



VIEW POINT

Elizabeth Jones

Playing to Get SMART

Ten very busy children are in the house area. The youngest three-year-olds are investigating dress-ups, going through the kitchen cupboards, talking on the phone. They are finding out what there is to do here, engaged in the exploration preliminary to focused play.

The older four-year-olds are involved in elaborate cooperative play. Beautifully dressed up, five children sit on chairs they have arranged as a car. Ashley tells the teacher, "We've come home, and now we're going to sleep." She spreads two blankets on the floor in front of the car, and they all lie down. Ashley puts her full shopping bag by the cupboard and pretends to yawn.

Ashley gently taps each sleeper with her long string of beads: "It's time to get up." They all do, picking up the blankets.

Vivian puts her blanket on the shelf and picks up two large blocks from the adjacent shelf. "OK," she announces, "we will make something like a TV or something." She and two helpers start building, while Ashley moves chairs into a semicircle. "OK!" says Ramon. "The movie is starting, you guys." "It's a TV show," says Vivian.

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PLAY IS PRACTICE IN CHOOSING, DOING, AND PROBLEM SOLVING.

When children play, they are thinking, innovating, negotiating, and taking risks. They create make-believe events and practice physical, social, and cognitive skills as they engage in these events as if they were real. Teachers support play by providing a variety of things to do, observing what unfolds, and staying nearby to help as needed and to acknowledge children's actions and words.

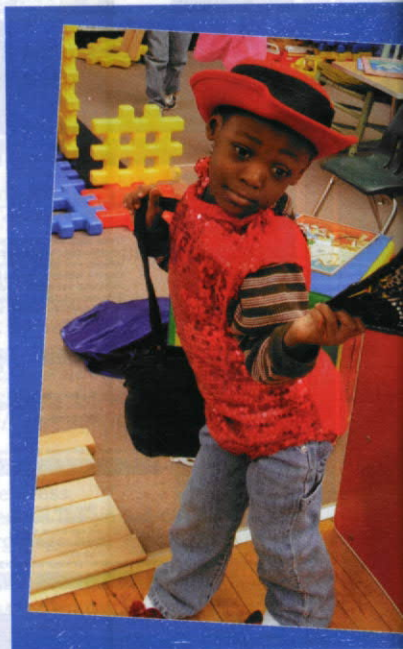
Schoolwork and play

Most traditional schoolwork is designed to teach standard rules and classification systems to young learners. *Closed*, right-answer tasks are what we all associate with our experiences of school. Play, in contrast, is *open*; it doesn't have preset rules (Jones & Reynolds 1992).

Children at play are constructing their own rules and learning at their own rates. As they test hypotheses and argue them with peers, they gain confidence in themselves as learners rather than becoming afraid to make mistakes. Children at play are learning to deal intelligently with the world. They are playing to get smart.

Smart is commonly defined as skills and knowledge of facts learned by rote and by directed practice. Today many schools experience pressure to provide teacher-directed instruction, cut out recess and the arts, and standardize curriculum and evaluation. In schools everywhere, even in Head Start, tests are being mandated to measure success in meeting learning objectives.

Early childhood educators understand, however, that one-size-fits-all testing is an ineffective way to measure the understanding and competence of four- and five-year-olds. Rather,



through their documentation based on observation and conversations carried on in the context of children's active learning, teachers take responsibility for assessing each child's growth toward developmental objectives.

Bombarded from all sides with what Piaget called "the American question"—How can we do it faster? How can we make children learn more, sooner? (Hall 1970)—we need to remember that facts acquired in isolation become easily forgotten trivia. Early childhood educators, focusing on the development of children's initiative, have chosen to think of *smart* as being skillful in curiosity and critical thinking. It is through play with materials and relationships, invention of classification systems, and solving problems in dialogue with others that young children develop the basic skills they will need to become effective contributors to the health of a changing world.

Living in a changing world

Success in our rapidly changing world depends on being able to think creatively and quickly. The modern world is full of the unexpected, as the global community brings strangers together and offers them many life choices. Decades ago anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote that we are "rearing unknown children for an unknown world" (1970, 75). That's the kind of world we live in; it changes.

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Some of the things we were taught as children aren't very useful by the time we're grown up. Some of the things we really need to know now are things no one had ever heard of when we were children, and so we have to learn about them for ourselves, if we can. To be able to learn for ourselves and, perhaps most important, to like learning new

things, we need to be skilled players who enjoy encountering the unexpected.

The rate of change in our world is unlikely to slow down in the future. Social problem solving is a life skill everyone needs more and more, as we encounter people who are not like us. There are few isolated communities any more—places where change is slow, social control is based on separateness of language and culture, and obedience to tradition is the highest virtue. Historically, all over the world strangers have been regarded as enemies—people not like us.

