

## naeyc Affiliate Successes



# Building Play Leadership and Advocacy

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**NAEYC Affiliate Successes**, published in the January, May, and September issues of *Young Children*, shares inspiring projects and strategies that other NAEYC Affiliates might learn from and replicate. If your Affiliate has a project or strategy to share, contact Meghan Dombrink-Green at [mgreen@naeyc.org](mailto:mgreen@naeyc.org). This column also appears in an online archive at [www.naeyc.org/yc/columns](http://www.naeyc.org/yc/columns).

Photos courtesy of the authors. Visit [www.ISAEplay.org](http://www.ISAEplay.org) for more play symposium photos.

NAEYC's Department of Affiliate Relations awarded Iowa AEYC a grant to be the first state host of the Hands, Hearts, & Mind play symposium in 2009. Two hundred teachers, providers, parents, administrators, policy makers, and college faculty participated in two days of hands-on play designed to promote and strengthen play-based learning as part of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs.

Conducted by the Institute for Self Active Education in collaboration with NAEYC's Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum, the symposium immersed participants in intensive but fun hands-on play experiences. The participants used a variety of open-ended, reusable materials—colorful foam, fabric, plastic caps, river rocks, birch tree pieces, bamboo, marbles, beads, cardboard tubes, ribbons, yarn, wire, wooden blocks, plastic springs.

Symposium sessions highlighted the intentional use of play in the curriculum, early education settings, and children's homes to help develop important life skills like self-regulation, engagement, and focused attention. Participants made connections between their play experiences and the role of play in the intentional teaching strategies they develop for mathematics, literacy, science, and other content areas.

The Department of Affiliate Relations, which manages NAEYC State Affiliates and the Play, Policy, and Practice Interest Forum, sponsored the play symposium model because of the growing relationship between the two groups. The premise of the grant was to develop the sustainable capacity to provide ongoing networking and support for play within communities and beyond the scope of a one-day professional development event.

State Affiliates applying for the grant submitted a statement outlining their rationale for intentionally and strategically increasing their presence, integrity, and capacity within their communities. They also identified one or more strategies to extend the impact of the play symposium, such as organizing a teacher support network on reflective teaching practice or developing a strategic plan to improve professional practice.

In addition to the play symposium in Iowa, State Affiliates in Florida, New Mexico, Puerto Rico, California, Alaska, and Maryland have hosted hands-on play symposiums.

## Responses from symposium participants

The response to the play symposiums has been overwhelmingly positive. Several AEYC Affiliates have commented on how the play symposiums supported them in their work. Barbara Merrill, executive director of Iowa AEYC, shares one of her observations:

In my professional career I have yet to witness an event as emotion-provoking as the play symposium experience was for the participants in Iowa. Barely an hour into the experience, a teacher said, "I realize how disrespectful I have been to young children in my care. I have interrupted their thinking, their problem solving, their play. Already today's experience has me rethinking how I will interact with children in the future."

As a coordinator of the event who was not fully participating at that moment, I remember stopping in my tracks and turning and looking at this teacher and the others in the room. Many heads were nodding. I realized the impact we were having on these professionals as well as on the hundreds of children they would be educating, caring for, and interacting with throughout their careers.

Sandra Giardi, executive director of the California AEYC, reflected on the effectiveness of the California symposium:

Our play symposium attendees truly appreciated the opportunity to add hands-on play practice to complement their learning about play theory. A number of participants reflected on the sym-

posium's powerful reminder that learning through play is for all ages, not just children.

The play symposiums in California, Alaska, and Maryland surveyed participants about what they perceived as barriers to play and what supports they would need to enhance the use of play as a tool for learning in their classrooms. In response, 41 percent of the California participants cited as barriers parents' lack of information and understanding about the learning benefits of play. Likewise, the participants recognized the need to support families by giving them hands-on play education experiences. Data from the Alaska and Maryland symposiums also reflected this trend.

Following the Maryland AEYC play symposium, Greg Stevens, copresident of the Maryland AEYC, explained that

the play symposium was a professional development opportunity for Maryland's early childhood community in response to members' demands that there should be some balance to the heightened school-readiness, standards-based training opportunities flooding the market throughout the state. The response to the symposium has been overwhelming, indicating the huge need for such opportunities now and in the future.

