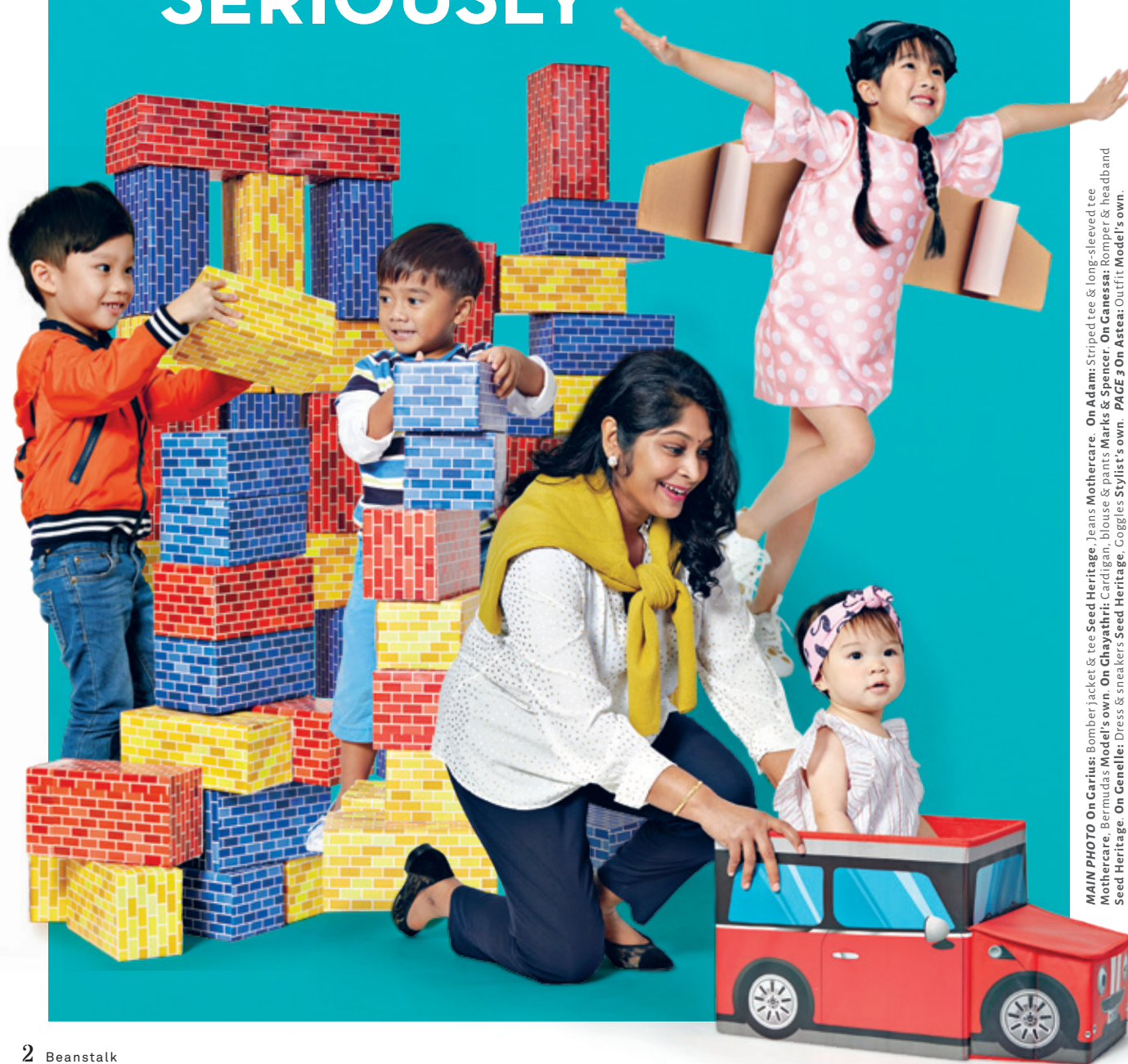


TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROFESSIONALS AND PARENTS DISCUSS THE WHY, WHAT AND HOW OF PLAY IN CHILDREN'S HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT.



