
Editor's note: *Do you feel on the defensive when parents challenge you to answer the question, "Why are you wasting so much time on free play? Our children are here to learn, not to play!"*

Do you feel ill-equipped not only to answer the challenge but to explain the values of play with such persuasiveness that your critic becomes an ally, an advocate instead of an adversary? Read on!

Wanted: Advocates for Play in the Primary Grades

Sandra J. Stone

In our national pursuit of academic excellence, young children in the primary grades have too long endured the absence of play in the classroom. Even in our kindergartens we see an erosion of quality playtime. If we are to be true advocates for children, then we must be outspoken advocates for play. In the present restructuring movement in our nation's schools, educators of young children must let their voices be heard. We must not succumb to the narrow definition of *learning* that undervalues or eliminates play as a curricular tool in the classroom (Bergen 1988).

Play is deemed by many experts as vitally important to the growth of the whole child (Piaget 1962; Vygotsky 1976; Elkind 1981; Bruner 1983; Fein 1986; Bergen

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1988). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports children's play as "a primary vehicle for and indicator of their mental growth. Play enables children to progress along the developmental sequence from the sensorimotor intelligence of infancy to preoperational thought in the preschool years to the concrete operational thinking exhibited by primary children. . . . In addition to its role in cognitive development, play serves important functions in children's physical, emotional, and social development. . . . Therefore, child-initiated, child-directed, teacher-supported play is an essential component of developmentally appropriate practice" (Bredekamp 1987, 54).

The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) also takes a strong position on play. ACEI "recognizes the need for children of all ages to play and affirms the essential role of play in children's healthy development. . . . ACEI supports those

adults who respect and understand the power of play in children's lives and who use their knowledge about how children play at different ages to guide their practices with children" (Isenberg & Quisenberry 1988, 138). Frost calls play an "indispensable element in child development. It is the child's natural process of learning and development and, consequently, a critical ingredient in the educative process" (1992, 19).

With such strong proponents of play as a curricular choice, one would think that play would enjoy a place of honor in our primary classrooms, where children participate in play as a cherished component of appropriate practice. However, what we find across our nation are educators who have or are unwittingly sacrificing play in their endeavor to reach prescribed academic goals. Even teachers who know the importance of play to a child's development find themselves on the defensive when questioned

about play in their classrooms. We have become too embarrassed to give playtime a place because of "more important" curricular priorities. Hence, play is reduced to recess time, hidden in the curriculum, or tagged as miscellaneous "free time." Children who *need* to play (a need for all children) go undercover, hoping their play in the classroom will not be discovered; or even worse, children deny themselves the play they need in order to please those they love and respect.

To those who value play and understand its critical importance to the growth and development of young children, the question is how do we empower ourselves to become true advocates of play?

Recognizing what play is

First, we must be able to recognize play in order to promote and nurture it in our classrooms. Play is defined as intrinsically moti-

We must not succumb to the narrow definition of learning that undervalues or eliminates play as a curricular tool in the kindergarten and primary classroom.

vated, freely chosen, process-oriented over product-oriented, nonliteral, and enjoyable (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987). Although play is hands-on learning, hands-on learning is not always play. Teachers must not assume that active learning constitutes play. Good teachers of young children should know the difference and provide for both. Because play is nonliteral, internal reality takes precedence over external reality. "This 'as if' stance allows children to escape the constraints of here and now and experiment with new possibilities" (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987, 12).

In order to recognize play, looking at play types is helpful.

Smilansky's (1968) adaptations of Piaget's (1962) cognitive play categories are standard for play observers. There are four categories: functional, constructive, dramatic, and games with rules.

