

# Playing: The Possibilities for All Ages

Marcia L. Nell, Ph.D., Millersville University, [mnell@ISAPlay.org](mailto:mnell@ISAPlay.org)

Walter F. Drew, Ed.D. Institute for Self Active Education, [wdrew@ISAPlay.org](mailto:wdrew@ISAPlay.org)

True play as described by David Elkind is “as fundamental a human disposition as loving and working” and has no preset goal (p. 36). True play is spontaneously created by the player(s) and is in direct response to our human need to play or to have fun – for its own sake. Self active play is true play and refers to the basic human need to seek enjoyment through the energetic interaction and transformative qualities initiated within one’s being during play. This article explores three principles of “Self Active Play” which are rooted in the belief each of us, adults as well as children, have a developmental need to experience our own innate creativity through self expression. It is through the process of self active play, fully engaging hands, heart and mind, that we spontaneously express and discover the inner capacity to create harmony and order. In this way, self active play becomes a powerful medium for “self” discovery.

Self active play is a process that begins with an open mind. Simply fiddling around with open-ended materials, such as blocks, paints, clay, Styrofoam packing, cardboard tubes, colorful plastic caps, bamboo pieces, fabric, yarn, stones, rocks, wood scraps, wire, or wooden twigs allows the mind to focus and inspires imagination. The non-representational, un-prescribed natures of these types of materials intrigue our imagination and tap into a basic human need to express thoughts and feelings through play. Self active play with open ended materials combine to offer an infinite number of possibilities to discovering new self knowledge.

## Self Active Play Principle 1

*Self active play is a source of creative energy, a positive force and safe context for constructing meaningful self knowledge and revitalizing the human spirit across the continuum of the human life-cycle.*

Many children’s play theorists have developed elaborate models to explain how play propels children’s developmental growth. Self active play awakens the awareness of the inner creative potential, such strengths as hope, will, purpose and competence (Erikson, 1988). Self active play promotes profound insight and inspiration for adults.

*“As I wrapped and curled the wire, I began to focus on smaller, thinner, brightly colored wires sticking out from the tan and gray exterior. While I hadn’t been excited by my materials earlier, I became thrilled with the idea of peeling off the outer layers to get to the beauty underneath. I want to be able to strip away my outer protective layers. There is a*

*potential for so much beauty if I can only relax and let myself be uncovered. The possibilities with the small, bright wires amazed me and I want to further explore that in future play. I organized the wire and became beautiful and full of potential for me.” (H.)*

Elkind describes how teachers can help children by providing them “materials that leave room for the imagination... [and] sufficient time to innovate with these materials” (pg. 41). In our self active play training workshops for early childhood educators, we use open ended, reusable resources as play materials for self discovery. The unusual nature of these materials summons full sensory exploration, imagining the possibilities, and reveling in the flow between the materials, the play, and personal meaning to your life. We believe this shifts the construction of knowledge paradigm from external control to a more internal intuitive process which offers the player the safety and freedom to self actively create new knowledge from within.

In this role of creator, the player realizes and develops their capacity to create and imagine. Being creative means finding ways of experiencing and expressing the feelings of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the movement of the body, what is seen by the eyes, and what is heard by the ears. This growing awareness of one’s own abilities to more fully express in creative ways begins with the fingers fiddling with materials. The fiddling leads to focus, openness, imagination, and being fully present in the play space. The mind pays attention to the senses, feeling arise. In that play space the individual perceives new possibilities and deeper understandings of relationships. We have found adults enjoy taking part in self active play which means being fully and sensorily enabled. After playing with open ended materials in this way, the participants are asked to reflect on their play experiences.

