

Documenting Play

by Lynn Cohen

The drama center has been transformed into a hospital. Gowns, masks, plastic gloves, bandages, Q-tips, stethoscope, flashlight, cradle, blanket, clipboards with paper, pencils, and a toy telephone are the props used by children as they engage in sociodramatic play.

Thomas says, "If you don't take care of me, I'm going to die."

Tory — Writes out a prescription on the clipboard.

Thomas — "Let's go fast, I'm going to die."

Tory — "I need to write everything."

Marissa and Tanika — Both girls are playing with the doctor's bag.

Tory — Finishes his report. Picks up a Q-tip to check

Marissa for head lice. He looks in her eye.

Tory says, "You have an eye infection."

Tanika takes the role of Marissa's mother.

Tory — "Moms are not allowed in the office."

Marissa — "I want my mommy."

Tory examines Marissa and says, "Just one lump. Rubber bands are pulling on it. You need medicine."

Tory gives Marissa a shot.

This is a typical pretend play scene in my early childhood classroom. Children are learning about the world of hospitals through play. It is important to try to capitalize on this natural inclination by providing the time and materials needed for play. In describing NAEYC's developmentally appropriate practices Bredekamp states: "The child's active participation in self-directed play with concrete, real-life experiences continues to be a key to motivated meaningful learning in kindergarten



Lynn Cohen is a kindergarten teacher for the Great Neck Public Schools and is recognized nationally as an early childhood curriculum consultant. She is a freelance writer, has written six early childhood trade books, and is an adjunct faculty at C.W. Post College, Brookville, New York.



and the early grades" (Bredekamp, 1987, p. 4). Many parents, administrators, and teachers think because children are in school, they should be doing *school things*. Parents typically ask, "What did you do in school today?" Children in developmentally appropriate early childhood classrooms, where play is seen as a vehicle for developing literacy, math and social skills, would probably reply, "We played!" This may cause parents to feel anxious because they do not fully understand or value the role of play in the early childhood curriculum, although they value and promote play at home. We need to help parents and administrators understand the differences in play.

Play in Child Care Programs

Here are some differences between children's play at home and early childhood programs that we can share with parents and administrators:

Group Size — Children learn to play in larger groups in child care programs. While some children may still engage in solitary or parallel play, their play takes place in the context of a larger group. A child at home couldn't organize a hospital episode or any early childhood circle game.

Materials and Equipment — Child care settings provide children with sand tables, water tables, wood-working tools, and easels. Clay and paint are sometimes considered too messy for home use. Many parents purchase commercial toys for their children. In child care programs, children can create, design, and invent their own materials.

Space — Indoor space is not limited to a bedroom, living room, or family room. Children in classroom settings have more space to engage in block play or sociodramatic play. Children can create a block structure and revisit it the following day! Children at home usually have limited outdoor space and equipment. Homes have swing sets and sand boxes, in comparison to play areas in child care centers equipped with outdoor apparatus for climbing and rings and bars for swinging. Children living in urban areas have limited opportunities to play outdoors, especially in inclement weather.

Time — In developmentally appropriate programs, play is an integral part of the day. Play is scheduled on a daily basis. At home, a parent is busy with household chores. Some families with busy schedules may skip play altogether.

Adult/Child Interaction — Teachers can facilitate, expand, and scaffold

children's play in child care programs. Vygotsky (1978) believes that learning leads development. According to his theory, learning is most effective when it takes place within the children's zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the area between a child's level of independent performance and assisted performance. For example, a child is playing with teddy bear counters. The teacher observes the child playing with the counters and assists by suggesting the child count, sort, and graph the bears by color or shape. Parents would probably not guide and discuss many playful discoveries with their children.

To eliminate misconceptions of play in schools, early childhood educators first need to help parents and administrators understand the differences between play at home and child care settings. Then we need to help parents and administrators recognize the way the play-oriented classroom supports learning. I write monthly newsletters and conduct workshops on topics such as early literacy or manipulative math. Many parents and/or grandparents can rearrange their schedules to volunteer an hour a week. I invite two parents or grandparents every day to participate in my room during play time for one hour each week.

Mechanisms to document play to parents are anecdotal descriptions of children's progress, photography, audiotapes, videotapes, and work samples. More recently, I am integrating Reggio Emilia's approach to documenting children's play and experiences through panels accompanied by explanatory notes, samples of children's work and transcripts of children's conversations.

Anecdotal Notes

In my classroom I try to observe children every day. Carol Seefeldt believes the best way to assess an individual child is through direct observation. "Observing is probably the oldest, most frequently used and most rewarding method of assessing children, their growth, development, and learning." (Seefeldt, 1990, p. 313).

Children play in the block center every day for at least an hour during activity time. Dr. Drew Discovery Blocks as well as Caroline Pratt unit blocks are arranged on book shelves and in crates. I provide a wealth of block accessories to add stimulation, aesthetic beauty, and dramatic play content. Literature related to building is left in the block center as reference material for classroom architects and mathematicians.

For many children building and constructing is the most comfortable way to represent thinking. You observe children talking to each other about their struc-



tures and verbalizing block building plans. Acts of literacy are incorporated when signs for buildings or maps are created. There is evidence of mathematical thinking as children use the blocks to create pattern and explore whole-part relationships.

Here's an observation in the form of an anecdotal record of a child building with unit and discovery blocks:

*"Lawrence began to build a castle. He took several blocks and made an enclosure. He looked at the book, **Castles. A First Discovery Book** (Jeunesse, 1993). He said, 'This doesn't look like a castle.' I said, 'Why don't you build up?' He started to stack blocks perpendicular, then vertical. He added block accessories and said, 'The animals are the guards of the castle. I'm only going to make a sign.' He drew a picture. 'This is the castle with animals in it. The animals are the guards. Real monkeys, bears, rhinoceros, and a couple of whales.'"*

Lawrence used language arts skills as he researched literature and drew a picture (see Figure 1). There was evidence of mathematical and scientific reasoning and problem-solving as I watched him build his structure and use animal block accessories.