Functional play. Functional play is when the child runs, jumps, splashes in water, or repetitively manipulates objects or materials. In this type of play, the child repeats muscle movements with or without objects just for the sake of movement. In a primary classroom, teachers can see many forms of functional play. Examples include all of these actions: the child who pulls on her shoe while sitting at circle time, re-



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Research substantiates a strong relationship between play and cognitive development. Play affords young children the opportunity to use divergent thinking. Children figure out solutions to problems as they play. Children discover scientific concepts, such as force, gravity, and balance, as they play with blocks.

peatedly taps her pencil, hoards a small piece of playdough and rolls it over and over again in her hand, or plays with the tiniest grain of sand on the carpet. Children gain great pleasure in playing in and with the environment, not for a product but for the sheer enjoyment of movement. Unfortunately, teachers of young children who are not knowledgeable of this form of play may reprimand the child for not paying attention or redirect the child to more "educational" involvement.

Constructive play. Constructive play is when children use objects or materials to make things. They create, construct, and solve problems. In constructive play, children build with Legos and blocks. They make things with playdough, paint, paper, and sand. Constructive play is probably the most frequently allowed play in the primary classroom. However, art, music, and project creation can only be play as long as they meet the criteria for play. As previously stated, play is intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, process-oriented over product-oriented, nonliteral, and enjoyable (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987). If these criteria are not met, then the activities may be active learning or even work, but they are not play. Too often, well-defined teacher-initiated activities become work projects rather than creative play construction by the children (Stone 1993). Again, the knowledgeable teacher must know the difference and adequately provide for both.

Dramatic play. Dramatic play is when children role-play or make make-believe transformations. Dramatic play becomes sociodramatic play when children role-play together. In dramatic play, one child may pretend she is a mother or superhero. An-

other child may transform a block into a car, a banana into a phone, playdough into pizza, or himself into a monster. Dramatic play is the most highly developed form of symbolic play, in which the child begins the incredible process of using objects as symbols for objects and events in the real world. Symbolic play is a critical foundation for literacy development and the key to representational thought (Piaget 1962). In sociodramatic play, the child is given multiple opportunities to be social as well as to play out his emotions. Thus, dramatic play's importance for the developing child in the primary grades should not be underestimated and should be given high priority in the primary classroom.

Games with rules. This is the type of play in which children make or use rules to play games. These may be simple or complex rules that are preestablished by the players. Examples of games with rules are tag, hide-and-seek, dodge ball, and card or board games. But do not overlook games of play in which children establish simple rules, such as "I'll hop first and then you are next" or "You can only race your car between these lines." Children develop or use rules to establish how the play is supposed to go. Games with rules support a child's development as she orders her world for consistency, fairness, stability, and predictability (Stone 1993).

Primary teachers will provide beginning games with rules while understanding the limitations of the children's thought processes

as well as the need to increase the complexity of rules as the children's understanding increases. Close observation of children's abilities and choices will help the teacher in selecting appropriate games with rules, keeping in mind that children will choose those games they understand and enjoy.

Although primary children will engage in constructive, dramatic, and games with rules more frequently than functional play, all four types of play are important for the development of young children in the primary grades. Knowing the types of children's play will help teachers not only recognize forms of play when they see them but will help teachers facilitate, honor, and plan for play's place in the primary classroom.

Verbalizing our knowledge of the benefits/values of play

To be a true advocate of children's play, a teacher must be able to verbalize her knowledge about the values of play. Stone notes that the "research on the values of play is formidable. In fact, there is so much evidence of play's overall benefits that to provide an 'education' without play seems ludicrous" (1993, 7). Knowledge of the values of play can empower a teacher to promote play in the classroom as well as guide her in effectively using play as a curricular tool.

First, play creates a natural learning environment. Wasserman describes five benefits of play: children are able to generate (create) something new, take

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risks, avoid the fear of failure, be autonomous, and actively engage their minds and bodies (1992, 135). Then, play provides the natural and experiential learning that supports the child's construction of his own knowledge of the world and his place in it. It significantly affects the development of the whole child. Within play's natural learning environment, children develop cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Cognitive development. Research substantiates a strong relationship between play and cognitive development. The appearance of symbolic play is considered one of the most significant cognitive developments of the young child. Symbolic play has a crucial role in developing abstract thought (Vygotsky 1976). Symbolic play signals the development of representational thought (Piaget 1962). The key importance of representational thought is that the child is now able to represent objects and events symbolically. When children begin to pretend (dramatic) play, they are using objects to symbolize other objects and events. This is a necessary step in representing the objects mentally. Even though this process begins at about 1½ years old, it does not peak until about age 6. Because children use dramatic play to practice representing objects symbolically, many opportunities to engage in symbolic play in the early primary grades should be provided to continue this foundation in the child's development of abstract thought as well as to further literacy development.

