
FEATURE

Talking with parents: How play promotes school readiness

“Stevie will start kindergarten next year,” says his mother. “He’s been in your class for several weeks now, and all he does is play. When are you going to teach him anything?”



For teachers of 4-year-olds, it’s not unusual to hear parents’ concerns about the value of play-based activities. Parents know, often from their own experience, how school performance affects future chances for success and happiness in life. They get anxious when they hear news about state-mandated tests, longer school days, graduation rates, America’s math scores compared to other countries, and the inevitable march of technology.

We can understand how parents must feel. They remember their own formal schooling where they learned reading, writing, and numbers and played mostly at recess. “The world has changed,” they say

to themselves. They may limit their children’s play to organized soccer or classes in gymnastics and swimming, for example.

How do we respond to parents’ concerns? As early childhood professionals, we know the value of play in learning. How can we show parents that we are helping prepare children for school and life?

Begin the conversation

Unfortunately, the word *play* has acquired a negative connotation in some circles. Naysayers associate play with idleness and triviality, a waste of time that goes against the serious business of learning. But *play*, as used here, refers to enjoyable activities in which children choose how to interact with materials and satisfy inner motives such as curiosity and self-expression.

Converting parents to your point of view probably won’t happen overnight. Misconceptions are often emotionally entrenched, and parents may filter your response through their own experiences and needs.

A first step may be to remind parents how much children have learned already through play and social interaction. You might say, for example, “Remember when Stevie was a baby and you played peek-a-boo? Or all those times when you read the same story over and over again because it was fun?”

Point out that children are born wanting to learn. No one taught Stevie to talk, walk, or feed himself through direct teaching. He learned naturally by babbling, imitating his parents, reaching out for objects and playing with them, falling down and getting up, and interacting with other children and adults. Certainly Stevie is no longer a baby, but he continues to learn naturally through everyday experiences and engaging activities.

Explain that you and parents have the same goals. You want children to learn and do well in school.



You want children to be happy and healthy now and to love learning for the rest of their lives. You believe the foundation for success is laid in the early years, and you're eager to work with parents to that end.

If parents seem skeptical, ask: "What do you think learning should look like?" Do they envision Stevie sitting at a desk all day memorizing the ABC's and numbers? Do they see teachers using flash cards and giving gold stars to children who give the right answers? How would we feel about ourselves and about learning if preschool looked like that?

Explain that you set up activities with learning objectives in mind. You guide children as they play by listening to their interests, asking questions, offering choices, and suggesting ideas. You support children's learning by encouraging them to stretch to a higher level and providing opportunities to practice new skills.

Quote the research

If parents say they want a more academic approach, point out that "there is little evidence that this approach improves long-term achievement; in fact, it may have the opposite effect, potentially slowing emotional and cognitive development, causing unnecessary stress and perhaps even souring kids' desire to learn" (Kohn 2015).

Refer parents to the report, *Crisis in the Kindergarten: Why Children Need to Play in School*, published by the Alliance for Childhood, a nonprofit partnership of educators and health professionals.

Although focused on kindergarten, the report warns: "Preschool education must not follow the same path that has led kindergartens toward intense academic instruction with little or no time for child-initiated learning. If such practices were effective for five-year-olds, we would have seen better long-term results by now" (Miller and Almon 2009).

Another useful resource is the National Association for the Education of Young Children (www.naeyc.org). As stated in one NAEYC report, play gives children "opportunities to explore the world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. Research shows the links between play and foundational capacities such as memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills and success in school" (NAEYC 2012).

As the report clearly implies, school success does not rest on academic skills alone, a fact affirmed by the American Academy of Pediatrics: "Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges. Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue" (Ginsburg 2007).

Show how play promotes school success

Parents probably already have some familiarity with the learning centers in your room, but they may not fully understand what they are seeing. Consider giving them a personal tour of the learning centers or creating a video or slide show from a typical day to help them connect specific play activities to learning.

The chart below lists common learning centers, typical activities, and examples of the learning they generate.



