

# Play, Policy, & Practice CONNECTIONS

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## From the Managing Editor . . .

As higher education increasingly goes “on line” to offer a wide range of courses to students all over the world, I had the exciting opportunity to jump aboard. Over the last two years, my university has offered an on-line Master’s Degree program in early childhood education. One of the elective courses for this program is called “Play and Development.” As the instructor of this course, I’ve “met” graduate students from throughout the country as together we study the fascinating topic of children’s play.

Last spring, I was honored to work with an incredible cadre of students whose work impressed me to the point of wanting to publish several of their papers. Knowing that there are teachers in our elementary schools who have the wisdom and skill to take the research, theory, and current thinking about issues related to play and articulate their findings in a way worthy of sharing with the wider professional community is enough to bring me hope that our children are in the best of hands. Vicki Newcomer, a pre-k teacher from Pennsylvania writes a personal perspective about why she is not about to give up on play in her school day. Jennie Vaughn, a school librarian from New York, shares her efforts to bring play into the school media center. And Adrienne Barkhymer, a teacher who spent several years teaching for the Department of Defense Schools in Germany before returning to the states, shares her research and thoughts on war play.

I hope that you are as encouraged as I am as you read the voices from the field. . . the teachers who are on the front lines in the education of our children.

Enjoy!

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*The opinions expressed in Play, Policy, and Practice Connections are those of the authors, and not of the National Association of the Education of Young Children.*

## Eliminate Play from the School Day? This Teacher says, “No Way!”

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Play is a critical component of the early childhood curriculum that is often overlooked. In many early childhood settings, unstructured play has been integrated into the curriculum to demonstrate evidence of children expressing choices independently. During unstructured play activities, including in the classroom or on the playground, children are permitted to play where they want and with whom they want. Early childhood teachers may acknowledge the importance of play for children’s development and learning and even integrate it into their own curriculum or daily schedule. The most recent NAEYC position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs states, “Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as for promoting language, cognition, and social competence” (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 14). Although early childhood teachers understand how important play is to the classroom curriculum, teachers are being forced to eliminate play from their typical daily schedule. The removal of play from the daily schedule is an issue that teachers and school district administrators across the nation are debating.

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School district administrators have collected an array of motives for eliminating play from the everyday curriculum. First and foremost, school administrators have to account for every single minute of the day. "Today's climate of increasing school accountability and intense focus on strictly cognitive performance has forced a restructuring of the school day" (Zygmunt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005, p.19). Many schools across the nation have eliminated play from the school day with the belief that time spent during play can be time focused on academics. The accountability issues that schools face has "transformed the concept of the school from an arena for the practicing of democracy and the learning of democratic skills to a place where test scores are the measure of education" (Astuto, 2007, p.6).

While school district administrators are primarily concerned about accountability and test score related issues, they are also fearful that playground related injuries will cause an increase in litigation and lawsuits. They have also expressed concern that "there is a shortage of teachers and volunteers willing to supervise play activities" and that during play on the playground "children are at an increased risk of coming in contact with threatening strangers" (NAEYC, 1998, p.1).

It is certain that school district administrators have concocted a variety of reasons for eliminating play from the school day. However, a common question among teachers and parents is why school administrators even began eliminating play and play-based activities from the typical school day curriculum in the first place. Historically, it began with the Nation at Risk report formulated in 1983. "This federal call to action, highlighting American schoolchildren's poor standing internationally, led to a push for standardized testing. With more emphasis on tests, schools required more time in the school day for test preparation" (Doyle, 1998, as cited in Goodale, et al., 1998 p.1). Consequentially, when restructuring the school day, recess was one of the first things to be eliminated.

According to the American Association for the Child's Right to Play, "Nearly 40% of the nation's 16,000 school districts have either modified, deleted, or are considering deleting recess" (Chmelynski, 2006, p.11). While this is quite a shocking statistic, as 40% accounts for almost half of the nation's schools, several states such as Michigan, Virginia, and Connecticut have mandated recess. However, several school districts, including locations in Atlanta, New York, Chicago and New Jersey, are in the process of eliminating recess altogether.

Since school districts are joining forces and removing play and play-based activities from the typical school day curriculum, the nation is now facing an even larger issue: childhood obesity. Since 1971, child

obesity has risen 11.3 percent. Not only are children denied the right to play at school, but parents' work schedules, overscheduled extracurricular activities and lack of proper supervision are all factors that deprive children the opportunity to play while at home. "Instead of playing outside, children today spend a significant amount of their day in front of video screens" (Healy, 2000, as cited in Waite-Stupiansky & Findlay, 2001, p.19). In addition to spending a vast amount of time in front of video screens, children also spend an average of "six hours a day watching television" (Chmelynski, 2006, p.10).