Play also affords young children the opportunity to use divergent thinking. Children research solutions to problems as they play. If a child is building a tower, she explores many ways to keep the tower from falling over.

Each problem she encounters in constructive play gives her opportunity to think divergently and find solutions.

Play is the natural place for children to express creativity. Children create, invent, and design as they draw, build, and dramatize. In constructive play, the child sculpts with clay, designs with paint, and constructs with blocks, all expressions of the child's creativity. In dramatic play, the "child is able to take a multitude of experiences and lace them together into new ones, which represents a monument to her creativity" (Stone 1993, 120).

Play encourages problem-solving. Problems encountered in play represent real, thus meaningful, problems to young children (Tegano, Sawyers, & Moran 1989). Real problems provide the motivation to engage in the problem-solving process. Providing a play context for young children is an effective way to help young

children develop problem-solving skills across all dimensions naturally. Instead of talking through problems, children play through problems for solutions. Tegano, Sawyers, and Moran note that "children who are encouraged to find and 'play' with their problems (trying out various solutions) are more apt to learn generalizable skills and be better equipped to cope with real-life problems" (1989, 97).

Play also provides an avenue for concept development by which children test out and revise their concepts of the world. In mud play, the child develops concepts of mass, volume, and the nature of change. The child develops mathematical concepts of number, matching, classifying, and measurement when he plays with cars, cards, paints, and puzzles. Children discover scientific concepts such as force, gravity, and balance as they experiment with blocks.



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Play is the primary mode for children's social development. Play encourages social interaction. Children learn how to negotiate, resolve conflicts, solve problems, get along with each other, take turns, be patient, cooperate, and share. Play also helps children understand concepts of fairness and competition.

Perspective taking is a cognitive process that often takes place during sociodramatic play. The child learns how to see the world from another's point of view as she takes on the roles of different characters. The social interaction also allows her to see things from her playmate's point of view. Being able to see something from someone's else's view is a developmental milestone for the egocentric child and is a process facilitated by play.

Play provides a rich environment for language development. As the young child interacts with others, he must communicate meaning and also develop narrative language, as demonstrated in sociodramatic play. His vocabulary undergoes incredible growth during play. Especially valuable to his language development is that in play the new words are tied to meaning and experiences enacted or engaged in by the child.

Social development. Play is the primary mode for children's social development. Play encourages social interaction. Children learn how to negotiate, resolve conflicts, solve problems, get along with each other, take turns, be patient, cooperate, and share. Play also helps children understand concepts of fairness and competition.

Even though perspective taking is a cognitive skill, it is also vital to a child's social development. Play supports children in their self-decentering process. This is especially important as children learn to deal with their friends' feelings and attitudes.

Play contributes to children's social competence by giving them the opportunity to be social. It also provides children with an arena in which to practice social conventions, with the freedom to accept or reject those conventions. Play is the perfect opportunity for children to develop friend-

Values of Play

Emotional

- acts as a medium for expressing thoughts/feelings
- softens the realities of the world
- serves as a risk-free environment
- releases children's stress
- decreases children's anxiety
- builds well-being/self-concept

Physical

- motor development
- balancing of systems
- body command
- distance judgment
- hand-eye coordination

- testing of bodies
- self-assurance

Cognitive

- abstract thought
- divergent thinking
- creativity
- problem solving
- concept development
- perspective taking
- language development

