

PLAY AND LEARNING

For most parents, children's play is just that and no more – diversion or entertainment. Kids do seem to like it after all, and their pleasure in devoting hours to play, make-believe and following their imaginations is usually obvious.

As educators, we know that play is ultimately about learning. And all play is educational play. How do we convey this to parents? One of the interesting findings in a recent poll conducted by Zero to Three, National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families, is that many parents don't fully appreciate the connection between play and cognition. According to the poll, parents of young children significantly underestimate the power that play has in enriching a child's learning competence. Furthermore, they thought their role as play partner was much less important than it was a learning partner.

Sue Adair, Director of Education at The Goddard School®, suggests that we offer parents examples of how children learn through play, such as:

- Children learn what is soft and hard, cold and warm, scratchy or smooth, as they touch and manipulate everything within reach.
- Children learn what is heavy and light, as they heft and fling things about their world.
- Children learn what is sour and sweet, as they mouth, suck and drool their way through everyday life.
- Children learn what is quiet and loud, pleasing and raucous, as they scream and coo or rub and smash.
- Children learn what works and doesn't work, as they pull and push, fit, stack and destroy.

"One of the most important things children learn through all this tireless trial and error is how to connect events, feelings, thoughts and learning together into experience and to file it away in their brains under certain symbols," Adair adds. This all starts to happen well before they have command of spoken language. Simply stated, through play, children learn to symbolize their experience. Share with parents the playful learning that goes on every day in your classroom and they will begin to understand the value of play.

WHAT CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH PLAY

There are a myriad of developmental skills that children learn through play. From their infant to Pre-Kindergarten stages, children are experiencing and learning new things each and every day. With play consuming most of their time, there are different things children learn during every stage of their growth.

Sue Adair, Director of Education at The Goddard School®, states that teachers use developmental guidelines while observing a child's play to gauge what they have learned, what skills are emerging and what playful activities can be added to introduce new skills.

Infant to Six Months: Everything is a baby's first. For example, the first time a baby opens his eyes in his bassinet, he discovers something new – an animal on his mobile. The next morning, there it is again. Will it be there tomorrow? Yes and then baby learns to trust that when he opens his eyes he will always see the mobile's giraffe looking back at him. Babies will engage in play first by responding to sounds, then by following objects and people with their eyes. Babies will demonstrate memory by repeating an action that made you laugh yesterday. Once infants can hold a rattle a whole new world opens up – you will watch them turn it over, bang it, shake it and even taste it. Rolling over also widens a baby's world from what is placed before him to 360 degrees of eye-catching curiosity. The new world is fun.

Six Months to One Year: Baby is now his own driving force to play. He no longer needs an adult or older sibling to spark his interest. Rolling over and sitting up has created choices and as he discovers how to move from lying to sitting, he is covering ground and taking aim at his own source of interest. Place toys within and outside of the baby's reach to encourage self-discovery and motion. Children at this stage will look at a familiar object when called by name. Babies not only want to turn objects around, they want to talk to them and use them the way you tell them to use them. See my hands! You say "clap" with a smile on your face and baby wants to clap and smile, too.

First Steps (12 to 18 months): No longer a baby, a **First Stepper** "steps" into everything. A **First Step** child will play with water, smell a flower (which is not as easy as you think) and recognize animals like the ones from the mobile. He will join in the conversation with simple words and phrases and respond to "bye, bye" with an unsolicited wave. One year olds love to demonstrate their knowledge – they will point to anything you name and find body parts, like their ears, when they cannot even see them. They have learned to trust their own experiences with their ears. A one year old will play with you and imitate your actions. Watch a child reflect your care with a baby doll with "hugs and kisses" and help you the way you have guided him.

Toddler (18-30 months): A toddler's world is all about ME – "Me do it!" This demonstration of independence is an exercise in trusting the child's own limits. A toddler will speak on a play phone and answer questions such as "Why?" and "Where?" Playing is on his terms – when and how. Toddlers love new experiences, too. They have graduated from 'turning it over and tasting it' to doing it right. A toddler will put a puzzle together, hold crayons in his hand, hum and sing as he plays and join activities without prompting. Give your toddler plenty of opportunities to join in imaginary play – pour from one cup to another and manipulate play dough.

