Director’s Corner: Play as a Priority

“Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children, play is serious learning. Play really is the work of childhood.”

Fred Rogers

Young children’s play has many benefits for all aspects of development. At the Children’s School, educators support children’s play as a significant means to engage them in effective learning in all six of our goal domains.

**Self-Esteem & Independence:** Play contexts invite children to express their own ideas and understanding while they explore and master new materials. Children thrive when they have a choice of meaningful activities and open-ended options for using a variety of materials. Such choices invite children to take initiative in their own learning and foster intrinsic motivation – the desire to work on a task primarily because it is satisfying.

**Interaction & Cooperation:** Children play in diverse ways. They engage in “solitary play” apart from others or in “parallel play” near another child who is using the same materials but engrossed in his own activity. Interaction begins with “associative play”, which involves some conversation, sharing of materials, and similar actions but no coordination of goals. True “cooperative play” emerges as children begin to develop shared goals, such as a coordinated scenario in the dramatic play area, a joint building endeavor in the block area, or a team game on the playground. The more children play together, the better they understand other children’s points of view, demonstrate empathy and caring, and develop conflict resolution skills.

**Communication:** As children interact during play, they learn to use language in new ways to describe their play, negotiate sharing, plan joint goals, etc. Their vocabulary increases as they learn words for new objects and actions in our changing theme-related centers (e.g., the vehicle “Fixit Shop” in the 3’s or “Department of Motor Vehicles–DMV” in the 4’s during the upcoming Transportation unit).

**Discovery & Exploration:** Children’s indoor and outdoor play provides many opportunities for developing and testing theories about how things work in the world. Sand, water, light, and block play enhance children’s understanding of physical realities of everyday materials. Changing materials in the centers as new themes are introduced provides frequent catalysts for new experiments.

**Physical Capabilities / Health & Safety:** During play, children’s whole bodies are engaged in learning, which builds both small and large motor skills naturally. Children learn what is safe and risky as they stretch their physical prowess and build coordination and stamina.

**Artistic Expression & Appreciation:** Dramatic play, art and writing center explorations, and other music and movement opportunities offer children a variety of media for expressing their ideas and learning to appreciate others’. These experiences build skills in each of the other domains as well, thus expanding children’s learning via play.

Parents can support play in many of the same ways that we do at school, by providing space, opportunities, and materials, as well as arranging “play dates” with peers and visiting public play areas where children can interact with groups of different age children. Space where children can play without fear of damaging furniture or injuring themselves, time to choose and become engaged in their own play activities, and simple, interesting materials are key ingredients. Feel free to come observe play at the Children’s School and to share your ideas with us.
Director’s Corner: Outdoor Play

“It is a happy talent to know how to play.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson
“Play is the highest form of research.” – Albert Einstein

Free play outdoors is one of the most developmentally rich opportunities we can offer our children. Pittsburgh’s diverse parks and playgrounds afford families a myriad of venues for exploring together and enjoying each other. At the same time, outdoor free play provides children with varied challenges to foster growth in all developmental domains. For example, outdoor play helps children gain confidence in their skills and fosters initiative (Self-esteem & Independence), encourages peers to support each other’s ideas and negotiate plans (Interaction & Cooperation), provides rich topics of conversation and contexts for recording nature observations (Communication), provokes inquiry with diverse opportunities to compare, sort, and quantify (Discovery & Exploration), builds skills for controlled movement and use of tools while managing risks (Physical Capabilities / Health & Safety), and inspires children to both perceive and create beauty (Artistic Expression & Appreciation).

During November, the preschoolers will be learning about ways to have a “Healthy Mind & Body”. They’ll explore strategies for giving their minds and bodies good nutrition, exercise and rest. In addition to the obvious benefits of outdoor experiences for physical exercise, time outdoors also nourishes our minds, stimulates our senses, gives our attention and observation skills a workout, calms our nerves, and focuses our thinking, all in ways that relax both our minds and bodies. The kindergartners will be studying “Native Americans”, with an emphasis on the cultural values that emphasize reverence, respect, and humility in our relationship with nature, as well as the practices that encourage humans to live within and as a part of nature.

