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Playing the Day Away

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

"It is in playing, and perhaps only in playing, that the child is free to be creative."

— D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge (1989)

Play: As Natural As Breathing

Think about all the young children who have passed through the doors of your child care program over the years. Each one is an individual, a special young person who approaches the world in his own unique way. Yet there are some behaviors that nearly all children have in common — activities that come to them as naturally as breathing and eating. Anyone who knows the world of children will agree that *play* is one of those behaviors.

There are compelling developmental reasons for a child's instinct to play. Play is the way a child explores his world, builds skills, exercises his imagination, and learns through experience. "All play means something," wrote the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens,* his pre-World War II seminal study on the social function of play in western culture. "It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a *significant* function — that is to say, there is some sense to it."

Play IS for Keeps

At *Playing for Keeps* (www.playingforkeeps.org), we believe that play makes a *lot* of sense, especially for young children, and its developmental benefits are crucial to good outcomes for children. To borrow a playful phrase of childhood: play, itself, *is* for keeps.

Susan Oliver's favorite childhood play space was the huge haymow in the main barn on the dairy farm where she was raised. She and her siblings spent countless carefree hours arranging hay bales into houses, forts, and small villages and populating them with imaginary children and families. Since then, she has spent much of her career working in the not-for-profit sector to improve living and learning conditions for children. Today, as executive director of the national non-profit organization *Playing for Keeps*, she devotes her time to promoting and protecting the role of play in our culture. Prior to her association with *Playing for Keeps*, Ms. Oliver served in various positions at the National Lekotek Center, a national non-profit organization dedicated to making play accessible to children with disabilities and the Family Resource Coalition of America, a national non-profit organization committed to building community-based support and resources for children and families.

Edgar Klugman has always enjoyed play. That is what attracted him to teaching. Can you imagine having the opportunity to make a movie, raise chickens in your classroom, produce eggs from a bantam hen, collect 37 eggs, and have enough to make a wedding cake? And, what is a wedding cake without a wedding? They had to write a play in which the prince and princess married. Of course, they shared the cake with the audience along with song and dance. Play can lead to other opportunities. He is now the co-founder of *Playing for Keeps* as well as professor emeritus of Early Childhood Education and Care at Wheelock College in Boston, Massachusetts. He is also a charter member of the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum within the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Among his publications are *Play, Policy and Practice* (Redleaf Press), and *Children's Play and Learning: Perspectives and Policy Implications* (edited with Smilansky; Teachers College Press). He currently serves on the board of New England AEYC. And, he continues to play!

Play for all young children is in all the environments where they spend their time, including home, child care, preschool, cultural institutions, and other community settings. We use the term *constructive play* to describe the type of developmentally appropriate, productive, non-violent, and fun activities that give young children a strong base for building gross motor, fine motor, cognitive, social, sensory, and emotional skills — the kind of skills that will increase their chances for success in elementary school and beyond.

What is *Constructive Play*?

Our concept of *constructive play* has been shaped through input from several leading scholars and practitioners who specialize in infant, toddler, and preschool development and education. For many years, researchers have studied the role of play in the growth and development of children. They have found that constructive play — like food, love, care, and hope — is an essential building block for healthy children and a critical part of the foundation children need to lead well-adjusted, happy, and productive lives.

Constructive play is characterized by the following qualities:

- It is safe, wholesome, and non-violent.
- It stimulates children to develop skills and positive relationships.
- It inspires children to learn more about themselves and the world around them.
- It encourages and enables children to fully realize their potential.
- It encourages creativity.
- It helps develop a child's personality.
- It makes learning fun.

The Benefits of Play

Jerome Singer, Ph.D., professor of Child Studies at Yale University and member of the Playing for Keeps' board of directors, notes that learning through play is intrinsically motivating for both children and adults. "Play can miniaturize a part of the complex world children experience, reduce it to understandable dimensions, manipulate it, and help them understand how it works." (Singer & Singer, 2000.)

A significant body of research conducted over the past generation has articulated a long list of specific benefits that play provides for children. Among the benefits noted in various publications by Singer (1994), Sara Smilansky, Ph.D., of Tel Aviv University, Edgar Klugman, Ed.D. (1990), professor Emeritus at Wheelock College, and others, are the following:

- development of motor skills
- sharpening of the senses
- development of empathy and the ability to express emotions
- understanding and practice of sharing, turn taking, and other peer cooperation skills
- increasing control of compulsive actions and learning to accept delayed gratification
- building ordering and sequencing skills
- increasing the size of the vocabulary and the ability to comprehend language
- increasing concentration skills
- learning to navigate assigned roles
- development of capacity to be flexible
- expansion of imagination, creativity, and curiosity
- reducing aggression

Today's Play Landscape

If play is so central to healthy development and if it comes naturally to kids, why is there a need to study it, talk about it, and promote it? Won't children do whatever they need to do on their own?

Unfortunately, access to constructive play — especially the type of unstructured free play that does so much to nurture creativity and the imagination — is not a simple matter for many of today's children. Why? It has to do with the lifestyles we have given our children and the fact that not all play is created equal.

Early childhood caregivers and teachers are welcoming children into their classrooms who may bring play habits and experiences unknown to earlier generations. Those working with children in early childhood settings should be aware of the play landscape on which these kids have been nurtured, because it may impact the type of developmentally appropriate learning the children are prepared to do. Here are a few of the realities:

- **Increasing "screen time."** A recent study (Jordan & Woodard, 2001) published by ZERO TO THREE, the National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and Families, reports that the average two to three year old spends more than four hours a day in front of a screen (television or computer). One in six children in that age group have a television set in his or her bedroom. New *play* products for very young children include a *toddlerized* remote control to make channel surfing easier for little kids and *lapware*, which is computer games designed for children as young as nine months to play while sitting in an adult's lap.