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

How play promotes school success

Learning center	Typical activities	What children are learning
Art	Kendra rolls play dough into a long snake, Gabe paints an oak leaf purple, Allyson pastes torn paper strips on a paper plate	Self-expression, eye-hand coordination, finger dexterity (pre-writing), creativity, decision making, vocabulary, attention span, aesthetics
Blocks	Three children build a tower and then knock it over, Trevor and Terry play with animal figures in a corral, Rad puts a block to his ear like a telephone, Amir and Amy use blocks of different sizes and shapes to build a house	Cooperation, negotiation, conflict resolution, problem solving, persistence, spatial relationships, imagination, use of symbols, attention span, following directions, math concepts (geometric shapes, fractions, size/height/weight comparisons), science concepts (gravity, balance, levers), related vocabulary, small and big muscle development
Dramatic play	Molly and Eric button and zip their dress-up clothes, Mark and Gisela put a doll to sleep in crib, Tim and Shayla pretend to fly a spaceship; Ana and Geraldo choose a theme for their play and assign other children roles ("Let's play stegosaurus dinosaurs. You be the mommy. I'll be the daddy. Jeremy and Amy, you are the babies who are being chased by velociraptors. We'll rescue you.")	Imagination, language, adult roles, cooperation, symbols, leadership, related vocabulary, fine motor skills, memory, following directions, perspective-taking
Literacy	Michael slowly turns the pages of a book, Alice retells a story with a puppet, Amy writes her name on a card for a sick friend, Kristy draws and writes in her daily journal, Adolfo dictates a story to the teacher about his picture	Pre-reading, print awareness, self-regulation, language, memory, self-advocacy, alphabet, writing, attention span, sequencing ("What happened first?")
Sensory materials/Sand and water	Eugenio pours water into different containers, Marylou creates rivers and a sand dam, Phillip makes mud pies	Quantity, cause and effect, stress reduction, imagination, logic, decision making, self-expression, hand dexterity, experimentation, related vocabulary, compare and contrast, science concepts (heavy, light)
Science and discovery	Antonio picks up screws with magnets and shares his finding with Olivia, Elise examines a split orange seed under a magnifying glass, Leah compares weights of rocks and pecans on a balance scale	Experimentation, cause and effect, connection with nature, measurement, counting, comparison, curiosity, related vocabulary (hypothesis), communication, concentrated interest, categorizing
Math and manipulatives	Three children squirm on a floor outline of a buffalo, Dade and Alfonso play Hi Ho Cherry O, Paulina sorts buttons by size and color	Measurement, size and shape, cooperation, rules, problem solving, critical thinking, emotion control, comparison, color, sequence, parts and whole
Cooking	Sonia and Yuni follow rebus directions and make a small cup of trail mix, A small group of children and a teacher prepare vegetables for soup, Amir's mother shows the children how to prepare a traditional dish, and the children sample it	Following directions, symbols, fractions, measurement, metric system, cooperation, cultural diversity, expand palate (try new flavors and textures)
Outdoor play	Alexa and Georgiana skip on a dirt path, Wade pulls Gary in a wagon, three children stack boards	Physical development, confidence, muscular strength, sharing, imagination, spatial relationships, cooperation, decision making, emotional release, appropriate risk taking

Encourage parents to play at home

At parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences, invite suggestions about how to enhance play for their children. Examples:

- After picking up children, talk with them about their day. “What did you do today?” can turn into a boring routine, so vary the question. “What was the thing you liked best (or least) about today?” “Who did you play with?” “How can we play at home?”
- Limit the time children spend with TV and video games. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no more than two hours a day for preschoolers. Brain research indicates young children learn best through two-way communication (Brown, Shifrin and Hill 2015).
- Provide simple objects for play such as cardboard boxes, balls, and plastic containers. They invite imaginative play. Invite children to make mud pies, build something with blocks, or make collections of things such as acorns and rocks.
- Provide art materials such as paper and crayons, clay or play dough, construction paper, safety scissors and paste, ribbon and yarn, and fabric scraps. Avoid expecting children to copy something made by someone else.
- Play with your children. Toss a ball, ride bikes, or play checkers. Take time to look at the stars, identify shapes in clouds, or play hide-and-seek. Cultivate a playful attitude.

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- If a child complains of boredom, ask: “What do you mean?” A preschooler reared with a TV constantly turned on may not have experience playing and need some ideas. Or the child could be asking for attention. Make a game out of gathering up laundry or preparing dinner. Invite the child to choose a book you can read together before bedtime or an art project that you both can enjoy.

Educate parents about the importance of play

Parents worried that their preschool children are not learning anything in play reflect a trend toward more structured academics in early childhood education. You can respond to parents’ concerns with reassurance that you share the same goals for children’s school success. Parents may need to be reminded of how much their children have already learned through play and how effective the natural learning process continues to be.

CHILDREN ARE BORN WANTING TO LEARN.

For those parents wanting evidence, refer to volumes of research, available online and in print, that document the value of play beyond question.

Describe your program’s play-based curriculum, noting the balance between child-driven and teacher-directed activities. Perhaps most important, demonstrate the specific learning that can occur in activities such as making mud pies and donning dress-up clothes.

Once parents understand the benefits of play, they may be willing to allow more free play at home—and take time for play themselves.

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