

Introduction: Preparing for Life Through Play

When we think about play for adults we talk about playing ball, cards, chess, computer games, and board games like Scrabble and Monopoly. The play usually requires some level of skill. Play can be very challenging, and many adults make a considerable living “playing” professional sports. By comparison, when we want to indicate that adults are doing nothing we usually say they are chilling out or goofing off.

When associated with young children, the word *play* seems to imply very little of value. Many think of it as the child’s way of just chilling out. Nothing could be further from the truth. A child at play is as active and mentally engaged as a quarterback in the last moments of a Super Bowl game. I wish there were another more important-sounding word or term for a child’s play—such as *exploriantation*, *life readiness*, or *extreme reality quest*—to give it the importance it deserves.

In almost every nature film I have seen about lions or any other animal there is sure to be an entertaining scene of young cubs playing. The narrator usually tells us that while this appears to be just play, the cubs are actually honing skills they will need as adults. They are, in fact, preparing to grow up. For young children, exactly the same thing is going on. Play is a natural part of a child’s preparation to grow up. Through play a child explores materials and ideas about everything in life. Instead of learning to hunt and kill as a lioness cub must do, children start to think about very basic issues. Common subjects of play are good guys and bad guys, power and weakness, real and pretend, speed and safety, and human relationships. In many instances, children will actually think aloud as they grapple with these important topics.

When a child runs around on the playground as a superhero, he is not just playing. He is actively and seriously thinking and wrestling with important issues about humankind, and this helps him prepare for his role in society as an adult. Similarly, when a child builds a pretend road with blocks and then races a car around it she is busy exploring ideas and concepts. She may be thinking about road construction, how things go together (various shapes of blocks), inclines and curves. When she drives the toy car she could be thinking about speed, accidents, safety, the role of the police, how Dad drives, and how she will drive one day.

The natural need and importance of play for the young child cannot be overemphasized. Everything that a child does that is not adult directed is play. It is the most important part of a young child's education. Regardless of language, culture, or economic status, young children play. You will find children playing in the snow of the Arctic, the mud of the Amazon rainforest, the sands of the Sahara desert, the grasslands of Mongolia, the creeks of Louisiana, the mountains of Colorado, and the streets of Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. Play is truly a universal experience.

You should value play for the necessary part of human development that it represents, and then actively encourage and facilitate it as a part of your program. The way to do this is to provide varied materials, lots of free time for exploration, and on occasion suggestions and guidance toward new subjects and materials for the children to explore and think about. Some of the best learning occurs when children are dealing with materials, having experiences, and discovering ideas and forming concepts for themselves. Play should be an integral part of everything you plan to teach. It is fundamental to human development, and is the foundation of a good early childhood program.

Play is the way the child learns what no one can teach him. It is the way he explores and orients himself to the actual world of space and time, of things, animals, structures, and people. . . . Play is a child's work.

—Lawrence K. Frank