

Incorporating constructive play in the early childhood classroom

Play and Learning Day by Day

by Susan J. Oliver and Edgar Klugman

“Let’s play rescue.” “Yeah! I am the firefighter!” “I want to drive the truck.” “We need to make a road.” And off the children go into their imaginary world, where rows of blocks lined up and weaving around the play space become an emergency access road, a sturdy plastic plate quickly grabbed from the house corner is the steering wheel that creates a driver, and an unsuspecting but cooperative doll is rescued from a series of mishaps conjured up in the minds of heroic pre-schoolers. At the end of the story, everyone is safe and feeling positive about his or her role in the important business of imagining a problem, generating a solution, and implementing it effectively.

This is constructive play in action. In it, you see many key elements of the type of play-based learning that early childhood experts recognize as developmentally appropriate for young children. Playing for Keeps (www.playingforkeeps.org), a national not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting healthy, constructive, nonviolent play for all children, is an emerging advocate for play-based programming in response to an increasing emphasis on academic-type instruction for younger and younger children.

Creating a “learning through play” classroom

If play is the most natural and effective way for young children to develop, what are the hallmarks of a “learning through play” early childhood class? How do you know if your program accommodates constructive play?

Children often spend a significant portion of their waking hours in their child care or pre-school setting. If you want to give them the full range of developmental benefits from play, take a look at three key areas:

1) the philosophy about children and learning that you — as the teacher — bring to the classroom; 2) the physical environment you have created as the children’s learning laboratory; and 3) the type and range of play-based activities you make available to the children.

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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.



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Start with a constructive play philosophy

Many well-documented systems of thought support a view of children as active, natural learners who need a few simple basics — though complex in their cumulative impact — to launch their development: namely, a safe, stimulating environment to explore, appropriate support, and loving encouragement.

Professor Lillian Katz of the University of Illinois proposes that educators start with the premise that all children have lively minds. The role of the teacher should be to offer a classroom where a child's inborn "intellectual dispositions" — e.g. the inclination to make sense of experience, to predict, to analyze, to synthesize, to hypothesize, and to wonder — are strengthened and supported.

Incorporating constructive play into the classroom requires the teacher to embrace some basic assumptions about children and the way they learn. Many early childhood experts and organizations have articulated a version of these basic philosophies. Playing for Keeps embraces a philosophy of learning through play that is summarized below:

- Children have an inborn disposition to learn that is fueled by their natural curiosity.
- Through the natural activity of constructive play, children increase their knowledge about and understanding of the world around them.
- Constructive play is a testing ground for children to practice language, reasoning, numeracy, and physical skills.
- Children who learn through constructive play are absorbing new concepts and building skills at a pace that fits their developmental level.
- Play-based learning offers children the opportunity to make choices that are directed by and meaningful to the child

in an environment organized by appropriate and comforting boundaries.

- Constructive play stimulates children to build positive relationships with other children and adults, and helps develop a child's personality and sense of self.
- Constructive play inspires creativity, stirs the imagination, and presents opportunities for meaningful problem solving.
- Constructive play makes learning fun.

The tools of learning: space, toys, and more

Early childhood teachers generally are trained to create learning environments that promote constructive play. The physical layout of a classroom recommended by Diane Trister Dodge, president of Teaching Strategies, Inc. and author of a widely-used play-based pre-school curriculum, recommends that a play-based classroom include space for:

- blocks
- playing house
- table toys
- art
- sand and water play
- a library
- music and movement
- cooking
- computer play
- outdoor play

Both the physical layout of these spaces and what children can experience in them should be reviewed for their contribution to a child's constructive play. Professor Sandra Waite-Stupiansky of Edinboro University in Pennsylvania suggests that the different play areas of the classroom be roomy, if possible, and with clear, though not impenetrable, boundaries between them.

"To make sure your environment fosters and enhances children's play," she recommends, "look around your setting,

The opportunities you open up, along with your personal enthusiasm and interest, set the stage for creative growth and development."

What should your physical space provide your young learners? In many ways, the expectations of the special arrangement mirror and support the main points of a constructive play philosophy. Waite-Stupiansky maintains that the environment and the materials in each area should be designed to give children:

- **Open-ended experiences.** The play *script* is not already written for them. Rather, they must create it themselves.
- **The chance to make their own decisions.** Choices about what to do next, and with what, and with whom, are readily and regularly available.
- **Inspiration to generate their own themes.** Children have opportunities to impact the direction of the curriculum around their own interests.
- **Help in staying organized.** Materials are safely accessible and easy to put back when play is finished.
- **Free movement from one play area to another.** What if the firefighters who just rescued the doll want to stage a high-drama return of the baby to its parents? All it takes is a quick visit to the house corner to put that baby back in the arms of its father.
- **Access to materials from another play area if needed.** Need a firefighter's hat in the block area for that impending rescue? Need to make a sign to let other rescuers know where to go? Children can find resources anywhere in the classroom to aid imaginative and other forms of play.

