Get serious about embracing play

The concern is that the true impact of what he says is not reflected in the current practices of most Singaporean parents, and even some preschools.

Based on our interviews conducted with parents, the common findings were that most parents agree with the Prime Minister's notion to let children play. However, some parents still view play as separate from cognitive development, which is a motivating factor that drives them to send their children to enrichment or tuition centres at a young age.

WHAT IS PLAY?

Renowned child physician and educator Maria Montessori states that "play is a child's work". Hence, play is a vital part of a child's life which aids a child's development.

Simply put, play is a medium through which children learn. When engaging in play, children are reinforcing lifelong learning skills and abilities. Most importantly, play is a precursor to learning as it instills ke learning dispositions in children (as outlined in the Ministry of Education Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens), such as a sense of wonder and curiosity.

Therefore, contrary to the misguided belief that play is an activity just to pass the time, play can instead be thought of as time children use to construct their own ideas and learning about themselves and their surroundings.

WHY PLAY?

Research conducted by McCaul, Mustard and Shankar as part of the Early Years study for the Council for Early Child Development in Ontario has shown that play is interlinked with brain development. Play is a mod for children to explore their surroundings and make connections to what they know. Through play, children's cognitive and physical development are strengthened.

Play based activities aid in developing children's critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as language and literacy abilities. For instance, when children engage in block play activities, they acquire mathematical concepts like sorting, counting and patterning, which will develop into more complex mathematical concepts in their later schooli years.

Children will also improve their vocabulary leading to enhanced language abilities when they label their block structures and engage in conversations about their block building, as they become more motivated to share their ideas with others during the play process.

Furthermore, children will be able to practise their negotiation, critical thinking and problem solving skills when they engage in more complex play with their friends, such as building the tallest and sturdiest tower using blocks.

Play also enhances children's physical development. Play offers a natural process for children to develop and practice their fine and gross motor skills, such as picking up pieces of leaves and hopping around with one foot. With play, children's fine motor skills will be enhanced, especially in the area of their finger-grasps, which provides the basis for drawing and writing.

Additionally, children enhance their socio-emotional skills, like sharing and working cooperatively in a group. Children also benefit socio-emotionally when they feel happy as a result of the play activity, make friends with others and learn to regulate their emotions.

Play also enables children to increase their level of confidence and self-esteem. They can also manage their anger and frustrations more effectively as a play activity provides an avenue for children to relieve stress.

Hence, these skills that are developed through play at a young age are crucial to children as they will utilise them for the rest of their lives.

TEACHERS, EDUCATE PARENTS

In one of the interviews we recently conducted with Singaporeans about education, a parent asserted that a country where its citizens rely a lot on the Government to provide for them will not prosper.

Parents thus are the most powerful advocates for their children. But they will need support from preschools and teachers to make informed decisions for the benefit of their child. Therefore, teachers have a large responsibility to educate parents about the approach to play, such as sharing strategies on the different types of play, the choice of play materials, facilitating and engaging in play with young children, as well as the benefits of play in relation to a child's holistic development.

It is also important for parents to be open-minded about the different approaches to learning and be receptive to them in order for their children to receive the best care and education.

The Singapore Government may indeed be promoting the benefits of play; however without a shift in mindsets towards a positive recognition about the importance play in a child's learning and overall growth, not all parents and preschools will readily embrace it.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Jane Murtyi Singh and Nathania Tan Hui Yi are final year students of the Bachelor of Science in Early Childhood Studies and Leadership program at Wheelock College Singapore.

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