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The ability to play is a basic life long learning skill. It is where young children learn how to convert thought into action. Open-ended play is where discovery is constant and outcome uncertain. Not unlike life itself.

"I built a tower and I made it with pink foam pieces and black pieces and tubes and a plate with a diamond on top. I felt bappy making it and knocking it down. I had fun with you."

Five-year-old Jeremy had just finished playing with a variety of open-ended materials — reusable resources. He looked at me and spontaneously exclaimed his unmistakable joy. Jeremy's play is an example of self directed, open-ended play. He began by simply fiddling with the materials. There was no stated purpose other than exploring with his finger tips and "going with the flow." There was no pressure to produce a preconceived structure, no imposed problems to solve or questions to answer. Simply to relax and explore. Jeremy had the freedom, freedom to invent and discover.

1. Children develop brain power and their ability to create and express thoughts and feeling through multiple, hands-on experiences with open-ended materials.

This principle, expressed in Maria Montessori's call to us "to arouse such interest that it engages the child's whole personality," and familiar to many early childhood educators, is confirmed and supported by brain research that documents the importance of creative, open-ended play in the early years, when the brain is rapidly developing (Jenson 1998; Eliot 2000).

As parents and teachers, we want to help our children develop their creative potential. Rich, stimulating hands-on experiences provided in a safe, responsive environment create the best conditions for optimal creative brain development. In this setting, we help our children learn to see themselves as strong and powerful, capable of influencing and changing the world around them, of creating harmony and order in positive and acceptable ways.

The early years present us with a window of opportunity to help children develop complex wiring of the brain. After that time, a pruning process begins, leaving the child



A Happy Talent

"It's a happy talent to know how to play"

— Ralph Waldo Emerson

"The essential thing is for the task to arouse such interest that it engages the child's whole personality."

— Maria Montessori

by Walter F. Drew, Ed.D.

with a brain foundation that is uniquely his or hers for life. The key to intelligence is the recognition and creation of patterns and relationships in the early years, and that is precisely what open-ended play uniquely achieves. (Gardner 1983; Jeon 2000; Shonkoff & Philips 2000; Zigler, Singer, & Bishop-Joset 2004)

2. Parents learn to communicate more effectively and develop strong parent-child bonds when they observe and engage in open-ended play with their children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics 2006 Report on The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds emphasizes that all children need some

"free," undirected play for creative growth, self-reflection, and decompression. All children benefit from the unique developmental benefits of child-driven, open-ended play. Healthy parent involvement in that play fosters strong parent-child bonds for life.

When we, as parents, observe our children in play or join them in child-driven, open-ended play, we are given a unique opportunity to experience joy and see the world through their eyes. The play interaction with our children tells them that we are paying full attention to them, in this way helping to build bonds for enduring relationships.

Present in Their Play

I am watching my 30-month-old grandson play with a toy weed whacker. "Vroom... vroom... vroom..." while making these sounds, John Henry is weed whacking away! Walking slowly and whirling back and forth, he play cuts blades of grass and low-hanging fiddlewood branches. This weed whacker is a make-believe"toy tool assembled moments ago by his attending father, using wooden dowels and wheels from a set of Tinker Toys™. Meanwhile, I stand nearby chuckling with delight. Immersed in imaginative open-ended play, John Henry imitates the sounds and actions of his father's yard work.

In this way, the play is a perfect context for parents (and grandparents!) to be fully present with their children. Some play is initiated by parents; some play is entirely child initiated and driven, with parents either not present or as permissive observers. Sometime later, I asked my son Mark about being present during John Henry's play. The first thing he said was, "I miss my children, I miss them when I am away." His response surprised me and then I realized that is the way many parents feel today. As David Elkind, eloquently reminds us in his classic book, *The Hurried Child*, the stress of living in our modern society and the demands of work often deny the time and energy for us to simply be present and play with our children.

There are many ways of playing. What is an appropriate role for you as parent in playing with your children? Children often need adult or peer stimulation in order to sustain their play. Parents can help keep the play light by suspending rules and patterns. Even if you are not directing the play, just being there may be important. Depending on the age of the child, your presence creates the

'safe' environment for play. You become an audience, a comfort, an interested party. Your presence inspires them. Your open attitude fosters exploration. By engaging in "parallel" play alongside your child (for example, building your own towers of foam pieces, blocks, or boxes), you 're-create' and refresh your own energy while not stifling your child's.

When we, as parents and grandparents, observe our children in play or join with them in child driven play, we are given a unique opportunity to see the world through our child's eyes. The interactions that occur through play tell children we are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships.