More often in today's rapidly-paced society, children are forced to grow up younger and younger. Due to parents' hectic work schedules, children are now expected to share household responsibilities, maintain a focus on academics, and have time for scheduled extracurricular activities, which leaves little, if any, time to play. Since children are forced to grow up younger, it is even more critical to bring play back into the school day to at least give these children a chance to enjoy their childhood despite all of the other obligations and responsibilities they may have outside of school.

Removing play from the everyday curriculum is causing detrimental damage to children. Children are forced to focus on academics all day, with no break from the pressure and stress of the academic rigor of the classroom. Additionally, children are being deprived the right to engage in any form of physical activity whatsoever. Most importantly, children are being deprived the right to be themselves, to run, to play, and to enjoy their childhoods. Play would allow children to let their minds take a break from the academic pressure of the classroom and think the unthinkable and explore the unimaginable.

Although schools across the nation are joining the play elimination bandwagon, administrators need to be aware that "research shows that physical activity improves children's attentiveness and decreases restlessness" (NAEYC, 1998, p.1). In addition to helping improve attention, play also offers children the opportunity to engage in social interactions with other children, how to negotiate and take turns with others, share, problem solve and understand others' perspectives. Play and play-based activities are also a "perfect opportunity to teach children how to cooperate and settle disputes" (Matthews, 2008, p.2). The benefits that play offers children are remarkable and infinite. However, there is one major benefit from play that many people may be unaware of: creating an inclusive classroom for all children.

With full-inclusion becoming more common across the nation, teachers with little or no training with special needs students are having a difficult time helping them become adjusted to the life of the classroom. However, there is one solution that will

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help any special needs student become adjusted to the classroom. That solution is play. Just about every child across the world knows how to play. Recent research suggests that “young children with special needs have exhibited an increase in socialization skills after interacting with peers in a play environment” (Van Hoorn, Scales, Nourot, & Alward, 2007, p. 316). Research also suggests that when included in play-based classrooms, children with severe disabilities have spent more time actively engaged in play-based activities with their peers. While some children, such as English Language Learners, may come from different cultures and have different games they play, they still engage in play-based activities. According to Pellegrini, a psychology professor at the University of Minnesota, “recess is where children, especially English Language Learners, can find something they are good at. It is something that encourages them to come to school and keeps them happy about going to school” (cited in Chmelynski, 2006, p.12).

Understanding the positive ramifications that play has on children, the question becomes this: why do school administrators continue to eliminate play and play-based activities from the school day? Being cooped up in the classroom all day without an academic break is not beneficial to anyone. “The Federal Fair Labor Standards Act requires employers to offer breaks after two-and-a-half hours of work, but we’re taking recess away from kids...” (Chmelynski, 2006, p.13). As adults, we require time when we need to step away from our work and just let our minds regroup and relax. How can we expect children to sit in the classroom all day with no break to unwind, relax, and enjoy their childhood years?

Of course, academics are important, but research has shown that an academic break from the classroom helps increase attentiveness and decreases restlessness. As Marc Tucker, the president of the Washington-based National Center on Education said, “Cognitive development is very important and so is imaginative play,” adding that it would be sad to see early childhood classrooms become “just another opportunity for mind-deadening drill-and-kill programs” (cited in Jacobson, 2008, p.15).

While school administrators across the county continue to eliminate play and play-based activities from the everyday school curriculum, parents do not support this notion. “In a national survey of parents, 97 percent indicated a strong preference toward guarding the right of recess for their children” (Cromwell, 1998, as cited in Zygumnt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005, p.22). Also, Bossenmeyer (2009) found that 8 out of every 10 students list recess as their favorite school activity.

With such strong statistical evidence in support of play and play-based activities throughout the school day, it is time that parents begin to seriously advocate for

keeping play in their child’s school. To help parents advocate for recess, a play-based activity, the American Association for the Child’s Right to Play, an International Play Association affiliate member, has developed a website ([www.IPAUSA.org](http://www.IPAUSA.org)) to help provide research based benefits that recess can provide children in addition to links to other state sites that also advocates for recess. If parents are interested in advocating for recess in their state or local community, they “will find this site an invaluable resource” (Zygumnt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005, p.23).

Across the nation, organizations are working and striving to convey the message that play helps children develop critical skills that may not simply be taught in the classroom. In fact, the Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) has released a statement that advocates for child’s play entitled, “Play: Essential for All Children.” The statement suggests that play is critical for child’s development. “ACEI believes that play--a dynamic, active, and constructive behavior--is an essential and integral part of all children's healthy growth, development, and learning across all ages, domains, and cultures” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p.1). However, play is being eliminated from schools across the country, as is children’s opportunity to develop because of the removal of play. Therefore, parents and educators must fight to keep play in the schools. “The time has come to advocate strongly in support of play for all children” (Zygumnt-Fillwalk & Bilello, 2005, p.23).

