The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

When thinking about learning, what comes to mind? Do images of structured schedules, multiple worksheets, and silent students listening while a teacher lectures at the front of the room appear? If so, how much learning is actually happening in this sort of situation?

What comes to mind when thinking about play? If images of leisure, laughter, and interaction with others emerge, then you are in good company. Play can be a powerful and positive experience for many people. Because of this, play is a vital aspect to any successful early childhood education program. Play offers many benefits to all children ages zero to eight. Play is a developmentally appropriate activity that promotes gains in the five developmental areas of social-emotional, sensory, physical, language, and cognitive development. However, despite all of the benefits and gains from play, there are many barriers that prevent play in children's everyday lives.

With all of this in mind, can any learning occur through play? If so, how does play factor into the learning equation?

The Many Benefits of Play

Before discussing the endless benefits associated with play, a general definition of play must be reached. What exactly is play? Friedrich Froebel, the father of kindergarten, offered the first definition of play over 118 years ago by stating, "Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul" (Sluss, 2005, p. 6). While this quote does provide the reader with beautiful imagery, it does very little to actually define what play is. In fact, the question of what play is exactly has been troubling minds for awhile. It has come to be believed that the notion of play cannot be limited to one universal definition. Play can be different for different people. In other words, the definition of play is to be decided by the people engaged in it.

Therefore, instead of defining play using one specific definition, it can be defined using common characteristics. Sluss (2005) offers six distinct characteristics of all children's play:

1.) Play is voluntary. Children choose to play because it is internally motivating.

2.) Play requires active involvement.

3.) Play is symbolic. In order for an activity to be play, it must be non-literal and carried out as if it were real.

4.) Play is free of external rules. The boundaries and rules of play are set by the children engaged in the activity.

5.) Play focuses on action rather than outcomes. In other words, the process of playing is more important than any products that result from play.

6.) Play is pleasurable. Children involved in play experience positive feelings that result from the ability to control what they choose to do.

While it is important to understand the characteristics of play, it is also important to know the different types of play. Play can take on many forms depending upon the age and maturity level of the children involved. Sluss (2005) illustrates five different stages of social play starting with onlooker behavior and progressing to cooperative play. The following stages usually flow in a developmental timeline. However, children can and often do revert back to previous play stages.

Onlooker behavior is the first play stage. This takes place when a child watches others play. Actually, as identified in the characteristics of play, onlooker behavior is not a true form of play since the child is not actively engaged in play. Instead, onlooker behavior is a form of pre-play. It allows the child to become comfortable with what play looks like and allows him or her to join in when they feel ready.

The next stage of play is solitary play. This occurs when a child plays independently or alone. In solitary play, the child might be near others who are playing together, but he or she is not aware of the other's play. The child in solitary play is only focused on what he or she is doing. Solitary play is most commonly observed during the first two years of life.

Parallel play, the third stage, happens when children play alongside one another without interacting. This can be seen when two or three children play in a block area. Each of the children in the area are building their own creations. None of the children are talking or interacting with one another. They are simply using the same materials in the same area to stimulate their play. Parallel play often occurs with preschool age children.

Eventually, parallel play progresses to the fourth stage of play, associative play. When children are playing with others, associative play is occurring. Children in this stage will begin having conversations with one another as they borrow one another's materials. While children in this stage do play together, no common group goals for play are formed. Instead, children are content playing with their own goals in mind.

Lastly, as children play together toward common goals, cooperative play, the fifth and final stage of play is achieved. Cooperative play tends to be very sophisticated in nature since children are negotiating common goals and objectives. Therefore, this stage of play is not usually observed until kindergarten or the primary grades.

Now that the common characteristics of play have been presented along with a general description of the social play stages, the benefits of play can be discussed. There are numerous advantages associated with play. For starters, play is a developmentally appropriate practice for all children. According to Bredekamp and Copple (1997), developmentally appropriate practice is defined by the NAEYC (National Association of the Education of Young Children) as, "the outcome of a process of teacher decisionmaking that draws on at least three critical, interrelated bodies of knowledge: (1) what teachers know about how children develop and learn; (2) what teachers know about the individual children in their group; and (3) knowledge of the social and cultural context in which those children live and learn" (p. vii).

