme;
- roles: theme-appropriate characters; and
- language: both language about the episode and in-role language.

Sociodramatic play is so much a part of childhood that parents and teachers often remain unaware of the complexity and depth of the learning that takes place. It is not a play as adults understand it but a sequence of makebelieve that is spontaneous and controlled by the children themselves. It has implicit rules that are understood by the players although they are not able to articulate them. In the older elementary-age children, sociodramatic play evolves into improvisation, but is quite different to preparation for putting on a play. Improvisation evolves from each child's own background knowledge and experience.

Within the classroom, an area has been created for a 'radio station' with microphones and headphones. This has become a favourite choice as children improvise various scenarios: being the talk show host or the guest, reading the news, providing musical interludes. The action changes daily depending on children's focus and interest.

### **GAMES WITH RULES**

ames with rules provide the basis for sports and recreational activities. They also stimulate social and cognitive development. The games that we play with children have the general features of all true play, that is, they are spontaneous, enjoyable, and satisfy inner needs. The difference is that games have explicit rules. Up until age seven, children tend to make up the rules as they go along. At age seven as they experience a cognitive growth spurt, children become very aware of rules as any teacher on yard duty knows. Grade two students are constantly agitated because someone isn't playing right.

Play is bound by implicit rules understood by the players. Play is not a free-for-all. It is highly active but never chaotic. Adults don't always see the rules but children themselves clearly understand them. In pretend play, for example, such things as staying in character, performing situation appropriate actions, and using language to further the actions make play a safe and productive activity.

Games with rules, particularly sports, are generally governed by external rules. For this reason, some play advocates suggest that sports are not true play. Playing sports, however, has proven to be an effective way of teaching valuable interpersonal skills such as co-operation, teamwork, and tolerance. The Right to Play organization, founded in Canada and now operating around the world, is dedicated to promoting education through play and sports. It has as its motto, "Take care of yourself. Take care of others." There can be many opportunities to participate in self-directed play through sports. If the expectations for sport games respect ageappropriate behavior and the goal is not necessarily who wins or loses, sports can be an enjoyable part of a child's play world.

When children take the soccer balls outside, different games emerge. Two children set up a target on the wall and practice kicking the ball at the target. They decide what counts as 'hitting the target', and how many points are awarded for each target. Others begin to organize a soccer game, deciding on the goal line, what will serve as goal posts, and who will be the goalie. One child takes over and chooses the teams and some express the feeling that the selection process is not 'fair'. The game begins, and after a while one of the goalies declares she wants to switch roles. Another child takes her place. There are arguments about a non-goal, but these quickly fade as the desire to keep playing is more compelling.

Each of these forms of play has something unique to offer. In an article featured in the New York Times (2008), Robin Henig examines why children play. She challenges the romanticized view of play and childhood as "too squishy" and searches the literature on animal play to find the essential purpose that play has in primate development. She concludes: "Animal findings about how play influences brain growth suggest that playing, though it might look silly and purposeless, warrants a place in every child's day ... a place that embraces all styles of play and that recognizes that play is every bit as essential to healthful neurological development as testtaking, Spanish lessons, or Suzuki violin." As adults we may not understand the value of play, but we can appreciate and respect the place it has in the lives of our children.

### A NEW LOOK AT LEARNING

n order to recognize the vital role of play in learning, teachers need to understand the connection between neuroscience and learning. Our profession is too often one in which the entrenched practices of an earlier day hold more sway than the valuable research of our day. We would not tolerate medical practices from a century or more ago, yet we base many of our expectations and practices in the classroom on just such traditions.

Neuroscience has tremendous potential for revolutionizing what goes on in schools. As McCain and Mustard (1999), play advocates observe, "the merging of the neuroscience story with the developmental story has increased our understanding of how fundamental the first years of a child's life are in laying the base for the future. We are beginning to understand the linkage between the way the brain develops and the neurological and biological pathways that affect learning, behavior and health throughout life." (p. 25) So much has been discovered over the years about how the brain learns that it is truly astonishing that education, by and large, makes so little use of this knowledge.

For a century, psychologists and other social scientists have developed learning theories. New research on how the brain develops adds to their findings. With knowledge of child development and neuroscience, educators are equipped to provide the very best learning opportunities for children. While teachers of young children have been most open to applying this knowledge, educators for all grades need to put it into practice. The process of learning does not change when the child moves from kindergarten to grade one,