

Play is the Best Teacher by Rise Richardson Village School Director

Ever since President Lyndon Johnson created Head Start over fifty years ago as part of the War on Poverty, studies have proven that preschool prepares children for kindergarten and beyond. Because of that, President Obama and many state governors have been working toward the goal of universal preschool, so all children are equally ready for kindergarten.

Accepting the value of preschool, we need to ask the question: What is the content of preschool that really prepares a child for kindergarten, kicking off their whole future of learning?

This is a question that was our focus as a school when we opened our doors in 1989, and continues to be a question that we keep in the forefront of our work with children. We sought a balance in education, recognizing that many of us experienced an overemphasis on academic learning in our own education, to the detriment of our social, emotional and physical development.

We have learned, over the past 27 years, that the most valuable preschool learning takes place when children are playing together. In play, children learn to communicate, make friends and solve conflicts, develop imagination, and engage in a myriad of pre-academic activities that prepare the foundation for math, reading, writing, science and more.

At the Village School, play is the center of the preschool curriculum. When they are playing, preschool children are learning at an accelerated pace in three central areas: physical, emotional and intellectual.

- Physical development: they are developing large and small motor skills, by climbing trees and monkey bars, by stacking blocks, by sledding and jumping, by painting, by holding crayons and using scissors. At the 'media table', they learn to pour, measure, and to handle beans, seeds, sand, and water. By watching each other and the adults around them, they imitate and practice new skills. They are learning to inhabit their growing body and use it as an effective instrument.
- Emotional development: Children learn social skills and communication in the constant interaction and negotiation with other children, and from the encouragement and example of the adults around them. Imaginative play, such as dress up and dramatic play, feeds the emerging feelings. Learning self-help skills, such as putting on their coats themselves, fosters confidence and independence. Art and music feed the imagination and the emotional life.
- Intellectual development: In play, children count, sort, rehearse stories, learn language, and enact their version of the world around them. At this age, children learn from “hand to head,” so that memory is permanently imprinted as a result of any physical activity. Mental capacity is increased as children explore the world around them, take in a variety of new impressions and make sense of them. The attention span grows as play deepens, and the focus extends to longer periods of time.

Teachers are careful not to interrupt playtime. It is during this time that children explore the classroom, interact with peers, learn to solve conflicts, learn to share toys and make friends. Teachers observe, listen, help resolve conflicts, redirect if necessary, and ask open ended questions to ignite the thinking process. The classroom is set up to facilitate imaginative play with a dress up and pretend kitchen area, media table, block area, puppet center, baby and family play area, and a natural tree-lined outdoor space.

We have seen that outdoor play is essential in preschool (and throughout childhood). The children play outdoors every day for an extended time period. Whether rolling in leaves in the fall, sledding in the winter or looking for bugs in the spring, outdoors is where preschoolers love to be! They love to run, get pushed on the swings, dig in the sand, climb the play structure and hang from the monkey bars. They are learning how to use their bodies in space. Just as they enter into make-believe in the classroom, they continue to engage in make-believe outside. Make-believe is an essential part of the process of building imagination and growing the mind.

You may ask- What about academics? When you watch 4 or 5 year-old children, you can see their minds are very active, taking in new information and making sense of it, every day, all the time. There are no barriers to their learning. It is so natural, so invisible, that we almost don't see it. They are doing math during cooking, at the sand table, at snack. They are engaged in literacy when hearing stories daily, sharing books in the quiet reading area. The repetition of the Story of the Week allows them to internalize the story, learn a sequence and follow plot. They love time with their Reading Buddies, listening as a book is read to them. They already love to read and do math, without having to sit down and receive formal instruction.

Play is the precursor of academic learning. The give and take of idea sharing, the seeking to satisfy curiosity, the mutual exploration of a topic or question- all have their roots in play. We all want children to be lifelong learners, explorers with unending curiosity- we see this happen when they extend their love of play to love of learning, as they move from preschool into kindergarten and beyond. It's our job as educators (and parents) to make learning as much fun and as natural as play.

The Village School provides a warm, safe, supportive, nurturing preschool environment for three, four and five year old children to grow and become themselves. Teachers are facilitators, gardeners and role models, providing positive reinforcement, encouragement and feedback for the children. The preschool teachers have over 20 years of experience working joyfully with children. And our growing network of amazing alumni inspires us to continue to spark the joy of early learning.