Public television is targeting children as young as 12 months in some of its programs. A toddler living in the average American home is living in a setting with a television operating for six hours

a day. For the toddler, much of that television is background noise and visuals while they continue to spend 40% of their time engaged in social activities and 32% of their time engaged in play, according to a study authored by Daniel R. Anderson and Marie K. Evans (Anderson & Evans, 2001). While the child might not be actively absorbed in the television at all times, the background noise and the peripheral motion can disrupt the ongoing play schemes and language development of the child. Moreover, the supervising adult generally is focused on the television even if the child is not, and is, therefore, not available to play with the child.

- **Limited outdoor play time.** While a child can certainly learn some things while watching television or playing on computers, there are other important developmental activities that simply cannot happen when a child is in front of a screen. The gross motor activity and social play that happens most easily in outdoor spaces is increasingly difficult for today's children to experience. Many parents and caregivers make decisions based on the perception that we live in an unpredictable, dangerous society, and therefore, children need to be heavily supervised while playing outdoors. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the many demands on parents and the limited time they have for supervising play makes it increasingly difficult to fit unstructured outdoor play into a child's day (www.kidsource.com/kidsource/content4/school.recess.html). In addition to missing out on valuable developmental experiences, limited outdoor play affects children's physical well-being. Experts believe that children do not get enough exercise today and this is cited as a leading factor in the rise of childhood obesity (Dietz, 1999).

- **Exposure to violence.** While the good news is that today's children have access to a wide variety of play materials to fit a wide variety of interests and abilities (e.g., classic toys, *high-tech interactive* toys, board games, video games, computer games, the internet, and more), the bad news is that some of these forms of play expose children to violent themes and content frequently, and at very young ages. A recent study conducted at the University of California at Santa Barbara found that most violence to which children are exposed is glamorized and sanitized — usually initiated by "good" characters who are likely to be perceived as attractive role models (www.media-awareness.ca/eng/issues/violence/resource/reports/ntvs3.htm). Few examples of violence show children any long-term consequences. "These patterns teach children that violence is desirable, necessary, and painless," said Dr. Dale Kunkel, associate professor of communication at UCSB, and a senior researcher for the study.

- **Overscheduling and overfacilitating.** Today's children may demonstrate new play patterns due to their relative lack of experience with unstructured free play. A recent University of Michigan study found that the average child's free time (i.e. after eating, sleeping, and structured educational activities) has dropped from 40% to 25% of their day in the last generation (www.isr.umich.edu/src/child-development/timerep.html). In many parts of our culture, children are in formal, scheduled, adult-driven activities like sports programs and lessons earlier than ever before.

For many, play with peers takes place in play groups that have been arranged by their parents and that are highly supervised by the adults in attendance. Despite the increased participation of mothers in the paid labor force, children aged three to 12 are spending 24% more time with their mothers and 21% more time with their fathers than they did a generation ago(www.umich.edu/~newsinfo/Releases/2001/May01/r050901a.html). While this is, in general, a positive development, it stands to reason that children who develop the habit of having a readily available adult arbitrator may not develop the same independent problem-solving skills that children allowed more unstructured play might achieve.

Consequences for Caregivers and Early Childhood Programs

These trends point to the possibility that many children entering child care and early childhood programs are coming with different play habits, skills, and expectations than in the past, and that the caregiver's or instructor's role in making constructive play experiences available is all the more crucial for children's healthy development.

If a significant part of the natural instinct to play has been directed to television and computers, it stands to reason that some of the time those children could have been spending on more traditional play activities richer in developmental benefits has been lost. If adults have facilitated most of the play the child has so far experienced, children may need to be challenged to work out conflicts on their own and explore their own unique creativity.

Link Between Constructive Play and Good Outcomes for Children

It is often said that play is a child's work. While today's preschoolers may present new challenges that require creative responses from caregivers, constructive play remains a standard for good practice in early childhood settings. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate play as best practice for early childhood, and several major early

childhood curricula are built on the philosophy that play is the natural way for children to learn. For younger children, organizations such as ZERO TO THREE advise parents seeking child care programs to look for a healthy, play-based environment — whether the family is choosing home-based care or center-based care.

The consequences of constructive play in a child's earliest days and years are powerful. "The benefits of rich play experiences during the preschool years are extensive and address academic goals for reading and writing, math, science, social studies, and the arts," note Diane Trister Dodge and Toni S. Bickart in their popular guide *Preschool for Parents*. "Several decades of research show that high-quality programs that aim to strengthen social and emotional skills through play have positive effects on all aspects of children's development — including cognitive or intellectual development. What's more, these positive effects are long lasting."

Play, then, is nothing short of a unique — even magical — tool for caregivers of our infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. "The activities that are the easiest, cheapest, and most fun to do, such as singing, playing games, reading, storytelling, and just talking and listening, are also the best for child development," says Jerome Singer. This is good news for those dedicated to the healthy development of our youngest children.

Watch upcoming issues for more information about the research basis for, and practice of, constructive play. And in the meantime, be generous with your time and imagination as you nurture those creative young children in your care. Remember . . . they can't help themselves — they MUST play!

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