

PLAYING TO LEARN

How do children gain self-esteem, character, and skill through play, and how can parents encourage it?

Walter F. Drew

“When I was building I felt like I could build anything and the sky was the limit!”

Chris Phillips, Age 9 Cub Scout Building Structures Workshop.

Children develop a unique sense of self worth from being creative. Play enchants the imagination. Through play children learn to embrace the unexpected, to overcome adversity, to persist and revel in self discovery. Like with Chris, when children play their minds are intentionally focused, their senses are actively engaged in expressing their own unique creative potential and gaining the feeling of mastery and self fulfillment.

As a father, I see the gift of play as an opportunity to witness and acknowledge the unfolding power of character virtues within children. Being present as they play helps to build the bonds of life long love and creates the possibility that we will see the sprouting seeds of confidence, courage, creativity, self initiative, resilience, perseverance, imagination, respect, compassion, generosity, gratitude, healthy self esteem.....revealed as our children play.

In these seed moments we can encourage children to develop wholesome virtues. By noticing how they play, what they say, how they feel, we see hints of who they may become. By acknowledging the presence of children, we affirm their existence. By

acknowledging the positive actions and virtues of children we encourage their development. Be descriptive. Simply describe what you see. By describing what the child has done right, rather than wrong, you highlight the existence of specific virtue.

Descriptive language teaches ownership of character qualities. Gently naming the virtue we observe in the actions of children we help children to realize that these qualities exist within them and that they can summon and direct their use for the good of themselves and humanity. Bonds are strengthened when we treat children gently and considerately.

As we direct attention to positive behavior of children, we are acknowledging their intent, need or desire. In this way we not only convey acceptance and understanding of children, we also reduce the potential for strong emotional backlash and resistance. Children who feel appreciated and understood are less likely to resist and exhibit unwanted behavior.

HOW DO I PLAY, WHAT DO I LEARN, WHO DO I BECOME?

To many adults, they are just pieces of foam, cardboard tubes, fabric remnants, wood cuttings and plastic caps,....cast-off materials from local business and industries who no longer want their discarded scraps. To children and youth they are tools for invention and self discovery,....resources for building self esteem.

Recently at a Kiwanis Key Club “play mentoring” workshop high school youth were learning to guide K-6 After School children to relax and play with a variety of open-ended materials. Once the children became engaged in play, the youth pulled back to give the children freedom to explore. Ideally play involves youth or adults, but when they

control the play, children acquiesce to the more adult concerns diminishing the benefits of developing creativity, leadership and social skills. Following the play there was a time for conversation and journaling

The children just started exploring and playing with the materials. Eventually what they were building evolved into something specific, a surfboard rack, a birthday cake, a theatre. After a short while six year old Briana who was playing with large blocks of pink and white foam, several yards of shimmery red fabric, and strands of colorful plastic beads proclaimed,.....“I am Queen Briana of this castle. I made the castle and queen throne and made myself a queen!” As she walked around the room draped in fabric Briana said,....“I made it with big foam, two cloths and some pearls. This is fun!”

Imagination, creativity, self-confidence are evident in her expressive language and dramatic actions. I smiled with acknowledgement and delight. Briana had brought to life and proudly displayed an imaginary persona. Through the power of her imagination she became the confident queen. “Look what I made,.....Look what I did,.....Look who I am,....” In this way, through child centered, self regulated play children, like Briana, construct knowledge and meaning as they open the door to developing critical life beliefs,.....

I like myself

I can think and do for myself

I can solve problems

When we look at building self esteem we see the importance of helping children develop these beliefs about themselves, and like with Brianna they emerge in children’s play.

PLAY IS SO MUCH MORE,..

Play is the essential setting for building a positive image of self. Children want to play mother and father, rule as the king or queen. In this way children learn to take the role of others, to understand other points of view through the drama of play. In a sense he uses the persona to represent power and the ability to act upon the life situations. In this way children build self confidence, they build a belief in themselves and their capacity to respond to living in the world. In play there is safety and freedom to practice spontaneous reactions to life happenings.

An example of this process happens in the development of self-initiative. When and where does this happen? How does it happen? Briana created a make believe world in which she could practice and proclaim her intentions. She self initiated the context for expressing her view of the regal world. In her play she subjugated all the elements of reality to her desires and drives. She fortified her inner feelings about her own power. This directly strengthens her sense of personal power, her self-image, and therefore her ability to deal with life as she knows or imagines it to be for her. It is a clear example of learning how to gain a sense of mastery and self assurance. In short Briana was in control of a self-created situation in her play environment.

The virtue has a chance to take root in play through practice. Like any virtue, there must be time and space for exploring and testing for himself. Children must first develop the awareness that taking action really is what it takes in life to get what you need and want. Then desire and courage may grow. Play teaches children to act on their interests to

achieve their goal. To be courageous and persistent. Play for children is the most reliable form of self education, self discovery. It is also a safe context for adults to try out new ways of being. Play is practice for life. A pathway to self competence.

Independence, self assurance, self confidence, and a creative spirit are advanced when children take to do something according to their own personal inclination or inspiration. Awareness, resilience, tenacity, flexibility are the outcomes of rich sensory play with a variety of stimulating and challenging materials. Again, open-ended or unstructured materials provide the greatest degree of freedom for children to most fully express their imagination. Above all, they strengthen children's need to feel fully capable of dealing with openness and ambiguity. In this way it is the children that assign meaning, determine purpose. They become the authority and through the process gain a sense of self control and an all important feelings of competence. In addition, since open ended materials offer a greater variety of ways be used, they offer greater potential for holding the interest of children, thus greater pleasure and learning.

