

Play All Day: Explaining the Importance of Play to Parents

Has a parent ever asked you "What are the children really learning here? It seems like all they do is play all day!"

One way to answer this type of question is to help parents notice the materials you provide for young children, explaining to them what their child is learning by playing with them. Here are a few responses that you might give to help parents understand how the materials and activities you provide prepare children for elementary school and beyond.

Blocks

Experiences with blocks help young children's growing knowledge in math, literacy and science. Playing with blocks also supports children's social and emotional development as they interact with, plan and share with other children. When young children play with blocks they are having hands-on experiences with concepts like fractions, construction and gravity as well as creative thinking. Research shows that children who build with blocks in preschool have better math grades in middle and high school than children who did not.

Puzzles

Puzzles help young children use the muscles in their fingers, hands and wrists with increasing control. As children look at the pictures on pieces, they develop their visual perception skills. When children judge a puzzle piece's size and placement, turning it in their minds, they practice spatial awareness; the ability to see objects in relation to each other and oneself. These are all critical foundational skills for reading and writing, as young children learn to make sense of printed letters and words on a page and as they gain control holding a pencil to write.

Manipulatives

Manipulatives are materials that children touch, hold and explore with their hands and fingers (buttons, shells, bristle blocks, pop beads, stacking toys, etc.). They assist in fine motor development as well as scientific thinking (making hypotheses or guesses about what will happen). Children may count, sort, order or arrange manipulatives into groups. When children use manipulatives, they explore new ideas and use their imaginations when, for example, their bristle blocks become an airplane in their hand that they imagine flying through the clouds.

Sensory Materials

Sand, water and other sensory materials are so very important for young children. They help build children's fine motor control as well as their thinking and social skills. Sand and water play also relax and

sooth young children who are still learning how to control their emotions. They support curiosity, imagination and experimentation. Since sand and water play are open-ended, there are many right answers and no wrong ones, as they experiment and test out their ideas. This builds children's self-confidence and curiosity.

Being a early childhood educator means that you are the expert in the eyes of the parents you serve. It is important that you help them understand your professional program and the educational opportunities you are providing for their children each and every day.