The National Center for Physical Development and Outdoor play cites research by Fjortoft (2004) and Burdette and Whitaker (2005) indicating that children who play outdoors regularly “become fitter and leaner, develop stronger immune systems, have lower stress levels, have more active imaginations, play more creatively, and have greater respect for themselves and others”. At the Children’s School, we have enhanced our outdoor classroom to include a wide range of interesting options for children’s play, and we are encouraging our classes to spend more time outside. We are observing increasing creativity in children’s play in our “mud kitchen” and in the complexity of the imaginative games that involve running and climbing, both when we provide props, such as fabric or costume wings, and when children use what nature provides, such as rocks, acorns, leaves, etc.

Now that the weather is turning colder, families may hesitate to venture outside. But the cold is not a good reason for healthy individuals to stay indoors. At the Children’s School, we go outside every day – except in heavy rain and unusually cold temperatures. Children simply need to have the appropriate outer garments – hats, scarves, mittens, boots, etc. In “Last Child in the Woods”, Richard Louv suggests that families ‘adopt’ a tree in your yard or nearby and then visit it regularly. Take pictures of it as it is losing leaves, when it has no leaves, when it has snow on it, and then as it buds in the spring. Rake the leaves and jump in them. Collect the leaves and do an art activity. Do a tree rubbing with crayons and paper. Compare and contrast the tree with others nearby to see which is taller, thinner, darker, smoother, etc. Encourage your child to creatively consider how else you can explore your adopted tree. We’d love to hear about and see photos of your experiences!
Director’s Corner: Dramatic Play

“Almost all creativity involves purposeful play.” – Abraham Maslow
“Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning.” – Fred Rogers

In Nurturing Creativity: An Essential Mindset for Young Children’s Learning (Isbell & Yoshizawa, 2016), the authors highlight the 4C’s of 21st Century Learning as Creativity, Communication, Collaboration, and Critical Thinking. These are exactly the skills developed by the rich play experiences I’ve been discussing in this fall’s Director’s Corner series.

Children’s pretend play engages their imaginations as they assume roles of other people and diverse creatures. They invent make-believe actions with imaginary props as they spin scenarios while playing house, school, zoo, restaurant, etc. Such dramatic play involves communication on two levels, both speaking in character while pretending and temporarily stepping out of character to negotiate the setting and plot. For example, this morning’s 3-year-olds were playing with rubber animals and foam blocks. In that context, I heard Mrs. Tomer suggest, “Let’s make houses for the animals” (in her normal tone of voice) and then later when the play developed into a zoo’s animal hospital, “Show me which paw is hurting” (in her most sympathetic veterinarian voice). As children progress to deeper collaboration in their play, they learn to build on each other’s ideas to create intricate story lines but also have to negotiate and compromise when peers have differing ideas. Together, they learn to creatively utilize open-ended materials like blocks, playdough, fabric, and boxes to become whatever their fantasy requires, and they practice solving problems that arise within the scenarios they invent. When trusted adults provide both time and space for dramatic play, as well as both scaffolding to foster richer pretend play (as Mrs. Tomer did in the situation above), children begin to demonstrate increasing persistence such that the play episodes can last for extended periods. According to Isbell and Yoshizawa, these “play experiences develop skills they need now and help prepare them to be creative thinkers, team leaders, and innovators in the future” (p. 97).

During December, the preschoolers will be exploring Building, which naturally leads to dramatic play related to both the construction process and the use of the final structures. For example, after reading about architects and construction workers, educators will provide opportunities for children to engage in pretend play within the “dramatic play center”, as well as in the block areas, at the playdough tables, etc. At the same time, our kindergartners will be studying the author A.A. Milne, who is most famous for the Winnie-the-Pooh stories. This unit will likely lead children to re-enact the stories with themselves as characters or using stuffed animals, and educators will encourage them to dramatize their own ideas for adventures in the “hundred acre wood” (i.e., the Children’s School playground and Schenley Park).

For families interested in promoting dramatic play, I have included practical tips in the “Bringing Theatre Home” article in this newsletter. I also highly recommend the enclosed piece on Choosing Playthings from the Fred Rogers Company. This insightful article explains that common preschool play themes emerge from the developmental tasks challenging children at the moment, answers common parenting questions about weapon play and electronic games, and encourages parents to take a proactive role in providing open-ended toys and time for imaginative and creative play. Perhaps reading it will help us all consider the gifts we offer our young children during the upcoming holiday and vacation season, particularly the gifts of our own time and attention. Enjoy!
Director’s Corner: Why Theatre?

