

Transforming professional practice through self-active play

by Marcia L. Nell and Walter F. Drew

Imagine walking into a room, soft music playing. Adults fully immersed in the wonder of play with an abundant assortment of unique open-ended materials including little wooden blocks, cardboard tubes, colorful plastic strips, red felt circles, cork discs, yellow and red plastic caps, gold and silver streamers, shiny copper caps, red and black plastic cubes, bamboo pieces, fabric, yarn, string, shells, rocks, wood scraps, wire, twigs and branches, beads, buttons, little silver metal beads placed on black velvet fabric, and colorful foam shapes. The non-representational, unprescribed nature of these types of materials intrigue our imagination and tap into a basic human need to explore and then express thoughts and feelings through self-active play.



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In this article we make the case for why adults engaging in their own self-active play experiences with materials and with others is key to understanding children's play and promoting developmentally appropriate practices (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; Nell, Drew, Klugman, & Jones, 2010). It is through constructive play experiences that adults are able to understand how children learn through play. Adults construct genuine understanding of the importance of play to children's learning through their own active adult play with open-ended materials (Jones, 2007).

Guiding principles for self-active play

Principle 1: Self-active play is a transformative process that enables adults to construct self-knowledge and powerful insights into children's play.

Principle 2: Self-active play is a unifying force that inspires individuals to take action and transform their professional practice.

Essential Elements of the Self-Active Play Experience

- Variety of open-ended materials
- Instrumental music
- Solo play
- Cooperative play
- Reflective practices
 - Journaling/drawing
 - Sharing one to one
 - Large group debriefing

Using these two guiding principles as the framework, self-active play training experiences can impact and strengthen professional practice. Insights arise through the play, journaling, discussions, and reflections (Chalufour, Drew, & Waite-Stupiansky, 2003).

The eye-opening emotional experiences of participants reach beyond the obvious benefits of using play and manipulative resources to improve children's performance in the content areas of literacy, mathematics, and science. Participants make the connection between their own deeply felt play and ways to better understand and guide the play of children. Participants expand their understanding of play and how it promotes emotional well-being and the devel-



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opment of broader life skills outlined by Ellen Galinsky in *Mind in the Making* (2010) including focus and self-control, perspective taking, communicating, making connections, critical thinking, taking on challenges, and self-directed, engaged learning.

“The goal of education is to create possibilities for children to invent and discover.”

Jean Piaget

The self-active play process, grounded in Piaget’s teachings, creates possibilities for adults to invent and discover (Nell & Drew, 2009). As adults explore, invent, and discover the unique nature of the open-ended materials, they:

- gain firsthand physical, logical, and mathematical knowledge
- construct social knowledge
- are immersed in a problem solving, inquiry process (Chouinard 2007; Parker, 2007)

Self-active play informs and enables educators to invent and discover new ways of guiding children’s play and thus helps to improve professional practice.

Principle 1: Self-active play is a transformative process that enables adults to construct self-knowledge and powerful insights into children’s play.

Self-active play offers adults opportunities to experience the essential elements of play including freedom of choice: freedom to choose materials, to use materials as they wish, and to express their ideas freely (Elkind, 2004). When adults freely choose the materials, control the materials through organizing, sorting, patterning, and building structures, and then see the successful visual result of their choice and actions, they feel an immediate sense of self-competence, a

Stuart Brown (2010) states, “If we stop playing, we share the fate of all animals that grow out of play. Our behavior becomes fixed. We are not interested in new and different things. We find fewer opportunities to take pleasure in the world around us” (p. 71).

cornerstone of self-regulation (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Often teachers know intuitively about the importance of play for children’s development, but encounter barriers to its implementation within their classrooms. The self-active play experience:

- provides a powerful insight to encourage teachers to overcome the barriers
- enables the teacher to feel hope, will, purpose, and competence in their professional practice (Erikson, 1988)
- is a source for optimism and emotional survival for teachers (Sutton-Smith, 1997)
- improves emotional well being and improves the quality of life across the human life cycle.

Brian Sutton-Smith (2008) says, “All of these expressive systems generate optimism about our life in this world; and they get this by displaying original ways of putting aside our pessimisms and depressions and boredoms and innovating a virtual life that is primarily a lot of fun!” (p. 20).

