

Play Energizes Our Brains

The next time you toss a ball to a toddler, think about this:

- Playful activities are more important to a child's complete development than most of us realize. They empower individuals to become resilient, happy and innovative.
- Play is for everyone. The best social, intellectual and emotional results occur when adults and children play together.
- Motion is a fundamental part of play and brain development, engaging the executive function of the pre-frontal cortex. Play "lights up" the brain more than any other activity.
- Playful activity helps alleviate stress and increases our capacity to resolve problems.
- There is a positive correlation between the length of recess time and academic achievement in school.
- Play is a survival state, just like exploration, sleep and dreams, fear and panic, passion and concern for others.
- The essence of play is exploring what is possible.
- Risk-taking is an inherent part of play. Although adults must set boundaries and practice wise intervention, the benefits of allowing some risk-taking outweigh the risks.

For more, go to <http://nifplay.org/>.



Tips You Can Try

Encourage young children to experience each of these different kinds of play:

- Pretend and imagination – play that comes from within the child.
- Social play – general interaction with others.
- Playful exploration – the chance to search for something different and new.
- Games – including those made up by children or organized by educators.
- Storytelling – creating the narrative of the inner self.
- "Rough and tumble" play and play-fighting – important for both genders as a way to learn friend from foe and to socialize.
- Play with objects and tools – connecting the hand and the brain; tinkerers are better problem-solvers.
- Aesthetic play – including music, art, poetry, drama and story-writing.

This issue of *Ready!* highlights recent research linking play and school readiness, and offers tips on ways to infuse play into experiences at home, in the classroom and elsewhere. We've distilled information from presentations at the Fifth Annual School Readiness Symposium held on April 25, 2009, and featured on pages 4 and 5. Whether or not you attended the symposium, this special edition on play is for you. Here ... catch!

Sandbox Skills Ready Children For Success in Future Workforce

Play is essential to the physical, cognitive, social and emotional wellbeing of children. The desire to enrich children's lives through a playful approach to learning will result in creative thinkers and knowledgeable workers.

- ▶ To meet the needs of the future, workers will need to be creators, pattern recognizers, empathizers and "big picture" thinkers, in addition to having basic math, science and literacy skills.
- ▶ Children need to be able to integrate facts, not just memorize them. A broad understanding makes it easier to see a variety of perspectives.
- ▶ The knowledgeable worker needs to be skilled in these six C's:
 - ▶ Content (reading, writing, math, social studies, science and the arts).
 - ▶ Critical thinking.
 - ▶ Collaboration across international boundaries (requiring a facility with languages, geography and culture).
 - ▶ Communication and sensitivity to diverse perspectives.
 - ▶ Creation and innovation, including a willingness to

continually try and fail in order to achieve success.

- ▶ Constant information renewal.
- ▶ Research suggests that the six C's can be learned in "high quality" play. Based on this research, China and other countries are incorporating play into formal learning. In "high quality" play, children:
 - ▶ Call the shots, although teachers have learning goals in mind when guiding children's play.
 - ▶ Engage in active learning.
 - ▶ Build relationships with parents, other children, teachers and caregivers.



Tips You Can Try

- ▶ Use songs like the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann" to teach phonics to children.
 - ▶ Read books with children, rather than leaving children alone to press the buttons of an electronic book. Reading together helps children
- make ongoing connections to other things in their lives. Reading also results in more conversation with children, which helps to build children's social, emotional and literacy skills.

Play Around!

Play is unpredictable and learning opportunities are everywhere. Teachers can help parents recognize and use these opportunities by:

- ▶ Sending home photos of children playing outside and on field trips as a way to encourage children and parents to talk about playtime that day.
- ▶ Giving parents the tools to replicate what children are doing in the classroom, such as creating a drum out of an ice cream container.
- ▶ Using specific language to describe interaction with children each day (e.g., "We talked about...") and listing topics to share with parents at home.

Tips You Can Try

Take advantage of everyday activities to help children with reading, math and science, as well as with social, artistic and physical development.

- ▶ Supermarket: Read product containers, talk about prices and do a price comparison, put more/less into one bag than another, sort different vegetables.
- ▶ Doctor's office: Describe instruments the doctor uses, describe symptoms, look at posters of body parts, trace and outline a child's body on the examining table paper.
- ▶ Playground: Encourage children to use chalk to draw pictures of outside activities—including running and playing, climbing, riding bikes and exploring nature—that they can then describe to you.
- ▶ Car: Look at car colors and license plates, count the number of cars, look at shapes of signs, move hands and fingers, imitate car sounds, sing car songs, draw each other, keep an eye on the sun and the moon and describe the weather.

Introduce Science to Infants? Naturally!

Infant education specialists advise us to include science in infant/toddler programs. While safety in an infant's environment is paramount, parents and educators should remember that:

- ▶ Babies are born curious and ready to learn.
- ▶ It is important to help infants and toddlers experience joy through play and investigation.
- ▶ Children learn best through hands-on experiences.
- ▶ Children construct knowledge based on what they already know.