Play is a vital element of a young child’s life. Considering how busy children’s lives outside of school may be when considering parents’ busy work schedules and an overloaded extracurricular calendar, it is even more important for parents and teachers to stand up and fight for play to be brought back into the everyday curriculum at school. Not only does play teach children skills that will last a lifetime, but it also gives children an opportunity to relax their minds while taking an academic break from the classroom.

“Childhood is such a special time. Without a care in the world we build, imagine, create, play, laugh, smile and cry. We break rules, make rules and ask what are rules. We give, take, share. All’s fair. We try, fall, and try again. As children, we have fun because having fun is what it means to be alive. Having fun isn’t a set activity at a set time. Having fun is *just what we do*” (Harrop, 2008, p.1). Think about the wonderful times that you spent on the playground playing double-dutch, tetherball, Red Rover, Hopscotch, Red Light/Green Light, Mother May I, climbing on the monkey bars or running full force to be the first one to the swing set. Think about how great it felt to be young and not have a care in the world. Close your eyes and imagine a time that you spent on the playground. Breathe the fresh crisp air. Listen to the laughter that surrounds you. Feel the gravel beneath your feet as you run and play with your friends. Now,

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open your eyes and realize what wonderful memories school administrators are taking away from children.

Now, more than ever, it is time for teachers, parents, and communities to join forces and fight for play and play-based activities to be a part of the curriculum every day, in every school across the country. A vast amount of research has shown the benefits that play has on children's development. With an infinite amount of research to support our argument, it is time that policymakers listen with their minds and hearts and give children back what they truly deserve: a right to play. It is time that administrators stop banning play from the school day and start to rekindle some of their fondest childhood memories and bring play back to the everyday school curriculum where it rightfully belongs.

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### ***Do You Live In One of These States?***

The following states are at different stages of developing a Play Interest Forum and would love to hear from you:

#### ***Florida***

Contact Walter Drew - [dr-drew@earthlink.net](mailto:dr-drew@earthlink.net)

#### ***New Mexico***

Contact - [Baji@nmaeyc.org](mailto:Baji@nmaeyc.org);

#### ***Missouri***

Contact Sue Blandford--[sltrc@sbcglobal.net](mailto:sltrc@sbcglobal.net)

#### ***Iowa***

Contact Barb Merrill in Iowa [bmerrill@iowaeyc.org](mailto:bmerrill@iowaeyc.org)



## Shhhhh.... We Are Playing In the Library!

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Play in the library media center seems a bit of an oxymoron, yet many educators deem “play” to be a valid and necessary component of a child’s development. In fact, many go so far as to tout that a child’s play time should be considered “work,” as it guides a child in problem solving and higher level thinking. This being true, the question must be posed, can play be an effective teaching strategy in the library media center? To answer this, we must first look at the responsibilities of today’s school library media specialist and school library media center and the role they play in education. From there, utilizing the results of three mini-research projects, I hope to sway even the most reluctant of believers that play has an esteemed place in our educational system, specifically in the library media center.

School library media centers have progressed and evolved into a place that may be unrecognizable to those who have not revisited a school library in many years. Long gone are the days of silence and somber. The school library is defined as, “a learning lab, a literacy classroom, a common space for students and teachers to study, research, read, think, question, argue, discover, connect to the world, or just curl up and relax with a good book” (Koechlin & Zwaan, 2008, p.8). If students are to learn effectively, they need to be actively engaged by discussing, exploring, and sharing their knowledge so that it can be reflected upon and learning can occur.

The role of school library media specialists has also evolved to play a critical role in the education of today’s students. Library Media Connection reports that, “Library media specialists lead in reflective practice, assessment of learning, and program evaluation to enact effective change” (Dees, et al., 2007, p.11). Library media specialists need to be at the top of their game, both on current literacy resources for their students and staff as well as current literacy practices to most effectively teach and reach their students.

One such effective practice that is moving to the forefront of education is including play in the curriculum. Van Hoorn, Scales, Nourot, & Alward (2007) take the position that, “play provides the motivating context for the ‘literate behaviors’ that precede the development of more specific literacy skills” (p. 204). Assuming that is true, a good library media specialist would be remiss to not delve further into the possibilities of play being an effective

teaching tool. Specifically, what might that “play” actually look like within the library media center?

So, being a “good” library media specialist, I have researched various activities and play opportunities that could be incorporated into skills I target in my library lessons. The following is a detailed account of three very different library units in three different grade levels, all incorporating play to some degree. Just to note, my library media center is in an extremely “high needs” school. This school includes students from a variety of cultures, provides 93% free and reduced lunch and breakfast, and many of the students often struggle to see the importance of academics. Almost a quarter of my school’s student population are English Language Learners. Classroom management and keeping students on task is a daily challenge at my school, so trying new things with these students can be risky at best.

The question looms. . . is learning taking place while students are, in essence, playing in the library?

