

Is today's society supporting the child's right to play or are today's children suffering from play deficits?

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In order to begin a discussion regarding play and child development it is important to develop an understanding of what is meant by the term play. It is generally accepted that play is what a child does. It is his work. Children of all cultures and socio economic groups engage in play experiences in which the process is the same although the materials, environment and outcome may be different.

It has been proposed that play is a natural state, that is to say that children engage in play spontaneously and voluntarily particularly in the early years. The quality of the play, the learning potential for play and the developmental consequences are directly influenced by the quality of the adult relationships and interactions. Children initiate play but adults extend and expand on the play experience.

There is little dispute about the statement that "Play equals Learning" however I would like to propose that "Learning does not equal Play". Not all experiences where a child is learning are play experiences. The current brain research seems to show that a child's brain is developed through the experiences he engages in. One impact of this research is the idea that stimulation should begin early and should be constant. However there has been very little guidance as to what constitutes a quality learning experience which is developmentally appropriate. As a result we see parents who are bombarded with media and marketing encouraging them to buy materials and equipment that will teach skills resulting in smarter children. The premise is that play should be educational which means that concepts should be taught. There is a focus on the importance of the toy or equipment rather than the importance of the adult/child interaction and relationship.

Throughout history there have been many theorists who have focused on the nature of play from a number of developmental perspectives including cognitive, emotional, social and physical. Play has been organized into types of play such as constructive play, exploratory play, social play or play with others, symbolic or pretend play, play with objects, motor play, instructional play and play with rules. There seems to be a continuum of play experiences which begins with activities that are totally child directed and where the child is an active participant to situations where the adult directs the activity.

Although perspectives and philosophies may differ, everyone seems to agree that play is a vital part of child development, particularly in the early years and that in order for an experience to be a play experience, the child must be an active participant. Passively observing an experience does not constitute play.

If an actual definition of play is difficult to comprise, then perhaps developing an understanding of play as a concept or process might be more appropriate. Play is

voluntary and spontaneous, often initiated by children and directed by children. Play is fun and continues as long as the experience is enjoyable. Play must involve active participation by children. Play is a creative process which does not need a goal or final objective.

Why is it important that we develop a clear understanding of what is meant by play? If we acknowledge that quality play experiences are an integral part of helping a child to reach his maximum potential, then we can also acknowledge that play deficits in the early years could lead to negative long term outcomes. These include issues in social and emotional development such as difficulties with self regulation, relationship development and social skill development. Positive cognitive development can also be affected in the areas of problem solving, executive functioning, creativity, attention and focus, task completion and critical thinking. Mental issues could also surface in areas such as anxiety disorders, depression and other illnesses. Finally physical health and well being are impacted as children face obesity, diabetes, eating disorders, and other issues related to passive, inactive recreational activities.

What we must ask ourselves is whether or not children in our modern society are provided with the materials, environments, time and adult support to engage in the quality play experiences necessary for optimum growth and development.

Play has always reflected the societal values and perspectives of the time and culture. At no time in history, however, has there been such a period of rapid change. The technological advancements we have experienced during the last fifteen years in particular, have resulted in a shift in the way children play. There are a number of reasons for this, which include direct and indirect technological influences. For example, toys and materials children explore and manipulate are less open ended and usually programmed with an outcome and limited play potential. Many include computerized modifications which direct the child's play, such as pretend play kitchens which tell the children what to do when buttons are pressed.

Other influences include changes in societal values and lifestyles which are the indirect result of technological advancements. Parenting practices are directly influenced by the media which encourages parents to teach their young children so that they do not fall behind. There is a focus on competitive economics, where parents are warned that smart kids equal economic success in the future, therefore parents should buy toys that teach their children. Here is where play equals learning which usually means concept or cognitive development (shape recognition, counting, colour recognition, letters and prereading). The fact that important growth and learning takes place in other areas of development during open ended play experiences is either ignored or not valued.

The reliance on electronics and equipment in parenting has led to a significant decrease in face to face contact amongst all family members. This would definitely impact a young child's development in the areas of attachment, relationships and language. There is often a developmentally inappropriate expectation that young children will play on their own and entertain themselves while parents are busy with other activities. When parents

do interact with their children in play experiences, they often direct, interfere and invade the child's play in their attempts to "teach" the child something thereby making the play worthwhile in the adult's eyes.

In ideal situations, the parent and young child engage in a subtle dance, where each responds to the other during interactions and play experiences. The adult learns to monitor information needs and presents new challenges and knowledge when appropriate for the child. The reliance on screen time, electronics and equipment can interfere with this process as the child is often bombarded with information he is not developmentally ready for.

Children are becoming passive recipients of data which is provided to them by others, including parents, computers and television,. There are less opportunities for active learning and exploration as play environments have less open ended manipulative materials and less time in which to explore them.

If play is the process of active learning through creative exploration of open ended materials with others or by himself, are today's children getting enough of these experiences? It can be argued that they are not and that we are already beginning to see the long term outcomes in today's adolescents and young adults who are the first generation of "techno-kids".

As members of a society which values the right of young children to play, we must ensure that we are providing quality play experiences which encourage optimum development in all areas. It is important to provide parents and care givers of young children with accurate information on the need for quality play experiences and the risks of play deficits. We must remember that children need to play, that it is not frivolous or unnecessary and that we need to respect their right to do so in a way which allows for positive growth and development in all areas.