Get Set (30 to 36 months): Just like the name states, get set for more play. The **Get Set** child is truly developing an identity. He knows his own name – first and last – and can tell you where his friends are playing. **Get Setters** know 'they can do it' and want to be like adults. They will share and wait turns, communicate in short sentences and demonstrate their personal understanding of the world around them in

their play. **Get Set** children will soak up any information you share with them. They can understand words like “under” and “over” and the description of how a plant grows. Art is no longer about exploring the material itself, but rather what they can do with the material. They will even paint with the opposite side of the paint brush just to see what it will create. Get set for these children to amaze you with their knowledge of good hygiene and specific book choices. A **Get Set** child can also multi-task now; try singing and doing the motions to the song or have a conversation while he paints.

Preschool (36 months +): This is the age of expectations. The preschool child’s play looks like going to work. As he mingles among the Interest Centers he is also playing out a role. Preschoolers have a large vocabulary and understand the intonations of language. As they act out a role, they will try on different emotions and see how they fit into their own personality. Preschoolers have begun to connect the spoken word to written language and can orally retell a favorite story. They are interested in cause and effect and can identify their colors, shapes, sizes and weights; and they want to explore what happens when they change them. A preschool child may remain in a particular Interest Center for long periods of time until he has exhausted his curiosity. Don’t forget to stand back because the preschool child also needs his space to move. Watch as he develops rhythm and tempo as both an individual or group learner. Either way, preschoolers are movers and shakers.

Pre-Kindergarten (48 months +): Complexity is the nature of the Pre-K classroom. Pre-Kindergarteners are complex social beings wanting to play with specific friends and still identifying when they want to do it alone. They can recognize how objects and people are the same and different simultaneously, and they can appreciate those attributes. Playing is beginning to turn into concepts. For instance, all of the exploration at the water table develops into an understanding of water – floating, sinking, absorbing, dissolving, etc. Pre-K children use their four years of play experience to develop an identifiable knowledge – they can match by relationships and verbalize invisible concepts, such as time and calendars. They no longer need to see or hold the toy to play; they can recall previous experiences and use the knowledge. While listening to music they can name the instrument, move to the beat and sing along. In Pre-K, phonemic awareness and the written word are magical – writing words is play.

USE PLAY TO CREATE AN “ACTIVE” CLASSROOM

Michelle Obama recently announced “Let’s Move,” a national campaign to combat childhood obesity through fitness and nutrition programs. Every day inside and outside the classroom, 360-plus Goddard Schools nationwide take great strides to get preschoolers, toddlers and infants moving, playing and learning.

From yoga to dance, dramatic play to music and movement, Goddard has been at the forefront of promoting children’s health by encouraging kids to get active throughout the day.

“It’s important that children learn, at an early age, how to lead a healthy lifestyle,” said Joseph Schumacher, Chief Executive Officer at Goddard Systems, Inc. “Our proactive approach and innovative early childhood programs are ideal for promoting physical activity in young children and for laying the foundation for gross motor development.”

To bring play, learning and health together in your classroom, the education experts at Goddard offer some simple and helpful ideas:

1. **Take It Outside** – Limit “classroom time” and bring children outside to PLAY. Have a relay race, set up an obstacle course or bring back one of your favorite childhood pastimes like hopscotch or jump rope.
 2. **It’s In Your Nature** – Take children on a nature walk. Use this great opportunity to talk to your students about plants and animals you see while getting fresh air and exercise. Nature is an amazing classroom.
 3. **Get Dramatic** – When you’re transitioning students from one activity to another – like from reading to science - ask them to move like their favorite animal. Hop like a kangaroo, slither like a snake or waddle like a duck. Engaging in playful movements is not only great exercise, but stimulates recall as well.
 4. **Be a Good Sport** – Preschool age children love to learn the basic rules of popular sports and games. Take this opportunity to talk about sportsmanship as you introduce new activities.
 5. **Be Free** – Remember free play? Let go of some structure and encourage your students to use their imaginations in their indoor and outdoor play.
 6. **Stretch It Out** – Preschoolers love basic yoga moves. Take a few minutes each day to stretch with your little ones.
 7. **Put Some Movement In Your Music** – When you sing songs or listen to music with young children, encourage them to dance with scarves, make up movements to go with the lyrics or just DANCE and move their bodies to the music.
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