IMAGINATION DEFICIT

by Remy Agee and Marlene Welch

Imagination is the engine of ideas. And yet, imagination deficit is rampant. Imagination deficit thrives on battery-operated toys; clever marketing of coloring and other activity books and the like as necessary learning tools; toys marketed as 'educational'; too much time spent in adult-directed activities; and too many passive children's activities such as movies, television shows, and video games: the core of many children's daily lives.

What is Imagination?

Imagination is one component of creativity; self-expression is another. The early childhood classroom should be full of creative possibilities that allow children to use their imaginations. For creativity to flourish, staff must provide an environment that fosters creative expression:

- facilitation (more than teaching) designed to help children to develop their creativity;
- unhurried time and provocative questions that spark curiosity and encourage discussion;
- a focus on the process — rather than the product;
- spontaneity and a willingness to veer from planned curriculum;
- a variety and lots of materials and resources; and
- materials that are readily accessible and displayed to invite observations, experiences, and exploration by individuals and groups.

Imagination itself is "the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality" and "the action or process of forming such images or concepts."

Imagination lets you conjure up another world inside your own mind:

1) You can imagine a smell, taste, sound, feeling, or something you have never experienced and places where you have never been.
2) You can create things, people, and countries from around the globe, the universe, and beyond.

Imagination gives you the ability to look at familiar situations or events from a different point of view, while exploring what could happen in different scenarios with alternative outcomes.

Imagination lets you understand the order of our world: 'experiencing' the real world mentally; exploring concepts, and learning about your relationship to others.

Imagination is an intangible, unlimited, free resource.

The Value of Imagination

A couple of decades ago, we could not have imagined some of the careers and skills now providing job security for thousands of people. Consider the electronic gadgets we enjoy as a part of everyday life today or the medical technology that allows major organ transplants and joint replacements. How did we get here? Imagining the possibilities and alternative solutions

"Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand, stimulating progress." Albert Einstein

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to problems helped pioneer the way. Using our imagination promotes new ways of thinking and helps us to discover better ways of doing things across a broad spectrum of fields: architecture, engineering, technology, medicine, energy, transportation, environment, nutrition, and health. Imagination can provide innovative approaches to rebuilding communities devastated by natural or economic disasters, to redesigning the delivery of services, goods, and medical procedures, and to developing supportive technological advances.

While children's play is critical to their social, emotional, and cognitive development, Stuart Brown asserts that imaginative 'free play' — as opposed to games or structured activities — is the most essential type (Brown, 2009).

Imaginative play is essential in helping children learn about the world around them and understanding how to interact with others. Children use their imagination to try distinct scenarios and a variety of ways to respond to, and deal with, other children and adults; learning to take turns; and negotiating conflicts. They can shape their imaginary world as they desire or base it on their own hopes and fears. Imaginary activities can help children emerge from setbacks and problems they encounter throughout their lives. Envisioning the possibilities is the first step to handling, or responding to, a situation or event differently or addressing fears in a specific situation.

What is Imagination Deficit?

Imagination is not an innate ability; it needs to be fostered. Failing to encourage it results in an inability to:

- Imagine alternative solutions.
- Understand how children relate to the world around them.
- Be innovative; feel compassion.
- Handle, and respond to, fearful situations.
- Develop problem-solving skills.
- Delay gratification.
- Practice new skills.
- Learn cooperative play; negotiate conflicts.
- Communicate effectively.

Social and technological changes, demands on children's time, almost constant pressure by the media on parents and professionals alike to focus on the academics of school readiness all highlight the need to raise awareness of, and generate, supportive policies and programs for imaginative play and its real-life benefits. Children's inability to imagine affects not only their success in school, but their future success in life and at work. According to Kenneth Ginsburg (2008), peer negotiation, taking chances, and failing and learning how to do things differently after failure are key to successful job performance.

What Children Learn through Imaginative Play

Imaginative play is child-directed, open-ended play that lets children explore old ideas and form new ones, while developing the creativity and empathy that are required for healthy intellectual and emotional development. Children can create, question, imitate, dream, and share during imaginary play. They can practice different skills; try out role-playing; explore their feelings and fears; and reenact situations and experiences to better understand them.

Shlomit Avshalom maintains that imagination is developed in young children through imaginative 'action' play:

When children need to do something in order to achieve results, they need to think more carefully about what they choose to do and what results they will get based on the decisions they make. If a child watches a show about cars on television, he does not need to move, physically or mentally. When a child pretends to drive a car, he thinks about what a car does; what actions the person in the car needs to do; and where he might want to go while driving. Then, he physically plays out these actions.

Ginsburg clarifies that imaginative play is essential for children because it allows them to be the conductor. They learn the critical skills for innovation through play — not lessons — supported by adults. Lawrence Cohen concurs, saying:

"Imagination teaches children they actually don't have to stop with what their minds and bodies can do in the 'real world.' They can use their imaginations to go anywhere in the universe, real or imaginary. These skills are learned best through play, *not* flashcards or academic drills!"

