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THE POWER OF PLAY

Construction Toys

Playing with construction toys is critical to children's overall play repertoire because it encourages manual dexterity, hand-eye coordination, and imaginary thinking. It is important that infant-toddler construction sets include large-scale, chunky pieces that are easily manipulated by small fingers and fit together easily but snugly. Construction sets that include figures of different shapes, sizes, and colors help children to begin differentiating objects on the basis of these distinctions. Pieces that fit together in a variety of ways help to develop cognitive flexibility and creative thinking. As well, pieces resembling concrete objects in the real world support children's early attempts at pretending. Research has found that pretend play both reflects and promotes the development of representational thought in children (i.e. actions stem from ideas rather than concrete objects). This type of thinking forms the foundation for later language awareness, understanding, and use.



THE POWER OF PLAY

Cause-and-Effect Toys

Cause-and-effect toys require children's active involvement. That is, such toys involve an action on the part of children that results in an immediate reaction in the toy. Such an immediate response by the toy serves as a natural, positive reward for children and increases the likelihood that they will repeat the action. This repetition is necessary to realize their actions impact the world around them and this leads to a sense of mastery and control.



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positive toy series

Written by Shelley Bergman, M.Sc., Ph.D., as part of the TLC3 Project (1999-2002). This project was sponsored, in part, by the University of Calgary Child Care Centre and the Hinks-Dellcrest Institute in Toronto and made possible through the generous funding and support of the Lawson Foundation. Adapted for use by The Calgary Children's Initiative

THE POWER OF PLAY

Nesting, Stacking Toys

Nesting and stacking toys help develop an understanding of ordering or sequencing. In other words, the child learns to order objects from smallest to largest with each smaller object fitting into or stacking onto the next larger object. Understanding sequencing is important because it is the precursor to (1) thinking in a logical, step-like way (i.e. "I need to do this before I can do that"), (2) classifying objects and seeing patterns within those objects (i.e., smaller block fits within next smaller block but not vice versa), and (3) engaging in numerical reasoning (i.e. 1 comes before 2 and 1 is less quantity than 2). Understanding the concept of sequencing is critical to young children's later organizational thinking. Mastering this understanding within the natural, fun, and non-threatening environment of play provides an ideal way for children to explore these concepts.



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THE POWER OF PLAY

Symbolic or Pretend Play Toys

Symbolic or pretend play, whereby children transform an external reality to suit their own purposes and desires, is one of the most fascinating and well-researched areas in the developmental play literature. One of the reasons it is such a popular topic to study is its versatility and adaptable nature. There are many forms of pretend play that change depending on children's age, availability of time, space, and resources, and social/cultural values and practices. Regardless of the form it takes, pretend play has been positively linked to children's (1) ability to manipulate mental ideas and images (i.e., representational thinking), (2) social awareness and understanding (i.e., participating in cultural roles, routines and activities, viewing the world from another person's point of view), (3) early language/story knowledge and use (i.e., literacy skills), and (4) emotional health and well-being (i.e., using play as a non-threatening way to work through emotionally charged issues). Most experts in the field agree that pretend play is a special form of play because it allows children to transcend the physical limits of their reality and move within the "field of meanings" to explore new thoughts, feelings, actions, and identities. This type of play activity appears to be integrally linked to many critical areas of their development.



THE POWER OF PLAY

Educational Toys

Educational toys appear to be appealing to a growing number of well-meaning parents wishing to expose their children to early concepts believed to advance their development prior to their entry into formal schooling. Many parents have been disappointed when the new electronic toy they bought containing various nursery songs, the alphabet, numbers, shapes, and colors is discarded or forgotten by their youngster in favor of toys and play materials that appear to be of no real obvious educational value. What parents need to understand is that children will not play with such toys if the work-pleasure ratio contained in these toys weigh too heavily in favor of work. Toys that allow preschool concepts to emerge naturally during the course of play (e.g., counting spaces while playing a game) and that emphasize the more pleasurable sensory, manipulative, and imaginative aspects of the toy over the educational aspects are more likely to engage and maintain young children's attention and interest. This sustained interest and attention is necessary for children to realize the developmental benefits (i.e., increased understanding of basic concepts) of such educational toys.



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THE POWER OF PLAY

Action-Play Toys

In action play, children's primary purpose is to explore and manipulate toys using gross motor action (e.g., running, riding, throwing, rolling). Young children learn a great deal about themselves, their competencies, and the physical world of objects and motion through these large-muscle play activities. By conquering their physical body, learning to coordinate their movements, and using these movements to cause certain reactions in the external, physical world, children begin to perceive similarities and distinctions between themselves and that world. So, as they act on the world, they gradually build a greater understanding and knowledge of that world. That is, their mental conceptions of objects and their functions/meanings become increasingly elaborated and differentiated. As well, as they move about they formulate naïve theories about space and direction such as up/down, in/out, near/far, in-between, around, and separate/together. Action play, which is an important part of toddlers' and preschoolers' larger repertoire of play behavior, leads to a sense of mastery and competence which, in turn, motivates them to continue to engage in it in order reap these developmental benefits.



THE POWER OF PLAY

Game Play

Game playing is one of the more advanced forms of play that preschool children engage in due to the advanced thinking required for children to be aware of and adhere to a general set of predefined, logical rules that serve as an organizing guide for the play. In other words, the rules in game play take precedence over idiosyncratic play needs, goals, and meanings which is more prevalent in other forms of play. For example, in pretend play children explore, manipulate, and transform toys according to their personal whims in order to bring personal meaning and satisfaction to their play. Unlike pretend play, game play requires children to subordinate these personal wishes and needs to more general rules and goals established by and with other people. Once the rules have been set, any deviation from these rules is considered unacceptable and may lead to a disruption of play or rejection of the deviating player. Game play utilizes rules so that all the players have a mutual sense of purpose and direction. In general, the purpose of game play is to use rules and strategy to achieve a mutually agreed upon goal (e.g., win the game). Achieving these goals while abiding to game rules helps children to (1) suppress their own personal desires and needs in favor of those negotiated and established by the group, (2) delay any immediate gratification to achieve a specific outcome or goal, (3) focus, plan, problem-solve, make decisions, and strategize, and (4) consider multiple sources of information and perspectives prior to taking a move. As children practice using these various skills and abilities in a game situation, they become more competent and confident and, in doing so, are able to apply these newfound capabilities to increasingly diverse and challenging situations, both play-related and otherwise.