In many languages the word for *people* was synonymous with *our people*; there was another word for everyone else. War and oppression could be justified against those people. In a rapidly shrinking world, these are not viable solutions to the problem of the stranger. Like children, adults need practiced ways to ask, "Will you play with me? What can we do together?"



Democracy, no matter how imperfectly it works, holds a vision of the potential in everyone. John Dewey had a clear vision of democracy as built on the insights and talents of all its members, building community through respect for diversity (Cuffaro 1995, 103). That's a particularly important vision in early childhood education. Each young child is filled with potential for intelligence and caring relationships with others. We owe it both to the children and to our society to cultivate that potential through respect for children's need to play and to cultivate adult joy and creativity in inventing child-friendly play opportunities for them.

To be able to learn for ourselves and to like learning new things, we need to be skilled players.

Teaching children the skills of play

Play is a mode of response to experiences that can and should be taught in early childhood education. We teach young children to play by providing them with space, time, and materials; offering them support in problem solving; presenting new problems for them to solve; paying attention to their spontaneous interests; and valuing their eagerness to learn about the world in which we all live together.

By providing culturally relevant materials, a teacher of kindergartners from Southeast Asian immigrant families encourages play and problem solving:

From [the] children's drawings, dictated stories, and chats with the children, I found out how important fishing was to the families. At the water table I added fishing poles, magnetic fish, rubber sea creatures, rocks, shells, and tin buckets. This became an engaging, important place to play. Unfortunately it only had room for three, and many more wanted to fish. So, from construction toys the children invented fishing poles—the long, deep-sea kind. On pillows, which functioned as the bank, they sat, fished, laughed, and joked for an extended period of time. (Evans 2001, 69)

By imaginatively entering play that is beginning to fall apart, this teacher successfully extends it:

Two children are beginning to squabble in the playhouse. The teacher knocks on an invisible door. "May I come in? I've come to tea." The squabble stops, and they serve her graciously. "Is this Earl Grey tea?" she asks, sipping it. "No, it's soap tea," says one of the boys. (Reynolds & Jones 1997, 95)

By adding writing tools to the blocks and medical play equipment, this teacher extends the play to include literacy practice:

A group of children are building a hospital with large blocks, and playing with medical equipment to treat patients. The teacher puts a collection of signs, and tools for writing signs, on the adjacent table. Children quickly notice them and begin writing signs and taping them on the hospital. (Reynolds & Jones 1997, 95)

For school success in America today, early literacy has become the primary criterion. Often it is taught by rote. But standardized instruction ignores each child's relationship-based, meaningful experiences with language and literacy. In a literate society children pretend to be readers and writers just as they pretend to be shoppers and drivers of cars; they are spontaneously practicing adult roles to learn about them in ever increasing detail. Children playing together frequently correct each other, jointly shaping their understandings.

Within the safety of play, children sort out their current understandings and risk trying new possibilities. For example, four-year-old Erin is playing with pencil and paper and talking to her teacher Karen:

Erin writes E-R-I-H-H-D, and then moves her pencil across the letters several times, moving her lips as if she is reading.

Erin: Karen, I wrote bottle. Karen, I wrote bottle.

Karen: You wrote what?

Erin: Bottle.

Karen: [looking at Erin's paper] Bottle? Wow, look at that, Erin. You wrote bottle.

Erin continues to write more words and to read back what she has written. Later, she looks for the page where she had written bottle.

Erin: [softly to herself] Where's bottle? Where's bottle? [She finds where she had written E-R-I-H-H-D.] See? Bottle. Two-two-one-one-one-one. [while pointing to the letters E-R-I-H-H-D] (Owocki 1999, 97)

Erin is systematically constructing her knowledge of written language with spontaneous learning behavior reinforced by Karen's response.

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Teaching adults the skills of play

Effective teachers of young children become skillful observers and co-players, not mere implementers of standardized curricula. Such a teacher leads group times based on her observations of play events, not on a preset plan. She can demonstrate the varied languages—speech and storytelling, drawing and writing—that people use to represent and remember their experiences. Literacy is integrated into children's understanding as they discover, "My experiences make pictures and play and conversation" "My play makes stories" "My words make print." Teachers are bridge builders to literacy, as the following account illustrates:

Theresa likes to use her drawing skills as part of her own playfulness in teaching. One day she sketched the children at play, as one child was pretending to call the doctor on the phone and others were going for a ride on the "train" they had built of plastic crates. The next day she brought her drawing to circle time.

"Do you know what I saw today?" she asked the children. "I saw Rosa talking to the doctor on the telephone. 'My baby is very sick,' she told the doctor. And I drew a picture of her. Do you see her?" Theresa held up the picture and the children squeezed close to see. "Rosa," they said. "*Con el telefono.*" Rosa, overwhelmed, put her hands over her face. Yolanda, who had been looking closely at the picture, burst out, "That's me! I driving!"