MAIN PHOTO: On Garius: Bomber jacket & tee Seed Heritage; Jeans Mothercare; On Adam: Striped tee & long-sleeved tee Mothercare; Bermudas Model's own. On Ghayathri: Cardigan, blouse & pants Marks & Spencer. On Ganessa: Romper & headband Seed Heritage. On Genelle: Dress & sneakers Seed Heritage; Coggles; Stylist's own. PAGE 3 On Astea: Outfit Model's own.

A growing number of educators and researchers are now extolling the benefits of play-based learning and its positive impact on children's holistic development.

Research continues to build on the works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, who both believed that children discover, understand and make sense of the world through play. There are also several studies evaluating the value and impact of play-based learning, prompting ongoing discussions on our roles as educators and parents.

Educator Janet Moyles, Professor Emeritus, Anglia Ruskin University, makes the case that parents, policy-makers and practitioners need to now think of playful pedagogy rather than just 'teaching', and embrace a whole different range of deeper learning and teaching practices to help young children build 21st-century skills.

Beanstalk spoke with EC practitioners and parents to get their views on how they can support their children as they learn to play, and play to learn.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE "PLAY"?

Astea Tay: I believe play is something that children do naturally. It is anything that children find fun and enjoyable.

Ghayathri Rajandeeran: Play is intrinsic in children. It is any activity that the children are observed to be engaged in and enjoying themselves, and it is how they discover themselves.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF PLAY FOR CHILDREN?

Astea: Research tells us that play is the way children learn. It is a channel through which they acquire information and develop their understanding of the world around them. Through play, children are able to break down and understand complex concepts. For example, playing with LEGO® bricks and building blocks



“ Play is a channel through which children acquire information and develop their understanding of the world around them.

MS ASTEA TAY, 28

Educator, Between Two Trees Preschool



THE SCIENCE OF PLAY

CHILDREN WHO 'PLAY PRETEND' ARE FOUND TO BE BETTER AT THINKING ABOUT DIFFERENT POSSIBILITIES, ACCORDING TO A STUDY BY THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA AT BERKELEY. THE IDEA IS THAT CHILDREN AT PLAY ARE LIKE PINT-SIZED SCIENTISTS TESTING THEORIES.

give young children the opportunity to acquire mathematical concepts and skills such as quantity, measurement and spatial awareness. With this foundation, they will then be better equipped to solve fraction questions and draw models in the formal school years.

Ghayathri: Play develops gross and fine motor skills. It also boosts children's confidence and social skills when they are given opportunities to learn to interact, take turns and communicate with other children. Research studies have also shown that play lowers stress levels and this creates a favourable condition for learning.

PARENTS, DO YOU AGREE WITH THE EC PRACTITIONERS' VIEWS ON PLAY?

Herman Adam Litak: Absolutely! I believe that having fun through play is one of the best ways to learn and grow. In fact, as a trainer, I find games effective in imparting

knowledge and retaining attention, even in adults. Play is essential for children to discover their physical and emotional selves, as well as the environment. It helps children regulate or manage their behaviour and builds confidence. It allows them to experiment with different techniques and interests, and also bond with loved ones.

Ma Xiu Li: A resounding yes! Play is an important part of a child's learning and development. I believe that learning should be made fun at their age. My children look forward to preschool and are motivated to learn because they associate learning with play. It is important for children to make that association as it will lay the foundation for lifelong learning. Compared to rote learning, play can help children relax and make the learning process more enjoyable and memorable. Children absorb information better, and remember the skills and concepts taught more easily.

HOW DO YOU CREATE PLAY LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT HOME?

Xiu Li: I go along with my children's interests and preferences, and follow their lead. I source for play ideas from Pinterest, educational blogs and Instagram. For me, it is important to provide my children with a variety of play experiences which are also interesting and enjoyable. We set up a "clinic" at home for the children to role play as doctors and patients. We also



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MR HERMAN ADAM LITAK, 42

Training Manager, Father of a 3-year-old boy



LEARN ABOUT PLAY

EDUCATORS CAN SIGN UP FOR THESE PLAY-CENTRIC CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (CPD) COURSES AT ONE@ECDA.

- Learning through Play: Building Competence and Skills of New Early Childhood Educators in Facilitating Play
- Harnessing Play for Intentional Teaching
- Learning Numeracy through Play

provide them with kitchen sets and toy food to run a "restaurant".

