Importance of Play in the Kindergarten Classroom

The Power of Play

Have you ever heard someone remark about an early childhood program

- even ours, perhaps - that "All the children do there is play?" Good early

childhood programs incorporate a lot of play - and they should!

Years of research around children's learning and development document the many benefits of play for children's intellectual, social, emotional, physical and language development. Children at play are actively involved in creating themes, exploring and establishing environments, solving problems and developing shared understandings.

Children play in many ways:

1. They play "**independently**" - sometimes near each other but with each child engrossed in his/her own activity.
2. They engage in what is called "**parallel play**" - perhaps using each

other's toys or even talking, but not coordinating their play.

1. They also play "**cooperatively**" - organizing roles and scenarios for group play. Young children usually find true "cooperative play" very difficult since developmentally they are very egocentric and need time to develop skills such as turn taking, empathy, sharing, etc. As they get older, children are capable of more cooperative, coordinated play. But all kinds of play are valuable.

As children play with each other, they learn to see other children's point of view and begin to become more empathetic and caring. They come to understand customs and rules in their own culture and to appreciate those of others. They learn to use language in new ways to describe their play and to interact with others. And in play, children develop their muscles and coordination.

Adults can support children's play by providing space, opportunity and materials. At school we set up areas where children can play without fear of damaging furniture or injuring themselves. We make sure that they have the time to choose and to become engaged in their own play activities. And when we provide them with simple, interesting materials - no newfangled, expensive gadgets required - children take it from there.

Play is fun. But it is also serious business that pays big dividends to its eager, young investors.

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*

The Play-­Full Prop Box

The ability to pretend is very important to a child's future success. To pretend children must be able to recall experiences they have had and then re-­create them. They must be able to picture experiences in their minds.

Children like to try on different roles, act out experiences, recall past events and work out anxieties. One day a child may act out going to the grocery store, making a list, gathering items, playing at the checkout counter. Another day the child may pretend to be a dentist or a firefighter.

One way to encourage dramatic play - "pretend" experiences that enhance your child's cognitive abilities and encourage creative thinking and problem solving - is through the use of prop boxes or bags. Prop boxes contain an assortment of items centered on a dramatic play theme.

For a "day at the beach" theme, a box may hold beach towels, old swimsuits, flip-­flops, empty suntan lotion containers, old sunglasses, and magazines. Or a box may contain a baker's hat, rolling pin, cookie cutters, playdough, pans, spoons, aprons and dishtowels.

Clearly label the containers, perhaps with pictures or words, and store them where your child can reach them. Keep adding to your collections. Yard sales and flea markets are great places to find props. As your child's interests change, start new collections.

Your child will benefit from these collections in many ways other than just having fun. For instance, research indicates that children who have many opportunities to participate in dramatic play use more sophisticated language and become better readers and writers.

Prop boxes are only as limited as the imagination. And, if you have some fun ideas of your own, please let me know!

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*

The Listening Centre

Listening is the language ability that develops first and is used most often. True listening means not only hearing sounds in the environment but also taking meaning from and responding to those sounds.

Listening is an essential part of the development of both written and oral language. We can best help children develop listening abilities by providing experiences that encourage careful listening. One of these experiences takes place in our classroom listening centre.

The listening centre, a comfortable area where children can use a tape recorder, headsets and a variety of audiotapes, gives them daily opportunities to listen to oral language and music. Through songs, poems and stories children can begin to identify and differentiate between familiar or similar sounds, rhyming words, letter sounds and speech patterns.

Children's vocabulary, comprehension and critical thinking skills also get a boost. Listening experiences stimulate children to express their own reactions in various ways, including verbal discussion, art, drama and stories of their own. Through these activities children relate what they hear to their own experiences.

Families can extend this focus on "listening with a purpose" at home or during car trips. Try to identify particular sounds. Point out the differences in pieces of music. Play games with words by finding rhyming words or words that begin with the same sound. Don't make this a task - just have fun!

