

## HOW CHILDREN LEARN THROUGH PLAY

By Alissa Levy Chung

Anyone remember this?

### All I really need to know. . . I learned in Kindergarten

**Share** everything. Play **fair**. Don't hit people.

Put things back where you found them. **Clean up**  
your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours.

**Say you're sorry** when you hurt somebody.

**Wash** your hands before you eat. **Flush**.

Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you. **Live**  
a balanced life — **learn** some and **think** some and  
**draw** and **paint** and **sing** and **dance** and **play** and  
**work** every day some. **Take a nap** every afternoon.

When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic,  
hold hands, and stick together. Be aware of **wonder**.

**Remember** the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The  
roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really  
knows **how** or **why**, but we are all like that. Goldfish  
and hamsters and white mice and even **the little seed**

in the Styrofoam cup — they all die. So do we. And  
then **remember** the Dick-and-Jane books and the first  
word you learned — the biggest word of all — **LOOK**.

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*All I really need to know about how to live and what to do and how to be I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not at the top of the graduate school mountain, but there in the sand pile at school...Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.*

*Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm. Think what a better world it would be if we all - the whole world - had cookies and milk at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.*

*And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out in the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.*

It has been just over 25 years since Robert Fulghum wrote those words of wisdom that became posters on college dorm walls for many years. I was thinking about Robert Fulghum's essay as I was reading yet another article about school test scores. It occurred to me that it may no longer be the case that any of those lessons are considered all that valuable in kindergarten anymore. Our focus today is the Common Core curriculum and standardized testing. Today's kindergarteners are supposed to learn to read and write and do math worksheets. But I wonder if they need to learn how to share, collaborate, or create any more. Is the cost of our increasing focus on academics at an early age the loss of the foundational lessons of life that children need to be social beings or even pursuers of knowledge in this world?

I wonder about this loss especially for children who are not fortunate enough to attend wonderful developmental early childhood programs, where they really do learn all of Fulghum's lessons (except for the cookies because now we are much more health conscious than we were in the '80s). It has saddened me to hear politicians and educators saying that it is more important for children who come to school with disadvantaged backgrounds to drill the academics early than it is for other children. I actually think that the opposite is true. I believe, and there is a mountain of developmental research to support this claim, that children's play and interactions cannot be dismissed as mere fun or leisure, but are an essential part of development.

When observing a classroom in a developmentally appropriate early childhood program, sometimes it can be difficult to see the richness and complexity of what happens during free play. In order to navigate this time, children need to learn about turn taking, sharing, building on each other's ideas, compromising, and resolving conflicts. One child might suggest a game of house. Roles need to be assigned, which involves a combination of leadership skills and compromising. Some one may have to give up a desired part to another child, or it can be agreed that they will take turns or both be daddies that day. Creativity comes into play when figuring out how a child who wants to be nothing but a dinosaur can fit into a game of house (children can actually resolve that issue without telling the dinosaur that she has to change her plan; I'm not sure adults are always so flexible). Then there needs to be a plan of what happens during the play and what to do when there are disagreements. Four-year-olds can learn to cycle through all of these skills when they are given the time and space to play. Each one of the skills is an essential part of not only adult social relationships, but of functioning in an adult work setting.

Children are also establishing the building blocks of reading and writing without even realizing it during a day of play-based preschool. Free play is complemented by the relative structure of circle time and story dictations. Today's emphasis in school seems to be primarily on phonetics and learning to write letters. While of course these elements are essential for reading and writing, a child who learns only these skills will be reading books of meaningless words and stringing together words with no real content. In order to be a real reader, a child needs not just decoding, but also comprehension and motivation. Motivation comes from a love of books that can be developed by reading wonderful stories to children and letting them find the books that pique their interest. Comprehension develops from learning that books tell stories and that stories have a beginning, middle, and an ending. Stories have an overall lesson or point and a coherence to them. During circle time, teachers not only read books, but also discuss what is happening and ask children questions about what they think might happen next. Before they can decode words, children will pick up books, look at the pictures, and "read" by making up their own stories to match what they see on the pages. This is not just an exercise in futility for

children who are “not really reading,” but a critical step along the path to becoming a good reader.

Story dictations can be seen as the beginnings of learning how to write. Children do not have to write a single letter or even make a picture to learn writing essentials from dictating. They are learning how to tell a story, which is truly the purpose of what we do when we write. Whether the story is fictional or not, conveying a coherent idea or experience is what we strive to do when we write. When children’s fine motor skills develop to the point that they can begin to form their letters consistently (which happens at different ages for different children), then they are both motivated to be able to put their own stories on paper and able to plan out what they want to say. Additionally, when children make up stories on their own during free play, it is as if they are writing a novel or a screenplay.

Although math foundations can be more subtle in a play-based curriculum, children are learning the concept of sequencing when they talk about the days of the week at circle time. They are noticing how many children are present and how many are missing. They are constantly categorizing and grouping like things when they pretend to shop or work with manipulative toys. A game of grocery store can turn into lessons about numeracy (counting items) and the meaning and use of money.

Most of all, when children learn through the medium of play, they develop a natural curiosity about the world and a love of learning. I was talking to a first grader recently who was complaining about how she dislikes school this year for the first time. She was fortunate enough to have a kindergarten teacher who managed to use active learning and play to teach the academic concepts that the children needed to master. Her biggest disappointment in first grade was not just that she was bored, but that she was “not learning anything” because she spent so much time just doing seatwork and worksheets. She spoke wistfully of hands-on science experiments and group play-based activities from the year before. She knew that these had not just been fun, but had been learning exercises. I thought it was both sad and poignant that a 6-year-old had a better sense of the

importance of play for learning than many adults seem to have with the current zeitgeist of educational policy.

For decades now, there has been an effort to understand why American children stand up so poorly to children in other countries when academic outcomes are compared. People have often assumed that children have too much leisure time here and that other countries drill academic learning both earlier and more often. As it turns out, in many countries where children perform successfully, there is much less academic pressure in early grades. Play and gross motor exercise are important parts of the children's days. When the children get older (teen years), the academic focus intensifies, and they tend to work harder than the average American teen.

The counter-intuitive nature of the play-first, academics-later idea makes it a difficult sell politically. If development were linear, it would make sense that doing more academics at an earlier age would translate into more success subsequently. But, of course, development is incredibly complex and layered and is rarely linear. Foundational skills may bear no clear resemblance to the skills that they give rise to in later development. For example, infants who are nurtured and responded to when they are in need do not become whiny and dependent children, but actually quite the opposite. When infants are given what they need when they request it (appropriate for babies), they learn to be confident and self-reliant preschoolers. It is actually the children forced into precocious independence who become the whiny and dependent ones. Fulfilling the needs of an earlier stage of development allows for a child to flourish in the next stage.

So young children do need to play. This is why play of all kinds (independent, socio-dramatic, gross and fine motor...) is found ubiquitously across cultures. It is an essential part of the way that children learn to be social beings, learn about self-expression, learn about problem solving, and learn how to apply the basic skills they have developed. Free play will never be a waste of time or just a break from "real learning." It is the nuts and bolts of what young children need to be doing for both social and academic purposes.