

Education 1999

Play helps children to develop at all levels

Children learn to problem solve, learn new concepts and stimulate the imagination

During a routine visit to my neighbour, my attention was caught by her imaginative son as he set up a pretend shop in his living room, equipped to sell imaginary hamburgers and French fries for the acceptable price of \$5.

Fictitious Coca-Cola was a bargain at thirty-nine cents a can. What struck me, as an educator, about the boy's imaginary scenario was not so much its childlike ingeniousness, but the fact that it provided him with a meaningful situation to practice counting, to hone his social skills, to enter into the world of adult role-playing, and, last but not least, to engage him in decision making.

How many hamburgers were to be made for each person? Should the hamburger be prepared first or simultaneously with the French fries? And so on.

Play is the primary means by which children develop at all levels - physically, cognitively, emotionally, socially. Play provides the appropriate context for learning concepts, for developing problem solving skills and for stimulating the imagination.

Play is not just fun. It is nature's way of allowing children to learn experientially. No wonder, then, that parents and educators have become so interested to play as an educational process.

Indeed, more and more schools are adopting play-based curricula and methodologies designed to stimulate intellectual growth naturally and efficiently.

This usually involves the use of materials that the children can manipulate directly. So, even though such classrooms may seem chaotic on the surface, there is method to the madness. In any game format, the child is interacting purposefully with peers and deploying both conscious and unconscious strategies for solving some specific problem.

Through the noise and commotion, real learning is taking



Allowing your child to set up shop will improve his/her problem solving skills.

place, as worldwide educational research has documented.

Children reared in a play environment score consistently higher than their peers on all tests of academic abilities. Remember that a carefully constructed play environment will ensure that each child has an opportunity to develop and practice the skills required for progress in language and math.

This is the key to an effective play program. In 1985, the Ministry of Education published a document entitled *Shared Discovery*, which acknowledges the value of play. "Children learn naturally through play. For this reason, the primary learning environment should encourage children to play either individually or in groups."

You can create situations for educational play right in the home. Here are some activities that are appropriate for your

3-5-year-old:

1. Developing science skills is easy when you provide your child with a bucket of water and objects such as a cork, a rock, a plastic boat, etc. Watch as your child makes discoveries relating to these materials - which objects float and why?

2. Help your child to set up shop with household objects - boxes, toys, dolls, plastic dishes and cutlery, etc. Watch as your child improves his/her problem solving skills. He/she will have to decide what to put on sale, how much to charge, how to organize the lay-out, etc.

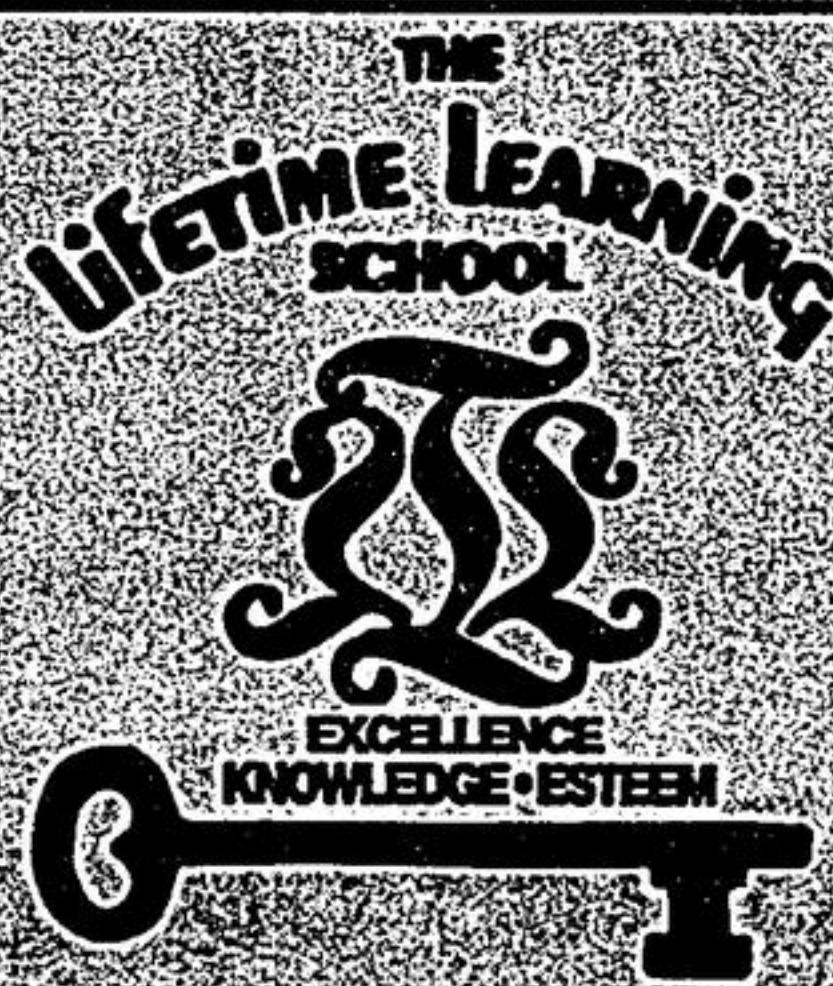
3. Create puppets from paper lunch bags decorated with crayons or markers. Encourage your child to use these puppets to put on a play. This experience will stimulate his/her imagination, develop language skills and entertain the household.

4. Stimulate your child's artistic skills by giving him/her your old clothes, a mirror and art materials. Your child will paint his/her self-portrait in an creative way. What type of character will he/she take on?

5. Provide your child with large boxes and containers so that spatial awareness can develop as he/she builds a fantastic castle or fort.

Children will create their own play environment. A child's imagination is rich with fertile ideas. As the famous psychologist Carl Gustav Jung stated (1923), "Without this playing with fantasy, no creative work has ever yet come to birth. The debt we owe to the play of imagination is incalculable."

This article was submitted by Dr. Gary Hunt, a University of Toronto and senior educational advisor to Grade Expectations Learning Centres.



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