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*

Learning with Blocks

Blocks are open-­ended materials that stimulate young imaginations, provide choice for discovery and invention, and promote the development of problem-­solving skills. One day a block may be an airplane. The next day that same block in the hands of the same child can be a sofa for the house s/he is building.

Building with blocks helps develop young children's hand-­eye coordination, visual perception and large and small muscle control. It builds self-­confidence and provides opportunities for creativity and dramatic play. These things occur naturally when children play with blocks.

We also find that working with blocks often deepens a child's engagement with literature and literacy. A child may be inspired, for example, to construct the "Three Bears" beds and chairs, a pirate boat or an enchanted castle.

Inviting children to reconstruct buildings and other things they have seen on field trips is one way we encourage their thinking in relation to social studies. They work with concepts behind maps and models, and as they build block cities, farms and factories, they work out their own understanding of these complex sites and communities. Children also develop mathematical and scientific concepts such as balance and gravity as they work with blocks.

Blocks are engrossing and fun for young children, of course. They are also invaluable tools for promoting children's development on many fronts.

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*

The Artful Classroom

A child becomes totally engrossed, immersed in the process of making a "work of art". The sensations of feeling the smooth thick paint sliding onto the easel paper calms the child and brings pleasure to the creation. When the child grapples with the challenge of representing an object or person on the page, s/he is engaging in a task that is both demanding and satisfying.

Teachers provide an assortment of art materials that children may choose from to make their own unique creations. We do not usually have children copy a teacher's model or make a designed product. We encourage them to use the materials in different ways. Art is a vital and vibrant part of the early childhood program, contributing to all aspects of the young child's development.

As they paint, draw and sculpt children think creatively, make decisions and solve problems. Children's fine motor skills are developed naturally through manipulation of brushes, crayons, scissors or playdough. All of these activities prepare children for writing in later years. Language is also developed as children talk about colour, shape and size, and as they describe their work to friends and teachers.

To encourage your child's artistic enterprises, provide large blank paper (the ends of newsprint rolls I understand can be purchased at a nominal cost from your local newspaper, or you can recycle paper by letting your child use the back of office paper), watercolours, markers or chalk for use at home. Art supplies also make great gifts!

Value your child's efforts and expose him/her to quality artwork through visits to museums and art shows. Recognize that young children learn in a variety of ways and that creative activities provide positive, satisfying experiences for all children.

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*

Let's Pretend!

Make believe play is not only one of the great joys of childhood, it also offers abundant opportunities for children's development. Children develop interpersonal skills, particularly cooperation and conflict resolution, and improve their language and problem-­solving abilities in pretend (dramatic) play.

Around the age of 2, children begin to pretend to cry, sleep and eat. They soon include a stuffed animal, doll or favorite toy in their play. They also begin to transform objects into symbols - a simple block becomes a fast racecar or a stick makes a fine racehorse.

As children approach 3, they begin participating in make-­believe play with other children. Dramatic play gradually becomes more elaborate and complex. 4 and 5 year olds engage in socio-­dramatic play, which provides opportunities to rehearse adult roles. Such play helps children make sense of the world.

These first dramatic experiences often focus on home experiences. Children pretend to cook, clean and care for younger children. That's why our dramatic play area (ex. the house) has props and equipment that represent the home setting. These stimulate children to act out roles familiar to them.

Dramatic play fosters emotional development as children work through fears and worries in a safe context. Social skills are promoted as children communicate and negotiate their roles and actions. Another plus is that children use language more frequently and more elaborately in make-­ believe play than they do in virtually any other activity.

Parents can actively encourage dramatic play at home by capitalizing on their children's interest at the moment, developing themes from stories their children have heard or movies they have seen, and providing props for pretend play. Providing a home environment that is conductive to play stimulates intellectual and social development. At the same time, parents will be developing rich memories of their children at play - memories that last a lifetime.

\*\*\*Letter borrowed from Tracy Fulton, New Westminister School District\*\*\*