What is open-ended play?

Open-ended play (OEP) is a source of healing, discovery, and inspiration! The process begins with an open mind. Simply fiddling around with open-ended materials, such as blocks, paints, clay, and an endless array of reusable resources, such as styrofoam packing, cardboard tubes, colorful plastic caps, bamboo pieces, fabric, yarn, wood scraps, wire, wooden twigs, pebbles, and cardboard boxes, and so on inspire imagination and offer long-term creative play value.

The non-representational, un-prescribed nature of these types of materials intrigue our imagination and stimulate the brain to imagine and create new patterns and relationships. Tapping into a developmental need to express thoughts and feeling through play, open-ended play is an adventure in exploring and inventing things no one has ever seen before.

Open-ended play and open-ended materials combine to offer an infinite number of possible configurations that engage, challenge, and inform our intellect, offering the mind the greatest freedom and opportunity to discover and express meaning. In this way, we come to realize the enormous creative power we have within us to create harmony and order. Several principles guide our understanding of OEP:

1. There is no predetermined outcome or specific topic being investigated. Children express themselves and focus on creating something based on inner inspiration and developmental necessity. During play, children have choices and decisions to make. This format offers great potential for creative thinking and self-discovery.
2. Trial and error is a natural part of the play process. In open play, unintended results cause the child to pause and discover. Errors produce fascination instead of frustra-

tion and foster new creation. Self-initiating behaviors are developed. OEP encourages children to do their own work, to make their own creations, to build their own castles.

3. Children are given a sense of freedom and autonomy needed to develop initiative and self-confidence. They enjoy the feeling of control that play gives them. They enjoy making choices themselves, affirming their ability to be responsible and self directed.
4. Knowledge is not considered a fixed commodity. It is construction through action. It is formed and re-formed through direct experience. Each time we experience, we reshape and reform our ideas and advance our understanding. A child who learns to play need never feel bored or helpless and therefore alienated from his environment. How can learning be made more enjoyable?

Tips for Parents

Set out materials so that children may fiddle and explore without interruption. The children use the materials to create their own patterns, structures, and inventions. These materials may be blocks, paints, clay, wood, musical instruments, fabric, cardboard, plastic, and foam packaging materials ... the list is infinite. Initiate play by saying, "Here are some interesting materials to play with." Explore the materials with your own hands to see how they feel. Start to manipulate and play with them. Engage in reflective conversation following the play. Ask your child to think back on the experience and express what she or he felt, learned, and was proud of achieving. Develop your relationship with

your child by visibly understanding the meaning your child ascribes to the experience. Ask your child, "What can you do with this?" Then, relax, observe, and discover what happens. Free yourself from the need to control your child and keep your child quietly on a specific task. Create time to play. Enjoy this process often!

In *Playing to Get Smart*, Betty Jones urges parents to understand that children, who are skilled at play with both things and ideas, have more power, influence, and capacity to create meaningful lives than people who are less skilled at responding to ambiguity and stuck in the way things are or were. Play is a mode of response to living that can, and should, be taught by providing time for creative play in a happy, safe environment with materials for self discovery. Play is a happy talent!§

Dr. Walter F. Drew is an early childhood educator who offers play-coaching workshops for parents, teachers, and community organizations. Since 1975 he has pioneered the establishment of community-based reusable resource centers for teachers and parents nationwide. He has recently led initiatives to train high school students in Kiwanis Key Clubs to assist children in After School Care programs with open-ended play, using reusable resources. He may be contacted at drdrew@cfl.rr.com. Dr. Drew's Blocks are an award-winning educational toy available at www.drdrewblocks.com.

Be on the lookout!

Our special combined Back-to-School and Guided Tour issue, *Montessori 101*, will be mailed in August to schools that subscribe in bulk to *Tomorrow's Child*. If you haven't ordered copies for your parents, there's still time. Call 800-655-5843 or order online at www.montessori.org

More Play Tips for Parents

Parents serve as an advocate for creative expression and to value, encourage, and facilitate creative play:

- Organize a set of open-ended materials which might include, blocks, clay, paints, and/or a variety of reusable resources including foam, plastic caps, cardboard tubes, fabric scraps and other items from your home or local resource center.
- Insure a totally safe and accepting environment, and time to bring forth creative expression.
- Trust and value the play process as a profoundly meaningful experience which develops your child's innate creative power.
- See their child as creative and powerful constructor of knowledge and meaning from the play.
- Observe and listen carefully while interacting with your child during play.