



The Seriousness of Play

Do parents and educators see eye-to-eye on the benefits of play for pre-schoolers? *Beanstalk* talks to parents Winston Ng, Gillian Chan and Thangam Nareshkumar, and their children's educators, Kartina Bte Sudirman and Janice Chua.

PHOTOS BY EALBERT HO & TAN KAY HIAN

Parents, what is your definition of "play"?
Thangam: When children are at play, they should be doing something that they enjoy, that [has not been] forced upon them, and has been ideally created or invented by them.

Gillian: To me, play is all about having fun and learning from the process at the same time.

What lessons or values do you think children can learn through play?

Winston: Naomi usually plays with her older sister, Nicolle, who is eight. I find that through playing, they develop social skills and critical thinking. Don't underestimate little children — they form their own social networks just like adults!

Gillian: At home, we have Lego sets, cooking toys, board games, jigsaw puzzles, musical instruments, art and craft materials, etc. Sometimes my kids make their own toys out of recycled paper. The variety of toys keeps them occupied, and it is interesting to see how creative and imaginative they can get with these.

Thangam: Abbeimanyu likes to pretend-play with his younger sister, Aanyaa, who is two. One of their favourite games is to imitate my husband and I, and act as 'parents' to their dolls. For example, they will say things like "Shh!" or "Don't do that!" to their dolls, just like what we often say to them! It shows that they have registered what we teach them. Sometimes, Abbeimanyu prefers to play alone with his cars, trains and action figures while Aanyaa amuses herself with her toy kitchen and Barbie dolls.

Educators, do you have a similar view of the term?

Kartina: Yes! I define "play" as an activity

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// Janice Chua

that is child-directed, enjoyable and spontaneous. Some parents may think that playing with toys or running around the playground with friends is not as essential as learning how to read, add or subtract. However, I believe it is through play that most of our children's early learning is achieved.

Janice: Play activities should be relevant and meaningful for children in that they are able to relate the activity to their everyday lives. For instance,

when we were talking about transportation, we had our children at the centre wash a real car while we showed them the basic parts of the car.

There are different domains of child development — physical, cognitive, language and social-emotional. How is play incorporated at your centre to support each domain?

Kartina: At PCF Chong Pang, we have an indoor piazza made up of various play areas. For example at the art studio, children can paint objects or mould



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 NAOMI, 6



Naomi with classmates at her school's water play area.



PCF Chong Pang kids playing with coloured salt at the light box area.



Ameera (left) and Ellie, playmates at PMI@East.



clay to build up their finger dexterity and fine motor skills. Cognitive development is also stimulated when they explore what happens if they mix colours or use different art techniques. The light box area is a wonderful way to learn about shapes, colours and shadows, and to expand their vocabulary. As for social-emotional development, the more children play together, the better they can get along with one another.

Janice: All of the developmental domains can also be integrated in one activity. For example, at PMI@East we organise cooking 'classes' in which children make food like pizzas and cookies. Reading the recipes introduces them to new words, while numeracy concepts are learned by measuring the ingredients. Steps like kneading the dough and stirring the mixture involve physical movement. And interpersonal skills are facilitated through role-play as the children pretend to be waiters, customers and cashiers.

Is outdoor play as important as indoor play?

Janice: Definitely, if not more important, because children's sensorial, hands-on experiences are mostly outdoors. Instead of just seeing, for example, pictures of snails in books, they can actually see real snails in the garden. My centre has an outdoor playground consisting of equipment such as tire swings, monkey bars, a trampoline and a sandpit. We let our kids play outside for one hour each day.

Kartina: I believe that learning does not have to be confined to the classroom. At my centre, we have twice-weekly Physical Education lessons in which the children navigate obstacle courses to stimulate gross motor skill development. Numeracy lessons are also conducted outdoors where we use the environment to teach new concepts. For instance, children can use leaves, flowers and twigs to create their own ABAB patterns [a pattern composed of two alternating variables, which plays an important part in developing numeracy and thinking process].

Parents, do you place equal emphasis on outdoor play?

Thangam: Yes, although we only go out on weekends when my husband and I are not at work. We often go to the East Coast Park and cycle or walk on the beach.

Winston: Outdoor play can be fun and educational, too. I recently brought Naomi



Thangam Nareshkumar
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ABBEIMANYU, 4

on a trail hike at MacRitchie Reservoir. She fell in love with the place after seeing squirrels, snakes and even a huge monitor lizard!

Thangam: Indoor playgrounds are a good alternative to outdoor ones. They have contained and padded play areas, so kids are safer and less prone to injury. Whenever I take my children to an indoor playground, they can easily spend half a day there.

How much time do you allocate for play?

Winston: I don't stipulate an exact amount of time. I have a pact with Naomi — as long as she finishes her homework, she can play all she wants.

Gillian: I feel that it is important for Naomi to enjoy her childhood and [to] keep playtime as the main part of her life for now. But as with her older sister, her playtime will likely be limited to weekends once she starts primary school.

Thangam: Abbeimanyu is only four, so every time is still like playtime for him. When I ask him, "What did you do in school today?", his usual answer is "I played." That will probably change as he grows older. The challenge

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//Winston Ng

then will be how to make sure he enjoys his schoolwork as much as his playtime.

Educators, do you think parents are becoming more aware of the importance of play for their children?

Janice: Yes, based on my experience with parents at my centre. We maintain regular contact with parents not just when they drop off and pick up their kids from the centre. We also keep in touch with parents through our six-monthly parent-teacher meetings, quarterly newsletters and fortnightly class notes. We use these opportunities to show parents photos and other documentation of our play activities, so they are now more knowledgeable about the benefits of play.

What tips can you give to parents on extending learning through play in the home environment?

Kartina: Let play ideas develop naturally; there's no need to overthink them. Use things available around the house as teaching aids, such as socks for 'matching' lessons or household items for a treasure hunt. Through play, enjoyment and curiosity for learning can be cultivated. These will then shape the child's attitude towards learning. ♥



A toy cash register at PCF Chong Pang's dramatic play area.



Putting the Joy of Play into Learning

Dr Catherine Donahue, Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education at Wheelock College, USA, on the value of play.

What is play? Play is the way a child engages with his or her environment to learn through exploration and experimentation, questioning and hypothesising. It is one of the most important experiences children can have to promote their development and learning.



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THE EVOLVING COMPLEXITY OF PLAY REFLECTS THE CHILD'S CHANGING COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT.

//Dr Catherine Donahue

How does play promote learning in young children?

Play develops from birth along a continuum and in stages. During the pre-school years, an infant's play behaviour progresses from visual and tactile exploration to trial-and-error exploration to experimentation to symbolic play (using objects to represent something else). The evolving complexity of play reflects the child's changing cognitive development. Play also provides the foundation for learning mathematics, science, physics, language and reading. It can address several curriculum areas in a positive and age-appropriate way.

Are there any 'best practices' in terms of incorporating play to encourage children's learning and development?

Open-ended play activities — both indoors and outdoors, such as with water and sand, or block and dramatic play — provide opportunities for children to work at their own pace, to question and create new strategies to solve problems.

What are some practical strategies for parents and educators to support children's learning through play?

Observe the child and match his or her emerging abilities with activities that challenge his or her thinking. That provides opportunities for practice learning. Adults can guide the child's play by allowing him or her to engage with the material, asking questions ("What would happen if you _____?") or extending play with additional props.

Can you suggest some cheap and easily-accessible play materials that parents and educators can provide for children?

Look for materials that allow the child to direct his or her play, explore and experiment, and that invite active engagement. Examples include blocks, paint supplies, housekeeping toys, farm sets and Lego sets. ♥