Social

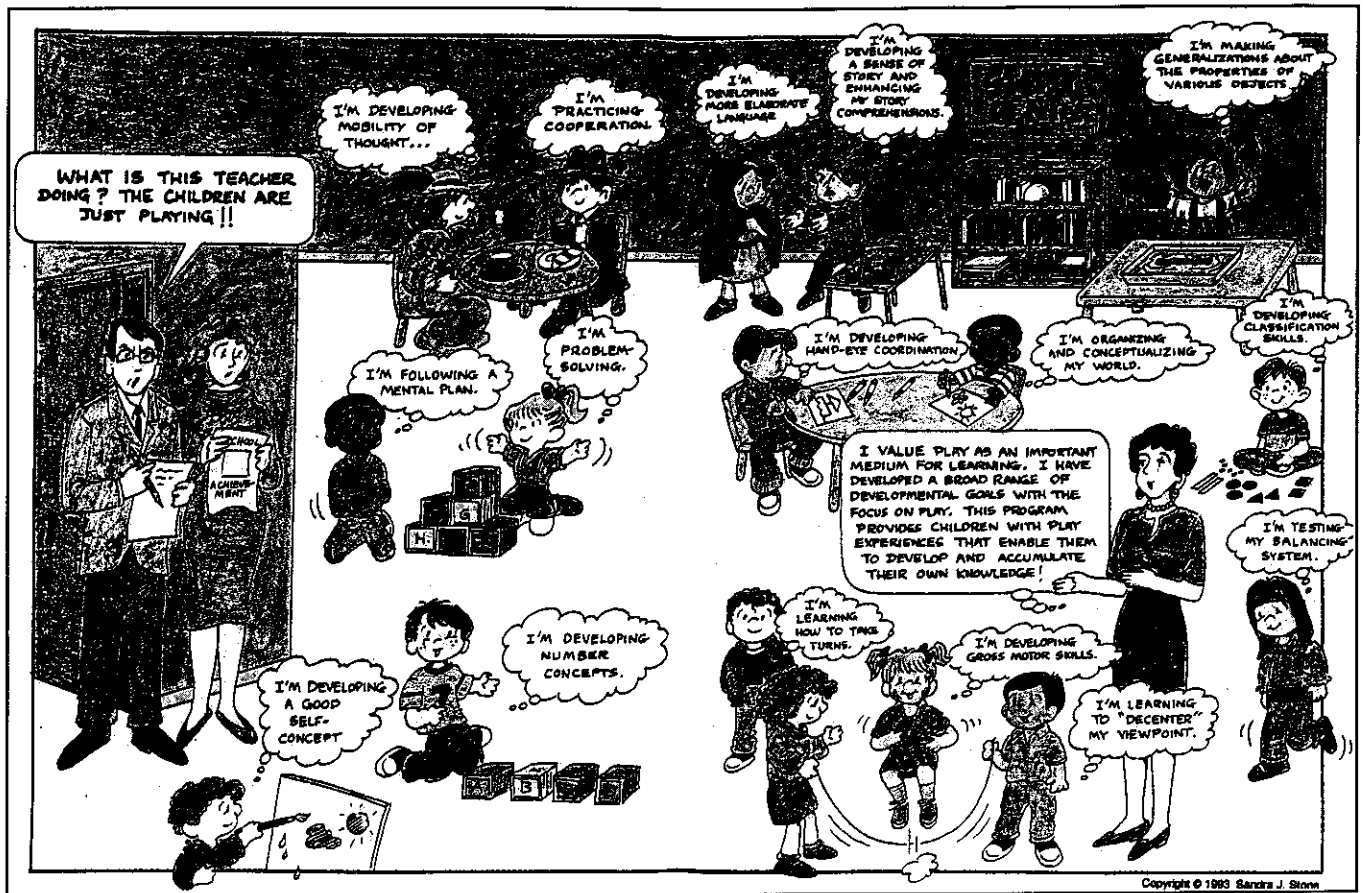
- decentering
- practicing of social patterns
- encouraging social interaction
- learning to get along

ships and to see that someone else values them.