Assessing Imagination Deficit in Your Program

What does it take to address imagination deficit in your own program? Start with a review of your classroom or centers and equipment as well as policies, purchasing guidelines, and staff training to ensure that spaces or materials provide an environment that encourages lots of unstructured, child-directed rather than staff-directed play time along with an increased supply of open-ended items and materials that offer multiple, creative play options.
Next, refocus your efforts with a few low- or no-cost ideas and techniques you and your staff can incorporate eas-

ily into your daily activities. Once you have addressed this issue within your own program, you and your staff can serve as role models for parents and spark discussions about the need for more child-driven and child-directed, imaginative play at home.

Adults make all the decisions about how a classroom environment will be equipped, what the daily schedule will be, and what policies will guide the work. A classroom with imagination deficit is an environment lacking the stimulus (or providing a minimum of opportunity) for creativity and development of a child's imagination in all areas.

Addressing Imagination Deficit

Engage in story building:

- Gather a pocketful of story-building ideas (written key word list) relevant to children's lives, interests, neighborhood or community.
- Invite the children to guide the direction the story will take. Prompt only when necessary with questions like "What happened next?" and "What did he look like/do/say/think?"
- Keep an 'anything goes' attitude about the storytelling: no right or wrong answers. Go with the flow of the children's ideas as much as possible.
- Ask children to provide their own alternative endings to stories you read. Be sure to inquire about what they think will happen to the characters in the story.

Play thought-provoking games:

- Use imaginary — or real — problems and situations to engage children in creative thinking to solve a problem by asking "What could we do?"
- Encourage children to create new and silly uses for everyday items. Jump start the game by offering one or two ideas, such as using a toothbrush or comb for painting; peanut butter as glue; or chocolate to make a shirt so when you get hungry, you have a handy snack!
- Help children create images in their minds by playing "What animal is this?" Describe one aspect of the animal at a time until the children begin guessing: "I'm thinking of an animal with whiskers." If no one guesses correctly, then add "and a long tail," etc.
- Start conversations with children using open-ended questions:
  —"If you could invent the best toy/car ever, what it would look like/do?"
  —"If you had a magic wand, what would you do first?"
  —"If you ran the world, what changes would you make?"
- Help children understand multiple perspectives. Have one child stand up with his back turned to the group. Have him provide general directions for drawing an image to the other children: "Draw a square" or "draw a

Use the following set of questions to measure the level of imagination deficit in your classroom. Answers of 'Yes' or 'Not Sure' indicate the need for a more in-depth review of your policies, procedures, and staff training.	
Teachers and staff do more 'directing' of the creative activities and imaginative play and there are fewer child-initiated imaginative play opportunities.	Yes No Not Sure
Staff focuses more on the 'end product' of a project, rather than the process and individual effort of each child.	Yes No Not Sure
Most experiences, props, and materials provide limited play options that do not inspire exploration.	Yes No Not Sure
Staff has strict ideas about the right way to do things, censoring and, thus, stifling, children's ideas, rather than promoting creative thinking and alternative ways of doings things.	Yes No Not Sure
Children are fearful of making mistakes, focusing on doing things the 'correct' way.	Yes No Not Sure
Children are provided images via books, videos, commercialized products and the like, rather than being invited to create images in their minds and describe those images	Yes No Not Sure
Storytelling originates with adults, with little encouragement for the children to provide ideas about characters and storyline	Yes No Not Sure
Even when age-appropriate, children are told how to correct a situation or problem, rather than invited to explore alternative or creative solutions toward helping resolve a problem or negotiate a situation with a peer.	Yes No Not Sure
Children are exposed to more passive than active learning opportunities.	Yes No Not Sure
Fostering creativity is valued less than traditional school readiness activities, which include math and literacy.	Yes No Not Sure

head." The child continues with additional details (e.g., a face, tail, ears, feet or hair). After a few minutes, have the children hold up their drawings to share with each other and celebrate their individuality and the power of their imaginations.

Create child-directed environments

- Provide unstructured, child-directed playtime.
- Ensure the availability of props, supplies, space, and time for exploration.
- Use puppets, stuffed animals, and dolls to facilitate discussions; ask questions; help children explore emotions and fears; tell stories with children providing details/direction.
- Offer ideas and provide materials for a greater variety of child-initiated, role playing: for example, space travel, photography, gardening, fashion and floral design, restaurant, painting, office work, and appliance repair.
- Use role-play materials to help children design their own community: What would it look like? Who would live there? What jobs would people do? What would people do for fun? How would people help each other? Adults can offer examples of how a community functions:

  —A mechanic can be called to fix the spaceship
  —A photographer can take pictures of the fashion show
  —An appliance repair person can fix the office copier
  —A florist can deliver flowers to a restaurant or business person
  —A gardener can deliver fresh vegetables and fruit to a restaurant
  —A painter can paint an office or restaurant
  —A business person can go to a restaurant to eat
  —A business person can drop off a pet to be groomed
  —A composer can provide background music for the restaurant.
- Group materials to allow children to see the connections between them.