“At first I didn’t want to do this,...But then, as I got started, I made my initials, little circles, squares, rectangles and then a little tiny house. All my inner feelings started coming out. At first it didn’t mean anything, then it focused on certain things in my life. I thought about my kids, and how I want to protect them as well as myself,...because you put your inner feelings on the back burner and deal with your children’s feelings instead. Then, when you come to something like this, you look at yourself and you have to deal with those feelings,... You realize that regardless of what comes or goes, you have to take a moment for yourself. Inner feelings can destroy you as well as build you up. Even though you have feelings, you have to question those feeling and bring

them out so you can go on. I'm very organized, and I try not to let my kids know that I am burdened. But you have to take that moment for yourself. You have to build yourself back up so you can go on."

### Self Active Play Principle 2

*Hands on self active play and art making with open-ended materials reconnect the individual with earlier stages of human development, spontaneously balancing and strengthening hope, will, purpose, competence, fidelity, love, care and wisdom.*

Self active play experiences for adults using open ended materials also provide an opportunity to reconnect with earlier life experiences. While adults innovate with the materials, previous experiences are recalled and reflected upon. Many times these recollections enable the player to better understand the significance embedded in those earlier experiences. The power of the play results in dealing with or healing wounds, in this way making play a positive force for balancing and strengthening.

*"Before I felt tension and stress, now I feel peacefulness. I was feeling my connection to my sister who just passed three weeks ago. As I strung the plastic rings I thought of hope. As I wrapped them around the wooden pieces that stood up at different heights in the plastic cubes, I thought of how my sister and I were always connected and intertwined. Then as the thread emerged from the sculpture, I was able to form a face with two eyes, nose and smile with the thread trailing off into eternity to represent our happy times and comfort I will receive from the happy memories." (N., OH)*

### Self Active Play Principle 3

*Self active play's intrinsic qualities include spontaneity of the spirit, thinking deeply, feeling intensely and building a trust in one's intuitive self.*

While fiddling with open ended materials adults become vividly conscious of the essential human need to experience self active play as a way of awakening their creative and intuitive selves. Self active play provides a safe context for adults to experiment, take risks, and explore in order to better understand their world and themselves. Often times the adults realize the metaphor that arises between the open ended materials and their own life situations. This metaphorical realization moves with the adult as they continue to reflect on the metaphor beyond the immediate play experience. Through further reflection the player opens up possibilities for new understandings, much like the open ended materials themselves. As adults participate in this play they come to appreciate the importance and value of play as a lifelong transformational process.

*"I built a fortress. I just started laying pieces down and then I formed one in the shape of a wooden heart, my heart, and suddenly was overcome with the overwhelming need to*

*protect it, to guard it, to keep it from breaking. It's funny how I can see what I should do when I look at the blocks, yet taking that path, the one to protect it, is much harder. The rocks on the outside are the circles of people who want in, who want to know me, but I keep out. The ones of the inside are my friends. Yet no rock can get close to my wooden heart, the center of my fortress, the center of me. I'm scared I'll never love again. I'm scared of being alone. I'm scared mostly that someone again will be able to bring me this low again. I was myself and I wasn't enough. What makes it different next time?" (L., Florida, 2009).*

This innate value of play is an especially important concept to reinforce with teachers and parents of young children. Miller and Almon (2009) state in their report *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, "Educating kindergarten teachers so that they can develop strong and effective play-based programs will be a challenge requiring workshops, courses, and mentoring" (pg. 54). Our self active play experience training workshops give adults the opportunity to experience the benefits of play and the time in which to reflect on those benefits. Through the reflective component of the workshop the adults create their value system about the importance of play based on direct personal experiences. The teacher or play leader is the key to successful self active play experiences for self and others. The leader or coach is an advocate for creative expression and through that for the keener awareness of one's self.

Betty Neugebauer suggests "Children need [playful] adults in their lives, people who will model the importance of play to living" (as cited in Miller and Almon, 2009, pg. 54). David Elkind concurs "Most of all we need to adopt a playful attitude that will encourage our children to do the same" (p. 41). So, play is not something that should occur in childhood and then vanishes as we "grow up." But rather, self active play is something that should be a ubiquitous part of the way in which we live our lives. Think of the possibilities: the freedom to engage in the transformative power of self active play to guide and renew the human spirit throughout life.

### References

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