

CHILD'S PLAY: It's All in a Day's Work

With so much information about preschools available to parents, it can be difficult to choose the right program. One approach to evaluating a school that can help parents choose is the level of emphasis on learning through play. For young children, play is the *natural* way to learn, according to the experts.

In fact, research studies confirm that children who are allowed to play function better later in life, both socially and academically.

"Young children who learn through play are more ready to make their own decisions, advocate for themselves and use creativity to solve problems as they grow," says Dr. Kyle Pruett, a Yale University child psychiatrist and consultant to The Goddard School®, the fastest-growing franchise preschool program in the United States.

Dr. Pruett points out that play helps children learn to solve problems, promotes flexibility and motivation, teaches regulation of emotions and builds resilience and confidence. Play is also essential to the development of the child's brain, triggering trillions of neural connections that form the basis of healthy cognitive function and mastery of the child's physical world.

Playing alone and with others not only builds brain development, it also helps children develop social skills and a sense of ethics. The most effective play is free of evaluation and correction (after all, throwing a ball shouldn't be "right" or "wrong"), while promoting autonomy.

"True play is actually hard work," says Sue Adair, Director of Education at The Goddard School. "The child lost in play is exploring infinite possibilities. Caretakers and parents can assist the child's growth by participating in play and creating an environment that encourages play as a means to meet new developmental challenges."

So after parents have checked the basics that are required for any preschool, how can they find one with the right emphasis on play?

Adair suggests looking at three things:

- **Find a school that puts a priority on learning through play.** For young children, play is unstructured and freeing. It's not about expensive toys, in fact, the simpler the toy, the more ways it can be used by a child developing his or her imagination. Toys and equipment should be carefully chosen, first for safety and then for how they stimulate young imaginations and help children develop.
- **Look at the total environment.** Environment means having clean, safe and spacious places to play, as well as the resources to provide imaginative, rewarding playtime. It also means a caring and well-trained staff, a critical element for any preschool. "Remember, how children are treated is as critical to their development as what they are taught," says Dr. Pruett.
- **Ask about enrichment programs.** Only the best preschools offer special enrichment programs at no extra cost, as part of the tuition. Enrichment programs - including yoga, manners and world cultures, for example, develop the whole child by encouraging their innate curiosity and imagination.

"At the end of the day, parents know they've chosen the right childcare program when their children are given time for child-centered exploratory play during the day," Adair says. "For a child, play isn't optional. The educational and other benefits of play are so important - in terms of healthy bodies and minds - that parents should put play at the top of their list when comparing preschool programs."

PLAY IS LEARNING

Have you ever caught a glimpse of your child playing and pretending to be you or someone you know? Dramatic play and socio-dramatic play are important components of children's cognitive and social development.

"By acting out real or fictional situations through dramatic play (pretend play); children are working through their feelings and their understanding of the world. Dramatic play lets them process their perception of events and/or roles," according to Sue Adair, Director of Education at The Goddard School®. For instance, if a child is playing house as the "mommy" – she is expressing her view of what "mommy" is and how she views the role. She is practicing how "mommy" would or could react to different situations. This play doesn't necessarily represent her reality of the role, but rather her interpretation of "mommy" in this particular situation at this place and this time.

Socio-dramatic play (dramatic play with social interaction) lets children practice social rules. When playing alone there is no etiquette to follow, however when another child or adult is involved each party has to follow certain rules. Children playing "brother and sister" with children who are not their siblings, allows for experimenting with different interactions and testing how others will react.

Your child's preschool should encourage both dramatic and socio-dramatic play. In fact, a play-rich learning environment is essential. Classrooms should include "dress-up" areas to support children's creativity and imagination. Teachers generally fill these areas with real-life props relevant to curriculum topics.

Adair illustrates how this works in a classroom. "Let's say the curriculum topic is numbers. Your child's teacher might add telephones, calculators or cash registers to the dramatic play center because these props provide exposure to using numbers in realistic situations. Your child is learning to memorize his telephone numbers and this skill can be applied in the dramatic play center by teachers encouraging children to 'call' each other; or when learning about money, your child may play 'store' and take turns playing the roles of customer and shopkeeper with her friends."

Play is a child's work – they are practicing. This practice is without judgment – they can rehearse roles, feelings and ideas in a completely uninhibited environment.

TRUE TOYS AND THEIR POSITIVE EFFECTS ON CHILDREN

True toys have no bells or whistles, they do not do anything and you do not turn them on. Most toys today have taken the fun out of imaginative play. Manipulating toys and giving them life develops reasoning and problem-solving skills as well as creates a base of simple knowledge of how things work.

“Good toys are accoutrements that make everyday interactions more fun and expand the boundaries of children’s ordinary experiences,” according to Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Ph.D., Temple University. The following list of “good toys” at each age level is provided by the educators at The Goddard School®. “Our teachers create an engaging and stimulating learning environment to naturally build social and academic skills,” says Sue Adair, Director of Education.

Infants

Rattles – Fine motor development toy of the century. Grasping, repetitive motion that creates a desired outcome, music, hand-eye coordination and focusing visually on a moving object are all part of infant learning. Have rattles handy in a variety of colors, shapes, sizes and sounds.

One Year Olds

Blocks, blocks and more blocks – Spatial relationships, size and shape discrimination leads to early math skills, fine motor control as well as cause and effect. This true toy is fun at any age! A child may spend hours building and knocking down blocks while developing science skills including balance, gravity and concepts of weight.

Two Year Olds

Paint and playdough – It is messy and that is why they like it so much. This tactile experience will open the doors of creativity and thinking. Let them mix the colors, use different tools and add to the experience by playing some music in the background. Finger paint, paintbrushes and textured paint can be mixed with a variety of painting surfaces for further explanation.

Three Year Olds

A ball – Look at everything you can do with a ball – kick it, catch it, sit on it, bounce it, dribble it, play alone or with someone. A ball develops gross motor skills, hand-eye coordination and encourages healthy practices. A child needs to learn to handle a ball before they can handle a pencil.

Four and Five Year Olds

Dramatic Play – Dramatic play is more than dress-up. It is a shovel, a whisk, a pad of paper. It is a pile of dirt, an old tire and a cardboard box. The sky is the limit – if your children have seen it, they want to explore it. Cut the cord off an old landline telephone and let them look inside as the telephone repair man. True toys for a four year old are simply real life items. These toys will allow children to try on new personalities and play out roles.