The split second children enter the world, they are equipped with all the tools necessary for the ability to play. Most every child is born with innate curiosities about the world around him or her. As children explore their curiosities by manipulating objects, they are learning new ideas and concepts about the world around them in an

interesting manner. It is this curiosity that sparks play and allows it to flourish. Looking at play in this sense, every child is capable of play. For instance, children with special needs as well as children who speak English as a second language are capable of playing. However, their play might look different from another child, but it is still considered play. Every child is capable of playing because no new concepts need to be taught to children in order for them to learn through play.

In addition to all children being capable of playing, play is developmentally appropriate in the sense that it facilitates children's learning. Play fully utilizes the one mode of learning that young children thrive on, which is simply hands-on manipulation of objects. By allowing children time to play with hands-on activities, they are better able to understand concepts and form concrete ideas about them. Brewer (2004) illustrates this by stating, "Play, then, offers the child the opportunity to make sense out of the world by using available tools. Understanding is created by doing, by doing with others, and by being completely involved in that doing" (p. 158).

Not only does play allow children to learn through hands-on manipulation, but it also allows each child to learn at his or her own rate. Play is one of the few activities that meets each child's level of development. Since play is self-selected, each child is choosing an activity that he or she is interested in and capable of participating in given his or her abilities. As children continue to play, their developmental level progresses along with their play. Because of this, children are able to practice improving their current abilities through play at their own pace. In other words, children are not being forced to learn concepts that they are not ready for mentally at a pace that is too quick to fully understand.

Since play allows children to learn and progress at their own developmental rate, it gives them a secure feeling of control. According to Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002) this is because, "At all levels of development, play enables children to feel comfortable and in control of their feelings by: 1) allowing the expression of unacceptable feelings in acceptable ways and 2) providing the opportunity to work through conflicting feelings" (p. 34).

As children feel in control during play, they also experience positive and successful feelings. Because children are engaged in activities at their developmental level, they often experience success and seldom become frustrated. These feeling combine to establish a positive self- concept and self-esteem in each child engaged in play. This positive self-image is so important for teachers and parents to establish in younger children because it contributes to their social-emotional development. Children who feel better about themselves are more willing to interact and form relationships with others.

Along with the development of a positive self-image, play offers many additional benefits in the area of social-emotional development as well as gains in each of the four other developmental areas. The main benefit of play in a social-emotional context is the learning and practicing of important social skills. For instance, all children, regardless of age, interact with one another during play. Children as young as six or seven months of age will begin interacting with other children or adults in their environment. As children grow and mature, their increased interactions will grow and mature also. Starting around age two or three, children begin taking turns with one another in a very simplistic form. This turn taking ability progresses into cooperative play as children progress. Around the

preschool age, children will start engaging in dramatic play. During dramatic play, children take on roles of other people. This not only helps children's turn taking ability, but also allows them to consider other people's perspectives. This in turn increases children's level of sympathy for others. In addition to this, since not all play goes according to plan, preschool children and older receive the opportunity to practice the social skill of negotiation with one another whenever a rift occurs in their play.

Shifting from social-emotional development to sensory development finds many gains for younger children as well. All children, especially infants and toddlers, experience gains in sensory development during play. This is mainly because infants and toddlers are extremely sensory learners. Play offers children practice in visual, auditory and tactile skills. It is through these skills that children best learn about the world around them.

The tactile experiences children engage in during play not only aids in their sensory development, but also in their physical development. Fine motor or small muscle development in children of all ages is enhanced as children manipulate objects during play. For instance, gains in fine motor development are made when infants and toddlers grasp objects and pick them up, or when preschool and kindergarten children string beads on yarn. Eye-hand coordination is also practiced and developed during these play activities.

While there are many gains in fine motor development, there are also many gains in gross motor or large muscle development. Since most of their day is based around play, infants and toddlers experience many gains in gross motor development. Such skills as reaching, crawling, sitting up, and walking are practiced during play. For

children ages three through eight, most gains in gross motor development come from outdoor play or recess. Since many types of outdoor play tend to be vigorous in nature, many different gross motor actions can be practiced and mastered. During outdoor play, children are given the opportunity to engage in activities that help develop such skills as running, jumping, hopping, throwing, catching, kicking and even walking.