Emotional development. Play is a medium through which children can express their feelings as well as learn to cope with them. They can express feelings of happiness, sadness, anger, or worry in a world separate from the real world. In this world of play, these feelings are freely explored and expressed because they are not in the "real world." In pretend play, the feelings can be understood and worked out. Play provides this safe context for emotional development. A child scolded by a parent or teacher can scold a doll in the play context, and this is acceptable. A child can replay, over and over again, an unsettling incident, such as seeing someone hurt on the playground. He plays the scene until he is able to cope with his feelings of fear. In this sense, play softens the realities of the world. Play is a risk-free environment in which unpleasant experiences can be worked out.

Elkind (1981) suggests that play is also a release from the stresses children face. Physiological evidence links play with anxiety reduction (Barnett & Storm 1981). In our hurried society, play gives children a place of solitude where they can escape and be in control of their world, their thoughts, their feelings.

Physical development. Play is the primary way children develop physically. Play provides opportunities for both fine- and gross-motor development. Children can test out their balancing systems as they do acrobatics, develop a command of their bodies as they skip and hop, and judge distances as they jump and throw. Play also gives children opportunities to develop hand-eye coordination as they build, paint, cut, and paste. As children play, they test out their bodies to see how they best function. And, as children develop a command of their bodies, play helps them "feel physically confident, secure, and self-



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assured" (Isenberg & Quisenberry 1988, 139).

Knowing the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical benefits of play to the development of young children is essential for us to be advocates for children's play. We need to be able to verbalize our knowledge of the value of play to parents, teachers, and administrators.

Being "open" advocates for play

Knowing what play is, the types of play, and the benefits of play empowers us as "open" advocates for play. No longer do we have to hide play in our curriculums, give only cursory "free time" for children to play, or be embarrassed when someone sees our children playing. Equipped

with the knowledge of the value of play, teachers can not only allow play in their classrooms but vigorously plan for it.

Posting the values of play in a prominent place in the classroom (see box on p. 47) and displaying the play cartoon (above) let parents and colleagues and, most of all, the children know that "Play is valued here!"

Play centers can be labeled with the benefits children gain through the play experience at each specific center. For example, at the home center, a chart may be posted that reads, "Children

are learning to use more elaborate language, get along, share, negotiate, plan, use social skills, and make friends." At the art center, the chart could indicate that "Children are learning to create, invent, share, socialize, and plan."

In addition to posting the values of play, it is equally important to demonstrate that learning is taking place. We can display evidence of things children have invented or solved, show examples of language or stories created, and use anecdotal records to substantiate times of negotiation, planning, and sharing. Teachers may take photo-

Posting the values of play in a prominent place in the classroom lets parents and colleagues know that "Play is valued here!"

graphs of castles and spaceships constructed from Legos or videotape children's dramatizations.

Vivid examples of the benefits of play further support the position that play is important, but even more importantly, this information helps guide our teaching decisions as we become astute observers of what is happening during play.

Another way to become an open advocate of play is to inform others. We can share timely articles with colleagues, schedule discussion groups with interested teachers and parents, and exchange valuable play experiences with each other.

Involving parents

Parents can be valued partners in creating and supporting quality play experiences for their children. A class newsletter informing parents and periodically highlighting the importance of children's play can be a useful educational tool. At informative parent meetings planned throughout the year, when we may normally discuss literacy development and math strategies, we can also share how play supports children's learning, growth, and development.

Teachers upgrade the importance of play by bringing it into the context of parent conferences. Letting parents see how play is integrated into our curriculum and how we use play to help each child in his development is valuable. This can include sharing each child's play experiences that document growth, for example, in imagination, problem solving, negotiation, and language development.

Parents can extend play at home. Teachers can help them see the importance of play in their children's learning and can make play kits for children to take home. These kits might be

Involving Parents in Creating Prop Boxes

Dear Parents,

One of my goals for this school year is to increase the opportunities and materials for sociodramatic play of stories in literature. Research supports sociodramatic play as one of the most important forms of play because it involves the use of such skills as symbolic representation, perspective taking, precise use of language, cooperation, and sharing. Research has also shown that acting out stories helps children improve their comprehension abilities as well as story-element understanding.

