Director’s Corner: Reviving Nature Play

Throughout this school year, the lives of “Animals in the Wild” have been my inspiration for this column. With so much to celebrate this spring – our 50th anniversary, our NAEYC accreditation and PA private school license renewals, our lab school collaborations around the world, our kindergarten graduation, and a fabulous school year overall – I began to wonder whether animals celebrate in the wild. Of course, culture ascribes meaning to the milestones humans celebrate, and diverse cultures creatively plan unique ways for people to have fun together. Considering opportunities for having fun is where animals can inspire us to launch our summer celebrations by reviving nature play.

Animals love to play. Crows will slide on their backs on a steep snowy slope, then fly to the top to slide down again; bison will repeatedly sprint onto a frozen lake, then bellow gleefully as they skid across the ice. Brown bear cubs who play the most, Alaskan scientists have found, live the longest. Why is play behavior so prevalent in the animal kingdom? Through play, animals explore their world and discover all its possibilities. In higher animals, play stimulates the brain, enhances cognitive function and adaptability, and strengthens social bonds. Beyond these biological and social explanations, scientists are starting to believe that play is a means by which animals can express their joy of life. (From Deep Nature Play, by Joseph Bharat Cornell, 2018)

Early childhood educators advocate strongly for increasing children’s nature play opportunities, for all of the reasons mentioned in Cornell’s description of animal play’s prevalence. Furthermore, we see benefit of encouraging more open-ended play with simpler materials for children’s creative and critical thinking, as well as their attention, persistence, and resilience, all of which are evident in the ways that dogs fully engage in water play or pigs in mud, or that polar bears relish the unusual springtime sensations, chimps care for their “stick babies”, and river otters play with river stones.

In a way, engaging children in nature play is both easy and inexpensive because intriguing materials like water, dirt, plants, sticks, rocks, etc. are abundantly available across the seasons. At the same time, educators and parents may need to adjust their tolerance for risk-taking, mess-making, and lollygagging. Summer is a perfect time for taking a slower pace and reflecting on our priorities for children’s development into adults who are healthy in both mind and body.

A quote often attributed to Einstein is that, “Play is the highest form of research.” Closely observing children’s play often reveals that they are indeed creatively and systematically seeking to understand the world through their “hands on” and “minds on” interactions, particularly when supported by adults willing to listen, acknowledge, and encourage their endeavors. May the animal kingdom inspire your summer to be wildly joyful with nature play that invigorates children and adults alike.