In addition to the developmental areas mentioned above, play also benefits language development. Infants and toddlers experience gains in receptive language skills during play as they listen to the world around them. Expressive language skills are also enhanced as infants and toddlers practice using their speaking skills both verbally by making sounds or talking and non-verbally by expressing different emotions through body language. As children grow, they still experience gains in these language skills through play. However, gains in other language skills are apparent as well. According to Bodrova and Leong (2003b), "In a comprehensive review of numerous studies on play, researchers found evidence that play contributes to advances in 'verbalization, vocabulary, language comprehension, attention span, and imagination…'" (p. 90).

Lastly, gains from play can be found in the area of cognitive or intellectual development. Gains in cognitive development can be found as early as infancy. At birth, infant's brains are extremely plastic. In other words, their brains can be molded from their experiences. Positive experiences have a stimulating effect on the neurological connections in the brain while negative experiences decrease brain activity. Since play is a positive experience for infants, it stimulates the brain, causing more neurological connections to form, thus aiding in their brain development. This increased brain activity during play is not only seen in infants. It continues as children grow since at all ages

children who are actively engaged in play have active brains. When active, these children's brains are experiencing positive feelings during play that allows neurological connections to form.

In addition to the cognitive gains discussed above, play helps all children, ages zero through eight, develop problem-solving skills. For instance, preschool children putting together a puzzle are developing and applying problem-solving skills to sustain their play activity. Sluss (2005) illustrates another cognitive development gain. She states, "Play allows children to develop symbolic thought necessary for higher-level thinking that involves imagination and creativity" (p. 88). Other gains illustrated by Bodrova and Leong (2003a) include increase in memory, and self-regulation.

Overall, play provides many benefits to all children ages zero through eight. Play is not only considered a developmentally appropriate activity, but also has gains for children in all five developmental areas. All children can benefit from play because all have the ability to play in some way or another.

Current Barriers to Play

With all the benefits of play and it's developmentally appropriateness, it is hard to believe that a variety of play activities would not be a part of children's everyday curriculum, in or out of school. However, play is being placed on the back burner more and more each day. There are several different reasons for this.

Regarding home life, the greatest barrier to play for children in America is found within the media. Children at home are watching more television and playing more computer and video games than ever before. According to Sluss (2005), "The average child spends 35 hours per week either watching television or playing video games" (p. 333). This averages out to roughly five hours a day. For school age children during the academic school year, this daily five hours of watching television and playing video games hardly leaves time for family rituals such as dinner let alone time for play. Sluss further elaborates on this media epidemic in young children by stating, "Before kindergarten, they [children] will have spent over 4,000 hours watching television" (p. 333).

While simply watching this much television is bad enough, the quality of television children are being exposed to makes these statistics much worse. In her article, Schmidt (2003) gives the results of a recent television survey, "The National Television Violence Study examined 10,000 hours of programming between 1994 and 1997 and found that 60 percent of all shows contained some kind of violence" (p. 86). While this statistic is a little upsetting, parents can still argue the case that they screen such programs containing adult situations and violence. However, many parents still allow their children

to watch cartoons, often not realizing the content of the cartoons. These cartoons can be just as violent. Schmidt (2003) illustrates this by stating, "The study also found that a preschool child watching two hours of cartoons each day will witness nearly 10,000 acts of violence each year"(p. 86).

Being exposed to this degree of violence drastically changes children's imaginative, cooperative play into superhero war play that promotes fighting and more violence. In fact, Sluss (2005) reports seven distinct effects of media violence on children. She states that according to the American Medical Association, media violence:

1. causes an increase in mean-spirited, aggressive behavior.
2. causes increased levels of fearfulness, mistrust, and self-protective behaviors towards others.
3. contributes to desensitization and callousness to the effects of violence and the suffering of others.
4. provides violent heroes whom children seek to emulate.
5. provides justification for resorting to violence when children think they are right.
6. creates an increasing appetite for viewing more violence and more extreme violence.
7. fosters a culture in which disrespectful behavior becomes a legitimate way for people to treat each other. (p. 333).

In addition to media viewing, more children are being pushed and required to participate in extra-curricular activities and competitive athletic leagues. While these types of activities get children off the couch and active, they also take time away from children's self-directed play. Instead of bringing pleasure as play does, a lot of these activities place an over abundance of stress on children, especially those who feel the desire and need to win.

