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What is the importance of play in early childhood education

Choosing a preschool for your child to attend can be a difficult one. In addition to thinking about their safety and happiness, you are probably also considering other factors, such as academics, student success, cost, accreditation, etc. One element that is crucial to nurture a happy, well-formed child—but which often gets overlooked in the search for a preschool—is the idea of playful discovery, and creativity. Want to learn more about Friends' Central early childhood education programs? Get the free guide! Facilitated, playful learning is as important to intellectual and personal growth as academic support and success. For this reason, many parents choose play-based preschool programs that nurture this sense of discovery from the very outset of their child's education. The Importance of Play in Preschool Play-based preschool programs are centered on the individual child and their interests. Play-based classrooms are often broken into different "centers" that nurture particular interests and areas of childhood development, and allow children to choose their own daily activities. Common areas of exploration in play-based preschools include: Home areas with domestic and kitchen settings Science and technology areas Reading spaces Water and/or sand tables Areas for imaginative play Teachers encourage students to explore and play on their own in these various areas. At Friends' Central School, we believe that when students are allowed to be discoverers and explorers, and when teachers act as facilitators, flexible and creative thinking happens. When children are encouraged to explore without intrinsic goals, they become problem solvers, they gain confidence and learn to collaborate. Moreover, children are greatly motivated by the notion of play. Using play as both the context for learning, and the driver for discovery, play-based learning can instill in children a zeal and enthusiasm for learning they might not experience otherwise. Through playful discovery, children can find a joy in learning they might not otherwise in a traditional educational setting. 5 Advantages of Play-Based Preschool 1. Communication Skills Play helps children develop key language and communication skills. When playing with other children and adults, children learn to both communicate effectively, and listen intently. And during these early years, when a child's vocabulary is rapidly growing, participating in teacher-led play where their conversation is encouraged in a natural way can be especially effective in boosting their communication skills. Even participating in individual play, where the child is guiding their own narrative, encourages communication growth. Often, children will speak to themselves and the toys they're playing with, enacting multiple sides of conversation, and participating in active-language scenarios. 2. Motor Skills Active play also quickly works to develop strong motor skills in children: Activities like running, jumping, and throwing help children develop strong gross motor skills. Participating in sports, climbing, and skipping require core strength, hand-eye coordination, and encourages a strong sense of balance. Coloring, drawing and crafting encourages and develops fine motor skills. Your child might look like they're just enjoying the monkey bars with their friends, but their body is doing real work and developing the essential strengths that will help them grow. 3. Social and Emotional Development Unsurprisingly, play-based learning also plays an important role in the development of healthy social and emotional habits in children. When children play with other children, they learn to cooperate, communicate and engage with their peers in a way that ensures they feel part of their young community. These interactions give them the ability to develop relationships, and nurtures their sense of emotional and social intelligence. Educators that facilitate this type of play-based learning, like the ones at the Friends' Central Nursery Program, can encourage children to work through common emotions and scenarios—both positive and negative—which in turn strengthens the way they are able to interact and cope with the world around them. When they are playing 'family' or 'doctor', they are demonstrating empathy, responsibility, and an awareness of their relationships with those around them. Playing also serves a purpose we too often overlook - stress relief. While children might not communicate stress in the way most adults do, they are constantly internalizing elements of their environment. Play acts as a form of therapy, and participating in calm, facilitated play allows them to work through their stressors in a healthy, productive way. 4. Creativity and Imagination Creativity and Imaginations may seem like hallmarks of childhood, but they are important skills that are learned—not inherit. Play and playful learning, foster this sense of creativity, and allow children to navigate so many scenarios in their lives—both real and imagined. Whether they are pretending to be a doctor, acting like the mother to their teddy bear "babies", or flying a cardboard box airplane, children are acting as creative problem-solvers, and demonstrating the skills that come naturally to them. Likewise, they develop the ability to see potential in the world around them, while baking cookies with playdough, and turning blankets into capes. This imaginative play