My first “play” experiment, revolved around the concept of a discovery box as the teaching tool. Brown (2008) explains that, “a ‘Multimedia Box,’ like its cousin the ‘Artifacts Box,’ is a container filled to the brim with every form of legitimate material imaginable that is associated with a particular theme” (p.18). I loved the idea of the students making connections to a theme. So I took this idea and created “Dewey Decimal Discovery Boxes” for my fourth grade students. This activity was a structured play activity, allowing for discovery and independence, with a definite end result in mind. For example, I labeled a shoebox 500’s: science. Inside of that 500’s discovery box, students found a calculator (math), plastic flowers (nature), stuffed blue frog (animals), umbrella (weather), and rocks (land formations). Some items were more concrete connections for the students to make. For example, the plastic flowers led students to find actual books titled, Flowers. Other items required the students to begin problem solving and discussing what that “artifact” could be pointing them towards. Students need to ponder leading questions: Why would there be an umbrella? I use an umbrella when it rains. Rain is a type of weather, I’ll look for a weather related book.

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Students were allowed to select partners and had thirty minutes to write down two items from that Dewey hundred section and then locate and write down a title related to that item. Partners needed to be focused as they were to complete four boxes of different 100's sections in that thirty minute time period. With ten minutes of class remaining, we debriefed as a group, sharing the connections and "ah-ha moments" of why students chose the certain titles they did and how their item related to that title.

I was surprised at both the behaviors the students demonstrated as well as the results the students produced. The students were driven and focused as they searched for their connections and there was little time off task. Students exhibited pride when they successfully made a connection and were excited to share the "why" in the reasoning behind selecting that book.

My second "play" experiment comprised components of readers' theater, puppets, script writing and story acting. My first grade students and I read several Piggie and Elephant books by Mo Willems. The students and I talked about the value of using inflection when reading and speaking.

The first couple of weeks we focused on readers' theater and created stick puppets. We read many of the books, and, as we did, we created voices for each character. We rehearsed them together as a group and then students were able to volunteer reading independently. The students shifted their voices to create amusing, witty characters. They loved the attention from their peers when they became "the character." One key piece of the readers' theater was that the reading level was appropriate for my students' reading levels so that they could be successful. Students also worked on a two-sided paper plate puppet; one week they worked on the Piggie side and the next week they completed the Elephant side. Both weeks I did not give directions for what students should do upon the completion of their puppet. It is interesting to note, however, that both weeks the students got to work independently and immediately went into a dialogue mode with their puppet once they had finished their creation. Students used their puppets to storytell with their peers at their table, with a great deal of inflection I might add. Some students retold the story we had just read while others changed various elements within their stories. This spontaneous verbal banter was unexpected, but refreshing and validating to witness.

The following week we wrote our own Piggie and Elephant stories. In their writing, the students used the Piggie and Elephant characters, but made up original storylines. Because writing is so vital in my school's curriculum, I had the students write their own stories, rather than taking dictation. All of the students got busy immediately trying to create their

own story. The ease with which most students began confirmed the value of the readers' theater we had done the previous weeks. Vivian Paley encourages educators that the connection has to be made that writing stories is just like playing them out, but with more complete sentences and thoughts (Matlock & Testa, n.d.). Some students were successful in creating a cohesive plot, amusing dialog, and overall strong storyline. Others had pieces that could be figured out and while they didn't make complete sense--they loved and were proud of what they had written. A few students seemed to struggle, but when I approached them, they had the stories all ready in their head. These students just had difficulty knowing how to go about scripting them. I went around assisting students who needed it and noting words that could not be easily read, so that our stories were primed for story acting.

So, we were on to our culminating play activity for a day of story acting. Cooney (1996) explains that, "story acting is a form of play for the children who delight in sharing their stories with one another through drama" (p.1). I have to admit, I was a bit reluctant for this activity, as it required me to relinquish a little control of my classroom management. One piece of the true success of story acting hinges on the students' reactions and responses to their peer's stories and acting ability. Would the students be patient and respectful of their peers?

The answer was a resounding YES! I was astounded at the students' responses. They were kind and encouraging to one another. "How did they think of that?" and "boy, that was a creative story!" were just a few of the phrases I heard over and over. I was leery about reading students' pieces that did not have much "meat" to them, but I did. While I saw a few shrugs and eyebrows go up on the faces of students who had written stronger pieces, not a negative word was spoken, and the students who were not strong writers were pleased with themselves for what they did complete.

The acting itself was nothing elaborate, and yet different classes focused on different things. One class was big on placement and directed the characters to move around so they were in the "right" place. Another class was good at individual movements, listening carefully to what was read and creating an action that corresponded with it. Yet another class was very aware of the response they were eliciting from the "audience" and really hammed up whatever they observed as getting a positive response or a laugh.

This activity was pure success and, despite my initial reservations, I would do it again in a heartbeat. Pfannenstiel, a puppet master, noted that after any good show, "the book was never left on the shelf" (Pfannenstiel, 1989, p. 22). I cannot keep the Piggie

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and Elephant books on my library shelves.