Certain circumstances in the home can also lead to play barriers. For instance, poverty can create a drastic demise in play. Children who live in poverty are often relied upon to work in some way in order to contribute funds for their family. This leaves very little time and energy left to focus on play. In the case that children are not asked to work, they have very few resources to encourage and support their play.

For those children who are given the time to play in their home life, some find they still cannot play due to inadequate or unsafe places to play. Neighborhoods are losing playgrounds more often than new ones are being built. As for the existing playgrounds, many are found to be unsafe in regards to their equipment or their location. While many countries, including the U.S., are starting to enforce playground regulations to higher the standard of playgrounds, there is still a long way to go. Sluss (2005) reports that playgrounds in the U.S. are rated a "C" according to the National Program for Playground Safety (p. 27).

With all of the barriers to play found in children's home life, one would think that teachers would recognize the importance of providing opportunities for play in school. However, this is not the case. In fact, the play barriers found in school may be greater than those found at home.

The single, most common barrier to play in school is academic pressure placed on teachers by parents, administrators, and state requirements. Most parents today want their children to learn more at younger ages. Olfman (2003) illustrates these pressures by reporting the results of a 1995 study completed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) entitled *Readiness for Kindergarten: Parent and Teacher Beliefs*. According to the study, a majority of parents placed higher emphasis on such academic

skills as knowing the letters of the alphabet, counting to 20, and being able to use pencils and paintbrushes for their preschool children to be ready for kindergarten than most kindergarten teachers do.

For most of these parents, they believe their children can only learn these important academic skills through the direct instruction of teachers. Because of this, play is viewed as unimportant. Also, parents want to see more solid evidence of their child's learning. More often than not, this evidence takes the form of completed worksheets along with paper and pencil tests.

In addition to parents, teachers are facing pressure from administrators, such as principals and assistant principals. Much of this pressure takes the form of teacher accountability in the area of academics. Teachers in Minnesota are being held accountable for teaching the Minnesota Academic Standards. This may not seem like a big deal, but having to be responsible for students successfully completing 30 standards by second grade in language arts alone illustrates the enormous nature of this task. As if it were not enough for the teachers to have to keep track of the completion of all of these standards, principals and assistant principals are also interested in seeing how the teachers in their school are successfully meeting these standards. While almost all academic concepts can be learned through play, it is much harder for administrators to physically see this progress as compared with paper and pencil evidence.

Going along with teacher accountability is the added pressure of standardized testing. School districts throughout the nation are required to complete standardized tests in accordance with the No Child Left Behind Act. Schools that meet or exceed expectations through their tests results are granted funding. However, the schools that

test below the pre-established level may have funding withheld. With all the budget cuts that are occurring in education these days, it is hard for teachers not to feel like they have to teach to the tests.

Another barrier to play found in schools across America is the elimination of recess time. The only sacred student play time in the school day is now being shortened considerably and even facing elimination in some schools. According to Kieff (2001), "In approximately 40 percent of American elementary and middle schools, recess bells have been silenced" (p. 99). Sluss (2005) adds to this disturbing trend by stating, "In 1989 over 90% of the principals in districts throughout the United States reported recess in their school. Ten years later, only 40% had recess" (p. 309). These statistics have a devastating effect on children. Simply eliminating recess does not eliminate children's need to play. That desire still burns strong in children across America. As illustrated earlier, play can be beneficial for children. According to Sluss (2005),

> NAEYC [National Association for the Education of Young Children] supports the reinstatement of recess and notes that recess benefits instruction in the following ways:
>
> 1. It is an appropriate outlet for reducing stress in children.
> 2. It allows children the opportunity to make choices, plan, and expand their creativity.
> 3. It releases energy (p. 310).

While play is beneficial for children, lack of play can have a harmful effect on children. For one, the sedentary life style that results from a lack of play is contributing to the disturbing declines in health seen in today's youth. For instance, obesity rates in children are the highest ever. Sluss (2005) reports, "In October 1999 the Agriculture Department released a report that revealed a record 10 million American children – or one in five – are overweight, and that a record eight percent of the children are already

overweight by preschool age" (p. 294). Stegelin (2005) paints a similar picture. She states, "According to the American Heart Association (2005) the U.S. obesity epidemic is now affecting the youngest children, with more than 10 percent of two- to five-year-olds overweight—up from 7 percent in 1994" (p. 79). She goes on further to mention, "Childhood obesity is related to five critical health and psychosocial problems: (1) high blood pressure, (2) Type 2 diabetes, (3) coronary heart disease, (4) social rejection, (5) school failure and dropout" (p. 79). As these statistics show, the sedentary lifestyle that results from a lack of play is devastating to the health of children.