The activities of constructive play

If you are an early childhood educator, you have no doubt spent countless hours developing play-based activities to help children learn. In a classroom based on

constructive play, is there a simple set of guidelines that can help you shape appropriate activities?

Tina Bruce, a leading early childhood expert in Britain and vice president of the UK's Campaign for Nursery Education, offers a handy summary of "The Twelve Features of Play" that can help serve as touchpoints for constructive play. Children who are learning through play, proposes Bruce, are:

- using first-hand experiences
- making up rules
- making props
- choosing to play
- rehearsing the future
- pretending
- playing alone
- playing together
- having a personal agenda
- being deeply involved
- trying out recent learning
- coordinating ideas, feelings, and relationships for free-flow play

Teachers committed to offering a learning environment based on constructive play can apply Bruce's touchpoints while creating a *balanced diet* of play experiences

Scenario #1

- Teacher:* That's not a good place to build a road because Emily and Andrew are working over there to put out our snack.
- Child # 1:* They can drive on the road to put out the snack.
- Teacher:* It's hard to drive and put out snacks at the same time. Besides, we need to keep the blocks in the block area because we are going to be going home soon.
- Child # 2:* Can we build a road here?

that build children's minds, muscles, and more. This daily balance of play opportunities should feature activities that develop these parts of the child, as the child is able: gross motor skills, fine motor skills, imagination and creativity, sensory learning, cognitive skills, and social and emotional development.

Assuming that the environment and the activities support a learning through play philosophy, the piece of the puzzle that is most critical to successful learning is the teacher — his or her enthusiasm, support for children's choices and ideas, and style of interaction with child-centered or child-driven activities.

Consider our group of children who find themselves inspired to rescue the unwit-

ting doll. If the discussion unfolds like Scenario #1, what has happened to the learning potential of the spontaneous imaginative play? The teacher has set up a conversation that gives his solutions to the problem priority over the solutions the children might imagine, and requires his permission for the children to proceed.

In contrast, consider Scenario #2, in which the adult presents a problem and expects the children to take it from there — adding his own voice when the children may not be developmentally ready to self-generate the point he needs to make.

In Scenario #2, the teacher presents the problem as a question and lets the children work through the consequences of their own potential solutions. They draw on and apply their own real life experience ("my mom stops for fire trucks"), put themselves in the place of other children doing other activities, imagine other consequences to their original plan and solve those problems, and finally, bring in a mathematical concept.

After all, for all we know about play and its powerful impact on young children's development, there is still much more to learn. In your own classroom, remember (in the words of Sandra Waite-Stupiansky) "there is no magic formula to fostering and learning from children's creative play. With the support of an inviting environment and understanding adults, children usually

Scenario #2

- Teacher:* If you build the road there and drive on it, will Emily and Andrew be able to put out our snack?
- Child # 1:* They can drive on the road to put out the snack.
- Child # 2:* What if your truck is in the way?
- Child # 1:* They have to stop because that's what my mom does when the fire truck goes by.
- Teacher:* But it can be hard to stop and wait if you are holding a snack. What if it's hard to rescue the baby and they have to wait a long time?
- Child # 2:* Maybe they can make a different road.
- Teacher:* But Emily and Andrew have already washed their hands.
- Child # 3:* If they drive on our road, we won't be able to save the baby because they will be in the way!
- Child # 1:* Maybe we should make the road over there. Maybe we don't have enough blocks to make it go here.
- Teacher:* Maybe the shorter road is better anyway because then you can finish the rescue before we have to go home.

know just what to do." Her advice to early childhood teachers? "Like an assistant director of an impromptu theatre production, set the stage, provide the necessary props, and do what you can to subtly keep creative action and energy flowing. Then sit back and watch! Creative play will provide invaluable learning experiences, not just for your children, but also for you."

References

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Find out more . . .

If you are interested in learning more about constructive play, its impact on young children, and how to incorporate more of it into your classroom, check out the upcoming Playing for Keeps international conference to be held March 14-16, 2003 at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Chaired by Professor Jerome Singer of Yale University, the theme is "The Power of Play: Cornerstone of Learning and Literacy." It will feature reviews of the latest research, a discussion of the future of childhood, and a special appearance by Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood and Family Communications, Inc. Check out the Playing for Keeps' web site at www.playingforkeeps.org for more information.