Eliminate commercial and packaged images

Encourage children to create their own images and stories:

- Read about new places and experiences.
- Help children explore their senses (hearing, taste, smell, sight, and touch) to create interactive stories. For example, a teddy bear or puppet searching for something to eat could 'smell' or 'feel' different items (not visible, hidden in a box or other container) until the children help identify what there is to eat.
- Help children explore simple designs in magazines and the environment (wavy lines, stripes, and concentric circles) and ask the children what these look like to them. Enjoy their individual view of things.
- Invite children to represent their imaginary worlds with safe recyclables (empty plastic containers, boxes, household, and office items); wooden, plastic, cardboard blocks; dress-up clothes; play dough.
- Use blocks or furniture as imaginary trains, buses, airplanes and shuttle launch pads, restaurants, hospitals, offices, and stores.
- Base a new storyline on the child-created imaginary world or the child-designed blocks/furniture activity. Follow the children's lead in developing the story.

Rethink future purchases

Let the following questions guide your purchases of new materials for your program:

- How many ways could a child use it?
- Will a child be able to be creative with it, pretend with it?
- Is it designed to be played with in a certain (restricted) way?

Help parents address imagination deficit

Engage parents in discussions about the importance of children's imaginative play:

- Create visual displays to communicate your key messages.

Kaitlyn Hunter, Director
The Children's Place/Fun & Fit, INTEGRIS Health
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma
Interview by Kay Albrecht

I very strongly believe that it is our job as adults working with children to embrace childhood as an opportunity to imagine and explore. As the middle child and only girl in a large family, I often found myself very aware of everyone's personality and needs. I wanted everyone to be a team and work together, so I saw it as my role in the family to make sure we all got along. I still have a strong need to pay attention to those around me and to listen to those things said and unsaid in order to best meet their needs.

Archie

When do you get your ideas?

When I come from the sensory room.

Submitted by Karen Graham
World Forum National Representative Wales

- Add photos of the displays to your classroom or center website or newsletter (e.g., display examples of passive and active toys that parents typically buy, focusing on ones that encourage imaginative play).
- Develop 'quick reads' for parents to help them rethink future toy purchases by including a set of questions to ask themselves.
- Discuss imaginative play during parent-teacher conferences.
- Help parents change their home environments by setting aside time for unstructured, child-directed play time.
- Offer hands-on workshops for parents:
  - —Make hand puppets from socks or paper bags.
  - —Sort through the center's dress-up clothes to help get ideas about clothes and accessories they might donate.
  - —Play interactive "What if?" and "How about?" games, demonstrating how easy it is to encourage imaginative play anywhere, anytime.

Imaginative play serves a critical role in a child's overall healthy development and future success in life. Imagination deficit is a call to action for early childhood professionals who are in a unique position to convey this message to parents, collaborating with them to address this issue by providing the environment, materials, time and encouragement so that children fully develop this invaluable resource . . . the engine that will drive their success in school and adult life.

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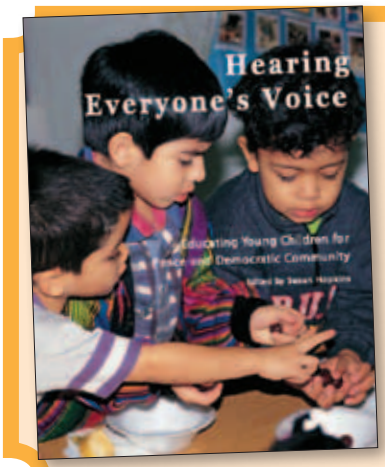
Resources

Alliance for Childhood: www.allianceforchildhood.org

The National Institute for Play: www.nifplay.org

Art is a favorite activity for children, which gives a meaning to children to express themselves and their ideas and also is a reflection of their interests and influences. The favorite objects in drawings are houses, animals, hand pumps, trees, kites, sun, ball, bat, etc. Interestingly in a child's world there are no humans, but things and objects.

Submitted by Amrita Jain
World Forum National Representative
India



"To truly listen to someone is one of the rarest and most valuable gifts we can give. There is very little else we can really do for a friend: we can't make decisions for them, we can't solve their problems for them, we can't alter the past or bring a particular future to them. But we can give them the gift of truly being present for them — the gift of giving ourselves to them without reservation."

Susan Hopkins, *Hearing Everyone's Voice: Educating young children for peace and democratic community* (Redmond, WA: Exchange Press, 1999)

Jerry Smith
Real Estate Broker
(Retired)
Rancho Mirage, California
Interview by Bruce Schon

I get my new ideas from reading newspapers and magazines, browsing the Internet, and having conversations with a wide range of people.

New ideas come to me by observing what is happening around me, carefully thinking things through, and reading everything I can get my hands on.

Ruthesh, 5 years
When do you get your ideas?
When I am playing, I put my ideas in before starting to play.

Navtej, 3 years
When do you get your ideas?
While looking and observing everywhere.

Submitted by Soonita Kistamah
World Forum National Representative Mauritius