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO HELP SOMEONE?

"I helped build Trump Tower with my friend Hannah"

"It was great playing with Mia and building a train track. It stretched really far and had a tunnel and a dog show."

Laura, Age 11

“I like when I made friends. It was fun when I made a ship out of foam. I felt happy when I saw all the toys and stuff. That was the best day of my life. I like the people with me.”

Justin, Age 7

We all, children and adults need to learn that we can solve problems, and also that we can seek and receive help from others as well as offer and give help to others. Self esteem increases as does emotional health when we feel we can contribute to the well being of others. It's easy to recognize the sense of worth generated by helping others. Children especially enjoy the feeling of helping others and of being important and big which accompanies helping their friends and family.

Madelyn Swift in points out that, “Children who view themselves as helpful are more positive and cooperative individuals. They learn that they are capable.” Children who contribute to the group feel more welcome and attached to the group. They begin to become true members of the group. I belong is very important. Play teaches children how to work in groups, to share, negotiate, to resolve conflict and to learn advocacy skills.

Children who feel understood and appreciated are more likely to be helpful and feel good about themselves.

Play remains one of the most reliable factors in building self esteem. It is the cornerstone of healthy personality development. Liking ourselves is a personal imperative that shapes all of our perceptions, feelings, and deeds. Parents who understand the ego needs of their children know that their emotional health is promoted through play. They provide their

children with suitable and sufficient unstructured play materials, adequate play space and time for full play. Unstructured playthings lend themselves to the full expression of a child's imagination. The child learns to explore and not fear the unknown.

Children's sense of self worth does not come from achievement alone, it comes also from our acceptance and acknowledgement of each child just like he or she is. Play helps our children realize that they have value simply because they exist and express themselves freely as they are.

PARENT TIPS

Be present with children.

Play with your children

Trust the process

Remain nearby but sensitive and unobtrusive.

Refrain from interrupting and taking up child's psychic or process space.

Observe carefully, gently name the character qualities you observe.

Avoid judgement and praise.

Practice reverence for children's play.

Follow activities with conversation where possible.

Allow time each day for children to express themselves through play.

When children are denied free expression, resentment results. Not being able to feel or express one's power, creates internal dissonance, negative feelings and conflict. This may be directed toward one's self often resulting in stress and belittling, or aggression, argumentative misbehavior. When children direct emotional dissonance and negative feeling toward themselves, their self-esteem suffers. They lose confidence and feel and misbehavior disobedience or tantrums.

Freedom and power: sense of freedom that goes with the time, freedom from interruption, freedom to express, degree of circumspect on part of teacher is required, not expecting the child to do like the first child.

Practice: revisiting the practice of play or art making, better understand the process, better able to understand the child.

Compelling need, you have visited it, you have to do it yourself to get it. In the experience is the knowledge

How do I play, what do I learn, who do I become,...

Play enables children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children and adults.

Play develops new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence, resilience and tenacity needed to face future challenges.

Play helps children develop decision making skills, move at their own pace, and discover areas of interest, ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue.

Will I quit what I want to do,...

What does it mean to you,....

The fundamental value of this kind of play is that it has personal meaning because it offers the most freedom for creative expression. Children who have the freedom, structure and encouragement to play and learn in ways that develop personal gifts, are more likely to possess the attitudes, skills, and personal character to sustain them throughout their lives.

The problem solving act of transforming objects and materials into organized ideas, expressive designs, and unique and orderly physical patterns is a creative intellectual process which engages the whole child.

END

Play as learning experiences that stimulate creativity and curiosity are the vehicles for promoting brain development, as they encourage children to visualize and model, experiment and discover through role playing, imagination and problem solving,

The future of any society depends on its ability to foster the health and well-being of the children. Stated simply, today's children will become tomorrow's citizens, workers, and parents. When we care for our children wisely, we help to insure a lifetime of productivity and responsible citizenship. When we fail to develop the gifts and essential character of our children, the very qualities they need to build a strong foundation for healthy and productive lives, we put their future prosperity at risk.

The explosion of research in neurobiology clarifies the extent to which the interaction early experience literally shapes brain architecture.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

Am I playing with my children?

Am I exhibiting acceptance and caring that show a genuine interest?

Am I providing materials that capture and sustain my children's interest and imagination?

Am I providing play activities where they can learn new skills and tap into my children's potential and intrinsic interests?

Does the activity encourage joyful, self active learning

Does the activity help children to express their personal connection and meaning to the content?

Does the activity help children develop collaborative skills?

Does the activity help children to develop and express symbolic concepts?

Parents must be very intentional about their choice of materials for their children.

PHYSICAL MOTOR PLAY

Motor play broad category of play that usually refers to gross motor or functional physical or locomotor play, also playground play. It includes fine motor manipulative play. Gymnastics, organized sports, outdoor games usually fall into this category

CONSTRUCTIVE PLAY

Constructive play is organized goal oriented play in which children use materials to build some thing. This form of play is distinguished by greater sophistication and social collaboration often involving pretense.

DRAMATIC PLAY Pretend or Dramatic social play

Dramatic play involves role playing and make believe which may or may not involve the use of objects or props.

SYMBOLIC PLAY

Symbolic play is a higher form of play,...add more