The students eagerly ask about the books and check them out. I hear them doing the character voices we rehearsed and using inflection when they arrive at question marks and capital letters. It is so reaffirming that weeks later, they are still requesting the books we used, rereading the stories we read, and incorporating the special voices they have adopted.

My final “play” experiment was the result of observing the kitchen area in a pre-kindergarten class earlier this semester. My thoughts began to race as I started wondering what young students would do if there was a library play area. I “played” library as a young child and loved it. Look where it led me? What would their responses be?

Due to large kindergarten class sizes, creating a library play area took some strategizing. I created four centers that students would rotate through over a four week period, one of which would be my library play center. Ferguson (2007) relates that, “young children are more likely to engage in elaborate and sustained dramatic play during 30- minute play periods rather than 15-minute play sessions” (p. 46). Students would have approximately 40 minutes, which should be plenty of time to determine what their roles were and what activities they wanted to accomplish within those roles. Unless students were absent, the play center allowed for five students to “work” at a time.

In creating my library center, I filled it with literacy pieces from top to bottom. To start with, the area included newspapers, reference books, globes, keyboards, blank empty boxes for computer screens, and a telephone. After that was in place, I went through my library materials to determine what would be appropriate and cost-effective for the students’ play. I had many actual book covers that didn’t fit the books perfectly and were collecting dust. We don’t use pockets any more, and I had a whole box of them. We don’t stamp date dues on index cards--so all of those pieces were free game. I ran off several sheets of dummy barcodes that they could cut up and apply to the covers. Then of course I had scissors, staplers, tape, paper, post-its, markers, and pencils. One book cart was placed in the area, to be moved around as needed. I took a huge furniture box to create a book drop for students to return books. I used another furniture box to make a book shelf unit.

Ahead of time, I organized which children were going to work together in groups. Three out of the four groups were an equal mix of gender, academic ability, and cultural background. One group, however, was all girls and all boys. Groups were posted on the wall for students to visually see where they had been and where they would be going.

Before the four weeks of centers began, I took one week to explain the four centers to my kindergartners.

I addressed my expectations of their behavior and what they were to accomplish. At the play center I briefly outlined many of the jobs I do that go unseen. I explained how I apply barcodes and pockets, check in/out materials, shelve books (book covers for them), stamp date dues, or even make their own books. I told them that whatever they thought was important to accomplish is what they should consider their work. As far as behavior, my expectations included appropriate library behavior and a respectful voice level.

I was not sure what to expect from my kindergarten students, as we have many behavior issues, many English Language Learning students who primarily speak Spanish, and many who struggle academically. Despite these challenges, my hopes were pretty high. The students seemed excited about this new opportunity and eager to try something different.

The educational results of my final play experiment, far exceeded anything I could have imagined. I was wowed to say the least. I would like to speak to areas I felt were most impressive as learning opportunities during these play sessions. Students exemplified incredible strides in communication skills, problem solving skills, and literacy development.

Students not only communicated with their peers, but displayed many forms of communication skills. When speaking with each other here are just a few of comments I heard. “It’s time to return the book, sir.” “Isn’t anyone going to check in all those books?” “Who wants to do this job?” “Some people aren’t taking care of the books.” “This goes here in a library.” “I’m waiting for someone to sign out a book.” In addition to speaking with each other, they showcased communicating beyond the confines of the play area. One little girl was on the phone saying, “I’m glad you called me. I will look for the book, and then I’ll call you back.” One little boy was at the keyboard and announced, “Oh great! I just got another email. I don’t have time for this!” Another little boy interrupted someone on the phone and said, “Hey, I think someone is texting you. Are you going to text back?” “No! I don’t know how to text. I’m only five!”

Problem solving was definitely a skill that emerged during this play center. The book drop I had cut out of the cardboard was 8-10 inches, and some of the book covers were too wide. Students talked through how to get the books returned without ruining them. The computer screens were blank sheets taped to cardboard boxes. Some classes did not even look at the screens, but others wrote all over them. If a group came in that wanted to use it, and it was drawn all over, students would go about, on their own, taking the “used” screen down and taping on a new one. One little boy was watching a girl cut up the last sheet of barcodes. Instead of asking her for some of them, he

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started rooting through the newspaper section. He found the television guide and began cutting it up, because it too had numbers. One little girl was very frustrated playing with a stamp. I went over and asked her what was wrong. She had an old date due stamp. She asked, "Why can't I turn this to 2009?" I told her that it was made a long time ago and it only went up to 2007. She responded, "Really? That is old! You need some new stuff Mrs. Vaughn!"