I have begun a collection of "prop boxes" that will be placed in the play stage in our classroom. Each box contains some clothing, accessories, and props for a specific story we will be reading this year. For example, the "Henny Penny" prop box contains an acorn, umbrella, hat, stool, and a few clothing items for each character.

I need your help in completing the remaining prop boxes. Please review the story list below and return the bottom portion of this letter, indicating which story you and your child would be willing to work on and find props for to bring to our classroom. Items are often found at home, from a neighbor, or at a secondhand store. I would appreciate it if you could work with your child to complete a single story; however, if you have an item that would fit another story, please send it in.

Thank you for your support of this project that will benefit your children. I'm looking forward to a wonderful year.

Story list

"Stone Soup"	"The Lion and the Mouse"
"The Gingerbread Boy"	"Cinderella"
"Jack and the Beanstalk"	<i>Where the Wild Things Are</i>
"The Little Red Hen"	<i>Sylvester and the Magic Pebble</i>
"The Elves and the Shoemaker"	<i>There's a Nightmare in My Closet</i>
"The Hare and the Tortoise"	"Henny Penny"
"Little Red Riding Hood"	"The Three Bears"
"The City Mouse and the Country Mouse"	"The Three Little Pigs"

Please decide on which story you would like to work. Write down your first and second choices on the bottom portion of this page, tear it off, and return it as soon as possible. I will send a list of possible items that you may want to include in your prop box as well as a bag for putting everything into. Thanks so much for your help!

Sincerely,

Child's name _____

Parent's name _____

I would like to put together the following prop box:

First choice _____ Second choice _____

I would like to put together a prop box that is not on this list.

Title _____

I cannot help at this time. Ask me again another time.

Courtesy of Kim Huff and Kim Rimbey, Washington School District, Phoenix, Arizona.

Inviting Help from Parents for Dramatic Play

Dear Parents,

One of my goals for this school year is to increase the opportunities and materials for sociodramatic play. Research supports sociodramatic play as one of the most important forms of play because it involves the use of such skills as symbolic representation, perspective taking, precise use of language, cooperation, and sharing.

I have begun a collection of "character boxes" for the children's use in our housekeeping center. Each box contains some clothing, accessories, and props for creating an individual character. For example, the farmer box includes overalls, a flannel shirt, a straw hat, and a bandanna.

I need your help in completing the remaining characters. Please review the character list and return the bottom portion, indicating what character you and your child would be willing to work on and donate to our classroom. You can find items at home (clean those closets!) or ask a neighbor or look at a secondhand store. I would appreciate it if you could work with your child to complete a single character; however, if you discover an item that would fit another character, please also send it in.

Thank you for your support of this project that will benefit your children. I'm looking forward to a wonderful year.

Character list

artist	doctor	painter
bride/groom	firefighter	pilot
business person	grocery clerk	police officer
cheerleader	hairdresser	postal worker
chef	judge/lawyer	prince/princess
circus performer	mechanic	teacher
construction worker	mountain climber	waitress/waiter
cowboy/cowgirl	musician	zookeeper

Or, name any other character you can think of!

Sincerely,

Child's name _____

Parent's name _____

Character we will be willing to complete for a character box:

Specific items we can donate for another character: _____

Courtesy of Kim Huff and Kim Rimbey, Washington School District, Phoenix, Arizona.

simple props for dramatic play, felt flannelboard figures to play out a favorite story, or puppets, Popsicle sticks, even playdough. Children can bring the kits back and tell about or demonstrate what they did at home. This type of homework for young children is extremely valuable.

We want to involve parents in planning play environments in the classroom or playground. One easy way is to send home requests for props for sociodramatic play, puppets, and art and building materials (see boxes on p. 49 and this page). Inviting parents to observe or participate in the children's play and having them as partners strengthen our advocacy role.

Investigating ways to integrate play into the curriculum

Play's integration into the curriculum can be done by creating a variety of play centers, not overlooking a home center for one. The home center is an acceptable play center in kindergarten, but it is not usually used in the primary grades. However, it has continued value for 6- to 8-year-olds. Children are still developing language and narrative story. They continue to plan and make friends. They still need the support that play gives to a good self-concept. Unfortunately, just when young children are becoming "good players," the home center is removed from the classroom.