As illustrated above, children's play is being halted due to a variety of obstacles. While some barriers are found in children's home life, some are present in school. No matter where the barriers occur, the effects they have on children's play and children themselves are devastating and far reaching.

The Teacher's Role in Making Play a Part of the Curriculum

With all the benefits of play mentioned and the drastic effects from lack of play, it is important now more than ever before for teachers to understand and realize their role in supporting and promoting play curriculums in their classrooms. A general play curriculum contains each of the following essential elements: movement, music, art, and materials. In order to achieve each element of the play curriculum, the teacher must take on five different, but distinct roles. These roles include: organizer, observer/supervisor, evaluator, participant, and advocate. By completing each role successfully, teachers can ensure that productive play is occurring in their classroom.

The first, and perhaps most important role of the teacher in making play a part of the curriculum is being an organizer. This includes not only planning sufficient amounts of time for play into the daily schedule, but also setting up the classroom environment to encourage play. While this role varies according to what age of children the teacher is working with, there are a few commonalities for classroom management of play among all ages.

One commonality found in the teacher's role of organizer is the amount of time allocated specifically for play. A teacher of infants and toddlers will find that he or she allocates most of the day, aside from fulfilling physical needs such as eating and sleeping, to play. However, when it comes to children age four and up, Sluss (2005) recommends planning at least thirty minutes for play. However, this time could easily be extended to forty-five minutes to a full hour, especially for preschool and kindergarten children. This is because anything less does not give children adequate time to select their play activity

and then become deeply engaged in it. In addition, once children have selected an activity, they should be allowed to partake in the play as long as they deem necessary for the amount of time allotted. This means that children should not be forced to rotate to additional play centers once they have started playing. Forcing children to switch or rotate only disrupts the play of children who are deeply engrossed in the activity they are partaking in. It is only when children become truly engaged in play that learning and developmental benefits occur.

In order for children to become truly emerged in their play, they must also be given the choice of what to play. This seems to be more of an issue for preschool children up through primary aged children, since infants and toddlers almost always choose what they play. Sluss (2005) suggests giving children age four and up a choice of what to play through a "choice board" which illustrates all of the available play choices in the classroom (pg. 178). By allowing children to select their preferred play activities, teachers are ensuring that children are becoming engaged in a personally desired activity. Play is only play when it is internally motivating and enjoyable. In the rare event that a child refuses to play, the teacher must respect the child's decision and not force him or her into play-like behaviors. Any child who is forced into play is not gaining any of the benefits associated with self-selected play. Actually, the total opposite is happening. Instead of seeing play as fun and desirable, the child views play as work. When this occurs, play is not play anymore.

When giving children the choice of what to play, there are many times when children will have problems selecting what they want to do. Teachers in the role of organizer can help children through these troubles. For teachers of infants and toddlers,

the best way is by showing and modeling for the children a few different choices of activities. When one activity is chosen, the teacher can engage in the play with the child until he or she is fully engaged in the activity and can continue by him or herself. As for preschool, kindergarten and primary teachers, a different strategy can be employed. Just as teachers of preschool, kindergarten and primary grades plan for play in their classroom, they can help the children plan their own play for the day. This planning time should happen right before playtime is to occur. During this time, the teacher can discuss with each child what they will be playing. Bodrova and Leong (2003a) suggest three specific points for the teacher to include in play planning to promote mature play. First, the teacher should ask the children the roles of their play, or who they are going to be in their play. Second, the children should be prompted to think about the theme of their play, or what they are going to play. Lastly, the children should reflect on how the play will unfold, or what is going to happen during their play. By helping children plan their play, they will be able to decide what they want to play in a faster manner, thus allowing them more time to actually play.