Literacy development was equally impressive. Many students worked appropriately cutting out barcodes, applying pockets, stamping books, and organizing them on the shelves. What was most remarkable was that several students were, on their own, creating books. They took the empty book covers, stapled pages into them, and then wrote a string of letters on the pages or their names inside the cover. Many students got that far and then just processed their book. At least a dozen students, however, went on to look at the picture on the book cover and actually draw a picture and/or write a story that related. This was pre-writing at best, but the thought processes were there and actively working! One little boy, "Nathan\*," picked up a cover titled, *Estimations*. The cover was filled with jellybeans. He immediately got to work drawing jelly beans on every page and numbered them as he went. He went up to 43! Shay and Emma were working together with a book cover that was titled, *About Arachnids*. Based on the illustration on the cover, they started discussing, "This is the Itsy Bitsy Spider. I'll write the words and you write the pictures." They each worked on a side of the book while singing the song. I would be remiss if I didn't mention Josniel, an English Language Learner. He was working on his book, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*. This book cover has a picture of a panda bear. On the inside pages of his book, Josniel has drawn a picture of him and his dad. There is a panda in the tree and the boy is chasing him. His text read, "I am clime up that tree no no no my dad yells." He was so proud, and so was I.

Just to note, the gender same groups would be extremely interesting as a separate case study, but I'm not sure I'd do it again in the library play area. Both groups of boys took approximately 25 minutes of wandering around to get in the groove of finding their

role and doing something "productive." When they finally got acclimated, they were very active: returning books, cutting barcodes or trying to fix a broken cord on the keyboard. The boys communicated constantly, but seemed a bit unsure of themselves. The all girl group, interestingly enough, exhibited very little communication. Most went in focused, knowing what they wanted to accomplish, and they got right to work. In fact the communication I did witness showcased quite a bit of bossiness as they had specific plans of what they wanted to do, and some of them wanted the same tasks.

The most validating piece, for me, was that due to some scheduling conflicts, I ran the centers an additional week. Because all students had rotated through each center once already, I allowed students to choose the center they were interested in until, due to numbers, that center was filled. In all classes, the majority of students wanted to revisit the play center. They were choosing library play over computers! I had so many unhappy faces, that I ended up rotating them through so that they could all have "one last chance" at being a librarian. (That is, until they decide to make a career out of it someday, due to fond memories of their kindergarten internship!)

So, to reflect on my earlier question, is learning taking place while, in essence, students are "playing" in the library? Through my research, the answer is obvious and clear. Play should be imperative in every educational curriculum. Yes, play activities do require preparation and structure so that objectives can be successfully met. The educational outcomes, however, far outweigh any amount of time an educator may spend creating this learning opportunity. The results abound with benefits to students both academically, socially, and behaviorally.

The library naturally lends itself to play activities with rich, colorful characters gracing the pages of today's literature. Bane (2008) reminds us that, "books can be stepping stones to play experiences" (p. 21). I do believe that whatever play experiences a media specialist provides, books to support the activity must be available and offered to the students. This allows students to feed their enthusiasm for what you, the educator, have inspired. Gordon (2005) concludes that it is a "library media center's mission of expanding children's literacy and cultural skills while offering them interesting, educational activities" (p. 45).

Yes. It is true that we ARE playing in the library, but after my research and mini- research projects there is definitely no need to be quiet about it. If you are entering my library, be forewarned, that imaginations are required and will be used to the fullest extent.

\*All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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## To Ban or Not to Ban... That is the Question

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*A preschool teacher walks around her classroom of four- and five-year-old students during free choice center time. She notices Joey, a five-year-old boy whose father was recently deployed to Iraq, playing in the dramatic play center. He is packing all the dress-up clothes into one of the mail-carrier bags. Joey announces that he is moving. He then marches over to the block area, puts down his "suitcase," grabs a block and holds it like a gun. Joey gets down on one knee with the block balanced on his shoulder and pretends to take aim. His teacher squats beside him and asks him who he is looking for. Joey responds "The enemy." The teacher responds, "Who is the enemy?" Joey answers "The bad guys in the war. I am GI Joe." Joey then begins to make shooting noises as he moves his "gun" around the room. He then jumps up, puts down the "gun" and says, "It would've been easier if I had my real gun from my house like GI Joe, but I got 'em all. Now I can move back home." Joey picks up his "suitcase" and goes back into the dramatic play area.*

After witnessing scenarios like this, the question on my mind as a parent and an educator has been whether or not to ban war play. I know that through play, parents and educators catch a glimpse of what the child is trying to understand. Children express their needs, wants, and anxieties through play. During war play children are trying to "make sense of what is confusing, chaotic, or frightening" (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2007, p. 133). This could be something the child has seen on television or a frightening and/or violent situation the child has experienced firsthand. But, before exploring the advantages and disadvantages of war play, first some history.

In 1978 the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) took the current regulations that protected children from over commercialization a step further and attempted to outright ban advertising to children under the age of eight. However in 1984 the Reagan administration, under pressure from corporate lobbyists, stripped the FTC of its power and lifted all previous bans on children's television programming and advertising (Carlsson-Paige, 2007; Carlsson-Paige, 2008) changing how our children approach play, in need, reason, and props (Carlsson-Paige, 2007), specifically

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war play and/or violent play. Shows such as *GI Joe*, the show Joey was re-enacting, were born after this deregulation. The tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the ensuing war have also contributed to the increase of war play (Levin, 2003).