## Outcomes

Several State Affiliates have established play committees as part of their infrastructure. The intentional strategy of developing successful play

## Putting Play Back into Practice

Hands-on play training symposiums

- elevate the discourse about the importance of play for young children and throughout life
- strengthen play-based learning, as recommended in the revised NAEYC developmentally appropriate practice position statement (NAEYC 2009) and book (Copple & Bredekamp 2009).
- empower and support early childhood educators by providing them with resources and advocacy tools for advancing play
- establish state and local AEYC Affiliates as early learning partners, collaborating with Head Start programs, art and science museums, children's museums, colleges, universities, and businesses to build a community of informed play advocates
- Inspire innovative methods for integrating play advocacy in Affiliates' strategic planning.

committees at the State Affiliate level models and encourages the practice of establishing play committees at the Local Affiliate level. A systems approach can directly link NAEYC and State and Local Affiliates in developing play leadership, communication, research, and social resiliency within the early childhood community.



## Intentional Strategies and Outcomes

Additional benefits from the play symposiums include the following:

- Teachers recognized the need for a change in their practice and have scheduled more time for play, increased use of open-ended materials, and incorporated music in their classroom.
- Iowa State Affiliate developed a play training DVD as a professional development resource.
- Iowa, Alaska, and Maryland State Affiliates have developed a cadre of play coaches who provide hands-on training for teachers and parents.
- Iowa, Florida, New Mexico, California, and Alaska State Affiliates held parent training events.
- Florida and Iowa Play Committee members, as well as New Mexico AEYC members, presented play workshops at State Affiliate annual conferences.
- Developmentally Appropriate Play Competencies were included in the Iowa Department of Education's Professional Levels and Competencies for Teaching Roles.
- Iowa and North Florida AEYCs built partnerships with businesses to acquire open-ended materials for classroom use.
- Florida Play Committee created an online play course.
- Iowa State Affiliate publishes a play-themed newsletter.
- The Institute of Self Active Education created and implemented a parent play-education program, "Let My Children Play."

Following the AEYC play symposium in Iowa, 10 experienced early childhood professionals enrolled in a play leadership training program. These professionals are working with the Institute for Self Active Education and the Iowa AEYC leadership to create a support system for championing play.

Through Local Affiliate chapters and their partners, such as child care resource and referral agencies and Head Start, the Iowa play coaches have taken leadership roles in promoting in their communities an understanding of the importance of play in early education and in children's lives. One coach has developed a reusable resource center in her community to provide teachers with open-ended materials. Other coaches are conducting play workshops across the state for both teachers and parents. These play coaches are all members of the Iowa AEYC State Affiliate Play Committee.

The Florida AEYC Play Committee focuses on developing play symposiums with Local Affiliates throughout the state. Local Affiliates partner with local and state organizations, including Kiwanis clubs, early learning coalitions, Head Start programs, and museums, to cosponsor affiliate symposiums and to help locate, collect, and redistribute open-ended materials.

Charlene Gross, president of the Florida AEYC, details the North Florida AEYC Local Affiliate's plans to create community partnerships:

Our Local Affiliate is going to make this a project to reach out to the business community to locate and collect materials for teachers to use as classroom resources. It is also a way for us to develop a relationship with businesses to help them better understand the important issues related to the care and education of young children.

The New Mexico AEYC has established an informal partnership with the University of New Mexico Family Development Program (UNM-FDP) to promote play experiences. Baji Rankin, executive director of the New Mexico AEYC, explains that "the UNM-FDP also runs the Wemagination Center, a reusable resource center in Albuquerque serving the state with a whole variety of recycled materials that are great for open-ended play."

Suzanne Gellens, executive director of Florida AEYC, shares that by engaging in hands-on adult play, participants experience the joy and freedom of play, which they can transmit to young children and their families. In this age of accountability, it is imperative that every child have the opportunity to grow and learn through play.



Alaska AEYC board member Veronica Plumb found that

for some, the Hands, Heart, & Mind play experience was an emotional and revealing reflection of their personal philosophy. For others, the experience provided insights for reflection and thought about supporting play in classrooms and other places of childhood. Thought and reflection by 100-plus participants for future planning around play can only be seen as a very positive response.

### Implications for the future

Symposium host states continue to report positive outcomes from participants, new and engaging projects of member outreach and support, and a new way to connect to policy makers within their communities about the value and importance of play in a young child's daily experiences. When early childhood educators look for reasons to join their State Affiliate, play inspires passion in potential members. The play symposium experience also gives AEYC State Affiliates leadership roles in promoting developmentally appropriate practices at the state level and the opportunity to guide other state systems. The success stories from these states ensure that funding from NAEYC's Department of Affiliate Relations will again be available in 2011 for two more play symposium grants.

As the symposiums grow in each state, the communities of "players"

come closer to making play the most natural experience for young children and the center of the curriculum. The future hope is for an informed play community comprised of not only early childhood educators, but also parents, business leaders, and civil servants who understand and value play in the lives of children, adults, and families. Research shows that play is for keeps!

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### Resources

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