My spouse and I are mindful of giving our children alone time for free play, while also engaging them in family activities such as board games, craftwork, jigsaw puzzles and hide-and-seek. Even mundane activities can be turned into fun play experiences; one of our favourite things to do together is singing and dancing during the children's bath time.

Herman: Children are generally attracted to the visual and sensory cues that toys bring. We play together with my son's toys, which are changing as he grows

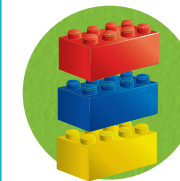
older. At present, he has developed a strong liking for toy cars. We experiment with different ways of making the cars jump and go faster, for instance by using books to serve as ramps.

Besides playing with toys, we also enjoy running in open spaces, playing in the swimming pool, and kicking and throwing balls. Occasionally, I bring him to playgrounds and let him freely enjoy the swings, slides and climbing apparatus. This quality time together helps us bond, and at the same time, builds his physical strength and reflexes.

“My children look forward to preschool and are motivated to learn because they associate learning with play. It is important for children to make that association as it will lay the foundation for lifelong learning.”

MS MA XIU LI, 34

Homemaker, Mother of Genelle Lim, 6, and Garius Lim, 4



BUILDING BLOCKS

Playing with LEGO® bricks does more than help children acquire a strong mathematical background; it also develops critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This was the aim of an eight-week LEGO® project undertaken by K2 children at Far Eastern Kindergarten.

“We thought it would be meaningful and enjoyable for children to use LEGO® bricks to solve real-world problems, in order to make learning relevant,” Mrs Ang-Oh Chui Hwa, ECDA Fellow and Centre Principal, tells *Beanstalk*.

K2 children were tasked with identifying problem areas at the centre. They then brainstormed and constructed design solutions using LEGO® bricks and other resources.

One problem that came up was children forgetting to flush the toilet after use. Using LEGO® bricks, a littleBits circuit and sensors, the children created an eye-catching sign that would light up whenever they flushed the toilet. To prevent school bags from falling off the open shelf, the children also built a "spinning door"-type device made of LEGO® that functions as a divider and stopper for the shelf.

By entrusting them to resolve problems in their immediate vicinity, the children felt empowered and gained confidence. “It is a natural platform for character development,” adds Mrs Ang-Oh, as children also pick up important values such as teamwork, perseverance and creativity through this process.



THIS SPREAD On Herman: Shirt & tee Mothercare, Shorts Seed Heritage. On Genelle: Blouse & dungaree dress Gingersnaps, Headband & sandals Seed Heritage. On Xiu Li: Peplum blouse Seed Heritage, pants Marks & Spencer. On Garius: Pullover Marks & Spencer, Chinos & sneakers Seed Heritage.



“Assessing children's learning and development in play settings offers rich insights and enables educators to plan appropriate child-centred activities.”

MS GHAYATHRI RAJANDEERAN, 35
Principal, Summer Montessori



EDUCATORS, HOW DO YOU FACILITATE CHILDREN'S LEARNING THROUGH PLAY AT YOUR CENTRE?

Ghayathri: We have a combination of free and purposeful play. While free play gives children the freedom to choose their play and how they wish to direct the activity, we balance this with play activities with specific objectives in mind. Classroom activities are lessons structured to achieve purposeful learning objectives and enable children to acquire concepts and achieve a deeper understanding of the topic.

For example, when learning about parts of the human body, kindergarten children are encouraged to play with and manipulate materials such as X-ray films, light boxes and magnifying glasses, while the educators ask open-ended questions to extend their exploration. At the pre-nursery level, the children express themselves through role-play and songs.

Astea: At our centre, we adopt a project-based approach to learning, which enables children to actively investigate and discover ideas and concepts in a fun way. The N2 class recently carried out a project about the army with various hands-on activities. They engaged in role play, sang army songs, tasted combat rations, designed a standard obstacle course and created origami jockey caps.

Different aspects of the curriculum, such as mathematics and literacy, were incorporated into these play experiences. For instance, the children practised counting every day, while doing jumping jacks, wrote or traced simple words like "cap" and "hat" on their project cards, and discussed healthy living in the military.

WHAT SHOULD WE BEAR IN MIND WHEN PROVIDING PLAY EXPERIENCES FOR CHILDREN?

