The Importance of Imagination and Creativity

Many leaders in the corporate world are claiming creativity and imagination are the future of the US economy (Miller & Almon, 2009). For example, Cal Tech’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory has reportedly noticed a decline in employee ability to conceptualize an idea and bring it into practical reality (Brown, 2009). Despite hiring top notch engineering students, they noted a lack of ability to recognize flaws in design, brainstorm, and test new solutions to problems, and discover new and innovative ways to reconcile dilemmas. Their own investigation into the play history of their employees has led them to believe that those who played and were given opportunities to explore and manipulate objects as a child—in other words—those who were allowed to “fiddle with stuff” are more creative, and more readily able to solve problems and find imaginative solutions.

Play is the soil in which creativity and imagination is born and nurtured in the life of a young child. When given open-ended, non-specific materials, they imagine and create new uses for ordinary things. For example, a cardboard box becomes a plane, a castle, or a fort. A strip of fabric becomes a dress, a sail on a boat, or a blanket for a doll. As children engage in dramatic play, they imagine what it is like to walk, talk, and act like another person. As children explore and experiment with art materials, they create ways to express and bring to life the thoughts and ideas that rumble around in their heads, thus making their thinking visible.

“A child miseducated is a child lost.”
—John F. Kennedy
Types of Play

There are many different lenses through which to categorize and think of play. Some of the most commonly recognized forms of play that should be a part of an effective early learning environment include:

Make Believe. This type of play is typically what comes to mind when we think of “playing pretend.” It involves fantasy, role playing, and make believe. It is considered by some to be the most advanced form of play because it requires children to suspend reality and imitate others. Children get better at “make believe” with age and experience, and gain competence from playing with more skilled others.

Constructive Play. This type of play refers to experiences in which children use materials to construct, or build things. It is typically organized and goal-directed. By age 4 this type of play occupies approximately 50% of the time children spend in early childhood settings (Johnson, 1., Christie, 1. & Wardle, E, 2005).

Sensory Play. In this type of play, the child manipulates and explores the properties and characteristics of objects, one’s body, or the environment. Research has found the more complex the materials, the more time children will spend in exploratory play. If the environment does not provide a variety of intriguing materials to investigate, exploratory play will diminish (Johnson, 1., Christie, 1. & Wardle, E, 2005).

Large Motor Play. Running, jumping, hopping, skipping, and riding tricycles are just some of the active things children quite spontaneously do while playing. This type of play develops strength, coordination, balance, and a sense of personal space.

Fine Motor Play. This type of play develops the small muscles in the hands and fingers. As children string beads, create with bristle blocks, and crumple paper for a collage, they are developing fine motor skills.
Artistic Play. As children paint, work with dough and clay, create a collage, a stabile, or make a print, they are learning about the properties of materials, the texture of objects. These materials allow children to express their feelings, bring life to their ideas, and develop imagination and creativity. It is important that teachers and caregivers focus on the process and not the product. Allow children to finger paint or play with playdough for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of the experience and not because they are forced.

Language Play. Listen to the sounds of children at play and it is obvious that language is a huge part of the experience. They sing songs, invent chants, make up silly rhymes, tell silly jokes, and experiment with the tone and cadence of language. Language-rich environments are playful environments.

Rough and Tumble Play. This form of play is often misunderstood and forbidden in early childhood environments, but researchers now believe this form of play has particular benefit to emotional regulation. As children wrestle and “play fight,” they learn to control aggressive impulses, and develop an understanding of fairness and cooperation with others (Brown, 2009). The key to differentiating rough and tumble play from true aggression is the facial expressions and demeanor of the children involved. Rough and tumble play was noticeably absent in the lives of young murderers in Brown’s research with convicted murderers.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children” —Nelson Mandela
Developmental Stages of Social Interaction in Play

Mildred Parten has identified six developmental stages of social interaction in play:

1. **Uninvolved:** The child is very active and on the move but his play is seemingly aimless and there is no indication he is aware of the play of others. This stage is commonly seen with young toddlers.

2. **Onlooker:** The child demonstrates awareness of others’ play by watching, but he does not join in and participate. This stage is commonly seen with older toddlers.

3. **Solitary:** The child plays by himself with his own toys. There is no interaction with those around him. This has typically been thought of as an immature form of play as it is a stage commonly seen in two and three year olds. However, experts now realize that solitary play takes place at all age levels and is not necessarily an indication of immaturity.

4. **Parallel:** The child plays in proximity to others but there is no sharing or turn taking and little, if any, conversation.

5. **Associative:** The child plays with and has conversations with other children; however, there is no collaboration or common purpose to their play. Each child remains focused on his/her own goals.

6. **Cooperative:** Children work together toward a common goal that may be a product, an experience, or a game. There is a great deal of negotiation and planning of the play scenario as well as sharing, turn taking, and exchange of ideas. This form of interaction typically emerges around 4 years of age.