

The Connection Between Play and Character

by David Elkind

Free, spontaneous, and self-initiated play was once the norm for young children. This is no longer the case. Even toys for infants both talk and move with little left to the child's imagination. The fastest selling softwares for toddlers are so-called Lapwares® which are no more than stimulus-response computer programs. Both parents and early childhood educators, who once encouraged young children to choose their own activities, are being pressured to replace them with adult directed games, sports, and academic instruction.

All of this reflects a changed conception of the meaning and value of play. Free, spontaneous, and self-initiated play was once welcomed as a measure of healthy growth and development. Today, however, true play is often looked upon as frivolous and a waste of time. Only toys and games that are educational, in the sense of teaching concepts such as colors, or tool skills such as reading, are worthwhile. In short, even for young children, promoting academic and athletic achievement is now seen to be more important than the encouragement of imagination and creativity.

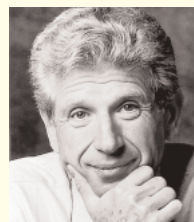
This change in the valuation of free, spontaneous play is to be regretted for many reasons. True play is fun, whereas learning is often serious business. When we make toys and games educational, we take much of the joy out of childhood. Joyless childhood may be unavoidable in some third world countries (where children nonetheless play with homemade rag dolls and tools) but it is inexcusable in America. Even more significant and less recognized, is the effect of a joyless childhood upon character development.

Character can be defined as the disposition to make socially responsible choices. That is to say, we have the choice to be honest or dishonest, to be truthful or deceitful, compassionate or insensitive. The disposition to make socially responsible choices is not inborn and must be learned. When children have the opportunity to engage in true play, they are learning to consider options and make choices. Children who play with blocks, to illustrate, have to choose among the blocks and decide just what structure they want to build. In dramatic play children must select the clothes they will wear and the roles they will take. Children who play their own games learn

to take the other child's point of view. True play thus encourages character building, problem solving, decision making, and perspective taking skills.

Of course it might be argued that character is best learned from the behavior of others, namely parents. And this is certainly true. Consider the message parents convey when they encourage and support children's true play. They are telling their children that they trust them to make socially responsible choices. When parents give their children the opportunity to play freely with toys and games this shows their confidence that the children will play constructively, rather than destructively, with the materials. Children, who are given these opportunities internalize the sense that they are competent to act independently and responsibly. It becomes part of their self-concept. Children learn the same things when they are given choices in early childhood educational settings. In contrast, when parents and/or teachers provide adult-structured toys and activities, they convey the opposite message. This directive approach tells children that they are not able to make socially responsible choices on their own. Children make this part of their self-conception as well.

While this relation between play and character sounds good in theory, is there any data to back it up? While we don't have many direct studies, there is a lot of indirect evidence to support this contention. For one thing, we have become increasingly less playful as a nation. Our national sports are so professional, and so monetary in their goals, that the original fun of playing the game is all but gone. This emphasis upon goals, rather than fun, is equally true for children who are



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participating in organized team sports. Much of our theater, art, music, television, and movies has become so commercialized that freedom and spontaneity are all but absent from them as well. The profit motive drives the joyfulness out of these activities.

As we have become less playful and less joyous as a nation, we have also become less civil. Recent surveys suggest that a majority of people feel that our society is becoming increasingly rude and disrespectful. While correlation is not causation, it is not improbable that as we become less playful with one another we are also less willing to take the perspective of others, the basis of civility.

In this connection, it is interesting that as the amounts of time children spend in true play goes down, the amount of time they spend in character education programs goes up. The number of character education programs in our schools seems to have increased in direct proportion to the decline in the time children spend in free play. Perhaps the most direct evidence of this relation between true play and character come from the longitudinal studies of the long-term effects of quality early childhood programs. These programs allow plenty of time for free play. One of the best examples is the Chicago longitudinal study of some 1,500 inner city young people followed from kindergarten through graduation from high school. The children were in high quality kindergarten (teacher/child ratio was 2 to 17 in kindergarten and 2 to 25 in first and second grade). There was no uniform curriculum but activities were aimed at promoting language and reading skills as well as social and psychological development. There was considerable parent involvement as well.

The results were impressive. Children who participated in the program had higher reading and math scores than those who did not participate. Children in the program were also less likely to be retained than those not in the program. Only 12% of the participating children were in special need classes as opposed to 21.3% for those who were not. Participants in the program had a 37% lower arrest rate by age 18 than did non-participants. In general, the longer a child was in the program the better the results on all of the measures described above. For our purposes, perhaps the most interesting data comes from a survey conducted when the participants were in 10th grade. The students were asked, "If you attended a Child-Parent Center, what do you remember most about it?" The most frequent response was *fun*, followed by *teacher*, *friends/kids*, and *play*. *Learning* and *taking tests* were listed in seventh and eighth place. Other longitudinal studies have come up with similar results. That *fun* is what these young remember

most of their early childhood experience is the best evidence I can offer regarding the connection of play and character.

Free, spontaneous, and self-initiated play is neither frivolous nor a waste of time. Rather, it is that part of our human nature that helps us be more thoughtful and considerate of others.

As parents, grandparents, and teachers we can do much to encourage children's true play. First, we can encourage children to make their own toys out of a variety of otherwise discarded objects. I have a young niece who was delighted with a discarded phone on which she makes make-believe calls to her friends and relatives. When we do purchase toys, we need to choose those which encourage children to use their imagination such as blocks, paints, and clay. Likewise, when we read to children we can also ask them to make up their own stories, which we can write down and read back to them. These are but a few of the ways that we can encourage both joyful play and healthy character development.

Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers

by Kay Albrecht

Joyless Childhoods: The concern that children are not getting enough play time with the right kinds of toys, open-ended materials, and character-building experiences is raised in Elkind's article. Ask teachers to carefully analyze their daily schedules to determine how much time is devoted to this character-building kind of play. Discuss what they discover and create a plan to make this kind of play a priority in your classrooms.

Four Ways to Build Skills: Character building, problem solving, decision making, and perspective taking are the four skills encouraged by true play. Work with teachers to document the emergence and practice of these skills in the classroom with photos, anecdotal notes, observations of children at play, audiotapes, or videotapes. Share your discoveries about how children are practicing and building skills with parents at a parent meeting or during parent conferences.

Play Teaches Reading!: Elkind reports on a longitudinal study that documents the results of high quality early childhood programs with certain characteristics. Locate this study, review its conclusions, and learn to talk about how this research supports having plenty of play time at school. Use this knowledge to help parents and other stakeholders embrace the importance of quality early childhood education as well as to support the inclusion of considerable playtime in the classroom schedule.