Ghayathri: As much as possible, we should try and integrate the various learning or developmental areas into children's play to provide them with a well-rounded and holistic experience — language & literacy, numeracy, socio-emotional skills, motor skills and creative thinking. As educators, assessing children's learning and development in play settings will offer rich insights to their developmental progress and enable us to plan appropriate child-centred activities.

Astea: It is important for teachers and parents to have an open mind towards play, and support their children's preferences. At times, they should also get involved in their children's play either to facilitate or just be a participant. Adults can learn alongside the children when playing or working on a project together. I didn't know much about life in an army camp until I embarked on the project with my students. Above all, have fun!

ON COVER On Alex: Sweater, shirt & chinos Marks & Spencer. On Ganessa: Top & shorts Gingersnaps. Headband Seed Heritage. On Adam: Striped tee & long-sleeved tee Mothercare. Bermudas Model's own. Sneakers Seed Heritage. On Genelle: Tee Mothercare. On Ghayathri: Cardigan & Blouse Marks & Spencer. PAGE 6 On Ghayathri: Tee Mothercare. Blouse Marks & Spencer.

AN EXPERT'S PERSPECTIVE

DR HANIN HUSSAIN EXPANDS ON THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PLAY AND HOW THEY CAN HELP CHILDREN EXPERIENCE THE JOY OF LEARNING.



HOW CAN WE RECOGNISE PLAY WHEN WE SEE IT?

We can recognise play when we see children having fun or being really engaged in what they are doing. At the same time, it is not the activity that defines whether something is play; it is how children feel about the activity. The more autonomy and control children feel they have over an activity, the more they will "own" or engage with the activity and judge it as play.

WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING EXPERIENCES?

There are two main types: free (or unstructured) play, and structured play. In the former, children have the autonomy to choose what to do, when and how to do it, and who to do it with. There is little adult intervention, and children have a sense that they are in control of their own experiences and the learning that comes with it.

Structured play has more structure and adult involvement. These include setting learning goals and objectives, as well as concepts and skills for children to acquire. Children still count it as play because they are given choices. Even direct teaching, when delivered in a playful manner, can be considered structured play. As adults, we need to balance

the type of play experiences we provide children with.

WHY IS FREE PLAY ALSO IMPORTANT?

With autonomy and control over their choices, children learn to make decisions and take responsibility for them. Playing with others fosters their social as well as conflict-resolution skills. Every time children engage in pretend play, or make up a story or game, they are exercising their critical thinking as well as their imagination and creativity. And the more children make mistakes during play, and learn from their mistakes as they work through the problems, the more resilient and confident they become in dealing with failures.

HOW CAN ADULTS EXTEND CHILDREN'S PLAY REPERTOIRE?

- Provide children with lots of opportunities to play.
- Encourage different types of play including playing alone, playing with friends and playing with adults.
- Provide a variety of resources and materials for children to engage with, such as used plastic bottles, milk cartons, scarves and even natural materials with endless possibilities. Include sand and water play, playing with dough and constructive and manipulative materials like building blocks and puzzles.

WHAT DO KIDS THINK?

A big takeaway from *Beanstalk's* conversation with the adults is that when it comes to play, more is better in terms of quantity and variety. Siblings Genelle and Garius Lim, both students at Summer Montessori, agree!

“I have a great a time playing board games with my family, and running around the playground with my friends. It's fun!”

GENELLE LIM, 6

“Sometimes I ride my tricycle by myself. Other times, I tell funny jokes to my *jie jie* (elder sister) or play with my toy cars with her. I also like playing together with my teachers.”

GARIUS LIM, 4

- Encourage plenty of free play where children are given the freedom to choose the type of play, how they want to play and who they want to play with. Adults can provide a safe and secure environment with the necessary space and materials.
- Ensure a safe and secure environment for children to explore freely and confidently, feel supported.



Dr Hanin Hussain

Lecturer, Early Childhood and Special Needs Education Academic Group, National Institute of Education

Dr Hussain's previous teaching experiences include teaching in early childhood settings in New Zealand and at a primary school in Singapore. She believes that teaching practices should focus on experiences that are relevant and meaningful for children, and provide them with opportunities to play and interact with people, places, materials and ideas.