Another task of the teacher as organizer is to set up the classroom environment in a way that promotes and encourages play. This can be done in a number of ways. Olfman (2003) suggests teachers keep in mind the number of stimuli present when creating the optimal environment for play. Many teachers today feel that they have to cover every inch of wall space with colorful pictures and posters, and fill each shelf with an overabundance of toys and books. When environments are set up in this way, it is extremely easy for children to become overstimulated. In turn, this makes it very difficult for them to focus on one thing, causing them to jump from one activity to the

next rapidly. This has severe effects on the quality of their play. Instead, teachers should include just enough pictures and posters to make the space warm and inviting. In other words, the space should be pleasing to the senses.

Toys and materials are another aspect to consider when setting up the classroom environment for play. In addition to selecting toys that are safe for the age of the children, Bodrova and Leong (2003a) recommend toys and materials that are simple and encourage interaction and cooperation between children. Realistic and specific props are expensive and do not require a lot of imagination on the part of the child. Instead, using general, nonspecific props, such as blocks or boxes encourages children to use their imaginations when playing. These props also promote interaction between older children as they describe to one another what each prop is being used for.

While the type of play materials is important, the most crucial aspect of supporting play in any environment is the degree in which children feel comfortable playing. It is an absolute necessity that children of all ages feel comfortable playing in the classroom environment. This can be done by setting up an environment where children are welcomed and encouraged to explore through play. This can also be done by getting to know each child individually and establishing a relationship with each child. The relationship between a child and the teacher can help all to feel more comfortable in the classroom. In turn, this relationship helps the teacher to understand each child better in order to include play activities that are culturally appropriate. Once children are comfortable in the classroom environment, they will be more likely to engage in play activities with others. The availability of materials must also be considered. If children

are uncomfortable with play materials or feel that the materials are not to be manipulated, very little play will occur.

In addition to the tasks mentioned above, the teacher needs to observe children and their play. This will allow the teacher to recognize each child's unique interests and therefore will be able to plan a variety of play opportunities accordingly.

While observation is a small part of the teacher's role as organizer, it is a very large part of the teacher's second, third, and fourth roles in facilitating and supporting play in the classroom. The teacher in the roles of observer/supervisor, participant and evaluator spends a great deal of time observing children's play. The reasons for this vary depending on which role the teacher is fulfilling.

In the role of observer/supervisor the teacher observes children's play mostly to make sure all children are safely engaged in play and interacting positively with one another. In the case that this is not happening, the teacher can easily step from the second role of observing into the third role of participant to intervene and guide their play back to being productive by offering different ideas and suggestions. However, the teacher in the role of participant must be aware of his or her amount of involvement in play in order not to dominate or disturb the activity. For instance, when a teacher intervenes too quickly to settle a dispute over play, the children involved rarely get the chance to use their negotiation or conflict management skills and strategies. In addition, when a teacher becomes too involved in play, the play itself loses the child-initiated character and becomes yet another teacher-directed activity. The best way to avoid this is to observe the children and follow their lead when entering and exiting play.

In contrast to the roles above, the teacher in the role of evaluator observes children's play with the intent to evaluate each child's developmental level. As stated in previous sections, play can serve as a method of learning new skills and information. In order for the teacher to assess the growth of each child through play, he or she needs to observe each child's uninterrupted, self-chosen play. Detailed observations should be recorded on paper as they are happening. Specific forms should be used depending on the age of the child. For example, checklists and anecdotal observations can be used with all ages of children. Developmental profiles are best used when observing the play of infants and toddlers, while records of behavior and time-activity samples are best suited for preschool age children and up. (Examples of specific, age-related assessment forms can be found in Appendix A.)

Assessment forms, when completed correctly, not only help to refresh the teacher's memory when it comes time to document and share each child's growth with parents, but also serve as concrete evidence of children's developmental growth through play. In order to get a true assessment of children's abilities, observations should be completed at regular intervals throughout the year. By doing this, a profile of the child's play and learning will progress as the year does.

Different than all of the other roles mentioned above, and maybe the most important, is the teacher's fifth and final role in facilitating and encouraging play. A teacher in the role of advocacy has many different jobs. For starters, a teacher needs to be a positive role model for children to imitate during play. Many children who are moving into more mature play start imitating the behaviors of adults they are in constant

contact with. By modeling positive behaviors and actions in the classroom, the children's play will benefit as they start to include these behaviors and actions into their play.