- ▶ Activities and opportunities that enable children to use all five senses help them to learn best.



Tips You Can Try

- ▶ Place a fish tank at floor level. Place babies on their tummies. Pour water and talk about how the water sounds.
- ▶ Bring a netting-covered container of small animals into the room. Place the container where the babies can see and hear what is inside. Talk about the animals.
- ▶ Mix ingredients and watch how they change. Cooking is chemistry.
- ▶ Bring ramps into the room and let children roll objects up and down the ramps. Bring in a tire that children can climb around.
- ▶ Take children outside to learn about animals in their natural habitats.
- ▶ Cut up fruits and veggies, like lemons, limes, yams, avocados and star fruit. Let children touch, taste and look at each piece.
- ▶ Create shadows using flashlights.
- ▶ Read books with pictures or photographs of real objects that children might see every day.

Keep Playing in Elementary School

Make room for playful learning in elementary classrooms. For children of all ages, play:

- ▶ Serves as a vehicle for a child's development.
- ▶ Helps children to make sense of the world.
- ▶ Allows expression of thoughts and feelings.
- ▶ Fosters flexibility and adaptiveness.
- ▶ Develops social and cultural understanding.
- ▶ Builds language, literacy, numeracy and other skills.

Recess is a vital part of the school day.

- ▶ Recess is often the only time that children interact with peers on their own terms.
- ▶ Recess play can help children learn more effectively by combining learning and processing of information with movement.



Mixing the Arts, Imagination and Play

Help children become active learners through self-initiated play, including drama, dance, music and storytelling.

Tips You Can Try

- ▶ During songs and dances, model ways that children can match the rhythm, tempo and beat.
- ▶ Use finger snapping, knee tapping, tip-toeing, clapping or other movements to help children remember sequence.
- ▶ Provide different movements for each character in a song or for each part of a story.
- ▶ Play music while encouraging the children to imagine themselves as butterflies in a garden.
- ▶ Teach conservation by having children act out a routine of getting out of bed, turning on the lights, brushing their teeth (without the water running), rinsing their mouths, taking a quick shower, drying off, and turning off the lights.

Tips You Can Try

- ▶ Invent games based on current curriculum, thus allowing children to practice and consolidate what they have been learning.
- ▶ Incorporate activities into the teaching of content area standards. For example, model the water cycle using sand, pebbles, water and natural objects.



These photos were taken at the Fifth Annual School Readiness Symposium, held at the Fairfax County Government Center in Fairfax, Virginia, on April 25, 2009. More than 325 early childhood educators gathered to hear from local and national experts on the importance of learning through play. Participants came from family child care, child care center, preschool and elementary school programs throughout the area. Sponsored by Fairfax Futures, Fairfax County Public Schools and Fairfax County's Office for Children, the symposium provided an opportunity to share best practices, meet other educators and learn new strategies for incorporating "playful learning" into the early childhood curriculum. Fairfax Futures also recognized three early childhood educators for their achievements. For more on the awards, turn to page 4.

Pictured:

1. Playful participants
2. Educator award recipients (left to right) Joy Hanbury, Debbie Brown and Shemsa Minni, with Vera Steiner Blore, executive director, Fairfax Futures
3. Anne-Marie Twohie, acting director, Fairfax County's Office for Children
4. Roberta Golinkoff, H. Rodney Sharp Chair of Education, University of Delaware
5. Jolie McHenry, Child Play Center, Harrisburg, PA
6. Richard Moniuszko, deputy superintendent, Fairfax County Public Schools
7. Joan Isenberg, George Mason University, Fairfax, VA
8. Stuart Brown, founder, National Institute of Play
9. Sylvia Zwi, Oyster-Adams Bilingual School, Washington, DC
10. Kathy Buerk, Child Play Center, Harrisburg, PA

Special Edition on Play

Highlights from the 2009 School Readiness Symposium

Early childhood educators are learning that play for young children is not the “icing on the cake”—it *is* the cake. This edition of *Ready!* brings you the latest information on the value of play in your classroom or early education program.

Myth

Play is different from learning.
Play is a waste of valuable time.
Play takes away time from teaching math, science and literacy skills.
Play should happen at home, not in school.

Fact

Play equals learning.
Play helps prepare children for school.
Playful activities can be powerful tools for increasing these skills.
Play is important wherever children are, helping them to alleviate stress and develop greater independence, creativity and critical thinking skills.



Fairfax Futures
12011 Government Center Pkwy
Suite 920
Fairfax, Virginia 22035

PRESORT
NONPROFIT
BULK RATE
U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

FAIRFAX, VA
PERMIT NO. 6589



Ready! The Smart Resource for Fairfax County's Early Childhood Educators