quickly forms the foundation of a healthy childhood, and sets them up to become creative, curious adults who can adapt to the world around them. 5. Critical Thinking and Problem Solving As children interact with the world around them, especially in ways that inspire their creativity and critical thinking skills, they learn to become effective problem solvers. From planting seeds in their community garden, to helping bandage and imaginary scrape, to reading about others' joys and pitfalls, they see cause and effect, and begin to notice both the patterns around them, and the consequences of actions, both simple and complex. They see connections between themselves and their surroundings, and the lives of those around them. They begin to predict outcomes, and start to consider a variety of choices and actions. These simple, but impactful, exercises are opportunities that guided, play-based learning present as a way of constantly and consistently developing the critical thinking skills of preschoolers, and lay the foundation for strong future problem solvers! Empowering Education Through Play Ultimately, parents want to ensure that their children have a happy, healthy educational experience. And while test scores and an ambition curriculum are often the focus of searches when looking at schools, the importance of play-based preschool programs cannot be underestimated. Students who begin their education in an environment of playful learning and discovery emerge as more confident, imaginative, socially aware individuals. These children continue to approach their learning with the critical thinking and communication skills that make them curious, well-rounded, and successful members of their communities. To learn more about the ways that a Friends' Central education empowers our youngest learners through play-based learning, families are invited to speak to an admissions counselor or visit the campus to explore all it has to offer. The science of child development points to three core principles that can guide what society needs to do to help children and families thrive. These include: Supporting responsive relationships Strengthening core life skills Reducing sources of stress Play in early childhood is an effective way of supporting all three of these principles. In this video, learn more about how play can foster children's resilience to hardship, and how the complex interactions involved when children play help build their brains. This year, Wisconsin's Collaborative Leadership Forum Preserving Early Childhood Conference (PEC) will focus on play, child-initiated learning, and developmentally appropriate learning. The conference will be held March 12-14 at the Madison Concourse Hotel. It will coincide with the Reggio Emilia Wonder of Learning exhibit. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction points to the importance of play as an integral way for young children to learn. Play is explicitly called out in the department's "Play is the Way" video, emphasizing the complex cognitive actions and communication that children are able to produce during play, all while meeting the standards. Meaningful learning that is child-initiated, respective of linguistic and cultural differences, and multi-sensory, can all be accomplished through the context of play. The benefits are shown to last through the school years (Ostroff 2012, Yogman, et al. 2018). In early childhood education, the concept of play does not mean every child is doing exactly the same thing. Children may need different supports, provided by knowledgeable early childhood educators, to individualize the benefits of play (Frost, Wortham, and Reifel 2012). In developing the Wisconsin Model Early Learning Standards, (WMELS) the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, along with the departments of Children and Families and Health Services, established Guiding Principles for educating young children. Two of the principles specifically speak to the importance of play and child-initiated learning and developmentally appropriate learning: "Expectations for children must be guided by knowledge of child growth and development" and "Children learn through play and the active exploration of their environment." From a developmental perspective, research also highlights the individualized need for rest for young children in early education environments, making learning more effective. (Harper 2018). Just like play, rest may mean different things. Some children may need time to nap while others may need some quiet time or be engaged in a quiet activity. Regardless of the mode, rest allows children to recharge. Additional information, including research and implementation of best practices surrounding play and individualized learning, will be addressed at PEC, which will feature Dr. Rachel White, Assistant Professor of Psychology, from Hamilton College, as the keynote speaker. PEC is for stakeholders - early childhood through higher education - who want to learn more about play, child-initiated learning, and developmentally appropriate learning, and to network with others across the state. For more information, visit the Department of Public Instruction Early Childhood web page. References Frost, Joe. L., Susan C. Wortham, and Stuart C. Reifel. 2012. Play and Child Development, 4 ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson. Harper, Amelia. 2018. "Research Ties Pre-K, Kindergarten Nap Time to Stronger Recall Skills." 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