Tori and Christine's knowledge of maps and zoos was observed when they built a petting zoo with blocks and labeled it with signs. (See Figures 2 and 3). Figure 3 is a map of the zoo for



Figure 1.

visitors to use as a guide.

Anecdotal records of children playing with blocks is an example of one learning center where you can record children's learning. You can use anecdotes in the dramatic play area, art area, manipulative areas, and especially while the children are playing outdoors.

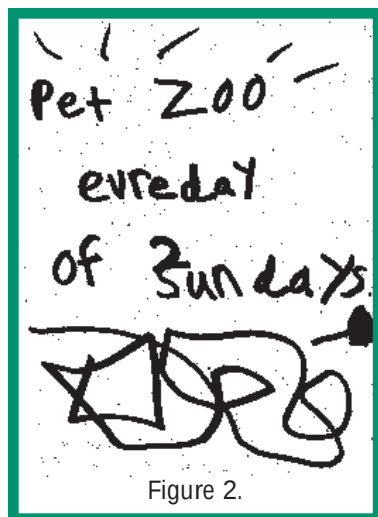


Figure 2.

As you watch children play, write down what children do or say verbatim. Record the date, time, and setting. While watching, jot down enough information to get the basic story and most significant details. It is important in anecdotal records to keep information factual rather than subjective.



Figure 3.

Photography

Keep a camera loaded with film to photograph your child's thinking and learning while playing. Photographs communicate to children, parents, and administrators the process of how knowledge is constructed. They also let children know you value their play by providing a sense of permanence to their creativity. Photography provides opportunities for you and your children to look at and talk about play, long after blocks have been put back on the block shelves or sand toys put away in the sand box.

Audiotapes

Make audiotape recordings while children are playing. Taping your children's verbal communications will provide you with information about their language skills, as well as their development as cooperative players and problem solvers. It is useful to use audiotapes while taking anecdotal notes.

Videotapes

Videotaping play in the classroom and on the playground can be a passageway into learning about children's spontaneous play, their social interactions and development and physical changes. It is important that we ask children's permission before videotaping their play. Videotapes, as well as audiotapes, support our observations of children. It is impossible to see and record everything a child does and says while engaged in play! Technology assisted observations increase the accuracy of recording children's thinking and problem solving.



You can make video prints of those special playful moments if you use an 8mm video camera and have an audiovisual computer. Video prints can also be made from a Sony color video printer (CVP-M3). Tape field trips, story retellings, block structures, dramatic play, and outdoor play. Try videotaping the children a few times; and share the tapes at parent meetings, so that parents can observe their children's learning through play.

Work Samples

Children's own work is the most authentic form of documentation of play and learning. Save all signs and labels children write and draw as they build structures or play in the drama center. Work samples can provide concrete information about development in literacy, creativity, problem-solving, and fine-motor skills. You can save the originals or make photocopies of children's writing and artwork. I often take photographs of a child using woodworking tools to make a math geoboard or sorting and classifying colored macaroni. It is important to date each work sample and create a portfolio or folder for each child.

Documentation Panels

Many early childhood educators observe and record children's learning and development. Over the past six years interest in the preschool programs (for ages 3–6) of Reggio Emilia, Italy, has grown. Although early childhood educators have been practicing observation techniques for decades, we are just beginning to closely examine Reggio Emilia's use of extensive documentation. "Documentation in Reggio Emilia schools focuses on children's experiences, memories, thoughts, and ideas in the course of their work. It typically includes samples of a child's work at several different stages of completion, photographs showing work in progress, comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children, transcriptions of children's discussions, and comments made by parents (Katz and Chard, 1996).

I hang presentation boards at children's eye level outside my room. On these boards the process and product of children's learning are shared with children, parents, colleagues, administrators, and visitors. Below are some essential elements to keep in mind when creating a documentation panel:

1. Focus on children's engagement in meaningful experiences (i.e., a project, a field trip, working with clay, playing with blocks).



2. Select photographs that relate to the experience being described.
3. Provide information related to the process as well as completed products.
4. Include samples of children's work.
5. Include a verbatim dialogue of children's discussions or responses by parents and/or teachers.
6. The aesthetic presentation of the panel is very important. Use a computer for text and enlarge photographs with a color copier. Mount text, photographs, and work samples on construction paper.

The challenge of adults today for the children of tomorrow is to allow the child to be a child, to do child-like things, and to value their play at home and in child care settings. Documentation of play provides us with an understanding of how children construct knowledge. As we watch and document children making discoveries with blocks, paints, and earthworms, we are supporting the future architect, artist, and scientist of tomorrow.

References

- Bredenkamp, S. (editor). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice In Early Childhood Programs Serving Children From Birth Through Age 8. (Expanded edition)* Washington, DC: National Association for The Education of Young Children, 1987.
- Hendrick, Joanne (editor). *First Steps Toward Teaching The Reggio Way.* New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Jeunesse, Gallinard, et. al. *Castles. A First Discovery Book.* New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1993.
- Katz, Lillian G. and Sylvia C. Chard. "The Contribution of Documentation to the Quality of Early Childhood Education": *Eric Digest*, April 1996.
- Seefeldt, Carolyn. Assessing Young Children. In Carolyn Seefeldt (editor) *Continuing Issues In Early Childhood Education.* New York: Merrill / Macmillan, 1990.
- Vygotsky, L. *The Mind In Society.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.