WHAT CHILDREN LEARN AND PRACTICE THROUGH BLOCK PLAY

- spatial relationships – distance, space, size and position
- sorting, classification and patterns
- stability, balance, and symmetry
- measurement — length, width, height, depth, volume and area
- number, equality and inequality
- problem solving
- symbolic/representational thought
- cooperation

(Bedrova & Leong, 2003; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; NCDPI, 2009)

WHAT CHILDREN LEARN AND PRACTICE THROUGH DRAMATIC PLAY

- oral language skills
- literacy skills
- retell, listen to, and sequence stories
- use language for problem-solving and analysis
- use new vocabulary
- self-regulation, delayed gratification
- take turns, share, and cooperate
- negotiate, resolve conflicts, and express feelings
- understand another person’s point of view
- represent objects and ideas symbolically
- practice small (fine) and large (gross) muscle skills
- develop spatial and distance awareness

(Bedrova & Leong, 2003; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Jones & Reynolds, 1992; NCDPI, 2009)

REFERENCES


WEB RESOURCES

Alliance for Childhood — http://www.allianceforchildhood.org/
The National Institute for Play — http://nifplay.org/index.html


The Power of Play in Kindergarten

The familiar picture of the kindergarten classroom – where the room is buzzing with children actively engaged in playful learning – is rapidly becoming an image from the past. Today many kindergarten classrooms reflect an emphasis on a more narrow view of learning. However, the kindergarten year “must emphasize the underlying skills that will make later academic success possible. This should be accomplished not by pushing down the curriculum goals and objectives of first grade, but creating learning opportunities that will address the unique developmental accomplishments that ought to emerge in kindergarten” (Bedrova & Leong, 2006, p. 142).

Decades of research tells us that play is an essential part of children's healthy growth and development. Early childhood experts have long agreed that young children who are provided with rich play-based learning environments excel in all domains of development and learning. Play helps children increase their memory, critical thinking skills, self-regulation, social skills, oral language skills, literacy skills, mathematical and problem-solving skills, and lays the foundation for all academic learning (Gullo, 2006; Copple and Bredekamp, 2009). Play is truly the indispensable work of children.
There is a common misconception that playing is not learning – or is the opposite of learning – and therefore play does not have a place in the kindergarten classroom. This thinking has become more prevalent as the pressures of accountability have forced more academic content into the kindergarten curriculum, transforming kindergarten into what some are calling “The New First Grade” (Tyre, 2008). However, play should not be treated as a break from learning, but instead as the way that children learn best. In fact, play is a young child’s fundamental mode of learning. Teachers who place an emphasis on child-initiated play in their classrooms do not detract from academic learning, but instead provide an optimal learning environment which enables children to develop and learn in all domains and at their own rates (Bodrova & Long, 2003).

Academic goals can be met through play with intentional teacher guidance and support. An effective kindergarten teacher knows how young children learn and develop and creates a learning environment that reflects this knowledge. “A program organized around well-designed centers for interactive play activities helps children develop self-regulation skills, language skills, and mathematics concepts, as well as knowledge in all other discipline areas” (NCDPI, 2009, p. 28). However, the effective teacher does not take a passive role in the play-based kindergarten. Through careful planning and intentional modeling, scaffolding, and use of open-ended questions, kindergarten teachers support academic learning within the context of child-initiated play. A play-based kindergarten provides a developmentally appropriate context for the differentiated teaching and learning of age appropriate academic content.

A generation ago playing outdoors in nature was usually taken for granted; but times have changed. Children today spend less time playing outdoors than any previous generation. Research tells us that children need to spend time outdoors and have contact with nature to grow and develop into healthy human beings. “Nature is important to children’s development in every major way – intellectually, emotionally, socially, spiritually and physically. Play in nature is especially important for developing capacities for creativity, problem-solving, and intellectual development” (Kellert, 2005). Also, spending time outdoors has a positive impact on symptoms of stress, attention-deficit disorder, on self-control and self-discipline (Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan, 2001). In today’s schools, playing and learning in the outdoors is often abandoned for more academic “time-on-task” in the classroom. The outdoor learning environment should be seen as an extension of the classroom where learning occurs across all content areas not as a place to visit if time permits.

WHAT PLAY IN KINDERGARTEN LOOKS LIKE

• There is a balance between child-initiated play and teacher-guided learning activities. The teacher provides large blocks of time for child-initiated play and children are allowed to explore their own interests.

• Curriculum is integrated across subjects and throughout the day and supports all areas of development – physical, emotional, social, cognitive, language and literacy and approaches to learning.

• Children are playing and working with materials and with other children and not sitting for long periods of time doing seat work.

• Children have access to a variety of open-ended materials throughout the day including blocks, art supplies, children’s books, writing materials, dramatic play props, math manipulatives, materials for science and inquiry, equipment for gross motor movement, etc.

• Children are allowed to pursue their own interests while the teacher provides support and guidance to extend learning.

• Children are provided time every day to play outside if weather permits and outdoor play is never given up to add more instructional time.

• Children’s artwork is prominently displayed around the classroom and reflects their individual creativity and interests rather than a pattern supplied by the teacher.

• Teachers intentionally interact with children while they are engaged in child-initiated play to guide their thinking and support learning.

• Large group activities are not the primary method of instruction. Most teaching and learning is play-based, hands-on and occurs in small groups.