



Championing Uninterrupted Play

By Cindy Heaney

"Trust the child."

Children thrive in all areas of development when play is the main venue for learning. As teachers, we know this to our very core and are dismayed when we see play being increasingly diminished, sidelined, and replaced with scheduled activities outside of school. Play is often misunderstood and therefore marginalized - relegated to a recreational role, allowing children to "blow off steam" or used to "fill time" between more structured, adult-centric - mistakenly understood as more valued - activities. While continuing to educate parents on the value of play outside of school is critical, I am proposing we, as teachers, revisit our school settings and see where we can make more room for play, growing a play-rich community that is a model for all of our stakeholders.

As Reggio-inspired schools, we are already well on our way to honoring play :

- Children's interests and skill development inform curriculum development at every stage in the process.
- Careful documentation of play and exploration support what teachers offer children for further provocation as areas of focus expand in the classroom.
- Topics of study come from the immediate environment and connect to children's lived experiences.
- Our spaces are outfitted with a range of open-ended materials that invite creativity and reinforce imaginative, unscripted play.
- We try to balance teacher-led moments with ample opportunities for free exploration, not valuing one over the other.
- And while all of that is happening, we are also instilling values that grow good citizens; caring for shared spaces and materials, personal items, and each other.

Getting it all right is a tall order ...

What, then, can teachers do to improve play opportunities for children?



Playing with symmetry with blocks and animals

1. Trust children to be curious, active agents in their own growth and development. When a child is ready, and free from scrutiny and pressure, they can conquer anything they set their mind to. Trust that the child knows best what's next and what is driving their play and learning. As teachers, it is our job to expose children to ideas, activities and new materials. It is the child's job to pick one up, turn it over in their mind, and make it their own (or not...yet).
2. Never underestimate the power of repetition and revisiting ~ of ideas, materials, activities, favorite stories, etc... Children need ample opportunities to work with ideas, and, through play, build an understanding of the world. Plain and simple, this takes TIME. Once classrooms are outfitted with materials that suit the particular children that inhabit it, changes should be made carefully and infrequently, respecting the ongoing work and exploration that children are doing. If children are repeating play themes over and over again, you are doing something right. Clearly, they are working something out, perhaps engaged with a play schema, even if it is not immediately obvious to us. Keep watching... the children will make their intentions known. And remember, adults may crave novelty far sooner than children.
3. Reassess your classroom schedule and routines. Is there a way to limit the number of transitions required in a day? Transitions interrupt time and segment our days. Fewer transitions mean larger swaths of time for uninterrupted play and exploration. Try a few things and tweak your schedule until it responds to the needs of your group. If the time set aside for play is longer, are you noticing the play deepen? Blocks of play time should be an hour or more, optimally, and not less than 45 minutes, excluding cleanup and transitions. Challenge yourself to see what a difference you can make, simply by providing more TIME.
4. Consider your role in children's play. Observe other teachers and ask that they observe you. When do you insert yourself in children's play? When is your participation an interruption? What is the purpose of your participation in that

moment? Is it necessary, or are the children doing fine on their own? Tell yourself this: “Not every moment needs to be a teachable moment.” More often than not, things sort themselves out just fine without us (perhaps even better!). Trust the process...



Acting out the 3 Billy Goats Gruff in their own style...

5. How do you observe and document children’s play without changing it? This is a big challenge! We want to capture what children are interested in, working on, and progressing with (or not) so that we can use that knowledge to build a responsive curriculum and classroom environment that supports every child. How do we do it without interrupting the play? Without shifting the play or stopping it? What observation and documentation techniques are least disruptive? Use those as often as possible.



6. In Reggio-inspired classrooms, it is important that teachers learn alongside children and grow themselves in equal measure. However, our engagement in

the learning process should be done with great care, allowing for the free-flow of ideas and theories as they arise—not a search for the “right answer.” Our involvement should be even more deeply considered when it comes to children’s play, which is sacrosanct and rarely requires our intervention unless safety is a concern.



Inventing a new way to embellish their playscape: velcroing the silks to a gym mat...

When we truly value play and put it at the center of our curriculum, giving it the time and space necessary for children to flourish, we see the results in big and small ways every single day. Teaching this way is hard work. It is also incredibly satisfying when we can teach through our beliefs and in a way that allows us to grow as teachers as much as the children do.

What will you do differently tomorrow? And the next day?

You believe in the power of play. Let your practices reflect it and see how far you go!

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Cindy Heaney has an M.S. in Child and Family Studies from Wheelock College. Cindy has worked in the field of early education for 39 years, continually learning (and re-learning!) lessons from the children in her care. Her extensive work with infants and toddlers taught her the significance of trust and how it must be reciprocal in a vibrant learning environment across all ages. Her work with preschoolers and young school-agers builds upon the values of joy, humor, respect and understanding in a classroom community. Cindy is currently a teacher in the Extended Day Program at Lincoln Nursery School and a strong advocate for play!