

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 is really 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.