As you’ve undoubtedly noticed from Fall 2016 communications, we’ve been experimenting with theatre arts this year and encouraging families to do the same. This emphasis is preparing for our Whole School Theatre Arts Unit in February, which will culminate in our Family Theatre Arts Festival on Thursday, March 9th from 4:30-6:30pm. We chose this theme because people of all ages, cultures, and ability levels can enjoy participating in or watching creative dramatics.

During early childhood, theatre arts experiences can promote growth in all six of our developmental domains. Of course, the unit fits best with our emphasis on Artistic Expression and Appreciation. The children can experiment with different roles, create and enact stories, learn to use their movements, voice, and props to represent aspects of the setting and story, etc. In addition, theatre arts production can help children develop the following aspects of our other categories of objectives: Self-Esteem & Independence: self-description & sharing personal stories, pride in accomplishments, expressing & reacting to emotions, self-care skills, etc. Interaction & Cooperation: taking turns, following directions, understanding others’ perspectives, being a leader and a follower, negotiating conflicts, respecting differences, etc. Communication: listening skills, speaking to a group, reading signs & symbols, using pictures and print to convey a message, using body language to help communication, etc. Discovery & Exploration: visual perception, spatial skills, planning skills, measurement, scientific concepts and process involved in technology, problem solving, etc. Physical Capabilities: fine motor skills involved in using technology tools, eye-hand coordination, gross motor movement, body awareness and coordination with others, etc.

The Children’s School’s individualized approach to helping all children progress in all domains will enable us to tailor the specific theatre arts projects to each one, including those with special needs and English as a second language.

As a NAEYC Accredited Program, we commit to providing young children with diverse topic area learning and vocabulary development opportunities (2.D.04). While a Theatre Arts exploration most naturally fits within NAEYC’s “Appreciation of the Arts” category (2.J.01) and includes “Arts Terminology” (2.J.04), the kindergartner’s recent dramatic play about Native Americans clearly supported their learning in “Social Studies” and “History” (2.L.11). Similarly, the Green Room friends’ interactions with architects and subsequent play in their “architect studio” enriched both their “Social Studies” (2.L.11) and “Skills for Artistic Expression (2.J.05). Dramas involving this month’s Animals in Winter and Water themes will of course build “Life Science” concepts (2.G.02a), while scenery and sound effects design could enhance both “Earth Science” and “Physical Science” concepts (2.G.02b and c respectively), as well as “Scientific Terminology” (2.G.08). Preschoolers will be able to apply concepts of structures and stability from the Building unit when constructing the actual sets.

So, both in terms of general skill development across all domains and conceptual knowledge in a range of topic areas, Theatre Arts has it all. Besides, creative drama is FUN! What a wonderful way to enliven the cold winter months. We hope you’ll join the process so that we can together learn creatively and constructively in 2017.
Director’s Corner: Parents-as-Directors

Last Father’s Day, Dave Sanders, from Parentmap.com, wrote, “Parenting, for me, is one of the few things I can think of that can be placed in the front half of an analogy, and you can fill in the blank with just about anything.

  Being a parent is like ___________.


For the next few months, I will use diverse roles from the Theatre Arts to “fill in the blank” in Sanders’ analogy. In our preparation for the whole school unit, we have begun investigating the roles of many different professionals involved in dramatic productions, from the director, to the playwright, to the set, costume, and lighting designers, to the stage manager, etc. As in the theatre, collaboration is the key to parenting, and we value the contributions of our partners, extended families, educators, medical professionals, etc. At the same time, it behooves each parent to consider adopting a variety of roles to best fit the unique situations, developmental stages, and temperaments of his or her children.

Let’s consider first the role of “Director”, one with which – at least in the school context – I am very familiar. How is being a parent like being a director? According to the American Association of Community Theatre (https://www.aact.org/director), “it is the director who sets the vision for the production for everyone involved”. The director’s vision impacts choices of script interpretation, casting, sets, costumes, lighting, props, music, and so on, and the synergy between all these elements is key to creating a production that is a unified whole. Similarly, the complex interplay of family life and child-rearing works best if common goals and priorities help frame the decisions to be made about the day to day details of life at home, at school, and in the community. There are so many options for activities, media, purchases, etc., that one important parenting role is to wisely choose based on both quality and quantity. My sense is that the best Parents-as-Directors know when to say “enough” so that everyone in the family has both time and space for quality engagement and constructive interactions in pursuit of the family goals.

