

Playing to Get SMART

Elizabeth Jones

PLAY IS PRACTICE IN CHOOSING, DOING, AND PROBLEM SOLVING.

When children play, they are thinking, innovating, negotiating, and taking risks. They create make-believe events and practice physical, social, and cognitive skills as they engage in these events as if they were real. Teachers support play by providing a variety of things to do, observing what unfolds, and staying nearby to help as needed and to acknowledge children's actions and words.

Schoolwork and play

Most traditional schoolwork is designed to teach standard rules and classification systems to young learners. *Closed*, right-answer tasks are what we all associate with our experiences of school. Play, in contrast, is *open*; it doesn't have preset rules (Jones & Reynolds 1992).

Children at play are constructing their own rules and learning at their own rates. As they test hypotheses and argue them with peers, they gain confidence in themselves as learners rather than becoming afraid to make mistakes. Children at play are learning to deal intelligently with the world. They are playing to get smart.

Bombarded from all sides with what Piaget called "the American question"—How can we do it faster? How can we make children learn more, sooner? (Hall 1970)—we need to remember that facts acquired in isolation become easily forgotten trivia. Early childhood educators, focusing on the development of children's initiative, have chosen to think of *smart* as being skillful in curiosity and critical thinking.

It is through play with materials and relationships, invention of classification systems, and solving problems in dialogue with others that young children develop the basic skills they will need to become effective contributors to the health of a changing world.

The rate of change in our world is unlikely to slow down in the future. Social problem solving is a life skill everyone needs more and more, as we encounter people who are not like us.

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Success in our rapidly changing world depends on being able to think creatively and quickly.

Democracy, no matter how imperfectly it works, holds a vision of the potential in everyone. John Dewey had a clear vision of democracy as built on the insights and talents of all its members, building community through respect for diversity (Cuffaro 1995, 103). That's a particularly important vision in early childhood education. Each young child is filled with potential for intelligence and caring relationships with others. We owe it both to the children and to our society to cultivate that potential through respect for children's need to play and to cultivate adult joy and creativity in inventing child-friendly play opportunities for them.

Interpreting the meaning of play

The world today is full of good and bad choices among the many ways of constructing a life. Children, adolescents, and adults who are smart—skilled at play with things, ideas, and people—will have more capacity to create meaningful lives than people who are unable to tolerate ambiguity and the unexpected, who are stuck in defending the way things are or used to be. Early childhood is the best time to practice these important skills and attitudes, because adults are there to keep things safe.