



Play Is a Child's Work

...A conversation with Mimi Basso

I've been working with parents of young children for over thirty years, and one topic that comes up repeatedly in our conversations is the role of play in the classroom. At West Side Montessori School we work hard to create opportunities for spontaneous play throughout the school day. Parents' questions vary, but they all boil down to this fundamental (and entirely understandable) concern: "Wouldn't my child be better prepared to succeed academically if her experience at WSMS were more focused on reading and writing and numeracy?" My short answer is a resounding "No!" My longer answer begins with a close look at our definition of "play" and at the enormous impact this activity has—not only on early childhood development, but on lifelong learning. I believe that play complements the traditional Montessori curriculum as a vital component of a child's academic and social development.





Q What is play?

Researchers have described play in a number of different ways. One of the most useful definitions I've come across is from psychology professor Catherine Garvey, who describes play as an activity that:

- is pleasurable, enjoyable, positively valued by the player
- is self-motivated and has no extrinsic goals
- is freely chosen
- is actively engaging
- has certain systematic relations to what is not play*

As educators we are very aware of the need to facilitate and gently direct children's play. We must be keen observers, good listeners, and skillful models in order to further our students' motivation, experience, pleasure, engagement, and free choice as they play in the block area, in the dramatic play area, in the gym, on the roof, and outdoors.

Q Why do you value children's play?

Albert Einstein once said, "Play is the best form of research." I like to add that it's research, initiated by the child, that helps him/her learn about how the world works—a lifelong condition for achievement if ever there was one. When you watch children play "house," for example, you will notice that they use language, plan the rules of the game, define relationships, and look at things differently. They talk about what is for dinner; they describe what the parent(s) should be doing; they react to what they consider to be good

or unacceptable behaviors. Perhaps most importantly, children learn to create and play by their own rules, and to respect the rules made by their peers. For example: "Dana will be the mommy first, and then Dana picks who will be the mommy next." "All the children in the family need to listen, and try everything on their plate, and take turns talking." Children feel in control and learn how to take turns; they begin to understand the world through the eyes of others.

Q How does play fit into the development of preschool-age kids?

Cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget (once a student of Maria Montessori) tells us that children between the ages of two

and seven are in the "pre-operational" period of development. During this phase children begin to occupy themselves with mathematical concepts such as classifying, comparing, counting, measurement, and parts and wholes. They also begin to use descriptive terms such as big and small.**

In addition, during the pre-operational period, children begin to use symbols to represent real things: a block represents a car, a stick represents a horse, etc. This symbolic function lays the foundation for later understanding abstract symbols such as numerals and letters. Socio-dramatic play occurs as children act out a make-believe situation or a story from a much-loved book. For example, in acting out the book "Go Away, Big Green Monster!," one child might play the frightened child while another plays the monster or a comforting parent. In so doing the children help each other learn strategies to deal with fears by confronting frightening situations with

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*Garvey, Catherine, *Play* (Harvard University Press, 1977)

**Amazingly, Maria Montessori developed the numerous sensorial and math materials that we use in all of our classrooms to help children master these essential concepts in the early 1900's, long before this stage of child development was scientifically defined by Piaget and others—another example of the prescience and genius of the Montessori approach.



friends or by emulating the adults in their lives who are responsible for their safety.

Q How does play influence cognitive development?

Piaget and Lev Vygotsky are the go-to theorists when it comes to the relationship between play and cognitive development. Piaget asserts that play provides a child with an opportunity to practice skills he/she has already mastered. In contrast, Vygotsky argues that play facilitates the acquisition of new skills and/or knowledge. Through play children develop an understanding of who they are, learn to interact with others, and discover how to make friends. In a nutshell, Piaget says that play reflects thought, while Vygotsky says that it *creates* thought.

I think they are both right. When a child plays “firefighter” and runs to save a “crying baby,” that child is probably practicing what he/she has already experienced. The role-playing helps him/her to better understand human relationships, caring, and cause and effect. When a child puts four triangle blocks together in the block area and says to the teacher: “Look, I’ve made a square!,” that is the child acquiring new knowledge. In both cases, play helps the child build lasting concepts and skills.

Q How does play develop in children?

In the late 1920s, at the Institute of Child Development in Minnesota, theorist Mildred Parten conducted the now famous study of how play develops in children. Parten, like Vygotsky, emphasized the idea that learning to play is learning how to relate to others, and categorized children’s play in stages. The earliest stage



is “solitary” play, in which the infant is totally engrossed in exploring an object or a toy by him/herself. The toddler moves on to “onlooker” play, in which he/she is carefully observing what others are doing. As the child matures, the phenomenon of “parallel” play emerges. In this stage, the child copies what he/she sees other children doing, typically with the same

toy, but doesn’t actively engage with others. Next is “associative” play, in which children first begin relating more to other children than to the toys they are using. And, finally, “cooperative” play emerges, in which play has rules and goals, and children play-act a variety of roles.

Q What is the role of the teacher during a child’s play?

Teachers carefully prepare our classrooms with Montessori materials designed to meet children’s pre-operational developmental needs. They provide constructive and engaging opportunities for play throughout the school day, often joining in to “extend” the activity. This happens through the use of rich vocabulary: “If you put this rectangular block at an angle, and then rest it on the two square blocks at the entrance, you will create a ramp for your castle.” Or, when the children are playing “restaurant,” a teacher might suggest that the waiters write down the orders for the chef, and that the hostess explain the menu to the children who can’t read it. There are endless ways in which teachers can help children get more out of their play.

Most parents new to WSMS eventually adopt a few “Montessori-isms” into their everyday speech. The most common of these is to refer to their child’s interactions with traditional Montessori materials as “work” instead of “play.” As dictionary.com says, work is “productive or operative activity.” I encourage families to begin to think of *everything* that occurs during their child’s school day as work, for in the context of their lifelong education, work is truly what it is.

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