Directors also have the responsibility of helping each of the production team members to both be and contribute his or her best to the overall creative process. So it is with parenting, regardless of the number of parents and children in the family. Effective directors and parents start with understanding themselves and how to nurture their own growth while they are looking for ways to build on the strengths of everyone involved to help them stretch to their full potential. In concrete terms, Parents-as-Directors listen to each family member and observe what engages, energizes, and enlivens them so as to maximize those conditions and minimize less effective ones. Parents may be surprised at how interested and innovative children can be when offered important roles as helpers in the family and as participants in problem solving and planning. At the same time, all directors have the ultimate responsibility for the success of any production, and there are clearly some decisions that are the director’s alone. That said, in my role as director, I value the input of my administrative team and other lab school directors when it feels pretty lonely at the top, so I encourage parents to seek others with common parenting goals for support throughout the production process. I’d be honored to consult with you if you would ever find that helpful.
Director’s Corner: Parents-as-Set Designers

Last month, I claimed that being a parent is like being a theatre’s director, in terms of defining the vision for the entire production with the aim of synergy between all of the diverse elements of family life and child-rearing. This month, I consider the role of “Set Designer”. According to the American Association of Community Theatre (https://www.aact.org/set-designer), “The set designer’s job is to design the physical surroundings in which the action will take place,” including the scenery, furniture, and stage properties (or props). For children’s development, the primary setting is the home, which is further set within a community that includes secondary settings of the neighborhood, school, museums, worship sites, parks, etc. Since most readers of this article chose Pittsburgh’s family-friendly environs for our neighborhood and the Children’s School’s developmentally appropriate environment for our children’s early learning, I will focus the rest of my reflections on Parents-as-Set Designers in the home.

The primary goal of the theatre’s set designers, in collaboration with the costume, lighting, and sound designers, is to create a unified look and feel for the production that aligns with the director’s vision. Parents’ efforts to design the atmosphere of the home sets the overall mood for the family and tone for their interactions. Consider your priorities for the look and feel of home. Do you want a “Goodnight Moon” type of set, or do you have a different image in mind? Think about what will make family members and guests feel most welcome, secure, comfortable, etc. At school, we aim for color schemes that are naturally calming and décor that respectfully displays children’s images and work.

Set designers also envision “creative possibilities for movement” of the actors throughout the space so that they can interact most effectively to bring their stories to life. For parents, that means balancing safety elements with opportunities for age-appropriate risk taking, both indoors and outdoors. We organize furniture and materials so children have the freedom of independent and innovative action, but we also recognize the limits of their self-regulation (e.g., so we anchor tall furniture, protect outlets, etc.). Set designers also consider varied groupings of the actors, so that the space is conducive to scenes with single actors, pairs, small groups, or the entire company. Similarly, homes can be arranged so that there are cozy places for individuals to rest, work, and play alone, as well as spaces for small groups to converse or the whole family to share a meal, a game, etc. Having multiple options for group size is especially important for managing the differing preferences and needs of the introverts and extroverts in the family.

Finally, the theatre’s set may also need to be designed so the backstage areas used by the actors and stage crew are kept out of sight from the audience. Props are on stage only when they are needed. In the same way, Parents-as-Set Designers can rotate books, toys, games, etc. to limit children’s choices to a manageable number and to highlight forgotten options in ways that might re-ignite interest. Children also benefit from learning to help tidy the living spaces so that everyone can safely maneuver without tripping. All of this set design work can support the director’s vision so that the family home is a place of consistent encouragement and nurture for each child and for the family as a whole. Likewise, we aim for a school environment where your whole family feels welcome!
**Director’s Corner: Parents-as-Playwrights**

This spring, I have compared parenting to theatre directing and set design, claiming that parents define the vision for their children’s developmental outcomes and design the atmosphere of their home to set the overall mood for the family and tone for their interactions. This month, I consider the role of “Playwright”. **How is being a parent like being a playwright?** According to the American Association of Community Theatre ([https://www.aact.org/playwright](https://www.aact.org/playwright)), “Playwrights create scripts … [they] tell stories through the words and actions of characters”. Similarly, based on the stories of their own childhoods, parents craft the narrative of the family’s life together, which will then become the initial chapters for each child’s life story.

The AACT describes a playwright’s “toolkit” as including “a vivid imagination, a gripping story to tell, insight into what makes people tick, etc. These same tools are essential for parents because we rarely get to choose all of the characters, plot elements, and settings that may be central to the final production. Extroverted parents who have chosen a lifestyle with highly public elements may bear an introverted child and have to creatively construct a revised narrative so that the child can blossom. The planned family vacation to visit the great grandparents may have a twist in the plot when one of them lands in the hospital, which may then require amending the planned setting, activities, etc.

