The Academics-Versus-Play Debate
by Rae Pica

Children are active, concrete, experiential learners who acquire information and knowledge with all of their senses. Studies have shown that:

- Movement is the young child's preferred mode of learning.
- Lessons that are physically experienced have more immediate and longer-lasting impact.
- The integration of body systems allows for optimal learning to take place.
- The more senses used in the learning process, the more information retained.
- Play is linked to greater creativity and problem solving, improved reading levels, and higher IQ scores.
- There is a strong correlation between the time children are most playful and the time when the brain is making the most connections.

Given all of that, it seems pretty clear that there should be no debate: play is far more appropriate for a young child's first formal school experiences than academics. Yet despite this information, the efforts of such groups as the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the fact that educators have for years emphasized the importance of educating the "whole child," preschoolers are now being required to do more and more seatwork. This includes producing worksheets that purport to show evidence of their learning, and following curriculums originally designated for kindergartners and even first-graders.

Why are schools devoted to making children simply sit still and learn? Part of the explanation comes from society's long-entrenched belief that the functions of the brain are more significant than the functions of the body. Moreover, we've labored for years under the misguided notion that the mind and body are separate entities. Thus, schools have insisted on training minds via the eyes and ears only.

In the past, based on what they knew of and observed in young children, early childhood teachers designed their programs to meet their students' developmental needs. Play and active learning were considered key tools to accommodate those needs and facilitate the children's education. Typical activities included:

- Sorting and stacking blocks and other manipulatives (mathematical knowledge).
- Singing and dancing, or acting out a story (emergent literacy).
- Growing plants from seeds, exploring the outdoors, and investigating at sand and water tables (science).
- Trying on various roles and interacting with one another at housekeeping and other dramatic-play centers (social studies).

Today, these types of lessons are steadily disappearing as the "earlier-is-better" syndrome takes hold, critically affecting the child's first experiences with formal education. Today, the curriculum once considered appropriate for first and second grades is being taught to children in kindergarten, and the kindergarten curriculum is foisted on children who are not yet five years old.

Even kindergarten through third-grade students should be doing less seatwork and more active learning, because, developmentally speaking, they're more like preschoolers than like their upper elementary counterparts. But instead of making active experiences a greater part
of the primary-grade classrooms, we’re instead making early education less developmentally appropriate for everyone, beginning in preschool.

However, recent brain research is confirming what many educators have believed all along: the mind and body are not separate entities. Moreover, not only do children learn by doing but also physical activity activates the brain much more so than does seatwork. While sitting increases fatigue and reduces concentration, movement feeds oxygen, water, and glucose to the brain, optimizing its performance. Moreover, learning by doing creates more neural networks in the brain and throughout the body, making the entire body a tool for learning. Active learning is also more enjoyable for young children.

You don’t have to worry that your child will fall behind if enrolled in a preschool that emphasizes play and discovery. Studies have determined that children enrolled in play-oriented preschools do not have a disadvantage over those who are enrolled in preschools focusing on early academics. One study, in fact, showed that there were neither short-term nor long-term advantages of early academics versus play, and that there were no distinguishable differences by first grade. The only difference was that the children who had experienced early academics were more anxious and less creative than their peers who had been in traditional, play-based preschools – a distinctive disadvantage. In another study, fourth-graders who had attended play-oriented preschools in which children often initiated their own activities had better academic performance than those who had attended academic-oriented preschools.

Obviously, then, when you visit preschools and interview teachers and directors, the word play should loom large at the top of your checklist!

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