Besides providing a natural environment for language development, the home center welcomes literacy's integration. Note pads, pencils, recipe book and cards, phone, telephone book, magazines and books are supplies to be added. The home center creates a meaningful environment for functional use of literacy elements (Neuman & Roskos 1990).

Math may also be integrated into the home center by adding measuring cups and spoons. Introducing a toy "pet" and a pet care book incorporates social studies. The possibilities are endless.

Sociodramatic play centers in the primary grades are an excellent medium for children to act out favorite storybooks or curricular themes. Acting out stories using simple props supports wholistic retelling and demonstrates children's story sense. Thematic play centers are another wonderful educational tool for primary teachers. For example, a thematic unit on oceans lends itself to a play area complete with a submarine made from a box and underwater creatures painted by the children. In play centers like this that provide a meaningful setting, children use more elaborate vocabulary, such as words like submerge, periscope, depth, fathom, and sonar.

Children may also create their own play centers based on their interests. During this process, the children will invent, design, problem solve, and plan—all higher-order thinking skills.

Primary school children can play with flannelboard story figures from favorite storybooks. This enhances story sense, story sequence, and language use. They can make their own flannel-board story figures and create their own stories. Flannel-board story play is excellent rehearsal for a creative writing activity. Flannel-board pieces can also be used by children to play with numbers, create sets, and visualize mathematical operations such as multiplication.

There's no need to limit the types of centers in our classrooms just because we are teaching primary children. In an art or music center, children create, design, and invent. Even primary children continue to enjoy building at a blocks center. Their skills are becoming

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more refined and their projects more complex. How sad it is to deny them this creative time when their minds are envisioning magnificent structures, spaceships, and gadgets. We want to document the children's ingenuity and insights by photographing their creations or recording their ideas in anecdotal records.

Play may be infused into all of the content areas of an integrated curriculum: setting up a store when studying economics, creating a rain-forest play center when studying the environment, and providing simple props for recreating history through sociodramatic play. With a few props, children become pioneers, archaeologists, and astronauts. As we evaluate our class environments (indoor and outdoor play), let's

look at them with "playful" eyes. We can ask ourselves, "Where can play be added to support my children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical growth?"

Creating quality time for play

When planning for play, it is crucial to provide enough time for play to evolve. Children cannot be herded from one center to another at the ringing of a bell every 15 minutes. Children should have at least 30 minutes or more for play to evolve. However we choose to provide for play in our classrooms, whether it is integrated into the curriculum through centers or is given a block of time, we want to make sure the time is sufficient for quality play to take place.

Honoring children's play

To be an advocate for play also means to honor children's play. This is done by providing time for play, also by planning for and encouraging play.

A teacher who plans for play is most likely to encourage continued play. We can encourage play by expressing pleasure in the children's play, such as tasting newly made playdough pizza or admiring an intricately constructed Lego spaceship or agreeing to be Daddy at the home center. Honoring children's play involves respect for the process. Teachers who do not understand the value of play will communicate their nonvaluing feelings by retreating from or ignoring the play. A teacher who does not honor play may say to herself, "The children are just playing. While they are 'busy,' I will do more important things." A teacher who honors play encourages children to play. She will involve herself in the play as an observer, supporter, or participant.

Creating "play" support groups

While play is acceptable for preschool and kindergarten children, advocating play in the primary grades is, indeed, a challenge. We need to find colleagues in our schools, school districts, or the wider educational community who also value play for young children. A support group will strengthen our roles as advocates. Many voices are better than one isolated voice. Support groups share information, exchange ideas, and confirm beliefs. A support group does not have to be large. It can be as small as two people or as many as one hundred. The important thing is to have someone who supports our position of advocacy for play.

Becoming an advocate for play in the primary grades is not an easy role. Critics lie in wait to spear such frivolous use of time in public schools. To keep play in classrooms where it exists and to return play to classrooms void of play are efforts demanding courageous people.

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