Years ago, I entered the field of early childhood education because I could not think of a better, more rewarding career path. What could be more fun than hanging out with little kids all day? What other career was going to let me play games, dance, and watch young minds grow and develop before my eyes? Was there another job where I would be happy to take my work home with me, recounting the day’s activities for my family and etching them into memory? It was the perfect choice.

These days, I feel that the field of early childhood education can be uptight. There are a lot of rules and many new responsibilities, and there is certainly not enough time in any given day to kick back and have fun. Right?

Somewhere between the creation of Developmentally Appropriate Practice by the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act, some practitioners and administrators got the notion that all fun has to stop and seriousness must begin. Maybe this increasing academic rigor in early childhood education is making us forget to enjoy it. Maybe a return to the fun of early childhood, making sure that all learning is fun for both students and teachers, would make the world a better place.

But where do we, as early childhood educators, start?

A good place to look is the microcosm of a pre-kindergarten classroom, and specifically, one in which the teacher believes in the simple benefits of fun. Twenty children look forward to coming to school each and every day simply because their class is fun. Learning is fun. They get to play. They get to talk and laugh. They learn and they don’t even realize it. This teacher doesn’t overemphasize the academic skills that will be tested later. She doesn’t force the drills and memorization that are often overvalued in education.

And because of all this, she doesn’t have major behavior problems. Her students do not have the truancy rate that the school, the district, or even the state has. The children come to school every day, acting in a manner that would impress even the toughest of critics, and they are learning. What could be more remarkable than that?

Fun is good for children

Over the years, studies have consistently found that play is important to the development and well-being of children (Ortlieb 2010). Play, when un-scripted and child-led, is fun for children. Kids enjoy off-the-cuff time where they can be imaginative and just have fun.

Play, and fun, is a time when students can be fully engaged, physically active, and participating in concept development (Ortlieb 2010; Bekker, Sturm, and Eggen 2010). We all know being active is part of...
being healthy. We know that fun, for children, is a basic human need that can affect learning (Jarrett and Burnley 2010). As educators, we remember that kids need to create their own games and have fun to stimulate positive social interactions and socialization (Diamant-Cohen, Prendergast, Estrovitz, Banks, and Van der Veen 2012.)

**Fun is also good for teachers**

Sometimes it’s easier for a teacher to allow her class to be fun than it is for her to take part in the fun, too. Big mistake! The importance and influence of fun goes beyond the age levels of early childhood education (Ortlieb 2010) and into the workplace.

Fun “is the part of the job that you don’t have to do, but doing it may be the best part of the job” (Glasser 1986). A fun work environment attracts and retains employees (Chan 2010). When work is fun, there are positive influences on employee well-being, including increased enthusiasm, job satisfaction, creativity, and communication (Lancaster 1999.) What teacher wouldn’t want all these things? And we now know the way to get all these things. Have fun with your students!

**Let’s all have fun**

Teachers can join in the fun and mutually reap the benefits that the children do in lots of ways. First, and foremost, is to forget the idea that a job is work and shouldn’t be fun. Nah…work, especially in early childhood education, ought to be the most fun part of the day. Some of the fun and games listed below might seem intuitive, but how many of them do you actually do on a daily basis?

- When you read stories to children, use the silliest voices you can (depending on the plot line, of course). Give characters different accents, and make the noises suggested by the onomatopoeia (the vocal imitation of a sound, such as buzz).
- After all, don’t babies and kids also have fun making noises and sounds? Take their lead! Act out the storyline. Stomp around the room, make faces, and use your hands to gesture when appropriate. Make story time come to life!
- While you’re at it, play dress up, too. Become the queen with your class of princes and princesses. Serve on the police force in uniform. Don the astronaut helmet and take a ride into outer space. Pretend you’re someone else, anyone else, for just a moment. Let the children dress you up or create a character for you. Don’t worry, after you surrender your throne, after you arrest the bad guy, or the rocket comes back to earth, you can go back to being yourself.
- When children put on aprons or shirts before a messy art project, get one in your size. Get into the paint with them. Dive hands first into that pile of shaving cream mixed with tempera. Squish it through your fingers and smear it across the paper or plastic on the table. Get covered in marker (washable, of course), and don’t be afraid to go home with the rainbow adorning your skin. The mess will wash off, but the memories and fun will stick with you for a long time.

**PLAY IS IMPORTANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN.**

- Go outside with the kids and join in when they start digging in the sand, picking up wet leaves, or touching bugs. Just as children love sensory explorations, you will enjoy being thrown back in time to your younger days. The same principle applies when it starts to sprinkle and rain. Stick your tongue out and taste the fresh droplets. Don’t be worried when the wind really blows through your hair. Your students will admire your devil-may-care attitude, and you will have a good time.
- When you are outside, learn new games or teach some of your old favorites, like hopscotch and four square. Climb on the jungle gym, and take a few swings on the swing set. Cover your eyes and start counting (Don’t worry, the kids will know to run and hide!). Run, just for the sake of running, as fast as you can. You don’t have to be an Olympic sprinter to look fast to a little kid, and your speed will amaze them just the same!
- Back inside, anytime you have a classroom transition, or a time when you play music, let the children see you dancing. Even better, pick out a song that can be your signature song. Then show off your signature moves. Chances are, you will laugh
and so will the kids, but the laughter will fade away as the song plays on and everyone is dancing and having fun.

- Along these same lines, sing with the children. Most of us do not have Grammy-worthy voices, but singing lets children know that we are not above doing what we ask them to do. Plus, think of all the endorphins you can release with a singing or dancing party in class. Fun and physical fitness roll into one easy activity.
- Finally, never underestimate the fun potential of a high five or fist bump. Everyone likes to know when they do something well or correctly. Think of how much more fun it would be to get a high five or a fist bump instead of a typical pat on the back. You become the cool, fun teacher who gives fist bumps, which is a pretty awesome reputation to have.

**Make the world fun again**

Imagine how much more fun life would be in general if we could look into the minds of 3-year-old children and follow their lead. The above activities represent just a small selection of ways to make the classroom fun for both students and teachers.

As adults, practitioners and parents alike, we are constantly pushing our knowledge onto young children. It is naïve for us to think that this should be a one-way relationship. Children have much more to teach us, in their active and often animated day-to-day lives of having fun and playing games, than most anyone thinks possible. The funny thing is, children don’t even know how brilliant they are! So, take their lead and let the fun begin!

**References**


Diamant-Cohen, B.; T. Prendergast; C. Estrovitz; C. Banks; and K. Van der Veen. 2012. We play here! Bringing the power of play into children’s libraries. *Children and Libraries*, April, Vol. 10 (1).


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