

A NEW LOOK AT PLAY

One 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.

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.



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.

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 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.