Being an advocate for play also includes being knowledgeable about the different play stages and how to guide or support each child to reach subsequent mature play stages. This job can be one of the harder ones for a teacher in the role of advocate to successfully complete because it requires him or her to be able to use appropriate scaffolding techniques to boost each child up to the next play stage. According to Sluss (2005), this can be done by assisting and guiding the child's play in the current context in a way that enables the child to perform the play activity on his or her own in the future.

Finally, being an advocate for play involves communicating the importance of play with parents and others who are willing to listen. It is imperative that the teacher shares the valuable learning experiences that play provides with parents especially. Without this communication, parents come to rely on more traditional assessment measures such as worksheets as a means of understanding their child's learning. Play provides far too many benefits, as illustrated, to be pushed aside and replaced by strict academics. The teacher in the role of advocate understands this and shares with everyone the importance of play along with its many benefits.

In general, the teacher plays an essential part in supporting and encouraging play through each of the five roles discussed. It is up to the teacher to recognize and understand their own feelings toward play and decide what role it plays in his or her classroom. However, in order for play to flourish, the teacher needs to understand and assume all five roles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, play can have many positive benefits for children. For one, play is a developmentally appropriate activity that all children can participate in. Play is also beneficial because it enhances development in each of the areas of social-emotional, sensory, physical, language, and cognitive development. In general, play is an important factor in the learning equation.

However, due to many barriers found in the home and at school, children are being refused the right to play. This lack of play is having a devastating effect on the youth of America, as shown in our children's obesity rate. It is now up to teachers to educate themselves about the power of play in order to become advocates for play in their classroom. By understanding and assuming five unique roles, teachers can guarantee that beneficial play is flourishing in their classroom. It is only through communicating the importance of play with others that a shift away from teacher-directed learning to child-directed learning through play will occur.

Appendix A: Examples of Play-Based Assessments

Example of Checklist with Comment:

Child Observed:_____ Date:_____

Objective:_____

_____

Checklist: Fully Completed ☐ Partially Completed ☐ Not Completed ☐ N/A ☐

Comment (speaks to objective):_____

_____

_____

_____

Example of Anecdotal Observation with Interpretation:

Child Observed:_____ Date:_____

Objective:_____

_____

Observation (specific account of what happened):_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Interpretation (speaks to objective):_____

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Example of Developmental Profile (18 – 23 Months):

Child's Name:	**Name of Teacher/Caregiver:**			
Date of Birth:	**Name of Center/School:**			
Chronological Age:	**Phone Number:**			
Area of Development	**Date Observed**		**Emerging**	**Proficient**
Physical: Large Muscles				
Walks fast and well				
Seldom falls				
Can run, but it looks awkward				
Walks up stairs holding adult's hand				
Comments:				
Physical: Small Muscle				
Can use crayons to scribble				
Has better control of self-feeding				
Comments:				
Social/Emotional				
Imitates adults in dramatic play				
Interested in helping with chores				
Interested in dressing process				
Beginning to get bladder/bowel control				
Comments:				
Intellectual				
Can begin to solve problems in head				
Rapid increase of language dev.				
Beginning to fantasize and role-play				
Comments:				
Language:				
Uses words to get attention				
Uses words to indicate wants				
Knows at least ten words				
Enjoys picture books				
Comments:				

**Adapted fromEyer, D.W. & Gonzalez-Mena (2004) Infants, Toddlers, and Caregivers, Appendix B, A-10.*

Example of Time-Activity Record:

Date:_____			
	9:00 a.m.	9:10 a.m.	9:20 a.m.
Block Center	Sara David Carlos	Sara Carlos Phil	
Art Center	Phil Karen Juanita	Karen Juanita Ty	
Dramatic Play Center	Brenna Matthew Dylan Cassie	Brenna Matthew Dylan Cassie	
Math Manipulatives	Kelby Ty Hannah	Kelby David Hannah	

** Taken from Brewer (2004), Introduction to Early Childhood Education, Fifth Edition, pg. 160.*

Example of Record of Behavior:

Child's Name	**Objectives** Completes puzzles with 10 pieces	Strings beads in a pattern	Plays cooperatively with at least 2 others	Uses a paintbrush correctly when painting
Geoffrey				
Judith				
Leslie				

** Taken from Brewer (2004), Introduction to Early Childhood Education, Fifth Edition, pg. 161.*

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