Are there any advantages of allowing children to engage in war play? War play encourages children's development of distinguishing reality from fantasy, staying within boundaries, understanding other points of view, resolving conflict, controlling aggression, and fulfilling the need to feel powerful. "When it (play) springs from their own needs and imagination, war play can be a vital resource for children" (Carlsson-Paige, 2008, p. 96). It allows for problem solving, cooperation, and provides fertile ground to discuss moral concepts like killing and death (Carlsson-Paige, 2008).

According to Levin (2003), children use play to work out an understanding of experience. They have not yet grasped the abstract idea of reality versus fantasy. Children do not perceive a violent act on television the same way it is perceived by an adult. While adults understand that what they see on television isn't likely to happen to them, children cannot make that distinction (Carlsson-Paige, 2008). It is through war play that we see children acting out, imitating this behavior in order to grasp its meaning and understand the differences between reality and fantasy.

War play also allows children to feel powerful in a world they oftentimes feel powerless in, especially during times of family stress such as moving, divorce, or deployment. Playing the "good guy" gives the child a sense of competence and helps him or her feel strong. It is through this type of play that we see children feeling especially vulnerable and powerless (Levin, 2003, p. 2). In the example of Joey we can see that Joey is trying to deal with and understand the stress of his father being deployed to Iraq. He takes on the persona of *GI Joe*, a character with power and in the military, to help him feel more secure with his insecure feelings.

One area that has educators and parents concerned about war play is when it turns to aggressive play. Dr. Stuart Brown (as cited in Butler & Kratz, n.d.) explains "typical exuberant play which may seem non-sensical and chaotic to adults includes, falling down, hitting without hurting, diving, yelling, or other loud mimicking vocalizations, etc." (p. 2). On the other hand, aggression includes domination, threats, humiliation, or real hitting and fighting (Butler & Katz, n.d.). There is a significant difference between aggressive play and war play. When play turns to aggressive play, children stop having fun, show real anger or fear, or begin real hitting; educators and parents need to step in (Butler & Katz, n.d.).

This brings up the concern of safety. Oftentimes play that started out as rough and tumble play or healthy war play can lead to children becoming out of control, scared, and hurt (Levin, 2003). Managing this type of play can be an all consuming, never-ending job as parents and educators attempt to keep everyone safe. With the adults' attention focused on safety, little time and attention is spent on the positive lessons we want children to learn from healthy war play (Levin, 2003).

Another area of concern is when play is imitative rather than imaginative. This is when children act out scenes they have seen on television or in movies. The child's play is limited to what they have seen or heard they are not bringing in their own experiences, extending story lines, or using objects to represent other objects to extend play. Such is the case with single purpose toys such as replicas, "it's much harder for kids to bring in their own experiences, imagination, and needs" (Carlsson-Paige, 2008, p. 60). Replicas and media linked toys bring with them a specific, limited way to play. They promote imitative play, and the need to replicate violent scenes (Levin, 2003, p. 2), rather than promote imaginative play.

Many educators and parents have chosen to ban war play. While this may alleviate many problems on the surface, it also denies children the opportunity to work out developmental issues and violence they have been exposed to (Carlsson-Paige, 2007). Outright "banning" this type of play also drives the play "underground" into peer culture. (Carlsson-Paige, 2008; Van Hoorn et al., 2007). At this point adults are missing out on learning the issues children are trying to work out as well as being left out of an important part of what is important to children. When adults do not guide this type of play, children may also create their own understandings about war and violence that are untrue. In the example of Joey's play we can see how he understands the concept of war, if all the "bad guys" are gone then his dad can come home. If an adult is observing his play, the adult can address Joey's understanding and help him better understand the concept of war.

Levin (2003) explains, "Children find ways to circumvent the ban--they deny that their play is really war play (that is, they learn to lie) or sneak around conducting guerilla wars the teacher does not detect (they learn to deceive)" (p. 2). Feelings of guilt also ensue when war play is outlawed.

While many educators and parents attempt to ban war play, there is a significant need for children to engage in this type of play. We can only assume that the need for this type of play will increase, as it has done so since 1984, due to media influences and the violent times we live in. Parents and educators may have to step out of their comfort zones in their effort to "support children's need to play through the violent

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experiences they had witnessed” (Van Hoorn et al., 2007, p. 132). With this in mind there are many ways parents and educators can observe this type of play and address the underlying issue(s).

To begin with, adults need to set the “playing field,” beginning with an ample sized play space. Then they can stock the area with an abundance of open-ended playthings such as play dough and building blocks, as well as art supplies like paper, crayons, and paint. Parents and educators will need to work with children to create rules for indoor and outdoor play that will ensure safety. (Carlsson-Paige, 2007; Levin, 2003).

