



CENTRE COUNTY PREVENTION COALITION
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March 2009 – Play: Not Just Fun and Games

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At 9:50 am, children at the “Co-Op” are busily stacking blocks, drawing on blueprint paper and pouring water through funnels at the water table. “Watch out! Here comes the lava,” shouts one of the children. A small group is preparing bouquets for a princess wedding while another child is talking to felted snow fairies as she weaves them in and out of fabric-draped branches adorned with crystal beads. Everyone is lost in their own world of imagination, exploration and self-expression. A teacher sings, “Ten minutes ‘til clean up time.”

Five year old Jolie earnestly responds, “I can’t yet because first I have to work on this important thing that has to go in here like this. . .” her voice trailing off as she bends to pick up an uncooked noodle that has fallen under the table. She has a basket full of noodles, sparkly pipe cleaners, a pile of cotton batting and a blue scale lined up on what had been the nature table just twenty minutes before.

By the end of clean up, the noodles are on the scale, the batting is draped over a felt bird and the pipe cleaners are loosely twisted around the scale’s top. Ten minutes later, it’s no wonder Jolie says she’s tired and needs a snack for “new energy.” Play is hard work!

While it seems obvious that children’s play is their work and that having fun can promote learning, there’s more to it than meets the eye. Dr. James Johnson, professor-in-charge of Early Childhood Education at Penn State, says that play contributes to the emotional, cognitive, physical, social and over-all development of the child. He adds that teachers and parents can help children reap the promises of healthy self-directed play, namely: knowing one’s self and others better, heightened creativity and imagination and problem-solving skills, greater emotional and personal and spiritual well-being, self-motivation and will- power to control one’s experiences, achieving and maintaining a sense of contentment, having confidence and a good moral compass and, finally, being a compassionate and a loving person. All these promises are possible for our children when the power of play is unleashed, and harnessed.

Providing opportunities for children to engage in rich, imaginative play doesn’t have to be costly or require a full schedule of play dates. Simple household props, toys that have open-ended or multiple uses and some quiet time and space are often all that’s needed for a child to launch into rich, self-sustained play. Quality children’s literature is also an excellent springboard for imaginative play.

For more information on the importance of play visit: www.earlychildhoodnews.com, www.aap.org (American Academy of Pediatrics, keyword: play), www.npr.org (Article: Old-Fashioned Play Builds Serious Skills.) The public is also invited to attend, “The Power of Play” at Schlow Regional Library on Sunday, March 29th from 2:00 – 3:30 p.m. The free program is sponsored by The Cooperative Playschool of State College and the library. Info at: www.cooperativeplayschool.com.

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