Such imagination and insight are essential to Parents-as-Playwrights, because the family’s story is the heart of the matter, the core messages of who we are in this world, as a unique and cohesive family composed of exceptional individuals. Just as a play cannot become a blockbuster by repeating what others have done or blindly following convention, families willing to write their own original narratives are most likely to construct family scripts with language, routines, expectations, and rules that best fit parents and children alike.

As mentioned in my article on the recent N4C Conference, Jason Kotecki, artist, motivational speaker, and father of three children ranging in age from 3 to 8, cautioned us to beware of following rules that don’t actually exist. Maybe some of these will resonate with you.

- “Thou shalt act thine age.”
- “Thou shalt color inside the lines.”
- “Thou shalt not jump in puddles.”
- “Thou shalt always be careful.”
- “Thou shalt not make a mess.”
- “Thine offspring shalt be in a million extracurricular activities.”

Recently, I heard myself asking my granddaughter whether she wanted one ponytail on top or two pigtails. “I want seven pigtails,” she said with joy. After just a moment’s panicked hesitation, I said, “Why not? Let’s see how many we can do before it’s time to leave for the zoo.” We can all enrich our family scripts when we share in what playwrights call “collective creation” with the actors.

Just like directors striving to craft a sensational production and set designers seeking “creative possibilities for movement”, playwrights can most effectively tell a compelling story by imaginatively and artistically weaving elements to bring their stories to life in the theatre. Each day on the family stage, there is a story in the making, with a plot that twists and turns through life’s ups and downs. We look forward to hearing your story and supporting your playwriting along the way.
Director’s Corner: Parents-as-Stage Managers

In recent months, I have suggested that parents have a multi-faceted role in the theatre of family life. Like directors, they define the developmental vision; like set designers, they create the home atmosphere as the stage for family interactions; like playwrights, they craft the domestic story for their children’s foundational years. This month, I consider the role of “Stage Manager”. How is being a parent like being a stage manager? According to the American Association of Community Theatre (https://www.aact.org/stage-manager), a stage manager’s roles include documenting “decisions about blocking and notes for the actors, keeping track of logistical and scheduling details and communicating what goes on in rehearsals to the rest of the team”.

You’ve probably heard that it takes a village to raise a child, but proponents of this African proverb rarely discuss the importance of communication and coordination among partners within the community throughout the developmental journey. In the theatre, the stage manager is responsible for these essential elements, including “scheduling and running rehearsals, communicating the director's wishes to designers and crafts people, coordinating the work of the stage crew, calling cues and possibly actors' entrances during performance”, etc. Regarding communication, parents need to share their vision of a child’s development with the community partners, such as educators, medical professionals, caregivers, and coaches so that together they can support the child’s growth in a consistent manner. For example, parents of bilingual children may want to stress different languages in different settings or encourage the children to utilize both languages in all settings, depending on the conversation partners. As a parent of an only child, I sought to involve my daughter in child care, church, and other community settings where she could interact with the same cohort of children varying in age to develop deep relationships with them, similar to the interactions that children with siblings would develop naturally at home.

The most important element of coordination involves scheduling the rehearsals, which in the family context is, simply, living. Parents-as-Stage Managers need to be good at multi-tasking and problem solving so they can coordinate a “smooth and efficient plan” for the timing of the myriad set changes, props, cues, etc. that happen in a given day or week. They need diverse resources, such as snacks, activities, band-aids, and duct tape, so they are ready for whatever challenges arise. Moreover, stage managers need an attitude of calm, both within themselves and to influence those around them when chaos erupts. A sense of humor and a song go a long way when facing unexpected delays, detours, etc.

As you approach the transition from the school year to the summer, remember that the family’s story is the heart of the matter on the child’s journey toward maturity. When planning your summer activities and schedule, prioritize the possibilities to select those that best fit your Parent-as-Director vision, set the stage with elements that fit the children’s interests and ability levels so they are challenged to grow, and manage the script and schedule aiming for consistency and clear communication. As events unfold and the best laid plans must change, use your stage-manager presence to help everyone navigate the circumstances with a sense of calm and good humor. Then reflect on each day’s stories so you can weave the memories into a family narrative you’ll want to share for years to come. Warm regards and best wishes for a summer that’s a smashing success!