If children have a difficult time “letting go” of their replica type toys, encourage them to extend their scripts beyond the imitative play they are used to with the open-ended toys. For example, children can create hospitals out of blocks to take care of “bad guys” or wounded “good guys” (Butler, S. & Kratz, D., n.d.; Carlsson-Paige, 2008).

While parents and educators observe children at play they need to look for what need is being met through war play, for example, power or security, and look for literature that addresses this need such as fairytales. While re-enacting fairytales the same needs met through war play, power or security are being met through re-enacting the fairytale. (Carlsson-Paige, 2007).

Another example of helping children move beyond war play is to help children extend their play beyond their narrowly scripted imitative play by asking open-ended questions. An example of this could be if children are playing out a scene from a favorite movie or television show, ask them what happens when the television is turned off, e.g., “Where does everyone go?” Not only is the adult extending the play beyond the script, he/she is learning what the children know and/or understand about fantasy and reality. This insight also allows the adult to find ways to move the scripted play to more open-ended play by using the open-ended materials for the children to create their own scripts thus using their own imaginations.

Many studies have shown that too much TV time has a negative impact on the development of children. “Reducing children’s exposure to violence, to inappropriate media, and to excessive time consuming media is one of the most important ways teachers can foster healthy war play” (Carlsson-Paige, 2007, p.4). Taking this statement a step further, parents also need to be on board with reducing children’s time in front of the television. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 1-2 hours of television, computer and video game time a day. During an average 24 hour period of network television, the American Academy of Pediatrics found 27 violent acts occur, 1 in 4 of which include gun violence, and 55 commercials for toys and video games geared toward

children occur. In order to foster healthy play the amount of time children sit in front of a screen needs to be greatly reduced.

From 2003-2008, I worked for the Department of Defense Dependent Schools in Wiesbaden, Germany. The school had approximately 850 students in grades PreK-5 in a predominately military community. I taught 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and PreK during my time at that school. Each year I was confronted with the theme of war play and how to best address it. My initial reaction was to ban this type of play altogether, but how do I ban what many of my students’ families do for a living? I struggled with this idea in first and second grade, but with my “older” students we could talk about the themes that were brought out in their play especially when many of my students were dealing with the family stress of deployment. As a class we all came to the decision of how to handle our feelings such as writing letters to deployed parents, writing in journals, drawing pictures, reading stories, and acting out situations with the help of the Second Step violence prevention program.

Second Step is a violence prevention program that uses photographs and role-playing to help children identify feelings and how to deal with them in different situations. It calls for students to identify the physical aspects of feelings such as how a persons’ mouth, eyes, cheeks, arms, look when they are happy, sad, angry, etc. There are also role-playing situations that the students engage in to act out the different feelings they have just described and discussed.

My true concern and self-debate with the theme of war play arose when I taught PreK. I couldn’t figure out the best way to handle this theme in a classroom of four-year old students who were dealing with second and third deployments of parents and five years of war. I noticed an increase in the theme of war play with my younger students more so than I did with my older students. Again, my first thought was to ban this type of play completely. I asked a veteran teacher of PreK how she addresses this theme in her classroom and her response was, “Guns are for adults and you (the student) are not an adult so you can’t have a gun.” It was also suggested that I just tell the children that guns hurt people and we don’t hurt people at school, even when pretending. While this seemed like a logical way to approach the subject it didn’t seem to stop war play from seeping in to my students’ play.

I began to notice my students gathering in a corner of the play-yard in an almost secretive manner disbanding as soon as I came near. I overheard plots on how to continue their war play without it actually looking or sounding like war play. I began to feel that I had completely missed the mark, the teachable moment, on how to address this situation with my “kids.” The need for my students to work through the issues of war, deployment, good guys/bad guys,

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relocating, and single parent homes was coming out in their play. I now had to acknowledge the underlying themes and address them.

As an amateur dealing with the underlying themes and war play in and of itself I began letting the students share at morning meeting about those themes. Even at the age of four, words like scared, sad, and angry had meaning for everyone in the class.

I also began to notice a pattern of the amount of television watching. Recalling the home visits I conducted at the beginning of the year, I realized that most of my students had a television in their bedroom. Several students even said they fell asleep while watching television. After speaking with several parents, I learned that many parents used the television as a way to “keep the kids busy” while the parent made dinner, cleaned, etc. So I knew that I had to alert parents to the effects that television viewing could be having on their children, especially when the shows were violent in nature.

Through my research on the topic of war play, I cannot accurately state whether war play is more frequent in military communities. I can, however, see why the need exists for military children to engage in this type of play and why parents and educators need to work with the children’s play, not against it. Children of military families have extreme amounts of stress to deal with and the one of the ways their young children can attempt to understand it all is to act it out in their play, as do all children who are seeking to understand their complicated worlds.

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