"Yes, that's Yolanda," agreed the teacher. "Yolanda and Juan and Diana and Alex and Joanie went on the train. And here they are." "Our teacher drew our picture, and there we are!"

At the end of circle time there was a rush for the crates and chairs. Reminding children of their interesting play encourages them to repeat it, to understand and elaborate it more fully. (Jones & Reynolds 1992, 60-61)

In the scenario at the beginning of this article, Ashley, Ramon, and Vivian's teacher brings their story to circle time too, illustrating it with a few props from their play.

"Did you know," she asks the whole group, "that one, two, three, four, five children in our class built a car this morning? And that they got all dressed up and went for a drive? And then they all lay down and took a nap on this blanket? Ashley was wearing this long string of beads. Vivian was wearing these bright red shoes."

"I had on my cowboy boots," Ramon says in a big voice.

"So you did," replies the teacher. "Dwayne, what were you wearing?" Dwayne grins from under his hat brim. "A big hat! And you're still wearing it."

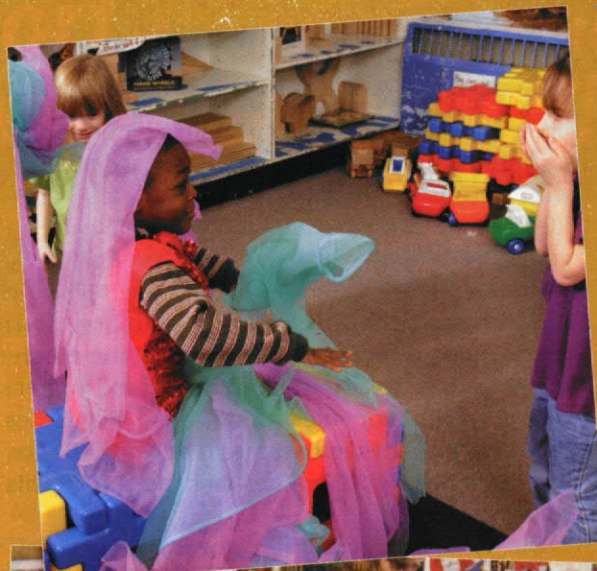
"I get mine, teacher," says Josué, reaching for the rack at the edge of the rug and pulling off an ID holder suspended from a cord. He puts it over his head. "See there? That's my name, right there."

"There are lots of ways to dress up," the teacher acknowledges. Then she holds up another familiar object. "Can you guess what this is?" she asks.

"It's just a block," say several of the children.

"Yes, it's just a block," agrees the teacher. "But sometimes children make blocks be other things. This morning it was a TV!"

Young children who are mastering play are endlessly imaginative. Teachers need to practice to keep up with them, and



so it is important that teacher education and staff development include many opportunities for adults to create and critique curriculum ideas. Teachers need to play with materials—blocks, books, and paints—and with ideas and feelings, asking each other: “What else could you do with that? What could children do?”

Practice in telling stories and making up stories on the spot is essential. Teachers need to brainstorm curriculum possibilities: “What are all the different things people do at the store? How could you enrich that play with more ideas and props?” Play relies on *divergent* rather than *convergent thinking*; it asks, “What are all the ways . . . ?” rather than insisting, “This is the right way.”

One child care center director invites her staff to brainstorm curriculum, webbing their ideas into a multidirectional action plan:

“‘Collect shells’ is something some of us liked to do as children and like to do as adults, too. Suppose you went to the beach this summer, and now you have a collection of seashells. . . . Suppose you’ve decided that the shells can be played with. What do you think are all the things that might happen, growing out of both your ideas and the children’s? Let’s see!” . . .

A web is a *tentative* plan. It doesn’t tell you exactly what will happen or in what order. That depends in large part on the children’s responses. . . .

“So if I plan a unit on shells and it turns into dam building, that doesn’t mean I’m an awful teacher who keeps losing control?” asks Sandra.

“No, it means you’re a teacher who’s paying attention to children’s interests, who’s flexible and creative,” says Bethany. (Jones & Nimmo 1994, 10–11)

Interpreting the meaning of play


The world today is full of good and bad choices among the many ways of constructing a life. Children, adolescents, and adults who are smart—skilled at play with things, ideas, and people—will have more capacity to create meaningful lives than people who are unable to tolerate ambiguity and the unexpected, who are stuck in defending the way things are or used to be.

Early childhood is the best time to practice these important skills and attitudes, because adults are there to keep things safe. And so, if you are a teacher of young children, think—playfully but thoroughly—about answers you can give to all those other people who criticize you by saying, “But the children are only playing. When do you teach them?”

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Correction

In the article “When Pictures Are Worth a Thousand Words: The Nonfiction Books of Gail Gibbons” (*Young Children*, March 2003, pp. 22–23), there were several errors. Gail Gibbons’s upcoming books *The Quilting Bee* and *Mummies, Pyramids, and Pharaohs* will both be published by HarperCollins in 2004.