Play with open-ended materials offers physical, visual evidence of one’s accomplishments. This transformative process provides the basis for understanding the relationship between freedom of choice, self-competence, and the needs of children. This process is a living example of teacher action research: setting the context, collecting data, analyzing the data, and making inferences about their own profession practice based on the data they collected (Burnaford, Fisher, & Hobson, 2001).

Through play, wonder and imagination begin to flow freely! It is amazing to see adults create with open-ended materials and then share their insights and strategies for understanding and teaching young children in new ways. There is no better way to help teachers develop a greater appreciation for the importance of play than by engaging them in their own unique and enjoyable hands-on adult play experiences as illustrated in the following quotes.

“As I layered and added the beautiful kaleidoscope of colorful fabrics on my body, a sense of calmness came over me.

I am a Seaweed Queen and the jellyfish are my friends. We float and we are free. I have learned the other side of free play. Children need time to choose materials and get ready for free play.” — Sandy

“I felt enjoyment and empowerment because I was in complete control. My decisions were to my complete satisfaction. The thought of a time limit distracted me. I began to understand the frustration of playtime coming to an end for children.” — Cheryl

Principle 2: Self-active play is a unifying force that inspires individuals to take action and transform their professional practice.

Our follow-up research with self-active play workshop participants indicates long-term effects on professional practice (Nell, et al., 2011). Participants indicate increasing the time allotted for play in their classrooms, an increased use of open-ended materials for play, greater attempts to incorporate play into the curriculum, and efforts to connect play with early learning standards of creativity and independent thinking (Drew, et al., 2008). Here’s what two participants had to say about their experiences:

“Playing with the fabric was something different for me. I felt much like a child. Oh my goodness, what am I going to do with this? At first I felt a little silly, but as I played my feelings went from intimidation to accomplishment. I reached a point where what I was doing felt great and was fulfilling an inner need to be creative, even if no one else liked it. . . . I now offer my 3 to 5 year olds an opportunity for solo play every morning. Children love the creative opportunity to play and problem solve independently and cooperatively.” — Angela

“I was struck by the thoughtful use of soft, piano music that helped me concentrate on what I was doing, even though lots of people were all around me. Now in my classroom, just as we did in the workshop, we set out mats with sets of materials for each child, play soft music, and take 20 minutes to play. When we are done, we walk around the room and the children talk about what they have done. I see this benefitting their creative ability to make choices and think of things themselves, to develop self-control, to sit alone and find ways of expressing their ideas.” — Michele

An extension of professional practice includes empowering and supporting families, helping them understand the importance of play within the classroom and at home. As recommended by the American Pediatric Association, play is a way of strengthening family bonds. Using self-active play provides an effective way of helping parents develop

stronger bonds with their children (Ginsburg, 2007; Nell, et al., 2011).

In January 2011 we interviewed Kathy Ramirez, California Association for the Education of Young Children Vice President, Executive Director of the Village Infant and Toddler Preschool, and Adjunct Instructor at Pierce College:

“After participating in a self-active play symposium, I took the information back to the College of the Canyons Early Childhood Center to share what I learned. I presented a brief history of ‘play’ and engaged the teachers in solitary and cooperative play with a variety of open-ended materials. The next step is to touch parents. We have a group called, MOPs (Mothers of Preschoolers) who come together twice a month. We’re planning play workshops for parents in the San Fernando, Santa Clarita, and Antelope Valley areas of Southern California.”

As we see here, self-active play impacts professional practice and extends to our work with families. This same process that enables teachers to make powerful insights about the value of play in the classroom also applies to enable parents to understand the value of play in their homes.

Brown continues, “Play can become a doorway to a new self, one much more in tune with the world. Because play is all about trying on new behaviors, thoughts, it frees us from established patterns. For children, who are always in the process of changing and becoming, transformative play is a constant part of their world, and often goes unnoticed” (p. 92).

Conclusion

During the preschool years, constructive, exploratory, and sociodramatic play is at the heart of early childhood education. Here we’ve seen evidence of how professional development experiences that feature hands-on self-active play with open-ended materials help early childhood educators extend and deepen their understanding of play and transform their professional practice. Through play, observing themselves and others at play, and reflecting and talking about play, adults come to a deeper understanding of children’s

learning through play. In this way teachers, and parents can become more knowledgeable about the purposeful use of materials and intentional strategies for helping their children develop essential life skills.

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